



# Chasing Wild Heart (Sexy as Sin)

**Author:** *Chessa Andersen*

**Category:** Sport

**Description:** Juniper Mitchell:

The new assistant cross country coach, Dash, irritates me. His training methods are surprisingly helpful, but his overzealous determination to win is annoying as his name and handsome face. Whatever happened to go do your best but have fun? Because hearing your best isn't good enough is a little more than irritating.

The more he pushes, I push back twice as hard with a few choice words and an intimidating stink eye.

Dashwood Black:

Juni irritates me. She's the epitome of a team player, pushing others to dig deep and watching them shine while she stands contently in their shadows. She's outgoing, sassy, witty, and refuses to listen to a helpful word I say as an assistant coach.

While the team itself boasts solid rankings in the division, I know for a fact Juni's name would be at the top in the individual rankings. The fact she's not even considered the team's number one runner puzzles me, but her lack of drive to push herself irritates me even more.

When I chase her for answers, she challenges me to examine my own past and the one rule I followed most my life. Maybe winning isn't everything. Or even the only thing.

?WELCOME TO THE SEXY AS SIN SERIES,? where badass female athletes don't mind working up a good sweat on or off the field.

**Total Pages (Source):** 9

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:24 am*

“Move it, Mitchell!” I bellow, scowling at the familiar form of a runner meandering toward me.

My lips fight the temptation to curve into a self-serving smirk when a familiar pair of chocolate brown eyes drift from the path ahead and lock onto my clearly impatient stance. Even without her knitted brows and lips pulled into a frustrated frown, I know she’s angry. At me.

“Let’s go!” I yell crossly, clapping my hands louder than before and ignoring the disapproving glances from the crowd milling around on the golf course turned cross country course for a day.

As assistant coach to the university’s team, I think I’m allowed to shout at my runners any way I want. Anything to make them move faster. More specifically, the stubborn thorn in my side since day one.

Juniper Mitchell.

My ego inflates, believing it found the key to push the best runner faster. But my heart falters for a fraction of a second when I notice conflict brewing in her eyes.

Even though we met only three months ago, I know what she’s thinking. To stop running right now would be a huge, “ Fuck you, Dash. You’re not the boss of me, so stop yelling.” But the super stubborn, competitive streak in her won’t allow her to sink that low. I’m pretty sure she would rather viciously claw out my eyes than throw a race. Even a charity fun run.

“Go, Juni!” screams a familiar voice next to me. “You got this, girl!”

I roll my eyes and grunt in frustration as Juni silently runs past us. Her eyes concentrating on the trail in front of her. Her naturally tan skin flush from the first mile and the unusually warm October day. Her long black hair pulled back into a ponytail bounces in rhythm with her pace.

Glancing at the timer on my phone, I grumble under my breath at the unimpressive numbers.

“You’re a moron,” the source of the high-pitched shriek scoffs, interrupting my search for other members of the team among the onslaught of runners.

“Excuse me?” My head whips to the side to stare dumbfounded at Daphne Brooks, a freshman runner sidelined for a few races for a minor injury.

The smug smile she wears widens the longer I stand in silence.

“Everyone knows you have a crush on Juni,” she answers simply, looking over my shoulder and cheering loudly. “Go, Auds! Looking good!”

“Good job, Audrey,” I blubber out, silently cursing the diminutive blonde for distracting me from my job, as the remaining three members pass us.

Without another word or glance, Daphne turns and heads toward the next checkpoint, knowing I’ll follow. She probably believes she has the upper hand, expecting me to badger her with endless questions about my alleged crush. Well, joke’s on her because I learned a lesson or two from growing up with three overdramatic and gossipy sisters.

I stopped caring about what everyone thinks they know about me a long time ago.

And I don't have time for middle-school shenanigans when I have a job to do and a residency to complete.

My mind proudly pats my mature ego when Daphne halts suddenly and I stop within a centimeter from crashing into her.

The young runner narrows her blue eyes and scowls at my inattention. "Just ask her out, Dash. She'll say yes."

"Really?"

God, I'm a fucking idiot.

I braced myself for the hushed whispers of "he's so hot" or "how is he single" when I signed on as the assistant coach with a focus on the women's team. I was all ready to ignore the conspiratorial giggles of soothing my bruised ego and healing my foot through oral ministrations and hands-on therapy.

Except my preparation was for nothing. Absolutely nothing. Well, one or two members from the men's team asked about my preferences, but not even a flirty wink from the other team.

For a millisecond, I suspected Daphne harbored a small crush, considering we saw each other outside of practice for one-on-one physical therapy sessions. Mistaking her rapid blinking for awkward flirting, I got as far as, "Look, Daphne," when she indignantly interrupted, "I have something in my eye, you dumbass."

Later, she informed me she's exploring her sexuality but knows with absolute certainty she's not into "silver foxes." When my wounded pride pointed out the nine-year age gap between us, she thoughtfully replied, "Hmph. I figured you were well into your forties."

She's been an annoying little shit ever since.

“Ha!” Daphne exclaims with a self-congratulatory smirk before whirling around and continuing to the checkpoint. “I knew it! You like Juni!”

“No, I don't!” I snap back a little more defensively than I like – or at all.

Even a blind man would notice and appreciate her natural beauty and easygoing nature. Sure, I might have had an occasional erection whenever she pranced around in thin running shorts and a sports bra. I highly doubt I've been the only one based on the dozens of stolen glances from the average heterosexual male.

Have I thought about sliding my fingers under the seam of her bra or down the shorts when she returns from a run all hot and sweaty? I'm a typical 27-year-old male with a very healthy sexual appetite. While I'm open to the idea of a one-time hookup with her, my interest is strictly professional – mostly.

“The only thing I'm interested in is why she's not the lead runner on the team,” I clarify in a more authoritative tone.

Daphne shakes her head as if the answer is obvious and I'm an idiot for even asking. “Because she doesn't want to be.”

“Why?” I demand, frowning. “I don't get why she's wasting her potential to settle for second or third place when she could be winning.”

“What if she doesn't want to win?”

My feet stop momentarily, and my mind spins confusingly. Why would a four-year all-state runner from Nebraska not want to win? And why would she choose an Illinois university known for its prestigious arts program than a full-ride scholarship

to a more acclaimed college with an equally acclaimed cross country team?

Doesn't want to win? Everyone wants to win. Well, everyone should want that. I mentally scoff at the people that like to play for fun. Because where's the fun in losing?

"Huh? Why not?" My long strides easily catch up to the annoying freshman.

"You really are a moron," Daphne replies with a dramatic sigh. "She just wants to run."

"She should be winning," I push. "Doesn't it piss you off she's holding back? That she's wasting her potential?"

"Because she was some all-star runner in high school?"

"So, you know who she is and what she can do!"

"For fuck's sake, Dash," she curses exasperatedly. "None of us really care where she places since we're not exactly dominating the division. We're here because we like to run."

Like to run, my ass. Should be here to win, I think to myself.

"Also, don't we all have the potential to win?" Daphne asks, weaving through the crowd and stopping near the trail, where lead runners will cross shortly. "But yet I'm not hearing you yell extra hard at anyone else. Talk about having a favorite."

"She's not my favorite," I mutter, pushing up the long sleeves of my navy t-shirt.

"So, why aren't you shouting at Tabby? She's the one who has been finishing in the

top twenty this season,” she presses, glancing at her watch before swinging her gaze to the empty path. “You not paying attention to Eden part of your master strategy to help her improve her PR?”

How is this girl so intuitive when she’s not sure China is a country? I wonder sourly before a smidgen of guilt slips through. Is Eden the ginger who hums during runs? Or the one who wears the hideous neon green shoes?

Words of denial sit on the tip of my tongue when Daphne claps enthusiastically and I narrow my eyes to see a familiar form approach.

“Let’s go, Eden!” she shrieks, bouncing up and down in place. “You got this!”

“Good job, Eden!” I shout, watching bright green blurs skim over the dark green course. “Nice pace. Keep it up.”

Wait a second, my mind processes slowly. Eden. Pace. Since when did the number five or six runner keep pace with Juni? Answer: never.

Either Juni decided to “fuck it” and walk or Eden picked up her pace, risking the chance of burning out toward the end. But when the tall, lanky brunette sprints past us, her stride looks strong and her breathing sounds fine. In short, she’s not struggling.

“Where’s Juni?” I frown, desperately tamping down the dread clawing through my stomach, as I search among the long line of more runners nearing us.

Is she injured? Did I push her too far? Shit! Where the fuck is she?

“Gone,” Daphne replies far too cheerfully and not entirely helpful before yelling out Audrey’s name.

Shouts and whistles from other spectators interrupt my further interrogation. I struggle to even focus on encouraging the rest of the team when my mind demands to know what happened to Juni.

My jaw clenches tightly at the thought, because this is a job. I'm the fucking coach. Well, technically the assistant coach. The entire team is my responsibility, not some extraordinary athlete from my home state.

Damn her for distracting me.

"Where is she?" I ask, glancing over the once-continuous line break into sporadic clumps of two or three runners.

"With Tabby," Daphne replies easily. "They're probably finishing the race now."

"What?" My head whips around to take in her smug expression. With my hands tightly curled into fists and resting on my hips and despite my furious glare hidden behind my sunglasses, anyone within a ten-foot radius could probably feel my anger and annoyance vibrate through my solid posture.

What kills me is the sassy, petite freshman not batting an eye or even looking the slightest bit intimidated. When her watch chirps, her gaze drops for a second before resuming our staring contest with a bright smile.

"She and Tabby just finished," Daphne reports, lightly tapping a perfectly manicured nail against the watch screen a few times. "Landed in ninth and tenth place."

The anger simmering inside immediately erupts into an all-consuming rage. The clench in my jaw tightens even more, holding back a barrage of words I will immediately regret.

One, where the fuck is the modicum of respect I deserve for pushing these girls? With the amount of talent and camaraderie, the team shouldn't settle for sitting in the middle of the division. They could be in the top three if they took this seriously and stopped acting like a bunch of junior high students.

Two, the stunt Juniper just pulled proves she's more than capable of winning. If she would stop dicking around for a second or two, she could crush the competition like she did in high school. Where the hell is her drive? Her instincts? The fire to win?

Three, with twenty-one other teams here, I expected Tabby to finish somewhere in the top twenty and Juni top thirty. While finishing ninth and tenth is amazing, pushing that hard without proper training could lead to serious injury.

I frown at the last point, instinctively shifting my balance from one foot to the other.

"How do you know this?" I ask evenly after sucking in a deep breath.

Daphne pops a shoulder, either ignoring or not noticing my barely controlled wrath. I suspect the latter. "A few of her friends are here and stayed near the chute, and one texted me."

"Fuck me," I mutter, incredibly tempted to ignore the disapproving looks from a few nearby parents. Except I could be easily associated with the team, considering I'm wearing a navy t-shirt with the university name printed across the chest and my last name on the back.

Daphne is basically a walking billboard in the school branded warm-up suit of navy joggers and matching hoodie.

Hoping my sunglasses hide my annoyance, I unlock my jaw to soften my tight facial expression before giving the offending spectators a slight nod. I pray they interpret

the silent gesture as an apology because I'd like to avoid a reprimand three months into a new job.

“What the hell is she thinking?” I grumble more to myself.

“Have you ever asked her?”

“I'm not asking her out,” I reply flatly, exasperated at the thought of the team discussing my social life.

“Psssh,” she tsks, waving her hand around as if to bat away a pesky fly. “I know you'll never ask her out because you're too much of a chickenshit. No, dummy, I'm asking if you ever asked her what she's thinking?”

“What?”

Daphne rolls her eyes before answering with an enormous sigh. “You're coaching her based on her stats and achievements. You haven't once talked to her or ask about her goals.”

I open my mouth to argue when she plows ahead, shaking her head for emphasis. “Talking to her is nowhere the same as telling her what she's doing wrong and what she should be doing.”

My lips slam shut as my mind processes the distinct difference. Slivers of shame and confusion tread through me as I realize she's right. Right about everything minus the crush.

“Like I said, moron,” Daphne harrumphs, accepting my silence as the end of the discussion, and literally bounces away.

I stand still, feeling oddly disorientated, and watch her disappear into the crowd heading toward the finish area.

What the hell just happened?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:24 am*

“Sit.” I stop dead in my tracks and scowl at the bane of my existence since August.

Dashwood freaking Black.

Sitting by the window in the first row of the mini bus, he lifts his chin toward the empty row across the aisle.

“I’m not a dog,” I reply tightly, loosening my grip on the strap of my gym bag to prevent myself from “accidentally” swinging it toward his stupid, handsome face.

His broad shoulders slump slightly as he sighs tiredly. “Please sit. I’d like to talk to you.”

Talk at me, I silently correct with disgust.

I want to ignore him. I want to march past him and throw my weary body and the rest of my shit in the last row. I want to yell at him for being a dick since day one, but I don’t. I can be a mature adult.

Rolling my eyes and huffing loudly, I toss my bag onto the seat closest to the window and sullenly slide into the empty one by the aisle.

I pin my arms across my chest and slink further into the cushion as the rest of the team pile onto the bus.

Tabby and Eden are the first to unexpectedly abandon their animated conversation the second their curious eyes glance between me and Dash occupying the first rows.

Amusing grins break wide open when they walk past us and settle into the empty seats.

The cycle repeats with the remaining six members, but Daphne's silent grin and sparkling eyes shine the brightest.

“Told ya so,” she mouths at me with an annoying wink.

The bus driver, Ben, is the last to board and catches the wordless all clear from Dash.

I don't miss the fifty-something father of three's frown when he glances at the unusually quiet passengers through the rear-view mirror. For a split second, his lips part as if he'll address the gigantic elephant on the bus, but just as quick, he presses them together, shakes his head, and shifts into drive.

Even five minutes into the hour-long ride home, the eerie and irritating silence speaks volumes. With front row seats to the Juni his closer to Colorado. Because of many conflicting logistics, our schools never competed in the same meets, but I admittedly followed his growing fandom after he won his first state title.

Was I inspired to try a few fun races after he nabbed his second state title? Maybe.

Did a nerdy 13-year-old of Asian descent have a massive crush on the golden boy with blue eyes and a charming smile? I will take that secret with me to the grave, but I know my family would happily share all the embarrassing details of an infatuation I tried to hide.

“Do you know how many runners would kill to even half your drive?” Dash asks another rhetorical question on my “I've heard all this before” list.

“I don't care,” I grit out, emphasizing each word. “I'm happy with where I am, so

kindly fuck off.”

“Yeah, leave her alone,” Daphne echoes. “She’s fine. We’re fine. Everyone’s fine.”

Except one person isn’t fine, judging from the unrelenting scowl on his dumb face with the perfect amount of stubble.

“You of all people shouldn’t be happy with being mediocre,” he tries again, ignoring the murmurs of the audience behind us.

“Are you fucking serious?” I exclaim, throwing my hands in the air before shoving my index finger in his face. “You chased greatness, Dashwood. And where exactly did that land you? I’m pretty sure being an assistant coach at a liberal arts university was never part of your ultimate dream.”

When my high school coach started recommending colleges with good running programs my junior year, I knew running wasn’t my life. I had no desire to compete in the Olympics or other prestigious races. I had known this deep down, but never said those words out loud. To myself. Or even other people. Like coach. My parents. My brothers.

Maybe because my family unconditionally supported my insane drive to win and desire to have my name etched in state history, they figured I had my sights on something bigger after high school. So their surprise and initial resistance was understandable when I shared running competitively wasn’t part of my future.

“Look,” I sigh, feeling a speckle of guilt when his intense gaze falls to his feet. “I’ve been through this argument too many times, and you’re not the only one who’s disappointed in my decision. But that’s something you need to deal with because this is my choice. My life.”

With exhaustion threatening to dull my sharp tongue and Dash's thoughtful silence, I reach for my duffel because I'm more than ready to crash in the back row with Daphne or one of the other girls.

More than anything, I'm mad at myself for letting him get to me during the stupid race. Pushing myself harder to avoid him at the second checkpoint had been the ultimate "fuck you, Dash, you're not the boss of me." But now, my tired body complains about the extra effort and my bratty behavior.

"Yeah, I don't buy it."

My head whips around in his direction to find his eyes dancing and his lips pulled into a smirk. "Buy what? There's nothing to buy."

"I don't buy that you just want to run," Dash explains smoothly, pulling his arms off his knees. "I think you want to win."

I roll my eyes so hard that I feel a headache forming. Will this idiot ever learn?

"And you're an idiot," I snap, slinging the duffel strap over my shoulder.

"Doesn't mean I'm wrong," he replies in a playful sing-song tone, shuffling his legs away from the aisle and leaning back in his seat. "You just need a new reason."

"Or maybe," I growl, standing up with a hard glare, "you don't want to admit you're wrong and you're a shit coach."

What did he expect when he accepted to coach the women's team? That we would eagerly follow his every word any time he flashed a beautiful smile and saucy wink? That we would be so incredibly humbled the great Dashwood Black wanted to coach us? Arrogant asshole, if he really thinks that highly of himself.

His broad smile falters for a nanosecond before shining brighter. “Nah, I know I’m right.”

“Whatever,” I mutter, stalking toward the last row, where Daphne waits with a gigantic grin.

What the hell just happened?

For two beautiful – glorious, really – years, I led a perfectly normal college life. New state. New friends. New team. I loved every second even when I cried dumb tears over Hayden Collins who broke my heart during my freshman year.

Even without the pressure to win, I still wanted to run. I needed the time and space where nothing could touch me once my feet hit the ground. Anything of importance or real simply faded.

Except left to my own devices, I’d rather burrow myself deeper in the comfort of my bed than rise at the butt crack of dawn to run. Sadly, I need discipline and a schedule.

The head coach, Justine, completely understood my intentions, considering the rest of the team had the same goal. To be surrounded by others with the same mentality made the past seasons unexpectedly fun.

My life was beautifully boring until I heard the whispers of a new assistant coach a month before official practice started. With the men’s team on track for an undefeated season and division championship, Justine believed the guys needed undivided attention from her and the assistant coach, Henry. So, the search for a second assistant coach began.

None of that bothered me until Dash’s name was dropped as the frontrunner for the position. Even then, what was the likelihood of him knowing anything about me?

High. The chance was super duper high.

He probably knew before Justine's individual introductions. I watched recognition and then confusion flash through his eyes, but he said nothing.

My attitude with him began when I approached him to share my reason for being on the team. Before I could say a word, he sneered and stated icily, "I know who you are, and I don't care about what you want. I won't treat you any different from the rest of the team."

Except he's a big fat liar.

A big fat liar who might be a teeny bit right about me needing a new reason to win.

An exhilaration hit me hard today when I caught up with Tabby and finished slightly ahead of her. The adrenaline rush I hadn't felt in a long time was like seeing an old friend. Not realizing how much you miss something until it returns.

But there's no fucking way I'm telling Dash that.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:24 am*

“You chased greatness, Dashwood. And where exactly did that land you?”

It landed me here. In a city about ninety minutes away from Chicago. Because I’m lost. And bored. And tired.

It landed me here. Running around an unfamiliar neighborhood at a fucking leisurely pace. To avoid further damage to my already delicate foot.

It landed me here. Being an asshole angrier with himself than with a short, sassy runner with a sharp tongue.

One full week has already passed since the meet. Despite my efforts to pay attention to everyone, awkwardness and annoyance continue to fill the gap between me and the team.

“I’m pretty sure being an assistant coach at a liberal arts university was never part of your ultimate dream.”

To be fair, is it anyone’s dream? No, I lost mine during my sophomore year at a North Carolina university that had offered me a full scholarship for running.

One diagnosis from one doctor informing me the common navicular stress fracture I had been treating for a year wasn’t healing properly snowballed into dozens of “second” medical opinions chipping away at my lifelong aspirations.

I had been “one to watch” one minute and “remember that kid from Nebraska” the next. Humiliation didn’t cover everything I felt watching my dream die a slow and

painful death.

My mom and sisters encouraged me to return home and mourn what I had lost (my mom's words, not mine). But I didn't need to take a gap year to know what I needed to do. My brain automatically switched gears and focused on what had always been plan B: become a physical therapist. I completed my bachelor's degree in exercise science three years later and then spent the following year traveling with my sisters and my girlfriend, Tara.

"I'm happy with where I am, so kindly fuck off."

I can't even remember the last time I had been genuinely happy. I wanted to feel something when I remained on the East Coast after the year of travel. When Tara and I moved in together. When I spent another three years for a degree in Doctor of Physical Therapy.

But then I realized I felt nothing all those years thanks to a simple question on an exam application.

Where do you see yourself in five years ? My immediate answer: I don't know.

Would I remain in North Carolina? Would I be married to Tara? Would she be expecting our first kid? Did we have a dog? What the fuck did I want?

When I couldn't answer any of the questions my mind threw at me, I knew I had to do something . Anything.

With my residency search expanded to anywhere in the country, one of my former roommates mentioned an opening at a university's sports program. My options were limited, but my need for change was greater. Landing a coaching job was a bonus.

But despite doing something , I still feel nothing . Except misdirected anger at a certain runner who easily pisses me off with just one look.

Gah! I scowl, slowing my pace a fraction to catch my breath.

Even though I can't run in a professional capacity, dozens of doctors insisted a few easy miles won't hurt me. Had I lost the chance to run at all, I'd be a bigger asshole than I am now.

The continuous vibration of my phone against my arm interrupts my self-loathing thoughts. I stop running to check why my three sisters are blowing up our group chat. Dread slowly sinks through my chest, already suspecting the reason.

While my siblings and I definitely have our differences, one super annoying topic unites us. Our parents' toxic relationship.

"Fuck," I mutter, scanning through the dozens of texts ending with too many exclamation and question marks.

The biggest news takeaway is everyone owes Genevieve, the second to youngest sibling, fifty bucks for calling how long our dad's third marriage would last. Not even a year. I figured the latest wife, despite the twenty-year age gap, would try to make it to the first anniversary. I guess not.

The commotion isn't even about the third wife leaving. Nope, my sisters are up in arms over our dad's "devastation" and our mom's sympathetic shoulder for him.

The latest development only increases my frustration and my need for a longer run. But knowing what will soon follow, I cut my run short and head back to my two-story, two-bedroom townhouse.

The first expected call comes through when I shut the front door to my place and start peeling off my sweaty clothes. Gen, the champion of compartmentalization, wants to know how soon she can expect my fifty dollars and shares she's ignored two (and counting) calls from Mom. We chat for a few minutes before she heads out the door to meet friends for dinner.

I jump in the shower after reading texts from the other two sisters warning Mom is calling "all of her darling children." I envy Gen's ability to ignore messages from either parent because I've never been able to avoid our mom without feeling immense guilt. Dad, on the other hand, not an issue.

When my mom checks in, I set the speaker on and throw on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. Guilt might not allow me to ignore my mom's calls, but it doesn't stop me from tuning out words I've heard a billion times before. I toss in an occasional "hmmm" or another one- to two-word reply whenever she pauses for air.

I swallow a groan after opening the refrigerator door and scanning the contents for anything edible. Nothing. The cabinets offer nothing except a sleeve of saltine crackers.

"Dash?" my mom calls out as I stand helplessly in the middle of the small kitchen. Maybe the food gods will take pity on me and magically stock the shelves behind the closed doors. Or the components for a good sandwich at least.

"Yeah, Mom?" I grab my coat from the couch and head toward the front door.

"Will you do that for me? Please?"

Shit. I halt suddenly in panic, forgetting about shoving my other arm into my coat. What did I miss?

My mom exhales the universal “disappointed, tired mother” sigh, interpreting my delayed reply as a resounding no.

“Dash, he’s your father.”

I roll my eyes and resume shrugging into my coat. The sense of dread long gone.

“He’s really hurting,” she insists as I step outside into the early evening and welcome the cool air sweeping over my heated emotional state.

Devastated the third Mrs. Black finally realized he wasn’t a rich silver fox, I think dryly, finally taking my mom off speaker and holding the phone to my ear.

Despite the last bits of sun fading, I walk toward a local diner a few guys on the team had recommended. Under normal circumstances, I’d hop in the car and waste five minutes of gas, but I’m hoping the chilly stroll will keep my mental health in check.

“Just think about how you felt when you and Tara separated,” my mom pushes, not waiting for a reply. “How many years were you two together? Weren’t you sad when it ended?”

Six years. Not really, my mind answers honestly.

“The breakup with Tara isn’t the same thing as Nicole leaving Dad,” I point out, balancing the phone between my ear and shoulder.

“But he was there for you, Dash.”

I bite back my growl because his version of “there for you” was saying, “You’re too good for her, son,” before clapping me on the back and throwing back shots of whiskey.

In reality, Tara deserved better. She held on for so long, waiting for the day I pull my head from my ass. I stayed because I was a selfish asshole. Well, I'm still a selfish asshole, but I'd like not to be. Some would call that recognition growth.

"He could really use some support from you and your sisters," my mom insists, an air of frustration mounting in her normally calm voice. "I don't understand why you're all so mad at him all the time. You need to let go of his past mistakes."

Oh, that will never happen. I flatten my lips to keep myself from saying those words out loud.

I'm one hundred percent sure my sisters won't forget any of the disparaging remarks he's made in recent years. Marianne is a dirty slut. Genevieve is a fat pig. Cordelia is a nerdy freak. And I'm a pussy because a small boo-boo on my foot stopped me from running.

"Mom, you know it's not that easy, especially when he's never apologized."

A bright neon sign in the window of a dive bar I've visited a few times catches my attention, tempting me to walk in and stay for awhile. Except my stomach complains with a rumble, and I need more sustenance than stale popcorn and peanuts. I make a mental note to stop by on the way back from dinner.

"Dash, he says things when he's upset," she protests. "He doesn't mean to hurt any of you."

Bull-fucking-shit.

"I love you, Mom, but I gotta go," I rush out apologetically, knowing I'll snap at her if I stay on the line a minute longer.

“But Dash—”

“Love you! Bye!” I kill the call and speed walk on fumes the last two blocks to the restaurant.

As much as I love my mom, I will never understand why she allows herself to be a fucking doormat for a man who’s always been an asshole to her.

I puff out my cheeks and yank on the diner’s door a little too hard, causing the attached bell to chirp too loudly.

I suck in a deep breath and exhale slowly when I step inside the quiet and practically deserted space. Giant framed pictures of the city dot the pale yellow walls, creating a casual and relaxed vibe.

Two female staff members huddle at the long bar, one behind it and the other sitting on a stool in front.

“Hello!” the server, likely a student at the university, perched on the stool greets before hopping off and grabbing a menu from the host stand. “Feel free to sit anywhere.”

Empty wooden booths line the walls while small square tables fill the inside area. An older couple quietly dine at a table near the bar, and another sit near a window.

I start walking toward the closest booth but stop when I see a familiar face. With her brown eyes downcast at a sketchbook and her hand flying over the paper with a pencil, Juni occupies a booth by herself. Judging from the full glass of ice water and no other dishes on the table, I guess she’s been here a minute or two.

Still feeling slightly salty from my conversation with my mom, I silently stalk over to

her and slide into the empty bench across from her.

My sudden presence startles her, her head snapping up from the sketchbook and her hand stopping in mid-air.

“What the ...” she trails off, staring at me with confusion before her pretty pink lips form a scowl. “What are you doing?”

“What’s it look like?” I shrug out of my coat and stash it at the end of the bench. “Grabbing dinner obviously.”

“Go sit at another table.”

“Uh,” the young server stammers, glancing nervously between us, unsure about her role in an awkward situation.

“I’ll just have a water for now,” I say smoothly with a wink and smile, gently tugging the laminated menu from her hand.

“Um, okay,” she replies, shooting an uncertain look at Juni, who rolls her eyes and slightly shakes her head, before heading toward the bar.

“Where are your manners, Juniper?” I tsk playfully, peeking at the menu.

“Where are your manners?” she shoots back, jabbing the sharpened end of her pencil in my direction. “I don’t remember inviting you to my table.”

“I’m not a vampire. I don’t need an invitation.”

Juni huffs as the brunette server returns with my water and her dinner plate.

“I’ll take the mushroom and Swiss burger,” I order after she sets the glass down and some sort of breakfast skillet in front of Juni. “For my side, I’d like the salad with Italian dressing please.”

The server named Mindy bounces away with the promise my order will be ready shortly.

Juni quietly lifts a slim brow as she frees her utensils from the napkin wrap.

I shrug before sweeping a hand over my torso area. “French fries will wreck this girlish figure I’ve worked so hard for.”

The sound of her light, genuine laugh sends an unexpected pulse of warmth through my chest.

Even though I see her most days at practice, she somehow looks different in this moment in an old faded black t-shirt. Her black hair isn’t pulled back into a ponytail but instead messily swept into a clip with tendrils framing her face. A few flecks of paint or ink stick to her unpainted and short fingernails, and a few more faint smudges linger on her wrists and part of her cheek.

Other than the light sheen of lip gloss, she’s not wearing an ounce of makeup. But she looks refreshingly beautiful – as always.

“What’s up your butt?” Juni asks, sinking a fork into her over-easy eggs sitting on top of what appears to be biscuits and gravy.

With my brain still functioning like a bratty teen, I bite out, “Your mom.”

“Considering my mom is a tiger mom, she’s up everyone’s butt,” she throws back just as quick before taking a bite and sighing softly in happiness. “My brothers and I

learned a long time ago to never mess with her.”

I smile at her reaction, reaching for my utensils wrapped in a napkin.

“Why you so grouchy?” Juni amends her earlier question.

My initial instinct is to deflect, allowing the familiar irritation to slowly fester into anger. But for some reason, I have an urge to vent. Maybe I need to talk to someone other than my sisters.

“My mom,” I admit, reaching across the table with my fork and swiping a bite of biscuits and gravy.

“Hey,” she protests weakly, pulling the skillet closer to her.

The surprisingly delicious taste makes me wonder how I missed the breakfast section on the menu and if it’s too late to change my order.

“My parents separated when I was ten,” I continue, laying my fork on the napkin and leaning back. “My dad fell in love with someone else and moved out of the house. But six months later, he came crawling back and begged Mom for a second chance. Because my mom is a hopeless romantic, she took him back.

“But the reconciliation didn’t even last a month when they started fighting again and he moved out again. My sisters and I watched the vicious cycle last for three years until Dad finally served her with divorce papers. When my mom signed the papers, I took it as a positive sign that she was moving forward but deep down, she believes he’ll come back.”

“That sucks,” Juni offers with a sad smile.

“Yeah,” I agree softly. “She called me tonight, saying my dad is devastated his third marriage is ending. And that led us to arguing about why is he crying on her shoulder and why is she sympathizing with him. She says I don’t have a right to be angry with either of them.”

Her nose scrunches in disapproval. “Parents kinda suck, don’t they?”

I nod wordlessly, watching my fingers fiddle with the napkin, not knowing what else to add.

Fortunately, the awkward stillness breaks when Mindy drops off my burger and salad and refills our water glasses.

A few bites into my salad makes me wish I had ordered fries or Juni’s breakfast skillet. Not sure if it’s the food or the unwilling dinner date, but I feel my frustrations slowly fade.

“I kinda figured your mom was a hopeless romantic,” Juni admits, shoveling more food onto her fork.

I shoot her a skeptical look, wondering how anyone who doesn’t know my mom would come to that conclusion.

“It’s not hard to figure out when your sisters’ names are Marianne, Genevieve, and Cordelia.”

The question about how she knew the names almost slips out when my mind pulls me back to a time when I had been a really big deal. A really big deal where I found myself answering the same questions for different outlets.

The most frequently asked question had been if my parents knew I would be a runner

when they named me Dashwood. With my oldest sister named Marianne, our dad strongly objected to our mom's top choice for a boy: Willoughby. According to him, naming a brother and sister after a doomed literary couple sounds "icky." After Mom pulled the "who has to push a watermelon out of her vagina" card, Dad reluctantly accepted the alternative: the last name of the three sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen.

He foolishly believed he ended the trend of character names after banning the classic novel, just one of my mom's favorites, for inspiration. Except my mom had dozens of "favorite" books that became fair game.

My new question is: when did Juni research me? Did she want to know more about the new assistant coach? Or did she follow me when I was in high school?

The idea of a teenage Juni scrolling through my past social media accounts on her phone tugs at something inside me. Amusement, for sure. But the unfamiliar pulse of warmth from earlier returns but slightly stronger. Despite its intentions, I find I don't hate it.

Juni's empathic smile fades slowly when mine brightens, edging toward devious.

"No," she snaps without any real heat, pointing her empty fork at me. "Whatever you're thinking about is wrong. So, just stop thinking."

I hum quietly as I finish the rest of my salad and watch her squirm in her seat. As the silence between us stretches, the more agitated she becomes. I freaking love it.

"Ugh!" she huffs, pushing a few strands of hair away from her eyes. "We lived in the same state, and your stupid name was freakin' everywhere, Dash. Everyone knew who you were."

“Mmm hmm.”

“I was just a dumb kid. I didn’t know any better.”

“Didn’t know any better than to what, Juni?” I tease, leaning forward and whispering conspiratorially. “Juniper Mitchell, did you have a crush on me?”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:24 am*

Don't blush. Don't blush. Don't blush.

The internal mantra doesn't matter when I feel a deep warmth spread over my face.

Stupid cheeks. Stupid fucking cheeks.

Despite the obvious non-verbal answer, I still choose to lie. As if I can save my ass. As if he's so dumb, he won't know any better.

I casually lift my shoulders and aim for a bored look. "Like I said, I was a dumb kid who didn't know any better."

"Mmm hmm." The smirk painting his face not only tells me he doesn't believe a word I say, but he's enjoying the front-row seat of watching me die a slow, painful death of humiliation. Asshole.

"I was twelve," I scoff, leaving out the fact my crush started a year or two earlier. "I was just coming out of the boys have cooties phase."

Dash's nose scrunches and his lips pull into a frown. "Twelve? Shit, Mitchell, how old are you?"

"Hey, you're never supposed to ask a lady her age."

"Good thing you're not a lady," he easily tosses back.

"Twenty-one," I answer, smiling at the recent memory of taking too many shots only

to hurl everything back up at the end of the night. “I was twelve – a seventh grader – when I watched you win your third straight state title.”

“So, wait,” Dash ponders, squinting an eye thoughtfully. “If you were there, that means you ran your first state meet earlier in the day, right? Because I know you went to state six times.”

“Yeah, that was my first state meet.”

“Wait, a second.” His ocean blue eyes grow wide with surprise and excitement. “You were the seventh grader who finished fourteenth!”

I nod, sliding my fork around the near empty skillet to scoop up the last bits of hashbrowns hidden under the biscuits and gravy.

A few lines wrinkle his forehead as his mind searches for a familiar face to connect the informational tidbit.

“Come on,” I tease with a snicker. “You got this, old man. It’s been what? A couple of decades?”

“No.” Dash scowls before suddenly lighting up, snapping his fingers, and pointing at me. “I remember you!”

His enthusiasm for remembering minor specifics on a chaotic and significant day for him amuses me too much that I don’t care that he’ll remember a skinny 12-year-old geek with glasses and braces.

“You were the ner... nervous. You looked nervous,” he stammers suddenly, slumping a bit with a sheepish smile.

I wonder if he remembered he has three sisters who probably wouldn't be thrilled to be teased about their looks. Especially during the awkward periods. Because I highly doubt Dash went through one when he was younger.

“I was a nerd, Dash,” I admit, setting the utensils inside the empty dish. “I had braces and glasses and skinny legs.”

“Yeah, but now look at you, you’re all se...secretary-ish,” he stumbles awkwardly.

Secretary-ish? What the hell does that mean?

With brows knitted together, I shoot him a quizzical look for an explanation. But then I notice a pink tinge slowly warming his tanned cheeks. His gaze falling anywhere but me. His hands shoving the last big bite of his burger in his mouth.

You’re all se...

“Dashwood Black,” I exclaim with faux surprise and copy the way he leaned forward a few moments ago. “Do you think I’m sexy?”

He swallows visibly before rolling his eyes and sitting straighter. “Oh, come on, you know you’re sexy. Don’t deny it.”

“I’m not denying anything.” I hold up my hands in mock surrender. “So, you remember me at state, then?”

He nods silently, pushing his empty plate aside. “I didn’t watch you run, but everyone was talking about how this seventh grader would be the next big thing. I saw you and your coach talk to some other coaches before my race.”

I vaguely remember being nervous before the race, but everything after it had been a

big blur. Tired smiles. Soft “thank you” whenever someone complimented me. Unfamiliar faces after another.

“Did you save room for dessert?” Mindy pops by the table with a big smile, quickly grabbing the two empty plates.

Dash and I both shake our heads.

“Separate checks?” she asks slyly, shooting me a sassy wink that says, “You’re gonna hit that if he picks up your check, right?”

The small smile I give her conveys, “You and your sister suck at matchmaking so give it up. I’ll give you details about this turd later.”

“Yes,” I confirm quickly, just as Dash says, “One check please.”

I open my mouth to protest, but he pulls a credit card from his wallet and hands it to Mindy.

“I’ll be right back with your receipt,” she chirps, bouncing away before I can stop her.

Apparently, our conversations during my frequent visits have done nothing to enhance our telepathic communications.

“Thanks,” I mumble, praying the small flutters in my stomach have nothing to do with my meal. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I also didn’t have to crash into your booth like an asshole,” Dash replies with an apologetic smile. “Sorry about that.”

I lift a shoulder. “Eh, I think it all worked out in the end.”

What the hell? My mind shrieks in horror before frantically pulling the mental red alarms. It worked out in the end? What does even mean? Time to go, you weirdo.

I’m good at harmless teasing. I’m fabulous with sarcasm. I exceed expectations during confrontations. But my small talk skills definitely need improvement. Especially when I’m used to giving a certain someone my best stink eye and calling him a “fuckwit”.

As soon as Dash signs the check, I scramble out of the booth, shrug into my coat, and grab my sketchbook. He remains silent when he pulls on his coat and holds the diner’s door open for me to walk through first. Like a freakin’ gentleman.

Just remain calm, my mind continues to yell before launching into a step-by-step plan. Just say good night, walk to the corner, and run like hell once you’re out of sight.

“Well, uh, I’ll see you at practice tomorrow,” I stammer, leaning toward the corner. “Thanks again for dinner.”

Dash frowns, his eyes catching me shove my hands in the pockets of my coat. “Did you drive?”

I shake my head and jerk it toward the end of the block. “I don’t live that far from here.”

“I’ll walk with you,” he states in a tone that leaves no room for argument, standing taller and puffing out his chest a bit.

I snicker, rolling my eyes. “Seriously, Dash, you don’t need to. I literally live right

around the corner. Plus, this isn't the 1940s or whatever era did that sort of thing."

He mimics my sarcastic eye roll. "I know, but remember, I was raised by a hopeless romantic of a mother. Not only would she freak out and fear for your safety, but she would disown her only son if she knew I allowed a young single woman to walk home alone. At night. In Chicago."

The mock scandalous tone emphasizing the last four words makes me laugh out loud. "She thinks you live in Chicago?"

"No, but in her mind, she thinks the ninety-minute drive takes ten minutes." He shrugs, his gaze falling to the sidewalk. "Mom math."

"Well, come on," I sigh, shivering slightly against the light chill. "I'm getting cold."

He quietly falls in step next to me, walking toward the corner as a few cars drive by. In my peripheral, I watch his teeth scrape over his lower lip as his eyes sweep over the quiet neighborhood.

Halfway through my freshman year of living on campus with a rising adult film star and sneaky kleptomaniac, I decided roommates weren't for me and I would live off campus the following year.

Even though I live too far away from the university to walk, I love the mostly residential area with a few local businesses scattered around. Including my favorite diner of all time, Clara & June . During my first visit, I secretly hoped the service would be terrible and the food even worse, giving me reasons to never return. But the friendly staff, all-day breakfast menu, and prime location easily trumps my laziness to cook anything decent.

"Um, so, this is me," I announce, stopping on the other side of the aged brick building

that houses the diner and a local hair salon.

I follow his gaze to the darkened windows of the second and third floors above Style & Grace , a modest and cozy business with a solid reputation.

“So, you literally live right around the corner,” Dash teases, sounding slightly embarrassed that I didn’t need an escort.

“Yeah. The rent is cheap because no one wants to climb three sets of stairs for a basic studio apartment.”

“No elevator?” He stares at the brick walls as if he could see through it.

I shake my head. “I don’t mind the stairs when I basically have the whole third floor to myself.”

“That’s cool.” The slight awkwardness in his reply reminds me of a nervous teen on a first date.

My mind can’t imagine a younger Dash ever going on a first date. My guess is he’s the guy who bangs first before the late-night booty calls morph into a full-fledge relationship.

“Well, uh, I guess I’ll see you at practice tomorrow,” I repeat from a few minutes earlier. “Thanks for dinner and for walking me home. Your mom will be so proud of you.”

“Uh, yeah, I guess she’s stuck with me for a little longer,” he cracks lamely with an awkward chuckle that makes me inwardly cringe.

With my keys in my hand, I step toward the door and give him a shy smile. “Good

night, Dash.”

“Good night, Juniper.”

“What’s going on with you and Dash?”

“I have no idea,” I admit, taking a step back to study my biggest project to date.

“Kinda looks like you two are falling in love,” Daphne sings out happily.

“It’s weird seeing you two get along,” Tabby adds. “I kinda miss the days of you giving him the stink eye.”

I chuckle, shaking my head, as I set a dirty palette knife on the bucket lid of plaster. With my eyes scouring the wall for major errors, I carefully step backwards toward the sound of my teammates’ giggles.

“Here.” Daphne pushes my plastic water bottle in my hand as I flop down next to her on the cool tile floor.

I don’t need to glance at the time on my phone to know it’s getting late. My body protests every move I make, first objecting to rolling out of bed at the ungodly hour of six in the morning. Then scurrying to the art center for a few hours. Bouncing from building to building for classes. Lifting weights for an hour before finishing practice with a five-mile run. Finally, scuttling my weary ass back to the center until I’m in danger of falling asleep with my face literally plastered to a wall.

Fortunately, my teammates love me enough to drop by with a sandwich for dinner and keep me company under the pretense of studying. Students from three separate art courses filter in and out of the spacious gallery area to work on their own projects.

Eden passes through because she's been flirting with a handsome student named Marcos from a different class. Tabby claims the background noise helps her study. And Daphne likes to be anywhere but in her dorm room to avoid her politically active roommate.

Right now, we have the open but cluttered space to ourselves. Tabby sits in a folded chair with her long legs stretched onto another chair. Eden set up shop on a nearby scaffold, and Daphne leans against unopened industrial-sized bags of plaster on the floor.

"Perry's looking good," Tabby comments, dragging her emerald-colored eyes up from the laptop on her outstretched legs.

I follow her gaze to my current assignment: a gigantic octopus sculpture plastered to a wide wall. A variety of materials, from mesh wiring to recyclable plastic jugs to plaster, formed the basic outline of the sea creature. An ungodly amount of plaster powder mixed with water was manhandled and molded to shape the figure.

"Yeah," I agree, taking a healthy gulp from my water bottle. A wave of satisfaction swells inside my chest at the progress I've made over the past month.

"Have you decided on the color scheme yet?" Eden asks, resting her chin on her arms folded across a scaffold bar.

A frustrated sigh billows between my lips as I shake my head.

Daphne studies the gray work in progress with a slight head tilt. "What are our choices?"

"A orange-reddish hue, a popular one used for a more natural look," I explain, my fingers sliding across my phone to find rough color composites. "I was thinking about

a somewhat dark-ish teal for a more dramatic and almost fantasy-ish effect. And the last would be a bronze – almost metallic – finish for an artsy fartsy look.”

Eden snickers. “You said artsy fartsy .”

“I thought you were leaning toward the bronze finish.” Tabby frowns, staring at the unfinished octopus she named Perry during her first visit. She had been appalled I had been working without a title in mind, so she decided the tentacled creature itself needed a name.

I submitted my sketch with the bronze finish, knowing it would outshine the submissions by the mean girls in the class. After our professor went through the guidelines and requirements for the annual art show, the trio of terror believed one of them would nab the ultimate canvas at stake: one full wall in the gallery area that would remain throughout the year.

Their loud and obnoxious argument over who would use the “timeless and classic” flowers irritated me into avoiding anything scenic. But they truly pissed me off when they mocked my very rough draft of a dragon emerging from flames.

A night of sketching anything and everything led me to Perry. The sea creature might not seem “timeless or classic,” but I found beauty in a subject that was so out of my realm. My professor and other important people in the art department thought so as well and awarded me the wall.

Of course, the mean girls weren’t happy about the decision, especially when their unimpressive submissions were relegated to simple canvas boards.

Suck it, mean girls.

“I think the metallic effect elevates it as an art piece, but I kinda think color would

give Perry some character,” I admit, standing up and stretching my arms above my head. “Does that sound dumb?”

All three shake their heads.

“Listen to Perry,” suggests Eden, a second-year art major. “Now, answer my question. What’s going on with you and Dash?”

I groan like a petulant child not wanting to take a bath, dropping my arms to my side. “My answer is still the same: I don’t know.”

Daphne shoots her arm in the air and waves her hand like a kid in class. “Oh, I know! I know the answer.”

Tabby and Eden chuckle. I pinch the bridge of my nose, knowing I should listen to the perceptive freshman spitfire.

Practices over the past two weeks have been... less hostile. Almost fun. Dash continues to give his irritatingly helpful advice. And I remind him to “shove it up his ass” with little bite.

During the most recent meet, he made a sarcastic joke about another team, and I laughed! Out loud! Then the bastard smiled and stared at me for a hot second. It was weird.

“Daphne,” Eden calls out jokingly. “What would you like to share with the class?”

“They’re falling in love,” she repeats in a sing-song tone. “It’s so obvious.”

Obvious? I wrinkle my nose at the notion. As one of the two parties involved in falling in love, shouldn’t I at least be aware of my own feelings?

I know Teenage Juni squeals with joy whenever Dash pays the slightest bit of attention to her. Doesn't matter if it's a quick glance. Or saucy grin. Or "move faster, Mitchell!" Because any attention is good attention.

Teenage Juni is a fucking idiot and on the verge of scribbling Mrs. Juniper Black all over her notebooks.

Adult Juni doesn't like the way her heart beats a teeny bit faster if he's standing a little too close. Or when he's quick to volunteer to spot her at the weight bench.

"Have you slept with him yet?" Tabby asks, shoving her tongue in one cheek as her hand strokes an invisible dick outside the other.

"What? No!" I laugh at the comically obscene gesture, not her question.

"But you're going to," Eden guesses with a sly wink.

"I mean..." I lift my shoulders and hold my hands up in surrender. "Have you seen him without a shirt?"

My dirty whore of a mind kicks into overdrive whenever my eyes roam over his deliciously contoured torso. Any time my gaze falls below his waist, I force myself to look away before I do something embarrassing. Like drool. Or jump his bones.

"But why is it obvious to us and not to them?" Eden asks, pointing an accusatory finger at me. "Why is she just standing there like a dumbass—"

"Hey!" I protest, narrowing my gaze at my teammate, who simply ignores me.

"And not trying to seduce him or something?" she finishes, looking toward the other two for answers.

“Because she’s not in a terrible rom-com that would stoop to such degrading and manipulative ways?” Tabby guesses dryly.

“Because she’s too busy fighting her attraction,” Daphne adds with a pop of her shoulders.

“I am not!” My retort objects to the authoritative tone in Daphne’s statement rather than the solid logic. “Also, is that how relationships begin now? Fuck each other first, and then just magically fall into a relationship?”

“When was the last time you went on a legitimate date?” Eden questions, tapping a manicured nail against her lips as if she’s internally searching for her own answer.

“Fighting my attraction?” I challenge, picking up my palette knife and stepping toward Perry. “I freely admit he’s hot, and I would bang him.”

“Could you imagine being in a relationship with him?” Daphne fires back just as I turn to fully face the wall so she can’t see the pink stain spreading over my cheeks.

Because, yes, I could imagine spending more time with him outside practice and meets. I could imagine us taking runs together that would lead to fun chases and tickle sessions and passionate kisses.

“Maybe,” I answer, hoping I sound nonchalant despite the images in my mind creating a questioning ache in my chest.

“Mmmmm.” The genuine indifferent reply points out I’m full of shit and fooling no one.

Just because my mind can create a beautiful and imaginary relationship doesn’t mean I want it, right?

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:24 am*

Why the fuck am I here? I berate myself, standing awkwardly outside the locked building door leading to Juni's apartment.

The darkness from the third-floor window suggests she could be tucked in for the night, but deep down, I don't think that's true. I couldn't even explain my logic because I don't even know why I'm here. At an hour where most of the residents in the neighborhood are turning in for the night. Where a handful wander out for a few drinks at the nearby haunts.

Where a tired neighbor might glance out the front window and spot a twenty-something white male acting suspiciously near a closed diner and hair salon.

Twenty minutes ago, I was settling to watch a few episodes of Taskmaster (the British version, not the short-lived U.S. one). But seconds later, I was trading my comfy joggers for jeans and walking into the cold, dark night.

The liar in me whispered I was heading toward the dive bar for a drink or two, but my mind didn't believe that for a second. Especially when my brisk pace didn't falter for a nanosecond as I passed the neon sign in the window and the faint sounds of people laughing and talking inside.

Why the fuck am I here? My mind screams as I peek at my phone in my hands, debating if I should call her.

"Dash?"

"Argh!" I warble out nervously, turning around so fast my phone slips from my

fingers, and I'm frantically juggling air and nerves to catch the device. Luckily, it lands in my open palm, and a sigh of relief escape through my lips.

Stuffing my phone into the pocket of my coat, I smile hesitantly and study her for a moment under the faint glow of the streetlight on the corner. Her tired eyes hold a mix of curiosity and amusement. Her shoulders slump from the weight of carrying her backpack and gym bag.

My eyes dart around her, noting we're the only two people standing outside in the late October cold. Where the hell did she come from? Has she always been a stealthy little ninja?

"Are you okay?" Juni asks, moving past me to unlock the door.

Nope. Not even close.

"Uh, yeah," I stammer, rubbing a hand over the back of my neck. "I think so. Are you just getting home from school or something? It's kinda late."

A small part of me dies from embarrassment.

She shoots me a puzzled look but says nothing else before stepping inside and holding the door open for me. "Want to come inside?"

"Uh, sure. Yeah. Thanks."

Dear God in heaven, please kill me now.

I survey the small entryway as Juni flips on the light and drops her bags at the bottom of the stairs to grab some mail sitting on a small shelf. The area between the door and the first set of steps is comfortable enough for two people to hold a normal

conversation.

My eyes trail over Juni's shoulder and wander up the long and narrow flight of dark green carpeted stairs. Motion-sensor lights stuck to the white walls brighten the path between the two light fixtures at the bottom and top.

"Wanna come up and see my place?" she asks, tucking her mail into an outside pocket of her gym bag.

"Uh, yeah. Sure." I gulp, picking up her backpack, and shoot her a hard look that leaves no room for arguments.

Juni holds up her hands in mock surrender before turning and starting the ascent.

My ego huffs with victory after passing the first landing. Of course, the close view of Juni's shapely ass serves as a great distraction.

But all that changes in a matter of seconds before hitting the second landing. My calves are yelling at me for being a stupid, stupid man, and my lungs are ready to give up on life. Even Juni's butt can't save me.

I want to collapse against the wall and gasp for air when we reach the final landing outside her door. But I don't because my broken pride won't let me. Apparently, three flights of stairs have the power to strip a man of his dignity in a matter of seconds.

Juni peeks at me before turning her back to unlock the door, and I discreetly as I fucking possibly can suck in much needed air into my withering soul.

As soon as I step into the open studio space, I understand her reasons for living here. Bricks walls. Exposed wooden beams. Wide windows. Wood floor. So much room.

If any of my sisters lived here, they would've set up makeshift walls with bookcases or whatever Pinterest suggested to create separate rooms. Dividers aren't necessary to see how Juni separated the areas into three distinct spaces.

An unmade queen-sized bed sits a few feet away from an open door, which I'm guessing leads to the bathroom. Two short wooden cubicles serve a dual purpose of a nightstand and bookshelf. Any clothes not folded neatly in one of the open cubbies or stashed in a tall white laundry basket are hanging from a clothes rack normally found in retail stores.

The basic appliances – refrigerator, stove, and dishwasher – plus the sink, laminated marble counters, and cabinets overhead line one wall to create a one-sided galley kitchen. A small wooden table with four matching chairs rounds out the second area.

Tall easels and a second set of wooden cubicles sit on top of a few floral rugs splattered with paint and other art materials. The layout and prime location near the open windows create a makeshift art studio.

“So, wanna tell me why you're here?” Juni asks, shrugging off her coat and hanging it on a hook by the door.

“I was in the neighborhood,” I murmur, watching her open the refrigerator.

She huffs exasperatedly, bumping the door closed with a hip check, and holds out a bottle of water for me.

“Thanks.” I crack open the seal, grateful for the cold beverage, as my eyes roam over dozens of sketches covering the table.

“Dash,” Juni barks out sharply. My neck snaps up to find her scowling and leaning back against the counter. “It's late, and I'm tired. I honestly don't have time to guess

what you want.”

“I think I want you.” Both our eyes go wide at the words that simply bypassed my mental filter.

“What?” she squeaks out. “What the hell does that mean?”

“I don’t know,” I exclaim truthfully, running a hand through my hair.

Is now a good time to mention the unexplainable pull that landed me here in the first place? Probably not.

Something shifted between us since dinner at the diner two weeks ago. I still yell at her for being too slow, and she runs through a list of sharp art tools I can shove up my ass. But there’s no real threat behind any of our comically insulting banter – just sexual tension. I think.

I stand behind the fact that I’m an average twenty-something guy with a healthy sexual appetite who wouldn’t say no to a night or two with Juni. Watching her run around in tiny shorts and sports bra during the summer, I’m not hard pressed to imagine what she would look like naked.

I just don’t know what she wants because I recognize all the tell-tale signs of someone flirting or wanting my attention. Not once have I seen her gaze drop to my lips. Or her swinging her midnight black hair over her slim shoulders. Or winking coyly in passing.

Burying her face in both hands, Juni groans loudly.

“Okay,” she breathes out, her hands scraping down her face. “We’re both adults, right? We can have a mature conversation, right?”

Not trusting my mind or mouth, I lift a shoulder.

“For fuck’s sake, Dash! Seriously?”

Watching her throw her hands in the air and rapidly mutter something under her breath fascinates me in the same way when I watch her run. The words I didn’t mean to blurt out earlier ring true: I want Juni. I know I want her writhing with pleasure under my touch. How else I want her remains undecided.

Right now, I’m aching to touch her, but I need to know what she wants.

“Juniper.” I call out her name in a serious tone to catch her attention.

The tirade to herself stops. Her head cants to one side. Her chest saws in and out from her undecipherable word vomit. Tiny fists planted on her hips.

“Dash,” she whispers, her dark eyes glued to mine.

That’s when I see desire crash through her. A tongue running across her upper lip. A faint breathy moan. The slight clench of her thighs.

We hold our gazes for a nanosecond longer before stepping forward and crashing into each other. We are a fucking hot mess, fighting for dominance. This isn’t a sexy coordinated dance of my erection pressing into her belly or her hands weaving through my hair.

My lips dip to her neck, but she tilts her head to the opposite side and my tongue laps at her cheek. Her hands slide up my chest but then collide with mine wanting to cup her face so I can kiss the ever-living shit out of her.

We’re two flames wrecking into each other, just wanting to burn bigger and brighter.

I couldn't imagine this moment being anything other than crazy, raw, and passionate.

Through the sloppy kisses and the groping hands, I back her into the table covered with notepads and loose sketches and set her on the edge. Keeping her eyes on me, her hands push off most of the mess from the surface.

I reach behind me and yank on the collar of my t-shirt, pulling it off in one fluid motion. Her tortured groan grabs my attention.

“What?” I tilt my head with curiosity.

“That is so fucking sexy,” Juni whimpers, her teeth digging into her lower lip. “The whole take your shirt off with one hand from the back.”

“Really?”

She nods eagerly as one of her hands trails between her legs.

“Even sexier than all this?” I tease, sweeping a hand over my naked torso before swatting her fingers away.

“Mmmmm.” She scowls at my palm guarding her pussy. “You without a shirt is nothing new, Dash. But you just magnified your sexiness by a hundred with that move.”

Interesting.

“Hands up,” I order, stepping between her legs, as my fingers find the bottom hem of her shirt.

She complies, and I quickly pull it over her head and toss it over my shoulder.

A tortuous groan rumbles from my throat when I slip her gray sports bra over head, revealing her beautiful tits. My dick hardens impossibly more at the contrast in her skin between the sun kissed and the pale outline of the sports bras. I'm the lucky bastard with the chance to see what she hides from the rest of the world.

"Fuck, Juniper," I rumble lowly, slowly running a finger over a taut nipple.

"Dash," she whines breathlessly, her head falling back, as I repeat the motion to the other tit begging for attention.

Even though my finger wants to stay longer to play, the rest of my hand slowly drags lower to the waistband of her black leggings. As soon as the pants and a pair of white lacy underwear hit the floor, I step back to stare at the gorgeous masterpiece of a naked Juniper Mitchell.

My mind desperately wants to remember every detail in case this is the only chance I have with her.

Her palms lay flat on the table behind her, and her short legs dangle off the edge of the table. Her fiery gaze and coy smirk invite me closer. Her perky tits bounce with each breath she takes. A small glimpse of her pussy makes my mind spin with all the ways to tease, tantalize, and please.

I edge closer, flattening my hand against the smooth expanse above her chest, and gently push her onto her back. A tortured cry slips between her lips when a finger "accidentally" brushes against a rock-hard nipple. My chest and cock swell with pride, knowing I'm the one driving her wild with need.

The little brat props herself up on her elbows with a self-satisfying smile, watching my hands spread her thighs wider.

I inhale sharply and deeply at the better view of her sweet pussy and the intoxicating scent of her arousal.

I know I should punish her with long, lingering strokes of my tongue. Torment her until she's begging me to fuck her hard. But at this point, I would only be torturing both of us.

Because I need to taste her. I need my hands on her. I just need her.

Slipping my hands under her thighs to cup her ass, I lean forward, bury my face into her sweet core, and breathe her in.

Holy fucking shit.

Trapped between her legs would be the best way to die.

"Dash," Juni cries the instant my tongue laps vigorously at the sensitive bundle of nerves.

Her fingers rake through my hair, alternating between holding me closer or attempting to push me away. My tight grip on her ass keeps her from squirming away.

I desperately want to whip out my cock and jerk off at the same time she comes, but my hands rebel at the notion of leaving the warmth and curves of her body.

Instead, my fingers dig deeper into her dewy skin as she rides my face until I recognize the tell-tale signs of her imploding pleasure.

Even after screaming my name and cursing like a sailor when she arches her back for a second or two, I continue to feast on her heat. She might think she's done, but I'm

not. Not even close.

“Dash,” she whimpers, probably feeling the exhilaration build again.

I smirk against her wet pussy before shoving two fingers inside.

“Fuck me,” Juni wails, bowing her back again to ride my fingers.

“I will, baby, I will,” I murmur before lapping my tongue against her clit.

Listening to her shriek my name again and feeling her nails rake over my scalp only intensifies my need for her. She’s a sight, laying on her back and attempting to regain her breath, as I fish a condom from my wallet and pull off my jeans and black boxer briefs.

As soon as my achingly stiff dick is protected, I plant my hands around her waist and yank her off the table. Before she has a chance to respond, I spin her around and bend her over the surface.

I should take my time and ease into her, but I can’t. My desire to feel her is too strong. The moment I slam into her warmth, my eyes flutter shut and a deep groan escapes from my throat.

“Fuck, Dash,” she groans passionately, bracing herself on her forearms, pushes her ass back to match my brutal thrusts. “You feel so fucking good.”

I’m too caught up with how fucking fantastic her body feels with mine to respond properly. An animalistic caveman grunt is all I can handle. My hands grip her hips tighter as I piston into her harder. Faster. Deeper.

Everything about this moment shoves me to the edge. The way she moans my name.

The slick warmth of her body. The sound of our skin slapping together.

Seconds before euphoria blinds me, I pull out, rip the condom off, and yank on my cock once before spraying my release onto her back and curvy ass.

“Shit, Juniper,” I cry out, shutting my eyes, and succumb to the beautiful ecstasy washing over me.

With one final whimper, I collapse against her back, not giving a damn about smearing the product of my climax over me.

My lips press against her shoulder blade before I reluctantly peel myself off her spent body. I disappear into the small bathroom to wipe myself clean before grabbing a blue towel hanging from a hook and running warm water over a matching washcloth.

I can't help but feather light kisses over her skin as I gently run the damp cloth over the mess I made. Juni whines dramatically when I carefully pry her off the table, wrap the towel around her, and gingerly push her toward the bathroom.

“You should probably go pee,” I suggest, my lips brushing over her damp forehead.

“So bossy,” she mutters, clutching the towel to her chest before slowly shuffling away.

“Don't blame me if you get a UTI,” I tease, gently swatting her ass.

I scrub a hand down my face as soon as the door closes.

Do I stay? Do I go? What exactly is the protocol here?

My last meaningless fling had been about a year ago during an off-period with Tara.

After the requisite amount of cuddling to not look like a complete asshole, I had hightailed it out of there because I had no intention of staying the night.

But now? Do I want to spend the night? I glance around the area as if it holds the answer, but only spot a trail of discarded clothes and the used condom on the wood flooring.

I grin like an idiot even as I clean the spot and properly dispose of the protection. A quick spot check is totally worth marking her.

The bathroom door creaks open, and I turn to watch Juni lumber out with the towel neatly wrapped around her. Her eyes are heavy with exhaustion and satisfaction as I take her hand and lead her to the unmade bed. I chuckle when she face plants onto the mattress and struggles to roll onto her back, attempting to keep the covering in place.

I guess I should leave. A pang of disappointment creeps through me as I pick up my pants near the table.

I shake out my jeans when she calls out my name.

“Yeah?” I look over my shoulder to see her leaning back on her elbows.

The towel no longer covers her delicious body. Lust dances in her warm, dark eyes. Her legs spread open, gifting me another peek at her beautiful pussy.

My gaze greedily travels north to find her crooking her index finger at me. “More.”

The corner of my lips pull into a satisfied smile as my fingers drop my jeans onto the floor.

I don't even question how or why I'm happy to return to her.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:24 am*

Sex makes everything better. But amazingly mind-blowing sex with Juni makes me ridiculously happy and surprisingly productive.

I'm too busy smiling like a lovesick fool to contemplate how this hookup differs vastly from the previous ones. It just is. She pulls me in without saying a single word or doing anything special.

As if spending the night at her place almost every night over the past two weeks isn't enough, I'm pathetically sitting in my car parked in the back lot reserved for the management staff at the hair salon and diner. The engine hums softly to keep me warm from the early November chill as I patiently wait for Juni to return from campus. My ridiculous eagerness to see her would rather hang out in my car for twenty minutes like a dedicated stalker than remain at my house like a lonely puppy.

I used to be a smart man. I sigh, lightly banging my head against the headrest.

My need to be around her isn't solely based on our chemistry between the sheets.

A few questions about her love for art led to us sketching portraits of each other earlier this week. We spent ten minutes grinning idiotically at each other while our pencils furiously scribbled over paper. Satisfaction buried deep within when she burst out laughing at my drawing of her: the classic stick figure girl with a triangle representing a skirt and then two circles as her boobs.

I explained she had the confidence to pull off the "free the nipple" look if she wanted to walk around in a skirt topless. This led her to look down her shirt to confirm her tits were worthy of showing off in public. Of course, I volunteered to check to offer

not only a second opinion but the all-important male perspective. The faux examination led to a torrid affair with Dr. Black, the rogue surgeon who played by his own set of rules.

I should've known her adventurous streak included role playing and a drawer full of sex toys. Surprisingly, being terrible actors doesn't make the sex awkward or terrible – if anything, it makes it hotter.

After torturing and teasing her incredibly sensitive breasts, which ended in an epic tit fucking, I peeked at Juni's portrait of me. I believed her admission that she wasn't great at drawing people, considering she sketched a clown nose on me. When I asked if she had issues sketching other appendages, she nodded with a sly grin, glancing at the bulge in my shorts.

Two seconds after freeing my cock, Juni fell to knees in front of me for a “visual inspection” and “hands-on research”. Of course, as the popular art professor known for his unorthodox methods of teaching, I helped the painfully shy and virginal student (Juni giggled every time I used the word “pure”) express herself without wielding an art tool. The aspiring artist not only passed the course, but earned an invitation to study in Paris for a year. I definitely questioned Juni's ending of the professor's pledge to wait faithfully for her while he remained behind.

I feel my lips pull into a smile and my cock stiffen at the thought of her creative genius and her love for role-playing romance tropes. I adjust myself just as my phone lights up with my mom's name on the screen. Both forms of amusement quickly disappear.

“Hey, Mom,” I answer, glancing at the time on the dashboard, and breathe easier knowing the conversation will be ten minutes or less.

“Were you going to tell me you had a girlfriend, Dashwood? Why did I have to learn

about this from your sisters? Mari mentioned the name Juni. Is that ...”

Dammit, Mari. I bump my forehead against the steering wheel as my mom continues to rattle off a series of questions without waiting for an answer.

When my older sister texted me earlier in the evening, I replied with the usual one- to two-word answer. Her call five seconds after my message caught me by surprise.

"Hey, Mari, what's going on?" That's all I said before she blurted out, "You're getting laid!" Knowing each other way too well, I didn't even bother to deny it. She claimed her "sister intuition" sensed my text sounded "lighter" and my verbal greeting more "relaxed". Even though I call bullshit on all that, I have no other logical explanation.

I knew Mari would spill all the details to the other two siblings, but I figured Mom would be kept in the dark for a few more weeks. Her well-meaning optimism and romantic notions did none of us a favor during the awkward "what exactly are we doing?" stage. Once the boyfriend and girlfriend labels were in place, we're comfortable enough to talk about relationships and seek advice from our mom.

Is Mari banging anyone? I ponder briefly about throwing her under the Mom bus.

"Dashwood Seth Black!"

I stifle a groan at the use of my full name in the all-authoritative mom voice. "Yeah?"

"When do I get to meet her?" she asks eagerly, probably already planning a road trip if it meant meeting a future daughter-in-law.

I rub the heel of my palm against my forehead as if a reasonable answer will spring up. Because I don't know how to reply without saying "we're just fucking around."

"I don't know," I admit as an urge to strangle all three sisters grows stronger with each word.

"Why wouldn't I get to meet her, Dash?"

"Because she's not my girlfriend."

"But you've known her since August, right? Mari said she's a runner on your team." My mom suddenly gasps, and I imagine she's slapping a hand over her heart in disbelief. "Are you not supposed to date someone you're coaching? Is that why you can't call her your girlfriend? Is your romance forbidden?"

I smack a hand over my forehead and groan softly.

"Mom," I interrupt her barrage of annoying questions. "Yes, coaches can date a player. It's not ideal, but there's no official rule."

"Good," she breathes a sigh of relief. "I think she might be the one for you, Dash. Not only are you both runners, but you're both from Nebraska and are state champions. You have a lot in common."

Which is a solid foundation for any relationship, I think sarcastically.

"We're in no rush to jump into anything," I mutter, considering I'm too chickenshit to admit I actually care about Juni.

"Well, I suppose you have time since she's only 21, right? So, she's the same age as Cordy. If Juni is anything like your sister, she'll be impressed with the little things like remembering she doesn't like tomatoes on a sandwich but tomatoes are okay on a salad."

I know the light pounding ache in my head will only intensify because my mom's "helpful" advice leaves me spinning and breathless. I don't know if Juni likes tomatoes on a sandwich, but should I? Besides running, art, and sex, what else does she like?

"You've been holding the door open for her, right?" My mom's excited voice distracts me momentarily from spiraling. "Have you been paying for the check when you guys go out? I know some women like to pay, and you should let her if she's really insistent. But a gentleman always picks up the check. I'll send you some money so you don't go completely broke- oh, that gives me an idea! Why don't take a cooking class and impress her with a good meal? Women love a man who can cook. Oh, sweetheart! I have a better idea. Maybe you two should take a cooking class together. That would be fun, right?"

"Mom! We're just fucking around!" I blurt out, halting her parade of ideas. "She's just a good time."

"Dashwood!" I imagine she's covering her heart with her hand again and frowning at the idea her "baby boy" is some sort of heartless playboy.

"We're having a good time," I clarify, my voice softer. "This isn't serious. Neither of us are looking for anything more."

"But it could be," my mom insists. "If only-"

"You're not listening," I breathe out frustratingly. "I don't want to be with her like you want. I'm not looking for drama or commitment right now. I have too much going on to even think about another person."

"I just want you to be happy, Dash," she whispers sadly, sending a sharp pang to my heart.

"I know, Mom." My eyes land on the clock on the dashboard. "I'll talk to you later, okay? I gotta go. Love you."

"Love you, too."

I scrub a hand down my face and exhale deeply before glimpsing out the window. My already pounding heart unexpectedly plummets when my eyes land on Juni leaning against the passenger side door of her car. Her arms tightly folded across her chest. Her beautifully plump lips flattened. Her dark eyes are definitely not burning with desire.

Shit. How did I not notice her parking beside me?

"Juni," I start nervously, carefully opening the door.

"Go home, Dash," she snaps, pushing herself off the car, and speeds toward the front of the building.

"Wait!" I scramble out of my car, slamming the door shut, and chase after her. "Let me explain."

She whirls around, the soft clank of her keys sound when she waves an arm around.

"What's there to explain? I think the entire neighborhood heard you loud and clear."

"So, you're upset everyone knows we're just fucking around?"

Her mouth drop opens, and her eyes blaze with fury and bitterness. "If you honestly believe that's what I'm mad about, then go home."

"Then tell me," I beg, following her into the tiny entryway and up the stairs. "Why are you mad when we're not even in a relationship? Are you mad because you want

more?”

Her stomps halt suddenly before she pivots to glare at me. “Are you fucking serious, Dash? You honestly can’t be this stupid.”

I swallow hard, tamping down my anger at her “stupid” comment. “I’m not a mind reader.”

“So, according to you, I can’t ever be mad at you because we’re not in a relationship?”

Well, that doesn’t sound quite right. Is she twisting my words?

My mind tries to replay the exact sentence when Juni pushes on. “Have I ever, ever given you the impression that I want more than what we’ve been doing?”

Uh, not really.

Not once has she ever said, “Hey, we need to talk.” Or even ask to define what we’ve been doing. Or what she means to me.

“So, why do you think I want more?” she demands.

Don’t say it, my mind scream frantically. Don’t say it!

My shoulders lift slightly with an overwhelming weight of shame as my reply.

While I might not be a card-carrying feminist like my sisters, I’ve always believed they should be treated equally in every aspect. To think Juni secretly wants more because she’s a woman shows me I’m an ignorant asshole.

“Blargh!” Juni turns to resume stomping up the stairs as I barely catch muttered words “misogynist pig” and “emotions”.

Even out of context, I know she’s not wrong.

“Go home,” she repeats, pushing the apartment door open and barreling through.

“Why? Let’s talk about this.” I follow inside, watching her dump her bags by the table and shrugging out of her coat.

“I honestly don’t have the energy or the bandwidth to argue with you right now, Dash.”

“But this is what we do, Juni,” I explain desperately, ignoring the sudden sense of fear pounding inside me. “We argue. We push each other’s buttons, and then we fuck each other’s brains out.”

“But this is different,” she explains with a tired sigh. “This isn’t an argument; this is a legitimate fight. You hurt me, Dash. Yes, everything you said to your mom is true, but it’s the way you said it. It was demeaning and cruel. I’m not a toy.”

Fuck. I recoil in disbelief because she’s one hundred percent right. What I said didn’t hold an ounce of truth, but I used the words anyway to derail my mom’s idealistic grandeur of love.

Have I always been this self centered?

Have I always spouted random shit just to protect myself?

Have I always believed fools who dream about romantic notions and fairytale endings are morons?

Am I a true asshole?

One simple word painfully answers all those questions.

But the most important question that steals my attention doesn't have an answer. How do I undo the hurt and chaos?

Begging for forgiveness doesn't seem enough. Endlessly telling her she's beautiful and special seems hollow, even if the sentiment is genuine. All the words in the world don't seem to be enough.

"Junie," I croak, realizing the extent of my damage, and turn toward the apartment door. "I'm so sorry."

The shine in her eyes pierces my heart, staking it to remain forever huddled in the depth of my toes.

She nods sadly. "Me too."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:24 am*

I'm a liar. A big fat liar.

Of course, I want more.

Of course, I like him. Really like him. I might even be in love with him, but I'm nowhere ready to confront that truth.

Why does amazing sex create a protective bubble of happiness and safety that I never want to leave? Even when I'm having a bad day, everything seems a little better when I see him.

God, I'm a fucking idiot.

I should've known those two weeks were too good to be true. Too good to lead to anything better. My guard dropped somewhere along with my panties any time Dash took me to the highest of heavens. I'm childishly blaming him for bursting the happiness bubble because it's ten times easier than telling him the truth.

I should've kept my panties on and talked to him about my feelings. Like a mature adult. Admit I wanted the good time to turn into something deeper. Something special.

But, like the chickenshit that I am, I waited for him to make the first move. To profess his all-consuming love for me. The tiny fire escape outside my apartment is simply waiting for someone to scale it in a dramatic declaration of love.

Would I feel less sad if I took the chance? If I bared my soul only to have him reject

me?

"Stop thinking," Tabby mutters, knocking her bony elbow into my arm. "You know he's a moron."

"I know," I grumble, slowing our pace into a walk and breathing in the chill November air.

The cool weather with gray skies is perfect for running. Well, for me at least. Tabby has been complaining about "freezing her tits off" ever since she stepped off the bus at our latest invitational. I was more than ready to stretch my legs after huddling in the back seats with the girls. And continue to avoid Dash, who looks like complete shit, according to Eden's five-second assessment.

After dumping our stuff at the team camp site, Tabby and I paired off to familiarize ourselves with the race route set on a swanky golf course. I didn't trust myself to stick around and check if Dash looked as miserable as I've felt over the past two days.

But I didn't proof because he sounded awful in his series of apologetic texts and voicemail messages. Part of me wanted to reply, but not knowing what to say always stopped me. Because what happens after I accept his apology? Would that be a convenient time to admit my feelings? Would we go back to fun-naked time?

"Do you think he'll come to the art show next week?" Tabby asks, breaking the parade of dumb questions swirling in my mind.

"I don't know," I answer with a small shoulder shrug, remembering talking about it with him earlier in the week.

He asked if I was part of the show after seeing fliers around campus. Thanks to my brothers' short attention spans and disinterest in art, I've learned to highlight the

important parts. But Dash genuinely seemed impressed and asked questions about my work.

"We'll be there, and we'll kick his ass if you want us to," my teammate reassures me. "But I also can't wait to see Perry."

While I love my friends' company, the final touches need my full focus during the last week. Tiny distractions could lead to major mistakes, and I'd rather not add more stress to my life.

"He looks fabulous," I share, smiling widely at the mental image of the nearly complete octopus.

"Caw caw caw!"

Tabby and I stop at the same time at the sound of an obnoxious but hilarious impression of a crow. Or raven. I groan, pinching the bridge of my nose, while Tabby laughs hysterically.

Despite my protests, Eden and Daphne appointed themselves as "Sisterhood of Dash Watch" members who would keep me posted on his whereabouts. With Eden's love for secret codes, she created a call signal in case I didn't have my phone or hear it. I didn't realize the sign would be for everyone within a one-mile radius.

Tabby wraps her arms around her stomach and laughs harder when we turn to see Eden and Daphne charging toward us with their heads and eyes tilting in one direction. I don't bother following their mad gaze to know Dash is nearby.

"Caw caw caw caw!"

I slap my hand to my forehead at Daphne's high-pitched, more feminine attempt.

"They know they're not being super discreet, right?"

"I don't think they care," Tabby wheezes, bending at the waist, as Eden lifts both arms up and down. As if she's flying. Like a crow. Or a baby bird learning to use its wings.

Other runners warming up on the path and spectators milling around stop momentarily to watch the amateur vaudeville act.

"What are they doing?" Dash asks genuinely confused, standing beside me. "Is Eden pretending to be a bird or something?"

I shake my head in disbelief, unable to convey all the emotions slamming into me.

When the two members of the ultra-sleek covert operation finally notice Dash's presence, their eyes go comically wide with surprise.

"Shit!" Eden shrieks, glancing at her partner-in-crime for direction.

"Caw caw!" Daphne grabs her hand and makes a beeline for Tabby, who is laughing so hard tears stream down her face.

Betraying the so-called sisterhood, Daphne and Eden flank a hysterical Tabby, hook their arms around hers, and practically drag her away.

Assholes, I swear with a resigning sigh.

"Are they okay?" Dash's brows furrow as he watches the trio of traitors run off happily. "Never mind. I'm not sure I want to know."

When Dash shifts his gaze to me, I mentally agree with Eden's earlier assessment: he looks like shit. Fatigue and melancholy dull his normally bright blue eyes. His once

confident posture shows signs of uncertainty and restlessness.

I want to feel the warmth of some sort of satisfaction, but I just feel sad. That he looks broken. Despite the hurt lingering inside me, I'm tempted to throw my arms around him and stupidly kiss him to make him feel better.

Instead, I pop a shoulder casually before taking a step back.

"Juni, wait," Dash says quickly, reaching out to touch my arm, but drops his hand. "I just wanted to check in with you before the race."

"I'm doing great." I wince slightly, not loving the bitchiness tone of my sarcastic remark.

"I'm sorry," he blurts out, his hand rubbing the back of neck.

"Agh!" I throw my arms up in the air before shooting him the evil eye. "You think now is a good time to talk?"

This is coming from the girl who wailed, "They killed the puppy," and sobbed uncontrollably while watching John Wick with her brothers in a packed movie theater. I blamed my hormones for the outburst, and my brothers banned me from all future screenings in public.

Without waiting for a reply, I turn to stomp away, but stop abruptly when I hear a desperate, "I like you!"

I don't move, keeping my back to him, and wait for him to continue.

"The truth is, I like you. More than I should- wait. I don't even know what the hell that even means," he growls in frustration and impatience.

My teeth dig into my lower lip to keep myself from giggling at his awkward apology. But part of me wonders often did Dash need to apologize to someone? My guess would be rarely based on his fumbling words alone.

"God, I'm an idiot."

"No argument here," I mutter, imagining him probably frowning and running his fingers through his hair.

"I know I can be a self-centered bastard, but I didn't realize just how terrible I am. Juni, I'm every therapist's dream patient. I have so many issues I don't even know where to begin. But I need- no, I want to start somewhere. I want to be a better person. I want to be happy."

My head tilts at his last admission, believing there's something more to explore at a later time.

"Being with you made me ridiculously happy," he admits nervously. "I didn't want to lose that. I don't know how much you heard when I was talking to my mom, but she unintentionally leads me and my sisters to kinda sabotage anything good in our lives. Again, something I should probably talk about with a therapist."

I nod silently, not knowing how or if I should reply.

"You're good for me," Dash continues. "And I felt the weird honeymoon phase of happiness slip during my conversation with my mom. So, I said a whole bunch of shit out of desperation, hoping to hang on to that feeling longer."

Aw, he liked the protective happiness bubble, too.

I hear him take a deep breath and lightly kick the short grass with his foot.

"I like you, Juniper Mitchell," he states shyly. "This is me manning up, or trying to be a mature adult. I want to take you on a proper date. Fuck me, did I just say proper date ? I sound so lame."

I can't help the snort escaping between my lips. He might sound lame, but his words are something I want to hear. And if I'm being honest, I want the proper date.

"Sorry," I mutter, realizing the small sound probably seems rude.

"No, it's okay," he assures me with a dry chuckle. "I deserve a lot more than you laughing at my expense."

"Dash." I start to face him, hating the underlying sadness in his voice, but the tentative placement of his hand on my shoulder stops me.

"It's okay, Juni. I just wanted to let you know where I'm at," he explains, his fingers gently squeezing before letting go.

"Thank you." Those two words sound so lame after his honest confession. I want to say more, but now isn't the time. Not when I need to focus on the race.

Another awkward moment passes before I hear his footsteps retreat reluctantly. As I welcome the chill air into my lungs, I feel his return at my back. Suppressing a sigh as his breath dances across my neck, I stand tall and still.

"Win this race," he murmurs in my ear, "and I'll let you restrain me to the bed tonight."

The corner of my lips quirk into a teeny smile at an image of a naked Dash spread out like a starfish on my bed.

Ooooh, I like that mental picture very much.

I remain silent, hoping my answer isn't obvious. He deserves to squirm until the straps tucked under my mattress are wrapped securely around his wrists and ankles.

"Good luck, Juni," Dash says before shuffling away.

When I no longer feel the heat from his body, I exhale and shake out the tension from my firm stance. I don't turn around in case he's watching for some sort of sign. But if he's a smart man, he should know what I plan to do.

Win the race. Happily torture him in my bed.

A wicked smile plays on my lips when a new thought streaks across my lusty fantasies. That bastard just dangled the power of sex to reignite my drive to win.

Well played, Dashwood, well played.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:24 am*

She won. Not by a few seconds. By an entire fucking minute.

And who came running after her? Tabby.

Her win didn't surprise me, but the saucy wink she threw at me after the race did. And the ensuing silence. While I didn't need an itinerary with a detailed breakdown, some information would've been helpful.

Not knowing anything put me on edge. Did I misinterpret the eye flutter? Wouldn't be the first time I did. Maybe she had something in her eye.

By the end of the meet and the women's and men's team boarded the bus for the two-hour trip back, I was a hot mess. When my phone pinged with a message from Juni, I nearly wept for joy. Except reading the number "10" and nothing else chucked the short-lived happiness out the window.

At least I kept my composure with an equally simple reply: "Tonight?" Bombarding her with dozens of questions skipping through my mind didn't sound sexy. I had never been so grateful to see a thumbs up icon than the one that popped under my message.

Knowing Juni and I were back on speaking terms alleviated some of my anxiety. But then the excruciatingly long countdown to ten started as soon as I got home. Ever after taking my sweet ass time getting ready, I had two fucking hours to kill.

Two hours to wonder how this sharp-tongue and feisty minx turned me into an emotional wrecking ball. None of the lowest points in any of my past relationships

twisted me into a second-guessing idiot.

Even now, after slowly climbing the three flights of stairs and standing nervously outside Juni's apartment door, I'm mentally and physically exhausted. Stupid steps never fail to remind me I'm not in peak physical condition.

I lift my hand to knock when the door swings open and reveals Juni wear a tiny smile and a very flimsy black negligee. The sheerness of the fabric reveals everything I've missed over the past few days.

Just as I open my mouth to say something, Juni's tiny hand shoots out, grabs the front of my jacket, and yanks me inside. My mind turns to mush when she stands on her tiptoes and presses her soft lips to mine.

I'm vaguely aware my hands land on her hips before sliding to her back, pulling her closer. I'm very aware of how her lithe figure leans on me for support as her fingers tangle in my hair.

When she rolls her hips over my steel cock, I groan and pull back slightly. I want nothing more than to strip her of the material covering her body and just love on her. Forget the restraints. The games. I need to show I'm hers.

"Juni," I stutter, only to be shushed by her fingers pressed gently to my lips.

"No talking," she instructs with a devious wink as she grabs my hand.

"But," I protest weakly, following her to the bed.

"No talking," she repeats, her tone firmer. "I promise we'll talk to later."

I nod mutely, halting at the edge of the bed and feeling incredibly turned on by her

direct approach.

"The only words I want to hear from you," Juni explains, sliding my coat off. "Are yes, Juni, please , and red . Red being the safe word."

Holy shit. My nerves amp up a notch. Small beads of sweat form on my forehead. My dick begs for attention.

I didn't realize how sexually adventurous Juni was until I discovered black straps with matching black leather restraints tucked neatly under her mattress. I didn't press for specifics, but she mentioned using them once or twice.

Something else she may have used once or twice? About a dozen sex toys, including a few butt plugs, in a nightstand drawer. We've played with a couple vibrators and dildos, and she helped me break in a new cock ring I bought online.

But this is the first time we've used a safe word. I trust her, but I need to earn hers back. I'm willing to be at her mercy, accepting any pleasure she'll give me.

I'm fairly confident I won't need to use it.

Red red red red red, the pansy in me chants hysterically while waving a white flag in surrender.

Don't say it , my ego warns. Stop being a pussy.

But I am a pussy. I've always been comfortable enough with my body to walk around shirtless whether I'm in public or the privacy of my home. Juni has seen me naked plenty of times, but being nude in a starfish position is different. Totally different.

I'm not ashamed of my nudity, but taking away my ability to cover myself leaves me

feeling vulnerable.

And right now, I'm ready to concede. I don't want to, but I will. Every part of me is frayed with tension but yet so incredibly weak. My dick may be standing tall, but it's dying for a release. It's ready to hibernate.

Juni has been expertly edging me all fucking night. I hate how much I love it. To feel her touch. To be so close to paradise only to have it yanked away from me. Not once. Not twice, but three fucking times.

At one point, she lowered herself onto me, and I was ready to watch her ride. Except she didn't. She slowly paged through a small book called *BDSM for Beginners*. I tried to remember some passages she read out loud when she said "good students would be rewarded." But her snug, wet fit around my cock distracted me.

Anytime I bucked my hips up to remind her of my presence, she frowned and tsked at me as if I disappointed her. Fortunately, several minutes later, she tossed the book aside and rode me until stars almost appeared before me. Then she quickly dismounted me and praised me for being a "good boy."

I wanted to cry.

And now? I'm putty in her hands. Maybe it's my pent-up frustration for release. Maybe it's all the teasing. Maybe because I'll do anything for her. As soon as she wraps her hands around my steel cock, I know I won't last long.

"Juni, please," I beg, hoping she understands the underlying message of my need for release.

"Let go, Dash," she demands, her grip grows tighter and faster.

The moment Juni runs a fingernail over my pebbled nipple, I erupt in her hand and groan with sweet relief. I happily surrender to the euphoric high, too dazed to feel embarrassed about exploding like a horny teenager.

My eyes drift shut as my body continues to bask in the afterglow. My mind clocks Juni moving around and realizes she needs to be worshiped. Except I'm one hundred percent drained, on the verge of passing out. And maybe crying like a newborn.

Even when I feel Juni releasing the restraints, I don't move or open my eyes. I am hopelessly content to stay like this for an undetermined amount of time.

A gratified sigh escapes my lips when I feel a warm, damp washcloth gently glide over my sweaty body. Sleep continues to whisper sweet thoughts as I feel Juni's fingers massage my wrists and ankles. I honestly don't know if they're even sore or need care, but I love she's taking care of me. Even when I don't deserve it.

"Juni," I moan, demanding my tired body man up and ravish her.

"Shhhh." I feel her soft lips against my forehead. "Go to sleep, baby."

I don't want to sleep. I want to take care of my girl. I want to give her the most epic orgasms. I just need five minutes of rest, and then I'll love on her.

The soft rhythmic sound of a paintbrush swishing across a canvas tells me the night is too young for Juni to join me in bed.

If it's too early for her, it's too early for me, I decide, nestling under the bed's comforter to speed my recovery. Because as soon as she puts down the paintbrush, I'll be all over her.

I scrunch my face in protest at the warmth creeping along my skin. My closed eyes

squint tighter against the slivers of light peeking through the darkness.

As my body shakes off the sleep, I groan loudly at the tightness and soreness in my limbs. Who knew being restrained would be a good workout?

Disappointment tugs at my conscience as I hear birds singing happily outside. I completely passed out, missing my chance to please Juni. Judging from the silence and the slight chill next to me, I know she's slipped out for the day. Probably on campus.

After yawning and scrubbing a hand down my face, I roll over onto my stomach with a groan and spot my phone on the nightstand. Happiness fills me when I notice a bottle of water with a small sticky note and a protein bar next to it. My fingers grab the paper, and my grin grows wider after reading the short handwritten note.

Need a new reason to win the last race of the season. See you at practice. ~ Juni

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:24 am*

I feel like the world's worst boyfriend as soon as I step inside the pristine visual arts center I didn't even know existed. Because most of my time would be spent at the advanced sports and wellness facility, I didn't bother to remember anything about the rest of campus after accepting the residency.

When the sports director walked me through the area, rattling off facts and telling stories about certain buildings, I feigned interest. My focus was on the job. Anything else didn't matter.

But shame fills me when I realize the exhibition will be absolutely nothing like an elementary art show. Brightly colored paintings shine dramatically against the open lobby's clinical white walls and flooring. While the polished exterior and clean design presents a professional aesthetic, the space is inviting, casual, and warm.

A steady stream of students and faculty members filters through the lobby. Animated conversations and gestures and even the soft tap of shoes against the glossy linoleum flooring hum with excitement. Volunteers eagerly hand out pamphlets before greeting well-dressed guests.

A sigh of relief escapes my chest after noticing I'm not the only one in business casual attire. I may be wearing my best pair of dark jeans, but at least I threw on a nice black sweater. My first choice was a hoodie with the school name written across the chest.

Why the hell did I think Juni and her peers were just capable of crayon—and maybe color pencils—drawings when I know she's capable of so much more? When I've seen her previous work? Do I really think so little about art? Maybe I'm not as

cultured as I thought.

God, I really am a selfish asshole.

I really need to see a therapist because Juni deserves better than me.

Technically, I'm not her boyfriend since we haven't had that mature, adult conversation about our feelings and stuff. I haven't spent the night at her place all week since she's been preoccupied with opening night.

Even without the flirty texts and the cute banter at practices, I know everything is good between us. The last thing Juni needs in her busy life is a guy whining for her attention. But I can be there for her when she wants to vent or voice her concerns over other projects.

That's what good boyfriends do. Right? Because I feel like one tonight. What's surprising is I don't mind the unofficial label or voluntarily looking at art. If my presence makes Juni happy, then I'll spend the entire evening here. Okay, maybe not all night. Unless alcohol is involved, but that's highly unlikely since this is an academic event.

I take a deep breath before stepping forward and accepting a glossy pamphlet from a student volunteer.

"Are you here for a specific exhibit?" she asks, straightening her composure before tossing her long golden locks over her slim shoulders.

I wonder if she's one of the mean girls Juni occasionally complained about.

"Uh, yeah," I answer awkwardly, curling the paper in my hand. "Juniper Mitchell? I'm with her."

The way her eyes light up and her lips curl into a wide smile suggests she's a friend or fan of Juni. Or she could be one of the mean girls, and she's a superb actress.

"Just follow the crowd over there." She tilts her head toward a specific hallway. "It will lead you to her exhibit."

"Thanks," I murmur with a nod as I fall behind a group of students meandering that way.

My gaze follows a line of framed black-and-white pictures hanging on the white walls. Each photo highlights the normalcy of life on campus, from students studying in the library to working on a group project. The theme may be simple, but the photographers captured more than a range of emotions.

I really need to do better, I chide myself, impressed with the high level of aptitude.

I enter a spacious area where a multitude of colors brighten the white walls. A line of people standing shoulder to shoulder partially blocks my view of the far wall. When my gaze lands on shades of blue streaking across the surface, I know it's the beginning of Juni's work.

She's shown me rough sketches and a few work-in-progress snapshots, so I have an idea what to expect. But when part of the crowd breaks off, leaving me with a clear view, a small gasp filters through my lips at the magnificent creature before me.

A gorgeous sculpted dark teal octopus floats effortlessly against the deep blue sea. Its tentacles, detailed with rows of suckers, stretch over the width of the surface and seem to sway both innocently and protectively. The slim, dark eyes carry a sharp, predatory gaze.

Beauty in the unexpected.

How did Tabby pick the perfect name? I wonder, feeling a tinge of jealousy that she and the others watched the progression.

Perry was never meant to be an accurate replica, considering the teal color palette with a dusting of gold. Instead, the entire work of art not only demands attention but offers a touch of idealization.

"I should've gone with flowers," a familiar voice teases as I feel a small hand looping around my arm.

I smile and turn to find Juni glowing with happiness. As she should because the night is hers.

She looks exceptionally radiant in an embroidered floral mini skirt that hugs her hips and thighs and a simple green sweater. Thigh-high gray boots, which add an inch or two to her height, complete the look. Her raven tresses usually pulled back into a ponytail cascade over her shoulders.

"You should never go with flowers," I reply jokingly as my hand reaches over to cover hers.

"You sure?" Her dark eyes hold a flicker of self doubt that surprises me.

Even as a crowd surrounds her work and their observations and reviews shine with praise, she continues to second guess herself. But that's who she is; she works hard only to wonder if she deserves the acclaim that comes achieving greatness.

The countless hours she put in don't matter to her because she would've happily spent another week or month until she was satisfied.

"It's beautiful, Juni," I reassure her, pulling my arm from her grasp to wrap it around her shoulder and pull her close. "Trust your instincts."

"Yeah, maybe," she concedes uncertainly, resting her head against my shoulder.  
"Perry is beautiful."

We stand silently, staring at the stunning sea creature, for a few moments before some guests shyly approach Juni.

I stick close, half studying the smallest of details and half watching Juni explain her thought process.

Her enthusiasm and love for art captivate anyone listening, drawing them into her world. The night belongs to her, but it doesn't stop her from engaging and encouraging others to share their insights.

Curious to feel even an ounce of Juni's extraordinary talent, my fingers ghost over a tentacle when I hear, "Don't touch that!"

A high-pitched shriek escapes me as I drop the offending hand to my side. I turn to find Juni grinning wickedly.

Little minx.

"Other people are touching Perry!" I whine, pointing to a few guests with sticky fingers.

Juni rolls her eyes before giving me a nod of approval. "It's been sealed so many times with a ton of different sealers that no one can really ruin it. Except with fingerprints."

"I seriously cannot believe you created this masterpiece," I breathe in awe, my finger tracing over the bumps and ridges of the suckers on a tentacle.

As a physical therapist, I marvel at the complexities of the human body. How

everything is connected. The way the body heals, moves, and responds. But to create a piece of art from a concept? Using every day resources? That's simply another level of amazement.

"So, how do you keep Perry?" I ask, realizing she can't walk out of the building with an entire wall under her arm.

"I don't," Juni answer with a casual shrug. "He'll remain here for the rest of the school year, but then he'll get torn down."

A mix of outrage, confusion, and sadness drifts inside me. Why create something so magnificent for a short period? Perry deserves to live on the wall for more than a year.

"Really? That's kinda sad."

"Yeah, it is," she agrees ruefully. "But I also understand. Even beautiful things don't last forever."

Something inside me breaks, as my heart picks up speed for no good reason. The idea of someone swinging a sledgehammer at her labor of love sounds cruel, but she accepts Perry's fate without a second thought. Or without a fight.

Am I even talking about Perry at this point? I don't know.

"Dash?" Her soft voice pulls me from my spiral, and I see the concern in her eyes.

I want to tell her I'm fine. To shake off the odd feeling twisting viciously inside me. But I can't. Not with the room closing in and the air alarmingly hot and dry.

I want to stay with her. Support her. But my instincts tell me to run.

“Even beautiful things don't last forever.”

“I'm sorry,” I whisper, gently pressing my lips to her cheek. “But I gotta go.”

I don't give her a chance to respond before turning and walking away.

I sit on a wooden bench somewhere in a botanical garden I didn't even know existed on campus. Feels right to drown myself in shame and regret.

My sisters routinely called me an "arrogant jackass" during arguments when we were younger. I always believed they threw out those words to be mean, thinking they hurt my feelings. I never thought they actually meant it.

But I really am an arrogant jackass.

The chill of the evening and the fresh air make me breathe easier, but the sad ache in my chest remains.

The narrow cobblestone path weaving through the garden must be a shortcut as the sound of occasional footsteps tells me I'm not alone. I appreciate passersby leaving me alone in my pathetic state. My legs cocked open. My forearms resting on my knees. My head hanging with too many emotions to count.

That's why I love running so much. I felt absolutely nothing once my feet hit the ground. The world sort of faded. I couldn't hear my parents screaming at each other. Or my sisters crying in fear. My struggles in school didn't matter. Or my girlfriend's delusions of our futures.

Of course, all those issues patiently waited for me at the finish line, but for a brief time, I was happy to escape. To lose myself. To sweat under the blazing sun. To battle the unbroken winds. I was happy to run until I couldn't.

“Even beautiful things don't last forever.”

Even with all the other floral scents surrounding me, I immediately recognize hers. A soft and simple mix of jasmine and sweet lemon.

I don't lift my head when a pair of gray boots drops into view. She stands silently, gently weaving her fingers through my hair.

I sigh softly, wrapping my arms around her waist and burying my face in the softness of her belly.

How did she become my anchor? The one who soothes my soul?

"How did you find me?" I mumble, leaning into her soothing touch.

"Um, uh, Eden might have followed you here after you left," Juni answers nervously.

"To make sure I didn't do anything stupid?"

Somehow, their actions don't surprise me because I've learned the team members are givers. They take care of each other. And, apparently, an arrogant assistant coach.

"Uh, no. Just in case the girls needed to murder you," she explains with a light laugh.

"Keeping eyes on you is much easier than hunting you down."

With a small frown, I lift my head to meet her tender gaze. "Murder me?"

Her shoulders cave slightly in defeat. "Well, you know, for hurting me or breaking my heart. Something like that."

Despair sinks further because I didn't mean to hurt her. I never want to hurt her again.

"Did I?" I swallow the lump in my throat. "Did I break your heart?"

She gives me a sweet smile and shakes her head, her raven locks falling forward.

"No."

I should feel relieved, but why does my heart ache? Is this why we haven't discussed our feelings? Because she doesn't want more than a few nights of fun? She doesn't care I like her and want more?

My hold on her loosens as I lower my head again.

"Hey," Juni says softly, sliding two fingers under my chin and lifting it gently. "You didn't break my heart, but I'm trusting you not to."

My eyes don't leave hers as my mind replays her words.

"Really?" I rasp.

She nods, slipping her hand from my chin and running toward the base of my neck. "My heart is yours."

Pure happiness waltzes through me at her confession, making me realize how much I mean to her. How much I needed to hear her share her feelings.

"I think I love you," I breathe out, sitting straighter and sweeping her into my lap.

Juni squeals, throwing her arms around my neck for balance and resting her feet on the bench. With my arms around her, I tenderly capture her lips with mine. When a sexy little moan filters into the night, my cock stiffens in response. I reluctantly pull away before the moment becomes steamier.

The back of her hand softly caresses my neatly trimmed scruff as her dark eyes

search mine.

"I think I love you, too," Juni whispers shyly.

I bury my face in the curve of her neck and tighten my hold, memorizing everything around us. The distant chatter and laughter. The buzz of lamp posts. The rich combination of floral fragrances.

"You were right," she admits, resting her forehead against mine.

"Mmmm. About what?"

"About not pushing myself harder when I run. I dedicated years to being the best, and I wasn't sure if I could just run for fun. I convinced myself to set my expectations super low so I wouldn't feel like a failure if I didn't win."

"I don't think you could fail even if you tried," I tell her, tugging her closer when I feel her shiver.

Juni laughs shortly. "I failed as a teammate. I thought I was being open and honest, but really, I gave the team an excuse to not rely on me. I gave myself permission to use them for my personal benefit. Just because I don't want to win doesn't mean my teammates don't want to win either. Wait... that sounds weird. Doesn't mean... don't want... that's a double negative, right?"

I chuckle at her confusion, even though I understand her message.

"I understand what you're trying to say," I reveal, running the tip of my nose along the soft curves of her neck. "By the way, I thought of a new incentive for your last race."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Win the race, and I'll let you peg me."

I feel her lips curve into a smile before she whispers in my ear, "Game fuckin' on."