

Untitled Valentine's Romance One-shot

By BreaktheBar

UNCOMPLETE; Part 1

September

After school pick up was, somehow, only moderately better after moving out of the city.

To be fair, I'd grown up in the same town that my daughter and I had moved to and always rode the school bus, so it was strange in general to me that things had changed so dramatically over time. Still, there was something almost cinematic about being parked in the roundabout on the younger kids' side of the elementary school and seeing a wave of the little munchkins come running out of the doors as a couple of teachers tried to keep some semblance of order.

The volunteer parents, dressed up in reflective vests with their clipboards, weren't faring much better.

June came skipping out of school with another little girl who must have been in her class, and they were yammering away until she saw me and she waved to her friend and then sprinted in my direction with a big grin on her face. I went down to one knee and held out my arms and she rushed into them, and I hugged her and her backpack tight as I picked her up and spun her around. "Hello, little bug," I said, giving her a smooch on the cheek and holding her up.

"Hi, Daddy," she said with a goofy grin. She'd lost one of her last baby teeth, an incisor, the previous weekend and it was almost as cute as when she'd lost her front teeth.

"How was school?" I asked.

"Good!"

"Did you learn anything new today?"

June shook her head, still grinning.

"Well what possible use is school, then?" I asked playfully. "Maybe you should never go back."

"No!" she laughed. "I met my best friend today."

"You did?" I asked, raising my eyebrows. Her old best friend, back in San Jose, had been our neighbour's cute little daughter Rosita, and their friendship had been the only thing that had

made me hesitate about moving us. At the end of the day, I knew my seven-year-old daughter would get over the cross-country move and make new friends, but it was still a little heartbreaking at the time.

“Uh-huh,” she nodded, pointing at an SUV a couple of cars back. “That’s her! Her name is May, we’re Month Buddies!”

I chuckled, giving her another little smooch on the cheek that made her giggle. I hadn’t been a major fan of the name Juniper when my ex-wife suggested it, but had figured I could warm up to the shorter ‘June.’ My ex had, of course, hated that I did that, but then she’d been volatile about a lot of shit. Hence why she was my ex and not in June’s life.

“Well, let’s go say hello,” I said, shifting my daughter to holding her on one hip as she hugged my shoulder.

We technically weren’t supposed to ‘dilly-dally,’ as the volunteer parking managers liked to say, but I really didn’t give a crap. I swerved around a minivan that seemed to be picking up half a soccer team worth of little boys, each of them capped with ginger hair so I assumed they were brothers, and headed for the blue SUV my daughter had pointed out. The back passenger door was open, as was the trunk, and as I got closer I saw that May was already strapped into a booster seat in the back while her mother was rummaging for something in the trunk.

“Hey there,” I said as I came alongside the back window. “I-”

“Jesus, Francine, I get it, OK?” the woman said, not looking out of the trunk.

“I’m, ah, not Francine,” I said.

Now the woman pulled herself out of the trunk. She had a tan complexion, was fairly short and maybe topped her height at five-foot-two, and her dark brown hair was softly wavy if a little frazzled in that way that parents of young children who actually parented their kids tended to develop after an hour or two. I could tell she was of mixed ethnicity, but couldn’t immediately pinpoint what, and she was clearly having one of *those* sorts of days that I knew all too well.

She gave me a quick once over. “Look,” she said flatly. “I’m not looking to try and get hit on in the school pickup line, buddy. I’m just here to get my kid.”

“Wow,” I chuckled. “Jesus, you sound like you’ve got a couple of stories to tell. I actually just wanted to introduce ourselves - my daughter June says that May is her best friend.”

“And Month Buddy!” June happily added.

The woman’s face dropped a little of her frustration, and I could see the switch from ‘beleaguered woman reaching her limit’ to ‘mom who is managing to maintain a semblance of

feeling like a normal adult.' "Is that right?" she asked. "May, honey, did you make a new best friend today?"

"The bestest!" May said with enthusiasm from her booster seat, grinning and waving out the open door. She was a cute kid with dark, wavy hair and a complexion close to her mother's. "June is really good at basketball and *I'm* really good at basketball too. We played in gym and we were the best!"

"You guys played basketball today?" I asked, putting on a bit of excitement for the two girls.

"We did, Daddy," June said. "And I scored six shots and May scored seven."

"No, I scored six, too!" May said. "We were the same. And we were better than *all* the boys."

"Wow," I said, offering June a high five that she returned, and then May who gave me it back enthusiastically.

May's mother was smiling now and shot me an apologetic look. "I'm Olivia," she said. "Sorry about that."

"Adrian," I said, shaking the hand she offered me lightly. "And it's no worries. I get it. I just have one question - who is Francine, and why should I be avoiding her?"

Olivia smirked a little and nodded down the roundabout area towards one of the volunteers with the clipboards who currently seemed to be haranguing a couple of women. "That's her," she said. "Three kids, all of them snotty little shits, and she's trying to get an official PTA installed instead of letting the school manage volunteers and events. Very pushy, very judgy."

"Noted," I said, turning back to her. "We just moved back to town. I grew up here, but June doesn't have any buddies around yet, let alone a *bestest friend*," I leaned toward May in the car and gave it some emphasis and wink, which made her grin. "How about I touch base with you tomorrow, trade details, and we can maybe set up a park playdate or something?"

"Sure," Olivia nodded, sweeping a hand through her hair and shaking her head. "Again, sorry, it's just been a day."

"Like I said, I get it," I assured her. "We should probably get moving though before we risk the ire of Francine."

I shook her hand again, exchanging smiles, and then headed back to our car.

"What do you think, Juney?" I asked my daughter as I got her into her own booster seat. "Did we make some friends?"

“I think so, Daddy,” she grinned at me.

I got her strapped in and stood up, glancing back towards Olivia and May since the redheaded minivan had pulled away. Olivia was just opening her driver’s side door and saw me looking, and she waved lightly and smiled again. I returned the wave and blew out a breath as I rounded to my own door. When she wasn’t thinking I was inappropriately hitting on her, she had a great smile.

“What’s for dinner, Daddy?” June asked from behind me as I got in behind the wheel.

“Dinner?” I asked back. “Are you already hungry? I think it’s just snack time.”

“McDonald’s?” she asked hopefully.

“Hah, no McDee’s, June. Nice try though. I made your favourite popsicles at home though.”

My daughter cheered, and I knew that in a few years I would miss the fact that popsicles seemed like the best thing in the world.

I had learned quickly, during the first week of June at the new school, that I needed to get there twenty minutes early to have a spot in the roundabout. Only a few minutes later and I’d be parked out on the street, or trying to find a space on a neighbouring street and walking over. So I planned accordingly, and I pulled up at exactly 3:10pm, twenty minutes before school let out. The line quickly filled in behind me and the roundabout was full before I even stepped out of my car.

It was another gorgeous, early autumn day with a nice kick of heat and only a slight breeze so I was in a t-shirt and jeans. Moving back to the Midwest from California had been a lot of things, but getting more variety in the seasons was something I was both looking forward to and dreading. June was going to *love* snow, and I was going to hate clearing my driveway.

Still, with time to spare and the crisp, clean air filling my lungs, I decided to follow through on my offer from yesterday and I strode down the line of cars. Olivia was almost a dozen vehicles back this time, right on the curve and only a few from being on the street. She must have seen me coming because she was getting out of her vehicle. Her hair was back in a ponytail and she was wearing a plain maroon t-shirt and some basic black leggings, and she smiled as she stepped onto the curve.

“Hey, Adrian,” she said. “Look, I was thinking about it last night and I just wanted to apologise again for yesterday.”

“No need at all,” I said. “I was a random guy coming up to you, I’m sure a woman with a smile like yours gets approached all the time.”

She flashed me that smile, a little chagrined by the compliment, and shook her head. “Thank you,” she said humbly. “But really, I’m embarrassed at how I reacted. What’s your schedule like for playdates? I’ll bring the coffee.”

“How does Sunday work for you?” I offered.

“May and I do stuff with my parents most Sundays, is Saturday better? Maybe an hour before lunch?”

“That works for me,” I said. We quickly traded phone numbers so we could organise it more specifically, and she took a note of how I liked my coffee.

“So, I’ve got to ask - you’re one of a very few Dads who are here for pickup,” she said. “Usually it’s just me avoiding making eye contact with a lot of judgey housewives and some nannies. Are you one of those fabled stay-at-home Dads?”

I smirked a little and chuckled. “Sort of. I’m more of a work-from-home Dad. My ex and I split about four years ago and she’s not in the picture by her choice, and I’d reworked my contracting business to be entirely remote before that happened since I saw the writing on the walls.”

“Oh, shit,” she said. “That sounds complicated. Sorry if I’m poking an old wound.”

“No, no,” I said. “It’s fine. Juney and I make do, and making the move back here only complicated my business a little bit and brought us back to my parents so they get to be a lot more involved and spoil her.”

“Well, if it’s any help, once your story gets around you’re going to be the new hot merchandise on the meat market,” Olivia said. “Single Dad with a steady job is like catnip for the desperate single moms club.”

“I think I’m good,” I chuckled. “I’m not looking for anything, permanent or temporary. June has been through more than enough because of her Mom. What is it you do?”

“I work from home as well,” Olivia said. “I used to do more social media content creation stuff when I lived out in LA, but I transitioned to pure graphic design and video editing for other people when I got pregnant with May. My husband passed before she was born, and my parents had moved here from northern California, so I decided to move out here as well.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I said.

“Thanks, but I’m at peace with it all,” she said. “We were only together about eight months, and looking back - with the help of some good therapy - we probably wouldn’t have lasted. Burn hot, burn bright sort of thing.”

“Still, it’s good you got to land on your feet with a support network.”

“Olivia,” a woman said from behind me with the sort of self-important voice that sent a shiver up my spine. “I was wondering when we would be able to connect about the Fall Bake Sale. I noticed you haven’t responded to the email I sent out.”

I turned and found Francine, the woman Olivia had warned me about the day before, was approaching us. She was in a blouse, slacks and short heels and looked a little ridiculous with her orange reflective volunteer vest. The clipboard and pen in her hands gave me big middle-manager vibes, and she even had a whistle around her neck - I knew if she ever tried to blow that thing at me or my kid I would *not* be happy. The most cringe-inducing part of her whole facade, however, was that vapid, arrogant smile.

“Francine,” Olivia said, and I could almost *feel* the repressed ire. “I saw your email, but it didn’t give any specifics about what the bake sale was for, just when you wanted things brought in.”

“It’s for the PTA registration,” Francine said. “You would know this if you came to the start-of-year meeting like all the other Grade 2 mothers. Speaking of which, hello,” she turned her smile on me. “I don’t recognize you, sir. Are you a parent?”

“I am,” I said.

“Wonderful. Do you have contact information for your wife? I’ll want to get her on the mailing list. The PTA has a lot planned for this year and we need all hands available to make sure our children are getting proper education fueled by academics.”

I internally groaned and glanced at Olivia for a moment and caught the flash of a smirk that said, *‘Now you’re trapped.’*

“I’m actually single,” I said. “And my daughter’s mother isn’t in the picture.”

“Oh!” Francine said. “Well, I’m so sorry to hear that. It’s good that you’re here then. I’ll just need an email and phone number contact so that we can organise things with you then...?”

“Adrian,” I filled in. “Mancini. I’m Juniper’s Dad.”

The corner of Francine’s mouth quivered. “You don’t happen to be related to Rebecca Mancini, do you?”

“That’s my older sister,” I said. “You know her?”

"I've had the pleasure," Francine smiled, everything about her expression saying that her run-ins with Rebecca were anything *but* pleasurable. Which didn't surprise me, considering how I knew my sister would react to a woman like her. "So, contact details?"

"No thanks," I said.

"I'm sorry?" she asked, cocking her head in confusion.

"Oh, I thought that was pretty clear," I said. "The school has my contact details for any sort of emergencies or contact needed for official reasons. If they haven't provided that to you, then you mustn't be asking me in any sort of official capacity, and I don't give out my contact information unnecessarily."

"But we're organising important changes for the school, and-"

"That doesn't sound like something I'm particularly interested in," I said. "I actually went to this school when I was a kid, and the Principal was a couple of years older than me. She's got a good handle on things from what I could see when I did my registration tour."

Francine's puckered smile reminded me of someone eating a lemon square that had way too much lemon and way too little sugar but didn't want to tell the person who made it. "I see," she said.

"Great," I said. "Thanks for asking though."

She turned back to look at Olivia. "I'll email you the details," she said with a syrupy edge.

"Thanks, Francine," Olivia said. Then, once the woman had stalked away in the direction of a small group of mothers who were talking, she exhaled and snorted, covering her mouth. "OK, that was the best smackdown I've seen in person in a *long* time."

"If she's on the bad side of my sister, then she's gotten worse," I sighed, shaking my head and turning my back on Francine and the group. No doubt everything we'd just discussed would be passed on, and then passed on again into the rumour mill. "I'll have to ask Rebecca for the backstory."

"Well, good luck," Olivia laughed. "It looks like the Mom Squad is already reeling from this new information."

I just hung my head and sighed, making Olivia laugh again. "Alright," I said. "I better get back to my car before Francine writes me up for leaving it unattended. I'll text you about Saturday?"

"Sounds good," Olivia said with a smile. "And thanks for all of *that*."

“No problem,” I smiled back. “Next time I’ll sell tickets.”

May and June ran off towards the big boat-shaped play area together. The weather had turned a little since earlier in the week - not enough for it to be cold, but I was in a sweatshirt and both the girls were in jackets looking adorable. Olivia had met us just inside the parking lot adjacent to the park and my hands were getting warmed up by the large coffee she’d brought. She was wearing a vest over her long-sleeved shirt but was still rocking the leggings and sneakers.

“This is good,” I said, lifting my cup to my lips and taking another sip.

“I know the owner,” Olivia said, smiling as she watched our daughters start to play. “She’s a coffee snob, so when she opened her shop downtown I knew it would be good. Still can’t make a good doughnut to save her life though.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “She’ll never make it in this town, then.”

“Probably not, but she’s giving it a good go,” Olivia said. “So, I know we talked quickly and you said you’re fully remote, but I didn’t actually catch what you do other than it was something with contracting.”

“I usually keep it vague on purpose because it’s complicated,” I said. “But we’ve got time, so I’ll give you the whole life story if you want it.”

“Let’s just start with the job and see where it goes,” Olivia chuckled.

“At this point I’m more of an admin person than anything,” I said. “I got into the trades right out of high school with a carpentry apprenticeship, but I was a good people person so I ended up managing clients for my boss and became a site super for some builds before I switched to being a general contractor for custom builds.”

“That’s where you’re like the project manager and hire all the different trades, right?” she asked.

“Exactly. And it was around that time that I met my ex, and she was an aspiring actress, so we moved down to California and ended up in San Jose and I started up my company there, but then we moved to just south of LA after a couple of years because she needed to be closer to the auditions, but that ended up being a dud because there *were* no auditions other than open calls coming her way. After June was born we moved back up to San Jose again, and since I had all these contacts of guys I’d worked with, and they had guys that *they* worked with, I got into property preservation. I have a bunch of different contracts, but the main part of the business is that I have contracts with a few different banks and when they have a property they’ve acquired or foreclosed on in the territories I work, I hire and manage all the different

contractors needed from landscapers to carpenters to painters to get the property ready for resale, and keeping it that way until someone else takes over.”

“So you flip houses for someone else, and from a distance?” Olivia asked.

“Sort of. We’re rarely doing full renovations - lots of drywall fixing, painting, recarpeting, that sort of thing for the most part. Industrial and commercial spaces bring in more money though.”

“Damn,” she said. “And you can manage all that out there from here, while raising a kid?”

“Hell, I thought about homeschooling,” I chuckled. “Don’t get me wrong, I was hands-on part-time for a while and it took a lot of luck to get set up with the guys I have and trust. But now I’m mostly emailing or on the phone for work, and I miss working with my hands. Especially now that June is in school again.”

“Careful,” Olivia smirked a little, a teasing in her eyes. “Keep talking about missing working with your hands and I might just find a reno project for you to do on my place.”

I laughed, and our conversation was interrupted by the girls running back to us as they urged for pushes on the swings. That whole process brought a lot of giggles from them, and June taught May how to ‘properly’ jump off a swing - she was my little daredevil, sometimes, and jumping off and getting some hang time was an important lesson for her new best friend.

Then, all of a sudden, swing time was over and they rushed back towards the big jungle gym.

“So I got the backstory from my sister on her history with Francine,” I said to Olivia as we walked around the outside of the play area, keeping the girls in sight.

“Don’t tell me they were high school rivals or something,” Olivia guessed.

“No, it doesn’t go back that far,” I chuckled. “Francine’s oldest is the same age as my youngest niece, so Rebecca has been dealing with her crap for a while now. Apparently, she’s trying to get on to the PTA at the high school as well, and Rebecca is running just to keep her off of it.”

“Damn, entering politics for spite?” Olivia grinned. “I like your sister more and more.”

“So how is the video editing business?” I asked. “I honestly have no clue what that would entail.”

“It’s good,” Olivia said. “I can be as busy as I want to be, really. I have a few long-term clients that bring me repeat, stable business and then I pick up other freelance work to fill in the gaps. It’s a lot of staring at the computer screen, mostly, so wearing out May with stuff like this so that she’ll have a quiet afternoon is helpful.”

“Well, the girls seem to be having fun,” I said.

“They do,” Olivia smiled. “You know, May came home yesterday and asked if she could have school on Saturdays too, just so she could see June more often?”

I barked a laugh. “I hope they can both keep that outlook on school,” I said. “I’m dreading the terrible teens.”

“We’ve got a few years of sweet and simple left,” Olivia said.

“That we do,” I agreed as we watched the girls chasing each other across the rope bridge. June and I had watched the original Pirates of the Caribbean for our Daddy-Daughter Movie Night, and I was pretty sure she was telling May all about how they could sword-fight pirates and find buried treasure in the boat-like play area.

My daughter, I grinned to myself, was a cool little girl.

October

“Ugh, I hate these things,” Olivia mumbled to me under her breath before taking a sip of beer.

We were in the backyard of Annabelle Child's house and were surrounded by screaming children. The birthday party was probably being considered a success by most measures. All twenty-five of the girls from the Second Grade were dressed up as Disney princesses and were screaming and running around like little maniacs as a couple of Princess actresses were facilitating games for them. Where the parents found *two* Princess Party actresses in our town I couldn't start to guess.

June and I had gotten some looks when we arrived - my daughter, still on her pirate kick, had asked to dress as Elizabeth Swann. Considering she was a woman from a Disney movie, I was down for it; the only problem was that Miss Swann didn't exactly have a standard 'look.' It turned out that a little pirate coat with some trimming done up by my Mom on her sewing machine, a tricorne hat, a foam sabre and a boxy compass on a twine necklace was all she needed.

The hat and the occasional flailing of the foam sword over her head definitely made my daughter stand out among the various dresses of the other princesses. May wasn't far behind - as soon as she found out that June wasn't going to be a 'normal princess,' I'd gotten a sarcastic '*Thanks for that*' text from Olivia because May wanted to be Rey from the new Star Wars films. Not as great a pick, in my opinion, but still unique.

At least my daughter wasn't the only one running around with a fake sword, and the lightsaber noises May made were *very* cute.

“Awkward social gatherings where you have to interact with other people, birthday parties, or just other people’s mouth-breathing kids?” I asked Olivia quietly.

Olivia snorted and shook her head, giving me a warning look not to make her laugh with more statements like that. “The first one,” she said. “Though a big helping of the last one, too. It always feels so contrived, making small talk with some of these parents. Like, lady, I get it. You have errands to run and laundry to do and your husband comes home from work late and your therapist has taught you buzzwords like ‘narcissist’ and ‘enabler.’ I *don’t care*.”

I chuckled and looked out across the party. There were about half the number of adults as kids, which boggled my mind a bit - who just dropped their seven-year-old off at someone's house without any prior vetting? Still, beyond the birthday girl’s parents, I’d already made my rounds with the other Dads who were present. Jack was a ‘Sports Dad’ and wanted to know who I rooted for, Drew was the resident ‘I brew beer in my garage’ guy, and Paul was clearly whipped by his domineering wife and rarely left her side. The other seven adults were mothers who were swapping between trying to be helpful, looking helpful without actually doing anything, or gossiping.

Very few of them were sparing a glance for the kids unless they were taking a photo of them.

“So what did you end up getting for a present?” I asked Olivia. We’d texted some ideas back and forth as I tried to figure out the ‘present giving meta’ for the school year.

“I went with that big 120-colour marker pack,” Olivia said. “May says Annabelle is big on art, and I figure the kid can draw all over her walls in a couple of years as an act of rebellion. You?”

I snorted lightly and smirked. “Nerf gun. I can get away with it since I’m a single dad.”

“Asshole,” Olivia chuckled, keeping her voice low so her swearing wouldn’t be overheard. “You do realise that half of the presents are going to be educational ‘Girls in STEM’ kind of things, and the other half will be girly crap, right? Everyone is going to think you’re a crazy guy trying to teach their kids about the Second Amendment.”

“Good,” I said. “The more unhinged they think I am, the less likely they try to pull some shit.”

“Shit, hold on,” Olivia said, starting towards one of the groups of girls where May was currently pretending to stab the birthday girl with her lightsaber and then cut her head off. “Mayday, that’s not how we treat our friends on their special days, is it?”

I covered my mouth as I laughed, watching Olivia try and wrangle her daughter into letting the birthday girl try out the toy lightsaber. Of course, I made sure June wasn’t pulling the same shit with her foam sword - thankfully, she was busy pretending to be stabbed by her own deadly weapon, the foam blade caught between her torso and her arm as she staggered around like a goofball making some of the other girls laugh.

“So, you and Olivia, huh?” Drew said as he sidled up to me.

“Hmm?” I asked, then shook my head. “No, not like that. Our kids are just friends.”

“Really?” he asked, raising his bushy eyebrows in surprise. He was a stout guy and worked some sort of mindless office job he didn’t want to talk about. Our conversation earlier had revolved around how he was trying to fix the hoppiness of his latest batch of beer. I was more of a whiskey man so I hadn’t had a whole lot to offer, but had played along. “A couple of the moms were saying you two were becoming a thing.”

“Why would- What?” I asked.

“Just the rumour mill, I guess,” Drew shrugged. “You two talking all the time and stuff. So you’re really not... Y’know? Because, I mean, if I found myself single after a tragic accident...”

“No, man,” I said with a sigh. “May and June are friends. We organise playdates and stuff, and we’re friendly. We’re not seeing each other.” I ignored the lightly veiled suggestion; it wasn’t anywhere *near* the dirtiest thing I’d heard in regards to a woman, and him saying it seemed more like a ‘male bonding’ thing than a comment meant to degrade Olivia. And, to be fair, Olivia *was* an attractive woman. I still couldn’t get over that smile when she was about to laugh, and physically she was- well, she was attractive. I’d never deny that.

“Well, if that’s the case, Sharon is definitely going to farm some social points off of that. Mind not mentioning that to anyone today? My wife could use a win, that Francine lady has been on her ass about some crap with the PTA and I never hear the end of it,” Drew said.

“Sure,” I said. “As long as you promise that it gets out there. I don’t like people talking behind my back, and we aren’t in high school. Suggesting Olivia and I are hooking up is childish.”

“Oh, yeah. I can promise that,” he chuckled.

“Alright, no more decapitations,” Olivia said, cracking her knuckles a little unladylike as she came back over to us from the girls.

“I think the line is ‘No disintegrations,’” I said.

“OK, nerd,” she chuckled. “Drew, how are you? Have you guys signed Wendy up for gymnastics this year?”

“Sharon mentioned she was going to do that,” Drew said.

“How about you, Adrian?” Olivia asked. “Is June going to hit the mats? Classes start in a couple of weeks.”

"I hadn't really thought about extracurriculars for this winter," I said. "June hasn't shown interest, but I'm sure if May is going she'll start to."

"The girls who run the club are pretty good," Olivia said. "Not, like, Olympic level or anything but the main woman was on the State college team and she gets athletes out from their program to help. All you need to do is sacrifice your Saturday mornings at Ass O'Clock."

Drew chuckled. "And that's why I let Sharon take care of it."

"I'll see if June is up for it," I said.

"It's cheaper than hockey," Olivia said. "And less sexualized than dance or cheerleading."

"Sold," I said with a rueful smile.

Drew wandered away, likely to go fill in Sharon on the latest gossip developments, and Olivia shuffled a little closer to me. Sometimes, when she was close like that, I felt like I towered over her a bit at over a foot taller, but she had a big personality that filled the gap.

"Just FYI," I said. "The latest from Drew was that people are saying we're a thing. I tried to squash it definitively, I know you don't want shit like that getting spread around."

Olivia rolled her eyes and took a deep breath before letting it out. "Whatever," she said. "Those bitches will always have something to talk about. You better be careful, though."

"All the single ladies?"

"All the single ladies," Olivia confirmed with a smirk. "I bet Cathleen over there would be down for a quickie in the tool shed if you asked her."

Cathleen was a divorcee who would have fit into the stereotypical Trophy Wife category back in Cali, but up here in the midwest could just have easily been a well-endowed girl from good farming folk. She was curvy in all the right ways, tall, and from what I understood had dropped a good twenty pounds since her divorce.

"Not exactly my type," I said.

"Tall, leggy and blonde?" Olivia asked. "Whose type *isn't* she?"

"Mine," I said.

"Too much like your ex?" Olivia guessed.

“No, actually,” I chuckled. “Too much like my ex before her. Less crazy, but still not great. That’s how I ended up in my ex’s web to begin with.”

Olivia laughed and took another swig of beer. “So what you’re saying is that you’ve got a broken romance radar. I’ll keep that in mind and try and give you some hints if anyone is coming on to you.”

“That,” I said. “Would be appreciated. But make sure your hints come in the form of big red flags.”

“Noted,” she laughed.

“Morning,” I mumbled as I opened the back door of Olivia’s SUV and lifted June’s booster seat in. It was the second week of gymnastics and we’d decided to carpool. Since Olivia had the bigger vehicle we’d take hers, and I’d pay for coffee.

“Morning,” Olivia said back, turning in her seat to give me a weak, early-morning smile. A 7 AM start in the next town over meant a 6 AM departure time for us, which meant we’d both been up by at least 5:30 AM to make sure the kids were ready to go and had their breakfast. The first week I’d been cursing the decision to get June enrolled into the gymnastics program, but after the giant smile and how excited she’d been coming off the mats in the big gymnasium, it was hard to consider pulling her back out.

I got June’s booster seat locked in, then lifted her into the seat. She immediately reached over and hugged May, who hugged her back, which was cute as hell.

It was already starting to get cold and it felt like all at once the trees had turned from green to orange - after years down in California I’d forgotten how *fast* autumn really happened. I climbed into the passenger seat of the SUV and Olivia got us moving. We were quiet for the first bit other than a couple more mumbled pleasantries until we hit the Dunkin’ just outside of town. Then, with large coffees for both of us and doughnuts for the girls for a nice little extra kick of sugar and carbs before they had class, we started to perk up.