



# Falling for the Single Dad Firefighter (Fox Ridge: Fire Station #1)

**Author:** *Summer Rose*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Being the new teacher in town is complicated, but falling for a student's single dad is downright messy.

As Fox Ridge Elementary's newest teacher, I expected lesson plans and PTA meetings. Not a lightning strike of attraction to an older single father who ignites everything inside me. Samuel isn't just any dad—with his dark hair and broad shoulders, he's the firefighter enigma I can't stop thinking about.

My teaching career is just beginning, and he's carrying the weight of raising a child alone. But when we get ourselves stranded in a darkened classroom, the electricity between us becomes impossible to deny.

They say some connections defy explanation—instantaneous and all-consuming. But am I willing to risk everything I've worked for, for a love that struck without warning?

Falling for the Single Dad Firefighter is a short, sweet, and steamy small town instalove romance with a happy-ever-after. It can be read as a standalone or together with the rest of the books in the Fox Ridge: Fire Station series.

**Total Pages (Source):** 9

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:53 am*

The morning light spills through yellow curtains, casting a warm glow across the empty desks. I smooth the front of my navy dress and take a deep breath, inhaling the familiar scent of crayons, glue, and fresh bulletin board paper. My classroom.

I adjust a crooked name tag on the nearest desk and step back to survey my work. Alphabet charts with colorful animals. A reading corner piled with cushions. Cubbies labeled with each child's name.

Not so different from my classroom in Chicago, really, except everything here feels more... deliberate. In a school this size, in a town like Fox Ridge, every choice matters.

My stomach flutters as I straighten a stack of welcome packets.

Three years of teaching experience hasn't done much to calm the first-day nerves.

And this isn't just any first day—it's my first day in a new town, a new school, with families who've known each other since before their children were born.

I moved to Fox Ridge six weeks ago, drawn by the quiet streets and affordable rent, the chance to start fresh somewhere I could breathe. Chicago had been all noise and hustle, endless commutes on packed trains. Fox Ridge offers space—both the physical kind and the kind I need in my head.

"Good morning, Rebecca! All set for the big day?"

Principal Jenkins appears in my doorway, her silver bob swinging as she pokes her

head in.

"Morning, Mrs. Jenkins. As ready as I'll ever be." I manage a smile that feels more genuine than I expected.

"You'll be wonderful. First-day jitters are completely normal." She winks. "And remember, kindergarteners are forgiving. Trip over your own feet, and they'll think it's the funniest thing they've ever seen."

After she leaves, I open my desk drawer and touch the small frame tucked inside.

My parents smile back at me from their vacation in Florida, and I wish, not for the first time, that they lived closer.

Mom would've brought me coffee this morning.

Dad would've called with one of his terrible jokes to make me laugh.

The first bell rings, shattering my thoughts. Voices fill the hallway—high-pitched excitement mixed with parental reassurance. I square my shoulders and move to the doorway, pasting on my brightest smile.

"Good morning! Welcome to kindergarten!"

They arrive in trickles and waves—some bouncing with excitement, others hiding behind parents' legs. I crouch down to eye level for each one, using the techniques that have become second nature over the years.

"I love your unicorn backpack!" "What an awesome t-shirt—are those dinosaurs?"

"Your braids are beautiful. Did someone special do those for you?"

Each child responds differently—shy smiles, enthusiastic nods, whispered thank-yous. I guide them to find their desks, helping with backpacks and lunch boxes, maintaining a steady stream of chatter to distract from parents slipping away.

A little girl with glasses carefully arranges three colored pencils beside her name tag. "Ms. Brown? Will we have math today? I like counting."

"We sure will, Emma. We'll count all sorts of things."

A boy with a cowlick that defies gravity tugs my sleeve. "Teacher, I forgot my snack."

"That's okay. I keep extra snacks right here." I point to the cabinet by my desk.

The classroom hums with nervous energy, the children feeding off each other's excitement. I've just helped a boy named Tyler locate his cubby when a different sound cuts through the buzz—a high, thin wail that raises the hairs on my arms.

In the doorway stands a tiny girl with dark pigtails and a pink cardigan, her face crumpling as she clings to a man's leg. Her cries grow louder, more desperate with each passing second.

"D-daddy, no! P-please don't leave me!" Her whole body trembles as she buries her face against his jeans. "I want to go h-home!"

The classroom stills. Several parents exchange glances. A few children stop unpacking, their expressions uncertain, as if deciding whether to join the tears.

I move toward them, careful not to invade their space. The little girl's knuckles have gone white where she grips her father's leg. Her eyes are squeezed shut, tears streaming down flushed cheeks.

"Hi there," I say softly, kneeling a comfortable distance away. "I'm Ms. Brown."

One eye peeks open, regarding me warily through wet lashes.

Her father gently touches her head. "This is Mia. She's been a little worried about starting school."

His voice catches me by surprise—deeper than expected, with a gentleness that contrasts with his appearance. I look up briefly, registering broad shoulders and dark stubble, before returning my focus to Mia.

"Starting something new can feel pretty big and scary, can't it?" I keep my voice soft, angling my body so I'm not towering over her.

Mia hiccups, her grip on her father loosening just slightly.

I reach into my cardigan pocket and pull out a small, squishy star—swirled blue and purple, well-worn around the edges. I carry it out of habit, a reminder from my own teaching mentor years ago.

"This is my special star," I explain, holding it in my palm. "When I feel nervous, I like to squeeze it. Sometimes I even whisper my worries to it. Would you like to hold it today?"

Mia hesitates, then reaches out with a trembling hand. Her tiny fingers press into the soft material.

"It's squishy," she whispers, her breathing slowing as she focuses on the sensation.

"It sure is. And you know what else? We're going to read a story later about a bunny's first day of school. Would you like to be my special helper and turn the pages?"

She nods slowly, her tears subsiding to occasional sniffles.

"You can keep that star with you all day," I add. "Whenever you miss your dad, just give it a squeeze, okay?"

Only then do I allow myself to look properly at the man still standing patiently above us. The impact is immediate—not a lightning bolt, nothing so dramatic—but a subtle tug of awareness, like noticing the first cool breeze of autumn.

He is tall, with dark hair cut short and shoulders that fill out his gray t-shirt without trying. But it's his eyes that catch me off-guard—deep brown and tired around the edges, watching his daughter with such focused concern that it makes my chest tighten.

"Thank you," he says simply when he catches me looking. His voice matches his presence—steady but with a rough edge that suggests he doesn't waste words. "She's been having a tough time with the idea of school."

"That's completely normal," I assure him, dragging my attention back to Mia, who now squeezes the star ball rhythmically. "The first day is always the hardest."

I smile at Mia, who's finally relaxed her death grip on her father's jeans. "Would you like to see where your desk is? You get to sit right next to the reading corner."

Mia looks up at her father, waiting.

He crouches down to her level. "I'll be back at three o'clock, princess. Right after work." His voice softens even further. "And Ms. Brown will take good care of you until then."

"Promise?" Mia's voice is small but steadier.

"Promise." He presses a kiss to her forehead.

The tenderness of the gesture catches me off guard. Three years of parent interactions have shown me all types—the helicopter parents, the distracted ones, the overly formal—but something about this quiet exchange feels different. Real.

Mia's hand slips into mine, her other still clutching the star ball. Her father straightens, and I have to tilt my head back to meet his eyes.

"She'll be fine," I say quietly.

He nods once. "Thank you, Ms. Brown."

"Rebecca," I hear myself say. "The parents usually call me Rebecca."

"Rebecca," he repeats, and something about hearing my name in his voice makes my cheeks warm. "I'm Samuel. Samuel Lewis."

He extends his hand, and I shake it briefly, aware of the contrast—my smooth palm against his calloused one. An odd current passes between us, there and gone so quickly I might have imagined it.

"Nice to meet you, Samuel."

He nods again, gives Mia one more reassuring smile, and turns to leave. I watch him go for a moment too long before pulling my attention back to the classroom—to the twenty-two children who need me focused and present.

"Come on," I tell Mia gently. "Let's find your desk and meet some new friends."

The next two hours pass in a flurry of activity—name games, a tour of the classroom,

our first story. I guide the children through morning routines, gently redirecting when needed, praising often. Mia stays quiet but participates, clutching the star during transitions.

By the time we line up for break, the classroom has settled into a kind of organized chaos that feels familiar, comfortable. I've learned half their quirks already—which ones need extra guidance, which are natural leaders, which would rather observe than participate.

"Ms. Brown?" Mia tugs at my hand as we wait by the door. "Will my daddy really come back?"

I crouch down to meet her eyes. "Absolutely. He promised, remember? And until then, you and I and your new friends will have lots of adventures."

She nods, her fingers still wrapped around the blue star.

As I lead the line toward the cafeteria, I push thoughts of Samuel Lewis aside. I am here to teach, to create a safe space for twenty-two children finding their way in the world. Not to get distracted by kind eyes and careful hands.

No matter how they might linger in my mind.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:53 am*

I hang my jacket on the hook that's been mine for eight years now, right next to the faded photo of last year's department barbecue—Mia on my shoulders, ice cream smeared across her grinning face.

"There he is." Jax's voice carries from the kitchen area. "Thought you might've gotten lost at school drop-off."

I follow the smell of coffee into the common area where Jax sits at the table, boots propped up on an empty chair, scrolling through his phone. His dark hair is still wet from a shower, tattoos running up both forearms where he's pushed his sleeves back.

"Mia had a rough morning," I say, heading straight for the coffee pot. "First day..."

"How'd that go?" Jax asks, not looking up from his phone. "She do okay?"

"Eventually." The coffee is strong enough to strip paint, exactly how the night shift always leaves it. I pour a mug and lean against the counter. "Her teacher helped."

Something in my voice must give me away because Jax's head snaps up, a slow grin spreading across his face. "Teacher, huh?"

I take a deliberate sip of coffee. "Ms. Brown. New kindergarten teacher."

"Ms. Brown," he echoes, drawing out the syllables. "And what's Ms. Brown like?"

"She's good with kids."

"I bet she is."

"Drop it, Jax."

His grin widens. "Not a chance in hell, Lewis."

Before he can dig deeper, Caleb emerges from the equipment room carrying a toolbox.

"Morning, Sam," he says, setting the toolbox on the counter. "Mia get settled okay?"

"She did. Eventually." I'm grateful for Caleb's straightforward question. "New teacher helped calm her down."

"The new one from Chicago?" Caleb asks, grabbing a clean mug. "Principal Jenkins mentioned her at the town meeting last month. Said she's got some innovative teaching methods."

"Innovative," Jax repeats, wiggling his eyebrows. "Is that what the kids are calling it these days?"

I shoot him a look that would wither most men. Jax just grins wider.

"She gave Mia some kind of stress ball," I say, ignoring Jax completely. "Star-shaped. Calmed her down in about two minutes."

Caleb nods thoughtfully. "Smart. Physical distraction to break the emotional cycle."

"Yeah, well, it worked." I drain half my coffee in one swallow, trying not to think about the way Rebecca—Ms. Brown—had knelt down to Mia's level, her voice soft but confident. The gentle curve of her smile when Mia finally stopped crying. The

warmth of her hand when we shook goodbye.

"So what does she look like, this miracle worker?" Jax asks, his tone deliberately casual.

"Normal," I say flatly.

"Normal," Jax repeats, exchanging a glance with Caleb. "He says 'normal' but his ears are turning red."

I set my mug down with more force than necessary. "Don't you have something to maintain? Equipment to check? A cliff to jump off of?"

"After you tell me about Ms. Brown." Jax swings his boots off the chair. "Blonde? Brunette? Tall? Short? Glasses? Face tattoo?"

"Brown hair. Curly." The words come out despite my best efforts. "About this tall." I hold my hand at shoulder level. "No tattoos that I could see."

"Nice body?" Jax pushes.

"Jesus, Jax. She's Mia's teacher."

"That's not a no."

From the doorway, Dom's gravelly laugh interrupts us. "Let me guess. Lewis finally noticed a woman exists, and Walker's on him like a dog with a bone."

Dom limps into the kitchen, his left leg stiff from an injury two years back that nearly ended his career. He's older than the rest of us, pushing fifty now, with salt-and-pepper hair and a perpetually unimpressed expression.

"Lewis met Mia's new teacher," Jax informs him. "And he won't admit she got under his skin."

"She didn't get under my skin," I say, but even I can hear the defensiveness in my voice. "She helped Mia. I'm grateful."

"Grateful," Dom repeats, exchanging a look with Jax. "Sure. That's why you're standing there strangling that coffee mug."

I realize I'm gripping my mug so hard my knuckles have gone white. I set it down and cross my arms.

"Let the man breathe," Caleb says mildly, though there's a hint of amusement in his eyes. "Not everyone lives for drama like you two."

"Not drama—entertainment," Jax corrects. "This place is dead on weekday mornings."

Chief Grey's voice cuts through the conversation as he emerges from his office. "If you're bored, Walker, I've got a stack of incident reports that need reviewing."

"Suddenly I'm very entertained by this coffee," Jax says, raising his mug in a mock toast.

Chief Grey—Mason to most of us, after hours—is in his early fifties with the kind of weathered face that's seen everything twice. He runs a tight ship but treats us like family, which means he knows exactly when to step in and when to let us sort ourselves out.

"Lewis," he nods at me. "Mia get off to school alright? First day can be tough."

"Yes, sir. Rough start but she settled in."

"Good, good." He refills his own mug. "Sarah's got pictures of Josh's first day if you need some consolation. Kid was so nervous he threw up on the principal's shoes."

I wince. "I'll take the tears over that."

"Don't we all," Chief says. "Anyway, light schedule today unless something comes up. Engine 3 needs maintenance, and those safety presentations for the elementary school need finalizing."

"I can handle the presentation prep," I offer, needing the distraction.

"Perfect." Chief heads back toward his office. "Oh, and Lewis? Ms. Jenkins mentioned the new kindergarten teacher's a keeper. Thought you'd want to know."

He disappears before I can respond, leaving me standing there while Jax practically vibrates with suppressed laughter.

"Not a word," I warn him.

"Wouldn't dream of it," he says, the picture of innocence.

Wyatt chooses that moment to walk in from his workout, towel around his neck. At thirty-five, he's closest to my age, transferred here three years ago from Seattle. No-nonsense, practical, ex-military with the discipline to match.

"What'd I miss?" he asks, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge.

"Nothing," I say, just as Jax says, "Lewis has the hots for Mia's kindergarten teacher."

Lewis has the hots for Mia's kindergarten teacher," Jax announces.

Wyatt raises an eyebrow at me. "That right?"

"No." I aim a glare at Jax. "Mia was upset this morning. Her teacher helped. End of story."

"She single?" Wyatt asks, cutting right to the chase.

"I didn't ask for her relationship status," I snap. "It wasn't a date, it was a school drop-off."

Jax throws an arm around my shoulders, his voice dropping so only I can hear. "Look, man, I'm just giving you shit because that's what brothers do. But seriously—if you're interested, it's been five years. You're allowed to notice someone."

I shake my head, but there's something about Jax's casual support that cuts through my defenses.

Despite his constant teasing, he's been there through everything—the pregnancy, Lisa leaving, those first sleepless months with a newborn.

The day Mia got sick and I panicked, Jax was the one who drove us to the hospital, stayed all night in the waiting room.

"I'm not interested," I mutter, even as I recall the gentle way Rebecca had knelt beside Mia, the warmth in her eyes.

Jax just grins, seeing right through me like always. "Whatever you say."

"You're all twelve years old," I mutter, grabbing the coffee pot to refill my mug.

"Look," Caleb says in his reasonable voice, "there's nothing wrong with noticing someone, Sam. It's been what, six years?"

"Five," I correct automatically, then regret it when Jax smirks. "And it doesn't matter. She's Mia's teacher. There are boundaries."

"Boundaries," Dom snorts. "In a town this size? Everyone's connected somehow."

"That's different."

"How?" Wyatt asks.

"It just is," I insist, uncomfortable with the direction of this conversation. "Can we talk about literally anything else?"

"Fine," Jax relents. "But only because your face is turning the color of our trucks."

I deliberately turn away, focusing on the schedule board on the wall. We've got a quiet day ahead—equipment checks, training drills, community outreach prep. Nothing that should get my heart rate up the way one simple conversation with Rebecca Brown had.

It's ridiculous. I've met hundreds of people through Mia and the job. Parents, babysitters, neighbors. None of them have stuck in my head like this. None of them made me notice the exact shade of their eyes or the way their voice softened when talking to Mia.

It's just because she helped with Mia, I tell myself. I'm grateful, that's all. Anyone would be.

I'm saved from further harassment by the sudden blare of the alarm. The automated voice comes over the speaker: "Engine 61, Truck 81, Squad 3. Vehicle accident with entrapment, Highway 23 mile marker 14."

The room transforms instantly. Coffee mugs abandoned, conversation forgotten. We move with practiced efficiency, all business now. This is the rhythm I understand—the clean, clear purpose of the job. No confusing feelings, no overthinking, just training and instinct.

I pull on my turnout gear, muscle memory taking over. Boots, pants, suspenders, coat. I catch a glimpse of Mia's photo as I pass my locker, her gap-toothed smile reminding me why I do this, why I come back every day despite the risks.

"Let's move!" Chief calls over the organized chaos.

As we load into the truck, Jax claps me on the shoulder. "We're not done with this conversation, Lewis."

"Yes, we are," I tell him, but I know it's a lie.

Because even as the sirens wail and we pull out of the station, lights flashing against the midday sun, I can't quite shake the image of warm eyes and gentle hands from my mind.

Not Rebecca Brown.

Ms. Brown, I correct myself firmly as the town blurs past our windows.

Mia's teacher. Nothing more.

The lie sits uncomfortably in my chest all the way to the scene.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:53 am*

The classroom feels different after the children leave. Now it's just me, the soft hum of the air conditioning, and the fading afternoon light filtering through the blinds.

I glance at her cubby, where she carefully hung her backpack before leaving with the after-school program coordinator.

The blue star I gave her sits on my desk, forgotten in her rush to join the other children.

She'd been doing well by mid-morning, even volunteering to help pass out crayons during art time.

A resilient little girl, despite her shaky start.

Thunder rumbles in the distance as I sort through a stack of worksheets the children completed today.

A soft knock startles me from my thoughts.

I look up to find Samuel Lewis standing in my doorway, filling the frame with his broad shoulders.

He's changed clothes since this morning—dark jeans and a faded gray t-shirt that hints at the firefighter's physique beneath.

His hair is slightly damp, like he's just showered.

"Mr. Lewis," I say, setting down the papers. "Is everything okay?"

He steps into the classroom, his movements measured and careful, like someone used to navigating tight spaces. "Sorry to interrupt. They called me from the after-school program. Mia's running a fever."

"Oh no." I stand immediately, concern replacing my momentary nervousness. "Is she alright?"

"A little warm and upset. Asking for her dad." A small smile softens his serious expression. "And apparently something about a blue star?"

"Oh!" I reach for the star on my desk. "She left it here after circle time. I was going to return it tomorrow."

I hold it out, and he crosses the room to take it. Our fingers brush briefly during the exchange—a fleeting touch that shouldn't register but somehow does, like a static spark jumping between us.

"Thanks," he says, pocketing the star. "She really connected with this thing."

"It helps ground her," I explain, falling into teacher mode. "Physical objects can be anchors when emotions feel overwhelming, especially for children just starting school."

He nods, his expression thoughtful. "Makes sense. You seem to really understand her."

"That's my job," I say, then add more softly, "And she's a special little girl. Very observant. Creative too—you should see her drawing from today."

I retrieve Mia's family picture from the stack and hold it out. Samuel takes it carefully, his eyes softening as he studies the two stick figures holding hands.

"Just the two of us," he murmurs, almost to himself.

The vulnerability in his voice creates a tightness in my chest. "She's very proud of her dad," I say gently. "She told the class you save people from fires."

He looks up, a faint flush coloring his cheekbones. "Not every day. Mostly we prevent fires, honestly. Less exciting but better for everyone involved."

"Still pretty heroic to a five-year-old," I point out. "Or to anyone, really."

Our eyes meet for a moment too long. I'm the first to look away, busying myself with straightening papers that don't need straightening.

"I'm sorry to keep you after hours," he says. "You've probably had a long enough day."

"It's fine," I assure him. "First days are always a bit chaotic. I like the quiet after everyone leaves—helps me decompress."

Another rumble of thunder, closer this time. The light in the classroom dims as clouds gather outside.

"Storm's coming," Samuel observes, glancing toward the windows. "Forecast said it might be a big one."

"That'll make for an exciting second day," I say with a small laugh. "Nothing like thunder to energize twenty-two kindergarteners."

He smiles—a real smile that transforms his serious face. "Mia loves storms. Watches them from the window like they're the best show on earth."

"A little storm-chaser in the making?"

"God, I hope not." He shakes his head, but his expression remains fond. "Being a firefighter is enough risk in one family."

The word 'family' hangs between us, reminding me of Mia's drawing. Just the two of them. I want to ask about Mia's mother but hesitate, unsure if it's my place.

"It must be challenging," I say instead, "balancing your work with raising her alone."

He shrugs one shoulder, a gesture that somehow understates what must be an enormous challenge. "We make it work. The station is flexible when they can be, and Mia's pretty adaptable."

"She's lucky to have you," I say sincerely.

"I'm the lucky one." His voice drops lower, filled with quiet certainty. "She saved me, honestly. Gave me purpose when I needed it most."

Lightning flashes outside, illuminating his profile for a brief moment. In that flash, I notice details I shouldn't be cataloging—the strong line of his jaw, the slight crease between his eyebrows, the way his dark lashes contrast with his eyes.

"What about you?" he asks suddenly. "What brought you to Fox Ridge? Bit of a change from Chicago, I imagine."

"Everything brought me here," I admit, leaning against my desk. "The pace, the community, the chance to really know my students and their families. In Chicago, I

had thirty-two kids in a classroom meant for twenty. Here, I can actually see each child, you know?"

He nods, understanding in his eyes. "Small towns have their challenges, but that connection isn't one of them."

"Exactly." I smile, surprised by how easily he gets it. "Though I'm still adjusting to certain things. Like how everyone knows everyone's business, or how the grocery store cashier already knows my name even though I've only been there twice."

"Mrs. Patel?" he asks, a hint of amusement in his voice.

"Yes! How did you—"

"She's been the Wednesday cashier for twenty years." He chuckles. "Probably knew you were coming before you did."

The storm draws closer, rain beginning to patter against the windows.

"I should probably get back to Mia," Samuel says, though he makes no move toward the door.

"Of course." I nod, equally stationary. "I hope she feels better soon."

Thunder crashes directly overhead, making both of us jump. The lights flicker once, twice, then go out completely, plunging the classroom into gray shadows broken only by occasional flashes of lightning.

"Perfect timing," Samuel murmurs, his voice closer than before.

"The joys of small-town infrastructure," I reply with a nervous laugh. "The

emergency lights should come on in the hallway at least."

"Do you need to find a flashlight?" he asks.

"I have one in my desk somewhere," I say, but make no move to search for it.

In the semi-darkness, with rain drumming against the windows, ordinary rules seem suspended. Lightning flashes again, illuminating the classroom in stark white light. Samuel has moved closer, or maybe I have—the distance between us has shrunk to mere feet.

"You've got something—" he begins, lifting his hand toward my face.

His fingers brush my temple, warm and slightly rough against my skin.

He gently tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, the gesture aching tender.

His hand lingers just a moment too long, and in that suspended second, I feel something shift between us—possibility opening like a door neither of us meant to unlock.

I can smell him now—soap and rain—and see the slight stubble along his jaw. His eyes ask a question I'm not ready to answer.

My heart hammers against my ribs as awareness floods through me. This isn't appropriate. He's Mia's father. I'm her teacher. There are boundaries for a reason, lines that shouldn't be crossed, no matter how the storm light softens his features or how gently his fingers brush against my skin.

I step back abruptly, creating necessary distance. "I should check if other teachers are still in the building," I say, my voice steadier than I feel. "The power outage

protocols..."

The spell breaks. Samuel drops his hand, nodding as he withdraws to a safer distance. "Of course. And I need to get back to Mia."

"Yes, Mia." Her name grounds me, reminds me of my responsibilities. "Don't forget to give her the star."

"I will." He collects the drawing from where he placed it on a nearby desk. "Thank you, Ms. Brown."

"Rebecca," I correct him softly. "The parents usually call me Rebecca."

"Rebecca," he repeats, and something about the way my name sounds in his voice makes my resolve waver. "Goodbye, then,"

"Goodbye, Samuel. I hope Mia feels better soon."

After he's gone, I sink into my chair, hands trembling slightly as I try to gather my scattered thoughts. The classroom feels different now—charged with possibilities I can't afford to consider.

I'm Mia's teacher. He's Mia's father. Whatever just happened—or almost happened—in the darkness of the storm cannot happen again.

I press my fingers to my temple where his touch still lingers, and try to convince myself that the pounding in my chest is just from the thunder, not from the memory of his nearness.

I almost believe it.

Almost.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:53 am*

The diner on Main Street glows like a lighthouse against the darkening sky.

The Fable—a Fox Ridge institution since before I was born, with its neon sign buzzing and windows fogged from the heat inside.

After fourteen hours at the station, all I want is coffee strong enough to strip paint and whatever the meal of the day is.

Mia is with my mother tonight, a standing arrangement for my late shifts.

Mom loves these grandmother nights, spoiling Mia with homemade cookies and bedtime stories I'm apparently "not dramatic enough" to tell properly.

It gives me rare hours of solitude that I should be grateful for, but tonight I'm restless, my thoughts circling back to the same place they've been stuck since yesterday evening.

Rebecca Brown.

I've tried to push the memory away—her standing in the dim classroom, lightning illuminating her face, the soft texture of her hair as I tucked it behind her ear.

A gesture too intimate for a parent-teacher interaction.

A moment charged with something I haven't felt in years, something I have no business feeling for Mia's kindergarten teacher.

The bell above the door jingles as I step inside The Fable. The familiar scents of coffee, grilled onions, and apple pie wrap around me like an old blanket—comforting, unchanging. Judy, the night waitress who's worked here since I was in high school, raises her coffee pot in greeting.

"The usual, Sam?" she calls, already reaching for a mug.

"Please," I nod, scanning the half-empty diner for an available booth.

That's when I see her.

Rebecca sits alone in a corner booth, a book propped against the sugar dispenser, fork absently twirling pasta on her plate.

Her curly hair is gathered in a loose knot at the nape of her neck, a few strands escaping to frame her face.

She's changed from her teaching clothes into jeans and a soft-looking sweater the color of autumn leaves.

I should turn around. Find another place. Or take a seat at the counter.

Instead, I find myself walking toward her booth.

She glances up as my shadow falls across her table, surprise registering in her eyes before they warm with recognition.

"Samuel," she says, closing her book. "Hi."

"Rebecca." Her name still feels new on my tongue. "Sorry to interrupt your dinner."

"You're not interrupting," she assures me, gesturing to the empty seat across from her. "Please, join me. If you'd like to, I mean."

I slide into the booth, our knees almost touching underneath.

"How's Mia feeling?" she asks, genuine concern in her voice.

"Better. Just overtired, I think. The excitement of the first day caught up with her." I fiddle with the paper napkin dispenser. "She's with my mother tonight."

"That must be nice," Rebecca says, "having family nearby."

"It is," I agree. "Mom's been a lifesaver since... well, always, but especially since Mia."

Rebecca nods, understanding in her eyes. "And how about you? Recovered from first-day dad nerves?"

"Getting there." I offer a small smile. "Though apparently I didn't pack the right kind of juice box. Major kindergarten faux pas."

She laughs, the sound warming something cold inside me. "The apple versus grape debate is serious business in room twelve."

I find myself wanting to tell her more, to share something I rarely speak about. "You know, I had no idea what I was doing when Mia was born. First night home from the hospital, she wouldn't stop crying. Nothing worked—not feeding, changing, rocking. I was convinced I'd somehow already failed her."

Rebecca's expression softens, her attention completely focused on me.

"I called my mom at three in the morning, probably sounding half-crazy.

She came over in her pajamas, took one look at Mia, and swaddled her in this specific way I couldn't figure out.

Mia was asleep in minutes." I shake my head at the memory.

"I sat on the kitchen floor and cried from exhaustion and relief.

Mom just sat next to me and said, 'Welcome to parenthood, sweetheart. You're doing just fine.'"

"She sounds wonderful," Rebecca says softly.

"She is." I meet Rebecca's eyes. "Sometimes I wonder how different things would have been if Mia had had a mother who stayed. If she's missing something I can't give her, no matter how hard I try."

Rebecca reaches across the table, her fingers brushing mine in a touch that feels bold in this public place. "From what I've seen, that little girl isn't missing anything. She's loved, secure, confident. That's what matters."

Her words unlock something tight in my chest, a validation I didn't know I needed until this moment.

Judy appears at our table, sliding a mug in front of me and filling it with coffee dark enough to stand a spoon in.

"You eating, Sam?" she asks, eyeing Rebecca with poorly disguised curiosity.

"Whatever's the special," I tell her.

"Meatloaf," Judy replies. "Mashed potatoes, green beans."

"Sounds perfect."

As Judy walks away, Rebecca leans forward slightly. "I think we just became the talk of tomorrow's coffee klatch," she says in a mock whisper.

"Probably already texting my mother," I admit, and we both laugh.

It strikes me how easy this is—sitting here with her, the awkwardness of yesterday's moment in the classroom somehow dissolved in the warm light of the diner. Here, we're just two people sharing a meal, not navigating the careful boundaries of teacher and parent.

"So," I ask, taking a sip of scalding coffee, "how was day two with the troops?"

"Slightly less chaotic than day one," she says, her expression brightening. "Though we had a minor crisis when Tyler convinced half the class that the class hamster could talk."

"And can it?"

"Sadly, no. Mr. Whiskers maintains a dignified silence at all times." Her eyes crinkle when she smiles. "But Tyler has quite the imagination. He'd get along well with some of my guys at the station."

"Especially Jax," I find myself saying. "He once convinced a rookie that we had a firehouse ghost that stole left boots."

Rebecca laughs again, and I realize how much I like the sound—warm and genuine, without pretense.

"How long have you been a firefighter?" she asks, taking a sip of her water.

"Twelve years now," I answer. "Started when I was twenty-four, right after college."

"Did you always want to be a firefighter?"

I consider this, stirring my coffee. "Not always. I thought I wanted to be an architect, actually. Studied it for two years before I realized I was more interested in saving buildings than designing them."

She tilts her head, studying me with genuine interest. "That's quite a shift."

"My father was a firefighter," I explain. "I grew up with it, even when I thought I wanted something different. Some things are just in your blood, I guess."

Judy returns with my plate, eyebrows raised as she glances between us before retreating again.

"And you?" I ask, cutting into my meatloaf. "Always wanted to be a teacher?"

Rebecca nods, twirling her pasta again. "Since I was old enough to line up my stuffed animals and give them spelling tests. I was a very exciting child, as you can imagine."

"I can picture it," I say, and I can—a younger Rebecca with the same patient kindness she shows Mia, teaching teddy bears their ABCs.

"My parents wanted me to consider other options," she continues. "Law school, maybe medicine. Something with better pay and hours. But after my first education class, I knew there wasn't anything else for me."

"They've come around?"

"Mostly." A shadow crosses her face. "They worry about me being so far from home. My dad keeps sending me apartment listings in Chicago."

"But you're happy here?"

Her smile returns, softer now. "I am. There's something about Fox Ridge that just feels... right. Like I can breathe here."

I understand that feeling more than she knows. After years away, coming back to Fox Ridge with Mia was like exhaling a breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

We eat in comfortable silence for a few moments, the diner's ambient noise wrapping around us—plates clinking, coffee being poured, the low murmur of other conversations. Outside, the last of the daylight fades, turning the windows into dark mirrors reflecting our small bubble of warmth.

"Can I ask you something?" Rebecca says suddenly, setting down her fork.

My guard instinctively rises, but I nod. "Sure."

"Yesterday, in the classroom—" she starts, then pauses, choosing her words carefully. "I know there are boundaries. Professional ones. I just want to make sure things aren't... awkward between us. For Mia's sake."

The mention of Mia grounds me. Everything comes back to her—my daughter, the center of my universe. The reason I can't simply follow where this pull toward Rebecca might lead.

"Nothing's awkward," I assure her, though it's not entirely true. "Yesterday was—" I struggle to find the right words. "It was a moment. The storm, the power outage..."

"A moment," she repeats, nodding slightly. "That's a good way to put it."

But it wasn't just a moment. It was the opening of a door I've kept firmly closed for five years.

A reminder that beneath the layers of father, firefighter, provider, there's still a man who notices the way light catches in a woman's eyes or how her voice softens when she talks about things she loves.

"Mia really likes you," I say, redirecting. "That blue star trick was impressive. Where'd you learn that?"

Rebecca accepts the change of subject with a small smile. "My mentor teacher in Chicago. She had a whole toolkit for helping anxious kids. The physical sensation gives them something to focus on besides their anxiety."

"Smart."

"She was. Is." Rebecca's expression turns wistful. "She retired last year. Forty-two years of teaching kindergarten. I can only hope to be half as good someday."

"You already are," I say, the words honest. "At least, from what I can see with Mia."



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:53 am*

A soft blush colors her cheeks. "Thank you. That means a lot, especially from you."

"From me?"

"From a parent who clearly cares so much," she clarifies. "I can tell how much thought you put into Mia's well-being. Not all parents are so engaged."

I shift uncomfortably under her praise. "I'm just doing my job."

"No," she says, her voice gentle but firm. "You're doing far more than that. Anyone can see it."

Her words touch something vulnerable in me, something I usually keep carefully guarded. Before I can formulate a response, Judy appears with the check, setting it between us.

"Separate or together?" she asks, looking between us expectantly.

"Together," I say at the same time Rebecca says, "Separate."

We look at each other, and I reach for the check. "Please. Let me."

She hesitates, then nods. "Thank you."

After I pay, we step outside into the cool evening air. The rain from yesterday has cleared, leaving the streets damp and reflective under the streetlights. Stars have emerged, scattered across the clear night sky like diamonds on black velvet.

"I'm this way," Rebecca says, gesturing down the street toward the newer apartments by the river.

"I'll walk you," I offer, then add, "If that's okay."

She nods, and we fall into step beside each other, close but not touching. The night is quiet, most of Fox Ridge already settling in for the evening. Our footsteps echo on the wet pavement.

"Can I tell you something?" I ask suddenly, surprising myself.

Rebecca glances up at me, her expression open. "Of course."

I take a deep breath, unsure why I'm saying this but knowing I need to. "I haven't—there hasn't been anyone since Mia's mother. Five years of just... focus. On Mia, on the job, on making sure we had stability."

Rebecca says nothing, giving me space to continue.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is—" I struggle, the words feeling rusty from disuse. "I'm not good at this. The talking, the connecting. Being anything other than Mia's dad or Firefighter Lewis."

"You're doing fine," she says softly. "Better than fine."

We reach her building, a renovated warehouse with large windows and iron railings. She turns to face me, her back to the entrance. The streetlight catches in her hair, highlighting strands of gold among the brown.

"I understand boundaries, Samuel," she says. "I respect them. Mia's education comes first for both of us."

"Yes," I agree, though something in me protests that it's not that simple.

"But—" she continues, her voice quieter now, "I enjoyed tonight. Just talking. Getting to know you a little."

"I did too," I admit.

We stand there, the space between us charged with things left unsaid. Neither of us moves to leave, though we've reached the natural ending point of the evening. Her eyes reflect the streetlight, warm and questioning.

I step closer, almost unconsciously. She doesn't back away.

"Rebecca," I murmur, unsure what I'm asking for but knowing I need something more than a simple goodnight.

She tilts her face up to mine, a small movement that seems to answer a question I haven't voiced. I lean down, hesitating just a breath away from her lips, giving her time to step back if she wants to.

She doesn't.

Our lips meet softly, briefly—just the gentlest pressure, a whisper of contact. It lasts only seconds, but I feel it everywhere, like a current running through my body, waking parts of me I thought had gone dormant years ago.

When we pull apart, her eyes are wide, reflecting my own surprise. Her lips part slightly, as if she wants to say something but can't find the words.

"I..." I clear my throat, suddenly feeling like a teenager again. "I didn't plan that."

"I didn't think you did," she says, a small smile tugging at her lips. Her cheeks are flushed, visible even in the dim light.

We both take a step back, creating necessary space between us. I run a hand through my hair, trying to gather my scattered thoughts.

"I should probably..." she gestures vaguely toward her building entrance.

"Right," I nod, but neither of us moves.

The night wraps around us, quiet and full of possibility. Mia is with my mother. My house is empty. The thought arrives unbidden, and with it comes a surge of courage I didn't know I still possessed.

"Mia's with my mother tonight," I say, the words coming out more abruptly than I intended. I take a breath, trying again. "Would you... would you like to come over? Maybe for a drink or... just to talk more?"

The invitation hangs between us, fragile and loaded with meaning. I'm not entirely sure what I'm asking for, just that I'm not ready for this evening to end.

Rebecca looks at me for a long moment, and I can see the conflict playing across her face—caution warring with desire. Finally, she smiles, a soft curve of her lips that makes my heart beat faster.

"I think I'd like that," she says quietly.

Relief and anticipation flood through me in equal measure. "My truck's just down the block," I tell her, nodding toward where I parked. "If you're sure?"

"I'm sure," she says, and something in her voice has changed—a new certainty, a

decision made.

As we walk toward my truck, not quite touching but closer than before, I realize I've crossed a line I've been standing behind for five years. I don't know where this night will lead, but for the first time in a long time, I'm willing to find out.

The possibility no longer follows me like a shadow—it walks beside me now, wearing Rebecca's smile and carrying the lingering warmth of her lips against mine.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:53 am*

Samuel's truck smells like him—a clean, woodsy scent with hints of coffee. I sit with my hands folded in my lap. The kiss lingers on my lips, so brief yet somehow more significant than any I've experienced before.

Neither of us speaks. The radio plays softly, some country station with a song about highways and heartbreak.

I should be overthinking this, listing all the reasons why getting into Samuel Lewis's truck was a terrible idea. He's Mia's father. I'm her teacher. There are boundaries for a reason.

But all I can focus on is the warmth spreading through my chest and the subtle anticipation building with each turn of the road.

"You okay?" Samuel asks, his voice low in the darkness of the cab.

"Yes," I answer honestly. "Just... processing."

He nods, understanding in his silence. That's something I'm beginning to appreciate about Samuel—he doesn't fill empty spaces with unnecessary words. His quiet has substance.

We turn onto a tree-lined street of modest homes, each with its own character. Samuel slows the truck in front of a craftsman-style bungalow with a wide front porch. The yard is neat but lived-in—a child's bicycle leaning against the steps, a swing hanging from the branch of a large oak tree.

"Home," he says simply, cutting the engine. He turns to me, his expression serious but gentle. "Rebecca, if you've changed your mind—"

"I haven't," I interrupt softly. "But thank you for checking."

The corner of his mouth lifts in a half-smile that makes my heart flutter. "Just so we're clear."

We walk to the front door, close but not touching. The porch light casts warm shadows as Samuel unlocks the door, stepping aside to let me enter first. I cross the threshold into his world—a place I hadn't imagined seeing when I woke up this morning.

The living room is cozy and lived-in—a comfortable-looking sofa with a few throw pillows, bookshelves filled with a mix of adult novels and children's books, and photos of Mia at various ages. A wooden fire truck sits on the coffee table next to a half-completed puzzle of dinosaurs.

"It's not much," Samuel says, watching me take it all in. "But it's home."

"It's lovely," I tell him, meaning it. The space feels genuine, warm with the presence of the people who live here.

"Can I get you something to drink? Wine? Beer? Coffee?" He runs a hand through his hair, and I realize he's nervous too. The thought is oddly comforting.

"Wine would be nice," I say. "If it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble." He gestures toward the sofa. "Make yourself comfortable. I'll be right back."

As he disappears into what I assume is the kitchen, I take a moment to breathe deeply, grounding myself in the reality of where I am and what I'm doing.

I slip off my shoes and place them neatly by the door before settling on the sofa.

From this angle, I can see more photos on the mantel—Samuel in his firefighter uniform, Mia as a newborn, an older couple who must be his parents.

Samuel returns with two glasses of red wine, handing one to me before sitting beside me, leaving a respectful distance between us. He's removed his jacket, and the soft gray t-shirt he wears reveals the defined muscles of his arms. I take a sip of wine, grateful for something to do with my hands.

"So," he says, his voice carrying a hint of uncertainty.

"So," I echo, smiling over the rim of my glass.

"I'm not great at this," he admits, gesturing vaguely between us. "The dating thing. Or whatever this is."

"I'm not sure what this is either," I confess. "But I like it."

His eyes meet mine, dark and intent. "I like it too."

We sip our wine in companionable silence for a moment. Through the window, I can see stars scattered across the clear night sky. The distant sound of a train whistle drifts through the quiet town.

"Tell me something about you," Samuel says suddenly. "Something not related to teaching or kindergarten."



I consider the question, tilting my head. "I collect old typewriters. I have three so far—a 1940s Remington, a Smith-Corona from the sixties, and a really beaten-up Underwood I found at a garage sale."

His eyebrows lift in surprise. "Do you use them?"

"The Remington, sometimes. There's something satisfying about the keys—the physical connection between thought and word." I take another sip of wine, feeling myself relax. "Your turn. Something not related to firefighting or being a dad."

"I build things," he says. "Furniture mostly. That bookshelf—" he points to a sturdy oak piece against the wall, "—and the coffee table. It helps me think, working with my hands."

"They're beautiful," I say, genuinely impressed. "You're talented."

He shrugs, but I can see he's pleased by the compliment. "Just a hobby."

"A good one." I set my wine glass on a coaster, turning more fully toward him. "Samuel, can I ask you something personal?"

He nods, though I see a slight wariness enter his expression.

"You don't have to answer," I clarify. "But I've been wondering about Mia's mother. You mentioned she wasn't in the picture from the start?"

Samuel is quiet for a long moment, his fingers tracing the rim of his glass.

When he speaks, his voice is measured, careful.

"Lisa and I dated for about a year. When she found out she was pregnant, she was

clear that she didn't want to be a mother.

We tried to make it work for a few months, but.

.." He shrugs, a gesture that doesn't quite hide the old pain.

"She left during the seventh month. Signed over all parental rights after Mia was born. "

"Do you ever hear from her? Does Mia?"

He's quiet for a long moment, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. "No. She made it clear she wanted a clean break. She moved to California right after Mia was born. Last I heard, she was working for a tech company, married to someone else."

"Does Mia ask about her?"

"Sometimes." His voice softens. "She went through a phase around three where she asked almost every day. Now it's more occasional—usually after mother-focused events at school or when she sees her friends with their moms."

"That must be hard for both of you."

Samuel turns to face me. "The hardest part is not knowing what to tell her. How do you explain to a child that someone chose not to be her mother? That it wasn't anything she did wrong?"

I place my palm against his cheek. "You tell her she's loved. That families come in all different shapes. That sometimes people aren't ready to be parents, but that doesn't mean she isn't perfect exactly as she is."

"You sound like you've done this before," he says with a sad smile.

"I've had a lot of students with complicated family situations." I hesitate before asking, "Are you worried? About me coming into Mia's life and then..."

"Leaving?" He finishes my thought. "The thought has crossed my mind. Not because I don't trust you, but because Mia's already experienced one woman walking away. I don't think she'd understand if it happened again."

"I wouldn't do that to her," I whisper, the promise feeling sacred in the quiet between us. "Or to you."

His arms tighten around me. "I believe you. That's what scares me most."

I nod, understanding better now his fierce protectiveness, his careful approach to relationships. "Thank you for telling me."

"What about you?" he asks. "Any serious relationships in your past?"

"Nothing that lasted," I admit. "Studying and teaching took priority."

I moved around for different positions, focused on building my career.

" I pause, considering how much to reveal.

"There was someone in Chicago, but we wanted different things.

He couldn't understand why I'd want to leave the city for a place like Fox Ridge. "

"His loss," Samuel says simply.

Our eyes meet again, and something shifts in the air between us—the conversation moving beyond polite exchange into something more intimate, more honest. I'm suddenly very aware of his nearness, the way the lamplight catches the angles of his face, the subtle movement of his chest as he breathes.

Samuel sets his glass beside mine on the coffee table, his movements deliberate. When he turns back to me, there's a question in his eyes.

"Rebecca," he says softly, my name like a caress in his voice.

I don't hesitate. I move closer, eliminating the careful space between us. His hand comes up to cup my cheek, warm and slightly calloused against my skin. When our lips meet this time, there's nothing brief about it.

The kiss deepens slowly, as if we're both savoring each moment, each new sensation. His lips are firm but gentle against mine, asking rather than demanding. I slide my hands up to his shoulders, feeling the solid strength of him under my fingertips.

His tongue traces the seam of my lips, and I open to him willingly, the taste of wine and something uniquely Samuel making me dizzy with want. A soft sound escapes me when his tongue meets mine, and I feel him respond, his hand sliding from my cheek to the nape of my neck.

I shift closer until I'm nearly in his lap, my body acting on instinct and desire. His free arm wraps around my waist, pulling me against him until there's no space left between us.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathing heavily. His eyes have darkened, pupils dilated with desire, but there's still a question there, a seeking of permission.

"We can stop," he murmurs, though his hand still cradles the back of my neck. "If

you want to."

"I don't want to stop," I whisper back, the honesty of it surprising even me.

Something flares in his eyes—desire, relief, anticipation. He leans in again, and this time the kiss carries more urgency. My hands find their way into his hair, soft between my fingers.

His mouth leaves mine to trace a path along my jaw, down the sensitive column of my throat. When he reaches the pulse point at the base of my neck, he lingers there, lips and tongue working against my skin in a way that draws a gasp from me.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:53 am*

"Samuel," I breathe, tilting my head to give him better access.

His hands remain careful but more confident now, one sliding down my back to rest at the curve where it meets my hip, the other still tangled in my hair. Even as desire builds between us, there's a restraint to him—a careful control that both frustrates and touches me.

I pull back slightly, meeting his gaze. "Is there... somewhere more comfortable we could go?"

Understanding dawns in his expression, followed by a flash of heat that makes my pulse quicken. He stands, offering me his hand. "Are you sure about this?"

I take his hand, rising to meet him. "I'm very sure."

He leads me down a short hallway, past a room I glimpse is clearly Mia's—walls painted a soft green, a small bed with a colorful quilt—to the door at the end.

His bedroom is simple and masculine—a large bed with navy blue covers, a dresser, a bedside table with a lamp casting a warm glow over the space.

We stand by the edge of the bed, suddenly shy despite the heat between us moments before. Samuel's hands find my waist, steadying rather than pulling.

"We can take this slow," he says quietly. "There's no rush."

My answer is to reach for the hem of his t-shirt, tugging it upward. He helps me,

pulling it over his head and dropping it to the floor.

The sight of him takes my breath away—broad shoulders, defined chest, a scattering of dark hair that narrows as it trails down his abdomen and disappears beneath his jeans. A few scars mark his skin—one near his collarbone, another along his right side.

I reach out, tracing the larger scar with my fingertips. "What happened?"

"Fire in an old factory," he explains, his voice rougher now. "Four years ago."

I lean in to press my lips to the mark, a gesture that makes him inhale sharply. His hands come to my shoulders, steadying himself as much as me.

"Your turn," he murmurs, fingers finding the hem of my sweater.

I lift my arms, allowing him to pull it over my head. Cool air hits my skin as I stand before him in my simple white bra. For a moment, I feel self-conscious—I'm soft where he's hard, curved where he's flat.

But the way he looks at me, his eyes traveling slowly over my exposed skin with undisguised appreciation, banishes any insecurity.

His hands find my waist, thumbs brushing the sensitive skin just above the waistband of my jeans. I step closer, wanting to feel his skin against mine. When our bodies meet, the contact draws sounds from both of us—my soft gasp mingling with his deeper groan.

We move to the bed, Samuel guiding me down gently, coming to rest beside me. His hand traces a path from my shoulder to my hip, learning the contours of my body with patient thoroughness. When his fingers brush the underside of my breast, I arch

into the touch, silently asking for more.

"Can I?" he asks, his hand sliding to the clasp of my bra.

I nod, lifting slightly to make it easier. With deft fingers, he undoes the clasp, drawing the straps down my arms and setting the garment aside. His sharp intake of breath as he looks at me sends a thrill of feminine power through me.

"So beautiful," he murmurs, before lowering his head to press a kiss to the curve of my breast.

His mouth is warm and gentle at first, exploring with careful attention.

But when his lips close around my nipple, all gentleness gives way to a more urgent need.

I arch against him, my hands finding his hair, holding him to me as his tongue and teeth work in tandem to draw sensations I've never felt so intensely.

"Samuel," I gasp, my hips lifting instinctively, seeking friction, seeking him.

He raises his head, his eyes meeting mine. The raw need I see there matches the ache building between my thighs. His hand travels down my stomach, pausing at the button of my jeans.

"Is this okay?" he asks, always checking, always making sure.

"Yes," I breathe. "Please."

He undoes the button, then the zipper, his movements deliberate but unhurried. When his fingers dip beneath the waistband, brushing against the sensitive skin of my lower



abdomen, I shiver with anticipation.

"Lift up," he instructs softly, and I do, allowing him to pull my jeans down and off, leaving me in only my underwear.

He kisses me again, deeper now, more urgent. His hand slides down my side, over my hip, to the outside of my thigh, then slowly inward. When his fingers brush against me through the thin cotton of my underwear, I gasp against his mouth, the touch electric even through the fabric.

"You're so wet," he murmurs, his voice filled with wonder and masculine satisfaction.

His fingers begin to move in slow circles, finding the bundle of nerves that makes my hips buck against his hand. The pressure builds exquisitely, but it's not enough—I want more, want him.

"Please," I breathe, not even sure what I'm asking for, only that I need it desperately.

Samuel seems to understand. He hooks his fingers in the waistband of my underwear, drawing it down my legs and off, leaving me completely exposed to his gaze. I should feel vulnerable, but all I feel is desired, wanted in a way I've never experienced before.

His hand returns to me, but this time there's no barrier between his skin and mine. His fingers slide through my folds, gathering moisture, exploring with careful attention to my reactions. When one finger circles my entrance, I lift my hips in silent invitation.

He enters me slowly, a single digit that has me clutching at his shoulders.

When he adds a second, stretching me gently, I moan his name, my head falling back against the pillows.

His thumb finds my clit, circling in time with the movement of his fingers inside me, and the dual sensation has me spiraling quickly toward the edge.

"Samuel," I gasp, my nails digging into his skin. "I'm close—"

"Let go," he encourages, his voice rough with desire. "I want to see you."

His words, combined with the skilled movement of his hand, push me over. My back arches as pleasure crashes through me in waves, my inner muscles clenching around his fingers. He works me through it, gentling his touch as I come down, trembling and sensitive.

Before I fully recover, Samuel moves to kneel between my legs. His jeans are still on, the fabric rough against my over-sensitized skin. I reach for his belt, suddenly desperate to feel all of him.

"Off," I manage, tugging at the leather strap. "I want to feel you."

He helps me, undoing the belt and button before standing to remove his jeans and boxers in one fluid motion. When he straightens, I get my first full view of him—all hard muscle and defined lines, his arousal prominent and intimidating in its size.

I reach for him, but he catches my hand, bringing it to his lips instead. "If you touch me right now, this will be over too quickly," he explains, pressing a kiss to my palm.

He settles between my thighs, his weight supported on his forearms. I can feel him, hot and hard against my entrance, but he doesn't push forward.

"Are you sure?" he asks one more time, his eyes searching mine.

I reach up to touch his face, tracing the line of his jaw. "I'm sure. I want this. I want

you."

That's all the permission he needs. He enters me slowly, giving me time to adjust to his size. The stretch is intense, bordering on discomfort, but then he pauses, allowing my body to relax around him.

"You feel incredible," he groans, his control evident in the tension of his arms, the careful restraint of his movements.

When he's fully seated within me, we both take a moment to adjust to the sensation. I've never felt so full, so completely joined with another person. It's overwhelming in the best possible way.

Samuel begins to move, slow, deep thrusts that have me gasping with each roll of his hips. He watches my face intently, learning what brings me pleasure, adjusting his angle when something makes me moan particularly loudly.

"More," I urge, wrapping my legs around his waist to draw him deeper.

He complies, his pace increasing, the force of his thrusts growing more insistent. The headboard begins to knock gently against the wall, a rhythmic counterpoint to our ragged breathing and soft sounds of pleasure.

I lift my hips to meet each thrust, feeling another climax building deep inside. Samuel must sense it too, because he slips a hand between us, his fingers finding my clit and circling it in time with his movements.

"Come for me again," he urges, his voice strained with the effort of holding back his own release. "I want to feel you come around me."

His words combined with the dual sensation of his cock stretching me and his fingers

working against my most sensitive spot push me over the edge for a second time. This orgasm is even more intense than the first, radiating outward from my core in waves that have me crying out his name.

As I clench around him, Samuel's rhythm falters, his thrusts becoming more erratic. With a deep groan, he follows me over, his body shuddering against mine as he finds his release. The feeling of him pulsing inside me prolongs my own pleasure.

For long moments afterward, we remain connected, both breathing heavily. Samuel's weight is a comfortable pressure above me, his forehead resting against mine.

When he finally moves to slip out of me, I make a small sound of protest that makes him chuckle softly.

His arm wraps around my waist, drawing me against the solid warmth of his chest. I curl into him instinctively, my head finding the perfect spot in the crook of his shoulder.

"You okay?" he asks softly, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on my bare hip.

I tilt my head to look up at him, finding his expression serious but tender. "More than okay."

He smiles, his eyes crinkling at the corners in a way that makes my heart skip. "Me too."

We lie in comfortable silence, our breathing gradually syncing.

Outside, a car passes by, its headlights briefly illuminating the room before returning us to the soft glow of the bedside lamp.

Reality begins to creep back in—the awareness of who we are, what this means, what complications might follow.

But for now, in the warmth of Samuel's bed, with his heartbeat steady under my palm, I choose to set those concerns aside. Tomorrow will bring what it will. Tonight, I am exactly where I want to be.

Samuel pulls the covers over us, tucks me against his side as if we've done this a hundred times before, and presses a kiss to my forehead. The simple gesture holds more tenderness than I expected, and I feel myself softening further into his embrace.

"Stay," he murmurs against my hair. It's not quite a question, not quite a command.

"For a while," I agree, knowing I should return to my own apartment before morning. Before Mia returns. Before we have to face the reality of what we've begun.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:53 am*

I wake before my alarm, awareness seeping in gradually—the warmth of another body pressed against mine, the subtle scent of vanilla, the soft, even breathing of someone deep in sleep. For a moment, I'm not sure where I am, and then it all rushes back.

Rebecca.

She's curled against my side, one arm draped across my chest, her face nestled in the crook of my neck. Her curls tickle my chin, a wild tangle from sleep and last night's activities. The memory of those sends a rush of warmth through me.

It's been so long since I've woken up with someone.

Now here she is, warm and real and breathing softly against my skin.

I should be panicking. Overthinking. Planning our careful exit strategy before Mia comes home from my mother's later this morning. Instead, I feel oddly calm, as if some piece that's been missing has finally clicked into place.

Rebecca stirs, her breathing changing rhythm as she transitions from sleep to wakefulness. She makes a small, contented sound and burrows closer before her eyes flutter open. For a moment, she seems confused, and then recognition dawns in her gaze.

"Morning," she murmurs, voice husky with sleep.

"Morning," I reply, reaching up to brush a curl from her face. "Sleep okay?"

She nods, stretching slightly against me like a contented cat. "Better than okay. What time is it?"

"Almost six."

"Mmm. Early." She makes no move to get up, instead tucking herself more securely against my side. "Your bed is comfortable."

"It has its moments," I say, unable to keep the smile from my voice. "Coffee?"

"Please," she says, finally sitting up, holding the sheet to her chest in a gesture that seems oddly modest after the intimacy we shared last night. "Mind if I borrow your shower?"

"Be my guest." I lean over to press a kiss to her bare shoulder before standing. "Towels are in the cabinet beside the sink. Use whatever you need."

I pull on a pair of sweatpants and head to the kitchen, hyperaware of the domesticity of this moment.

The coffee maker gurgles to life as I measure grounds with practiced movements.

The house is quiet in the way it only is when Mia isn't home—no cartoons playing softly in the background, no little voice asking questions or humming made-up songs.

I miss her with a familiar ache, even as part of me is grateful for this private morning with Rebecca.

By the time the shower turns off, I've set out mugs, milk, sugar, and the box of muffins my mother sent home with me earlier this week. Nothing fancy, but it's more than my usual rushed breakfast of coffee and whatever I can grab on the way out the

door.

Rebecca appears in the kitchen doorway wearing one of my t-shirts, which hangs to mid-thigh on her frame, and her jeans from last night. Her hair is damp, her face free of makeup, and something in my chest tightens at the sight of her. She looks younger this way, softer around the edges.

"That smells amazing," she says, padding barefoot across the kitchen floor. "I'm useless without coffee."

"Firefighter's lifeblood," I reply, pouring her a mug and sliding it across the counter. "Milk? Sugar?"

"Just a splash of milk, please."

I add it for her, then pour my own—black, no sugar. She takes a long sip, closing her eyes in appreciation, and I find myself watching the line of her throat as she swallows.

"Much better," she sighs, opening her eyes to catch me staring. "What?"

"Nothing," I say, though that's far from the truth. "Just... this is nice."

Her expression softens. "It is, isn't it? Weirdly normal for something so..." She trails off, searching for the right word.

"Complicated?" I offer.

"I was going to say unexpected. But complicated works too." She takes another sip of coffee. "Mia comes home today?"



"Around nine. My mom's bringing her after breakfast." I lean against the counter, studying her expression. "You're welcome to stay, but I understand if—"

"I should probably go before then," she interrupts gently. "Not because I want to, but because..."

"Because it's complicated," I finish for her.

She nods, setting her mug down. "Samuel, about last night—"

"No regrets," I say quickly, perhaps too quickly.

Her eyes widen slightly. "None. Not a single one. That's not what I was going to say."

Relief washes through me. "What were you going to say, then?"

She steps closer, close enough that I can smell the scent of my shampoo in her hair. "That I don't want it to be just last night. That I know this is complicated—you're Mia's father, I'm her teacher, there are boundaries we've already crossed. But I want to figure it out. If you do too."

The directness of her words catches me off guard. I've spent so long being careful, measuring my actions against what's best for Mia, that I've forgotten how to simply want something for myself.

"I do," I admit, reaching out to take her hand. "I want to figure it out too."

Her smile is like sunrise breaking over the horizon—gradual, then all at once brilliant. She twines her fingers with mine, the simple connection grounding me in the moment.

"So what does that look like?" she asks, her practical teacher's mind already seeking structure. "I mean, logistically speaking."

I guide her to the small kitchen table, pulling out a chair for her before taking my own. "Honestly? I'm not sure. I haven't done this in... a while."

"Me neither," she admits. "And never with someone who has a child."

The mention of Mia brings the complexity of our situation into sharper focus. "She comes first," I say simply. "Whatever we do, however we handle this, Mia's well-being has to be the priority."

Rebecca nods without hesitation. "Of course. She's a wonderful little girl, and I would never want to do anything that might hurt her."

"She likes you already," I tell her, remembering how Mia talks about Ms. Brown at dinner, recounting the day's activities with animated gestures. "The blue star is practically a family member now."

Rebecca laughs softly. "That's good to hear. But liking me as her teacher and accepting me as..." She pauses, seemingly unsure how to define her potential role.

"As someone important to her dad," I supply. "That's different, I know."

"We'd need to be careful," Rebecca says. "Take it slow, especially around her."

"Agreed." I take a sip of my coffee, considering our options. "Maybe we start with some time together when she's not around. Get to know each other better before introducing any changes to her routine."

"I'd like that," Rebecca says. She hesitates, then adds, "I have this little cabin booked

for the weekend after next.

Up by the lake. Nothing fancy, just a place to decompress after the first month of school.

" Her cheeks color slightly. "You could join me, if you wanted.

If you could arrange someone to watch Mia. "

The invitation sends a rush of warmth through me. "Mom would be happy to take her for a weekend. She's always asking for more grandma time."

"So that's a yes?" Rebecca's eyes hold a hopeful gleam.

"That's a definite yes," I reply, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

We sit in comfortable silence for a moment, drinking our coffee and sharing occasional glances that carry echoes of last night's intimacy. It strikes me how easily she fits into my kitchen, into my morning routine, as if she belongs here.

"Tell me something," I say suddenly. "Something you want. For the future, I mean."

She tilts her head, considering the question with the same thoughtfulness she seems to apply to everything.

"I want roots," she says finally. "Somewhere to belong, to build a life that matters.

I've moved around so much for my career—always chasing the next opportunity, the next challenge. But now..."

"Now?" I prompt when she trails off.

"Now I want to stay put. Build connections that last. Maybe even have a family someday." Her eyes meet mine briefly before dropping to her coffee mug. "What about you? What do you want?"

The question catches me off guard. I've spent so long focusing on what Mia needs, on keeping our little family of two afloat, that my own wants have become secondary, almost forgotten.

"I want Mia to grow up happy and secure," I start with the obvious. "But beyond that... I guess I want someone to share it with. The good days and the hard ones. Someone who understands that being a dad is always going to be part of who I am, but not all of who I am."

Rebecca nods, her expression soft. "I think those things are compatible. Your wants and mine."

"I think they are too," I agree, feeling a cautious hope unfurling in my chest.

She glances at the clock on the microwave and sighs. "I should probably head home soon. School prep waits for no teacher, and I need to change before work."

"I'll drive you," I offer, already anticipating the emptiness that will settle in when she leaves.

"You don't have to. I can call a rideshare."

"I want to," I insist gently. "Besides, it gives me a few more minutes with you."

Her smile is worth any inconvenience. "In that case, I accept."

We finish our coffee and the muffins—blueberry, my mother's specialty—talking

easily about her plans for the school day and my upcoming shift schedule. As she gathers her things, I find myself already calculating when we might see each other again, already missing her though she hasn't yet left.

She disappears briefly into the bathroom and returns with her hair pulled back, face freshened. The sight of her in my t-shirt stirs something possessive in me—a desire to see her like this more often, comfortable and at ease in my space.

"Keep it," I say when she begins to apologize for borrowing the shirt. "It looks better on you anyway."

Her cheeks flush, but she nods, gathering her sweater and purse. As we head to the door, I help her slip her sweater on, an unnecessarily chivalrous gesture that gives me an excuse to brush my hands over her shoulders, to stand close enough to catch the lingering scent of my soap on her skin.

At the truck, I open the passenger door for her, another small courtesy that feels right, feels important somehow. The morning is cool, the sky clear with the promise of a beautiful day ahead. As we drive through the quiet streets of Fox Ridge, Rebecca's hand finds mine on the console between us.

"I had a thought," she says, her voice casual though her fingers tighten around mine. "About Mia."

"Oh?" I glance at her, curious.

"The school has a family pizza night next Friday. All the kindergarten families are invited—games, pizza, that sort of thing. It might be a good opportunity for her to see us together in a setting that makes sense. No pressure, just... normalizing us being in the same space."

The thoughtfulness of the suggestion touches me. It's exactly the kind of careful approach Mia needs—nothing abrupt or confusing, just a gradual shift in how she sees the adults in her life.

"That's perfect," I tell her. "She loves pizza almost as much as she loves playing games."

"It's settled then," Rebecca says, satisfaction in her tone. "Our first official outing as... whatever we are."

"Whatever we are," I echo, liking the openness of the phrase, the room it leaves for growth.

We pull up in front of her apartment building all too soon. I park but leave the engine running, aware of the time ticking away before we both need to be at our respective jobs.

"Thank you," she says, turning to face me. "For last night. For this morning. For... wanting to figure it out."

"Thank you for being worth figuring it out for," I reply, meaning every word.

She leans across the console to kiss me, a soft, sweet press of lips that carries the promise of more to come. When she pulls back, her eyes are bright with something that looks a lot like happiness.

"I'll see you at pickup today?" she asks, her hand on the door handle.

"I'll be there," I promise. "Have a good day, Ms. Brown."

She laughs at the formality, a sound I'm quickly becoming addicted to. "You too, Mr.

Lewis."

I watch her walk to her building, turning once to wave before disappearing inside.  
Sometimes the best plans are the ones you never make.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:53 am*

Two Years Later

I stretch, savoring the warmth of the covers and the distant sounds of Samuel and Mia in the kitchen—the gentle clatter of dishes, their muffled voices, an occasional burst of laughter.

I glance at the simple gold band on my left hand, still new enough that I find myself looking at it throughout the day. Four months married, and the world still feels like a gift I get to unwrap every morning.

The door creaks open, and Mia's face appears in the gap—wide brown eyes, dark pigtails slightly askew.

"Becca?" she whispers, using the nickname she created herself. "Are you awake?"

"I'm awake, sweetheart," I tell her, sitting up against the pillows. "Come on in."

She doesn't need a second invitation, scampering across the room and climbing onto the bed. She settles beside me, her small body warm against mine.

"Daddy's making pancakes," she informs me solemnly. "With blueberries. And he said to tell you that the coffee is ready whenever you are."

"That sounds perfect." I smooth a hand over her hair, fixing a crooked pigtail. "Did you help mix the batter?"

She nods proudly. "I'm the official pancake mixer. Daddy says my arm is getting



strong from all the stirring."

"I bet it is." I press a kiss to the top of her head, breathing in the scent of her strawberry shampoo. "Should we go see how those pancakes are coming along?"

"Yep!" She bounces off the bed, energy radiating from her small frame. "Oh! And don't forget to bring Berry. He needs breakfast too."

Berry—the stuffed blue elephant that sits on our dresser. He was my gift to Mia on our first Christmas as a family, and he's rarely left her side since.

"We can't forget Berry," I agree seriously, retrieving the elephant and tucking him under my arm as we head toward the kitchen.

Samuel stands at the stove, his back to us, expertly flipping a pancake with a flick of his wrist. He's wearing the faded gray T-shirt I still steal regularly and flannel pajama pants, his hair slightly mussed from sleep.

The sight of him—so domestic, so at ease in this life we've built—fills me with warmth.

"There she is," he says without turning, somehow sensing my presence. "I was about to send in the rescue squad."

"Daddy, I was the rescue squad," Mia giggles, skipping ahead of me to claim her seat at the table.

Samuel turns, and the look he gives me—part tenderness, part something more heated—still makes my heart skip after all this time. "Morning, teacher," he says.

"Morning, firefighter," I return, crossing to him for a kiss that tastes of coffee and promises. His free hand settles briefly on my still-flat stomach, a gesture that's

become habit in the weeks since we discovered our newest family member is on the way.

"How are you feeling?" he murmurs against my hair.

"Good. Hungry," I admit. "Those pancakes smell amazing."

"One stack, coming right up." He presses another kiss to my forehead before turning back to the stove.

I pour myself a cup of coffee—decaf now, another small change in our routine—and settle at the table beside Mia, who's carefully arranging Berry in the fourth chair.

"Ms. Jenkins says we're getting a class pet," Mia announces, reaching for her orange juice. "Maybe a hamster or a guinea pig. We're voting on Friday."

"That's exciting," I say. "What are you going to vote for?"

"A guinea pig. They're fluffier." She takes a deliberate sip of juice. "Remember our class hamster?"

"I do, Mr. Whiskers. The hamster who supposedly could talk."

"Oh yeah!" Mia giggles. "Tyler made that up."

Samuel joins us, setting a plate of golden pancakes in the center of the table. "Speaking of Tyler, isn't his dad coming to career day next week? The marine biologist?"

"Yep. And Lily's mom the dentist, and Jamie's dad the architect." Mia counts on her fingers. "And you're coming too, right, Daddy? For firefighter day?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Samuel promises, sliding a pancake onto her plate. "As long as no emergencies come up."

The familiar rhythm of our Sunday continues—pancakes and conversation, Mia's stories from second grade, plans for the afternoon.

This is the life I never knew I wanted until I found it—roots sunk deep in the soil of Fox Ridge, a family built on quiet love and everyday moments. I found all that and so much more in the steady gaze of a single father twelve years my senior and the tentative trust of his daughter.

After breakfast, Samuel and Mia head outside to check on the garden while I linger at the table, savoring the last of my coffee.

Through the window, I watch them—Samuel pointing out something in the tomato plants, Mia crouching to examine it closely, their dark heads bent together in shared curiosity.

The sound of the front door opening breaks my reverie, "Anyone home? Uncle Jax has arrived with donuts!"

He appears in the kitchen doorway, holding a pink bakery box and wearing his sneaky grin. In jeans and a faded t-shirt, he looks more relaxed than the uniform-clad firefighter I first met, but no less charming.

"Morning, Rebecca," he says, setting the box on the counter. "Where's the rest of the Lewis clan?"

"Garden patrol," I reply, gesturing toward the backyard. "Help yourself to coffee. They'll be back soon."

Jax pours himself a mug and leans against the counter, his easy smile in place. "So,

house hunting today? Sam mentioned you two were looking at that place closer to the lake."

"This afternoon," I confirm. "With the baby coming, we need a little more space."

"Good timing," he nods. "Housing market's finally calming down around here."

I study him as he sips his coffee, noting the slight shadows under his eyes, the brief moment when his smile slips as he glances out the window at Samuel and Mia. There's something there—a flicker of longing, perhaps, or quiet reflection—before his usual carefree expression returns.

"You know you're welcome anytime at the new place too," I tell him. "We couldn't get through a move without Uncle Jax."

His smile turns genuine. "Wouldn't miss it. Someone's gotta teach that kid of yours all the bad stuff."

Samuel and Mia burst through the back door, cheeks flushed from the cool morning air, carrying a small basket of late tomatoes and herbs. Mia launches herself at Jax, and soon the kitchen is filled with laughter.

In the happy chaos, Samuel makes his way to my side, slipping an arm around my waist and pressing a kiss to my temple.

"Happy?" he murmurs, his voice for me alone.

I lean into him, watching Mia demonstrate her cartwheel technique for Jax. "Completely," I answer truthfully. "You?"

His hand finds mine, thumb brushing over my wedding band. "More than I ever thought possible."

Outside, autumn leaves dance on a gentle breeze, red and gold against the clear blue sky. Inside, the walls of this house hold our laughter, our memories, the thousand small moments that have brought us here.

Not just a house, but a home. Not just people who love each other, but a family.

Thank you for reading!