Summary

“Doesn’t it bother you that you’re wasting your money here every week when all you do is talk? Why don’t you just go to a therapist like a normal person?”

“You fit my budget better.”

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Youngjae loses a bet with his friends to spend the night with an escort, but what he ends up doing is a lot less than sex.

Notes

i'm such a bad procrastinator that this literally took me a whole year to finish...BUT i hope you enjoy it i was in a super fluffy mood this time last year sdfsdfsdf

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“Are you sure you want to bet something like that?” The youngest of the three asked. Yugyeom looked with concern as his two best friends stared each other down with nothing but mischief in their eyes.
“I have nothing but confidence in my princess,” Youngjae lifted his fluffy white dog and kissed her face as if she was his own child. He glanced at Bambam’s small cat and sneezed, his allergies surfacing. “Coco could definitely beat Pudding in a race. That’s not even a question.”

Yugyeom still didn’t seem convinced. “You know that if you lose, you’re going to have to spend the entire night with an escort, right? Y-you’re sure about that?”

“Frankly Yugyeom, I’m offended you even doubt that Coco will win against Pudding,” The youngest groaned. Youngjae was extremely stubborn and defensive whenever his precious puppy’s skills were challenged. “Just wait and see. She’ll run circles around that cat.”

Bambam only snorted. “Whatever. Make sure to leave a good review for the guy we’ll be choosing for you.”

“Why am I friends with these idiots?” Yugyeom muttered to himself before turning his attention towards his two best friends. Youngjae and Bambam were already kneeling with their pets at the makeshift starting line they created. Yugyeom was intended to signal the start of the race.

“Get ready Coco, because Pudding’s going to go full-on Dominic Toretto on you!”

“She’s a dog, Bambam, she’s never seen ‘Fast and Furious’.” Youngjae replied, rolling his eyes. “Pudding’s watched the entire series three times - Coco’s losing already.”

“Will you two just shut up and let me start the race so we can get it over with?” Yugyeom begged, growing increasingly tired of his friends. Youngjae and Bambam both set their pets on the floor as Yugyeom kneeled in front of the starting line. He half-heartedly lifted a tissue into the air and let it fall to the floor. “Ready, set, go!”

Youngjae and Bambam both released their pets and Coco and Pudding were soon running towards the finish line. The “finish line” they created was two plates filled with treats for each pet - Coco and Pudding’s favorites. The three boys stared in awe as they watched the two pets sprint across the room in search for their treats. Youngjae was elated and cheered once it seemed like Coco was taking the lead, but his joy was quickly cut short when Coco spotted a chew toy at the corner of her eye and went for it instead, ignoring the race.

“Coco, no!” Youngjae shouted, scrambling to get on his feet to chase his dog.

But it was too late – Pudding had already reached the finish line while Coco was resting comfortably at the other side of the apartment, chewing on her toy.

“Ha! I won! Pudding is the fastest cat alive!” Bambam cheered, taking his cat and raising him high in the air. “That means Youngjae has to spend the night with whoever I choose!”

“Hey, that wasn’t fair – I want a rematch!”

“Sorry, it’s not my fault Coco’s more interested in her toy than her owner.”

“Do I have to?” Youngjae was sulking now, but Bambam didn’t seem fazed.

“Did I have to run around our old high school in drag after I lost that bet? Did Yugyeom have to ask his biology professor out on a date after he came last in our Mario Kart tournament? No. But we do it because it’s the honorable thing to do.” He explained as-a-matter-of-factly.

“How is me sleeping with an escort honorable?”
“Nobody said anything about sleeping with him! You just have to spend the night with him.”

Youngjae felt conflicted. In a way, Bambam’s speech about doing the “honorable” thing made sense. Whenever his two friends lost a bet or a game, Youngjae would always push them to do their punishments the hardest. He didn’t want to spend the night with an escort, but he was the oldest out of the three of them and backing out would just make him a hypocrite – he did agree to the conditions.

“Fine,” He relented. “Do you even know where to find one?”

Bambam smirked. That wasn’t a good sign.

“My sweet, sweet friend.” He cooed.

“Youngjae, I told you not to take that bet.” Yugyeom sighed, his face spread with guilt. He suddenly had a growing feeling that they both knew something he didn’t.

Bambam pulled a piece of folded paper from his jeans pocket and placed it in Youngjae’s palm.

“Be at that address at 10 tonight – just tell them I sent you, everything’s been taken care of.” Youngjae’s eyes immediately went wide at Bambam’s sudden explanation. The realization suddenly dawned on him a little too late.

“You planned this in advance?” Youngjae shouted. The Thai boy laughed and placed his arm around Yugyeom, who tried his best to keep his eyes away from Youngjae. “Yugyeom? You knew?”

“I tried to warn you!”

“So, you put that chew toy near Coco?” Bambam shook his head.

“Hey, I don’t cheat. Pudding’s won against every cat and dog in our neighborhood, so I knew he was going to win anyway—”

“Pudding is the Usain Bolt of house pets.” Yugyeom interjected.

“—but when I saw that you didn’t put Coco’s toy away, I just…chose not to say anything.”

“You guys just wanted to see me get with a prostitute, didn’t you?”

“It’s not that – it’s just, you almost never get any penalties. The last time you had to do one was in middle school, and we only asked you to run ten laps around our street!” Yugyeom explained. Youngjae wanted to laugh at the memory but held himself back – the three of them had been obsessed with playing games and giving each other penalties since they were kids. It wasn’t Youngjae’s fault that he was good at every game they played since then.

“I hate you two so much,” He groaned and unfolded the piece of paper. There was an address written on it, along with the letters ‘JB’ in bold marker. Youngjae looked at Bambam with a questioning look. “What’s JB?”

“Not ‘what’, my dear Youngjae, but who.” There was a smirk glued onto his face. Youngjae wanted to slap it out of him.

“A friend of mine says JB comes highly recommended,” Bambam continued, another smirk forming across his face once he realized what he had just said. “He also—”
“If you’re going to make a dumb joke with the word ‘come’, I suggest you don’t.”

“My friend says the clients love him – JB’s his most popular employee.”

Youngjae kept silent, trying to process Bambam’s explanation when a specific word caught his ears.

“Wait, ‘his’? You know someone who runs an escort service?” Youngjae asked disbelievingly, eyes wide. He turned his head to see Yugyeom’s reaction, but the giant was too wrapped up in playing with their pets. He probably already knew anyway – Bambam told Yugyeom everything.

“I didn’t tell you about Mark?” Youngjae shook his head, still dumbfounded. “Mark and Brian practically raised me when I moved to here as a kid – we lived together, remember? You don’t know Mark?”

“You’re talking about Mark Tuan?” Youngjae’s jaw was practically on the floor at this point. He knew Mark Tuan – hell, he played Overwatch with Mark Tuan every Saturday night. He knew that Mark ran a business, but he never guessed that business was an escort service. “Of course I fucking know Mark! I’ve known Mark since that time you shat your pants when you were a freshman and he had to come pick you up from school!”

“Please do not bring up the single most traumatic event of my adolescent life!”

“Mark is a fucking pimp?”

“Business owner!” Yugyeom corrected.

“Mark Tuan?”

“You know any other Marks around here?” Bambam asked, getting frustrated.

“Mark Lee!” Yugyeom reminded from his corner of the room.

Bambam scoffed. “That kid’s even younger than us, how could he run an esteemed escort service?”

As the two boys continued arguing about whatever unimportant detail they had delved into, Youngjae stared at the piece of paper given to him. The address written on it seemed unfamiliar, but it wasn’t too far from the area he resided. There was another name aside from JB’s on the paper, “Relaxation Inn” – a motel.

All of a sudden Youngjae felt dirty. He felt like a sleazy business man who regularly cheated on his wife. Youngjae wasn’t entirely pure – what twenty-one-year-old was? – but he was never the type to seek out the services of escorts. He didn’t have anything against sex workers in general – it was a legitimate profession in Youngjae’s eyes – but he just couldn’t detach himself enough to commit to such an intimate act with someone he had just met.

“This JB guy,” Youngjae began, breaking out of his trance. Bambam and Yugyeom stopped their conversation and looked at him. “He’s…he’s nice, right?”

Bambam snorted. “Yeah…he’s really nice.” The two boys started giggling, wrapped up in their own world the way they always did when they knew things Youngjae didn’t. It had been like that for years, but Youngjae had learned to ignore them whenever he needed to.

“Don’t worry Youngjae, we’ll drive you there and make sure you don’t get kidnapped or anything.” Yugyeom reassured, flashing him a sweet smile. He had always been the sweeter and
more merciful of the two.

“You wanna know what I think?” Bambam asked.

“I never do.”

“I think,” He began, ignoring Youngjae’s reply. He placed his arm around the elder. “One day, you’re going to thank me for this.”

Youngjae could only let out a cruel laugh after hearing Bambam’s theory. “Why the fuck would I thank you for making me hire a prostitute?”

“Trust me,” There was a glint in Bambam’s eye that Youngjae couldn’t decipher. It was a faint cousin of the look he always had whenever he was planning something big, but Youngjae didn’t want to believe it was anything more than Bambam being a general asshole. “You’re going to thank me for this.”

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Youngjae felt his heart beat out of his chest as he approached the entrance of the motel. Bambam and Yugyeom had dropped him off with words of encouragement and the promise that they would pick him up at 6 in the morning.

“I don’t know why you guys hired him for such a long time.” Youngjae whined when they were on the way to the motel, burying his face in his hands.

“Hey! Mark may have given me a discount, but Yugyeom and I spent a good portion of our money on this guy, so you better fucking enjoy it!” He recalled Bambam yelling.

Youngjae took a deep breath and pushed the door open. He had expected the motel to look cheap and shabby at the very least, but the reality was far from his expectations. The main lobby was sleek and brand new – there was a plasma screen TV mounted on the wall right in front of a collection of soft white sofas. The walls surrounding the lobby were decorated with fine art – art that looked expensive (or at least were made to look expensive). The motel looked a lot more expensive than his expectations. It made him feel slightly less better about the whole situation.

As he walked closer to the front desk, he spotted a young man typing away at the computer behind the desk. He was pretty – too pretty to be working at a small motel – but he seemed serious about what he was doing. He looked young too, possibly several years older than Youngjae, but still young enough to get whatever he wanted. Youngjae cleared his throat as he prepared to speak, but the man beat him to it, raising his head from the monitor and flashing him a friendly smile.

“Hello! How may I help you?” His voice was deep and commanding, but somehow Youngjae felt like he could trust him – he seemed like he could be someone caring.

“Hi, uh, m-my name is Choi Youngjae, I was t-told to tell you that Bambam sent me?” The man’s eyebrows suddenly furrowed, causing the immediate spread of panic within Youngjae. *Fuck. Fuck. He doesn’t know what I’m talking about. This is all a scam. Fuck Bambam. Fuck Yugyeom. Fuck them for setting me up for this stupid—

“Ah, yes! Bambam, of course! I was told you would be coming.” The man suddenly ducked underneath the desk and disappeared for several seconds before popping back up with a card key in his hands. “JB is already waiting for you in room 120.”

Youngjae stared at the card in his hands before cautiously taking it in his own. “H-he is?”
The man nodded. “My name is Jinyoung, by the way. If there is anything else you need, please let me know.”

“Oh, y-yeah, of course. Thanks a lot, Jinyoung.” Youngjae mumbled and quickly bowed, scrambling out of the lobby and out to the complex of rooms by the parking lot.

Youngjae’s legs were doing all the thinking at this point. They walked fast as Youngjae’s eyes scanned for any sign of room 120. It didn’t take him very long to find the room, located just a few steps away from where Bambam and Yugyeom had dropped him off. Youngjae stood in front of the door for what felt like hours, staring at the golden lettering of the room number and contemplating the possible risks of the night. Once he actually bothered to check his time, however, he saw that he had only been standing there for a mere five minutes.

*Let’s just get this over with.*

Youngjae’s hands finally found the courage to scan the key and enter the room. His ears were immediately met by the sound of a sexy R&B song – it was by an artist he liked but couldn’t pin a name to – and the nervous knot that was forming in his guts suddenly became smaller. His eyes scanned the room for any sight of the man he was supposed to meet, but the room was completely empty. Youngjae contemplated turning around and leaving, but the situation somehow intrigued him too much to let go. He found himself walking towards the bed, but just as he was about to sit, he heard the sound of the bathroom door open, immediately taking his attention.

As the bathroom door opened, the knot in Youngjae’s guts grew bigger and bigger. The man that stepped out, however, was absolutely *beautiful*. His hair was dark and swept to the side, showing off his small but piercing eyes. He wore a dark blue button-down shirt with dark pants – it was simple, but it made him look like he came straight out of a movie. The man spotted Youngjae sitting at the edge of the bed and gave him a warm smile. It took that one smile to make the knot in Youngjae’s guts explode and disappear.

“Hi!” Youngjae greeted loudly, immediately standing from the bed. He realized how eager he seemed and mentally scolded himself. “Y-you must be JB.”

The smile on JB’s lips never left, but instead it morphed into a smirk. It was a smirk that could break hearts if it wanted to.

“And you must be Youngjae.”

They had only met for a few seconds, but Youngjae could already tell JB was good at his job. Even the way he said his name was enough to make Youngjae weak at the knees. JB was naturally sexy and seductive, he could already feel that.

JB casually strode across the room and sat next to Youngjae, his gaze at the boy never once waning. Youngjae felt himself getting even more nervous and moved just a millimeter farther from JB – the man was gorgeous, but it didn’t change the fact that this was his first interaction with an escort.

“So,” JB began, his voice filling up Youngjae’s ears. “I’m told we’re going to be together for quite some time—”

“Well? Is it too much? Do normal people not usually take up that much time?” Youngjae questioned anxiously. For a split second, Youngjae spotted a tiny laugh form at JB’s lips, breaking the persona he was building. *Good,* he thought to himself, *at least he’s human.*
JB shook his head. “It’s completely normal.”

Youngjae let out a breath of relief. “Thank god. I was afraid I’d seem like a sex addict or something – not that there’s anything wrong with being a sex addict! Wait, I mean, I guess all addictions are bad, aren’t they? But as long as it’s all consensual, just fire away!” This time JB’s persona had almost completely shattered. He was trying his hardest to hold in his laugh, but it didn’t seem to be working. Rather than feel more embarrassed, in a way, Youngjae felt more comfortable.

“You’re cute.” JB commented, his smile fond. Youngjae’s eyes went wide in shock and he could only laugh to cover up the red that was obviously shading his cheeks. JB immediately cleared his throat right after too, as if to mask the lapse in his act.

“So, what did you have in mind?” JB asked, slipping back into his seductive voice. Youngjae felt the nervous knot inside him form again as his palms started heating up.

He felt JB’s hand slowly slither on top of him, noticing how the man focused his gaze on him. His heart rate definitely went up at that. When Youngjae kept silent, JB suddenly moved closer. He came close enough that Youngjae almost believed they were going to kiss, but he shifted towards another direction and stopped right by his ear.

“I can do whatever you want me to do.” He whispered. Youngjae felt an immediate chill run through his entire body. If he were braver, Youngjae was sure he would have taken JB right then and there. But Youngjae was Youngjae, and he just didn’t have the right setting for things like that.

He was ready to apologize to JB for wasting his time and leaving when Bambam’s voice suddenly rang in his mind.

*Nobody said anything about sleeping with him! You just have to spend the night with him.*

Maybe Bambam was right – nobody ever said he had to sleep with JB.

“This is going to sound completely stupid and off-book,” Youngjae began, his voice becoming the loudest it had been since arriving. “But would you be cool with just…talking?”

JB looked puzzled. He pulled away from the close distance he maintained with his client and tilted his head, as if to observe him. It was an incredibly stupid request, Youngjae knew that, but hiring JB was never his idea, and if he was going to waste Bambam and Yugyeom’s money, he might as well make a new friend while he was at it.

“You don’t want to have sex?” JB finally asked, his tone cautious. Youngjae shook his head. “You don’t even want me to suck your dick?”

He shook his head again.

“Not even a handjob?”

JB received the same response.

“Wow,” He let out a breathy laugh, leaning on his arms. JB didn’t seem mad – just dumbfounded. “Then can I ask why you paid for a full eight hours if you weren’t even planning on having sex?”

This time Youngjae gave him a nervous laugh in response. “Can I be honest with you?”

JB nodded.
“Well, it’s kind of a long story, but I’ll start at the very beginning,” Youngjae took his phone from my pocket and quickly pulled out a picture of Coco. “This is Coco – isn’t she cute? I adopted her right after I graduated high school because I was finally getting my own place. She’s a Maltese puppy and she’s the best dog in the entire world. Do you have any pets, JB?”

The man seemed surprised by the sudden question, and Youngjae immediately felt a sense of regret wash over him as he realized that JB probably wasn’t comfortable sharing his personal details with a client. There was a brief moment of silence between the two but, acting against his expectations, JB gave him an answer.

“Three cats – Nora, Kunta and Odd.” The smile that took over his face gave Youngjae the feeling that he was incredibly proud of his cats.

“Well, it’s because of a cat that I’m here!” Youngjae exclaimed. “My two best friends in the entire world, Bambam and Yugyeom, are actual devils. They’re both a year younger than me but we all grew up in the same neighborhood, so we’ve been best friends since Bambam moved here from Thailand in middle school. Anyway, Bambam’s a cat owner like you. He has two cats, Pudding and Latte – I don’t actually know what breed they are, but I know that Pudding is probably, like, the Usain Bolt of cats.”

JB let out a small laugh. Youngjae suddenly felt warm inside.

“The thing with Bambam, Yugyeom and I is that we’re kind of obsessed with playing games and giving each other penalties – one time, we had Yugyeom run around our block in just his underwear after he lost a game of Jenga,” JB laughed again, but this time more openly and much louder. He looked a lot more human and a lot less intimidating when he laughed, which only made Youngjae feel like he could trust him even more. “So, this morning I was hanging out at Bambam and Yugyeom’s apartment and I brought along Coco. She loves Yugyeom. While the three of us were hanging out, Bambam suddenly started challenging Coco and I to a race! And, okay, I’m not usually a very competitive person, but he started doubting Coco’s skills, and I’m nothing if I’m not a protective and very prideful dog owner!

“Before we started the race, Bambam and I made a bet that if he lost, I could have his car for a month, but if I lost…I’d have to come see you,” Youngjae avoided JB’s gaze at the last part of his sentence. “So, guess what happened.”

“Coco lost?”

“Coco fucking lost!” Youngjae shouted, still in disbelief. For some reason, his exclamation of the fact made JB crack up – he fell back towards the bed and started laughing hard. “I know she’s a princess and all but come on! One chew toy shouldn’t distract you from winning a race.”

“Coco sounds like a class act.”

Youngjae shrugged. “Well, anyway, that’s the reason why I’m here until 6 in the morning.”

Once the laughter died down, JB sat up from the bed and tilted his head at Youngjae again, continuing his earlier observation.

“So, you just want to talk, huh?”

“Yeah…” He replied sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. “If you’re not cool with that we can just part now – I won’t tell anyone if you don’t.”

Youngjae sort of hoped he wouldn’t have to say goodbye right away.
“Uh, can I be honest with you, Youngjae?” JB asked, his tone wavering on something Youngjae couldn’t decipher. He was afraid of what he would say but he nodded anyway. “I’m actually kind of relieved.”

“Wait, really?”

JB nodded. “I pretty much rushed over here after taking care of this other guy and,” He let out a breath of relief. “He was really trying to make the most out of his time.”

Youngjae really couldn’t stop himself from laughing after that.

“I was hoping you’d be less…tiring, because damn, I really needed a break.”

“Oh, hey, if you’re exhausted, you can just go home! Really, you don’t need to entertain me by staying here and listening to my stupid stories. I’ll still leave you a really good review, and I’m pretty sure Bambam already paid for your time.”

JB gave him a fond smile and simply shrugged. “I don’t really mind. If I’m being frank, all that’s waiting for me at home is an overeager Chinese guy with way too much energy for me to deal with at this hour – I’d rather hear more about how you forced your friend to run around your block naked after losing at Jenga.”

So, he has a roommate.

JB glanced at the clock on the wall for a brief second and turned back to Youngjae. “You still have seven hours – if you just want to talk, I’m here, and if you suddenly change your mind about the sex part, I’m here for that too.”

Youngjae still felt slightly unsure about JB’s willingness to comply with his request, but he took his word and proceeded to tell the man more about his life. He began with showing him more pictures of Coco, telling him more about her habits and how she would never come to him unless he used his special call for her. But then the conversation moved towards different areas in Youngjae’s life – he started telling him about his friends, about how Bambam and Yugyeom disturbed his existence on a regular basis, how he was the oldest of the three but always got treated as the baby. The entire time, JB just listened, often smiling and nodding, occasionally adding a comment or letting out a small laugh. Youngjae didn’t dare ask anything personal about the escort – he was certain the man was uncomfortable sharing personal details to a client, even if that client was slightly unusual.

Several hours later, as Youngjae became caught up in a story about a camping trip from his childhood, he heard the faint sound of breathing coming from the male beside him. They had both ended up lying down on their backs on the bed. There was a considerable space that separated the both of them, but it didn’t hinder their conversation. Somehow, their conversation had become therapeutic for Youngjae. JB didn’t know him and he didn’t know JB, but this made it easier for him to say whatever was on his mind.

Hearing nothing but soft breathing, Youngjae turned his head and saw JB fast asleep beside him, eyes closed and peaceful. It was almost four in the morning and there was no doubt he had been working for a good portion of the day. Youngjae tried his best to stifle his giggle as he noticed how considerably different he looked now compared to when they first met – at the start, he had been intimidating and seductive, but now, he looked like someone Youngjae could protect – like someone he could see as a friend.

Feeling his eyelids become heavier, Youngjae fought all senses to stay awake and joined his new
friend, finally falling asleep.

+++ “Wake the fuck up, bitch!” This, paired with an endless parade of honking, was what Jaebum blamed for breaking his slumber.

The sound came from outside the hotel room, and as he opened his eyes, Jaebum realized he had fallen asleep. The events that occurred just a few hours prior were still fresh in his mind, becoming more vivid when he spotted the young male that slept right beside him. They were both fully clothed – another reminder of the unusual request that his new client had made the night before.

“Youngjae, wake up,” Jaebum whispered softly. He hesitated before touching the male’s shoulder, lightly shaking him. He didn’t budge. “I think your friends are here.”

Youngjae groaned. “Tell them to fuck off.”

Jaebum chuckled, continuing to shake his shoulder until the male finally opened his eyes. They were a regular dark brown color that all Korean men had, but for some reason, the sight of his eyes looking back at his made him feel strange inside. He couldn’t decipher what it was, but it wasn’t necessarily a bad thing.

“It’s six in the morning, I think we both need to go home.” Youngjae’s eyes immediately shot up at the mention of time, and the grogginess that he had was immediately replaced with a strong apologetic look.

“Shit, I’m sorry – it’s already six, you need to go home.”

“We both need to.” The time that was paid for was already up, and usually, Jaebum would be the first out the door, but something about this client made him feel like he had a responsibility to make sure he left all right.

Youngjae quickly stood from the bed and smoothed his clothes. He walked over to the mirror by the dresser and briefly fixed up his hair before turning back to Jaebum. The entire time, Jaebum had been watching him meticulously, wondering how the young man had managed to intrigue him so much. They had only met the night before, but Jaebum knew so much about Youngjae already. He wondered why he didn’t sprint out the door the moment Youngjae said he could.

“Well…this was fun,” Youngjae said sheepishly, his cheeks tinted a shade of pink. “Thanks for, uh, understanding.”

They were both standing by the door now, awkwardly facing each other as none of them knew what to say. It was the first time Jaebum had felt so unprepared in his occupation – he always had control, even in the most intense situations, but the moment someone sweet like Youngjae came along and declined his services, everything went to shambles.

“It’s all part of the job.” It wasn’t.

Youngjae narrowed his eyes. “Really?”

“Well…” Youngjae laughed as he trailed off, the loud, booming sound immediately filling up the room. Jaebum had learned throughout the night that it was quite easy to make him laugh.

Jaebum reached towards the handle of the door and slowly turned it, allowing some light from the sun to enter the room.
“Get home safe.”

“I hope we can meet again someday.” Youngjae quietly added, his cheeks turning a deep shade of pink once he spotted Jaebum’s surprise. “I think if we were under different circumstances, you would make a really good friend.”

His words made Jaebum stop in his tracks. It was the first time any client of his ever complimented him on qualities that were outside of sex – not that Jaebum minded, really, it was a natural product of the line he drew between his job and his personal life. Youngjae, however, was beginning to blur the lines between the two, and normally that would be enough reason for Jaebum to run, but there was just something about Youngjae’s unfiltered innocence that made him tolerate anything he did.

“Yeah,” Jaebum returned his smile. “Me too.”

“Yah, Choi Youngjae, put your dick back in your pants so we can go home!”

The continued honking sound further interrupted the moment as Youngjae finally stepped out of the hotel room.

“Watch your mouth, punk, I’m still older!” Youngjae shouted back, the first time Jaebum had ever heard him speak with such power. He turned back to Jaebum and shrugged. “Thanks again, JB.”

Youngjae ran towards the car and climbed in the backseat. From where he stood, Jaebum could hear the commotion that was going on inside the car, even as they sped off into the distance. Jaebum found himself laughing – something that happened far too much during his time with Youngjae – and reflecting on how interestingly his night had turned out. He walked towards the main lobby of the motel, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jinyoung before his shift ended.

Luckily, Jinyoung was still packing up his belongings when Jaebum reached the front desk. The younger of the two lit up once he caught sight of Jaebum, beginning the routine that occurred whenever Jaebum was finished for the day.

“How was work?” Jinyoung asked, a smirk playing at his lips.

Jinyoung was an old friend – one of the only people in the world who could bully him and get away with it. Jaebum had known him in high school, but the two naturally drifted apart as they went off to different universities. Their friendship was only reignited by Jinyoung’s coincidental employment at the motel Mark favored for his business. He could only imagine the surprise the younger boy experienced when he learned that the star student of their old high school was working as an escort. But despite it all, Jaebum considered Jinyoung to be one of his best friends – a small collection of people who had easy access to his thoughts.

“Nothing out of the ordinary.” That was a clear lie. Youngjae’s appointment had clearly been out of the ordinary, but Jaebum wasn’t going to let himself become a victim to Jinyoung’s teases.

Jinyoung raised his eyebrow. He knew Jaebum was keeping something to himself.

“That last client you had was cute – pretty different from the guys that usually ask for you, don’t you think?” He mentioned casually, organizing several papers on the desk. Jaebum knew what he was trying to do.

“What are the guys that ask for me like?” He challenged.

Jinyoung shrugged. “Oh, you know, they’re always buff, commanding, sexy – look like they spend too much time at the gym, definitely tops?”
“Did you forget you’re dating someone exactly like that?”

The younger male let out a loud laugh at his response. “You think Jackson tops?” He continued laughing as if it was the most hilarious thing he had ever heard.

“Oh god, shut up, I don’t need to imagine my roommate and best friend having sex.”

Once his laughter died down, Jinyoung narrowed his eyes at Jaebum, continuing his investigation. “So, what was he like?”

“Who?”

Jinyoung rolled his eyes at his attempt to play dumb. “The cute otter who booked you for an entire night!”

“He was…nice.”

“Nice? Come on,” He pried, completely unsatisfied with his answer. “He was wild, wasn’t he? You know, it’s always the unlikely ones that turn out to have the most kinks.”

“No! He was…” Cute. Adorable. Sweet. “Nice.”

He earned another eye-roll from his best friend. “Whatever, just make sure to tell your roommate I’m coming over tonight.”

“Maybe I’ll catch you before I go to work.”

“I hope not.”

Jaebum laughed as he walked away from the front desk and out into the open air. He grabbed his backpack from the employee room not too far from the main lobby and ran to the bus stop, hoping to catch the next bus to his apartment. This was his daily routine – on an average night he would entertain about four to five clients, always ending his shift around the crack of dawn. He would talk with Jinyoung for a while after his final client before running to catch the next bus to his apartment was located. Whenever he reached his home, the first and most important thing he would do was to take a shower. Jaebum knew the risks of his profession. Aside from getting regularly tested, wearing a condom and trying his best to make sure all of his clients were safe, the least he could do was take a shower at the end of each night. After his shower, the final part of Jaebum’s routine consisted of a long slumber that would last until it was time to start work again. For several years now, this had become his routine – and for quite some time, it became all he knew.

Jaebum’s job started off as a desperate attempt to survive. After college, he landed an entry-level job that he had been perfectly prepared for through his degree – until he realized he was never really prepared for any of it at all. One job after another, nothing was really working out and Jaebum was actually losing more money than he was making. With no job, no money for food, and no real way to raise the funds he needed to open his cat café, Jaebum turned to Mark, who seemed to struggle in all the ways he did, but had the sterling idea to start his own business of sex. Mark became his best friend and (technically) boss, and Jaebum became his best employee.

He hated it at first. It made him feel dirty and weird, but after he received his first cut of the profits, Jaebum decided that maybe it wasn’t so bad after all. The hours were flexible – he decided when he would work and for how long, and the money he got from it was worth all the fake moaning and seducing. It was no child’s dream job, but it kept him fed and he still had control of his own body, so the fact that he fucked people for money didn’t really matter to him anymore.
Jaebum’s deep sleep was interrupted by the sound of his ringtone almost ten hours later. Groggily peeking out of the covers, he reached out to his nightstand to view the caller. It was Mark.

“Hey.” Jaebum greeted, his voice still hoarse from the sleep.

“Hey, you up?” Mark always called him at the same time to ask him how his night went.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Just calling to ask how last night went – everything go okay?” This was Mark’s way of acting like a boss. He could never really be completely professional with Jaebum, considering how they had both seen each other at their worst all throughout college and was one of the only same-age friends either of them had.

“It was fine – that Hyunwoo guy was pretty intense though.”

“Intense how? Are you okay?” He could hear worry start to grow in Mark’s voice.

“It was nothing bad, it’s just that he seemed to have a lot of energy and by that time I’d already gone through three other guys, I didn’t really have the strength to keep up.”

“Hmm,” Mark replied, deliberating the situation. “I’ll see if Minhyuk would want to take him, his usual schedule fits Hyunwoo’s pretty well and there’s absolutely nothing can tire that kid out.”

“Could you? Thanks, Mark.”

“How about after Hyunwoo? You met with Youngjae?” The mention of the name triggered the image of his face to pop in his mind. “What did you think?”

“He was…nice.” Jaebum gave his standard answer, knowing full well that his thoughts screamed other, more descriptive adjectives.

“He’s a good kid.”

Jaebum immediately sat up from his bed. “Wait, you know Youngjae? Like, personally?”

He giggled. “I play Overwatch with him every Saturday – he’s a friend of a friend.”

The revelation made Jaebum think even more. “Wait. He’s the reason you’re always too ‘busy’ to go out every Saturday night? You two just sit around playing dumb games?”

“First of all, they are not dumb games, Mr. I-Want-To-Open-A-Cat-Café,” Mark retaliated. “Second of all, going out with you on a Saturday night just means lazing around your tiny studio and listening to you sing some whiny R&B song for your SoundCloud. I’d rather spend my time improving my strategy skills, thank you very much.”

He had him there.

“Did Youngjae have fun though?” Mark asked, moving back to their original conversation. When Jaebum kept quiet, he decided to add another question. “Did you have fun?”

Jaebum hesitated before answering. Mark wasn’t Jinyoung – he could be honest and know that Mark wasn’t going to tease him the was Jinyoung would.

“I actually kind of did, yeah.”
“Oh. That’s interesting. No offense, but I never thought someone like Youngjae would be able to keep up with you – he’s a sweet ray of sunshine and well, you’re you.”

“That’s the thing though – he didn’t want sex.”

“He didn’t? What did you guys do for eight hours then?”

“We just…talked.” There was a sudden strange warmth that formed within Jaebum as soon as he remembered his conversations with Youngjae.

“You…talked?” Mark didn’t sound confused at all – instead there was something else laced in his voice, it almost sounded like he was smug. But why would he be smug? “He didn’t try anything?”

Jaebum sighed. “It’s like you said, Mark, he’s a good kid – way too good for the likes of us, anyway.”

Mark snorted. “Speak for yourself, Im.”

“Whatever, I’m going to get some work done before I meet my first client tonight, talk to you later.”

“Stay safe, Bummie, I’ll call you again tomorrow!” Mark replied, using the nickname Jaebum always hated. He hung up the phone and stood from the bed, stretching his body as he felt his joints work again.

Jaebum walked out to the living room where he found his three cats all sleeping on his roommate’s chest. Jackson was fast asleep as well, napping in the middle of some drama he had started watching halfway through the day. Seeing his cats sleeping comfortably around his roommate reminded him of the many stories Youngjae had told him about Coco – if Coco had already claimed her spot on his chest, there was no way he would be moving for the next few hours. Jaebum fought a smile from forming on his lips – he grew to be rather fond of Youngjae, despite only knowing him for several hours. There was something about the way he reacted with Youngjae that was different from how he was around his other clients.

When he was working, he was JB – the mysterious and alluring sex dream any man would kill for, and his clients treated him accordingly. They worshipped him. He became used to hearing comments about his pretty ass or sinful mouth that they barely had any effect on him anymore. Jaebum felt that he had been JB for far too long, and as a result, had gotten extremely good at detaching himself from whoever he was being paid to satisfy. As JB, he was unattainable, and that was his appeal.

Jaebum, however, was a completely different story. Only a specific set of people were able to have access to Jaebum – the shy, easily-flustered cat lover who wanted nothing more than to pay off his student debts and open up his own business. Jaebum was vulnerable, easy to read and even easier to tease. It took quite some time for Mark, Jackson and Jinyoung to gain full entry this persona, and even then, it still came as a shock when he realized how much his three friends had pried him open. But perhaps, the thing that shocked Jaebum the most was how easily and effortlessly Youngjae managed to tick all the boxes – he had already found the young male reaching his true self faster than anyone else had ever managed.

Shaking his head at the thought, Jaebum let out a sigh. “Too dangerous,” He muttered to himself, still not exactly able to brush it off. “Way too dangerous.”

With the fact in mind, Jaebum found himself wondering if it would ever be possible for the two to
meet again and become friends.

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“Bummie,” Mark began in the middle of their daily call. “How many clients are you taking tonight?”

Jaebum ran through his work schedule for the night in his head – there were a couple of his regulars but nothing too wild.

“Just two, what’s up?”

“Do you think you could squeeze in a third? I got someone who just wants an hour.”

“An hour? Sure, I finish my second appointment at around midnight – when does this guy plan on coming?”

“He’s willing to wait until you’re free.” There was something about the way Mark spoke that made Jaebum feel strangely weary. It was almost like every word he said was laced with a double meaning.

Jaebum hesitated, trying his best to analyze Mark’s tone before finally giving up and giving in. “All right, I’ll see him right after I’m finished.”

“Oh, and also!” Mark suddenly called out. “After you met with Hyunwoo last week, Minhyuk’s agreed to take over for you so you’re good to go.”

Jaebum let out a breath of relief. “Remind me to treat him to some barbecue next weekend.”

“Only if you’re treating me too.” Jaebum could almost hear him grinning.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow, Tuan.” He replied, purposely ignoring his friend’s request. Jaebum ended the call and got himself off the bed. He had to get ready for work.

The thickly-built man rolled to the side, panting. Jaebum slowly turned to his back to catch his breath as the man beside him laughed in satisfaction.

“As always, you never disappoint.” He complimented between short breaths. Jaebum allowed himself a few more minutes to adjust before glancing at the clock on the nightstand beside him – it was two minutes past midnight, and he had another client waiting for him.

“That was fun,” Jaebum whispered, his sultry voice coming into play. “But unfortunately, it looks like I have to go now.”

The man nodded – he was a regular client of Jaebum’s and knew how these things went. “Same time next week?”

“Of course, baby.” Jaebum winked at him, taking his pants from the floor and putting them on hastily. He grabbed his shirt from the chair and threw it over his head.

Jaebum gave the man a tiny wave – the most affection he could give to any client – and walked out the door. He walked towards the direction of the employee room first, immediately making his way to the shower to cleanse his body as much as he could within five minutes. Jaebum was a prostitute but he was still somewhat hygienic.
After his mini shower, Jaebum quickly put his clothes back on and walked to the hotel room Mark had instructed him to go – room 120. He shook his body loose several times as he walked – this was his way of calming himself down. Even after years on the job, Jaebum still found himself getting nervous jitters before each client – it was stupid, they were all mostly the same, but there was just something about himself that could never let his heart rest before any appointment.

Jaebum checked his watch as he came nearer to the hotel room – it was fifteen minutes past midnight. He hoped he hadn’t kept this client waiting for long. Once he reached the door with numbers “120” written in gold, Jaebum gave his body one last shake before knocking on the door three times. He ran his hands through his face and tried his best to control his facial expressions – he had to morph back into JB.

When he heard the door slowly open, Jaebum already had his pose prepared – his whole weight rested on his left foot as his face projected a smirk that could break a million hearts. What appeared from the other side of the door, however, was enough to shatter his entire façade within seconds.

“Youngjae?” Jaebum asked disbelievingly. “You’re my last client?”

In front of him stood the same young male who came to him the week before and spent the entire time talking about his dog – the same young male who laughed as loudly as thunder and blushed as red as tomatoes. The male who had briefly made him question the line between himself and his work had returned, and he had no clue why.

“Hi JB.” He greeted back sheepishly, his cheeks turning pink once again. Youngjae refused to meet his eyes but pulled the door open wider, allowing Jaebum to enter the room.

“What are you doing here? Did you lose another bet?” He didn’t know Youngjae very well, but he knew that paying someone to have sex with him wasn’t exactly his style.

Youngjae shook his head. “I didn’t.” He muttered softly.

Why is he here then?

“Oh, so you changed your mind, did you?” Jaebum purred, purposely releasing his JB voice as he came closer to Youngjae and softly caressed the male’s arm. Youngjae looked like he was either going to run away or explode.

“No, no, I’m still not having sex!”

Jaebum removed his hand from his arm. “I’m confused then – what are you doing here?”

Youngjae laughed nervously and waddled towards the bed, sitting down. Jaebum watched him cautiously, still very much unaware of his true intentions. The younger male stared back at him with hopeful doe eyes and slowly patted the empty space beside him, urging him to sit. Jaebum wasn’t sure what was going on, but he did as he was told. There was a long period of silence that followed as they sat on the bed, but Youngjae eventually found it in him to speak.

“You ever feel like your life isn’t going the way it’s supposed to?” Youngjae asked, his eyes burning a hole on the wall.

Jaebum let out a resigned chuckle. *I graduated from one of the best universities in the country with honors and I’m working as an escort, I’m the definition of life not going the way it’s supposed to.* He didn’t say this to Youngjae though, instead nodding and humming in agreement.

“It’s just—” Youngjae finally faced him. His face seemed incredibly troubled, like he had been
keeping something in for quite some time that was dying to burst. Jaebum didn’t know why, but he found himself worrying for the boy and tried his best to keep his facial expressions stable – he was still JB and he had to keep it that way. It seemed like Youngjae noticed. “Fuck. I shouldn’t have come. I don’t even know why I asked Mark if I could see you, this is so unlike me – you probably think I’m wasting your time, and I am! I’m just going to go, I’m sorry I kept you from going home.”

Youngjae abruptly stood from the bed and moved towards the door, but Jaebum wasn’t going to let him escape so easily without a proper explanation. It was clear something was troubling him.

“Youngjae,” He quickly pulled the boy’s hand before he could reach the door, standing behind him. Youngjae kept his gaze at the door, seemingly too embarrassed to face him. “Sit down. You don’t have to leave.”

There was something about Youngjae that made Jaebum’s heart feel soft. This was only the second time they had met, but he had already grown an unexplainable form of affection for the boy that could only be explained as his old childhood desire to have a younger brother.

“I insisted Mark that I pay upfront, so you’re still getting paid even if I leave.” That kind of stung. But despite the sensation, Jaebum understood where he was coming from – he knew how his profession seemed.

“Do you want to leave?”

There was a beat of silence, followed by a tiny head shake.

“Then sit down and tell me what’s wrong.” Jaebum made sure to keep his voice soft. He didn’t want to scare him away.

Youngjae finally turned his back on the door and looked at him straight in the eyes. “You don’t think I’d be wasting your time if I stayed? You could just go home.”

Jaebum laughed. “I think you’d be wasting your money if you left right now – I’m not that cheap, you know.”

Youngjae finally cracked a smile. “Tell me about it! Mark didn’t even want to give me a discount and I’ve been playing video games with him since I was sixteen!”

“You’ve known Mark since you were sixteen?” Jaebum realized he never exactly got to find out how one of his best friends seemed to have a connection with the client that left the biggest impression on him. And Youngjae seemed like he was much older than sixteen – that meant they had known each other for quite some time. It was all just very weird and coincidental to Jaebum.

The younger of the two nodded. “Do you happen to also know Brian? Brian Kang? Bambam used to live with the two of them when he first moved here.”

Jaebum felt his jaw drop. He knew Brian Kang – hell, before he moved back to Canada for work, Brian was one of his best friends in college. Jaebum, Mark and Brian were a trio that did everything together. Mark and Brian lived together with a kind old lady who housed and took care of foreign students living in Korea. Jaebum rarely visited their house when they were in college, but he did remember Mark mentioning something about having a small Thai kid as a roommate. Jaebum never would’ve guessed that he was Youngjae’s Thai friend.

“Bambam was Mark and Brian’s roommate?” Jaebum exclaimed, his voice almost reaching a shout. Youngjae looked completely taken aback – almost scared – but Jaebum couldn’t control is
expression. The revelation was much too large for him to ignore.

“The three of them lived in the neighborhood Yugyeom and I grew up in. I’ve known Bambam since I was thirteen, but I didn’t meet Mark until about three years later,” Youngjae explained. He seemed confused about the situation and Jaebum’s somewhat excessive reaction. “How do you know Mark and Brian?”

Jaebum hesitated. Answering him would mean disclosing something about his personal life – about Jaebum – and the number one rule he made for himself was to never disclose any personal information to his clients. But Youngjae had always been different from his other clients, hadn’t he?

“We were best friends in college.”

This time it was Youngjae’s turn to react excessively. “You went to college with Mark and Brian?” He gasped. “That’s so weird.”

“What is? The fact that I went to college?” Jaebum was only teasing but he could see Youngjae immediately straightening up to deny him.

“No! I meant that it’s weird that we have so many mutual friends and I’ve never heard of you before!” Jaebum laughed. Youngjae was getting so worked up over his claim that he was starting to turn red. It was kind of cute. “Why are you laughing?”

“Because you’re cute.”

Jaebum didn’t think it was possible but Youngjae’s cheeks turned an even darker, more prominent shade of red. He began laughing and started hitting the elder as he looked away, too shy to face Jaebum after his compliment.

“So,” He began once Youngjae had somewhat calmed down. “You wanna tell me what’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why did you come see me tonight?”

Youngjae looked to the ground, embarrassed. “Oh…that.”

“I mean, people usually come back because they like fucking me, but I didn’t even touch you when you came, so…what’s the deal? Are you like, in love with me or–”

“I just think you’re a cool person!” Youngjae interrupted, his voice loud and sharp, as if all of his anxiety had poured out at once. Jaebum tilted his head, amused. “I’m not back because I want to fuck you or because I’m in love with you! I-I told you that you’d make a good friend and I really liked talking to you last week, so I feel like I can trust enough to talk to without completely ripping myself apart!”

Jaebum watched as the younger male began breathing heavily to recover from his rapid-fast explanation. It was rather odd – he came back because he genuinely liked Jaebum’s personality. That was an unusual first. It wasn’t necessarily a bad thing though.

“What about your two friends – Bambam and Yugyeom?” Youngjae shrugged.

“They’re both kind of busy with their own lives right now, we don’t really get to spend that much
time together anymore,” He looked sad now. Jaebum noted how it didn’t suit him. “Listen, I know it’s completely pathetic – I’m literally paying you to listen to me bitch about my life, but if you think about it, you’re making extra money and all you have to do is just sit next to me and nod a couple of times – I’ll even work around your schedule!

“I just,” Youngjae looked at Jaebum now, his eyes boring into him. “don’t have anyone to talk to right now.”

Jaebum felt a heavy load of sadness suddenly weigh on him. He had to keep his guard up and maintain a professional border between his job and himself but listening to Youngjae’s plea only made him sad. He didn’t pity the boy, but instead, he felt broken at the idea that someone as cheerful and likable as Youngjae had no one to tell his problems to. Agreeing to his request meant that the clear line he drew between his two lives would only be blurred further, but there was just something about the way his eyes turned into crescent moons when he smiled that made Jaebum believe the risk was an unimportant footnote. Plus, he was being compensated for his time, and that didn’t sound too bad either.

Jaebum chuckled. “Well, you’re talking to me.”

The way Youngjae smiled immediately after convinced Jaebum that he had made a decision he would constantly thank himself for. His eyes turned into two small crescent moons and his lips grew wider in a bright smile that exposed his teeth – it was a blinding experience, being at the other end of Youngjae’s smile, but there was nothing about it that made Jaebum regret ever meeting him.

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The Uber back to his apartment after his second encounter with JB was one of the happiest car rides of Youngjae’s life. Despite having close to no money left to spend, he tipped his driver the largest amount available and skipped towards his tiny studio apartment, sickeningly giddy over his newfound friendship with the escort.

Youngjae did realize that, yes, JB was getting paid to sit and listen to his problems, and that didn’t necessarily mean they were friends, but there was something digging at the back of Youngjae’s mind that insisted otherwise. JB seemed completely genuine with him. He listened as Youngjae poured out the worries that had been bothering him all week and gave him actual input – that was already much more than he was expecting from their appointment.

He replayed their conversation in his mind as he punched in his apartment code and set his shoes aside.

“You’re not a failure, you know.” Jaebum replied as they both laid on their backs on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

Youngjae scoffed. “How are you so sure?”

“Because you’re only twenty-one,” There was an expression on Jaebum’s face that made Youngjae believe that he knew what he was talking about. The older male shifted his body sideways, facing Youngjae. It felt oddly intimate. “It’s been a while since I got out of college and let me tell you – there’s a shit ton of other things that define whether or not you’re a ‘failure’ and those things aren’t how you do well in classes or if your professor likes you, it’s how you hold up when you’ve got a million rocks thrown in your direction and the only thing you have for protection is yourself.”
Youngjae’s jaw dropped at the advice he was given. It was one of the best things anyone had ever said to him.

“And personally? I think you’re holding up better than I ever did.”

Back at his apartment, Youngjae felt his lips creep into a small smile at the memory. The short hour he had with JB had been incredibly useful and therapeutic – he entered the hotel room at the beginning of the night ridden with anxiety and doubt over the progress of his life, but towards the end, it felt like he had dumped everything on the floor and left it behind. It was a refreshing feeling to have his own weight taken away like that.

Maybe it was just Youngjae’s hopeful disposition, but he really believed that they had the potential to be good friends. The revelation that JB was also heavily connected to several people in his life didn’t seem like a complete coincidence either – maybe it was their fate to meet and become friends.

Coco’s barking from across the room interrupted Youngjae’s thoughts and a bright smile formed on his face as he approached his precious puppy, picking her up from where she stood to kiss her on the nose. Coco snuggled to his touch the way she always did and that brought him a sense of comfort – whenever Bambam and Yugyeom were busy like they were now, he always had Coco.

The whereabouts of his two best friends, were currently unknown to Youngjae. Over the past week, the two of them had gotten into a big conflict with each other. He wasn’t exactly sure what had caused their sudden fight, but he knew it had something to do with Yugyeom’s new “special friend”, Jungkook. Bambam had always been the most temperamental and impulsive of the three of them, and it was no secret to anyone that he was extremely protective of his friendship with Yugyeom. Whenever Bambam and Yugyeom had a big fight, it was always impossible to get through either of them, it was wisest to just let them work things out themselves. Usually, their absence wouldn’t bother Youngjae very much, but with three mental breakdowns by Tuesday and the threat of failing a class for the first time in his life, Youngjae needed his two best friends more than ever.

He turned again to his small Maltese dog and let out a tiny smile.

“You’re the only friend I have when those two idiots abandon me.” Youngjae muttered, stroking his puppy. But as he replayed those exact same words over again in his mind, he had a burning feeling that maybe it wasn’t the absolute truth anymore.

Exactly a week later, Youngjae didn’t know how he found himself in the exact same spot he was sure he wouldn’t return to. During his previous game night with Mark, a strange bubble of courage had brewed inside him and pushed him to ask the elder if it was possible to make another appointment with his most requested employee. Although his last meeting with JB had gone extremely well and ended with satisfactory results, the week passed, and he grew to believe that he had been nothing but a nuisance to the escort, promising himself not to return even if talking to JB did help soothe his anxiety.

However, as Youngjae realized while knocking on the door of a familiar hotel room, that thought didn’t last very long.

Mark had only chuckled when he heard Youngjae’s shy request. It wasn’t a mocking laugh, but it was enough to make him rethink his decision to ask him for the favor.
“You’re shaping up to become one of his regulars.” Mark commented during their call. Youngjae could almost hear him smirk through his voice.

“And regulars get discounts, right?” Youngjae tried his best to make his voice sound sweeter than usual. JB’s rates were getting a little too high for his funds, and he was determined to do what he could to save his money while also getting an appointment.

“No.” Mark replied flatly.

“Can’t you just give me a tiny discount? Pleeeasee? I’ve known you for half a decade, isn’t that worth something?” The elder let out one of his famous high-pitched laughs. It became impossible to hate him whenever he laughed like that.

“Hey, think of this as your payment for breaking my car AC when you were in high school!”

Youngjae groaned. “But you did that when you were mad at me!”

There was a brief silence from Mark’s end before he made a groaning sound that only meant he was relenting to Youngjae’s pleas.

“If you make another appointment next week, I’ll give you a 5% discount for each one after this – for all the years you’ve bugged me.”

So that was how Youngjae ended up in the same hotel room he had been visiting for three weeks in a row, waiting to see the intimidating but kind escort he had somewhat grew to see as a friend. It was nearing one in the morning and the December air was making him freeze to his toes – he hoped JB wouldn’t take long to open up.

After knocking on the wooden door three times, Youngjae stood idly as he waited for the door to open, hearing slight rummaging coming from the room. It didn’t take very long for the person on the other end to open the door, the surprised expression he sported the week before replaced by a warm smile.

“I had a feeling you were my one o’clock.” JB said, his smile radiating warmth. He seemed genuinely happy to see Youngjae and that made him happy too – it fueled his belief that maybe JB saw him as a friend too.

“Am I your Sunday night regular now?” Youngjae teased, entering the hotel room.

“Do you want to be?” JB’s reply caught him by surprise. His tone sounded playful – flirty, almost – it tinted Youngjae’s cheeks a shade of pink he was sure JB was used to by now.

“You wish.” Youngjae had only jokingly denied his personal desire, but as the time passed, he found himself visiting JB every weekend – indeed becoming his Sunday night regular.

Youngjae came to see him so often that Mark no longer had to ask him for an appointment – it was immediately created, and charge was made on his account. The discount Mark gave him had been useful, but it didn’t stop the bills from piling up – JB hadn’t lied when he said he wasn’t cheap. Youngjae realized that he had been using up almost half of his monthly salary from his part time job on JB, but it didn’t seem to bother as much as it should. He took some comfort in the fact that he was still a college student living on meal points and convinced himself that he would have used his salary on games and candy anyway – that seemed to reassure him pretty well.
Three months passed quickly, and the cold air of winter soon morphed into spring. His weekly meetings with JB grew in casualness as the two grew comfortable sharing more details about themselves. Youngjae still didn’t know JB’s real name – and he didn’t dare ask – but he knew that the older male lived off of strawberry milk and the sound of his cats meowing in the morning. He knew that JB had been living with Jackson, a pro-fencer from Hong Kong, since he graduated from college, and that he had once walked in on him and his best friend, Jinyoung, the hotel receptionist, having sex on the living room coffee table.

(The night JB went on a rage-fueled rant about how he had to burn his contaminated table was one for the books.)

Youngjae didn’t know JB’s real name or his phone number, but that didn’t make him any less of a friend than Bambam or Yugyeom. The initial reason he sought out JB’s services was because his two best friends had been too busy with their own lives to include Youngjae, but truthfully, Bambam and Yugyeom had become readily available again less than three weeks after his second appointment with JB – Youngjae just kept coming back because he liked the older male’s company.

The weariness that used to be present in Youngjae’s throat before each appointment had dissolved into excitement – Sunday nights became the highlight of his week and even if he didn’t have a problem he needed to rant about or a shoulder he needed to cry on, Youngjae came anyway just so he could bother the male that was slowly becoming one of his favorite people. Sometimes, JB would be the one venting – usually going on and on about how Jackson never knew when to turn down his own volume, or how Jinyoung always manipulated him into doing favors, or even how Mark was never free to hang out on his days off (“You’re the reason he never wants to go out with me on Saturday nights!” “Go out where? Mark told me all you do is drag him to your studio to make him listen to your whiny R&B songs.” “They’re not whiny!”). The slight banter they had formed was enough motivation for Youngjae to keep coming back every week.

Today they were both lying down on the bed, staring at the ceiling the way they always did as Youngjae gave him a full run-down of his week. He was in the middle of telling JB how Bambam made Yugyeom build him a cat tower in his elective shop class when the older male turned to the side – a position Youngjae had grown to know as the one he always made whenever he was about to say something important.

“They’re the reason he never wants to go out with me on Saturday nights!” “Go out where? Mark told me all you do is drag him to your studio to make him listen to your whiny R&B songs.” “They’re not whiny!”). The slight banter they had formed was enough motivation for Youngjae to keep coming back every week.

“You fit my budget better.”

JB shifted his eyes and crossed his arms, seemingly unconvinced. “See, you always say that, but I know how much I charge, and unless Mark is giving you a bigger discount than you’re both letting on, I’m not sure how I fit into your budget better than a therapist.”

He was smirking now – the smug smile on his face was enough to make Youngjae roll his eyes even more.

“I’m not going to say what I know you want me to say.”
“Why not?” JB was practically whining. It was a major jump from the chic, seductive escort he had been intimidated of just three months before.

“Because it’s embarrassing!”

“You said it once before!”

“Exactly – once is enough!”

JB dramatically sighed. *Here we go again.*

“I thought by meeting you every week, I’d be gaining a new friend – a new *faithful* friend – but like everyone else in my life, you turned out to be a fake. You won’t even humor me by saying the sweet things *any* person would be glad to hear, and yet, I’m a faithful friend to you, always listening, caring—”

Youngjae groaned. The two males had become incredibly comfortable with each other to the point where JB could openly show his silly and ridiculous side without any reservations. The only downside was that they could annoy each other in the exact same way only *real* friends ever could.

“You’re the kind of person anyone ever only meets once and letting you go would be like throwing a diamond into the ocean…or some shit like that.” It was a stupid remark Youngjae had accidentally slipped out when he was going through a particularly low point in his life and felt grateful for JB’s presence. He never knew it would inflate his ego that bad.

JB’s smug grin grew even wider and he jokingly punched Youngjae’s shoulder, obviously satisfied at the answer he received.

“Oh boy, you really know how to make a prostitute feel good.”

Youngjae furrowed his brows and stared at the elder curiously, wondering if he noticed just how wrong his statement had sounded. Not even a second after Youngjae’s reaction, JB heard himself as well, freezing for a quick second before the both of them broke out in a massive laughter.

“Seriously, do you ever hear yourself sometimes?”

“Fuck off, you compared me to a diamond!”

“That was *one* time!”

“Twice, now!” Jaebum retorted, holding up two fingers in the air. Youngjae gave up trying to fight with him – it was completely useless.

As their laughter died out, the two found themselves lying silently next to each other, staring at the ceiling the way they usually did. Youngjae had come to see him so often that the silence they shared no longer moved into awkward territory – it was a nice shared silence that both parties understood. As he laid on the bed, Youngjae felt a sudden tinge of electricity flow through the fingers of his left hand. He wasn’t exactly sure what the cause of the sensation was, but as he peeked down at the hands on his sides, he noticed that JB’s fingers were in an incredibly close proximity to his – they were almost touching.

Youngjae suddenly felt his heart beat a little faster. It wasn’t a major change, but it was noticeable enough for him to take longer and deeper breaths to calm himself down. There was a sudden urge that was present at the back of his mind to slowly interlock their fingers together, but he knew that was something he definitely *couldn’t* do. Sure, they had become rather close friends and yes, JB’s
primary profession involved a lot of physical contact with other people – a simple gesture like holding hands shouldn’t have freaked Youngjae out so much, but there was just something so tremendously intimate about the idea of allowing his fingers to find its home with JB’s own. At that very moment, holding hands with JB seemed even more like an invasion of intimacy than sex, and that confused Youngjae more than anything.

“Youngjae,” JB called out, breaking him from his thoughts. The elder didn’t shift his gaze to face him the way he usually did, but instead stayed focused on the ceiling. It was unusual. “You scare me.”

Youngjae was taken aback by the sudden statement. He had expected JB to make another quirky comment or ask more about his day – things he usually did – but he hadn’t expected him to make such a serious comment.

“The only scary thing about me is how loud my voice gets when I’m doing vocal warm-ups – how does that scare you?”

JB shook his head. “Never mind, it’s nothing. Forget about it.”

“It’s okay,” Without thinking, Youngjae grabbed his hand, his thumb resting on his wrist. He saw JB slowly peek at their two hands before quickly returning to face the ceiling again. From where Youngjae’s thumb was placed, he could feel JB’s pulse – it had been growing in speed since the moment they made contact. “You can tell me.”

“I don’t know who I am when I’m with you.” Youngjae didn’t quite understand what he meant. He wished JB would turn his head and look at him the way he always did, so he could read what the older male was thinking, but he kept his eyes glued to the ceiling.

“Oh…well, who are you, anyway?” JB let out a cynical laugh.

“I’m an escort who works six nights out of a week and gets fucked so often sex doesn’t have any meaning to me anymore. I’ve screamed more names than I can count with all my fingers and toes and I barely remember more than half of them. I am, by all means, impure. But I’m also…” JB trailed off for a bit, as if he was finding the right words to say. “I’m also someone who had dreams, has goals. I’m someone who loves anime and cries whenever I watch ‘Kimi No Nawa’. I can eat a whole corndog in one bite. I make whiny R&B songs in my free time. I adopt every single stray cat I see. I’m not the role I play every night, but that’s…not the side of me I can willingly show when I’m at work.”

Youngjae was still holding his hand. He thought twice before making circles on his wrist with his thumb but decided to do so anyway. It was a friendly, comforting gesture.

“Being ‘JB’ is my job. My job is to entertain and satisfy whoever comes in, and like it or not, you are part of my job. What scares me is that I’m not JB when I’m with you – I don’t even know your last name and you’ve pried me open faster than anyone else in my life. It fucking scares me that I can’t turn on my switch and just be JB around you.”

Youngjae could almost hear the sound of his walls breaking. This was the deepest conversation they had ever had involving JB, and if he was being honest, he was glad the older had grown to trust him enough to share such an intimate thought about himself.

“Is it such a bad thing to not be ‘JB’ around me?”

He hesitantly nodded. “It’s how I control this part of me – it’s separate and doesn’t spill into the
other sections of my life where I just get to be the usual version of me. I know what my job is and what it requires me to be, and ‘JB’ is the reason why I’m still able to look at my face in the mirror and not want to throw myself away. He’s not me.”

“Then I’ll ask you again – who are you?”

JB broke out into a cynical smile and finally faced Youngjae, their eyes meeting for the first time since his confession.

“You don’t have to tell me your real name or where you live or whatever, just tell me what makes you so different from JB.”

The elder raised his eyebrow, seemingly unsure of Youngjae’s request. But it didn’t take long for him to shrug and give Youngjae the answer to his question.

“You ever been to a cat café, Youngjae?” The question seemed completely out of the blue, but Youngjae decided to humor him, believing it would lead to a greater meaning.

“I’ve been to a dog café before, but never gone to a cat one – why?”

“Once I pay off all the debts I made as a student and save up enough money, I’m going to open my own cat café. It’ll be full of cats and fur and everything that could possibly make any cat-lover happy. It’ll be heaven on earth.” Youngjae looked over at JB. He had the biggest, happiest grin on his face – the largest he had ever seen on anyone. It was contagious.

It was such a simple dream, but it seemed to scream JB’s name on all possible senses. He wanted to open a cat café – of course he did. The man was completely obsessed with making sure every stray cat in the world found a home, the revelation failed to surprise Youngjae in any way.

“I’m twenty-six now. That means I’ve been working and saving up for almost three years,” JB paused and let out a breathy laugh. “I’ve been doing this job for three years.”

“Do you ever wish you never started being…an escort?”

The elder thought long and hard before shaking his head, going against Youngjae’s expectations completely.

“I tried the whole office thing – didn’t work. I don’t think I was ever wired for that kind of shit.”

“Me neither.”

At some point in the conversation, their hands parted. But after Youngjae’s response, JB found his way back, taking Youngjae’s hand in his instead. The older male looked at him with genuine concern and care in his eyes, and Youngjae would be lying if he said his heart didn’t skip several beats at the combination. They had had many discussions in the past about Youngjae’s unhappiness as an economics major and his recent interest in musical composition, but he decided to shelf the issue for a different week – he was trying to learn more about JB.

“I’m a timid person, Youngjae,” He said, coming after a brief period of silence. “People often mistake me as cold and uncaring, but really, I’m just too afraid to make conversation. God forbid you ever see me outside this shitty hotel room because I don’t think I’d have the guts to come up to you and say hi.”

“Well, why not?”
“Because I don’t think you’d like me outside this place. I don’t think you’d like to meet the timid, anime-obsessed cat lady that I usually am on a day-to-day basis. He’s lame, he sings way too much, and he definitely doesn’t seem like the type of guy who could give you the best blowjob of your life.”

Youngjae rolled his eyes. “JB, you’re adorable, but you’re also a little bit stupid,” JB widened his eyes, shocked by the comment. “I don’t think there’s ever been a moment between us where you weren’t genuinely the timid, anime-obsessed cat lady you claim to be. I’ve only ever spoken to JB once and that was when he tried to have sex with me barely five minutes after we met. I may not know you outside this place but whoever he is, that’s the guy I’ve been friends with for the last three months.”

Maybe it was the fact that it was nearing three in the morning or the way the atmosphere of the room was coming down to smother his lungs with affection, but for a brief moment, Youngjae felt JB’s hand squeeze his harder. He didn’t fully understand what was meant by that gesture but based on the way the older male was looking at him, he had a feeling that it carried some meaning.

Youngjae found himself looking at JB differently. Whenever they interacted, there would always be a muted, approachable yellow that surrounded the male – it felt warm and signified how safe Youngjae felt around his new friend. But for just a moment, the color around JB changed. It had morphed into a vibrant pink – intense and overpowering everything around him, including Youngjae himself. It started from the way his lips turned upwards in a small smile, to the double moles that marked his left eyelid. Youngjae knew he was just becoming drowsy, but the change in color somehow signified a change that was occurring within him. He wasn’t sure what it was just yet, but he was certain it had something to do with the way he was suddenly viewing JB.

“What time is it?” Youngjae asked, not bothering to pull out his phone to check the time. JB glanced at the clock on the nightstand beside him and sighed.

“It’s 2:59.”

Youngjae’s face dropped. They were out of time. He gave the older male a soft smile before untangling their hands.

“We never seem to have enough time. I always leave this place wishing I could stay longer.” Youngjae let out a small chuckle before shaking his head.

JB’s eyes widened at the statement, as if it wasn’t something he had expected to hear. “Wait. Do you mean that?”

Youngjae nodded. It didn’t seem like a big deal – they were becoming good friends, and it felt perfectly normal to want to spend more time with a good friend. JB took a deep breath, not saying anything more.

“I should get going then.” Youngjae sat up from the bed and started making his way to his shoes on the floor when JB reached for him again, sitting up as well.

“Do you have any classes in the morning?” He asked, eyes hopeful. The question took Youngjae aback – it was the first time JB had ever asked him such a thing.

“I have work at three, but nothing before then. Why?”

JB looked down at his legs and fidgeted with his fingers. If Youngjae didn’t know any better, he would have thought he was nervous. But that would be completely out of the realm of possibility,
“Y-You could always stay a little longer. If you wanted to, I mean,” Youngjae faced him, eyes confused. “You said that you always leave wishing you could stay longer, right? If you meant it, y-you can. You meant it, right?”

“But I only paid for an hour.” He replied, voice soft. He wasn’t entirely sure what the older male meant.

“I won’t charge you!” JB assured almost immediately. He rubbed the back of his neck shyly. “I just…I always wish you could stay longer too.”

The way JB stared at him made Youngjae’s heart pound in his chest. He had just asked him to stay longer – the first time any of them had made such a request. He seemed hopeful, and incredibly shy. It was the shyness that the escort portrayed that made Youngjae feel like he was getting kicked in the face. JB was absolutely adorable and it only made the pink around him even more vibrant. Youngjae’s heart was ready to burst. It was the first time he had ever felt this way about him.

“Ohkay.”

The way JB’s smile instantly appeared on his face caught Youngjae by surprise in the most affectionate way. Suddenly he wasn’t so drowsy anymore.

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Im Jaebum was an idiot.

“Im Jaebum is an idiot.”

Jaebum stared back at his reflection in the mirror, nodding in agreement with his own statement. He rubbed his face and groaned, exasperated by the situation. He turned off the faucet and walked out of the bathroom, making himself a bowl of cereal before joining his roommate on the couch.

Jackson was watching some fencing program on the television as Jaebum’s three cats roamed around the living room, minding their own business. He tried his best to keep his focus on the cereal he was supposed to be eating and not on the way Youngjae’s tiny hand held his own night before, but that plan didn’t seem to be going so well.

“Yah, stop making a mini earthquake with your leg-shaking!” Jackson demanded, taking note of how fidgety his roommate was being.

“I’m not shaking my legs.”

Jackson rolled his eyes. “You’re spilling milk all over the floor!” He pointed at the tiny droplets of white liquid on the floor, finally grabbing Jaebum’s attention. Jaebum groaned in frustration and quickly grabbed a tissue, wiping off the milk and mentally thanking Jinyoung for talking them out of carpeting the floors.

“What’s wrong?” Jackson turned off the television and faced him, seemingly determined to get to the bottom of the situation.

“Nothing’s wrong.” The Chinese male seemed far from convinced.

“Is this about that cute college kid who looks kind of like an otter?”
Jaebum’s eyes widened in surprise. “Who told you about that?”

“Jinyoung tells me *everything* during pillow talk.” Jaebum groaned again and threw a pillow at his roommate, covering his ears afterwards.

“How many times have I told you I don’t want to hear any details about your sex life?”

“So much, I don’t even listen to you anymore when you say that,” Jackson giggled as he took the cereal bowl from Jaebum and started eating it for himself, leaving his roommate even more exasperated than before. “But seriously, is it about that cute otter kid?”

Jaebum looked away, feeling his cheeks turn red as his mind pulled up an image of Youngjae. The boy *did* look like an otter, and it made him even more smitten for him.

“He’s a client, Jackson.”

“A client who gets you blushing like a fifteen-year-old girl.”

“I don’t blush like a fifteen-year-old girl!”

Jackson snorted. “I see the look on your face when you’re heading out to work on Sundays. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were going to church to see Jesus – god knows you need it!”

“Fuck off, Jackson.”

“Are you scared he won’t like you that way because of your job?” Jackson paid no mind to the rebuffs he had received. Jaebum shrugged, refusing to answer the question. “You paid off all your student debts last year and you’ve almost reached your budget for the cat café! If you’re scared he won’t want to date an escort, just quit. You can afford it.”

Jaebum thought long and hard about Jackson’s suggestions. He could find no fault in anything he said, but he had difficult time admitting to himself he had a thing for Youngjae, admitting it to others was a whole different story.

“You can have my cereal, I’m going back to bed.” Jaebum turned the television back on for his roommate and stood from the sofa, petting all three of his cats on the head as he walked back to his room.

“Hey! Can we go to the convenience store?” Jackson shouted behind him.

“Go by yourself.”

“No!” Jaebum decided to ignore him and close his door.

Jaebum turned off all the lights in his room and crawled towards his bed, laying on his back. He began to imagine Youngjae beside him, telling him some funny story about his life and laughing his strong, loud laugh endlessly. The fact that he still couldn’t kept his mind off of his client made him irritated.

*Im Jaebum was an idiot.*

*Im Jaebum was sort of in love with a client and he was absolutely sure it was the dumbest thing he had ever done in his entire life.*

Youngjae wasn’t some wealthy, sexy, experienced sugar daddy – he was the complete opposite of that. He was a broke, adorable, unseasoned college student just making his first steps into
adulthood. There was no reason for Jaebum to fall completely head over heels for the young boy, but he did. He did so without any complaints and restrictions. He fell into an endless void of breathy laughs and excited screaming, and there was not a cell in him that could deny how much of an enjoyable journey it had been.

It was only pity at first – he played along with the boy’s request because he could understand his loneliness and felt pity for the sadness he was feeling. But as time went on, Jaebum found himself looking forward to the Sunday nights where he would see Youngjae. He would purposely pack his best-smelling cologne with him and douse himself with it after every client that came before him. He would start noticing his client’s tiny mannerisms and the mole that resided under his right eye and go to bed hours later picturing these exact things. It took him a few weeks to admit to himself that Youngjae was his favorite client and he was content with things staying that way, but things never went according to plan when it came to Youngjae.

Jaebum could pinpoint the exact date his feelings for Youngjae went from mere adoration to fully-fledged affection – his twenty-sixth birthday. It was a common occurrence for Jaebum to work during his birthday – his parents were back in Ilsan, so a short phone call was the only obligation he needed to fulfill. Celebrating with his friends wasn’t a major issue either – his birthday had always been the only standing reason Mark would willingly abandon his Saturday night games for, so any celebrations would always occur on his day off. Working on his birthday never really bothered Jaebum, but somehow, he had unconsciously let it slip to Youngjae that his special day would occur right in the middle of their next appointment, and that was all it took to set things in motion.

Jaebum didn’t think Youngjae had heard or that he would remember, but the next time they met, the younger male arrived at the hotel room with a big black bag that he wouldn’t disclose details about. He remembered Youngjae had booked him for two hours that night – from 11 to 1 – and when the clock struck midnight in the middle of their time, Youngjae pulled out a medium-sized birthday cake from the big bag he carried and sang him happy birthday. It was completely unexpected and the first time anyone had ever surprised him on his birthday.

Jaebum was completely whipped for Youngjae the moment he realized he had gotten him chocolate cake – his favorite – but the present he brought along with him was what really got him trapped.

“JB, I don’t actually know what you like, but I know that you have three adorable cats, so this is my birthday present to you,” Youngjae pulled out a big blue binder from his bag. At the front, there were the words ‘For JB’ in English stuck together with different cut-outs from magazines. He handed the binder to Jaebum who proceeded to hold his tears back the moment he saw its contents. “These are a bunch of coupons and discounts I collected from most cat-supply stores in Seoul, and they’ll last you about a year, so you can get Nora, Kunta and Odd all the toys and things they want at considerably lower prices! I also put in my reviews and recommendations for all the cat stores and shelters around town that I visited, so you’d get a bigger insight on all the places you could take them to! I’m sorry if it seems like kind of a shitty gift. I wish I asked Mark earlier about your birthday, so I could have gotten you something way cooler.”

Jaebum’s eyes were beginning to water, but he hid it by flipping through the pages of the binder, finding pages where selfies of Youngjae at different cat stores were glued on along with handwritten comments and insights about his experiences. He felt like he was being treated like a precious being.

“But you’re allergic to cats,” Jaebum said in realization as he flipped through the pages. He looked up at the younger, who merely laughed shyly and looked away. Jaebum spotted a small red
rash on his neck and shook his head, blown away by his actions. “You risked your health just so you could put together a present for me? Me? Youngjae, you shouldn’t have done this.”

“What are you talking about? Of course, I should have! You and I are friends, right?” The innocent hope that was plastered on Youngjae’s face gave Jaebum an unexpected feeling of joy. He nodded his head. It was at that exact moment Jaebum knew he was going to stay by Youngjae’s side for quite some time.

Jaebum smiled at the memory. He had brought the cake home with him and shared it the next day with Jackson and Jinyoung, the latter of whom stared at him suspiciously once he learned Youngjae had brought him the cake. Jaebum kept the blue binder at his desk, always open at a specific page with a particularly adorable picture of the younger sneezing as he crouched beside a small kitten in a cage. Next to the picture, Youngjae had written, “The cat made me sneeze a lot, but she was so cute I wish I could’ve brought her home! Damn you, immune system!” Jaebum never failed to chuckle whenever he read his captions.

But two months had passed since his birthday, and Jaebum’s feelings never dimmed even for a second. He wanted to kick himself whenever he caught himself staring at his client because that was what Youngjae was – his *client*. Sure, they had become rather good friends, but before anything else, Youngjae was part of his job. He had made a personal promise to himself not to cross the line between his job and his life, but from his first appointment with Youngjae, that line was crossed, blurred, and erased all together – with Youngjae, there was no line anymore, just an endless path with nothing but sun.

Jaebum stayed in his position for hours, replaying the events of the night over and over again in his mind. He had made a bold move, asking Youngjae to stay the night. He half-expected the younger to rebuff him and create some fumbled excuse in order to leave, but he didn’t. Instead he stayed, and they talked until the sun rose and both of their eyes couldn’t keep open for much longer.

Thoughts of his favorite client, however, did nothing to soothe the growling stomach that appeared once the day bled into the afternoon. He dragged himself out of bed after Mark’s daily call and knocked on Jackson’s room. It took less than a second for his roommate to open the door, eyes big and soft.

“Yes, my beloved roommate?” He greeted, raising the pitch of his voice to sound cuter. Jaebum scoffed in disgust.

“Are you hungry? You wanna go to the convenience store and grab a bite?” Jackson let out a wide smile and quickly grabbed his coat from his room, walking past him towards the door.

“I assume you’re paying!” Jaebum rolled his eyes – a common habit of his whenever he was around Jackson – but grabbed his coat and followed along anyway.

The convenience store was a short walk from Jaebum and Jackson’s apartment – it was a regular chain store, but they had his favorite brand of strawberry milk, so he couldn’t complain. Walking in with Jackson, however, made Jaebum realize he had never actually been to the convenience store in the daylight. He would usually stop by late into the night, just as he was getting off from work, to pick up a late-night snack or something to refuel him. He had never really seen anyone there that wasn’t drunk or just plain creepy.

Jackson ran into the store like a child in a toy store, giggling with excitement as the thought of Jaebum paying for his food lit up his eyes.
“Don’t even think about trying to buy an entire shelf’s worth of food – one drink and one item of food is *all* I’m paying for,” Jaebum warned and walked straight to the chairs at the back of the store, paying no mind to cashier getting scolded by his manager on his right. He handed his card to his roommate who immediately disappeared to the tall aisles of food. “Don’t forget to get me strawberry milk and ramen!”

“Yes, daddy!” Jackson shouted from one of the aisles, the nickname making him shiver.

He sat on one of the chairs, scrolling mindlessly through the numerous apps on his phone and his schedule for the night when Jackson returned, his arms full of food and drinks. He very clearly violated Jaebum’s spending limit, but that was something he had already expected the moment he decided to take Jackson to the convenience store.

“At least you got my strawberry milk.” Jaebum commented as he took his card and slipped it in his wallet.

“The cashier is cute,” Jackson commented, tearing open his seasoning packets. “I feel bad for him though; his manager tore the fuck out of him for being late. Kid looked like he was ready to cry.”

“He shouldn’t have been late then.” Jaebum replied and made his way to the microwave, Jackson tailing behind him.

“Don’t say that, I want to protect him! Maybe he just overslept!”

“It’s four in the afternoon.”

“You wake up at five on most days, Jaebum.” Jackson rolled his eyes, walking past him. He placed his ramen in the microwave and set the time, drawing an annoyed grunt from Jaebum who had planned to use the microwave first.

“Hey, why don’t you buy me a can of soda while you wait? It’ll take a while for me to perfect my recipe.” Jackson suggested, pulling out his signature puppy dog eyes.

“Are you fucking serious right now?” The growling in Jaebum’s stomach wasn’t getting any better and he just wanted to eat.

Jackson pulled his card from his wallet and handed it to him. “I’ll even make your ramen for you!”

“Fine.” He grumbled and shuffled his way towards the refrigerator. He grabbed a can of Coke and another bottle of strawberry milk before walking towards the cashier in victory. *An extra two bucks? Oh, that’ll really show him, Im.*

The growling in Jaebum’s stomach suddenly grew exponentially and he could only focus on the floor as he dragged his feet towards the cash register. He could see the cashier flipping through a magazine from the corner of his eye and stopped himself from letting out mocking chuckle at how bad of a worker he was. He reached the register with his eyes still on the ground and noticed the cashier drop the magazine he was reading – Jaebum was too distracted by his hunger to realize the reason.

“Jackson, do you want anything else?” Jaebum called out across the room, turning his head lazily before he settled the items down.

“Just your love and affection!”

Jaebum sighed in irritation. “Can we talk about you moving out in the near future?”
“No, because I bring color to your life!”

Jaebum didn’t say anything in return, but instead muttered a quiet, “Dumbass.”

He settled the Coke and strawberry milk on the table and took out Jackson’s card, handing it to the cashier as he checked the time on his phone. When the male on the other side failed to respond, Jaebum finally raised his head and felt his jaw drop at the sight of person he was facing.

“JB?”

The tiny mole he spotted just underneath the cashier’s right eye was enough to almost make him pass out.

It was Youngjae. His favorite client. The sun of his nights. The person who made his heart jump like it was in a never-ending game of jump rope.

He was seeing Youngjae outside of their dark hotel room for the first time and the only thing he could hear was the sound of his chest exploding.

Jaebum was completely speechless. He didn’t know what to say. He suddenly thought of how he was dressed – he looked far from presentable in his baggy sweatpants and hoodie. He had his hood pulled up and tight around his face – he looked like an egg. He looked like Jaebum.

“Y-you work here?” Was all he managed to squeeze out. Youngjae nodded slowly, the shock in his face almost matching his.

“T-this is the job I was telling you about.” The younger male stuttered, his eyes still wide.

“Here? At this convenience store? B-but this is so close to my apartment.”

Youngjae’s mouth made a big ‘O’. “This is close to where you live?”

“Yah, Im Jaebum! Why are you taking so long, I’m thirsty!” Jackson shouted, walking towards the register. Jaebum was too shocked to realize that his roommate had just revealed his real name to a client.

“Im Jaebum?” Youngjae repeated, the name rolling off his tongue like a foreign word.

“Do you know him?” Jackson asked Jaebum. Jaebum didn’t know what to do – he didn’t know if he should nod or shake his head. Did Youngjae want him to deny? Did he want to reveal who Youngjae was to Jackson, the nosiest person in his life?

Before Jaebum could say or do anything, however, a short, older man came to the register, nostrils flaring in anger.

“Choi Youngjae! Didn’t I tell you to take out the trash? You can’t even come on time and instead of doing what I told you to do, you’re out here reading magazines and making customers wait! God, Youngjae, what’s been going on with you?” The man shouted, instantly draining all color from Youngjae’s face. The student immediately bowed and apologized, quickly making his way towards the back entrance when the man grabbed him by the arm, stopping him. “Forget it, I already took care of it. Learn to be competent for just one day, will you?”

“I’m sorry, sir, it won’t happen again.” Youngjae kept his eyes focused on the ground as the man walked away, mumbling angry words to himself. Once he had left, Youngjae reluctantly faced Jaebum again, his face mortified.
This time, it was Jaebum who was repeating his name like a foreign word.

“Choi Youngjae?”

It felt strange to know his full name – especially paired with the fact that he was not given such knowledge with the owner’s consent. It felt like he was trespassing into a separate, personal part of his life.

Suddenly Jaebum remembered how he heard the name in the first place and thought back to the scene that had just occurred.

“Are you okay?” He asked hesitantly. He felt himself become more protective of the younger male and the urge to defend Youngjae began growing within him. Jaebum tried pushing it down as deep as he could – he was in no place to act that way.

Youngjae rubbed the back of his neck wearily and avoided eye contact.

“Yeah, it was completely my fault,” His eyes shifted to the items on the counter and quickly scanned them. “J-just the soda and milk?”

Jaebum was still in too much shock to form coherent sentences, let alone ask important questions. How long had Youngjae been an employee at his usual convenience store? Had he been under his nose this entire time? How many more coincidences would bring them together until it became something more than that? Millions of similar questions shot through his mind, but none ever made it past his lips.

Instead, all Jaebum could blurt out was, “So, you work here?” A question he had already asked before.

Youngjae seemed equally still at shock.

“Oh, yeah, I d-don’t live too far away from here either, and the pay isn’t completely shit.” The younger male replied softly.

Another fucking coincidence.

“I live two blocks from here.” Jaebum heard himself saying. What was he doing? He was basically revealing personal information to a client – a clear violation of his rules.

Youngjae finally looked up from the ground and met his eyes in a pure expression of surprise. “Me too.”

“Wait – what?”

Youngjae began laughing nervously. “If I knew we lived so close we could’ve just carpooled!”

It was a bad joke. He seemed to know that. Youngjae’s expression went from nervous to completely mortified. He quickly placed Jaebum’s items in a plastic bag and handed it to him.

“It’s on the house!”

“For real? Shit, thanks man!” Jaebum heard Jackson exclaim beside him. He forgot he wasn’t alone. His roommate took the plastic bag from the counter and hopped to their table, overjoyed to have saved a few extra bucks.

“Hey, I can’t let you do that, you’re already in enough trouble with your boss.”
“No, really, it’s fine!”

Jaebum shook his head, pulling out some money from his pocket. “I get enough from you every week, I can’t take more of your money than I already have – I’m sucking you dry.”

It took a brief second for him to register what exactly had been said, but once he did, it was much too late, as Youngjae was already completely frozen, cheeks tinted red. The reference to their regular meetings and the slight unintended sexual innuendo was all it took to make Jaebum embarrassed enough to run away.

He placed the cash on the counter and gave a nervous smile.

“Uh, keep the change! I’ll s-see you next week!” Jaebum exclaimed, practically shouting at the younger male who only seemed even more embarrassed. “I mean, if y-you’re still coming. Yeah! Okay!”

Jaebum quickly sprinted to where Jackson was seated and dragged him out of the convenience store, ignoring the protests and cursing of his confused roommate.

On the walk back to their apartment, Jaebum’s mind flew through all the coincidences that surrounded their friendship and began considering the possibility that perhaps not all of it had been a complete coincidence. Maybe it was just foolish optimism, but Jaebum wanted to believe that something was pushing them together – that maybe it wasn’t the worst thing in the world if he liked Youngjae and Youngjae liked him.

But it was clear his mindless blabbering had ruined any chances of his thoughts ever becoming reality. For the first time in months, Jaebum wasn’t sure if he would get to hear his favorite laugh again.

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“When the fuck did I become friends with a creepy stalker like you?”

“Shut up Bam, just let him do his thing!”

“He’s been scrolling that Instagram profile so far down he’s at 2013!”

“Youngjae just has a little crush!”

Youngjae paused his analysis of an Instagram post and put down his phone, staring right into Yugyeom’s eyes. They were sitting together at a café near Youngjae’s apartment – the sheer proximity to his neighborhood made him nervous that JB – Jaebum – would suddenly appear and overhear their conversation.

“I do not have a crush on him.”

Bambam let out a loud, cruel laugh and rolled his eyes. “Is that why you stared at his Facebook profile for an hour last night trying to decide whether to should add him or not?”

“He’s my friend! Friends add each other on Facebook!”

Bambam narrowed his eyes. “We’ve been friends for ten years and you only added me last year to see if I was posting embarrassing pictures of you behind your back.”

“Because you were!”
“So, if you two are friends, why didn’t you add him?”

Youngjae moved to speak but quickly stopped himself when he realized he had no answer to his friend’s question. JB – Jaebum – was his friend, but at the same time, he was also someone Youngjae was paying to keep seeing. It was a strange relationship. They were extremely close friends in the sense that both openly shared intimate details to each other, but they were also not friends in the way that something as small and trivial as a Facebook friend request was worth a second thought.

Yugyeom noticed his growing worry and punched Bambam’s arm. “Leave him alone, all right? At least he has someone to talk to when we’re both not around.”

Bambam groaned but agreed nonetheless. “At least tell me what you’ve found out about him from your nonstop stalking.”

“Well, I mean, there’s really not much I found that he hadn’t already told me, but I found old pictures of him in college with Mark and Brian and he looked so cute!” He pulled up a picture from 2013 of the three of them sitting at a campsite in the middle of the night and proudly handed it over to his friend. Bambam scanned the picture for several seconds before raising his head and furrowing his eyebrows at Youngjae. “Doesn’t he look so cute?”

“You think he looks cute here?” He asked, as if the statement itself had disgusted him.

“Yeah,” Youngjae muttered quietly. “I think he looks adorable.”

“You think he looks cute with bleach blonde hair and an orange fringe?” Youngjae nodded slowly, not fully understanding what his friend meant. Bambam let out a small laugh and returned his phone before turning to Yugyeom, smirking. “You’re right, Youngjae has a crush.”

Youngjae’s eyes widened and he slammed his fist on the table. “I don’t have a crush on him!”

“You kind of do.” Yugyeom agreed.

“Gyeom? I thought you were on my side!”

“I was until you basically proved Bam right!”

He sighed in exasperation. “How did I prove him right?”

“Otter,” Bambam began, sipping his cappuccino. “No one could pull off that ugly hairstyle. No one. Not even a hunk like JB. And the fact that you still think he’s cute even with that deformed hair color… well, that just says a lot.”

Youngjae took another look at the picture on his phone. JB sat on a log beside Mark, a stick in his right hand holding several marshmallows. His hair was bleach blonde – almost white – with a big orange stripe around his fringe. He should have looked terrible, but he didn’t. At least not to Youngjae. The picture was taken and posted long before he became an escort and assumed the moniker “JB”, he must have been around twenty-one at the at the time – exactly Youngjae’s age. The difference in age showed. JB seemed much more carefree and loose, a slight contrast to the JB he knew who often came off as guarded and stiff. Looking at the image again, Youngjae noticed there was one large factor that stayed the same throughout both ages – his wide, eye-crinkling smile.

There was always something about the way he smiled that never failed to make his knees shake. It always came out more often that JB intended for it to, but it was the one thing Youngjae could
always count on to remember that he was a human too. Whenever Youngjae succeeded in teasing that smile out of him, it always felt like his heart had expanded three sizes and he never failed to become even more greedy each time. There was just something about the way JB was around him that made Youngjae think that maybe, for once, Bambam was right about something. Maybe he did have a little crush.

Why else did he get so flustered over seeing him at the convenience store? Or why he spent two weeks visiting cat stores and compiling a complete book for his birthday when he was deathly allergic to cats? Why did Youngjae keep coming to see him every week if it meant working more shifts at a job he hated just to see him for an hour? Why did that hour never feel like enough if he only saw JB as a platonic friend? Youngjae suddenly began laughing at his thoughts. He had a crush on an escort he was paying to become his friend. That was a revelation he did not expect to uncover over cheap coffee with his two best friends.

“Uh, Bam? I think we broke Youngjae.” Yugyeom waved his hand in front of Youngjae’s face, attempting to snap him out of his catatonic state.

“Why me? Of all people, why me?” He began pleading, still staring straight.

Bambam slowly moved his chair closer, softly rubbing his back. “You okay there, buddy?”

“Of all the stupid twenty-one-year-olds in the world, why did I have to have a crush on someone I was paying to be my friend?” Youngjae buried his face in his hands, internally screaming at himself for being so stupid.

“You guys are friends though.” Yugyeom said, trying his best to calm him down.

“We are, but now it’s just going to be weird! He’s an escort – he’s trained to not catch feelings!”

Bambam laughed. “Jeez, you’re acting like he had to go through some sort of training to be an escort.”

Youngjae and Yugyeom shot him an icy glare.

“Time and place, Bam.”

“Listen, I’m not trying to be a dick or anything, I’m just saying he’s human too. What you guys have is a lot more than just sex – heck, it’s not even sex! What you have is personal, it’s authentic. You don’t just fuck him blind, pay up and leave. You guys have an actual, real relationship, and if he’s human, then he has as much chance to feel something about you as you to him – and if he hasn’t already, then he’s definitely an advanced sex robot.”

Youngjae’s eyes widened as Yugyeom froze. “Bambam…did you just give actual advice?” The youngest asked, his voice trembling in shock.

He sipped his cappuccino. “It doesn’t happen often, but I do have the ability to be wise when someone I care about needs it.”

Yugyeom scoffed. “Where was this wisdom when I was afraid of not getting into any university?”

“What the fuck are you talking about? I did give you wisdom!”

“You told me to turn to stripping to support myself!”

“Because you have the height for it!”
“Guys!” Youngjae yelled, gathering the attention of other customers at the café but effectively ending his two friends’ argument. “I can’t believe I’m ever saying this but…Bambam might be onto something.”

“I’m not all legs and fashion – you have a crush on JB and you’re afraid he’ll freak out because you’re always so obvious whenever you have a crush.”

Youngjae sulked in his seat, irritated at the accuracy of his statement. “You know me way too well, it pisses me off.”

Bambam smirked, putting his arm around Youngjae. Beside them, Yugyeom smiled fondly at the rare sight of all three of them getting along.

“So, are you going to see him again this Sunday?” Yugyeom asked.

Youngjae bit his lip, whining at the question. “I haven’t decided. I made a complete fucking fool of myself when he came to the store, and he just had to come right around the time Mr. Lee was pissed and kept yelling at me. He’s got to think I’m some sort of loser now.”

“What was it like, seeing him outside?” Yugyeom asked, leaning his chin on his hand. He had a pure, doe-eyed expression on his face, like he seemed genuinely interested in what Youngjae had to say. Yugyeom had always been sweet like that – he was much more kind-spirited and soft compared to his best friend, and for as long as Youngjae had known him (practically his entire life), he had never changed his best qualities.

“It was…really weird.”

“ Weird how?” Bambam chimed in, getting interested as well.

“Just, everything about my situation with him is weird. Did you know he’s the friend Mark and Brian always mentioned when we were high school? Did you ever meet him?”

The younger shook his head. “He never really came over.”

“Anyway, it was a weird coincidence when I found out he’s close to the two guys who looked out for us a lot, but then he comes by where I work, and I find out he’s lived near me all this time?” Youngjae shook his head. “There’s just been way too many big coincidences surrounding us and I don’t know…it’s just weird.”

Yugyeom raised his eyebrow. “Are you saying it’s like…fate? Like something’s bringing you together?”

Youngjae heard the faint sound of something being slapped behind him but found himself too focused on the situation to pay attention.

“No, I wouldn’t go that far. I’m just saying that…maybe it wasn’t a complete surprise we ended up finding each other – it would’ve happened sooner or later anyway, right?”

“I still wonder why it wasn’t sooner.”

Another faint slap.

“Tell me – did he look cuter or uglier?” Bambam asked, placing his hand on Youngjae’s shoulder.
“He looked like a real person. Usually, whenever I see him he’d just come from a session with someone else, so he always looks like he’s ready to…you know, go. But on Monday, he just had this big oversized hoodie on with sweat pants and oh my god, you should’ve seen how cute he looked. He had his whole hood up and pulled tight all around his face – he looked like a cute egg!”

Yugyeom raised his eyebrow. “A cute…egg?” His question led Bambam to shake his head furiously.

“This is what true love looks like, Gyeom, we shouldn’t question it.”

His statement earned a strong hit on the chest from Youngjae.

“What I meant was that he seemed like some regular guy I could’ve ran into on the way to school or something. He’s not this cool, sexy escort all the time – he’s got a whole different life outside of his job and…” Youngjae trailed off, his mind suddenly going through all the possible endings to his sentence. He was beginning to reach some sort of revelation he hadn’t even thought to seek out just an hour earlier, and it was beginning to frighten him.

“And? How is that making you feel?” Bambam’s voice was soft, encouraging him to take the final step.

When his mind finally reached a conclusion, Youngjae couldn’t help but let out an exasperated chuckle.

“And I think I want to see if I could be part of that life.”

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On Sunday night, Youngjae made sure to clean up slightly more than usual. He wore his favorite sweater and gave himself a couple sprays of the fancy cologne he stole from Bambam’s closet. He decided to at least attempt to style his hair and try a hairstyle different from the flat black mop that almost covered his eyes. He wanted to seem presentable on this particular day – he had made the very brave decision to confess. Youngjae wasn’t expecting anything to come out of it. If anything, he felt that it would help him get over his feelings better if he just became open with it. He was hoping that JB wouldn’t be too freaked out over his feelings, especially considering how they were only supposed to be “friends”, but either way, Youngjae had prepared himself in case tonight’s appointment would be their very last. He was hoping with all he had that it wouldn’t be.

Youngjae walked through the motel lobby and spotted Jinyoung sitting at the front desk. He had come twenty minutes earlier than his appointment with the sole purpose of getting himself ready for what was to come, but seeing Jinyoung blankly tapping away on the motel computer compelled something in him to walk over and say hi. A bolder Youngjae was taking control now.

“Hi Jinyoung.” He greeted softly, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. He didn’t know Jinyoung very well, but they would sometimes talk whenever Youngjae arrived early for his appointment with JB. He was always friendly.

Jinyoung raised his head from the computer screen and smirked. “Well, if it isn’t JB’s favorite client.”

Youngjae almost choked on his spit. “F-favorite client? Come on, that’s not a real thing.”

“I’m just saying.” Jinyoung’s smirk grew more mischievous. “He talks about you all the time. Your birthday isn’t for another six months but he’s been bugging me about what to get you since January.”
“January?” Youngjae’s mind was running over multiple theories and possibilities now. Why was he planning so early? Why did he care? Did this even mean anything?

“January.” Jinyoung affirmed, resting his chin on his hand.

When Youngjae stayed quiet, Jinyoung spoke again. “I heard you ran into each other at a convenience store.”

“What? Oh, yeah, he came to where I work.” He tried his best to reply as casually as possible. He didn’t want Jinyoung to know that their accidental meeting had been on his mind for an entire week.

“He freaked out about it for a bit, you know,” Jinyoung began, the glint in his eyes never leaving. Youngjae found himself beginning to panic again – should he have not come to see JB after accidentally finding out his identity? “He was convinced you weren’t coming back and thought he blew it with you.”

He raised his head. “Blew it with me? Wait, Jinyoung, what do you mean –”

“Oh fuck! I just remembered the guest in 202 found a rat in the closet, I gotta go take care of that,” Jinyoung suddenly interrupted and took a ring of keys from under the desk. He gave Youngjae a smile that made him feel somewhat uneasy – like he had been played – and began walking out of his corner in the front desk. “It was nice talking to you, Youngjae, I’m sure JB’s waiting for you already.”

Youngjae didn’t even get the chance to say anything back and Jinyoung was already out the lobby. He sighed. A lot of what Jinyoung said was making him feel strange – he knew that he was JB’s best friend, so his words must’ve been reliable to a certain extent. At the back of his mind, he knew that Jinyoung was suggesting that Youngjae wasn’t alone in his feelings. But at the very front, Jinyoung’s words only made him more anxious.

“Don’t let it get to your head – you can do this, Choi.” Youngjae said to himself, shaking his hands and jumping up and down to ward off his growing nerves. He had all week to prepare himself. The worst-case scenario would be that JB didn’t feel the same way, and if anything, that would give him the green light to start moving on. Things were going to be just fine.

Youngjae’s feet began moving by itself and brought him to the usual room – 120. He hesitated for a moment, just as he did the first time they met, but forced himself to turn the doorknob. He was going to grow up and tell JB how he felt. That was the plan and he was going to stick to it. Better out than in, right?

“Listen, JB, there’s something I have to say –”

“You came back.”

Youngjae raised his head and found himself greeted by JB looking considerably different than usual. During their sessions JB would always look cool and suave in a button down or a black leather jacket, but today, he wore an oversized hoodie and black track pants. His hair, usually gelled and styled up, was flat and fell just a few centimeters above his eyes. He looked absolutely adorable.

“You look different.” He blurted out.

Jaebum cleared his throat and looked at his outfit. “Oh…yeah, this is…kind of what I usually wear on a day-to-day basis.”
“Oh.” So, this was Jaebum.

“Why? Do you not like it? I could change if—”

“No, I completely love it.” JB let out the most wholesome smile he had ever seen on anyone’s face. Youngjae returned the smile.

“Y—you look really nice tonight,” JB was stuttering and it was the cutest thing he had ever seen. “I really like your hair.”

Youngjae laughed. “I really like yours.”

The older of the two let out another dopey smile before clearing his throat and turning around. He walked towards the side of the bed near the wall and pulled something out of a black duffel bag. Youngjae couldn’t make out what it was under the low light but could hear the sound of papers rustling, and for a brief moment, Youngjae convinced himself that Jaebum had prepared a restraining order against him. But that was just his hyperactive imagination coming into play. Right?

JB finally turned around and handed Youngjae something wrapped in brown paper. The contents of which were still a mystery to the younger.

“What’s this?”

JB let out a nervous laugh and carefully unfolded the brown wrapping, revealing a stack of four CDs. Youngjae looked through them slowly, his heart beating fast, and saw that each CD corresponded to a different volume.

“Oh, I made them for you – t-they’re mix CDs,” JB stumbled through his words as he showed Youngjae the four mixes. When the younger stayed quiet, he spoke again. “I-I’m not good with words when the situation calls for it...so I made these instead.”

Youngjae wanted to cry. No one had ever taken the time to make a mix CD for him before.

“JB, you didn’t have to do this.”

“Jaebum,” He replied, his voice louder. He stuck out his hand for Youngjae. “Hi, my name is Im Jaebum. Please, call me Jaebum.”

If Youngjae wanted to see his walls completely break down, this was it. His name was the final barrier that separated them and now that he had given him his name under his terms, things felt different. More intimate.

Youngjae shook his hand and smiled. “I’m Choi Youngjae, it’s nice to meet you Jaebum.”

They shared a smile as their hands continued to shake. The touch of his skin made Youngjae shiver and he found himself holding onto Jaebum’s hand longer than what was acceptable. The other male seemed to realize this too, however, as both Youngjae and Jaebum quickly let go of each other’s hands and laughed.

“I have a question,” Youngjae began, walking from the doorway to the side of the bed he usually occupied. Jaebum gave him a questioning look. “Don’t get me wrong – I love the CDs, but...why did you feel like you had to make them? I mean, as far as I know, you’ve never had trouble being open with me.”
The older sighed. “I told you, I’m not good with words when the situation calls for it.”

Youngjae paused, he was becoming confused now. “What situation…?”

Jaebum didn’t say a word. Instead, he moved to where Youngjae was sitting and took the CD at the top of the stack from his hands. He opened the case and took the disc, placing it in the CD player that rested next to the television.

He turned to face Youngjae and took a deep breath, clearly nervous. “The situation is that I have something important to tell you, but I just know if I say it I’m going to fuck it up somehow, so I thought it’d be better to say it through someone else.”

Youngjae had never been more confused. In all honesty, he was a little irritated because he had something important to say too, and with each passing second, the bravery and adrenaline he had conjured up before slowly started disappearing. But he was curious about what Jaebum was trying to do – how important was it that he couldn’t even say it with his own words?

Jaebum stood by the CD player and hit the play button. The sound of the CD whirring played through the speakers and Jaebum stared at Youngjae the whole time. There was a familiar look on his face – it was the look he gave when he had asked him to stay longer. Youngjae’s hearts did tumbles all around whenever he remembered his friend’s stare was meant for him.

There was no sound coming from the player for a few seconds, until he heard a melody of low notes played on a guitar and a piano dancing over the same collection of notes. The tune sounded familiar but Youngjae couldn’t remember its title. It wasn’t until he heard a deep voice sing that his brain started to work.

“Wise men say, only fools rush in.”

Youngjae’s heart stopped beating. He realized what song Jaebum was playing. His mother used to play it around the house when he was a child. It was an important song. He had always thought the lyrics were beautiful. Youngjae raised his head and came into contact with Jaebum’s eyes. His heart went from still, to out of control. He knew the words that were coming next. That meant...that meant that Jaebum was —

“But I can’t help falling in love with you.”

Their eyes stayed glued to each other, not leaving for even a second. Youngjae’s palms were beginning to sweat now. Was Jaebum saying what he thought he was saying? The older continued to look at him, his face exuding a certain vulnerability that made Youngjae think he may had been right.

They stayed in silence as the song continued to play. Youngjae listened to every lyric closely and continued to study the male’s face. Jaebum’s gaze never wandered, not even for a second, and Youngjae’s heart never failed to beat faster with each coming second.

Jaebum was confessing to him.

When the song finished, Jaebum took the disc from the player and placed it back in its case, walking over slowly to Youngjae and handing it back to him. Youngjae was completely frozen. The night was turning out in a way that he would never have dreamed of in a million years.

“I’m not expecting anything from you,” Jaebum spoke quietly as he seated himself beside Youngjae. “I know that came out of nowhere but I’m not expecting you to do anything for me at all. I just...wanted to be honest.”
“Do you really mean it?”

Jaebum gazed at him earnestly and nodded. “More than anything I’ve ever said.”

And just like that, the erratic heartbeat and sweaty palms disappeared almost instantly. It was like Youngjae knew what was supposed to happen next. He suddenly found himself laughing at the situation and shook his head. Jaebum looked on, confused and extremely worried.

“The plan five minutes ago was to burst into this room and tell you the same thing, but you beat me to the punch.” Youngjae revealed, chuckling at the nervous male beside him. Jaebum turned his head rapidly, his face painted with shock.

“W-wait what?”

Youngjae wasn’t sure where this sudden surge of confidence was coming from, but it was making him do things that felt completely out of character. He turned to Jaebum and placed his hand on top of his. The touch seemed to have surprised the elder, who flinched and continued to stare at their overlapping hands with focused eyes. But Youngjae didn’t want him to look at their hands – he wanted Jaebum to look at him. It was as if he was given an additional injection of adrenaline, but Youngjae found the courage to gently lift Jaebum’s face by the chin so that they were looking at each other. Jaebum was practically shaking at this point.

He took a deep breath – the nerves were starting to return. “I like you, Jaebum.”

There was a speck of hope forming in Jaebum’s face that continued to grow, his eyes growing wider and his lips slowly curling into a surprised smile.

“I’ve been pretty late at realizing it but, I really do like you.” Jaebum couldn’t stop himself from fully smiling now and that made Youngjae laugh. He had the most adorable toothy smile, it was hard to believe that his presence used to intimidate Youngjae in the past.

“I really like you too, Youngjae.” He replied between shy laughs. Youngjae wanted nothing more than to take his face in his hands and kiss him all over, but instead, he just continued laughing. For a little while the two just kept laughing, still in disbelief over the fact that the other had done the one thing they couldn’t expect.


Jaebum lightly punched his arm. “Did you forget I’m older than you?”

His comment only made Youngjae roll his eyes. “Whatever.”

“You’re such a little shit.” Jaebum laughed and punched his arm again.

When the laughter died down, the two males looked at each other once again, both still unable to fully acknowledge the confessions that had occurred between them. It was like they were both dancing around the subject together, neither one ready to fully jump in.

“So you want to go out with me?” Jaebum asked abruptly, breaking their silence.

“Yes!” Youngjae answered almost immediately. He mentally hit himself on the head when he realized how eager he had sounded and cleared his throat. “I mean…like on a date?”

The fond smile Jaebum gave him made his knees weak and it took everything in him not to move forward and kiss the male beside him.
“Jackson’s birthday party is this Saturday…would you want to go with me?”

“Go with you…to Jackson’s birthday?” It was beginning to hit Youngjae that he was finally going to cross into another part of Jaebum’s life – a more tangible side of Jaebum that he could only ever imagine.

“We don’t have to, if you don’t want! But I just thought it’d be a bit fun because Jinyoung will be there and…Mark! He’ll be there too – you know Mark! Yes, he will definitely be there – if you wanted to come, I mean.”

“No, no! Of course, I’d love to come!”

Jaebum’s eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Yes, really!”

“That’s awesome!” Jaebum heard the over-eagerness in his response and cleared his throat. “I mean, that’s like, cool, or whatever.”

Maybe it was the adorable way Jaebum still tried so hard to seem nonchalant and mysterious despite his nervous confession, or maybe it was the way the low light of the lamp made him glow like some foreign jewelry, but something in Youngjae took control of his body and brought his lips to the older male’s cheeks. It was a quick peck, but it was enough to make both boys jump in shock.

Jaebum looked at Youngjae, who in turn, kept his gaze focused on the ground, incredibly embarrassed by his sudden bold act. It was another moment of silence that felt like decades until Youngjae felt a finger graze at his chin and found himself guided towards Jaebum. There was no time for him to think before he suddenly felt the soft lips of another on his own. Jaebum was kissing him.

It took a complete second for Youngjae to realize what was going on, but once he did he took no time to fully melt into the kiss, taking in every detail and feeling. This was the closest he had ever been to Jaebum and he could smell his cologne so clearly, it felt like he was entering a new boundary he had never thought of before. Jaebum’s lips were soft and thoroughly moisturized by his signature cherry lip balm that seemed to make his lips taste sweet as well. Youngjae couldn’t think of anything else as they continued to kiss, suddenly finding himself laid down on the bed still attached to the elder’s lips.

His mind went completely blank as his thoughts became filled with how good it felt to be kissing the man he had been crushing on for months. He felt his hands suddenly wander on their own and found them moving lower and lower down his back. When his hands reached the waistband of Jaebum’s pants, the older male quickly took them off his hips and pulled his lips away, chuckling to himself.

“I didn’t think you did this.” He whispered between heavy breaths. The tension was strong between them, but this didn’t seem to faze Youngjae at all – instead, it fueled his adrenaline and allowed him to act boldly, in a way he rarely did.

Youngjae smirked. “You really think I’m that innocent?” He pulled Jaebum’s face closer to his and continued to kiss him, feeling the other’s lips move against his own before he pulled away once again. “What’s wrong?”

Jaebum moved from on top of him and sat up, taking Youngjae’s hand in his. He looked into
Youngjae’s eyes and gave him a warm smile as he caressed the younger’s hand with his thumb. “I don’t want to sleep with you, Youngjae.”

“W-what?” He sat up from his position and began nervously fixing his shirt and hair, his mind racing through all the possibilities that could have led to his rejection.

“I mean, of course I do! But I just… I just don’t want it to be here – I don’t want to do it in the crappy motel that reminds me of my job and…” Jaebum was refusing to meet his eyes now, instead choosing to focus on his hand linking with Youngjae’s. “Well you’re not just any client, Youngjae. You’re special to me and with you… doing that would actually mean something to me, you know?”

Youngjae tilted his head, surprised at the softness exhibited by the seemingly-tough male. He smiled to himself and kissed Jaebum on the cheek. “You’re so cute.”

“Stop saying that.” Jaebum groaned, glaring.

“Why? You are cute.”

“I’m not cute, I’m sexy.” Youngjae raised his eyebrow at him and burst out laughing. He could see Jaebum’s eyes crinkle as he tried to stop himself from laughing with him, and that made him look even more adorable.

Youngjae couldn’t stop himself from giving him another kiss – this time soft and slow – before pulling away and fondly caressing the male’s cheek. For the first time in a while, Youngjae felt content with his life.

“I should probably go then.”

Jaebum made a sound very closely resembling a whine at his statement. “Why?”

“Because if I stay here, we both know I’m not going to be able to stop myself.”

“But Saturday’s too far from today, what am I supposed to do ‘til then?”

Youngjae racked his brain for ways to handle Jaebum’s (as well as his own) reluctance to part and quickly found an idea.

“Give me your phone.” He held his hand out and waited as Jaebum pulled out his phone from the nightstand drawer and handed it over to him. He opened the contacts book and added his own phone number, hesitating for a moment before saving himself as “Coco’s Mom” on Jaebum’s phone. “Now you can talk to me whenever you miss me.”

Jaebum rested his chin on Youngjae’s shoulders and took back his phone. “It’s late, at least let me take you home.”

“Hey, it’s not even midnight – you’re not working?” Jaebum’s face quickly tensed and he removed himself from Youngjae’s shoulder, shaking his head.

“I’m not,” He replied softly, his eyes pulling away. Youngjae simply shrugged, not thinking too much of it, and stood from the bed, preparing himself to leave. “We’re going to have to talk about it at some point, Youngjae.”

Youngjae stopped his actions and took a good look at Jaebum’s face. He looked worried. It was an expression he didn’t see on the older male’s face very often. Truthfully, Youngjae had never really put much thought into how Jaebum’s occupation would affect their relationship. The optimist in
him insisted that things were going to be fine – Jaebum wasn’t going to be an escort forever, he was close to reaching his goal for the cat café and then he’d quit. But his pessimistic side – the more dominant one – reminded him that he wasn’t living in some movie. His life was not *Pretty Woman*. Youngjae was not Richard Gere (although Jaebum could certainly give Julia Roberts a run for her money) and he definitely was not be able to give Jaebum the financial support he needed to leave his job.

Too many thoughts began consuming his mind all at once and it was beginning to give him a migraine. Instead of giving Jaebum a proper answer, Youngjae just shook his head and pushed the thought away.

“Not tonight,” He replied, walking closer to him. “Tonight, you’re just bringing me home, kissing me good night, and missing me for the rest of the week.”

Jaebum merely sighed and stood as well, following the younger out the door. The two walked along the hallway side by side, their hands close enough to touch but neither one brave enough to make the first move and hold the other hand. The rush of adrenaline that controlled most of Youngjae’s actions in the room had completely washed away, and he returned to his usual somewhat shy and jumpy self.

Neither of them had a car so they made their way towards the lobby to reach the bus stop that took them directly to their neighborhood. Youngjae looked to see the man beside him – he was so undeniably beautiful. Jaebum was conventionally attractive, that was an obvious fact, but somehow something was making Youngjae feel even more drawn to him. Maybe it was the way Jaebum clung to him like a puppy when they were alone – it was a clear contrast over how he often preferred to present himself to others.

Jaebum noticed him staring and let out a tiny smirk. For a split second, Jaebum morphed into JB once again – as always, a vague persona that perhaps not even he completely understood – before altering his smirk into a wide smile, completely dissolving any trace of JB. Youngjae felt his heart jump and almost stopped in his tracks, surprised at the sudden reaction his body was making. Once they made it out of the motel and into the cold outside air, Jaebum took the initiative to take his hand and interlock their fingers together, making Youngjae shiver. He was being so mushy it was a challenge not to melt into the pavement right there.

Their hands were still linked when they walked to the bus stop, and they continued to stay linked as the two males sat on the bus, sitting in a comfortable silence as Youngjae kept catching himself staring at Jaebum again and again. He was certain Jaebum noticed – he wouldn’t stop chuckling to himself whenever Youngjae looked at him.

“Take a picture, it’ll last longer.” Jaebum challenged, a smirk on his lips.

“I already have several.” Youngjae mumbled to himself, not completely aware that he had said such a thing out loud. He had a folder in his phone of pictures he saved from Jaebum’s Instagram.

“You do?” Jaebum was amused now, a cocky smile was now growing in place of his smirk.

Youngjae groaned and mentally scolded himself for having such loose lips. “*Maybe* I have some pictures saved from your Instagram profile.”

Jaebum raised his eyebrow. “I didn’t know you were kind of a stalker.”

“Hey! I’m not!” The escort was far from convinced. “You’re making it seem like I really searched all over the Internet for you! It took me two seconds to find your profile – you were the first to pop
up when I typed ‘Im Jaebum’ and you weren’t even on private!’"

Jaebum was laughing now, his eyes turning into tiny crescent moons that made Youngjae swoon.

“Why are you laughing at me? And don’t say it’s because I’m cute!”

Jaebum shook his head as he laughed and pulled out his phone from his pocket. He fiddled through it for a bit before handing it to Youngjae. “Look.”

Youngjae took the phone from his hands and looked at the screen. It was a photo album on his phone gallery titled “sunshine”, and it was filled with pictures of Youngjae from his own Instagram account. Jaebum had been doing the exact same thing he did.

Youngjae felt his cheeks turn bright red and immediately handed the phone back to the male beside him. He was beginning to feel shy and embarrassed again and quickly stood up once he saw the name of their stop flash on the screen of the bus.

“That’s our stop, let’s go!” Youngjae announced abruptly and ran as fast as he could from his seat. He was obviously relieved that he wasn’t the only stalker between the two of them, but the revelation had come so suddenly he was beginning to turn beet red – he felt so shy that he just couldn’t say anything else.

Jaebum yelled at him to wait and when he got down from the bus too, they stood at the bus stop, both sporting much redder cheeks than before. Jaebum had a smile on his face that Youngjae couldn’t decode – it was a far cry from the cocky smirk that he had on the entire bus ride, it looked almost…sheepish. He was shy too.

_God he’s so, so, so cute._

Youngjae snapped out from his embarrassment and rolled his eyes at how they were behaving. He took Jaebum’s hand without thinking and led him towards the direction of his apartment. He always walked a step ahead of Jaebum, but Youngjae could feel his eyes focusing only on him, and it made him want to swoon. He tried to save himself from another wave of red cheeks and embarrassment by keeping his eyes straight ahead, but soon found that to be too difficult and turned his head anyway. The first thing he saw was a pair of big brown eyes staring back at him.

And as he predicted, his cheeks turned red once again.

They continued to walk until they passed by the convenience store Youngjae worked at. He suddenly remembered that Jaebum mentioned how he lived two blocks away from the convenience store – exactly like Youngjae. He then pondered on the possibility that they had been living in the same building the entire time. After some thought, Youngjae decided it was unlikely – their relationship had many coincidences, but that would just be the universe toying with them.

They reached his apartment in no time, and Youngjae led Jaebum to the entrance of the building, their hands never parting. He could still feel Jaebum’s eyes burning a hole on his back and turned to face him once they were at the door. The elder did nothing but smile.

“Wanna hear something crazy?” Jaebum asked. Youngjae nodded. “My apartment is right there.”

He pointed to the right, leading Youngjae’s vision to the building that stood right beside them.

So maybe the universe was toying with them a _little_.

“But of all the ways we could’ve met, we met through Mark’s escort service?” Youngjae exclaimed
disbelievingly, almost shouting. Jaebum put his hand over his own mouth to keep himself from laughing loudly and put his other hand to Youngjae’s mouth, trying his hardest to keep them both quiet.

Youngjae took his hand away from his mouth and groaned. “I can’t deal with our stupidity right now, just kiss me good night and let me wallow in my own regret.”

Jaebum wasted no time and immediately brought his hand to Youngjae’s chin, pulling him closer as he leaned in for a kiss. It was soft and chaste, a romantic kiss rather than a sexual one, and it was completely enough to make one of his legs pop the way they did in movies.

When the kiss was over, Jaebum pulled away and gave him the sweetest smile he had ever seen in his life. Their hands somehow found their way to each other and they were linked once again.

“Saturday is too far from today,” Jaebum whined, his smile slowly turning into a pout. “Can’t we see each other before then?”

“I want to, but I have exams this week.” Youngjae replied, his tone deeply apologetic.

“What will I do when I miss you?”

“You have my number, right?” He nodded. “Text me the minute you start missing me.”

Jaebum sighed but agreed anyway. He looked like such a dejected puppy it was absolutely adorable.

“I guess I should let you go to bed,” Youngjae sighed in agreement, but held his hand a little bit tighter. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too.” A small smile formed on Jaebum’s face as he heard that, making Youngjae not want to let go of his hand even more.

“Good night, Youngjae.” Jaebum leaned in again, but this time to kiss his cheek. His face felt hot now.

“Good night, Jaebum.”

It took all the strength he had, but Youngjae finally let go of Jaebum’s hand and opened the door, looking back at the puppy he was leaving behind before he finally entered his apartment building. The doors were closed shut and Youngjae leaned his back on the wood separating him and Jaebum. The moment his back touched the door, Youngjae felt his phone begin to vibrate in his pocket. He fished it out with his hands and stared at the screen, feeling his heart slowly explode as he stared at the text notification on his phone.

Miss you.

+++ 

“Don’t wear that, you look like a hooker.”

“I am a hooker.”

“You’re an escort, it’s more respectable.”

Jaebum sighed exasperatedly as he removed the maroon-colored silk button-down from his body. Jinyoung was sitting on his bed, half-reading some music magazine of Jaebum’s as he gave his
unwanted opinions on all the clothes in his closet. Jaebum was beginning to question why he even invited Jinyoung over.

“Don’t you have anything better to do than insult my clothes? Shouldn’t you be giving the birthday boy a blowjob or something?”

Jinyoung shrugged and continued to read the magazine. “He never lets me in his room whenever he’s getting ready, says I’m too bitchy or whatever.”

“I can see why he would think that.”

“Hey! This is your first date with the cute otter boy – not to mention this is also your first date in like forever. Excuse me if I want to make sure that you won’t fuck it up.”

Jaebum glared at his best friend. “What makes you so sure I’m going to fuck it up? I’ve been in relationships before.”

“Yeah, but that was back when you were a hot college athlete – now you’re just old and gross.”

Jaebum narrowed his eyes, trying to think of a snide comeback to throw back at Jinyoung before eventually sighing. It’s not like he was wrong.

After much bickering and an intense exchange of snide comments, Jaebum finally put together an outfit that didn’t make Jinyoung’s eyes bleed. They fished an old graphic tee from the back of his closet and paired it with a fur-collared denim jacket – the younger of the two decided that this was an appropriate look. According to Jinyoung, he looked “stylish enough to seem trendy, but not snobby, and good enough to look hot, but not like a thot” – to which Jaebum replied with his usual eyeroll.

Jaebum was looking at himself once more in the mirror when he heard his phone buzz on the table. He raced towards the phone and quickly turned on the screen – it was a text from Youngjae. He felt his heart race as he read the text message from the boy he had been constantly talking to for the past week. They texted without stopping, both staying up until the early hours of the day just to talk to each other. Jaebum felt that maybe a real relationship was possible with Youngjae – a plausible future. It was because of this plausible future that Jaebum chose not to work at all for the week – he couldn’t emotionally detach from all those strangers right after he had willingly attached himself to someone.

Of course, Youngjae wasn’t aware of this detail. They never talked about his job, so Jaebum never found the right time to tell him. One of the first things he did after they separated was check the money in his bank account – he wasn’t too far off from his goal, he was sure if he moved some things around and made adjustments, he would have the funds he needed to open the café by the summer. He felt that to truly be with Youngjae, he would have to give up being an escort – and he had absolutely no problem with that.

Are you dressed?

Yeah, I’ll come get you soon, be ready by your door!

Thank god…Bam’s been bullying me about my clothes for the past couple of hours.

Jinyoung’s been doing the exact same. Our friends are annoying.

Tell me about it!!
No need to fear, I’m coming to save you soon.

*My hero <3 lol*

Jaebum tried his best to suppress the smile that was fighting to reveal itself – he knew if Jinyoung saw he would never hear the end of it. He lightly slapped his cheek to maintain his straight face and shoved his phone deep into his pocket.

“Are we ready to go?”

“Let me check on Jackson – you can go ahead and get Youngjae first.” Jinyoung set his magazine neatly on the desk and walked out of Jaebum’s room. He heard the room besides his open and light bickering occur between the couple about how the youngest male needed to learn how to knock. Jaebum sighed and walked towards the front door, grabbing his keys and exiting his shared apartment.

He made his way to the door of his building and walked to the apartment building on his right – the proximity between his and Youngjae’s apartments was strange. Too strange, to the point that it raised some suspicions in Jaebum. They had been in each other’s lives this entire time – like their roads paralleled but never crossed. When it came to Youngjae, it was just one big coincidence after another.

Jaebum reached the steps of the building and texted Youngjae. It wasn’t too long before the door opened and Jaebum found himself standing face-to-face with the person he had been dying to see the entire week.

“Hey!” Youngjae greeted, his smile so big it made his eyes small.

Jaebum was unable to say anything in response. The younger male was wearing a simple white shirt with a brown, slightly oversized blazer – the outfit itself was nothing special, but it looked so good on him it almost brought Jaebum to tears.

“You look really nice.” He accidentally blurted out, quickly closing his mouth shut and cursing himself in his mind for being so stupid.

“Thank you!” Youngjae replied, his smile somehow widening. “You look good too, did Jinyoung pick that out?”

Jaebum pretended to gasp and placed his hand on his chest. “You don’t think I can dress myself?”

“Not if you count wearing oversized hoodies and sweatpants dressing up.”

Jaebum laughing disbelievingly and lightly punched Youngjae’s arm. “So, you’re bullying me now? Is that it?”

Youngjae simply smirked and shrugged. “Are we going now?”

“No, not yet. I think Jinyoung’s trying to get Jackson to change into a less slutty outfit for the night.”

“Oh, do you want to come up to my place until they’re ready?”

Jaebum suddenly froze. He felt beads of sweat begin to roll down his forehead and gulped. *Is he suggesting what I think he’s suggesting? Does he...does he want to do the dirty? Should I? Wait, fuck! We’re probably going to leave soon, I shouldn’t. Fuck. Fuck!*
“Youngjae…I don’t think we should sleep together right now.” Jaebum mumbled softly, leaning closer to the younger.

Youngjae’s eyes quickly widened as he pulled away.

“That is *not* what I was suggesting *at all!* I just thought you might want to meet Coco and Bambam…oh my god!”

“Oh,” Jaebum’s cheeks turned bright red almost instantly. He was so stupid. What could have possibly led him to come to such a conclusion? “That’s…embarrassing. Please forget I *ever* said anything, I –”

Before Jaebum could continue his sentence, his phone began vibrating and ringing in his pocket. Jaebum nervously laughed at the interruption before quickly taking out his phone to answer the call. Youngjae had been laughing for almost a full minute.

“Hello?”

“I can’t believe you left me with Satan!” A male voice shrieked.

Jaebum sighed. “Jackson, he’s your *boyfriend.*”

“But he’s so *evil*!”

“I’m literally just trying to make sure you don’t look like an idiot at your own birthday party!” Jinyoung’s voice shouted in the background.

“But it’s *my* party!”

“Oh my god, give me the phone!” Jaebum heard a struggle occur between the couple and rolled his eyes. They were always putting him in the middle of their arguments. He shyly glanced at the male in front of him, still embarrassed over their previous interaction, and found himself unexpectedly meeting Youngjae’s gaze. *Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck.*

“Hey, we’ll meet you downstairs, I already called us a cab.” Jinyoung explained and immediately hung up.

Jaebum stared at his phone screen for a second, partly due to the confusing nature of the phone call, but mostly because he was still too afraid to face Youngjae after their exchange.

“Um, so, that was Jinyoung. They’re ready, and we’ll, um, all take a cab together.” Jaebum mumbled, refusing to meet his eyes. After a moment of silence, he heard Youngjae’s loud, heavy laugh ring in his ears once more, and finally found the courage to look up.

“Are you still embarrassed over the thing you said?” When Jaebum failed to answer, Youngjae took it upon himself to take a step closer. He flashed a warm smile at the older male and took his hand in his. He continued to smile before eventually leaning in, and pecking Jaebum on the cheek, causing the elder to jump. “You’re so cute.”

“Uh, I, um –”

“Oh look, it’s Jinyoung!” Youngjae pointed behind him, a smile rapidly forming on his face, and ran eagerly down the stairs.

Jaebum turned around and found himself faced with the sight of a grumpy Jackson in a decent-
looking button down and slacks, standing beside his bright-faced and satisfied boyfriend.  

“What’s with the long face?”

Jackson sulked even more as he crossed his arms. “Jinyoung made me look boring.”

Jinyoung’s eyes squinted in anger. “You were going to wear suspenders with nothing underneath – need I remind you that it’s less than ten degrees out here?”

“I can take it!”

“No, baby, you can’t – you would’ve started crying and begging to borrow my coat the moment we reached the club. I’m saving your life.”

“Whatever,” Jackson rolled his eyes. He seemed content to continue sulking before his eyes spotted the male hiding behind Jaebum, his expression quickly turning into one of joy. “You’re the otter boy!”

Youngjae was taken by surprise. His eyes widened from shock at first, but he managed to eventually regain some composure and nod.

“I told you, his name is Youngjae.” Jaebum reminded.

“Right, right, sorry. I’m Jackson – it’s so nice to finally put a face to the person who makes Bummie blush like a fifteen-year-old girl!”

Youngjae’s mouth hung wide open as he gasped. Oh god. Jackson was not embarrassing him this early.

“First of all, what did I tell you about calling me that?” Jackson simply shrugged. It didn’t matter to him. “Second of all, how many times do I have to tell you that I don’t blush like a fifteen-year-old girl!”

“Oh, you definitely do.” Jinyoung chimed in, smirking. Jaebum groaned at the couple’s joint attempt to humiliate him. He glanced over at his date, who just seemed to take in all the information with an excited, open-mouthed smile.

“I’m Youngjae, it’s nice to meet you!” He finally introduced himself once the situation had calmed down.

The group then entered into some conversation about the party and all the guests that had been invited. Jackson had reserved a table for them at the club and invited almost all of his friends in Korea. Many of Jaebum’s fellow friends from his job were attending – Minhyuk, Wonho, and the likes – which only served to make him feel even more nervous about the night. He and Youngjae still hadn’t had the opportunity to discuss the implications of Jaebum’s job on their relationship. Neither of them wanted to be the first to bring it up, and for the time being, Jaebum was fine with that.

After several minutes of talking, the cab finally arrived. The four boys piled into the yellow sedan, sighing in relief from the warmth that the car’s heater emitted. Jackson sat in the passenger seat, overwhelming the driver with directions in his accented Korean, while Jaebum sat in between Youngjae and Jinyoung in the back. Throughout the entire car ride, Jaebum could feel Youngjae’s fingers brush against his – like they wanted to hold his hand. It had been almost an entire week since he experienced the feeling of the younger’s fingers with his own. The thought of holding his hand again was making his heart beat rapidly – he had to hold Youngjae’s hand or else he would
It took large amounts of internal self-talking and motivation, but Jaebum slowly found the courage to lift his left pinky and slowly bring it closer to Youngjae’s fingers. He tried to start subtly – lightly brushing his pinky against the other male’s, hoping that he would receive the hint. When that proved to yield no results, Jaebum decided it was time to be a little bolder. Going slow once again, he began sliding his pinky above Youngjae’s, resting atop his pinky before eventually interlocking it. He felt his date somewhat jump at the touch, but he received the action well, moving his pinky to better accommodate Jaebum. After a short moment of holding each other by a finger, Jaebum decided once again to be bolder. He removed his pinky from Youngjae’s and took the younger’s entire hand in his, locking their fingers in the most comfortable spots before rubbing circles on his hand with his thumb. There was nothing that could contain Jaebum’s smile now.

After twenty minutes, the four finally reached the club, located on the trendier part of the city. The night was painfully cold and loud music was basically pulsating from the venue, but all Jaebum could focus on was how well his hand seemed to fit with Youngjae’s.

“Ah, let the party begin!” Jackson shouted, jumping up and down. The Chinese male brought them straight to the entrance where the bouncer didn’t even take a second look at the man before letting them in. A long line had formed across the block right beside the entrance, but Jackson had just skipped it like it was no big deal.

“Wait, what was that all about?” Jaebum questioned, still confused over the ordeal.

“What do you mean?” Jackson’s face was blank, like he didn’t understand the question.

“How come they just let us in like that?”

“Oh, this is technically kind of my club.”

Jaebum furrowed his eyebrows, completely confused by the response. He turned to his best friend, hoping for some form of explanation to the statement.

“He invested some money into this place a couple years ago, so technically he owns part of it.” Jinyoung explained.

“You own a fucking club, but you can’t even buy yourself a cup of noodles from the convenience store?” Jaebum half-shouted, bewildered by the situation. Jackson merely giggled and pouted, showing off the innocent image that always seemed to melt Jinyoung to his knees.

Just as their conversation came to an end, an older man approached their tiny group and bowed. He seemed to be several years older than them, but his features were smooth, giving him a youthful appearance that allowed him to blend with the younger crowd of the club.

“Mr. Wang?” The man cautiously asked. Jackson nodded and shook his hand, introducing himself. “Mr. Lee told me you would be coming – let me bring you to the VIP booth.”

Jaebum caught a glimpse of Youngjae raising his eyebrow from the corner of his eye, seemingly impressed.

“VIP booth? How much money did he invest?” Youngjae whispered quietly to Jaebum as they followed the man. Jaebum then realized he was curious about the answer to that question as well and leaned over to Jinyoung.

“How much did Jackson put into this place?”
Jinyoung let out an aggressive sigh and crossed his arms. “Enough to cancel the Hawaii trip we were supposed to take two years ago.”

“Ouch.” Jaebum replied and sucked in his breath, taking a step back from his best friend as he began fuming.

The four of them were led into a medium-sized booth beside the bar of the club, stepping through the velvet rope and onto the cushioned seats that surrounded a tiny circular table. Jackson ordered a bottle of vodka and some mixed drinks to the man as the rest settled down on the seats. The club was playing a typical-sounding EDM track, the volume so loud it made the floor shake. Jaebum enjoyed clubbing – he would try his best to go with his friends every other weekend – but there was always the risk of running into one of his clients at places like this. Most of his clients were around his age range and very likely to frequent the same places he did. There had been moments where Jaebum awkwardly made eye contact with a client at the club before quickly running away to hide behind his friends. He was just hoping nothing like that would happen with Youngjae around.

After a few moments, more of Jackson’s guests began rolling in – some Jaebum knew, some he didn’t – and so did the copious amounts of alcohol they ordered. Like a machine, Jackson quickly poured the gasoline-smelling liquid into tiny shot glasses and offered them to anyone standing near him. Somehow both Jaebum and Youngjae ended up with a glass in their hands, shyly glancing at each other before taking a quick gulp that burned both their throats.

“Are you a lightweight?” Jaebum asked, blurting out the first thing that came to mind.

Youngjae raised his eyebrow challengingly and laughed. “Why? Hoping I’ll make some drunken confession to you at the end of the night?”

Now it was Jaebum’s turn to raise his eyebrow. Youngjae had gotten far more playful and flirtatious since they kissed – the sudden change took him by surprise at times, but he would be lying if he said he didn’t enjoy it.

“I already got your confession, sweetheart, and I didn’t need to get you drunk that time.” He challenged, playing along. Youngjae’s expression slightly altered into something Jaebum was completely familiar with – desire.

The two stared at each other for what felt like an eternity, as if both were waiting for the other to make the first leap. The first leap to what? Jaebum wasn’t completely sure yet. But judging by the way the younger male was staring at him, he had an idea.

Youngjae lightly chuckled, breaking his stare. He reached out for another glass on the table and gulped it suddenly before slamming it back down on the table. “Would you still dance with me even if I tell you I’m a heavyweight?”

The younger male’s actions were so dominating, he was beginning to sweat. Stuck in the cycle of nervousness he only felt around Youngjae, Jaebum managed to move his head, nodding to his question. There was no time to think before Youngjae grabbed him by the hand and dragged him to the dance floor.

The floor was completely packed and full of other people dancing on each other and bumping around. The music changed from some mindless EDM track to a popular dance song that everyone knew the lyrics to. Youngjae’s hand slid down from Jaebum’s upper arm to his hand, lacing their fingers together in a way that made him shiver. The confidence that Youngjae was displaying at this moment was a far cry from the nervous boy he was when they first met. If anything, he was
the nervous one in their relationship now – always saying the wrong things and stuttering when embarrassed. He supposed that was their true dynamic.

The colorful lights made it difficult for Jaebum to see clearly, but it didn’t seem to affect his vision of Youngjae, who laughed and smiled with his eyes at the older as he moved them both to dance with the beat. They were jumping to the music and singing along to the songs that they knew, dancing with their hands locked together. After a few songs of just dancing with each other, Jaebum felt a light tap on his shoulder and turned around, finding himself facing a skinny American male.

“Mark!” Jaebum shouted excitedly and immediately went in for a hug. “What the fuck? I thought you said last night you weren’t coming!”

“I wasn’t, but then my gaming buddy decided to bail on me,” Mark pulled away from the hug and gave a playful glare at Youngjae before hugging him as well. “Youngjae! I haven’t seen you in forever!”

“I know! Last time I saw you was at Yugyeom’s birthday party – do you even remember that night?” Youngjae joked, laughing loudly at his comment.

Mark narrowed his eyes. “Didn’t I throw up in front of your building that night?” Youngjae nodded, causing Mark to giggle out of his mind.

“Speaking of Youngjae’s building,” Jaebum placed his hand on his friend’s shoulder, landing it hard enough to count as a hit. “When were you planning on telling me that we’re practically neighbors?”

Mark’s eyes quickly widened, and he gulped. He opened his mouth to speak but no words came out – his behavior was incredibly suspicious but Jaebum couldn’t think of any reason for him to act this way.

“Oh my gosh, this is my favorite song, dance with me!”

Without any time to speak, Mark grabbed both their hands and pulled them further into the dance floor, where he led the two to move with the beat of the song playing. The music was so hypnotizing and loud that it made Jaebum forget whatever it was they were trying to ask Mark.

The three danced together until the song ended, and not long after, many of Jaebum’s other friends started joining in, creating a big dance circle of drunk escorts. Jaebum was very much aware that it probably looked like some cult ritual to Youngjae and decided to pull both of them out of the circle. He led them to the bar and pulled out a stool for his date to sit on, before pulling one out for himself as well.

“Can I get two waters please?” Jaebum called at the bartender, who swiftly pulled out two glasses from under the bar and filled them with water, placing it in front of them.

“Okay, so give a rundown – who’s who?” Youngjae asked, referring to the dance circle they had just escaped from.

Jaebum squinted his eyes and tried his best to identify all his friends present in the circle. “There’s Minhyuk, he’s the skinny guy who kept grinding on everyone – crazy sex drive and energy, the dude never takes a break. Next to him is Wonho, he’s huge and looks like he could crush you like
a toothpick, but he’s an absolute softie. And then…oh! Jooheon! He was originally Jackson’s friend, but Jackson just kept bringing him everywhere so now he’s friends with all of us.”

Youngjae tried to find all the people Jaebum kept pointing at, his eyes squinting as well. After a moment of digesting all the information, he nodded. “So…you know Minhyuk and Wonho from…um…” Jaebum could tell Youngjae was struggling to find the appropriate word. “Work?”

Jaebum could feel his heart begin to pound nervously at the mention of his job, but he took a deep breath and managed to compose himself.

“Yes…we’re all escorts,” Jaebum clarified. He took note of how Youngjae slowly gulped and nervously nodded. He wasn’t sure what was going on in the younger male’s head but there was no way that was a positive reaction. “Listen, there’s something I have to tell you about my job –”

“I need to pee!” Youngjae interrupted, suddenly standing. “I’ll be right back.”

Jaebum sighed as he watched his date waddle his way to the men’s room. He knew they shouldn’t have started talking about his job – now Youngjae was probably freaking out about the fact that he fucked people for a living and their date was ruined. The worst thing was that Jaebum had been planning to tell him some surprise news that night – he was retiring. He had saved the money he needed to open the cat café, and the days leading up to their date had been dedicated to informing his regulars of his retirement and handling his resignation with Mark.

Jaebum’s resignation was also, maybe, largely because of a wide-eyed boy who always laughed at everything.

Jaebum sipped on his water and waited at the bar. He ran through all the possible ways he could get Youngjae to sit down and talk about his job without him running away – it seemed impossible at the moment, but Jaebum was optimistic. He was in the middle of considering a scenario where Youngjae would be tied up when he felt a light tap on his shoulder. Jaebum turned his head and saw a large, athletic man staring at him with a look that Jaebum knew had a lot of expectations tied behind it.

“JB?” Jaebum immediately froze when he heard his escort name. The man had a satisfied smile on his face as he crossed his arms. “You gotta remember me.”

Jaebum racked around his brain for his face and found a vague recollection of the man beside him. The man had come to see him some time before he met Youngjae – he came twice, at most, and claimed that “JB” had rocked his world. Jaebum didn’t share the same sentiment. He was much too rough and rude to Jaebum, that after his final appointment, he demanded that Mark either assigned someone else to the client or blacklist him altogether. He was ultimately blacklisted.

“Oh, yeah, hi.” Jaebum had absolutely no idea what his name was.

“So,” He dragged his chair closer to Jaebum. “What are you doing here? This is a pretty fancy establishment – didn’t know you could go to these kinds of places.”

“But I do.” Youngjae please just hurry up.

“Oh, I know what you’re doing here!” Don’t. The man inched even closer to Jaebum and moved so their faces were right next to each other. “You’re looking for customers, aren’t you?”

God, Jaebum wanted to punch him in the balls.

“I’m appointment only.” Jaebum snapped, venom dripping from each word. He looked over to
where the bathrooms were located, hoping to catch a sight of Youngjae returning, but he had no such luck.

“I see,” The man was speaking in a low tone now, as if he was trying to sound alluring. Jaebum could only hear desperation in his voice. He suddenly reached out and placed his hand on Jaebum’s forearm, gripping it. “So, how about I make an appointment for right now?”

Jaebum let out an exasperated sigh. He snapped his head at the direction of the man and glared.

“I’m not working;” He lifted his left hand to remove the man’s grip on his arm, but the hold only became tighter. “Let go of me.”

“Come on, JB…I’ll pay you double your worth,” Jaebum continued to struggle with the man’s grip, but he wasn’t letting go. “I’ve got a fifty on me right now, will that cover it?”

Now Jaebum was pissed. “Excuse me? How much do you fucking think I’m worth?” Jaebum practically shouted, offended by his comment.

“Judging by your behavior right now, not much,” Jaebum was now pulling his arm hard, trying to escape the man. “Stop struggling, you know you want to!”

“Let go of me!”

Jaebum kept pulling and pulling but the man continued to deny him of his freedom. Jaebum felt his eyes begin to sting as tears began welling up in his eyes from the pain of the man’s grip. He did not want to be a cautionary tale for other hookers – he needed to get away.

Jaebum continued his struggle until he felt a third person come between them and forcefully tear them apart. The pull was so strong that Jaebum almost fell to the ground.

“He said no!” Jaebum moved his head to follow where the shout was coming from, and saw his knight in shining armor – Youngjae, with his hands still wet from the bathroom sink.

“I don’t think this is any of your business.”

“Well, you’re hurting JB so, yeah, it’s kind of my fucking business!” Youngjae was practically yelling at this point, his eyes filled with anger.

The man shook his head and laughed. “Trust me, kid,” He spat out the final word like an insult. “You don’t want to mess with me.”

Youngjae rolled his eyes and pushed the man off his seat. Jaebum quickly took his hand – that was not the best decision and he knew this, because not long after he toppled off his seat, the man quickly lunged towards Youngjae, punching him in the face before Jaebum had any time to react.

Jaebum pulled the man off of Youngjae and grabbed him by the collar, pushing him against the bar. “Don’t you ever touch him.”

“What are you gonna do about it?”

“I’ll fucking kill you.” Jaebum gripped his collar tighter, intending to hit the living daylights out of him before his friends suddenly gathered around him.

“Give him to me, I’ll kick the shit out of him for this.” Wonho demanded, reaching his hand out.

Jaebum saw Mark, Jackson, Minhyuk, and Jooheon right beside him, ready to fight for him as
well. His grip on the man’s collar tightened as he began frantically searching the floor for Youngjae, before finding him leaning against Jinyoung, who had one arm around him and was stroking his head calmly. Seeing his date was safe, Jaebum threw the man towards his group of friends, who grabbed him by the collar as well and retreated out the building in a cult-like huddle. He walked towards Jinyoung and immediately hugged the both of them, blessing whoever was watching over him that the situation was over.

“Youngjae!” Jaebum shouted frantically and grabbed him by the face. The man had managed to land several punches on him, and it showed – Youngjae’s lip was bleeding and he could see several bruises were forming on his cheeks. It only made Jaebum even angrier. “I’m going to murder that asshole.”

“Jaebum, no!” Youngjae was quick to pull Jaebum by his arms, stopping him from finding the man who had hurt them. “I’m okay.”

“Doesn’t mean I won’t kill him!” Jaebum tried hard to pull away from the younger male’s grip but found it impossible to do so.

Jinyoung sighed. “Listen, the guys have it handled, okay? Why don’t you just take Youngjae home, patch him up, and I’ll make sure none of them do anything that could get us all arrested, okay?”

Jaebum could always count on Jinyoung to think clearly in situations like this. He nodded, agreeing with his friend’s plan.

“H-hey Jinyoung, I’m really sorry if we ruined Jackson’s birthday party…” Youngjae apologized quietly, keeping his head down. Jinyoung almost immediately burst out laughing at the statement, confusing the younger.

“Please! They get into some kind of bar fight every year. Trust me Youngjae, you didn’t ruin anything.” Jinyoung placed his hand on Youngjae’s shoulder reassuringly and smiled – it was a warm, kind smile that Jaebum had never seen directed at him. Jinyoung was always nice to everyone but him.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” Jaebum asked, earning a nod from his friend.

They said their goodbyes and Jaebum led Youngjae out of the club, feeling the chilly spring wind hit their faces. He hauled a cab to take them to their neighborhood and kept his hands interlocked with Youngjae’s, endlessly worried about how the fight must’ve affected him. This was what he absolutely hated about his job. Some of his clients were decent people, but some of them were awful and assumed he didn’t deserve any respect because of his occupation. This wasn’t the first time a former client was a little too handsy with him in public – he just hated how Youngjae had to get pulled into his mess this time.

“Can we go to your place?” Youngjae asked when the cab pulled up in front of their buildings. “It’s just…Bam’s probably still at my place and he’ll freak if he sees me like this.”

“Yeah, of course, don’t worry about it.” Jaebum rubbed calming circles on his hand as he led them both out of the cab and towards his building.

Jaebum unlocked the main door and took the elevator to his floor, never letting go of Youngjae’s hand. When he opened the door to his apartment, the sounds of his three cats greeting his return filled his ears like music. He pulled Youngjae inside and sat him down on the couch, frantically searching for the first aid kit Jinyoung had prepared for the apartment before finding it in a drawer.
in the bathroom. He sat beside Youngjae and placed the box on his lap, staring blankly at the contents inside as he tried to figure out what to do.

“Hey,” Youngjae placed his hand on Jaebum’s. “I think it’s time we talk about your job.”

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Youngjae’s face hurt like a bitch. His cheeks were completely swollen, and his lip was bleeding – he didn’t know what made him think he could take on someone twice his size, but he wasn’t exactly bitter about the decision either. He was always getting into unusual situations whenever Jaebum was involved.

They had just left the cab and were walking up the stairs to Jaebum’s apartment when his mind began to clear up. The events of the night were finally replaying themselves in a much clearer way, and Youngjae had finally realized the severity of the situation. He had picked a fight with an overeager former client of Jaebum’s and gotten himself hurt in the process. But everything in his mind kept circling back to the main concern of their relationship – Jaebum’s job.

Jaebum had tried to talk to him about it earlier at the club, but Youngjae was far too nervous and unprepared to think about Jaebum having sex with other people, so he ran away (which, in hindsight, was probably not the best decision). But now they were alone in Jaebum’s apartment building and all Youngjae could think about was how much he wanted the older male to be his only.

Youngjae was immediately surrounded by three cats the moment he stepped into the apartment. He recognized each of them from the pictures he had seen on Jaebum’s phone, but took his time playing with them on the sofa as Jaebum frantically searched for a first aid kit in the apartment. Despite experiencing an overload of cuteness from the cats, Youngjae still couldn’t get his mind off of the job talk. They had to talk about it at some point – was Jaebum going to continue working as an escort? Would Youngjae be okay with the thought of his boyfriend sleeping with other people every night? There were so many things to consider, and Youngjae decided to bring up the topic himself.

“Hey,” He began, placing his hand on Jaebum’s. “I think it’s time we talk about your job.”

Jaebum stared at him blankly, trying to decode the situation. “What?”

“We need to talk about how this,” Youngjae motioned to the both of them. “Is going to work out.”

Jaebum took a deep breath. “I need to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“I’m leaving my job.” He revealed quietly. Youngjae could feel the corners of his mouth begin to turn upward and tried his best to hide the growing joy that he was feeling.

“You are? Jaebum…that’s…I don’t know what to say!” Youngjae was completely overjoyed, and expected Jaebum to be the same, but the other male simply kept quiet and continued avoiding eye contact. “What’s wrong?”

“I really pictured this conversation going completely differently this afternoon.” Jaebum mumbled to himself, laughing and shaking his head. This was making Youngjae nervous.

“What’s going on?”
Jaebum gently pulled his hand away from Youngjae’s and looked him in the eyes. “This afternoon I was completely set on telling you that I was leaving my job and we could be together – I was so excited to tell you. But,” Youngjae could feel his heart beating like crazy from the anxiety. “Then that guy came and the whole mess happened…and I’m not sure if this is what’s best. For you.”

“Excuse me?” Youngjae was feeling a roller coaster of emotions now. He didn’t know what he expected, but it wasn’t this.

“Youngjae, I’ve been working as an escort for three years now – I’ve done a lot of things that I’m not proud of. I’m not the kind of boyfriend you would want.”

“I don’t care!” He shouted. “I don’t care about all that. I don’t care that you fuck people for a living. I just care about you.”

“Youngjae…that guy was awful, but he won’t be the last. I’ve dealt with worse through my job, and I’m sure that this will happen again. I don’t know if that would be good for you.”

“I told you, I don’t care! If they want to get near you, they have to go through me!”

Jaebum let out a tiny chuckle at the comment, and his face slowly softened. “Are you going to punch everyone that tries to fuck me?”

“Yes.”

Jaebum was laughing now and began squishing Youngjae’s cheeks. “You’re sweet. But I can’t let you do that. Not if you’re going to get fucked up like this each time.”

Youngjae took a deep breath. The situation was frustrating him beyond anything else, and he didn’t understand why Jaebum was making everything so much more complicated than it needed to be.

“You’re scared, aren’t you?” Youngjae asked quietly. The question seemed to take the older male by surprise, as he immediately froze without an immediate answer. “I get it. It’s scary. We don’t exactly have the most ideal situation, and neither of us have ever really been in a real relationship before. I don’t know how this works more than you do. But you’ve helped me out more than anyone, and you’ve made me feel cared for and loved when I felt like I had no one. You make me feel important.”

Jaebum didn’t respond. He didn’t have to – Youngjae just wanted him to listen for now.

“I know you’re scared that things will be difficult – I am too! But I… I have a lot of feelings for you. It’s taken me a bit of a while to get there, but I’m here. We’ve gone through too damn much to throw this opportunity away. I care about you more than anyone, and I know you care about me too, and I won’t let your fear get in the way of us being happy together.”

Youngjae took Jaebum’s hand again and looked him deep in the eyes. “So, what will it be?”

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“Baby, quit playing with the cats and give me attention!”

“This is a cat café, we’re supposed to give the cats attention, not our boyfriends.”

“But Jinyoung I miss you!”

“Well, pick up a cat and sit next to me if you miss me so bad.”
Jackson groaned lazily before gently taking a cat from the sofa and nuzzling it with his cheeks. He skipped over to where his boyfriend sat on the floor and plopped down beside him, seemingly content.

Youngjae watched the interaction from the sofa beside them as he held his boyfriend’s own cat on his lap. He took a deep breath and tried his best to take in his surroundings. Jaebum’s cat café was bustling with their friends and family as they all came to celebrate the grand opening of his boyfriend’s dream enterprise. It had been a little bit over a year since Jackson’s birthday, and although it took some time, the two of them were finally able to get on their feet with Jaebum’s business. For the first time in a long time, things were peaceful and good.

Some things had changed quite a bit within a year. After leaving his job at Mark’s agency, Jaebum became a lot tighter in funds than he was used to, and Youngjae and Jinyoung made the decision to move into his apartment to help lessen the burden of living costs – they were already unofficially living at Jaebum and Jackson’s apartment anyway. The apartment was zoo of house pets and Youngjae really couldn’t have pictured a better living situation.

Regarding Mark’s agency – the business was now Jooheon’s. After a run-in with a big gaming company executive, Mark found himself losing interest in the business he had built and made the executive decision to move the ownership to a trusted friend. He was now working for said-executive and using the skills he had learned from his little agency to get himself ahead at work.

The number of things that had changed within the year sometimes surprised Youngjae – things were the same, but they were also different. He still saw Bambam and Yugyeom every day, but he also saw Jinyoung and Jackson every day too. He still woke up with Coco sleeping right next to him, but he also woke up with the most adorable man beside him as well. Youngjae and Jaebum were solid, and absolutely in love – it was hard to believe that they met because Jaebum was an escort.

“Youngjae!” A voice called from the door. Youngjae looked up from Nora and saw Mark walking over to greet him.

“Mark! I’m so glad you made it.” He pulled the male he considered to be an older brother into a hug and patted his back.

“How could I not? Jaebum’s been bugging me about this idea since we were like, nineteen,” Mark replied, dramatically rolling his eyes. “Speaking of Jaebum, where is he?”

“He’s out back, bringing in some last-minute toys and treats.”

“Mark!” Two voices shouted in unison, and before Youngjae could say anything, Bambam and Yugyeom quickly tackled Mark to the ground.

“Where have you been, bro?” Bambam asked, lightly punching his arm.

“How can I take over the company if I’m getting off at 2 PM every day to hang out with you idiots?”

“Harsh! But I see your point.” Yugyeom agreed and tightly hugged him from the side. Youngjae always thought it was adorable how the two attached themselves to Mark.

“What’s going on here?” A voice called from behind them. Youngjae turned his head and spotted his boyfriend making his way to them, his arms holding a big box full of treats.

“I’m being attacked by Gremlins.” Mark responded, seemingly desperate.
Jaebum shook his head and set the box on the floor. “Come on, punks, get off the old man.”

“Says the one with back problems.” Bambam snorted under his breath, causing both him and Yugyeom to burst out laughing.

Another thing that happened within the year – the bond that formed between Jaebum and Youngjae’s two best friends. Bambam and Yugyeom came to the apartment quite often to see Youngjae, and after spending an entire three hours roasting Youngjae and Mark together, his two best friends would often come to the apartment even Youngjae wasn’t around. It wasn’t long before Jaebum became another target of Bambam and Yugyeom’s bullying.

Youngjae could see Jaebum begin to breathe furiously through his nostrils – a sign that he was restraining himself from hitting the two boys – and quickly began hugging him to calm him down, laughing loudly as he did so.

“It’s just Bam and Gyeom, baby.” Youngjae assured, caressing his boyfriend’s head.

“How much would you mind if I beat your best friends?” Jaebum asked half-jokingly.

“Oh, I personally wouldn’t mind,” Youngjae began. “But Jackson however…well you know how much he’s gotten attached to those assholes.”

“What are you guys whispering about?” Yugyeom asked. The three males on the floor were curious about their conversation.

“Yeah! Why are you guys keeping secrets from us? If it wasn’t for Mark, you two wouldn’t have even met!” Bambam shouted.

Youngjae and Jaebum were completely ready to ignore anything that their friends were saying, had it not been for the second part of Bambam’s statement.

“Mark?” Jaebum asked, tilting his head at the name. Youngjae could see Mark and Yugyeom shoot Bambam a look as the Thai boy’s eyes widened in panic – as if he wasn’t supposed to say anything. “Didn’t we meet because of you, Bambam?”

“Did I say Mark? I meant me! You two wouldn’t have met if it weren’t for me!” Bambam was trying to fix what he had said, but Mark was already starting to smack his leg to get him to stop talking. From the corner of his eye, Youngjae could see that even Jackson and Jinyoung were giving Bambam a look. Something wasn’t right.

“Wait a second,” Youngjae turned to Bambam. “Is there something we don’t know?”

Youngjae could see his best friend try to formulate a response to his question but stopping himself before he could even speak. Yugyeom was the same way. Nobody was giving them any answers until Mark decided to speak up.

“Just give it up, guys, there’s no use hiding it anymore.” Mark sighed, throwing his hands in the air.

“What have you guys been hiding?” Jaebum asked.

“It was all Mark’s idea!” Yugyeom quickly shouted, removing all responsibility from himself.

“I set you guys up.”
Youngjae and Jaebum paused for a second, glanced at each other, and turned back to their friend with disbelieving eyes. “What?”

“Okay, hear me out first,” Mark put his hands in front of his face to protect himself and sat up. “Didn’t you guys think it was weird that you literally lived right next to each other, were friends with the same people, and probably met a couple of times as teenagers – but didn’t know each other?”

Youngjae thought for a moment. It was strange. “Okay, but there’s no way you could’ve controlled that.”

Mark shrugged. “I didn’t. I just knew that Jaebum was a whiny coward who needed a bit of a push to quit working for me and open his café, and that you would definitely have fallen in love with Jaebum the moment you saw his soft side. So… I decided to make some things happen.”

“What things?” Jaebum asked.

“Things like taking out Coco’s chew toy before her race with Pudding.” Yugyeom answered quietly, avoiding eye contact with Youngjae.

“You did that?” Yugyeom nodded shamefully. “You guys made me lose on purpose!”

“We had to!” Yugyeom pleaded, but Youngjae was still in disbelief over the race.

“And things like…begging you to go to the convenience store during Youngjae’s shift.” Jackson added, still petting the cat in his lap.

“Wait. You guys were in on it too?” Jaebum asked, the situation blowing his mind.

“Duh, we were all in on it, dude.”

Youngjae’s mind went through the different moments that brought him and Jaebum together and realized how much it made sense for it all to be planned by Mark. It wasn’t until he reached one specific moment in time that he began to feel heavy.

“Did you guys purposely avoid me for a whole month just so I’d start going over to hang out with Jaebum?” Youngjae asked softly, his heart dropping at the memory of his time without them.

“No! Of course not! We were both just fighting with each other at the time and didn’t really want to see each other – we never meant to abandon you at all, Youngjae,” Bambam assured, his tone dripping with guilt. “We’re really sorry.”

“That would have been way too far.” Yugyeom added.

Sitting between them, Mark nodded. “They’re telling the truth. My initial plan was to just get you guys to spend the night together – I mean, I knew that you two wouldn’t have ended up fucking, but I genuinely didn’t think that you would end up coming to see him every week.”

“Oh.” Youngjae’s cheeks were bright pink as he began to get embarrassed over Mark’s comment.

“So, let me get this straight, you planned almost everything that led up to us getting together?” Jaebum confirmed, crossing his arms. When Mark simply nodded, he could only shake his head in disbelief. “You’re really going to fuckin’ take over the world one day.”

“But hey, things really turned out for the better, right?”
Youngjae sighed. “I kind of really hate you for lying to us all this time, but I also wouldn’t have met Jaebum if not for you so…good job, I guess?”

“I’ll take that as a sign of your satisfaction!” Mark exclaimed and quickly jumped up to hug the couple, his high-pitched giggle filling up Youngjae’s ears.

Jaebum reluctantly hugged his best friend back before pulling away from the embrace in disgust. “Okay, but if you ever pull a scheme like that again, I’m going to throw you under a bus. Literally.”

“Fine.” Mark agreed and released the both of them from their hug.

The seven of them spent much of the remaining opening ceremony together, playing with cats and revealing how involved they had been in the formation of Youngjae and Jaebum’s relationship. It was a day marked with success and surprise, and by the end of it, Youngjae and Jaebum found themselves lying on the floor of the cat café together, surrounded by their many cats. Coco had joined them halfway through and was lying comfortably on her owner’s chest.

The two lay comfortably in silence as they each went through the revelations of the day at their own pace. But it wasn’t long before Youngjae found himself sliding closer to his boyfriend and gently linking their pinkies together – triggering a flashback to the first time they had ever held hands.

“Jaebum,” He called out, gathering the elder’s attention. “Our friends are really sneaky but I’m glad they did all that.”

Jaebum let out a soft smile and leaned closer to him, until they were both on their sides, face to face. “Me too, baby.”

“I wonder what things would be like if they didn’t set us up.”

“I probably would have been getting ready for another night at the motel – too scared to quit my job and open this place,” Jaebum picked up a nearby cat and brought it between them. “But now this little kitty has a home, and that’s because you gave me a reason to start this new chapter.”

“Maybe,” Youngjae caressed the cat before sneezing. “But I’m grateful you didn’t run away after Jackson’s birthday. If you did, I don’t think I’d be able to get near all these cats.”

“Thank you for loving all my cats, despite your allergies.”

“Anything for you.”

Jaebum leaned closer to Youngjae’s face and gave him a quick, but passionate kiss on the lips, before they both went back to their respective pets.

“So, what was that thing you said about me being like a diamond?”

Youngjae groaned and rolled away. “Oh my god, let it go already!”

“Say it!”

“No!”

“Say it, or else.”

“Or else what?”
Jaebum had a mischievous look on his face as he crawled closer to where Youngjae was moving and began poking all of his tickle spots. The younger of the two immediately burst into a fit of laughter before jumping and standing up to avoid the wrath of his boyfriend. The couple began running in circles in the café, surrounded by their beloved pets.

Youngjae actually researched the cost of therapists after their third appointment. Jaebum never really fit his budget better. Not at all.

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