

Memories of Mist

An Urban Farm Fresh Romance 3

Chapter 1

No way. “A new teacher?” Adriana Diaz stared at her friend. “What happened to Mrs. Lopez?” She’d been looking forward to this meeting with her daughter’s second grade teacher, a woman she’d come to respect in the past three years.

“Her husband got a surprise promotion and transfer to Boston. She notified the school two weeks ago.”

Adriana sighed. How had the grapevine missed her? “So what did we get with such short notice?”

Heather Sund grinned. “A hunk.” She elbowed Adriana. “Too bad I’m married.”

Adriana sighed. The sting of losing Stephan had lessened over the years. That didn’t mean she was on a manhunt the way Heather assumed. Raising two kids alone took all the time, energy, and finances she could pull together.

“Violet is going to be crushed.” Just like her mother. “Mrs. Lopez is one of the few people who *got* her.”

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Heather laughed. “Desiree was looking forward to second grade with Mrs. Lopez, too, but she met Mr. Sheridan half an hour ago and she’s already decided she’s going to marry him someday.”

Desiree wasn’t Violet. Violet was a challenge, to put it lightly. Adriana dreaded her daughter’s teenage years with foreboding as strong as she’d felt the night four years earlier when Stephan had been called out to that fire. Somehow she’d known he wasn’t coming home long before the fire chief showed up at her door, hat in hand.

The monitor of Bridgeview Elementary came into the hallway. “Ms. Diaz?”

Heather gave her a nudge. “Is Violet at the playground with Desiree?”

Adriana blinked. “Yes. Would you mind sending her in?”

“My pleasure.” She leaned closer and waggled her brows. “Call me later. I want to know what you think of our new teacher.”

Um, yeah. Like Adriana was going to walk through the door into the second grade classroom and fall in love with her daughter’s new teacher in fifteen minutes flat. “Thanks for getting Violet.” She turned and entered the space.

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A tall man with dark hair and a short beard stood to meet her, a smile on his face. “Ms. Diaz? And... Violet.” He looked behind Adriana. “I’m Mr. Sheridan.”

“Yes, I’m Adriana Diaz. My daughter will be here in a minute.” She reached out her hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Sheridan.”

Heather was right about the hunk part. The man was awfully good looking, and the smile on his face seemed as genuine as his casual shirt and black jeans, just within the dress code for Bridgeview’s teachers. To say nothing of how warm his hand felt in hers.

The hand she was still holding. Adriana pulled back. She didn’t have time to waste before her daughter entered. There was no way to know whether Violet would bounce in happily, or skulk in with a snarl.

“So you’ll be the second grade teacher this year.” *Nice opening line, Adriana. Smooth.*

He shuffled his papers. “Yes, this classroom will house both first and second, since there are so few students in this group. That part hasn’t changed.”

“It’s unusual to find a male teacher in the younger grades. Why did you choose to pursue this age group?”

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He blinked, obviously not expecting to defend his choice. “I enjoy children. In the past few years I’ve taught mostly upper elementary, it’s true, but I like the innocence of younger ones. They’re not as jaded and bored with the whole school thing yet.”

Adriana glanced over her shoulder. “You haven’t met Violet. No one has called her innocent since she was a baby.”

Mr. Sheridan’s smile held. “Each child is an individual. What is your daughter passionate about?”

Picking legs off of flies did not seem to be the appropriate response. “She loves art. And recess.”

The man chuckled. “Don’t we all love recess? Tell me about your family, Ms. Diaz.”

“My husband was a firefighter who died in the line of duty several years ago.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“I have two children. My son, Sam, is in third grade, and you’ll soon meet Violet. I work from home with two quite different jobs, that of a seamstress and a bookkeeper for several small businesses in Bridgeview.” She paused. “How about you, Mr. Sheridan? What are you passionate about?”

“I... uh, teaching.”

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“What subjects? What are your after-school hobbies?”

“I enjoy cycling and swimming. Skiing when I get a chance. Also, I’m an avid reader. And you, Ms. Diaz?”

The man kept volleying the questions back to her. She supposed it was fair. After all, she wanted him to understand Violet, and Violet was the sum of her experiences thus far, and that included her home life.

Adriana resisted a shudder. She needed to get some better experiences into her daughter, if that was the case. “I love to cook. You’ll find Bridgeview residents share an interest in local food. We have several ongoing initiatives, such as a new community garden that will be ready for next spring. We’re also in the process of creating a food forest and, as you know, the Parent Teacher Association has just raised the funds for a greenhouse and fenced garden for the school. How do you plan to take advantage of that space in your teaching?”

He opened and closed his mouth.

She finally had Mr. Sheridan at a loss for words.

“Gardening isn’t really my strong suit, and first and second graders don’t require it, thankfully. Ms. Bertoli will ably pick up the

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children’s education in this area in third grade.”

“Pardon me?” Adriana took a step closer. “You can’t be serious. Mrs. Lopez had the entire school year planned around the greenhouse and school garden. The children are looking forward to it, and so are the parents.” She narrowed her gaze. “I’m sure the school board made the expectations clear during your interview process, short as it might have been.”

“Gardening is not a core curriculum, Ms. Di—”

“It’s core in Bridgeview.”

“The state—”

“We expect our children to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic, of course. But much as those are useful, there is more to life. Much more, and a healthy approach to food is vital for everyone. That is the reason the PTA worked so hard to make this happen.”

“I don’t disagree, Ms. Diaz, but the teaching approach may vary.” The teacher’s smile looked forced. “I have a full year planned without a gardening component. I’m sure you’ll understand.”

“No, I don’t. The greenhouse is there for every classroom, and the parents of Bridgeview Elementary School expect it to be used.”

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Bet he could hardly wait until her fifteen minutes was up and he could meet the next parents. But this wasn't something Adriana was willing to concede. Not after all the fundraising and grant-writing and everything the PTA had gone through. Her daughter needed this type of curriculum now, this year.

"Hi, Mom. Is this my new teacher? What happened to Mrs. Lopez?"

Adriana turned. Her child stood in the doorway, feet planted and arms crossed as she stared over at the man.

"Mr. Sheridan, my daughter, Violet. Violet, this is Mr. Sheridan."

"How come he's a man? Where's Mrs. Lopez?"

She'd skip the first question. "Mrs. Lopez moved to Boston, so she can't be your teacher after all."

"Hi, Violet. I'm pleased to meet you. We're going to have a really good school year. Your mom says you like art—"

"I want gardening class. My mom told me there'd be outside stuff in the greenhouse."

"Next year, when you're in third grade."

Violet's chin came out and her voice rose. "That's not fair. That's Sam's grade. I want it now. Mom said."

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Myles Sheridan stared at the belligerent girl with her arms crossed in front of her. The only thought he could summon was thankfulness the child was in second grade, not first, and he'd only have to deal with her one year. *Forgive me, Lord. I know every child is important, and this one is no exception.*

But gardening? The board had mentioned the greenhouse acquisition, of course, but not a single member had balked when he stated that his class wouldn't be making use of it. No one had warned him about Ms. Diaz or her daughter.

The expression on both faces was similar. Not particularly friendly. The mother had seemed pleasant — cordial, even — when she first entered, but now her lips were drawn into a tight line and her brown eyes flashed dangerously, not diminishing her natural beauty.

He'd met a mom or two with an agenda in his previous schools. Myles generated a smile for the child. Once she was won over, her mother would back off. "What was your favorite thing about this summer, Violet?"

She shoved her long blond hair off her face. "I went to the rodeo with my grandma and grandpa. There were even kids doing mutton

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bustin'. That looked like fun, but my grandpa said I couldn't try."

"Mutton busting?" That was a new one. Myles couldn't help glancing at Ms. Diaz.

"Sheep riding, like bull riding for kids. The kid who stays aboard the longest wins."

"I see." He looked back at Violet. "I hope you'll draw me a picture of that event on the first day of school."

The child shrugged. "Maybe."

Myles glanced at the clock on the wall. The next parent and child were likely waiting in the hallway by now. "It's been nice meeting you, Violet. Ms. Diaz. School starts at 8:30 on Tuesday. I look forward to making this your best school year ever." That line seemed to have more of a ring to it when he taught sixth grade.

"Before we go, Mr. Sheridan, I'd like to hear you address some ideas for use of the greenhouse space for your class. This is something the PTA has worked hard to bring to Bridgeview Elementary, and we're not about to let one rogue teacher derail our program."

"I hardly think I'm de—"

"How would you feel if your child's second grade teacher didn't think reading was important, Mr. Sheridan? Is it okay to take a year or two off? The children can always pick it up later, right?"

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“Excuse me, Ms. Diaz. I hardly think this falls in the same category. You are talking about a garden.”

“There are adults who do not read, Mr. Sheridan. Some who cannot, and some who can’t be bothered. I’m a reader myself, and I read to Violet and her brother every day. But it is possible to function in society with very limited reading ability.”

He crossed his arms and leaned against his desk. “Your point?”

“My point is that everyone in America eats every day, whether or not they read. Yes, some are more fortunate than others as to the choices they are offered, but an early introduction to the basics of nutrition is vital in this day of childhood obesity, to say nothing of society’s obsession with technology. Learning to grow food hands-on will open as many doors to our children as reading.”

She couldn’t be serious. School gardening class as an antidote to childhood obesity? As important as reading? He met her unyielding gaze. She was absolutely serious.

“I’ll consider it.” That was the best he could offer to clear the air and make way for meeting the next family.

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“I look forward to hearing you plans for implementation soon. I’ll be speaking to the school board about this, though. They were negligent if they didn’t make sure a new hire understood the situation.”

Myles scratched his neck. He hadn’t been hauled into the principal’s office since he was a kid. Hadn’t this been what it felt like? “I did say I’ll contemplate it.”

“Great choice. I’m not letting this go, Mr. Sheridan.” She turned to her daughter. “Coming, Violet?”

The child smirked at him as she went through the doorway, her mother’s hand on her shoulder.

Myles let out a long breath. Fit a greenhouse into his carefully written plans... or face this obstinate mother-daughter pair. They were going to be the death of him.

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is expected to release in Spring 2017