

A man with a beard and brown hair, wearing a red button-down shirt, is smiling and looking off to the side. He is standing in a living room decorated for Christmas. To his left is a large, decorated Christmas tree with lights and ornaments. The room has a stone fireplace wall and wooden beams on the ceiling.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LORI
WILDE

AND PAM ANDREWS HANSON

A PERFECT
Christmas
KISS

KRINGLE, TEXAS

A PERFECT CHRISTMAS KISS

KRINGLE, TEXAS

BOOK 6

LORI WILDE
PAM ANDREWS HANSON

Edited by
KIMBERLY STRIPLING

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CHAPTER 1

“YES, that’s it. We’re almost there. Steady, sweetheart.” The hypnotic male voice rolled like a Christmas melody out into the cramped room.

Mindy Ryder shook her head, desperate to break the magnetic spell. For a moment she imagined Dr. Eric Kincaid crooning to *her* instead of her mischievous corgi, Peaches.

No wonder his waiting room was always packed. Dr. Eric charmed his patients and their owners with his soothing tones. Two years ago, he moved to Kringle, Texas, after he’d become a vet and joined Dr. Chloe Connor’s growing veterinarian practice.

It made Mindy’s day whenever she came to his office, and not just because her dog adored him.

The guy was easy on the eyes.

He was also thorough, running a hand along Peaches’ spine, checking for any additional issues.

Mindy ventured into small talk, inquiring about his weekend plans and commenting on the weather. Each attempt was met with polite, brief responses that gently steered the conversation back to Peaches.

“I noticed the new café opened just off the square,” she said, hoping to find common ground before she jumped into the real reason she was here. “Have you been there yet?”

“Haven’t had the time.” His full attention was on Peaches. “Now, about her diet...”

A twinge of disappointment tugged at Mindy. His friendly demeanor was unquestionable, but there was a carefulness to it, a cautious barrier that kept their interactions strictly professional.

She'd watched him with other clients and noticed the pattern. His smiles were warm but guarded, his conversations pleasant yet detached. It was as if experience had drawn a line in the sand, making him wary of stepping too close to anyone.

But maybe she was just projecting.

While he worked, low Christmas music played through the speakers. Mindy cocked her head and listened closely, identifying the song "Last Christmas" by Wham! Mindy tapped her toes and bobbed her head in time to the infectious tune.

Eric darted a glance her way. She felt a fluttery thrill in her chest. His smile was polite, perhaps a tad distant, but it lifted her spirits. "Christmas music fan?"

"Uh-huh. It's my favorite time of year." Feeling sheepish for having been caught jamming out, Mindy stopped swaying and jerked her gaze away from his.

On the windows overlooking the parking lot, someone had placed holiday window clings. Snowmen with pipes and blue scarves. Santa's elves toiling in their workshop. Gingerbread people with bright smiles and lollipops.

That was Kringle. Filled with relentless holiday cheer.

Which was why she *adored* living here.

Eric turned his attention back to Peaches. Mindy purposefully pressed her faux fur-lined boots against the tiled floor so she wouldn't be tempted to bebop to the next song that came over the sound system, "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas."

"I don't know, Mindy..." Eric shook his head.

The sound of her first name tripping off his lips sent a happy shiver up Mindy's spine, and she suppressed a grin.

Usually he called her Ms. Ryder. *Careful*. She didn't want to give herself away too soon.

Dr. Delicious shook his head and gave her a puzzled stare. "Peaches seems healthy to me."

"She was sneezing and wheezing." A sensible dollop of shame heated her insides. She shouldn't be using her dog as a ploy to see Dr. Kincaid.

Although Peaches *had* been sneezing and wheezing, but only after she'd run through a neighboring pasture filled with ragweed. Now that she was here, Mindy was losing her nerve. This was a dumb idea. Why had she come?

Um, she was desperate.

Oh yeah, that.

"Sorry I wasted your time." She ducked her head and her cheeks flamed.

"I'm always glad to see Peaches. She's the only corgi on my patient list and that makes her pretty special."

His demeanor was as calm and collected as always. He rubbed the corgi's thick white neck ruff. Peaches basked in his attention, forgetting the exam indignities. He sets limits with people, but not with animals.

"She loves seeing you." *And so do I.*

"Don't worry," the good doctor said, "I won't charge you extra for this visit. It's covered by your comprehensive wellness package."

Mindy hadn't been worried, but how nice of him not to charge her.

From beneath the examination room lights, he shot her another glance. He wore a sky-blue lab coat that matched his lovely winter-colored eyes, and his sandy-blond hair was sexily tousled. He put his hands in his pocket, so self-contained. His interactions were warm, his care for animals unmistakable, yet there was a line he never crossed. Which made her mission harder than ever to broach.

“You’re still giving Peaches the allergy medication I prescribed?” he asked.

“Yes, with her breakfast every morning.”

“Hmm, maybe we should change the medication since she’s having breakthrough symptoms. I’ll call something into your pharmacy.”

“Thanks.”

He clipped the leash to Peaches’ collar and set Mindy’s thirty-pound pooch on the spotless white-tiled floor.

The appointment was over.

However, her real purpose for being here had nothing to do with dog allergies. Fact was, she needed a man. Also, that man *had* to be a doctor, and she needed him sooner rather than later.

But how to say that?

This single vet was the only bachelor she knew who qualified. His receptionist, Della Rodriguez, was friendly and chatty. She’d leaked enough tidbits about her boss to make Mindy sure he was unattached and eligible. How that was, Mindy had no idea. The man’s smile was as bright as Christmas morning and his pearly white teeth made his entire face sparkle with good humor.

He was the perfect candidate to play the role of pretend boyfriend this holiday season. She just had to convince Dr. Eric of that.

Normally, she didn’t fib, especially to her father, but this time Dad had irritated her so much she’d just blurted out the lie without even thinking. A white lie for self-preservation wasn’t the worst sin in the world, right?

But she couldn’t help feeling guilty and she should have come clean right away but... Dad was bound and determined to see her happily married like her older brother and sister. Wayne Ryder still held old-fashioned values about family. Values that Mindy didn’t always share.

It was wonderful that her older siblings had doting families, but true love was a special gift and not everyone got that lucky.

Besides, she was happy being single. More than happy. She got to do whatever she wanted. Whenever she wanted. She was free as a bird.

And she liked it that way.

Yes, okay, sometimes she was lonely, but it wasn't anything a nice vacation or a girls' night out with her friends couldn't cure.

Lately, Dad had been pushier than usual. He was sure that Mindy's biological clock was a ticking time bomb, even though she was only twenty-eight. Bothersome! She loved him to pieces, but he was at loose ends since her mother, Abby, died the previous summer in a drowning accident, and he got involved in Mindy's love life because he didn't have one of his own.

When he'd insisted on introducing her to a friend's son, that's when she'd fibbed and told him she was seeing someone. Of course, he'd gotten excited and pressed for details. She'd just taken Peaches to see Dr. Eric for vaccinations on the day Dad had phoned, so she had *seen* a doctor—an animal doctor.

Telling her father that she was seeing a doctor had slipped out because she wanted to stop his badgering. And as long as her widowed, workaholic father stayed in Pittsburgh, she could keep him at bay with her spur-of-the-moment deception.

And then the unexpected happened.

Dad retired early and sold his accounting business, saying life was too short not to live it to the fullest. Then, this very morning, he phoned to say he was coming to Kringle for a visit on his way to spend Thanksgiving with Mindy's brother and his family in Santa Fe.

And he wanted to meet her doctor boyfriend this very weekend.

Oh gosh, yes, she could have just told Dad she'd broken up with the fake boyfriend, but then he would spend the entire visit playing matchmaker.

Mindy exhaled, her mind racing back to the conversation with her father. His voice echoed in her head, his enthusiasm for finding her a husband overwhelming. She knew he meant well, but the thought of another failed relationship stung.

“Desperate times,” she mumbled under her breath.

“Excuse me?” Eric lifted his handsome head.

“Nothing, nothing.” She hesitated, her gaze darting around the room before settling on Peaches.

A pang of remorse mixed with desperation washed over her. She was using her beloved corgi as a reason to see Eric. But was it only about her father? Or was it a mask for the loneliness she sometimes felt amidst Kringle's relentless holiday cheer?

“Is there anything else?” Dr. Kincaid asked.

Why had she said it? That she was seeing a doctor?

Mindy knew the answer deep down. It was an escape, a small fib to fend off her father's well-intentioned meddling, to assure him she could find a suitable mate, even though it wasn't true. Her independence was her sanctuary. Her life in Kringle, though sometimes lonely, was hers and hers alone. Protecting that was of utmost importance.

She cleared her throat and studied the vet. The man had the planet's longest, thickest eyelashes. Did he know women paid good money to achieve such lash length and volume?

Heart skipping, Mindy watched Eric clip the leash onto Peaches' collar. She needed to ask him, and she needed to do it now, but the sticky words caught in her throat.

He extended the leash toward her. “Mindy? Anything else?”

“Oh, it's silly,” she said, taking the leash. “Just a personal issue.”

“I’m afraid I’m not licensed to treat humans.” He gave a good-natured chuckle.

“Um... I didn’t mean... I... er... you know.”

“It’s not a health problem?” He arched his eyebrows, his curiosity encouraging.

“No, not at all. It’s my father...”

“I see,” he said, but the baffled expression on his face belied his words.

“Dad is coming to visit from Pittsburgh. We lost my mother eighteen months, and now he’s sold his business. I’m afraid I’m his new project.”

“I hear you. I know what that’s like. My widowed mother always has some scheme up her sleeve concerning my personal life.” Sympathy tinged his smile.

“Dad’s a fanatic for minding my business,” she said. “My older brother and sister are both married, and each has two kids apiece, but four aren’t enough grandchildren for him. He won’t give up until he—and I quote—‘sees me settled,’ as if being single isn’t a viable lifestyle option. He’s got traditional ideas about what makes for a successful life.”

“My mother’s the same way. I was engaged once, and Mom was crushed when it didn’t work out, but I just felt relieved to have dodged a big mistake. It seems Mom’s hobby is matchmaking, and I’m her pet project.” He sighed.

“Then you understand! My father wants to mastermind a courtship sweepstake with more grandkids for him as the grand prize.”

“Yeah, folks from our parents’ generation have a weird fixation on marriage. I suppose things were different in their day when women didn’t have many options beyond getting married and raising families.”

“I do suppose it’s hard when the social paradigm shifts when you’re in your sixties and everything changes. They can’t help but think their way is the best, although nothing is

the same. It's human nature, I suppose, to be nostalgic about the world you were raised in."

"My mother adored my ex-fiancée. Cassandra loved horses more than people, including me. I think Cassandra believed having a vet for a husband would come in handy with her stable of Arabians."

"You gotta admit, that would save on the vet bills." Mindy let out a laugh, then cringed. It sounded too loud in the tiny room.

Ack! Don't overdo it.

Eric leaned against the metal-topped examination table and focused on the chart of dog breeds on the wall behind her.

Was he regretting oversharing with a pet-parent?

He cleared his throat and met her eyes again, giving her a rueful smile. Now she was much more interested in his problem than hers, but Dad would be getting off the plane in three days, expecting to meet her boyfriend.

"I'm afraid I did a terrible thing," she said, twisting the leash around her fingers as Peaches positioned herself between Mindy's legs.

"I find that hard to believe." Again, the thousand-watt smile. Did he have any idea how devastating it was?

"It happened the day Peaches came in for her heartworm shot..."

"I remember. Two weeks ago, right?"

"You have an excellent memory."

"Sometimes..." He raked his gaze over her, and a tingle shot up her spine.

"Anyway, that's the day Dad called to fix me up with one of his friend's sons. The guy lives in Fort Worth and he was eager to drive to Kringle to meet me, sight unseen."

"Yikes."

“Yeah, I told Dad I was seeing a doctor, which technically wasn’t a lie, since I was seeing you to give Peaches her shots.”

Eric looked amused.

“I shouldn’t have lied. I planned to tell him it didn’t work out with me and the fantasy doctor in a few months. Then Dad called yesterday to say he retired and sold his business. He’s coming to Kringle, and he wants to meet ‘my guy.’” She spouted the whole soliloquy on one long breath.

Cringing, she hoped Dr. Eric didn’t think she was an awful person for fibbing to her dad and making an unnecessary appointment for Peaches.

“Ahh.”

Again with the “ahh.” Was he sympathetic or eager to ditch her? “Well, I’ve wasted enough of your time. Thanks for listening.”

“You’re not the first,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Others have made a frivolous pet appointment just to see me.”

She opened her mouth to deny it, but his eyes were too all-knowing, too penetrating, and she couldn’t catch her breath.

“No wonder,” he said, “when my mom, my aunt, even my receptionist have been recruiting dates for me since Cassandra and I ended our engagement last year about this time. One of Mom’s prospects even borrowed a cockatoo so she could check me out.”

“Holy cow, no kidding?” The confession made her feel better about her own subterfuge. She was embarrassed, but glad she wasn’t the only one to book an unneeded appointment. At least Peaches was a regular patient, and she was Mindy’s pet, not a borrowed stand-in.

Okay, she was scrambling for justification. Guilty as charged.

“I understand the impulse to say you’re dating someone to get your well-meaning family and friends off your back.” His compassionate smile unraveled her.

“I’m really sorry I bothered you. I feel like a dope.” Mindy was already halfway out the door, chiding herself for the ridiculous scheme, when his playful voice stopped her cold.

“Maybe he will leave sooner rather than later if he gets to meet your doctor boyfriend.”

She spun around, baffled. Eric leaned casually against the counter, a teasing smile dancing on his lips. Was this the same stoic, all-business vet she’d seen during every other visit?

“There is that. Except I don’t have a doctor boyfriend.”

His chuckle was a warm, inviting sound that coaxed her nerves to unwind. “You gotta ask for what you want.”

His eyes twinkled with an unexpected mischief. He seemed... different.

Peaches plopped down on her hindquarters and settled in.

“So, are you gonna ask me?” Eric’s grin widened.

“Huh?” To compound her general embarrassment, her voice squeaked.

“The question you came to ask.”

She waved her free hand. “Oh, it doesn’t matter.”

“Clearly it does.”

Her nerve failed her. She didn’t want to get rejected. The man was gorgeous and by his own admission he had a pack of women on his heels.

“I’ve taken up too much of your time already and this is my busy season, too. I need to get back to work. Thank you for seeing Peaches.” She clicked her tongue and headed for the door, but Peaches wouldn’t budge.

Great. Terrific. Now she was standing here red-faced and breathless. Would he think she was terrible if she nudged the

stubborn dog with her toe? Peaches was acting infatuated with the man, sniffing at Dr. Kincaid's thick-soled running shoe.

"What are you? One of Santa's elves?" he asked. "Rushing to get toys ready for Christmas?"

"Close," she said, relaxing a little because he was so friendly despite her dumb idea of asking him to pose as her boyfriend. "I'm a professional organizer. I'm booked solid from Thanksgiving to Christmas Eve."

"Really? Hmm, what exactly does a professional organizer do?" he asked.

"Unclutter closets, rearrange rumples, fight disorder at its root level. I have parties to plan, trees to decorate, gifts to buy, whatever busy people don't have time to do themselves. Hopefully, my father will be satisfied with seeing me this weekend and not linger in Kringle before my schedule is in shambles. But that's not your problem. I brought this on myself."

"And yet you were secretly hoping I would—"

"It was a dumb idea. Very dumb." Vigorously, she shook her head.

"So you won't ask me?"

"Really?"

"Give it a shot."

"Okay, here goes. Will you be my pretend boyfriend while my dad is in town?"

"What's in it for me?" His grin turned mischievous and there was an unexpected lightheartedness to him.

Her mind jumped immediately to sex and a hot tingle zinged through her body. "Um, um..."

"That came out wrong, didn't it?" His laugh wobbled. "What I meant was, we need volunteers for our charity gala that raises money for the Kringle Kritters Animal Rescue."

"Quid pro quo? You'll pretend to be my boyfriend if I pitch in with the charity?"

“You’re much more than just a pretty face and bubbly personality.”

He thought she was pretty and bubbly? Mindy’s giddy heart galloped. “When is the event?”

“The second Saturday in December.”

“What time?”

“Seven to ten p.m.”

Crinkling her nose, Mindy pulled out her phone to check her schedule. She had errands that afternoon, but she could still make the event. “You’re on.”

“Deal?”

“Deal!”

“Should we shake on it?” He extended his hand.

Oh yes, please.

When her palm touched his, every nerve ending in her arm sent urgent messages to her brain. *This one, this one, this one.*

That was nonsense, wasn’t it? He just wanted someone to help him with a gala.

But a handshake sealed the deal. In that moment, something shifted. It was as if Eric, with that one mischievous grin, had stepped just a smidge outside the professional walls he’d always kept so firmly in place.

“So, when is your dad getting into town?”

“Friday. I’m picking him up at the airport. He hates flying, so he’ll be tired, and we’ll be guaranteed a short night. The date shouldn’t exceed three hours.”

“How about I show up at your house at seven on Friday evening?”

“Would you? Really?” She was so grateful she wanted to hug him. “Do you need my address?”

“I have it.” He tapped Peaches’ chart.

“Oh yes, right, of course you do.”

“See you on Friday.”

“Thank you.”

“You better wait to see how this goes before you thank me.” He turned his stunning grin on her.

Mindy was so breathless she couldn't think. She herded Peaches to the lobby, unable to believe her good fortune.

Imagine that! The buttoned-up Dr. Eric Kincaid was as kind to people as he was to animals.

CHAPTER 2

ERIC PLACED his lab coat in the hamper for the laundry pickup and switched off the exam room lights.

His office was neat and orderly, a stark contrast to the chaotic warmth of the kennels. His past relationship had taught him the importance of keeping his personal and professional spaces separate, a lesson he took to heart.

He glanced at his phone, noticing a casual business acquaintance had texted, inviting him to a lively social gathering that evening.

With a shake of his head, he texted back, thanking them for the invitation but saying he had other plans, and stuck his phone in his pocket, opting instead for a quiet night alone at home.

He had learned the hard way that boundaries were necessary, and he wasn't ready to blur those lines again. Cassandra had been a client first. And look how that had ended.

But today, he'd violated his own rule, agreeing to be Mindy Ryder's pretend boyfriend. Eric winced. Oh well, it was only one date with a mighty cute woman. Nothing to complain about.

Della went home an hour ago. She was the best receptionist and bookkeeper in town, albeit a little gossipy. He needed to be careful she didn't find out about his arrangement with Mindy. He didn't want it blabbed around town.

His partner in the clinic, Dr. Chloe Connor, had also left for the evening. Now that he'd joined the practice, Chloe was able to stop working long hours, and she was eager to get home to her husband Evan and their baby daughter, Emma.

Eric was a night owl by nature, so he enjoyed coming in later and staying to close up. There were no patients in the hospital wing tonight, so he anticipated a night of uninterrupted sleep.

For a moment, he lingered in the reception area. He liked this room. The sand-colored walls were hung with oil portraits of dogs that he'd painted himself and a few prints of cats, birds, and rodents to compensate for his canine bias. Several Formica tables with black metal legs held the usual assortment of magazines and brochures on pet care. At the front door, for his cowboy clientele, he'd installed an antique boot scraper shaped like a dachshund.

By the time he finished his evening run, the cleaning service would be at work, making sure his clinic looked and smelled fresh in the morning. With his practice thriving, he no longer had to do the chore of sweeping and scrubbing the marbleized floor tiles himself.

After vet school, his mother had helped him financially by co-signing loans and using her furniture store as collateral. It had been a sound investment, and last year, she'd sold the store and moved to Kringle to be near him.

He was an only child, so he understood why she didn't want to stay in Iowa after she retired. Now, if only Mom would stop trying to fix him up, he could breathe easier. His mother needed a boyfriend of her own. She'd been widowed for over ten years and rarely dated. She'd loved Cassandra to pieces and kept trying to get him to reconsider their breakup, even though they'd been split over a year.

After Cassandra broke off their engagement, he'd been hurt, but he'd never felt dumped. He'd seen the split coming, and honestly, it was for the best. He was happy with his single life. Very happy.

Then, for some bizarre reason, he thought of Mindy Ryder.

He'd really stepped into it today by agreeing to help Mindy, but he couldn't regret his stumble. He sympathized with her situation, considering his own mother's matchmaking attempts. This holiday arrangement benefited him as much as it did her.

Besides, Mindy was friendly and cute. Her personality sparkled, and it made his day whenever she brought Peaches in to see him, but mixing his professional and personal life was still a bad idea, even if he was just doing her a favor.

He smiled, remembering how adorably flustered Mindy got when asking him to be her pretend boyfriend. Far different from Cassandra's bold, sophisticated style. Not that he should compare them. Whatever he and Cass once shared had long faded.

With Mindy, though... the attraction was powerful. Try as he might to resist her bubbly spirit and caring heart, she stirred something inside him.

Not to mention those striking hazel eyes and her impish sense of humor.

Eric shook his head, laughing at himself. Here he was daydreaming about a client. Pitiful. He really needed to get out more.

After this weekend, he'd banish inconvenient thoughts of Mindy from his system. Their pretend date would go smoothly, and her dad would leave town and life would go back to normal.

Unless his mother got wind of this, but he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.



On Saturday afternoon, Mindy paced the concrete floor of the baggage claim area at DFW airport, awaiting her dad's arrival. The roar of taxiing planes set her teeth on edge. She inhaled the mingled scents of jet fuel and Cinnabon from inside the terminal and took a few calming breaths.

Stay focused. She could handle Dad.

She scanned the monitors and saw his flight number pop up. Soon, a fresh batch of departing passengers exited the revolving doors and headed for the baggage carousel. Going on tiptoe, she searched the crowd and spied her father's familiar tweed cap and beloved Pittsburgh Steelers windbreaker.

His gaze found hers and he came barreling through the crowd, his face alight. "Mindy!"

"Dad!"

He scooped her into a big hug and squeezed her tight. His five o'clock shadow scraped her skin as he kissed her cheek. "There's my baby girl!"

Mindy stepped from his embrace and smiled, savoring the warmth of her parent's greeting. She missed him more than she'd realized. "How was your flight?"

"Fantastic." His eyes shone bright, and his smile encompassed his entire face. She expected him to be tired from a morning of flying, but he seemed invigorated.

"Let's grab your bags." She guided him over to the carousel.

"Where's your fella?" He rubbed his palms together.

"He's working, Dad."

"When can I meet him?"

"He'll be at my house at seven. You seem unusually happy today."

"Because I'm seeing my daughter."

"No, it's more than that."

"Okay, you got me. I had the *best* seatmate on the plane."

"Oh, that's always nice."

"She's my age and lost her spouse too, but a long time ago. She's got a son near your age and he's single—"

Mindy put up a palm, feeling gleeful she could stop him. “Whoa, Dad. I’m dating someone, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah. Just in case things fall through with...” Dad paused. “What did you say his name was?”

She hadn’t given a name. “Eric.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting him.” Dad hauled in a deep breath as they waited for his suitcase to pop up on the carousel. “Little Bit,” he said, using the family’s nickname for her. “Don’t be mad but—”

“What’d you do?”

“I got that woman’s phone number, and I might see her while I’m here. You two would get along famously.”

Mindy stifled a groan. “Aren’t you moving a little fast, Dad?”

“We had a long conversation and discovered many common interests, what’s the problem?”

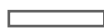
“And you asked for her number...”

“Hey, I don’t often meet interesting women my own age with whom I click. What’s wrong with wanting to keep in contact?”

“You won’t be in town for long, so what’s the point? Long-distance relationships don’t usually last.”

What was wrong with her? It was time Dad crawled out from under the grief of losing her mother. It was silly of her to begrudge him exploring a romantic spark. If he wasn’t trying to matchmake her, more power to him.

“Who knows?” Dad winked and grabbed his luggage. “Maybe I’ll move to Kringle.”



Eric was getting ready for dinner with Mindy and her father when his doorbell chimed. His heart hopped. Was it Mindy at his door? But why would she be here?

“Settle down,” he muttered.

Ever since Mindy’s last visit to the clinic, he was constantly distracted by thoughts of her, and that wasn’t good for business.

Closing the buttons on his shirt cuffs, he walked to the foyer and peeked through the peephole. His mother stood on the front porch, bearing a Christmas-themed pastry box from the Kringle bakery.

What was Mom doing here?

Eric opened the door. “Hey, when did you get home? I thought you weren’t flying back from your New York City excursion until tomorrow.”

“The lead actor in the play got sick. Since me and my friends had planned to attend the production just to catch that Hollywood actor’s Broadway debut, we skipped it, and I caught an earlier flight home.”

“I’m sorry you were disappointed.”

“Oh, I’m not.” Mom’s eyes twinkled.

“No? Why not?”

“Kismet.” She crossed the threshold and led the way into Eric’s kitchen.

“Huh?” He trailed after her.

She set down the bakery box and flipped open the lid to reveal it was piled high with cookies—chocolate chip, snickerdoodle, peanut butter, oatmeal raisin, and more.

“Mom, I can’t eat all these cookies.”

“It’s for the office, silly. Although do save some for yourself. They’re delicious.”

“Why the big cookie splurge?” Eric asked, unable to resist reaching for a cowboy cookie, which was an oatmeal cookie loaded with chocolate chips, coconut, and toasted pecans as well as raisins.

“Tomorrow is the annual pet photoshoot at the clinic.” His mother cocked her head. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten.”

“No, no. I didn’t forget.” He *had* forgotten for a moment, his mind engrossed with thoughts of Mindy. “But why bring cookies to the photoshoot?”

“Just a nice offering for your clients and everyone putting on the event.”

“Hmm, what’s really going on? Why are you buttering me up?”

A high pink sheen colored his mother’s cheeks.

“Mom? What did you do?”

“Nothing, nothing at all,” his mother said. “Well, not yet anyway.”

“What’s up?” He bit into the cookie. The yumminess distracted him for a minute.

“I’ve met someone.”

“In New York?” Eric said, unsure of how he felt. He did hope his mother would meet someone, but she’d been single for so long, he’d gotten used to it just being the two of them.

“No, on the plane home.” Her smile broadened. “He’s so delightful!”

“That’s wonderful, Mom. I know how much you love meeting new people when you travel.”

“Oh, but this man is special,” she said in a loud conspiratorial whisper and topped it off with an exaggerated wink. “We ended up seated together and struck up the most invigorating conversation. We chatted the entire flight after he boarded the plane during my layover in Pittsburgh.”

Eric shot a glance at the clock on the stove. He needed to get a move on, or he’d be late for dinner with Mindy and her dad, but he didn’t want to tell his mother about it. She’d leap to all the wrong conclusions.

“It was as if we’d known each other our whole lives,” his mother went on. “First, we discussed our respective families

and backgrounds. Oh, did I mention he's a recent retiree just like me? Yes, indeed, just sold his business after forty years. Anyway, we also discussed our hobbies—he's an avid golfer like your dad was and we discussed our favorite books and films and even our most embarrassing moments and hilarious vacation mishaps. Oh, and we also bonded over jigsaw puzzles, probiotic supplements, and the ideal way to grow heirloom tomatoes."

Eric was only half listening. How to get his mother to leave? He didn't want to tell her he had a date. She'd blow it out of proportion. He nodded and made affirmative noises through his mouthful of melting chocolate chips.

Eying the humongous bakery box, he selected a snickerdoodle, wondering if inhaling enough of these chewy cookies could somehow speed this meandering conversation along. But clearly, his mom was just getting warmed up.

"I told him all about my only son, the talented and successful veterinarian who built an impressive practice here in Kringle right after graduating vet school. He was so thoroughly impressed by your success and at such a youthful age."

"Mmm, that's nice."

"I might have also mentioned, just in passing, how you're still single and what an incredible catch you are. But naturally, I didn't belabor that angle. I kept it subtle."

"Knowing you, I'm sure you handled that with the utmost tact and diplomacy, Mom." Okay, he was being a little sarcastic, but his mother didn't seem to notice.

"Wait, I'm getting ahead of myself." She paused for dramatic effect, clasping her hands together. "His daughter lives right here in Kringle, and she's single too! He even showed me a picture of her, and she's an absolute doll. A lovely young woman. I just know in my heart you two would hit it off splendidly. I have the absolute best feeling about this man. It feels like destiny."

“Interesting,” Eric mumbled, brushing stray crumbs from his shirt. “But you know I’m focused on expanding my practice right now. Romance takes a back seat.”

“*Pfft.* You work too hard! You’re not getting any younger, you know. You deserve to find love too, sweetheart.” She leaned in, eyes sparkling. “Maybe you and I could double date with him and his daughter while he’s in Kringle.”

Just kill me now.

“That sounds nice, but I’ve got a date…” he said, deciding to use Mindy as an excuse not to double date with his mother and her airplane seatmate and his daughter.

“You do! Oh, that’s wonderful. Tell me all about her.”

“I don’t have time. I’m picking her up at seven.”

“Oh goodness, it’s six thirty already. What are you doing here gabbing with me. Shoo, shoo, go finish getting ready.” Mom waved him toward the bedroom. “Put on that aftershave Cassandra bought you. It smells like Christmas.”

He thought of the pine-scented cologne Cassandra bought him just before they broke up and shook his head. “I threw it out.”

“Why?” she asked, following him to his bedroom.

“To eliminate reminders of her.”

“But your breakup was amiable.”

As amiable as any breakup could be. “I needed a clean slate.”

“So who’s this girl? What’s she like?” His mother went to his closet and rifled through the ties on his tie rack.

“Mom, it’s our first date. Let’s not overreact, okay?”

“I’m just happy you’re dating again. This is the first person you’ve gone out with since Cassandra.”

He leaned into the closet and plucked the blue tie from her hand.

“No, no. That one is too plain. If this is your first date, you want to razzle dazzle. Tell me about her.”

“She’s whimsical,” he said, not really knowing where he got that word from.

“Then definitely this tie.” Mom took the blue tie away from him and handed him a yellow tie patterned with Scotty dogs that Della had gotten him as a Secret Santa gift last year. “She’ll appreciate it.”

Mom was right. Mindy did like bright colors and she loved dogs. Eric grinned just thinking about her.

“Don’t keep her waiting. Go, go.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“When you get home, text me how it went.”

“If it’s after ten, I won’t text.”

“I don’t mind if you wake me.”

“Mom, I’m not seventeen.”

“You’re right. But you do look so handsome.” She pressed her palms together. “What a wonderful day. I meet someone on the plane, and you have a date. The Kincaids are back in the dating saddle. And just in time for Christmas!”

CHAPTER 3

“DON’T STARE at me that way! I know it’s a lousy idea, but it’s much too late to call **it** off,” Mindy said to Peaches.

The corgi cocked her head and studied Mindy as she changed earrings for the third time. Mindy stared into the mirror at the little silver-and-turquoise donkeys dangling from her lobes.

“See, told you these are better. It’s not easy dressing for a date with a guy who’s just doing me a favor while still making it look like it’s an actual date, for Dad’s sake.”

Peaches yawned at her long-winded defense and stretched her short white legs as far as she could on the quilt made from salvaged remnants of blue jeans—a handmade gift last Christmas from Mindy’s older sister, Carly.

She’d picked Dad up from the airport three hours ago and he was now napping in her guest bedroom. In preparation of his visit, all the paraphernalia of her business, normally stored in the spare bedroom, was now stacked in her own room.

To get to the closet, she had to maneuver an obstacle course around her organizational supplies. Thank heavens her clients couldn’t see this mess. Her personal space looked like a recycling center.

She picked her way to the full-length mirror hanging on her bathroom door. Hopefully, she hit a happy medium with her attire. Her silky scoop-necked turquoise dress flared at mid-calf and had tiny cap sleeves. She’d added a delicate

silver belt and silvery-gray spike heels. Despite being overdressed, the donkey earrings said she was only kidding.

“Darn, I should have gotten a trim.” She ran a hand through her overgrown hair. At least she liked her hair—dark sable, cropped short, but the fashionable spikes seemed limp despite the salon special wax. Did the turquoise enhance or clash with the green glints in her hazel eyes? Was she silly, fussing over what she wore on a pretend date?

Peaches, who’d grown bored with Mindy’s anxiety, closed her eyes.

“Yeah, pretend to sleep, you lazy furball. I know those big ears of yours are picking up every word I say. You’re sulking because *you* don’t have a date with Dr. Eric.”

The door chimes startled her, which was ludicrous, since she’d spent the past hour expecting Eric’s arrival. He was here and exactly at seven. Punctual. A quality the professional organizer in her appreciated.

Peaches bounded off the bed with more agility than her short legs implied and stood impatiently, nose to the door, waiting for Mindy to open it.

“Now don’t slobber, shed, or jump on Dr. Eric. He gets plenty of that throughout the day.”

Peaches morphed into a streak of brindled tan and white, racing to greet their guest. Mindy grabbed the dog’s collar with one hand and opened the front door with the other.

“Hey there,” she said, feeling dizzy as she looked into his eyes.

“Hi. I knew I was in the right place when Peaches barked. You look gorgeous, by the way.”

Her cheeks flushed, and she had to remind herself he didn’t mean it. He was just playing a role. “I’m glad you found my house okay, Dr. Kincaid.”

It was a wonder anyone ever found her cottage in the fresh development of similar bungalows on the outskirts of Kringle. The small subdivision was surrounded by ranch land and

rolling hills, giving a pastoral feel to the setting. Which she loved, but if it weren't for the black wrought-iron street numbers on the ruddy-orange front doors, she might get confused herself.

“No problem.” He dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Shouldn't you call me Eric?”

“Oh, right, thanks.” She glanced over her shoulder. No sign of her dad yet. Had he heard the doorbell? “Please, come inside.”

“Healthy-looking plants.” He gestured at the enormous earthenware pots flanking her flagstone walkway.

“Thanks. I adore growing things.”

“Lucky you. I have a black thumb.”

“Probably not,” she said. “You're just too busy nurturing animals.”

His eyes caught hers and he looked amused, sending a giddy thrill through her body. “Maybe.”

Whoa. Slow down. This wasn't an actual date. She needed to remember that.

He stepped inside and followed her into the living room. The big picture window faced west and gave her a splendid view of sunsets, but it meant the bedrooms at the rear caught the early-morning sun and woke her at dawn. She opted for a simple decor, as much from lack of funds as design sense. Getting her own business started took up most of her free cash as she reinvested into the company.

The windows had pale-green slat blinds, but no curtains. The terra-cotta tiled floor was bare throughout the front of the house. Her only new purchase for the house was a round, braided rug. The bright greens and yellows made her gray couch and recliner seem less drab in their new setting. The thrift-shop tables she'd repainted mustard yellow and jade green were kitschy but cheerful. She was still searching for art for the walls, her hunt hindered by time and lack of funds.

In the meantime, she'd gone all out, already decorating for the Christmas holidays even though it was still November. She'd filled the room with holiday cheer. Decorating the ceiling with twinkling lights, evergreen garlands, red ribbons, and silver bells.

In the corner of the room was a lavish Christmas tree, overflowing with ornaments in every color imaginable. Shiny glass balls hung from the branches like tiny stars, along with glittering icicles that sparkled in the light. On the floor around the tree were piles of wrapped presents, each one topped with a bright-red bow.

"Wow," Eric said. "You're ready for Santa."

"I decorated last weekend," she said. "I enjoy getting a jump on the holiday season. I love Christmas and want to keep the decorations up as long as possible."

"I can tell."

He stood beside the couch, which she'd neglected to vacuum free of doggie hair. *Yikes*. Fortunately, Peaches' hair wouldn't show much on his pale-yellow long-sleeved dress shirt or tan chinos if he decided to sit down. He wore a tie, bright green with tiny Scottie dogs silhouetted in black.

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asked, wondering where the heck her father was. Dad had been so eager to meet her "boyfriend." Why wasn't he ready? "I have cola, light beer, mineral water, and a bottle of champagne Dad brought to celebrate me having a beau."

"Ouch, he is serious about seeing you married off. I can see why you need help."

"That's why you're my knight in shining armor." She winked. "Thanks again for the rescue."

"I don't mind." His smile crinkled the corner of his eyes. "It'll be fun."

"You say that now..." Mindy shook her head and gave a rueful chuckle.

"Where *is* your father?" Eric asked.

“Napping.”

“I’m wide awake and eager to meet your fella.” Dad appeared in the kitchen.

Mindy turned toward him. Her father had gotten into the Texas spirit and put on starched jeans, a western shirt, and cowboy boots. She’d never seen him dressed like a cowboy. He even sported a bolo tie, but it didn’t really matter. Her father looked like the accountant he was.

Neither tall nor short, Dad was lean with the studious air that made his clients feel safe, giving him their taxes to handle. His face was long, narrow, and clean-shaven. Lines near his mouth and thinning hair were the only signs of his age, but a side part and good haircut made it appear as if he had a full head of hair.

Dad thrust his hand at Eric. “Nice to meet you. I’m Wayne Ryder.”

“Eric Kincaid, sir.” He offered his hand to her dad with a deference that made her want to hug him.

They shook hands and eyed each other.

Silence fell.

Well, that was awkward. Mindy cleared her throat but couldn’t think of anything witty to say.

“Mindy girl, let’s break open that bottle of bubbly before we head to the restaurant and let’s have a small toast,” her father said.

“I have to pass on that, sir... er... Mr. Ryder,” Eric said.

“You’re a teetotaler?” Dad raised his eyebrows.

“I occasionally enjoy a beer, but I’m not a regular drinker. I am on call.”

“Oh well, that’s a disappointment, but I understand. Please, I’m Wayne. No need for formality.”

“Most likely I won’t get called in,” Eric said. “But I have to be ready.”

“We’ll take two cars in case you get a call. I’ll drive Mindy’s van and follow you two to the restaurant.”

Her father got in her secondhand van with a *Ryder Reorganizing Inc.* wrap while Mindy locked up the house. When she finished, Eric walked her to the curb where he’d parked.

“Um, would you do me a tremendous favor?” she asked before they got into his extended cab pickup truck.

He quirked a lopsided grin. “Another one?”

“It’s...” She waved. “Your tie.”

“My tie?” He looked down at the black Scotties cavorting on the bright-yellow silk. “Not dressy enough for where we’re going?”

“Oh, no, it’s perfect. I love it. I just have this compulsion. Well, maybe compulsion is too strong. But would you mind terribly if I fixed it?”

“Fixed it?” His hand shot up and tested the firm knot at his throat.

“Your long end is distracting.”

“My long end? You’ve lost me.”

“The skinny end is hanging lower a tad than the top. I don’t want to be picky. But it would look so much nicer if...”

He lifted the two ends of the tie and frowned.

“Here, let me,” she said, wishing she’d never mentioned it.

Her fingers were nimble, at least that’s what her mother used to say so. She loosened the knot and pulled gently until the full part of the tie hung the right way, and then she tightened the knot and patted his collar.

What made her try to reorganize Eric? Fussing with his tie was so intimate, so intrusive, so dumb, but she did like being close to him and she’d never noticed before the sexy shape of his lips.

Now she couldn’t stop noticing them.

“It’s an adorable tie. I’ve never seen one like it,” she said.

Of course, she never bought men’s ties unless a client sent her shopping. Her brother, Dwight, much preferred a book or a gift certificate, and her brother-in-law Chaz was a sports nut, so she bought him sports team branded items. And her father’s tastes were so conservative, he only wore black ties.

“Thanks. It was a gift from—” He bit off the sentence. “Never mind that.”

Ahh, it must have been from the ex-fiancée.

“I like off-beat ties,” Eric said. “I know ties are out of fashion these days, but I enjoy wearing them whenever I get the chance.”

“Well, it’s super cute,” she said. “And a tie strikes the right note with my dad, so kudos. You’re a terrific fake boyfriend.”

“I try.” He grinned and escorted her to the passenger side of his cherry-red pickup truck and opened the door for her.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Of course I do.” He winked. “Your dad is watching.”

Feeling self-conscious about having futzed with his tie, Mindy slid into the passenger seat, acutely aware of Eric’s hand on her lower back as he helped her inside. The interior smelled lightly of leather and his cologne. A clean, woody scent that made her pulse jump.

Eric closed her door and walked around to the driver’s side.

She smoothed her dress, more of a nervous gesture to ease her anxiety than to straighten wrinkles. What was she doing going on a pretend date with the handsome vet? This entire scheme was ridiculous and yet, her pulse quickened with possibility.

Eric climbed in beside her and started the truck. “So where to?”

“Cowboy Pete’s.” It wasn’t fancy, but the restaurant did have the best food in Kringle. And it would do for their

purposes.

“Great choice,” Eric said, glancing over at her as he pulled out onto the street.

Dad followed in her van.

Mindy shot him a sidelong glance, struck again by how handsome he was, with those earnest blue eyes and that endearingly crooked smile. She hadn't dated in months.

Stop it. This wasn't real.

An awkward silence lapsed. Mindy fiddled with the strap of her purse, unsure what else to say. Out the window, the rolling Texas hills stretched out, dark in the dusky evening.

Finally, Eric cleared his throat. “You know, we should probably get our story straight before we get to the restaurant.”

“Our story?”

“Provide more details about our relationship to convince your dad.”

“Oh, right,” Mindy gave an anxious laugh. Her deception was getting more complicated by the minute. What if her dad saw right through their fake dating charade?

Eric seemed perfectly at ease, but of course, he had nothing at stake. If her dad found out about the fraud, no big deal for him. “So let's say we met... when? Four months ago?”

“Sure, four months works.”

“How about we say we met at the dog park? Peaches could have come running up to me and we started chatting.”

Despite her nerves, Mindy smiled. “That sounds believable. Peaches is so friendly.”

“Yeah, and I was completely smitten with you right away,” Eric continued.

“Smitten, huh?” Mindy raised an eyebrow.

“Totally.” Eric grinned over at her. “I asked for your number right then and there.”

“Very smooth.”

“I try.” Eric winked.

“Wait, do you have a dog?”

“Not anymore.” He mused. “I see your point. I could say I was walking one of the dogs from the Kringle Kritters Animal Rescue. I do that occasionally to help.”

“Okay. That works. Let’s craft some fake dates.”

Laughing together, they invented romantic dates and inside jokes. By the time they pulled into the steakhouse parking lot, Mindy’s nerves had settled. Maybe this would be easy after all.

At Cowboy Pete’s, Eric helped her out of the truck and handed his keys to the valet. Mindy’s dad joined them at the hostess stand just as the hostess announced that it would be fifteen minutes before their table was ready, despite their reservation. Cowboy Pete’s was popular.

“You can wait in the lounge if you’d like.” The hostess offered with a flourish.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” Mindy apologized. “Friday nights are hopping in Kringle.”

Her father rubbed his palms together. “No worries. More time with Eric.” Dad led them into the bar. “The evening’s on me by the way, I insist.”

They settled on a low semicircular couch in the corner with a small table in front. A server appeared and took their orders. A beer for Dad, iced tea for her, and a club soda with lime for Eric.

“Tell me, Erie, are you a Kringle native?” her dad asked.

“No, I’m an Iowa boy originally.”

“Cornfed farm boy, huh?”

Mindy cringed. Sometimes Dad could come on a little strong when trying too hard to connect.

“Something like that,” Eric said, unbothered. “I came to Texas to go to vet school and stayed to set up my practice in Kringle.”

“Why Kringle and not Fort Worth or Dallas?”

“Because rural communities need competent vets and in the city, my practice would comprise of mostly cats and dogs. I like having a variety of animals to treat. It keeps me on my toes. Plus, I like the laid-back quiet of small-town life.”

Her father nodded, impressed by Eric’s answer.

Mindy shifted on the low couch, trying to maintain an appropriate distance from Eric while still looking cozy with him. She rested her palm on his knee, hoping the casual intimacy would seem natural.

Eric slid an arm around her shoulders, pulling her fractionally closer. His hand felt pleasantly warm through the fabric of her dress. She tried to focus on her dad instead of Eric’s nearness.

“So, Eric, what are your intentions toward my daughter?” Her dad fixed Eric with an intense stare as he took a long draw from his beer.

Eric nearly choked on his club soda. “Intentions?”

“Come now. You must have some plans if you’ve been dating this long.”

“Dad!” Mindy cut in, cheeks flaming. “Don’t interrogate him.”

Her dad held up his hands in mock surrender but kept his gaze locked on Eric, awaiting an answer.

Eric cleared his throat. “Mindy and I are still in the early stages of our relationship.”

Mindy gave a thin smile. Her father looked dissatisfied. She racked her brain for a topic to change the subject but came up empty.

Luckily, their server arrived to show them to their table. Mindy breathed a sigh of relief as they moved to the dining

room. Disaster averted, for now at least. She shot Eric an apologetic glance.

In the cavernous dining room, the old west décor really came alive. Long wooden tables for ten were covered with blue-and-white-checked gingham tablecloths. Customers sat on benches with thick log legs and no backs. It reminded Mindy of a family reunion with someone else's relatives.

“How about it, honey,” Eric said, resting his hand on her elbow. “I’ve heard their mesquite grilled steaks are the best. They have a porterhouse for two if you’re up for sharing.”

Honey. It sounded nice.

He massaged the back of her neck with his fingers, a deliciously intimate gesture that made her father look at Eric with a disapproving scowl and made Mindy feel all melty.

Eric was trying to help, but she didn't think Dad appreciated public displays of affection. Slowly, she scooted a few inches away from her fake date.

Overhead, the wooden ceiling looked smoky dark in contrast to the white plaster wall beneath it. A country band performed on a small stage, singing about a troubled man's inability to love only one woman. At least the music kept conversation to a minimum. They gave their orders to a blue jean-clad server in a flannel shirt. Finally, their appetizers arrived, and the band took a break.

Their salads arrived topped by the house dressing, in bowls large enough to mix up a cake. Her father sliced bread from a loaf of homemade sourdough and buttered the slices for everyone at the table. The porterhouse for two arrived smothered in mushrooms, onions, and a peppery sauce, cooked to a perfect medium and served with a baked potato on steroids. Her father had pork ribs and cowboy beans delivered in a brown ceramic pot large enough to plant a tree in it.

“You don't know how happy I am to meet you, Eric,” he said. “Mindy's track record with men isn't great. She's a bum magnet.”

Mindy winced.

“Do you always put her down like this?” Eric asked, meeting her father’s gaze head-on, all levity leaving his face.

Dad looked startled. “Huh? I... um... that’s not what I’m doing.”

“Isn’t it?” Eric raised his eyebrows.

Mindy’s heart stuttered, proud of Eric for standing up for her, but also a little worried how her father would take this confrontation.

Dad shot her a look. “You don’t see things that way, right, Min?”

“Well,” Mindy said. “It doesn’t feel good for my father to belittle the men I’ve dated.”

Her father’s face flushed, and he set down his fork, brows furrowed. “I never meant to belittle you. I just want what’s best for you. Some of those guys... well... I don’t think they had your best interests at heart.” He shot an irritated look at Eric. “And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t put words in my daughter’s mouth.”

Eric’s voice was calm but unwavering. “My apologies, sir. I may have spoken out of turn.”

Mindy cleared her throat, happy that she’d told her father how she felt, and it was all thanks to Eric. “Dad, I know you mean well, but I’m an adult now. I don’t need you vetting my relationships.”

Her father nodded and gave a snort. “You’re right, of course. It’s just... you’ll always be my little girl and I want to protect you.”

“I understand, but I can take care of myself.”

Dad seemed taken aback by her boldness. She never called him on the carpet before. “I know you can, and I do trust your judgment.” He turned to Eric with a grudging smile. “I may have been too hard on you. I can see you care about my daughter.”

“I do, sir.” Eric nodded, and he seemed so earnest. He deserved an Academy Award. And in the category of best fake

boyfriend, the Oscar goes to... Dr. Eric Kincaid.

“Well, then.” Her dad picked up his fork again. “Let’s enjoy this fine meal.”

Mindy breathed a sigh of relief. Crisis averted, for the moment at least. Underneath the table, Eric gave her knee a supportive squeeze. She smiled at him, grateful for his help in navigating her father’s overprotectiveness.

Maybe this fake relationship wasn’t such a bad idea after all. She finally felt supported by a guy she was dating.

Except they weren’t really dating, were they?

CHAPTER 4

ON SATURDAY MORNING, following his date with Mindy, Eric walked into the clinic to the best kind of bedlam.

Animals were everywhere—in cages, on leashes, cuddled in arms. Kitties meowed. Doggies barked, and a cocky Macaw parrot named Tootsie kept cawing, “Happy holidays, homies.”

The place hummed with energy—both animal and human. Christmas music played from the sound system and the cookies Eric had brought in were a colossal hit. Thanks, Mom! Although, it was chaotic with crumbs falling on the floor and pets trying to get to the tidbits.

Della corralled the excited children, lining them up to take pictures with their pets and Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus, as their adoring parents looked on. Ava and Caleb Sutton had taken over the Kringle Kritters Animal Rescue from Ava’s parents after they retired. Ava was behind the camera as the photographer while Caleb helped to pose the animals with their owners.

Dr. Chloe Connor and her husband Evan greeted clients at the door and directed them to the waiting area. Petite Chloe wore an elf costume and Evan had on reindeer antlers, fully getting into the holiday spirit.

On the small stage, in chairs covered with poinsettia patterned velvet, sat Zach Delaney and his wife Suzannah. They played the clinic’s de facto Santa and Mrs. Claus every year. They were in costume and hamming up their parts.

The three couples were among Eric's closest friends since he'd moved to Kringle, even though he was now the odd man out since he was single. But no one ever made him feel like a seventh wheel. The three couples made an effective team and Eric felt a tinge of envy watching the seamless way they worked together for the good of the pets and the clinic.

Yeah, he was a little jealous. Once upon a time, he thought he'd have that kind of camaraderie with Cassandra.

Losing his dad when he was young and with his mom staying single, he didn't much remember having the role model of two parents working together for a common goal. On his dad's side of the family, his grandparents had been divorced and Linda had lost both of her parents before Eric was born.

That's what had been missing in his relationship with Cassandra. The feeling that they were a team and could always count on each other.

Some people might find the day's activities pandemonium, but Eric enjoyed seeing the clinic filled with pets and people. Plus, his mood was extra cheerful after last night. He was probably just glad to have survived dinner with Mindy's dad, but after he'd called out Wayne Ryder for putting down his daughter, things had completely turned around.

Wayne wasn't a bad sort, just a little clueless about and most likely a little puzzled by his youngest child not following the path he imagined for her.

During the meal, Eric caught himself hanging on Mindy's every word. He enjoyed being around her and getting her take on things as if they'd been on a proper date. He had to catch himself several times to keep from asking questions he should already have known as her boyfriend.

He'd made a mental note to circle back and ask her those questions where they were alone again. Questions like: Do you have any special talents? What are you most proud of? What's your favorite music genre?

But that time might never come. Wayne Ryder was leaving town on Monday, and he'd no longer have to pretend he and Mindy were dating. He was surprised to find that thought unappealing. Honestly, he'd had a fun last night.

"Yo, Eric, hand me that mistletoe." Evan, who'd gotten on a stepstool beside the exam room door, held out his hand.

"Huh?" Eric blinked.

Evan nodded at the wicker basket resting on the counter near Eric's elbow. Inside was a basket of mistletoe wrapped with red ribbon and a jingle bell.

Eric grabbed a strand and passed it to Evan who tacked it up on the threshold leading from the lobby into the exam room.

Just then, Chloe opened the clinic door and a familiar brindled corgi bounded into the lobby, leash trailing behind.

"Oops." Chloe met Eric's eyes. "I think your patient is eager to see you."

Eric squatted to greet the corgi. "Well, hello there, Peaches. Where's your lovely owner?"

In answer, Peaches licked his face and Eric rocked back on his heels, laughing.

"Oh, you naughty girl!" Mindy hurried in, her cheeks flushing red from the cold. She sounded a little breathless, which gave her voice a sexy quality Eric found arousing. "Sorry, she got away from me out there."

Eric rubbed the corgi's ears. "No problem. Peaches just wanted to say hi, didn't you, girl?"

Peaches licked his hand, and Eric stood to face Mindy. "Are you here for the pet pictures with Santa?"

"What?" Mindy blinked, as if suddenly aware of all the activity going on around them. "Oh, that's today, isn't it."

He looked her up and down, thrilled to see her again. He loved the way her eyes sparkled and how a dimple formed in

her right cheek when she smiled. “Yeah, that’s today. But if you didn’t come for the event—”

“Happy holiday, homies!” Tootsie squawked from her owner’s shoulder and flapped her wings.

That set off two beagles who started baying as if they’d treed a squirrel.

“Is there somewhere to speak in quiet?” she asked, glancing around at the madhouse. “Although it would make for a really cute Christmas card if I could get a photo of Peaches with Santa and Mrs. Claus.”

“Let’s talk in my office, and you can get a photo afterward. Give this a madhouse a chance to wind down.”

“Good idea.”

He crooked his finger and led her and Peaches to his office. He shut the door behind her, and blissful silence filled the room. The corgi curled up on the rug at his feet.

“I think she likes you more than me,” Mindy said.

“It’s probably because I smell like the dog food I lugged into the clinic this morning.”

“That would do it.” She chuckled.

“Have a seat.” He motioned toward a chair.

She stayed standing. “This won’t take long.”

“Okay.” He folded his arms over his chest, choosing to stay standing as well, and waited for her to continue.

She sent him her dazzling rainbows-and-unicorns smile, and his knees wobbled. His heart thumped and his stomach did a swoop and dive.

That smile was quickly becoming his Achilles’ heel.

Mindy looked bright as summer sunshine in a fluffy yellow sweater, a black-and-white plaid skirt, and black leggings, with the cutest yellow cowgirl boots. The bonkers way his pulse pounded blood through his veins jolted him.

Holy cheese curds, what was happening to this Iowa farm boy?

The room felt impossibly hot. Eric shrugged from his lab jacket, hung it on the rack by the door, and palmed sweat from his brow. Mindy watched his every move.

“Eric?”

“Huh?”

“You okay?”

“Fine, great.” He dabbed at corresponding sweat on his upper lip.

“You seem...”

“Yeah?”

“Thrown.”

He waved a hand. “It’s just that rambunctious crowd out there.”

“It is a little wild.” That smile again. Rich and sweet. “Maybe we should open the window? Let in some fresh air?” She bounced over to the window, went up on tiptoe, and pried it open before he could protest.

The cool November morning filled the room along with the sounds of cars passing on the road outside and Christmas music from the town square, currently “All I Want for Christmas is You.” Mindy was the joyful sort, full of verve and grace, but right now, her zeal seemed just a little too exaggerated as she lowered herself and turned around, looking breathless and wide-eyed.

“There we go,” she said, her pitch just slightly higher than normal. “That’s better.”

Hey, could she be as nervous about being alone with him as he was with her? Gosh, what was it about her that turned him inside out? While he liked her before he’d agreed to her charade, he’d never been this thrown by being near her.

What was with the fluttery pulse, heated skin, and stomach jitters? Maybe he was coming down with the flu.

Peaches nosed the floor, sniffing out her environment. Mindy tugged on the leash. "Sit, girl."

"It's okay. Let her explore."

"I don't know if that's such a smart idea. She has a knack for getting into trouble." Snapping her fingers, Mindy pointed and reluctantly Peaches trotted over to sit beside her foot.

"She's just sassy."

"No kidding. I wanted to thank you again for dinner last night." She glanced down, twisting her scarf between her fingers. "I know it was silly, roping you into pretending to be my boyfriend because I lied to my dad."

"It wasn't silly at all," he said, feeling compassion for her. "I was happy to do it."

Mindy met his eyes, and the air seemed to crackle between them. "I enjoyed it."

"Me too."

Their gazes locked.

"Last night after you left, Dad grudgingly admitted you were all right, even if you were just an animal doctor."

"Damning with faint praise."

"Coming from Dad that's better than an Emmy, an Oscar, and the Nobel Peace Prize wrapped into one. Dad's not really as gruff as he seems. Deep down, he has a tender heart."

"I imagine that must be true, since he raised you."

Mindy blushed prettily. "Well, I just wanted you to know how much I appreciate what you did."

"My pleasure."

"That's not all." She nibbled her bottom lip and rubbed the calf of her right leg with her left foot.

"No?"

"Dad got up this morning raving about you," she said, "and talking about going sightseeing in the Fort Worth

Stockyards tomorrow—he wants to take you, me, and the lady he met on the plane yesterday.”

Eric sucked in his breath, winced, and put a palm to his nape.

“I know, I know. That’s way too much to ask of you. I tried to put him off, but he just kept on about it. Can you think of a good excuse to give him? He knows the clinic is closed on Sundays. He looked it up.”

“Tell him...” Eric paused. “Well, I can’t think of a single reason why I wouldn’t be eager to spend my day off with my girlfriend... Tell him I’m on board.”

Mindy’s mouth found a perfect circle. “Oh, don’t do that. I’m not trying to rope you into actually going. I swear I’m not.”

“You’re not roping me. I’m volunteering.” Why, he didn’t know.

“No wonder Peaches adores you.” Mindy clasped her hands together, the dog leash slipping down her left wrist. “You are so nice.”

“I’m not. My mom is giving a little dinner party tomorrow evening, and I very much want a reason not to attend. It’ll just be Mom, her friends, and me.”

“Really?” Mindy giggled.

“Mom joined the Kringle Civic League when she moved to town, and she threw herself into their activities. Every December they hold a big fundraiser to solicit donations for the Kringle Kritters Animal Rescue.”

“That’s the charity gala you want me to help with?”

“Yes.” He bobbed his head. “It’s a worthy cause. The money they raise is used to get homeless pets ready for adoption. That means spaying, neutering, grooming, shots, licenses, all the costly essentials.”

“I see.”

“Last year I got away with just volunteering my professional services. This year Mom wanted me on the committee, and her dinner party is really a planning meeting.” It was no coincidence that the committee was mostly women, many of them young, single, and eager to hang out with Linda’s bachelor son.

“I don’t see how I can ask you to entertain my dad and his new lady friend.” Mindy shook her head.

“Honestly, I didn’t have any plans other than the dinner party and I can still make that if we cut the trip short and come back around three. Five hours should be long enough in the Stockyards.”

“If you’re sure...”

He wasn’t but pretending to be hot for her wasn’t a stretch.

“I’ll drive us,” he said.

“Wonderful! If there’s anything I can do for you. I mean, anything professional. Organize your office, do your Christmas shopping...”

“Actually...” He lifted his eyebrows.

“Yes, what?”

“As part of my involvement in another charity, I’m appearing as Santa at Cook Children’s Hospital tonight, and I could really use an elf to help me out. Are you up for it? I know Chloe would be happy to lend you her elf costume, and you two are about the same size.”

She didn’t hesitate. “Sure! Should I just meet you there?”

“That would work.”

“Goodbye, Dr. Kincaid... I mean, Eric.”

“Goodbye, Mindy.” He watched her go, Peaches trotting happily at her heels.

For a moment, he imagined they were actually dating, and a gentle warmth spread over him. Shaking his head free of those thoughts, Eric plucked his lab jacket off the coatrack and slipped into it.

Clearly, last night had muddled his thinking. He needed to get his head on straight. Still, he couldn't ignore the pang of longing in his chest. Which was silly, of course, because Eric knew firsthand it wasn't smart to mix business with pleasure.

CHAPTER 5

THAT SAME DAY, as the sun sank down the horizon, Mindy fiddled absentmindedly with the small jingle bell earrings that swung merrily beneath her elfin ears.

She examined her reflection critically in the plate-glass window outside Cook Children's Hospital, taking in the swath of green velvet clinging to her from head to toe.

The outfit looked good on Chloe. On Mindy, well, she resembled a green marshmallow.

"I feel like I was destined for this." Eric patted the plump pillow that served as his Santa belly and tugged at his fake beard.

Mindy eyeballed herself. "I look like Cindy Lou Who."

"Ho, ho, ho. Correction, Mindy Lou Who in your case. And she's my favorite Seuss character. She's got so much heart."

Aww, that was sweet and unexpected of him to compare her to the heroine of the Grinch story. She grinned. "You ready for this, Claus?"

"No need for gritted teeth. It's a blast, I promise. I've volunteered every year since I've been in Kringle."

"So this is your third Christmas playing Santa?"

"Yep."

He held the door open, and she went ahead of Eric into the lobby ablaze with festive decorations. Strands of tinsel

garlands draped gracefully, and lights twinkled like distant stars around a towering, majestic Christmas tree.

A jubilant brigade of volunteers, each donning an assortment of festive costumes from reindeer to snowmen to nutcrackers to gingerbread people. They welcomed Eric and Mindy with hearty hellos. Together, the group all formed a kaleidoscope of holiday characters eager to spread yuletide glee to ailing children.

A visiting family strolled through the lobby. Two youngsters hopped eagerly alongside their parents, whose faces were alight with smiles.

Eric waved to them. "Season's greetings, friends! Wishing you all happy holidays!" His voice boomed, filling the space with warmth and joy.

The father, amused, nudged his kids who stared, wide-eyed and awestruck by the Christmas pageantry. "Check out Santa's lively helpers, kids."

With a twinkle in his eye, Eric stage-whispered, gesturing toward Mindy who did a little jig for them. "She's really throwing herself into this elf gig, isn't she?"

The kids giggled, and Mindy handed them candy canes.

"Come on, gang," the head volunteer said as she herded the costumed carolers toward the elevators. "Upstairs we go."

Once they reached the children's ward, any lingering reservations Mindy harbored melted away like snow under the sun.

Room by room, they visited the children, caroling timeless Christmas carols, handing out candy canes, and ringing jingle bells in a holiday serenade. The young patients, many of whom were initially reserved and shy, eventually threw caution to the wind, enthusiastically joining in with the costumed singers and dancers.

One boy, his leg in a cast, served as a conductor, orchestrating the carolers as if his candy cane was a baton, leading a spirited and foot-tapping rendition of "Jingle Bells."

Meanwhile, a little girl in a pink silk turban, hiding where she'd lost her hair to chemo, timidly chimed in during "Frosty the Snowman." Her delicate voice burst with heartfelt emotion.

A tear came to Mindy's eye. Brave kid. Quickly, she blinked it away and hitched up her smile.

Even the too-cool-for-school teens swayed in time to the music. The caroling crew transformed hallways and the nurses' stations into their stage, leaving behind a trail of smiles as they traversed wings dedicated to oncology, orthopedics, and post-op recovery. Their voices carried holiday cheer, leaving no place untouched by the festive spirit.

In one room, a curious girl who looked about six or seven years old sized up Eric with skepticism and thrust out a defiant chin. "You're not Santa. The real Santa is busy getting all the toys ready for Christmas."

Eric put a conspiratorial finger to his lips. "Shh, it's our little secret! I'm actually Santa's son and I'm assisting Dad."

"For real?" She cocked her head, wanting to believe him.

"Dad asked me to help, and I was glad to pitch in." He exaggerated a wink.

That sent the girl into peals of delighted laughter, her eyes sparkling with mischief. She beckoned her roommate, a younger boy engrossed in an intense battle with his action figure.

"Look! It's Santa's son." The girl pointed.

Finally, the boy lifted his head, eyes wide. "*Really?*"

Mindy marveled at Eric's innate ability to connect with children. His enthusiasm ran high throughout the entire program and even ramped up in the finale.

At the last stop, back in the lobby again, she swayed to the beat, her voice joining the chorus of "Deck the Halls."

Kids, parents, and staff alike danced and clapped to the Christmas beat. Moving in time with the rhythm, Mindy caught Eric's eye over the heads of the children.

They shared a grin.

“Hey, Santa Eric...” she shouted over the music, snapping her fingers in the air.

His eyes met hers. “Yes, Elf Mindy?”

“We’re definitely doing this again next year, right?”

Eric popped his Santa suspenders. “Absolutely! It’s a date!”

She laughed, her heart light and full. Her own hands clapped along to the rhythm, her laughter mingling with the children’s. The room filled with kinetic energy, and Mindy felt a part of something special, something joyful and communal.

Once the last notes of the carol echoed away, Eric theatrically wiped his brow, exaggerating the motion for comedic effect. “Phew, spreading cheer is demanding! I’m in dire need of cookies and hot chocolate.”

Playfully, he leaned against Mindy, feigning fatigue for the audience.

Mindy nudged him playfully, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “Oh, quit your theatrics, drama king.”

Encircling her with one arm, Eric grinned at the kids. “All of this was worthwhile for your big smiles!”

The audience cheered.

The hospital staff shooed the kids back to their rooms as Eric and Mindy caught up with their fellow volunteers in the hospital cafeteria, chatting over steaming cups of hot cocoa and Christmas cookies.

The director led them through a debriefing of the event, and they exchanged stories of touching encounters and amusing anecdotes. Mindy loved being part of it.

Eric’s eyes twinkled as he recounted a story of a preteen who feigned indifference but sneakily recorded their performance on his phone.

“I bet he’ll replay it when he’s alone just to relive the moment!” the director said. “Great job.”

Chuckling, Mindy playfully bumped his shoulder with hers. “Well, not everyone can unabashedly revel in Christmas like someone I know.”

Without missing a beat, Eric shot back, “What can I say, you bring out the inner Santa in me.”

Mindy rolled her eyes, secretly delighted by their banter. “Gee, thanks. What an honor.”

Several conversations started around them, everyone talking about their experiences. Eric snagged her gaze and studied her a moment. She felt her neck heat. He lowered his voice. “May I ask you a question?”

“If I’m not required to answer.”

“Of course not.”

She rested her elbows on the table and cupped her chin in her upturned palms, waiting... His blue eyes were as deep as a lake in the Swiss Alps.

“How come you’ve been unlucky in love?”

“Huh?” She blinked. This was not the question she expected.

“The other night, your dad said you had a bad picker for guys. What did he mean by that? You’re fun, gorgeous, smart, and lively. Why aren’t you swarmed with dates?”

“I could ask you the same,” she countered.

“Hmm, I was engaged once. But I haven’t dated since the breakup because I’m busy establishing my practice in Kringle.”

Was that really true or was it what he told himself because he was still hurting from his broken engagement? Mindy wondered.

“Which is now doing well if the crowds in your office lobby are any sign,” she pointed out.

“Right, and so now I’m dating again.”

She closed one eye and gave him a skeptical look. “We’re not really dating, though.”

“This feels like a date.”

“It’s not.” She opened her eye and twisted up her mouth.

“Wait just a minute.” He pointed a chiding finger at her. “You just changed the topic on me. I asked how come you’re still solo and you didn’t answer.”

“Like you, I was getting my business started,” she said. Which was true. Being an entrepreneur took a lot of time and hard work.

“And...”

“We just lost my mom eighteen months ago. I suppose grief is a factor. I didn’t want to start a relationship in the middle of sorting myself out from losing her.”

“I get that,” he said. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“And...” she whispered, tiptoeing around the heart of why she had dated guys who weren’t marriage material.

He leaned in closer and lowered his head. “And?”

“I confess, I’ve always feared being tied down by traditional roles. My mom and dad married when they were both twenty-one and right out of college. Dad immediately went into his father’s accounting business, and there he stayed for the rest of his life. Mom never even used her music degree. She had three kids and stayed home to raise us. Which was great for us, but Mom never lived up to her potential. She dreamed of being a concert pianist but because she chose marriage and children, that life passed her by.”

Eeep! Mindy slapped a palm over her mouth, stunned that she’d told him the secret buried so deeply inside her she was just now realizing the truth herself.

“Are you sure your mother saw things that way?” Eric asked. “Maybe she considered having a family worth the sacrifice.”

“Oh, I’m sure she did,” Mindy said. “But I feel sad that she didn’t have an identity separate from us.”

A nurse in blue scrubs came over to their table, and she thrust out her hand to shake theirs. “Thank you so much! The hallways haven’t echoed with such joy and laughter since last Christmas. You truly brought the magic today.”

Mindy’s heart went mushy as she and Eric exchanged smiles.

They finished their snacks, said goodbye to the group, and walked into the chilly evening, the sky awash in hues of twilight.

“Wow,” she whispered. “This was the best way to kick-start the holiday spirit.”

“Thanks for joining me on this adventure. I know the outfits were silly but—”

Mindy cut him off with a gentle smile. “No, you were right. A dash of silliness and a lot of cheer is exactly what this season needs.”

“I wished we’d driven here together,” he said when they reached the parking lot. Her van was on one end, his pickup truck on the opposite.

“We could have saved on gas.” She took her keys from her elf suit.

“And worked up a game plan for tomorrow with your dad and his lady love.”

“You sure you want to go with us?” she said, giving him an out. “You could have a pet emergency and be off the hook.”

“And leave you as third wheel?” he said. “Not on your life.”

“Thanks, Eric.”

“You’re welcome, Mindy.”

Grinning, they both walked off to their separate vehicles.



The truck engine rumbled as Eric steered it through the streets of Kringle, the glow from the dashboard lighting up his Santa suit. He reached up to scratch at the itchy fake belly.

Christmas tunes played softly from the radio, and Eric hummed along, his fingers tapping a rhythm on the wheel, his mind zinging from the hospital visit.

He thought of Mindy, dressed as an elf, her eyes lighting up as she handed out candy canes and sang with the kids. Chuckling, he replayed the scenes in his mind. He remembered how Mindy's nose had scrunched up when he teased her and how she had playfully bumped his shoulder.

At the red light, Eric's mind wandered. He liked spending time with Mindy, liked making her laugh. He gripped the steering wheel. She was fun to hang out with.

He thought about what she'd told him. Her relationship fears. Why she'd never had a long-term relationship. She feared commitment. He couldn't blame her. After Cassandra, he did too.

But while she'd seen her mother's choice to stay home and raise kids as cutting off her potential, was eschewing relationships in favor of a career any less stunting? It was a good question to ask himself.

A horn honked, pulling him out of his reverie.

Eric blinked.

The light had turned green.

He waved an apology and drove on, muttering to himself. "Mind on the road, Kincaid. Mind on the road."



That night, Mindy had such a sweet dream where she and Eric were at the gala, raising thousands for the animal shelter. Then

when she single-handedly secured the money needed, Eric swept her into his arms and kissed her—

The sound of Dad belting out “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer” in the shower yanked Mindy from the dream and she woke up kissing her pillow.

Yikes! Not since high school had that happened.

After the event at the hospital, her feelings for Eric grew stronger. How had she gotten herself into this?

All Mindy had wanted was to keep her dad from throwing eligible bachelors at her, and now she’d committed herself to spending an entire day with Eric, her dad, and dad’s new lady friend.

Ugh.

Eric would come to Mindy’s house at ten. From there, they would pick up her dad’s date and head to the Fort Worth Stockyards.

She wasn’t looking forward to this outing, despite getting to spend more time with Eric. The lie kept snowballing, and she had a terrible feeling this would not end well.

But Eric had agreed to help her out yet again, and she was determined to make the best of the situation. She put Peaches in the securely fenced backyard for the day, with food, water, and her chew toys, and a promise from her next-door neighbor to keep an eye on the corgi. Then she rushed inside to get ready for the double date.

Right on time, Eric pulled into the driveway. As an organized person, she so appreciated Eric’s punctuality and wondered how he managed it. Veterinarians couldn’t tightly control their schedule because of unexpected emergencies. But Eric made a point of being on time.

Taking a deep breath, Mindy greeted him at the door, her dad hot on her heels. With her father breathing down her neck, they wouldn’t have two seconds to get on the same page about the day.

“Morning, Eric!” Dad beamed. “Ready to hit the road?”

“You’re in good spirits this morning, sir.”

“Call me Wayne. You are dating my daughter, after all, and yes, I’m pretty excited. My date is a wonderful woman and I’m sure you’re both gonna love her.” Her dad rubbed his palms together. “Let’s roll.”

Mindy met Eric’s gaze, but his dazzling blue eyes gave nothing away. She had no idea what he was thinking. The sky was overcast, but the temperature hovered near a balmy sixty degrees.

Dad climbed into the back of Eric’s extended cab pickup, leaving Eric to escort Mindy around to the passenger side door.

“Really,” she murmured. “You don’t have to do the white knight thing.”

“Oh yes, I do.” He nodded toward the back seat where her father was leaning forward, eyeballing them. “I think he’s got a list of acceptable qualities for his daughter’s dates and he’s checking them off.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. Thanks again for being such a good sport.”

“Don’t mention it.” He opened the door and Mindy slid into the passenger seat, watching as he closed the door, hurried around the front of the truck, then got in and started the engine. The cab filled with the woody scent of his aftershave.

“Where to, Wayne?” Eric asked, turning to look over his shoulder at Mindy’s dad.

Her father squinted at his phone. “According to my date’s directions, take a left at the end of the street.”

Eric’s strong wrists turned the steering wheel toward the center of Kringle. This double date thing was a bad idea. She felt it in the pit of her stomach. What if she didn’t like the woman? Worse, what if Eric didn’t like her? *Ugh!* Why had she allowed her father to pressure her into this outing? She really did need to stand up to him.

“I’ll text her we’re on our way,” Dad said, sounding like a teenager on his first date.

Okay, she couldn’t begrudge her father. He had been pretty lonely since her mother passed away. If going out on a date with Mindy and her boyfriend brought him joy, she could accept a little personal inconvenience.

Except Eric wasn’t really her boyfriend, and she’d finagled him into this.

They pulled up at a stoplight and Eric shot a glance at her. She offered an apologetic smile and silently mouthed; *sorry I got you into this*.

His gorgeous sexy eyes peered into her, and he winked before turning his attention back to the road as the red light turned green. Her stomach gave a happy squeeze. That wink said they were in this together. He was on her side.

Her partner in crime.

They passed through the bustling town square, which even this early on a Sunday morning was packed. Kringle was a tourist town, especially at Christmas, and the community went all out courting holiday crowds.

Even from inside the cab, the smell of cinnamon and pine permeated the air. Christmas music poured from the outdoor speakers perched atop the courthouse. Shoppers carried branded bags and food vendors sold treats from carts—funnel cakes, hot apple cider, turkey and dressing sandwiches.

“What street does your lady friend live on, Wayne?” Eric asked.

“Noel Lane.”

“For real?” Eric sounded amused and turned from Main onto Pine. Noel Lane was one block over. “That’s the same street as my mom.”

“No kidding. Small world.” Her father’s phone dinged. “Hey, my friend just texted that it’s a frame cottage painted sage green with white shutters. Fourth house on the left.”

“Are you sure?” Eric asked.

“Positive.” Her father leaned over the seat and waggled his phone for Mindy to see the text.

“Number 320?” Eric’s voice took on a weird note.

Mindy shifted her gaze from trying to find the sage-green cottage to the man behind the wheel.

Dad pulled his phone back to check the screen. “Yes. How did you know?”

“Because...” Eric said as he turned into the driveway of the charming sage-green bungalow with white shutters. “My mother lives here.”

CHAPTER 6

WAYNE RYDER WAS the man his mother had met on the plane? Eric switched off the key and turned to Mindy who was looking at him wide-eyed. This was a shock to her, too.

“Linda is your mother?” Wayne asked.

Just then, the front door of the house opened, and his mother came out onto the porch. She stopped, blinked, and shook her head as if confused by Eric’s arrival.

Wayne opened up the back door, hopped out, and took off across the lawn. “Linda, hi!”

“Wayne?” She came down the steps in red, white, and blue cowboy boots. She looked like the Fourth of July in starched dark wash blue jeans, a white button-down western shirt, and red fringed vest. “Why are you in my son’s truck?”

“This is your mother?” Mindy asked Eric.

“It is,” Eric confirmed, unable to believe the coincidence himself.

She blinked. “Your mother is dating my dad?”

“Looks like it.”

As the situation sunk in, they watched Wayne take his mother’s arm and guide her toward the truck.

“What does this mean?” Mindy asked.

“That we’ve got to lie to my mom, too.”

“Oh, dear. This is getting out of hand.”

“No kidding.” Was she having regrets about their subterfuge? He surely was.

Wayne opened the back door behind Mindy’s seat and gave Eric’s mom a boost into the truck.

Mom settled in, an intrigued expression tugging her lips and eyebrows upward. “Well, isn’t this a surprise.”

“Hello, Mother.” Eric didn’t know what else to say.

He flexed his fingers against the steering wheel. His mind stalled, unable to conjure a reasonable explanation for this situation. He glanced over at Mindy. Beside him, she shrank back against the seat, looking as panicked as he felt.

Her eyes met his, alarmed. She gave a barely perceptible head shake. They were trapped.

“So...” his mother said, “I guess you and Mindy have met already.”

“You didn’t know they were dating?” Wayne asked, buckling his seat belt.

Eric’s tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He met his mother’s pointed stare in the rearview mirror, pulse thudding. She would not let this slide.

Mindy made a small strangled noise, like a squeak swallowed back down her throat. Her right leg jittered up and down.

They were sunk. Eric turned the key in the ignition with a leaden hand. No amount of stalling was going to get them out of this mess.

His mother waited expectantly. The weight of her silence pressed down, demanding an explanation. Eric’s brain fizzled.

“Mindy’s dog Peaches is a patient of mine,” Eric said.

“They met at the dog park,” Wayne said, relating the lie he and Mindy told him at Cowboy Pete’s on Friday. “I can’t believe they didn’t tell you.”

“How long have you been going out?” his mother asked.

“Four months,” Wayne said.

“We’re keeping things casual,” Mindy said. “There was nothing to tell.”

“Four months sounds more than just casual,” his mother said.

“I agree with Linda.” Mindy’s dad grunted. “Why are you being so secretive?”

“Thank you, Wayne.” His mother beamed at Wayne.

“We’re adults. We’re allowed to live our lives any way we see fit,” Eric said, feeling irritated with both their parents.

“Maybe that’s true, but I’m still hurt you didn’t tell me.” His mother sniffed.

“I didn’t know either,” Wayne said. “I had to wrangle it out of Mindy.”

“Young people nowadays. They’re so independent.” His mother patted her carefully coiffed hair.

“How about we concentrate on having a good day,” Eric suggested. “Just be happy we’re all together, okay?”

“Well, that is a nice sentiment. I agree. Fort Worth Stockyards, here we come,” his mother said, and as he watched in the rearview mirror, she reached across the seat to pat Wayne’s hand.

“What about your dinner party tonight?” Eric asked, backing out of the driveway. “When do we need to be back in time for that?”

“Oh, it’s been rescheduled. Milly Dunham came down with the flu. You would know that if you ever checked your voicemail. So I’m free for the entire day.” His mother turned in the seat to face Mindy’s dad. “Wayne, have you ever eaten at Joe T. Garcia’s?”

“I have not.”

“Then you’re in for a treat. That’s where we’ll have dinner. They have the best patio dining in Fort Worth. This time of

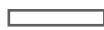
year they put out the big heaters, and it's lovely. Best Tex-Mex in the city."

"Sounds great," Wayne said. "Now tell me again, Linda, how long have you lived in Kringle?"

As their parents fell into their own conversation, Eric guided the truck onto the highway leading to Fort Worth and hazarded a glance over at Mindy.

She was clenching her teeth like she'd rather be anywhere else. To reassure her, he slipped his hand across the seat to squeeze hers and then wondered if he'd made a mistake in touching her.

But to his relief, she squeezed his hand right back.



An hour and fifty minutes later, the four of them strolled the Stockyards. Their folks were holding hands for crying out loud, walking among the crowd of tourists and taking in the cowboy sights of Commerce Street. From the White Elephant Saloon came the sound of guitar player singing "The Cowboy Christmas Ball."

Outside the infamous bar built in the 1890s, a line of young women—wearing skimpy red and green skirts, matching boots, and green felt Stetsons—two-stepped along the wooden sidewalks for tourists snapping photos.

Wayne and Linda started dancing along with them.

Mindy grabbed the sleeve of Eric's shirt and pulled him down a side alley. In a desperate whisper, she said, "We've got to break up!"

"Break up?" He laughed so loudly a wandering cowboy with a cigar clamped on one side of his mouth shot him the evil eye. "We can't break up."

"Why not?"

"Look at them." Eric nodded at their parents who were laughing and dancing like teenagers. "How can we burst their

bubble? Let them have today.”

“Their closeness doesn’t bother you?”

“Should it?”

Mindy snorted. “I’m trying to give you an out. Take it. This has already become a tangled web. Yikes, what a mess.”

“Your dad will be gone tomorrow,” he said logically. “And then I can tell my mother the truth that I was just helping you and I’ll let you sort out your issues with your dad.”

“Be serious. This has gotten too complicated. Either I have to come clean to my dad or we break up.”

“Here? Now?”

“Yes.”

“What do we do?” he asked. “Yell at each other, stage a fight? What’s my motivation in this scene? I don’t want to look like one of the bums you’ve dated.”

Mindy pulled back. “Ouch. That wasn’t very kind.”

“I’m sorry. Please forgive me. That was wrong of me to say. Knee-jerk reaction to being dumped.” He looked distressed that he’d hurt her.

“I’m not dumping you.”

“You want me to dump you?”

“I’ll just tell Dad it wasn’t working between us.”

“How will you get home if I leave?”

“Uber?”

“And my mom?”

“You can take her with you.”

“C’mon, we can’t do it now. You dad is heading for Santa Fe tomorrow. Let him leave happy. You’ll meet someone, eventually. That’s the time to tell him it didn’t work out between us.”

“What about your mother?”

“I’ll tell her the truth right after your dad leaves.”

“But what if our parents stay in contact with each other? What then?”

Eric sighed. “I see your point.”

“I’m sorry I roped you into this in the first place. I don’t enjoy taking advantage of your kindness, Eric. If my dad wasn’t so pushy...”

“He is who he is.”

Easy for him to say, she thought glumly.

“For what it’s worth, we’ve got bigger problems,” he said.

“What’s that?”

Eric nodded toward the White Elephant Saloon where the dancing had ended.

As the last notes of the song lingered, her father took Eric’s mother in his arms, dipped her low, and then planted a big kiss on Linda’s lips.

And the dancing cowgirls burst into applause.



The rest of the day passed weirdly with Wayne and Linda giggling and canoodling, while Eric and Mindy shot each other wary glances. Thank heavens her father was leaving for Santa Fe tomorrow or they might have a situation on their hands.

After Eric talked Mindy out of breaking up with him, he played the role of the perfect boyfriend, with an effortless charm that left her breathless. He held her hand, their fingers interlaced, and laughed at all her jokes. He even draped his arm around her shoulders when they strolled down the Stockyards’ streets.

For a moment, it was easy for Mindy to forget this was all pretend. She basked in the warmth of Eric’s attention without the nagging fear that had clouded her past relationships.

While their parents were at the opposite end of the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame and Museum, looking at an exhibit, Eric leaned in, his gaze softening.

“You know, this doesn’t feel like pretending,” he murmured, his warm, minty breath tickling her ear.

Mindy’s heart skipped a beat, and for a moment, she let herself imagine that this could be real. She smiled, her eyes meeting his. “Yeah, it’s surprisingly easy with you.”

But as quickly as the thought entered her mind, she pushed it away. This was safe territory—a relationship with training wheels. There was no risk here, no chance of rejection. She could let her guard down because it was all just an act... right?

After the museum, the four of them shopped and explored the stockyard maze. They saw cowboys herding longhorns from the pasture to the corral. They attended a calf-roping demonstration and checked out Billy Bob’s The World’s Largest Honky Tonk. They ate good, old-fashioned Tex-Mex at Joe T. Garcia’s on the outdoor patio and drank some potent margaritas.

Eric only had a few sips since he was driving them home.

Mindy was feeling warm and loose by the time they made their way to Eric’s truck and drove back home to Kringle. She started to soften over the growing romance between her dad and Eric’s mom. What could one weekend romance hurt? Dad was having a wonderful time with Linda, and she couldn’t begrudge him a little happiness.

They dropped Linda off first and Mindy’s father got out to walk Eric’s mom to her door. He gave her a peck on the cheek beneath the lamplight glow and sprinted back to the truck with a big grin on his face.

At Mindy’s house, Eric put a restraining hand on Mindy’s shoulder. “Could we have a moment?”

“Toss me your keys, Min,” her dad said. “And I’ll go inside. Give you two some privacy.”

Mindy passed her dad the house key and asked him to let Peaches inside from the backyard.

“Will do,” he said and hopped out.

Eric undid his seat belt and turned to Mindy. She did the same.

From her peripheral vision, she watched her father go inside.

Eric cleared his throat.

She met his gaze, giving him her full attention.

“I know this whole pretend relationship has gotten complicated,” he said.

Mindy nodded, hyperaware of how close they were in the cozy cab, knees almost touching as they faced each other. She was finding it hard to string two coherent thoughts together as his mesmerizing blue eyes drilled into hers.

“Yeah, I still can’t help thinking we should have broken up in front of them tonight.” She surrendered a rueful smile.

“It was nice of you to want your father to be happy with your situation in life. I think it’s important to him you find someone. He doesn’t like the idea of you being alone.”

“Even if it is a lie?”

“Well...” Eric hitched in a breath. “That *is* the sticking point.”

Mindy touched her upper lip with the tip of her tongue. Her mouth felt extraordinarily dry, and she had trouble concentrating on his words. The clean, woodsy scent of his aftershave distracted her.

“Uh-huh.”

“I don’t like keeping the truth from my mother.”

“Ditto for my father.”

“It feels shady and that’s not a feeling I’m accustomed to. I don’t like it.”

“Me either, but it’ll be over as soon as my dad leaves.”

“I did enjoy spending time with you today.”

“Same.” *Aww, Mindy, you scintillating conversationalist, you.*

“Even if we did have to chaperon our parents.” His amusement came out in a soft chuckle. “They were cutting up like teenagers.”

“I think they had more fun than we did.”

“Oh, no doubt.”

“Thanks again for doing this.” She put her hand on the door handle, ready to jump out and go inside.

Eric touched her shoulder. His warm palm sent a jolt arcing up her arm. Mindy bit her lip, and her cheeks flamed. Did he have any clue what he was doing to her?

“Wait,” he said, his voice husky.

She looked at him. Shadows engulfed the cab, the porch light illuminating just one side of his face. In the darkness, he looked like a stranger.

Her pulse skittered, and Mindy exhaled, her breath slipping over parted teeth.

Eric licked his lips, his gaze dropping to her mouth.

She inhaled sharply.

He wavered. Eyes unreadable.

Seconds ticked by. A minute. Two.

She should go but couldn't move. Mindy's heart slammed in her chest. She didn't dare stir or inhale. The air thickened.

He edged closer, his palm cradling her cheek.

Mindy leaned into him.

His thumb grazed her jaw, his nail lightly stroking her skin.

“Eric.”

“Mindy.” He hovered, lips just inches above her, giving her a chance to reject what he was about to do.

But she didn't want to stop him.

He tilted her head up while lowering his, bringing their mouths together in a gentle yet simmering kiss. Languid. Honied.

And oh so *hot*.

Then he pulled back and smiled down at her.

Oh, no. That wasn't enough. She needed more. A lot more. She cupped his face between her palms, pulled his head lower, and kissed him hard.

He laughed against her mouth as the tip of his tongue danced along her lips.

Mindy dissolved into the kiss, their contact electric. Blood raced through her veins. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him nearer. He emitted a rough sound, intensifying the kiss.

Their mouths fused, shaping and reshaping. She threaded her fingers through his hair, anchoring herself there.

He traced her arm, his touch burning through the fabric of her sweater.

Each caress sent desire blazing hotter until she thought she might ignite. Still, the kiss persisted, passionate, exquisite.

Yum, yum, yum. Best kiss ever!

She let out a shaky exhale and risked a glance up at him through her lashes. His eyes smoldered, mouth temptingly near. She had to go now, while she still could.

But he pulled away before she wanted him to.

“Wh-what, why, did you kiss me?” she asked.

His gaze darted toward the house. “Your dad is watching from your living room window. I saw the curtain move.”

“Oh.” Mindy's lips tingled. That was all. Show for her dad. Not because he *really* wanted to kiss her. Disappointment sagged her shoulders.

“Gotta keep up the ruse...” He hitched in a breath. “For now.”

She resisted the urge to trace her tingling lips. “I see.”

He shrugged. “Figured we needed to really sell it.”

“Smart thinking.” Did she sound nonchalant? Could he tell from her voice how his kiss unnerved her?

“Let me know when your dad leaves for Santa Fe and I can tell my mother the truth,” he said. “Put this all behind us.”

Clearly, he was just trying to help her sell the façade, so why did she wish so desperately the kiss had been real?

She opened the door and got out.

“Let me walk you to the door.”

“No, no, please. I’m fine.”

“You sure?” He arched his eyebrows.

“Positive.”

“See you... later.”

“Later,” she echoed.

On wobbly knees, she made it up the sidewalk, her head spinning. At the porch, she turned to wave, but Eric was already driving off, taillights shining in the darkness.

CHAPTER 7

ERIC STUMBLED into his apartment in the dark, his mind so consumed with thoughts of Mindy he was thrown off-balance. He flicked on the light and blinked at the brightness. It was like waking up from a spell.

Holy Christmas, what was happening to him?

He was a reasonable, well-respected doctor of veterinarian medicine. Why was he so loopy over one sweet kiss?

Watch it. You're crossing a dangerous line.

Feeling a little hungry, he headed to the kitchen. He thought about his dog Benji who passed away around the same time Cassandra ended their relationship. He'd had that yellow lab for sixteen years and he still pined for the old guy padding along at his side.

Thinking of Benji made him think of Peaches, and thinking of Peaches brought his mind back to Mindy and that scintillating kiss.

He went to the cookie jar in the shape of a Holstein dairy cow. It had been a gift from a pet parent. He fished around for the remaining cookies his mother had brought over. One snickerdoodle, one peanut butter, both cut in the shape of reindeer.

Eric poured himself a glass of milk and parked at the kitchen table, nibbling a cookie and trying to decide which tasted sweeter. Mindy or the sugar-dusted snickerdoodle. Sighing at the deliciousness of both, he leaned back in his chair.

From his pocket, his phone chimed the holiday ringtone, “Rocking Around the Christmas Tree.”

Eric fished out his phone and checked the screen. Mom. Wanting to video chat. Dusting cookie crumbs from his mouth, Eric hit Accept.

“Hi, honey!” His mother appeared on camera in a green facial mud mask, her hair pulled up into a bun.

Eric chuckled. “Hey, Mom, looks like you’re having a spa night.”

“Just pampering myself after such an amazing day.” Her expression turned dreamy. “I can’t stop thinking about Wayne. Tell me more about you and his daughter, Mindy. Why were you keeping her a secret?”

“Because it’s new. We’re still getting to know each other.”

Linda narrowed her eyes at him through the screen. “Eric James Kincaid, don’t think you can fool your dear mother. I saw the way you two looked at each other.”

Eric’s neck heated, and he cringed inwardly. “Mom, don’t jump the gun. This thing between Mindy and me is strictly...” He paused, searching for the right word. “Casual.”

His mother made a scoffing sound. “I know a solid relationship when I see it. Your dad and I had one for fifteen years before I lost him.”

Well, her eyes were deceiving her because there wasn’t a relationship to see. It was on the tip of his tongue to just tell her the truth, but she was so excited he couldn’t get a word in, plus he didn’t want to blow things up for Mindy before she was ready.

“I’m just so thrilled for you both. And with Wayne and I hitting it off too! It’s almost as if...”

Eric’s mind wandered, thoughts drifting back to Mindy’s soft lips. How would he start to untangle this web of well-meaning deception? He should just tell his mother the truth and ask to keep it from Wayne until Mindy was ready.

“Mom, there’s something—”

“Oh, before I forget, I signed you up for the charity bachelor auction, but now that you’re with Mindy, I assume you’ll want me to remove your name.”

Eric tensed. The humiliating bachelor auction was his least favorite event of the holiday season. Last year, he’d allowed himself to be roped into it because he and Cassandra had just split, and he’d needed something to take his mind off the breakup.

But gosh, the whole thing had been embarrassing. Miss Ledbetter, seventy if she was a day and never married, had bid on him and won.

Man up, tell her the truth. “Uh, yeah, about that—”

“I can’t wait to tell all my friends that not only did my son find a lovely girl, but his mom is also dating that girl’s father.”

“Mindy’s not a girl, Mom. She’s a woman.”

“It’s like a romantic comedy! When Eric Met Mindy and Wayne Met Linda.”

“Mom, seriously—”

“Don’t be so shy, Eric. You’ve always been a romantic at heart, just like your mother.”

And it’s gotten me into a lot of trouble.

“Remember when you were a little boy, and you used to write those adorable love notes to the little girl who lived across the street? Come to think of it, she was pretty and bubbly just like Mindy. No wonder things didn’t work out with Cassandra. She wasn’t your type. You like the girl next door.”

A groan slipped his lips. “Can we not revisit my puppy love phase, please?”

His mother chuckled. “Fine, but really, I’ll cancel your participation in the bachelor auction. Unless you want to make Mindy jealous, of course.”

“I don’t want to hurt her,” he said. “So yes, take me out of the auction, please.”

“Will do, although there’s gonna be a lot of disappointed single ladies in Kringle.”

“I’m sure they’ll find someone else to fill in for me,” Eric said, a mix of relief and guilt washing over him. The bachelor auction ordeal would be avoided, but at what cost? “Listen, Mom, it’s late and we both should get some sleep.”

“Of course, sweetheart. I can’t wait to share the good news with my friends! They’ll be so happy for you. Sweet dreams.”

“Good night, Mom.”

“Night, honey.”

He ended the call and sighed, pondering the complexities of his life. What started as a simple favor for Mindy had spiraled into a narrative worthy of a soap opera.

Eric got up to rinse his milk glass, and his gaze fell on a framed wall photo of him and Benji. His trusty old dog looked up at him with those knowing eyes, as if saying, “Really, man, this is a harebrained scheme.”

Eric smiled at the photograph. “Okay, buddy, I know. Honesty is the best policy.”

He switched off the kitchen light, brushed his teeth, and got ready for bed. Lying in the dark, he found himself at a crossroads. Escaping the auction was a short-term win, but how would he navigate the growing threads of his little white lies and his mounting feelings for Mindy Ryder?

As sleep claimed him, Eric made a mental promise to himself. He’d talk to Mindy. Clear the air, even if it meant complicating things with his mom and Wayne. Because his thoughts kept circling back to that scintillating kiss.

And he realized with a jolt he was doing the same thing with Mindy as he’d done with Cassandra—mixing business with pleasure.

Thankfully, her father was leaving town tomorrow, and they would end this charade and Eric could have his life back.

“I rescheduled my flight to Santa Fe,” her father announced over breakfast on Monday morning.

Startled, Mindy glanced up from her blueberry muffin and stared at her father. She’d been so looking forward to driving him to the airport and dropping this silly fake boyfriend lie once he was safely on the plane.

“Huh?”

“Linda texted me last night. She said it was too bad I was leaving today because she had two tickets to tonight’s performance of *Miracle on 34th Street* at the Kringle Playhouse. The friend who was supposed to go with her caught the flu.” Her father broke off a piece of muffin and slipped it under the table to Peaches.

Mindy sucked in a deep breath and slowly counted to ten. She wouldn’t overreact. “Dad, it’s not good to feed her table scraps.”

“Don’t be silly. We fed our dog Rufus table scraps all the time when you kids were growing up.”

“And he died of fatty liver disease.”

“No, he didn’t. He died of old age.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to contradict him, but why cause a kerfuffle? One bite of blueberry muffin wouldn’t cause Peaches irreparable harm, but she needed to send Dad on his way ASAP.

“Won’t Dwight, Carly, and the kids be disappointed that you’re cutting your visit short with them?” Mindy asked.

“It’s only by one day.” Her father spread a dollop of butter on his muffin. “Unless...” He caught her eye and grinned. “Things are heating up with me and Linda. Who knows? I was thinking about spending Thanksgiving right here in Kringle and visiting your brother and his family for Christmas instead.”

No!

“But don’t worry, I won’t horn in on your time with Eric.” Dad winked. “You don’t have to babysit me.”

“Dad, I’d love to see more of you, but you’ll be bored silly sitting around here all day even if you do go out with Linda in the evenings. I have to work. It’s my busy season.”

“You do whatever you need to do. Don’t worry about me. I’m used to being alone.”

The way he said the word *alone* was like a knife through her heart, and guilt kicked her in the gut. He did spend a lot of time by himself. She couldn’t say, *Dad, go to New Mexico, you make me nutso*. She loved him, but she couldn’t keep pretending to date Eric. It wasn’t fair to Eric, and she was embarrassed enough already.

“If you don’t go to Santa Fe for Thanksgiving, you’ll miss your only grandson’s birthday on Wednesday,” she reminded him.

“Sam is three. He won’t care when I show up, and I’ll get out of the party Janis has planned at Bucko’s Bonzeroo Pizza Palace. Have you ever been to that place? Corny clowns, noisy game machines, kids screaming and running.” He shuddered. “I went to Emily’s birthday party there. Gave me a sledgehammer headache.”

“But you love sharing your grandchildren’s big events,” she said. “Cake and candles, hugs and kisses for Grandpa.”

“You know, I *am* going to stay for Thanksgiving. I’ll help you put it on. You know I can baste a mean turkey. That’s the wonderful thing about retirement; I have plenty of time on my hands. I can make it up to the Santa Fe grands later. And let’s be honest, I don’t spend enough time with you. Even if Linda and I hadn’t sparked, I’d like to stay and get to know my future son-in-law better.”

“Dad! Stop with that future son-in-law business. Eric and I are not that serious!”

“Trust me, I know chemistry when I see it. Eric’s got it bad for you, honey. Mark my word, you’ll have an engagement

ring come next Christmas.”

Even if that were true, which it wasn't, would Mindy even want that?

The strange thrill in her stomach said *maybe*. But it didn't even matter. She and Eric weren't a couple and their whole attraction was just pretend.



What had started out as a little white lie was turning into a massive whopper.

By midmorning, Mindy was the one with a sledgehammer headache. She had to touch base with the caterer who was orchestrating the Robinson family Thanksgiving reunion—twenty-two people and counting—then run to the party store outlet in Fort Worth for autumn-themed napkins and table decorations because the items she'd ordered from Amazon got delayed in shipping. After that, she had to meet a new client at two and make sure the carpenter had come back to finish the shelves in Mrs. Kunkle's home office. People paid her to worry obsessively for them, and she was good at it.

Unfortunately, with her dad dropping the bomb that he planned on staying in Kringle for Thanksgiving, she couldn't fully concentrate.

How could she work with her father roaming the house? Even before she left to run errands, he was using her computer to tie up some loose ends from selling his accounting firm because he had trouble doing it on his cell phone. She could bump him off, of course, but then he'd just hover, waiting for his turn.

“I have to talk to Eric,” she muttered under her breath. “Now.”

Their bogus romance had to end. Telling her father it was a hoax was no longer an option, not when he'd be there with her day and night, expressing his disappointment with sad,

mournful pronouncements and pushing her to get on a dating app.

Leaving Dad to watch Peaches with strict instructions not to feed her, Mindy swung by the veterinarian clinic on her way to run errands in Fort Worth.

Once inside the building, the prospects for seeing him looked grim. Half a dozen people were crowded into the area with a Noah's ark of pets. The biggest gray cat she'd ever seen was perched on an elderly lady's lap, glaring at a Saint Bernard waiting with stoic resignation. Mindy eyed a square red cardboard box barely large enough to hold a teapot. It had holes punched in the top.

Did Eric treat snakes? She shuddered and hoped the hidden creature was something soft and furry, like a gerbil.

"Hey, Mindy," Della greeted her when she came through the door. "What's up? You're not on the schedule."

"I desperately need to speak to Dr. Kincaid."

"Sorry, but he's in the middle of a procedure. I can have him call you when office hours are over."

"I really need to talk to him as soon as possible." Mindy worried the strap of her purse with her fingers, rubbing the faux leather just as fake as her relationship with Eric.

"Is something wrong with Peaches?" Della asked, standing up from her desk and looking behind Mindy, searching for the corgi.

"No, she's fine. What about lunch? When does he take a lunch break?"

"I never know for sure. Sometimes he does. Other days, he's so busy he just skips eating."

"So no chance he'll have a spare five minutes soon?"

Della looked at the clock. "Maybe he can squeeze you in as soon as the current procedure is done. It shouldn't be more than twenty minutes. Can you wait that long?"

Could she? Mindy calculated her to-do list. If she skipped lunch herself, she could make it happen. She nodded.

“Take a seat,” Della invited.

Thirty minutes passed. Just when Mindy was about to leave, Della called her back. A few of the people who’d been waiting in the lobby ahead of her sent her resentful stares.

“I’ll just be sec,” she explained to the room at large, feeling self-conscious for cutting the line.

“The procedure took longer than expected,” Della said, leading her into the examination room. “Please be as quick as you can. We’re really backed up today.”

“Thanks, Della. I appreciate this so much.”

She went into the exam room. It was empty, but only seconds later Eric came through the back way that led to the hospital wing. He made eye contact.

Her heart thumped wildly.

“Mindy, I didn’t expect to see you today. Where’s Peaches?” He went to the sink and started scrubbing his hands with pink liquid soap from a wall dispenser.

“I won’t take much of your time, but I had to see you. We really should’ve broken up yesterday like I wanted.”

“You know, Mindy, I’m overbooked today.” He dried his hands on a paper towel. His tone was even, calm. “Exactly why are you here?”

He sounded pleasant enough, but he seemed stiff, distance. What had changed since their scintillating kiss last night? She didn’t know what it was, but from the straight set of his shoulders and the no-nonsense look on his face, something had.

She hated the feeling that she was a nuisance to this man who could turn her on with just a smile. Why had she come? What had she been thinking? She needed better boundaries.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have come to your place of business. That’s out of line.” She headed for the door.

He moved to block her way. “Wait, wait. It’s okay. You’re here now. How can I help?”

Gosh, he was so kind. She really needed to do something nice to thank him.

“Dad’s decided to stay in Kringle for Thanksgiving. He says he wants to get to know both you and your mother better. Your mom is taking him to see *Miracle on 34th Street* tonight at the Kringle Playhouse.”

He folded his arms and leaned his back against the wall. “I see.”

“I guess I freaked out a little. I apologize for disrupting your day.”

“You could never disrupt my day, sunshine.”

Sunshine? Had he just used a term of endearment on her? Mindy’s pulse skipped. Read nothing into it.

But his beguiling smile sucked the oxygen from the room. Mindy could barely breathe, overwhelmed by the way his eyes lit up as he studied her. His attentive gaze said she was important. That he cared. At least enough to put his busy day on hold for her.

“Will your dad leave after Thanksgiving?” he asked.

“Hopefully.”

Eric winced.

“Yeah, I know. We thought the pretense was over after last night.”

“Should you just tell him we broke up?”

“If I do that now, he’s gonna try to get us to reconcile. He won’t let it rest unless you did something unforgivably mean. Can you be unforgivably mean?”

“No, I’m not doing that.” His scowl wasn’t enough to mar his good looks.

“Listen, I’ll just go. You’re busy, and you’ve already done more than I had any right to expect.”

He cleared his throat. “But you did come, and I’m glad you did.”

What did he mean by that? She met his eyes and was more confused than ever. She shrugged.

“I shouldn’t have barged in on you. I need better impulse control.”

“You didn’t barge. I told Della to send you in as soon as I was able to spare a few minutes.”

“But your waiting room is packed.”

“That happens sometimes. I’ll work through lunch and get back on track.”

“I hate I caused you to miss lunch—”

“Let me get this straight, your dad is staying through Thursday, so he expects to see us together—”

“For Thanksgiving, I’m afraid so. Do you have plans?” She smacked her forehead with her palm. “Of course you have plans.”

“My mom and I have reservations at a restaurant.”

She crinkled her nose. “So you wouldn’t mind coming to Thanksgiving dinner at my house?”

“It sounds nice.”

“You mean it?”

“I do.”

“And you... you’re okay with keeping up the ruse?” She swallowed past the tightening in her throat.

Lightly, he touched her upper arm, resting it on the sleeve of her silky cherry-red ruffled blouse. She’d worn it with dressy gray slacks and low-heeled black pumps for meeting a new client this afternoon, hoping she’d look businesslike but imaginative. Red was her color, and she hoped Eric noticed.

His eyes met hers and held her gaze. “It’s just one last time?”

“One last time,” she vowed.

“All right then,” he said. “I’m in.”

CHAPTER 8

ERIC STUDIED Mindy's face as she blushed prettily.

The exam room became a world unto itself, separated from the hustle and bustle of the veterinary clinic by the mere closing of a door.

The air grew heavy with the weight of unspoken feelings, the walls closing in as Eric's pulse galloped. He had never crossed the line between professional and personal except with Cassandra—his greatest mistake—and yet here he was, unable to resist Mindy's pull.

Mindy stood in front of him, biting her lower lip and looking like the girl next door from some cute rom-com.

Eric felt sweat bead his palms, and he discreetly wiped his hands against his lab coat. He was playing with fire, jeopardizing not just his practice but potentially harming the client-vet dynamic.

Just as he had with Cassandra.

But suddenly the risk seemed worth it. Mindy captivated him completely, and he wanted to date her for real.

“Wh-what do you mean?” Mindy broke the silence, her voice tinged with a vulnerability that cut through him like a scalpel through tissue.

Seizing the moment, Eric took a deliberate step closer, guided by a force urging him to close the distance between them. “I'm willing to play this out for as long as you need me to do so.”

Why, he couldn't really say for sure, other than she was in a tight spot, and he wanted to make things easy for her. He took her hand.

Her flesh was velvety to the touch. Warmth spread from their entwined fingers straight to his chest.

Her pink lip gloss glimmered in the exam room's lights. "Why?"

Because whenever I'm with you the world is a brighter place. "I'm filled with the holiday spirit. My Christmas gift to you."

"Wow, that's so generous."

"You're still going to help me with the charity gala," he murmured, his thumb caressing the back of her hand. "You're not off the hook on that."

"Yes, sure, absolutely." For a moment, Mindy appeared lost in thought, her gaze dropping to their entangled hands.

"I'll need a date for that event, too. It's black tie. Are you up for it?"

Then she looked up, her eyes clear, a tentative but genuine smile pulling at her lips. "Yes, you betcha. That sounds like fun."

Eric took a deep breath. "So, about Thanksgiving... it sounds like you got drafted into hosting duties pretty last minute."

Mindy's shoulders relaxed. She seemed grateful for a topic that was both relevant and neutral. "You have no idea. Dad's spontaneous *I'm staying in town for Thanksgiving* really threw me for a loop. I'm just so used to him spending the holidays with my siblings since they're the ones with children."

"Maybe he just wants to be closer to you."

"Or maybe he wants to get closer to your mom." She wriggled her eyebrows.

"Yeah, our parents are, uh, hitting it off pretty quickly, huh?"

Mindy grimaced. “Fast doesn’t begin to cover it. Don’t get me wrong, I love that Dad’s happy, and your mother is lovely, but now I have two days to pull together a Thanksgiving feast amid my busiest time of year and I’m freaking out a little.”

“You know, if you need an extra pair of hands, I make a killer sweet potato casserole.”

Her eyes enlivened. “Are you saying you’ll help me avoid a Thanksgiving cooking disaster?”

“Well, I’ve never cooked a turkey, but how hard could it be?” Eric shrugged. “We can YouTube it.”

Mindy laughed. The sound was so genuine it broke through the remaining tension like sunlight through clouds. “You might just be my holiday hero, Eric.”

Her words were a breath of fresh air and the looming holiday events felt less like a challenge and more like an opportunity—something they could tackle together.

“In that case,” he said, “here’s to being thankful for unexpected, crazy, wonderful turns in life.”

They grinned at each other.

“This might be an odd question, but did you ever do the whole ‘perfect family Thanksgiving’ growing up?”

Eric blinked. “Oh, you mean the Norman Rockwell painting come to life? Turkey, trimmings, parades on TV, everyone behaving themselves?”

“Exactly.” Mindy giggled.

“Well, we tried. Mom would get overly ambitious with the menu; Dad would take over the turkey, and I had the all-important role of setting the table as we waited for the guests to arrive. Inevitably, the gravy would be lumpy; someone would forget the cranberry sauce, and an argument would break out among the relatives. But you know what? Those were some of the best times ever.”

Mindy’s face grew wistful. “Our Thanksgivings were special. Mom had this antique lace tablecloth she would only use on that day, and she’d use special dishes she inherited

from her mom. Dad would crack jokes while he basted the turkey. After dinner, we'd all sit on the couch, eating pie and watching football."

Eric felt a pang of longing. He never realized how much he'd missed those big family gatherings until now. Since his dad had passed away, he and his mom had mostly lost touch with his father's side of the family.

"That sounds wonderful, actually."

"It was," Mindy's voice was tinged with melancholy. "But people move on, things change. My mom is gone, Dad is retired, and I'm here with you, faking a relationship."

"It'll be over soon," he said, feeling wistful. He wasn't so sure he wanted it to be over.

"That only leaves two questions, and then I really must get back to work."

"What's that?" She moistened her lips with the top of her tongue, mesmerizing him.

"What should I bring to Thanksgiving dinner and what time should we be there?"

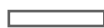
"Bring that sweet potato casserole. Dinner is at five."

A strange thrill tightened his throat. He was actually looking forward to this. "See you then, Mindy."

"It's a date."

But it wasn't. Not really.

And then she was gone, rushing from the exam room, leaving her lovely aroma lingering in the air behind her.



Excited at the thought of spending Thanksgiving with Mindy, Eric met his best friend, Scott Finley, at the gym that evening after he closed the clinic. Scott was a rancher and a carpenter, and he was also a newlywed who couldn't say enough good things about marriage.

They worked out with weights for an hour, spotting each other, then sat in the sauna making small talk.

“So the word around town is that you’re dating Mindy Ryder.”

Eric groaned. “Seriously? What have you heard?”

“It’s a small town, bro. The grapevine is sizzling. And everyone thinks you make a great couple. Me and Jenny included.”

“Ugh.”

“You gotta expect it. People adore you and Mindy both. By the way, when are you and Mindy gonna double date with me and Jenny?”

“Is this your idea or your wife’s?” Eric asked, covering his face with a towel.

“Both. We’d like to get to know her.”

“Yeah, well, I need to get to know her first.”

Scott laughed, something he did easily and often. “Well, at least you’re over Cassandra. She was as chilly as the North wind.”

“She didn’t like you much, either.”

“Whenever you feel like being sociable and sharing Mindy with the world, we’ll set something up,” Scott said. “You can’t keep her all to yourself forever.”

“Time to hit the showers.” Eric wanted out of this conversation as he realized this fake dating with Mindy could actually cause a lot of trouble for him.

And suddenly, he was worried.

With his family and friends and honestly, the whole of Kringle rooting for them, what would be the consequences when their playacting ended?



Eric was on call for Thanksgiving and that morning, he got pulled in to help Zach Delaney with a cow experiencing a difficult birth. Luckily, he'd made the sweet potato casserole the night before and stored it in the fridge.

He texted his mom to head on over Mindy's house to help with the food prep and he'd be there as soon as he finished up at Zach's ranch.

To tell the truth, he was grateful for the distraction, especially after saving both cow and calf. Mindy had so taken over his brain, it was nice to have something to focus on besides his feelings, fears, and doubts about their arrangement.

Trouble was, in just a brief time, Mindy had begun to mean something to him.

And he just wasn't ready for that.

He almost used the calving emergency as an excuse to skip the dinner entirely, but he knew Mindy needed his help, so after he left the Delaney ranch, he swung by the grocery store and picked up flowers to brighten her table.

He selected a flower bouquet that reminded him of autumn in Iowa, shades of gold and rust like the late fall foliage, but now that he was on her doorstep, Eric wondered if he'd overdone it. The flowers were long-stemmed and wrapped in green tissue paper. Was it over the top? Was he trying way too hard?

Shaking off the second-guessing, he rang the buzzer, the flowers in one hand, the sweet potato casserole in the other. His mom's compact Toyota sat in the driveway right next to Mindy's van.

Wayne threw the door open, and Eric took a step backward. He'd expected Mindy to answer.

"Good to see you again, Eric." Mindy's dad waved him into the foyer.

"Nice seeing you again, er... Wayne."

"Come on in, come on in. Your mom and Mindy are in the kitchen. Linda has been regaling us with tales of when you

were little.”

Good grief. What had his mother divulged?

Wayne must have read his mind. “She told us about the Thanksgiving when you were three and she served you asparagus for the first time. You took a bite and sailed it across the table where it landed in the turkey gravy and you hollered, “*Eww*, dirty green bean!”

“Yeah.” Eric wriggled his eyebrows. “That story is always a crowd-pleaser.”

Wayne chuckled and clamped a hand on Eric’s. “That story tells me you had discerning tastes, even back then. Bodes well for my Mindy.”

Peaches came running down the hallway, her short little legs moving surprisingly fast, her cute owner on her heels.

Mindy’s eyes widened at the flowers Eric clutched, and she stopped, pressing a hand to her chest. “Are those for me?”

“For the dinner table.” Eric’s heart gave a hop at the huge grin spreading across her face. He felt inordinately proud of himself for pleasing her. Okay, the flowers weren’t too over the top.

“Thank you, Eric.” Mindy’s fingers brushed his as she took the flowers from him.

Instantly, a blistering trail of tingles shot up his arm. She wore a cute little white top over a red plaid skirt, black leggings, and black ankle boots. She probably didn’t know how sexy she looked, which was a big part of her appeal.

“C’mon into the kitchen,” she invited. “I’ll put these in some water.”

He trailed after Wayne, and Peaches brought up the rear. He found his mother sitting on a barstool, sipping a glass of wine. He went over and planted a kiss on her cheek, while Mindy searched for a vase for the flowers.

He settled the sweet potato casserole, covered with foil, on the counter. Mindy took it and popped it into the oven to reheat.

“Hello, honey,” Mom said. “I brought the pinot noir. Help yourself to a glass. Mindy and I were just swapping Thanksgiving stories while the bird finishes roasting.”

“Can’t drink,” Eric said. “I’m still on call.”

“How did things go with the cow?” Mindy asked, finding a green vase underneath the kitchen sink and arranging his flowers with expert ease.

“Great, great, mom and calf are doing well.”

“That’s gotta be rewarding,” Wayne said.

“It is when things work out.” Eric nodded.

“All set.” Mindy placed the vase of flowers in the middle of the dining table and rearranged the cornucopia scene to incorporate his flowers into her holiday design.

Eric rolled up his sleeves. “What can I do to help?”

Mindy handed him stack of plates. “Why, you can set the table.”

“On it.” Grinning, he took the plates and got down to business.



The kitchen pulsed with activity. Christmas music filled the air infused with a blend of herbs and the mouthwatering aroma of roasting turkey. Mindy stirred the bubbling gravy, her tongue darting out to catch a stray droplet that splashed onto her lip.

When Mom was alive, Mindy had gone home to Pittsburgh for Thanksgiving. Last year without Mom had been tough and her older sister, Carly, had taken over hosting. But this year, Carly and her family had gone on a holiday cruise with her husband’s parents. Honestly, until Dad showed up, Mindy had planned on spending the day working. It had felt like an inconvenience when Dad announced he was staying, but now, she was so happy he had.

“Dad, you’re massacring those potatoes.” She laughed as her father wrestled with the peeler.

Wayne looked up, his cheeks flushing. “Giving it my best shot, honey.”

Linda, who was arranging the crescent rolls on a baking pan, wiped her hands on the apron Mindy had given her to wear and stepped over beside him. “Here, let me show you a trick, Wayne.”

She took the peeler and gracefully stripped a potato, demonstrating how to do it. Their laughter mingled with the notes of “Santa Claus is Coming to Town” oozing from the sound system.

Across the room at the dining table, Eric folded the holiday napkins into elegant swans. “Mindy, what do you think?” he asked, holding up a perfectly crafted bird.

“Where did you learn to do that? It’s gorgeous.” Mindy gave him a thumbs-up.

“I taught him,” Linda said. “I used to work in a restaurant. Told him it would come in handy when impressing his dates.”

“You were right,” Mindy told her. “I am impressed. I think you’ve missed your calling, Dr. Kincaid. You should have been a party planner.”

“Ahh, but then who would care of Peaches?”

At the sound of her name, Peaches hopped to her feet and trotted into the center of the kitchen with everyone. Laughing, they finished the dinner prep and got everything on the table.

Her dad poured wine in every glass, only adding a few swallows in one and handing it to Eric. “I know you’re on call, Eric, so just a sip for toasting.”

“Thanks.”

“To family and new friends.” Her father raised his glass.

“To joyful surprises,” Linda added, her eyes meeting Wayne’s with a soft sparkle.

Eric’s gaze found Mindy’s. “And unexpected moments.”

The toasts went around the table, glasses clinking in a symphony of warmth and connection. As they settled into their seats, conversation flowed as easily.

“Eric, this sweet potato casserole is amazing,” Linda said. “The student has outdone the master.”

“I’ll never be able to outdo you, Mom.” Eric grinned at his mother. “You raised me as a single parent after Dad died and I wouldn’t be where I am without you.”

“Aww, that’s sweet of you to say.” Linda beamed at her son.

“He’s a good egg, Linda,” her father said. “Job well done.”

Linda blushed. “I can say the same to you about Mindy.”

Mindy’s whole body tingled. The warmth in her chest had little to do with the wine and everything to do with the kindness and love at the table. She watched her father and Linda exchange shy glances, their hands brushing as they passed the food dishes. She caught Eric’s eye.

He winked.

Ducking her head, she smiled helplessly. What a lovely day. She’d avoided celebrating Thanksgiving on her own because it had been Mom’s holiday and she couldn’t imagine taking it over, but now? She was up for doing it again next year.

This was fun!

Except next year, Eric and Linda wouldn’t be here because she and Eric weren’t really a couple.

Mindy let out a soft sigh. Maybe not. But because of having fake-dated Eric, he’d taught her it was okay to embrace holiday traditions without becoming a slave to them.

As the laughter and stories swirled around the table, Mindy felt a shift, a gentle nudge toward something new and thrilling. In that room, amidst the clinking of cutlery and the glow of community, the promise of change bloomed and grew.

Eric took on the role of entertainer, regaling them with tales of his veterinary escapades. Mindy watched, captivated by his animated storytelling and the way his eyes lit with passion when he talked about animals.

Peaches had migrated to his chair and Mindy didn't miss that he scratched the corgi's back with the tip of his cowboy boot. Her dog adored him too.

Mindy felt herself teetering on the edge of something wonderful, and she cast a sidelong glance at Eric, wondering if he felt it too.

"That was the best Thanksgiving meal I've had in a long time. Don't tell your siblings." Dad patted his belly.

"It truly was delicious, Mindy. Thank you for inviting us," Linda said.

"We're so happy you could come." Mindy started clearing away the dishes and everyone else got up to help.

"It's been a genuine pleasure getting to know you both," her father said to Linda and Eric. "Everyone in Kringle has been so warm and welcoming, it's gonna be hard getting on that plane to Santa Fe tomorrow."

Mindy let out her breath. She'd been so worried Dad would extend his stay in Kringle yet again. She hated imposing on Eric, and it was a relief to get out from under the fake dating lie. She should be happy. Ecstatic.

But she wasn't. Glumness stuck to her like glue.

Because her time as Eric's girlfriend had ended, and their playacting was over. Time to return to their separate lives.

CHAPTER 9

IT WAS FOR THE BEST.

Fake-dating Mindy had complicated his life and Eric should have been thrilled to have his freedom back the minute Wayne Ryder stepped onto that plane.

But oddly, he wasn't.

During his workday, when he should have been concentrating on his patients, Eric would catch his mind wandering to Mindy, and he'd have to corral his thoughts and refocus on the task at hand.

Mindy had walked him to his truck on Thanksgiving night, telling him how relieved she was that their subterfuge was over. She looked happy to be done with it.

Done with him.

He'd asked her to wait to break the news to her father that they were no longer dating until after the charity gala. He didn't want his mother putting him back on the bachelor auction block. Mindy agreed and assured him they no longer had to go out or do things together, but she would attend the gala with him as if they were a couple.

The thing was, he *wanted* to go out with her.

But he had no idea how she felt about him. She seemed to enjoy his company, but how much of that had just been pretend?

He woke up every morning thinking about the kiss they'd shared and went to bed at night, smiling at the memory of her

scent. Honestly, he missed her. When he went for his evening jog, he was on the lookout for her van. He'd texted her a couple of times about the charity gala but included nothing personal and she'd responded in kind.

Both of them keeping things professional.

He really liked her. Probably more than he should. She was his client, after all. Although technically Peaches was his client, so while it wasn't unethical for him to date Mindy, it just didn't feel quite right somehow.

It was good, right? Sensible. Smart to maintain boundaries.

Why then was he sad?

"Focus," he muttered under his breath and tapped on his keyboard, starting up the dictation app so he could report the medical findings on his last patient.

Della opened his office door and stuck her head in. "I put the dobie who swallowed a squeak toy in exam room one. He seems okay on the surface. No coughing or drooling. They're waiting for you."

"Thanks. Be right there."

"You okay, doc?" Della asked.

"Sure. Fine. Why do you ask?"

"I dunno, you've been gloomy as a thundercloud ever since Thanksgiving and that's not like you. Did something happen between you and Mindy?"

"No, not at all." It wasn't a lie. Nothing had happened between him and Mindy other than their playacting ended.

"You sure? Because she was popping up here almost every day to see you and ever since Thanksgiving, crickets."

"She's busy. I'm busy. It's a busy season." He pushed back his chair, got up, and slipped on his lab jacket.

"Yes, maybe so, but if you want to have a relationship, you've got to make time for one." Della shot him a chided glance and sashayed from the room.



The day before the charity gala, Mindy paced her bedroom. Peaches lay in the middle of the bed watching her with one eye closed.

“I promised Eric I’d do this,” she said, “so I’ve got to go help set up for the event tomorrow, but it feels weird, you know?”

Peaches rolled over onto her back, paws held up like she was begging.

“I’ll only be gone for three hours, so it’s not the end of the world. You won’t be alone that long. Unless he asks me out for coffee afterward. Do you think he might ask me out for coffee?”

The corgi yawned.

“No chance, huh? I mean, I could ask *him* out for coffee, but I haven’t seen him since Thanksgiving, and he’s only texted twice, and he kept it short and focused on the business at hand.” Mindy stopped pacing.

Peaches eyeballed her.

“I don’t know how to act around him. Play it cool and pretend everything is normal? Or should I just come clean and tell him I’d like to date him for real?”

Peaches put her paws over her face.

“I’m overthinking it, aren’t I?”

Peaches jumped down and barked.

“Okay, okay, a short walk, and then I have to leave for the evening.”

After their walk, Mindy left Peaches at home and drove to the conference center to help with the setup. One of the side doors was propped open for delivery people and volunteers to enter with supplies and donations.

Mindy glanced around, looking for someone she knew, and spied Della setting up tables with Chloe. No sign of Eric, though.

Okay, simple plan. Help set up, then get out ASAP. If she saw Eric, she would be friendly, but not overly so. Calm. Cool. Collected. That was the ticket.

She went over to Della and Chloe. “I’m ready to roll up my sleeves. How can I help?”

“Grab those tablecloths from that pile over there.” Della nodded in the direction of the black tablecloths. “Put them on as we set up the tables.”

“On it.” Mindy bopped over, grabbed one of the stretchy spandex tablecloths that hooked around the feet of the rectangle tables.

It took a bit of wrestling to get the fitted cloth onto the table and just when she thought she had the fourth leg secured, the cloth popped off the first leg.

“Darn it.” She huffed, straightened, and brushed her hair from her face.

“Need a hand?” a familiar masculine voice asked from behind her.

Pulse hammering, face flushing, Mindy turned to face Eric. And oh heavens, he looked delicious. He wore snug-fitting Wranglers, a red plaid western shirt, and cowboy boots. “Hey,” she said.

“Hey.”

The fun, flirty stuff that usually spilled out so easily was gone. They peered into each other’s eyes. The air felt altered somehow—thicker, maybe, like they were both hyperaware of each other but didn’t want to show it. Staring, they simultaneously hitched in a deep breath.

Eric was the one to break the spell, bending to reattach the cloth to the table leg it had popped off of, and as he leaned over, Mindy couldn’t help ogling his backside in those jeans. He straightened, and she snatched her glance away.

There was a hum of activity in the convention center as volunteers hustled around, sorting out the auction items, putting up decorating, and unpacking boxes.

“Ready for the next table?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said and grabbed another tablecloth and away they went, wrapping each table with a spandex tablecloth, covering the legs.

It didn't take long to develop a rhythm. They worked side by side, in easy synergy. Once they finished stretching all the tables with tablecloths, they moved on to the centerpieces. Festive arrangements of flowers and miniature animal figurines.

“Hey, what do you think about adding some battery fairy lights around these centerpieces? I've got extras in my van,” Mindy asked.

Eric stepped back, appraising the table with a thoughtful tilt of his head. “I think that's a brilliant idea. It'll make the whole setup pop.”

His words lit her up inside.

“Do you have enough lights? I count thirty tables.”

“I believe I do.”

“Let's go get them.”

They walked out into the parking lot together. The sun had dipped lower toward the horizon and the air had grown cooler since she'd been inside. Mindy snuggled deeper into her sweater.

“How have you been?” Eric asked.

“Good. You?”

“Great.”

Silence yawned out between them.

“Here we are,” she said far too brightly and hit the remote on her alarm. The van chirped, and she hurried to open the back door.

“Wow, I can’t believe how organized your van is,” he said, peering inside.

“I have to be organized. It’s my job.” She leaned in, grabbed an empty cardboard box, and started filling it with the fairy lights.

“Let me help.” He reached for the lights and his hand brushed against hers.

Instantly, they both jumped back and then chuckled nervously.

“I can get it,” she said.

“At least let me carry the box for you.”

“Sure, sure.” She finished stuffing the box, handed it to him, and locked up the van.

They walked back to the convention center. Things still felt weird between them, and she wasn’t sure how to bridge that. Now every look, every touch seemed loaded, as if they were both thinking, *is this okay? What was going on between us?* She knew for sure she was.

Back inside, they returned to the centerpieces and once again, when they were working together for a common goal, the awkwardness fell away, and they just clicked. She showed Eric how she envisioned the lights woven around the decorations.

“Those fairy lights look beautiful, Mindy. Well done.” Linda came up behind them and put a hand on Mindy’s shoulder.

“We’ll turn the batteries off when we leave,” Eric said. “So they’ll be working tomorrow.”

“I have a good feeling about this event,” Linda said. “I think we’re going to raise the most money ever. Thank you so much for pitching in, Mindy.”

“Of course,” Mindy said. “Anything for Kringle Kritters. They rescue so many animals.”

“How’s your dad?” Linda asked.

“He’s great. You haven’t been talking to him?” She darted a glance at Eric’s mother.

“We decide to take a break. Things were moving a little too fast, and we needed some space apart to really see how we felt about each other.” Linda smiled. “It’s all good. We just want to make sure we’re not letting our emotions run away with us.”

“That sounds sensible,” Mindy said, but she was worried. Dad hadn’t mentioned he and Linda were taking a break, but he had promised to be back in Kringle for New Year’s Day.

“Well, I see someone over there I need to say hi to. I’ll check back in with you two later. Have fun.” Linda waved and trotted off.

Mindy turned to Eric. “Did you tell her anything about us?”

“No. I wanted to give you time to tell your dad first. Besides, I didn’t want her to know until after the gala. I don’t want to be up there again.” Eric nodded at the stage. “I’ve paid my dues at the bachelor auction.”

“Too bad,” she teased. “I would have bid on you.”

“Would you?” He looked amused and his eyes glistened in the soft glow of the fairy lights.

She caught her breath. “Uh-huh.”

“Well, you don’t have to. I’m yours for the entire event.” He paused and looked a little uncertain. “If you want me.”

“Of course. We have to make it look convincing for your mom, right?”

“Right.”

He gazed at her, and she gazed at him, and her head felt a little dizzy. Not knowing what to do with her feelings, she clapped her hands. “Well, let’s get back to work.”

They dove in with other volunteers, going through the donated items for the silent auction, opening boxes, cataloging, setting up the system for bids.

As they worked, the room transformed. They hung gala banners from the walls and put Christmas decorations on the doors. The once empty room had slowly turned into an elegant venue, ready to welcome guests and donors for tomorrow's big night.

Mindy adjusted a banner that stubbornly refused to hang straight.

"Here," Eric said. "Let me help."

He was the most helpful man she'd ever known. She loved his can-do spirit and work ethic that matched her own. Their hands brushed as they both reached for the same corner, and for a split second, the entire room seemed to fall away.

She gasped softly and stepped back as hot sparks of attraction shot up her arm.

"Looks like we've got ourselves a stubborn one," Eric said, trying to break the momentary tension. His eyes, however, lingered on Mindy's face.

"Yeah, but it's no match for us."

Together, they wrangled the banner into place, and the sense of accomplishment was coupled with an unspoken camaraderie that seemed to grow with every task they tackled together.

They looked around for a new task to tackle and realized everything was finished and all that remained was the cleanup.

"Wow, we did it." Mindy exhaled and scanned the room. "It looks spectacular."

Eric stood next to her, his gaze not surveying the room, but centered on her. "Yeah, we did."

"The gala will be the town."

"I'm looking forward to it." His gaze stayed pinned on her. "What time should I pick you up?"

"You don't have to do that. I can meet you here."

"I insist," he said. "Six thirty okay?"

“Yes, that sounds good.”

They peered into each other’s eyes. Mindy’s chest heated. She turned away, breaking his gaze, overwhelmed by the intensity. “Guess all we need to do now is gather up the trash and put away the boxes. Maybe sweep the floor.”

“There are already people on it.” He nodded at the efficient volunteers wielding trash bags and brooms. “Would you like to grab a bite to eat?”

Mindy lowered her lashes, and her heart beat faster. “Like on a date?”

“We don’t have to label it.”

She opened her mouth to accept his invitation, joy buoying her heart, but before she could say more than, “I—”

The front door to the convention center banged open and a striking blonde swept inside, two men behind her wheeling in dollies stacked high with boxes. She wore jodhpurs, riding boots, and a formfitting top. God had gifted the woman with many physical assets. She was shaped like an hourglass, and with her honied hair swept back off her forehead, it bounced around her shoulders like a glorious mane.

Everyone stopped what they were doing to gawk in open-mouthed admiration.

“Hold the horses, everyone,” she announced in a dulcet voice that could have belonged to a mermaid. “I have *the* best donations for your little group. Could someone please show my hands where to unload them?”

Linda moved forward to greet the blonde, her hand outstretched. “Thank you for your generous donations. We were just about to leave, so you got here in the nick of time, Cassandra.”

“Oh, am I making you all wait?” Cassandra blinked and looked around as if noticing for the first time there were other people in the room.

Mindy waited for her to apologize for showing up so late and expecting everyone to stay and catalogue the boxes of

donations her men were in the process of unloading.

“No trouble, no trouble at all,” Linda said, as if the woman had apologized.

Beside Mindy, Eric tensed.

Putting a hand to her mouth, Mindy leaned in to whisper to him, “Who *is* that stunning woman?”

“That,” Eric said. “Is my ex-fiancée.”

CHAPTER 10

MINDY'S STOMACH PLUMMETED. This gorgeous, exciting creature was Eric's ex? No wonder he'd kept his distance after her dad left town. Compared to a goddess like Cassandra, Mindy felt small and plain.

Cassandra spotted Eric and sailed over, ivory teeth flashing. "Eric, it's so good to see you. How have you been?"

The muscle at Eric's jaw ticked. He nodded. "Cassandra."

There was still emotion here. Tension for sure, but was there something else? Mindy's hopes plummeted. She didn't stand a chance against someone like Cassandra.

"Aren't you going to give me a proper hello?" Cassandra held out her arms.

Reluctantly, Eric stepped forward and gave her a brief, impersonal hug.

But Cassandra wasn't letting him get away with that. She slipped her arm around Eric's and drew him closer. Over her shoulder, Eric met Mindy's eyes, shaking his head slightly as if to say this wasn't his choice.

He stepped back from Cassandra and returned to Mindy's side. Cassandra's gaze flicked from Mindy to Eric and stared at him for a beat too long, her eyes inscrutable. She offered up a too bright smile.

"Well," Cassandra said. "Isn't this lovely?"

Eric's returning smile was tense.

Mindy's chest muscles tightened. Did Eric still have unresolved feelings for his ex? Yikes. She needed to get out of here.

Now.

"Gotta go," she mumbled, lifted a hand goodbye, ducked her head, and scurried out the door.

Inside her van, she dropped her head to the steering wheel. Darn it! Why had she allowed herself to start spinning fantasies about actually dating Eric for real? How could she have been so stupid? If he'd been interested, he would have initiated something after her dad left town.

Sighing, she started the engine. It was for the best. She didn't want to be tied down, anyway. She was happy being single.

After tomorrow night's gala, she would tell her dad the truth and fully close the book on her fake relationship with Eric.



Eric raised his hand to knock on Mindy's front door, then stopped, wiping his palm on the seat of his suit pants. He didn't know why he was so nervous, but he was.

It bothered him that Mindy had fled the community center last night upon Cassandra's arrival and he wanted to reassure he was truly over his ex. He had seen the disappointment in her eyes when Cassandra had claimed his attention and pulled him away from her.

The second he'd disentangled himself from Cassandra, he'd gone out into the night hoping to catch her before she took off, but her van was no longer in the parking lot. He'd texted her, but she'd silenced her notifications and hadn't texted him back.

This was their last night together. Their commitment to the fake dating pact complete. They'd both held up their end of

the bargain, but now Eric wanted more. He wanted the real thing.

With Mindy.

Exhaling, Eric rapped his knuckles against the wood door. A moment later, the door swung open.

Mindy peeked out at him, a vision in a sleek black cocktail dress and stiletto heels. She'd had her hair shorn and styled into the cutest pixie cut. She smiled at him, the green flecks in her hazel eyes shining in the glow of the porch light.

He caught his breath. She was absolutely gorgeous.

"Hi," she said, a shy expression sliding over her face.

His pulse kicked up. "You look absolutely stunning."

A pretty blush tinted Mindy's cheeks, and she lowered her thick, dark lashes. "Thank you. You look quite dapper yourself."

They stood there awkwardly for a moment, the air thickening between them.

Clearing his throat, he offered Mindy his arm. "Shall we?"

With a nod, she looped her hand through the crook of his elbow and let him lead her to the limo he'd rented for the occasion. He opened the door and helped her inside.

"Wow, you sprung for a limo?"

"Actually, I've got a client who runs a limo service in Fort Worth. This is a barter deal. His next vet visit is on me."

"This is so nice. I've never ridden in a limo before."

"Not even for senior prom?"

"I didn't go to prom."

"Why not?"

"I got stood up."

"By one of those bad boyfriends your dad disliked?"

"Yeah. Trae was my first boyfriend."

It was on the tip of Eric's tongue to tell her he wanted to be her last, but that was way too much too soon. They hadn't even been on a non-fake date yet and they'd only kissed once.

And what a kiss it had been!

Never mind that it had been for show, for her dad's sake. Kissing Mindy had knocked Eric's socks off.

He couldn't wait to kiss her again and he planned on doing so at the gala tonight and then ask her if she would go out with him for real. Eric slid in beside her. He was intensely aware of Mindy's bare knee mere inches from his own. He clenched his hands, resisting the urge to reach out and touch her smooth skin.

Boundaries.

He wasn't her boyfriend.

Yet.

The scent of her perfume, a delicate floral fragrance, filled the limo. He admired the elegant line of her neck, the graceful slope of her collarbone, and his pulse thrummed. What would her skin taste like if he pressed his mouth there?

She caught him looking and gave a *Mona Lisa* smile. Eric's stomach swooped.

Tonight has to be perfect. One magical evening. He would show her how he felt about her through his actions, and then he would tell her exactly what she'd come to mean to him.

And pray she felt the same way.



The auction was held first, before the music and dancing began. Eric and Mindy mingled with the guests. Eric introduced her to his friend group, all people Mindy knew in passing, but none she knew well.

They chatted casually until the auctioneer stepped up to the microphone as the guests gathered around, eagerly eying the

items on display—an Alaskan cruise, a set of diamond earrings, a week in a beachfront condo.

Mindy had donated a free home or office organizational package, and it felt paltry by comparison.

Signs on all three of the extravagant items said they'd been donated by Cassandra Trilby along with dozens of other items.

But of course, Cassandra was not only beautiful and exciting, but she was also rich. Why had Eric broken up with her? Mindy wanted to ask him, but this didn't seem the time or place.

“Welcome, folks!” the auctioneer boomed. “Who’s ready to open their hearts and wallets for our noble cause, Kringle Kritters Animal Rescue?”

The crowd cheered and applauded for Kringle Kritters.

Mindy squeezed Eric’s arm, smiling. “This is so exciting! With these wonderful items, maybe we’ll beat last year’s fundraising record.”

“All thanks to you,” Eric said.

“No, thanks to your ex. Look at the amazing things she donated.” Mindy waved a hand at the auction table.

“Cassandra wasn’t the one working her tail off setting up the event. You’ve worked miracles, pulling this event together.”

“I was just one of many volunteers. You included.”

“Okay, it was a communal effort,” he said. “But you were instrumental.”

“Kringle Kritters is a fantastic organization. I enjoyed every minute of helping.”

The auctioneer introduced the first item—a round of golf with a local celebrity athlete. “Let’s start the bidding at one hundred. Do I hear one hundred dollars?”

Hands shot up around the room. Mindy cheered along as the bids rolled in. She anxiously scanned the paddles, willing the numbers to climb higher.

“Going once... going twice... sold! For five hundred.” The auctioneer banged his gavel.

Mindy turned to Eric, her eyes shining. “We’re off to a great start!”

Item after item came up for bid, and the money rolled in as the denizens of Kringle generously bid on the donations. Mindy could hardly contain her excitement watching the dollar tally mount.

“You’re like a kid on Christmas morning,” he said.

“It’s just so exciting.” Mindy bounced on the balls of her feet.

“Your enthusiasm is infectious.”

“Look!” Mindy gripped Eric’s knee as the bidding as Cassandra’s luxury fourteen-day cruise sailed past five thousand dollars. “I think we might break a hundred grand tonight!”

“All thanks to your incredible organizing skills,” Eric said, pride in his voice. “You really whipped this place into shape last night.”

“Pah.” She waved a hand. “I was just a cog in the wheel... but I’m a very proud cog.”

The auction finished with uproarious applause as the final tally was announced—one hundred and six thousand, a record!

Mindy threw her arms around Eric’s neck, euphoric. “We did it!”

“You called it.” He chuckled, his eyes crinkling at the corners from his big radiant smile.

“I have a flair for doing math in my head.”

“Yes, you do.” Laughing, Eric lifted her off her feet and spun her in a circle.

Joy exploded through Mindy. She wanted this night to last forever.

“Would you like some punch and nibbles?” he asked. “While they clear away the auction and set up for the dance floor?”

“That would be lovely.”

They sat with Eric’s friends, and they welcomed her like she’d been a part of them forever—Chloe and Evan, Zach and Suzannah, Ava and Caleb, Dan and Joy, Scott and Jenny. What a lovely group of people. They chatted about the clinic, Kringle Kritters, and the record-breaking money the auction had brought in. When the music started, everyone bussed their dishes and headed for the dance floor.

“Your friends think we’re for real dating, don’t they?” she said to Eric.

“They do.”

“Did you tell them?”

“No, it’s Kringle. The grapevine hums.”

“What will they think when we break up?”

“About that—”

“Come on, slowpokes.” Chloe popped over to them. “The dance is starting. Time to kick up our heels.” She took hold of Eric’s arm and dragged him toward the dance floor. Eric grabbed on to Mindy, and laughing, the three of them joined the rest of Eric’s friends on the dance floor.

The DJ warmed up with a naughty Christmas song, “Santa Claus Wants Some Lovin’” and that got everyone laughing.

After that, the songs shifted to lively dance tunes and then slowed to waltzes as the evening wore on.

Mindy glided across the dance floor, barely noticing the other couples around them. In Eric’s arms, the rest of the room faded away.

He was a good dancer, guiding her with a subtle press of his palm or gentle nudge of his thighs. Each movement flowed seamlessly into the next.

“Where did you learn to dance so well?” she asked.

“Mom.” He grinned. “She insisted that learning to dance should be part of everyone’s education.”

“Linda is so wise.”

“I’ll tell her you said so.” He glided her around the dance floor.

Mindy thrilled at his powerful hands spanning her back, his fingertips pressing into her bare skin. The clean, woody scent of his cologne intoxicated her.

Gazing up at him, she traced the sharp angle of his jaw with her gaze. A lock of golden hair fell over his forehead, and she itched to brush it back.

“The Christmas Waltz” swelled to crescendo, and Eric pulled her closer until no space remained between them.

Mindy’s pulse thumped hard. It felt as if they were dancing in a Disney movie. Acutely aware of the hard muscles beneath his shirt, she rested her cheek against his chest, letting his heart’s rhythm sync with her own.

This was their last date.

The best one yet.

In his embrace, she’d never felt more beautiful, more seen. Here, in the circle of his arms, she found what had been missing in her life—connection, acceptance, belonging with a man.

The song ended too quickly. Breathless, they lingered on the dance floor, neither willing to break the spell.

Finally, Eric took her hand, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. “Have I told you how incredibly gorgeous you look tonight?”

Mindy’s knees wobbled. “Only a dozen times.”

He lowered his voice. “It bears repeating.”

“Looks like the DJ is taking a break and we’re standing in the middle of the dance floor drawing attention to ourselves,” she murmured.

“Would you like a bathroom break? Water?”

“Yes, to both.”

They went in opposite directions and Mindy realized it was the first time that night they’d been apart, and she felt strangely lonesome without him. Most likely because she knew this was their last night as a couple, even if it wasn’t real.

She rejoined Eric on the dance floor and off they went. The rest of the night passed in a fantastical blur of Eric’s tender looks, his arms encircling her waist, the joy of simply being together.

Mindy soaked it all up, enjoying every fleeting second, savoring the night.

The party broke up around ten. Everyone said their goodbyes and headed out. Mindy met Eric’s eyes.

“Should we stay and help clean up?”

“Mom and the committee hired a cleaning crew. They considered it worth the extra cost, knowing everyone would be exhausted after the event.”

“Smart thinking.” She’d been a little disappointed, thinking if they cleaned up together, they could extend the evening by an hour or so.

“I’ve learned my mother is quite wise.”

“Well, I guess this is it. Thank you for everything, Eric. It’s been amazing getting to you,” she said.

“Wait.” He touched her arm. “Would you to walk around the town square for a bit before the limo takes us home?”

“Why, Eric,” she said, fresh hope surging that at last they would have time to talk away from people. “I would love that.”

CHAPTER 11

IT HAD BEEN A MAGICAL NIGHT, and Eric didn't want it to end. He had so much to say to her, but he wasn't sure where to start.

He held out his hand, and silently, she took it.

They left the convention center, the limo trailing behind them after Eric texted the driver their intentions, and they walked to the town square hand in hand, peering in the store windows decorated with Christmas displays.

"It's so quiet this time of night." She stopped to turn to him. "Peaceful."

He studied her face. Eric really liked Mindy. She was bubbly and optimistic, but she was also someone he could relax around. The tension that had earlier dogged them vanished completely, and he got swept up in the moment.

Mindy's bright smile made the night, and the quaint town square, feel otherworldly somehow.

Attraction sparked between them like an electrical arc. His pulse strummed and he couldn't recall the last time he'd felt so alive. She was a magnet, and he was iron filings. All he wanted was to stick to her... *with* her.

"Do you realize," he said, glancing at the lamppost above them decorated with holly and ribbons. "That we're standing under mistletoe?"

"Oh?" She moistened her lips and followed his gaze. "So we are."

He'd kissed her for show, for her father's benefit, in his truck that night they came back from the Stockyards. But this kiss was all for him, slow and soft, until she leaned forward and melted into his arms.

Eric slid his lips to the skin below her ear.

"I didn't expect..." she murmured.

"Hmmm," he murmured. Her warm jaw tasted heavenly.

"I didn't plan..." she whispered a tad breathlessly.

"Shh."

He moved his hands to her shoulders and deepened the kiss. He wasn't sure where this would lead, but he wanted her—very much.

He locked his arms around her. She caressed the back of his neck.

Her lips parted under his, and his head spun, dizzied from the scent of her. He hadn't allowed himself to fantasize about kissing her like this—well, rarely anyway—but the reality of having her in his arms was better than anything he'd imagined.

She took his lower lip between her teeth and gently nipped at it, her boldness surprising him. She was as into this as he was.

He drew her closer, the pulse quickening at his throat.

She molded her body against his.

He slid one hand up to cradle the back of her head, tangling his fingers in her silky hair. She let out a soft moan. Desire for her coursed through his body.

They came up briefly for air, foreheads touching, breathing ragged.

"Wow," Mindy whispered.

"Yeah." Eric couldn't manage more than the single syllable, his ability to form coherent thoughts scattering in the wake of that knee-wobbling kiss.

He lowered his mouth to hers again, losing himself in her sweet taste. Her hands roamed over his back, igniting sparks everywhere she touched. He traced her bottom lip with his tongue, and she opened for him eagerly, deepening the connection.

The twinkle lights, the carols playing over the loudspeakers, the entire world narrowed to just the two of them and this perfect moment.

Eric's phone vibrated in his pocket.

What rotten timing.

"Should you get that?" Mindy murmured, pulling back.

"Let them leave a message. I'm not on call tonight."

The phone buzzed again.

"You sure?" she asked. "I don't mind if you need to take the call."

"I mind," he said. "You're the most important thing to me right now."

Her cheeks flushed, and she lowered her lashes.

He lowered his lips again, claiming her mouth once more, proving his mind was on only one thing.

Mindy.

But the buzzing continued. With a frustrated groan, he reluctantly broke off the kiss, shoved a hand through his hair, and fumbled in his pocket.

"Sorry, just give me a sec to see who it is," he said.

Mindy nodded, face endearingly flushed, lips puffy from kissing. She blinked at him. Her eyes wide.

Without even looking at the screen, his gaze was too full of Mindy to see anything else, he answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Eric, I'm so sorry to bother you," Cassandra's pleading voice jarred him back to reality. "Mr. Magic is colicky. I fear

he has a twisted gut. I need you stat. I don't trust him with anyone else but you."



"I've got to go see about a sick animal," Eric said, his words coming out in a rush. There was a note of regret in his eyes that made Mindy's heart sink a little.

"It's fine," Mindy assured him, painting on a smile that was a little too bright, a little too quick. "I understand completely. Your patients come first."

She wanted to ask him why he had to go since he wasn't on call, but really it was none of her business. They weren't a couple. They'd just had their first date. She had no claim on how he spent his time. He owed her no explanation.

Eric seemed poised to say something more—his mouth opened, and his eyes flickered with something that looked a lot like reluctance. But then he bit his bottom lip as if cutting off the words on the tip of his tongue and nodded. "Take the limo home."

"No, no," Mindy said, putting a hand gently on his chest and stepped back. She still felt light-headed from that kiss, the kind that rewrote maps and disrupted compasses. "I'll walk. It's just six blocks, and the chill is hardly anything to complain about."

"You sure?" Concern tinged his voice, his eyes searching hers.

"Positive," she said. "Go. Your patient needs you."

He hesitated, looking as if there was something else he wanted to tell her. "But it's dark and late—"

"This is Kringle. It's safe. Everyone practically knows everyone. I'll be fine, I promise. Go on. You take the limo to go see the sick animal."

"One more kiss before I go?" His eyes twinkled as he glanced up, a grin playing on his lips. "Since we're still

standing beneath the mistletoe.”

Mindy lowered her lashes, feeling her cheeks heat. “You don’t need to drum up an excuse to kiss me, you know.”

His eyes widened a fraction. “I don’t?”

She lifted her gaze to meet his. “No.”

Laughing, the sound soft and wonderfully intimate in the quiet night, he leaned in and captured her lips in a quick but soul-stirring kiss. “To be continued...”

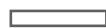
He turned away. Her gaze lingered on his back as he hurried to the limo. It felt as though her heart was running right alongside him, as if it might actually leap out of her chest and follow him into the night. Heavens above, she could really fall for this guy.

He stopped and turned back to look at her. Waved.

Still giddy from the evening, the taste of him still lingering on her lips, Mindy pressed her hand to her mouth and then blew him a kiss.

Eric pretended to catch it out of the air and patted it against his chest. He grinned that heart-melting grin of his, and for a moment, Mindy felt like the only woman in the world.

And to think she’d been concerned that her dad and Linda were the ones moving too fast. If she wasn’t careful, she was going to lose her heart. Because no one, absolutely no one, had ever sparked her interest the way Eric Kincaid did.



“Thank you for coming so quickly.” Cassandra was dressed in her usual jodhpurs, boots, and a formfitting shirt topped with a tufted goose down vest. She rushed up to Eric as he strode into the stables, his medical bag clutched in his hand.

Even at eleven o’clock at night, with one of her horses in crisis, she looked flawlessly put together. The picture of horsewoman perfection.

But Eric barely noticed. He was still thinking of the kiss that Mindy had blown his way, and his pulse was still pounding from the wonderful evening they'd shared. He'd had the limo driver drop him off at his house where he grabbed his gear and hopped into his pickup truck and took off for Cassandra's ranch.

"Which horse is it?" he asked, straightforward and to the point, not wanting to encourage conversation with his ex-fiancée that didn't pertain to the reason he was here.

"Prince Frederick." She led the way to the stall that housed her most prized Arabian.

The stallion was kicking at his flank, and he appeared distressed, his coat drenched in sweat. Cassandra had been right to call a vet, although he didn't know why she hadn't called the doctor who was now caring for her stable of horses. After they'd broken up, she'd switched vet practices altogether, and he'd been glad for it.

"He's been rolling a lot. I tried walking him, but he's not having any of it," Cassandra said, coming to stand closer to him than necessary.

Eric went right to work, performing a full exam on the stallion who was in such discomfort, he didn't put up much resistance.

The other horses in the neighboring stalls nickered softly, sensing Prince Frederick's distress and offering their condolences. Eric shot questions at Cassandra about the stallion's habits and behaviors over the past twenty-four hours. She answered each question with detailed answers. Cassandra might not have paid much attention to their relationship when they were together, but he could never fault her for neglecting her animals.

While he worked, she paced, walking back and forth across the stall. He blocked her out, focusing all his attention on the horse.

"I hope I didn't pull you from something important," Cassandra said, lightly touching his shoulder.

Eric shrugged off her hand. “Could you get the lavage tube from my bag?”

“Sure.” She fetched what he needed, handing him the hose and standing right beside him, coyly thrusting out her breasts and tilting her head to watch.

She was trying to flirt with him subtly, but he recognized what she was up to and didn’t fall for it.

Her familiar cologne filled his nose, but her exotic scent no longer enticed him the way it once had. Instead, he thought of Mindy. He felt guilty for having cut their date short in favor of Cassandra’s horse, but he could never leave an animal in distress.

Working together, they tended the horse and an hour later, Prince Frederick rewarded them for their efforts by passing manure.

He listened to the horse’s gut with a stethoscope, heard the gurgling sounds of it working, and nodded. He took the stethoscope from his ears and let it dangle around his neck.

“He’s going to be okay.”

“Thanks to you.” Cassandra sagged against the stall, relief on her face.

Even though Cassandra had been through rounds of colic before with her horses, Eric gave her instructions for Prince Frederick’s care. “You can call your regular vet in the morning and tell him what happened.”

“Thanks.” She gave him a tight smile. “My regular vet is at a conference in San Antonio, and I don’t have confidence in the vet who looks after his practice while he’s on the road.” She met Eric’s gaze. “I was hoping maybe you’d be my vet again.”

Eric shook his head. “I think that would be a bad idea.”

“But you’re the best vet in Kringle,” she said. “And you know my horses better than anyone.”

“I still don’t think it would be a good fit.” He crouched and started packing up his medical kit. “If you want to come back

to our practice, I'm sure Chloe would be happy to oversee the care of your stable."

"Eric." Cassandra put a hand to his arm.

He stepped back, and she dropped her hand. "Yes?"

"This is about more than the horses."

He jerked his gaze to her face. "What is it, Cassandra?"

"I made a mistake."

He arched an eyebrow, waiting to hear what she had to say.

"I didn't treat you right."

"No, Cassandra, you did not." He was proud of the lack of emotion in his voice. "But it's okay. We have different values and nothing much in common beyond a love for horses. I can't hold that against you."

Cassandra's dark eyes widened. "You've found someone else."

Eric wasn't sure about this thing with Mindy. It was still new. Still fresh. "I've moved on and you should, too."

"What's her name?"

"I'm not discussing this with you, Cassandra. I came here because you had a horse in trouble. If you think it's for any reason other than that, I'm afraid you're incorrect."

Her gorgeous face fell, and her shoulders slumped. For one wild moment, he wondered if she'd intentionally caused Prince Frederick's colic, but he couldn't let himself believe that. She truly loved her horses and while she could be conniving, he wanted to believe the best about her.

"It's that professional organizer, isn't it? The one I saw you with when I brought by the donations."

"What?" How did Cassandra know about Mindy?

"I ran into your mother at the auxiliary league, and she told me you were dating Mindy Ryder." Cassandra paused. "She is cute but a bit too—"

“Nope.” Eric put up his hand in a stop gesture. “You don’t get to trash-talk Mindy. I will not listen to that.”

Cassandra’s eyes narrowed. “So it *is* true. I thought your mom might have been trying to make me jealous so you and I would get back together, but you really are in a relationship with Mindy.”

He wasn’t. Not yet. But he wanted to be with Mindy. Honestly, it surprised him how much. Floored him how often he thought about her and missed her when she wasn’t around.

“So?” Cassandra interlaced her long, elegant fingers and clasped her hands in front of her body.

“So what?”

Cassandra chuffed out an indelicate breath, which wasn’t like her at all. She was usually smooth and classy in all her mannerisms and gestures. “Are you in love with her?”

Eric laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“This is just so *you*.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“You don’t pay any attention to me until someone else does.”

Cassandra lifted a perfectly plucked eyebrow. “So you’re not in love with her?”

“I like Mindy, yes. She’s fun to be around, but we barely know each other. That’s the point of dating. To get to know each other.”

“So you’re not serious.” Cassandra relaxed, and a smile flitted across her patrician face.

The woman enjoyed having him on a string like a yo-yo so she could pull him toward her when she wanted and send him away when she didn’t. He liked Mindy, a great deal. But while she’d been his client for two years, he knew little about her,

other than she had a father who was desperate to see her married.

Eric replayed the night over in his head—picking up Mindy at her house, being bowled over by how gorgeous she looked, their growing attraction, the kisses they'd shared, the phone call from Cassandra that had ended their evening.

Eric was comfortable in his own skin. Relaxed. Happy. He hadn't been that way with Cassandra. She'd kept him off-balance. Kept him guessing about her commitment to the relationship.

Sure, he was glad he'd met Mindy, but it was much too soon to decide if there was something special between them. He wanted to make certain before he jumped into anything. He didn't want to plunge headlong into a relationship like he'd done with Cassandra.

But he did want to pursue the spark. He enjoyed Mindy enough to slow things down, savor their courtship, take their time.

Courtship.

That word right there told him what he wanted, and it was not the woman in front of him. A mournful expression came over her face and she looked more vulnerable than he'd ever seen her look and that tugged at his empathy.

"Love isn't something to be rushed into," he said. "It takes time to fully get to know someone."

"Is that a jab at me?" She shook off the vulnerable countenance, acting nonchalant. Tough as nails.

He admired her for that. She was a strong woman. Maybe too strong to really connect with anyone intimately. He realized with a jolt he'd never really known her.

"No, Cassandra, it's not a jab at you. While we did move too fast, I'm not blaming you for anything that happened. We were both adults. We got together too quickly before we really knew each other. My mistake. I take the blame. It simply didn't work out. Now, if you have any more trouble with

Prince Frederick while your vet is out of town, you can call me again, but *only* if it's a horse-related emergency.”

With that, he turned and left the stables.

CHAPTER 12

MINDY TOSSED and turned in her bed, the crisp sheets feeling too starched, too cold—too everything. Her heart was still pumping adrenaline from the evening. Her thoughts circled back to Eric’s touch, his kiss, the sound of his laughter echoing in her ears.

“Ugh, get a grip.” She squeezed her eyes shut, but the memory of Eric looking at her—really looking at her—broke any hope of sleep.

She sat up, restless, her mind churning.

“Okay, logic review,” she said. “He had to leave. He had a legit reason. A vet’s job never stops, especially not for romance—or whatever this is.”

She remembered his eyes when he had to go. There was a genuine regret, but also a glimmer of... something else? Was it too early to even think of them becoming an actual couple?

Mindy buried her face into her hands. “I’m so screwed. I barely know him and yet... yet I feel like I’ve known him forever.”

A glow from her nightstand caught her eye. Her phone. She could call her best friend, Joy, and dissect every moment of the date, every micro-expression on Eric’s face, every potential future. But it was late, and Joy had a life of her own. A husband. Kids.

She sighed and reached for her journal from the drawer. She flicked on the bedside lamp and organized her swirling thoughts on paper. It wasn’t like talking to a human, but it was

an outlet. She finished writing, no closer to an answer than she was before she started.

Mindy picked up her phone again, her finger hovering over Eric's name in her contacts. She could text him. A simple 'Good night' or even 'I had a great time tonight.' But would that be too forward? Too desperate?

She shook her head, dispelling the hesitation. "What am I afraid of? That he'll think I'm too eager? So what if I am?"

With newfound resolve, she grabbed her journal and started writing again, not about her feelings, but a list—concrete steps to show Eric she was serious, invested, and most importantly, unwilling to be 'just friends.'

Her pulse quickened at the thought. She would do it. She would escalate things, break through the frustrating barrier of 'taking it slow.' If he was really interested, he'd keep up. If not, well, she'd rather know now than torture herself with endless what-ifs.

She closed her journal. "Full steam ahead."

Now, the room's shadows felt less like ominous omens and more like playful specters, dancing to the rhythm of wild thoughts. She switched off the lamp, feeling a strange blend of calm and excitement settle over her.

Tomorrow, before she started her busy day, she'd march right over to the clinic and tell Eric exactly how she felt.



At two o'clock in the morning, Eric paced his apartment. He'd gotten back from Cassandra's stables, and unable to sleep, he made himself some hot cocoa, but it did nothing to help him relax and get ready for sleep.

He thought of texting Mindy to tell her how he felt about her, but a couple of things held him back.

One, it would be rude to text her at this hour of the morning in case she hadn't silenced her phone.

And two, he hadn't fully sorted himself out yet. He felt... well, what *were* these emotions churning around inside him? Restless. Unsettled.

Conflicted.

He wanted to be with Mindy, but their relationship to date had been based on a lie. Could he trust what he was feeling? With Cassandra, he thought he'd found The One. He'd been wrong. How could he trust his feelings?

But he missed Mindy. More than he thought possible.

In just the brief time they'd been apart, a deep longing for her curled up tight against his heart. He missed her smile, her laugh, the way her eyes lit up when she looked at him. She brought out a playful, sunny side of him he'd buried when he dated Cassandra because she'd said he was too silly.

They'd had a wonderful evening together, and he'd blown it.

Was it too late? Had he ruined his chance by leaving early that night? Cassandra's emergency call hadn't been a genuine crisis, just her way of trying to get close to him again. He should have ignored it, but old habits died hard, and he couldn't leave a sick horse in the lurch, no matter the owner.

He raised his head and saw the photograph of him and Benji on the wall. The dog who'd been his constant companion. The dog who'd taught him the power of taking life moment by moment and not worrying so much about the future.

"I need you, boy," he said to the picture. "You kept me grounded."

In his head, he heard Benji's exuberant bark, telling him to get off the couch and get in the game.

"Snap out of it, Kincaid," he muttered, running a hand through his hair. He knew what he needed to do.

Text Chloe and Della and tell them he'd be in late. Go to bed. Get some sleep and sort out his love life tomorrow.



The next morning before she went to her first job of the day, Mindy got up earlier than normal, put Peaches on her leash, and set out for the veterinarian clinic. It was a brisk two-mile walk, but the weather was balmy at sixty degrees, and it gave Mindy time to rehearse what she wanted to say to Eric.

Inside the clinic, Della was at her desk, and she looked up with a bright smile as Mindy came through the door.

“Morning, Mindy. Good to see you. That was some wingding last night, huh?”

“I had a blast. Can you believe how much money we raised for Kringle Kritters?”

“For sure. It was all those amazing gifts Cassandra Landry donated. She’s so generous.”

“She is,” Mindy said. “That was kind of her. Listen, could you get me in to see Eric? I just need a few minutes before his day gets overwhelming.”

“Oh, hon, he’s not coming in until noon,” Della said. “I had to reshuffle all his patients. He’ll have to stay late to see everyone.”

“Why? Did something happen?” Concern for Eric’s welfare squeezed her stomach. “Is he sick? Is he okay?”

“He’s fit as a fiddle. He was just up until the wee hours of the morning taking care of Cassandra’s sick horse. It was so nice of him to help her out since he’s no longer the vet for her stables, but Cassandra’s vet was out of town and...” Della went on and on, but Mindy no longer heard her.

Her ears buzzed, and she felt as if an axe had just cleaved her through the heart. Eric had left her after that mind-blowing kiss to go to Cassandra?

She felt sick to her stomach. Here she’d been thinking maybe she meant something to him and the whole time, he’d been with his ex-fiancée.

Yes, okay, the woman had a sick horse, but why hadn't Eric just come clean and told her Cassandra was the person with the vet emergency?

Unless...

Yeah, he didn't want her to know.

"Mindy?" Della said, her voice pulling Mindy from her turbulent thoughts and back into the clinic.

She blinked. "Yes?"

"Considering his busy schedule, maybe you could see Eric after hours?"

"Yes, you're right, okay, thanks." Mindy wrapped Peaches leash around her hand. The corgi looked up at her, picking up on her anxiety.

"Honey, are you alright?"

"Yes, fine, fine. Fit as fiddle," she said, using the phrase Della had said to her earlier.

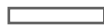
"You sure? You look pale and you're shaking. Is your blood sugar low? Did you eat breakfast?"

"Probably just tired from all that dancing last night."

Della got up from her chair. "Do you want to sit down?"

"No, no." Mindy backed away, desperate to get out of there and nurse her wounds.

Eric had left her last night to be with Cassandra without telling her the truth, and she needed to get off by herself to process this. All her lovely plans of reconnection with him had blown up in her face.



Mindy left the vet clinic in a daze, her heart aching. She'd been so foolish to think Eric was truly interested in her.

Of course he would drop everything to rush to beautiful, exotic Cassandra's side. They had history together that Mindy

could never compete with.

She took Peaches home, gave her a treat, and then went to work, battling her feelings and fears. How could she have let herself fall for Eric's charms so quickly? He was just doing her a favor by pretending to date her. She was the one who'd let it go to her head, imagining there could be something real between them.

That evening, she trudged in from work at seven, popped a prepared meal in the microwave to heat, and spent a little time playing with Peaches. After she ate, she heaved a heavy sigh, knowing she had an important conversation ahead of her.

Mindy picked up her phone and called her dad. It was time to come clean about the whole fake-dating mess she'd gotten them into with her little white lie, now that she knew she and Eric had no chance.

"Hey, Dad," she said when he answered. "How are things in Santa Fe?"

"Great! We just got back from skiing in Taos. You should see the kids. They're speed demons on snow skis. Carly and her family are arriving this weekend and we're going again. Next year, Mindy girl, you need to come to your brother's house for Christmas. I know it's your busiest time of year, but your family misses seeing you at the holidays."

She missed them too. Last year, the first year after losing Mom, they'd all gotten together at Carly's house in Pittsburgh, but this year, she'd wanted to concentrate on her business. She made most of her money over the holidays and right after the New Year, and she'd wanted to feather her nest, but now she regretted putting money first.

"Listen, Dad, there's something I need to tell you..."

"What is it, honey? You sound upset."

Taking a deep breath, Mindy confessed everything. How she'd panicked about him pushing her to date his friend's son and blurted out she was seeing someone, how she'd asked Eric to pose as her boyfriend, and how they'd tried to keep up the act, but it had all fallen apart.

To her surprise, her dad wasn't angry.

"I appreciate you telling me the truth," he whispered. "I know I come on too strong sometimes trying to look out for you. Your mom used to remind me that's why you moved all the way to Texas, so you could be more independent. I admire that about you, Min."

They talked for over an hour, clearing the air.

"You know," Dad said. "If things get tough in Kringle, you can jump on a plane and come to Santa Fe. I'll cover the flight."

"I'll be okay."

"You sure?"

"Uh-huh."

"All right, but the offer stands."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Love you, Min."

"Love you too."

As she hung up Mindy felt lighter, unburdened from her lies. She'd learned her lesson about honesty was the best policy and she felt more secure in her relationship with her father.

As for Eric, well, she was done pining for a fantasy. Time to lick her wounds, move forward, and keep looking for a man who would put her first.

With her newly open heart, she had faith Mr. Right was out there. And next time, she wouldn't rush things or tell a fib, no matter how well meaning. She'd take it slow and trust her instincts.

For now, she needed time to heal and focus on herself. She curled up on the couch with Peaches and reached for the TV remote, ready to dive into a cheesy holiday rom-com and start fresh tomorrow.

Halfway through the show, Eric texted her. Hey. Finally had a free moment. Just checking in.

Shaking her head, Mindy put her notifications on silent and went back to the Christmas movie where things ended happily ever after.



Eric stared at his phone, willing it to chime with a return text from Mindy. After last night's text, he'd sent her a few messages this morning, hoping to continue their conversation and make plans to see her again soon.

But she hadn't replied.

He tried not to read too much into her lack of a response. He understood they both had hectic holiday schedules. As a professional organizer, December was Mindy's busiest time of year. And the veterinary clinic was always overwhelmed with holiday boarding pets and seasonal viruses.

Still, her silence nagged him. Had he scared her off by leaving their date abruptly? Or was it the kisses underneath the mistletoe that were too much, too soon?

Eric sighed, drumming his fingers on his desk. He could swing by her house after his shift, talk to her in person. But maybe she needed space. He didn't want to come across as pushy or desperate.

Yet the not knowing was driving him crazy.

A bark interrupted his spiraling thoughts. His next appointment had arrived, a Yorkshire terrier with an infected paw. Eric straightened his spine, shelving his personal dilemma for now. His job was to help this little guy feel better.

"Hello, Winston!" He greeted the dog and smiled at the pooch's owner. "Let's look at that paw."

Eric focused on examining the dog's injury, making notes, and explaining the treatment plan to Winston's worried pet parent. He felt himself relax as his confidence renewed. No

matter his relationship woes, he could always count on veterinary medicine to lift his spirits.

By the end of the appointment, Eric decided to give Mindy more time. Stop overanalyzing and let things unfold naturally. When their schedules slowed down after the holidays, hopefully they could pick up where they left off.

For now, he would do what he did best, care for the animals who needed him. Be the vet Mindy had come to know and trust. And have faith that if it was meant to be, they'd find a way to be together.

CHAPTER 13

ERIC WAS LOCKING up the clinic for the evening when his mother breezed through the front door. He'd checked his text messages at least a dozen times that day but no return text from Mindy.

“Eric, there you are! I've been meaning to catch you.”

“Hi, Mom, what's up?”

“The Kringle Kritters board is having an appreciation dinner next weekend, and I wanted to let you and Mindy know you're both invited. It'll be a marvelous chance to dress up and enjoy a fun evening out together.”

Eric shifted uncomfortably. “About that...”

His mother narrowed her eyes. “Please don't tell me you two broke up! I thought you were so happy together.”

“Mom, I've got to tell you the truth. Mindy and I were never really together. I was just pretending to be her boyfriend to keep Wayne from trying to find a husband for her.”

“What? Pretending?”

He explained the whole thing. Mom listened quietly, looking rather crestfallen.

“Wow, you sure had me fooled. Does Wayne know?”

“Mindy said she was going to tell him, but I don't know if she has.”

“Such a shame.” His mother clicked her tongue. “I guess I got caught up in the fantasy. I'm sorry I assumed it was real.”

“It’s okay, Mom. To be honest, I think I got carried away too. My feelings for Mindy started to turn into something more.”

She perked up. “They did?”

“Yeah. The more time we spent together, the more I liked her. I was hoping we could date for real.”

“Then you have to tell her how you feel!”

“I don’t even know if she wants that.”

Linda waved her hand. “Pah, trust me. I saw the way that girl looked at you. She’s just as smitten.”

“It was just an act for her dad.”

“She was looking at you that way at the gala and Wayne was nowhere in sight.”

“Yeah? Well, I’ve been texting her, and she’s not answering me back. I think she wants to be left alone.” He picked up the photograph on his desk of Benji and traced his finger over it. “I’m thinking I’m not cut out for love.”

“Don’t be silly. Just because things didn’t work out with Cassandra doesn’t mean things won’t work out with Mindy.”

“It’s hard, you know. Maybe I should just get another dog and call it good. I do miss Benji something fierce.”

“I do know.” Mom nodded. “Losing Benji broke you. I also know that you have an enormous heart, son, and when you get hurt, you crawl into your shell. But you can’t keep running away from love just because you might get hurt. Love is worth the risk.”

“Well, what about you and Wayne? Just when things were heating up, you pulled the plug on that romance.”

His mother suppressed a smile. “Not really. We took a break so we could get some perspective and we’ve both decided to keep seeing each other. In fact, I hope this doesn’t upset you, but I’m going to Santa Fe for Christmas to meet Wayne’s other kids.”

“No kidding? That’s great, Mom. I like Wayne. He’s a good man.”

“He says the same about you.”

“He probably won’t once Mindy spills the beans.”

“He’s more accepting than you might think.”

“That’s good.”

“So you’re okay with being on your own for Christmas?”

“Hey, as long as he makes you happy, I’m thrilled.”

“We’ll exchange gifts when I get back.”

He put the photo of Benji he’d been hanging on to back on the desk. “Works for me.”

“Well, come here and give me a hug. I’m completely confident things will work out the way they’re supposed to.”

He gave his mother a hug and walked her to the door. He’d be alone for Christmas.

“Hey, is Mindy going to Santa Fe to be with her family?”

“Wayne said she wouldn’t be able to make the trip up until New Year’s. So like you, she’ll be solo for Christmas.”

With that, Mom gave him a wave and waltzed out the door.



After Mindy didn’t return Eric’s texts, he stopped texting her. She should have been relieved, but instead, she was even more heartbroken. Day after day leading up to Christmas, she kept her head down, did her job, came home, walked Peaches, and went to bed.

Her friends invited her out to various events, but she turned them all down, her usually sunny mood dampened over everything going sideways with Eric. She knew she’d get her mojo back, but for now, she needed to take time and space to shake off the doldrums.

She also knew the only surefire way to hit the fast-forward button on her healing was to get closure with Eric. She shouldn't have ghosted him. That wasn't cool, and she needed to apologize for it.

Despite that, she wasn't ready to see him because she didn't trust herself not to get emotional.

On Thursday, two days before Christmas Eve, she was walking Peaches when she ran into Linda coming out of the hair salon. Eric's mother looked stunning in an updated hair style and a new outfit.

Linda smiled brightly at Mindy. Clearly, Eric had said nothing bad about her.

"Mindy, hello! And Peaches, how are you this fine morning?" Linda crouched in front of the corgi and scratched her behind the ears.

"We're great. You look lovely."

"Thank you. I'm headed to the airport."

"Oh, where are you going?"

Linda bit her bottom lip. "You haven't talked to your dad."

"Not in the last few days. Are you guys getting together?" Mindy wasn't sure how she felt about that. She adored Linda and wanted to see her dad happy, but this thing with Eric was so complicated.

"I'm joining your family for Christmas in Santa Fe."

That took by her surprise. "Wow."

"How do you feel about that?" Linda asked.

"It's great," Mindy said, not knowing what else to say. She was suddenly feeling very sorry for herself that she was on her own for the holiday.

"Eric will be by himself too."

"Really?"

"Really." Linda's eyes sparkled.

"Did he tell you—"

“About the fake dating? Yes, he did. It makes for quite a romantic story to tell your children.”

“What are you saying, Linda?”

“That my son is just as miserable without you as you are without him.”

Mindy scarcely dared hope it was true. “He’s not with Cassandra?”

“Heavenly days, girl. Much as I like Cassandra, she’s far too selfish to be a wife and mother and most of all, she knows. You have nothing to fear from that one.”

How she prayed that was true.

“Here’s another thing.” Linda opened her fashionable purse and pulled out a card. “I reserved something as a Christmas gift for Eric. We’ve planned to exchange presents when I get back from visiting your family, but I’m thinking I’ll get him something else. I think this gift would be better coming from you. It’ll be ready for pickup on Christmas Eve.”

“Huh?” Mindy stared down at the card. It was the business card for a dog breeder specializing in yellow labs.

“Merry Christmas!” With a wave, Linda headed for her car.



On Christmas Eve, Mindy’s boots crunched on the fallen autumn leaves as she approached the vet clinic. She peered through the frosty windowpanes, disappointment sinking like a stone in her chest.

Empty.

The clinic was closed, of course.

The yellow lab puppy sleeping in her arms let out a burp, startling them both. He peered up at her with big brown eyes, a bright-green bow around his neck.

“Well,” she said. “Someone has kibble breath.”

The puppy wriggled and licked her hand.

“I guess I should have expected them to be closed. I don’t know what I was thinking. Just because Eric wasn’t at his house, didn’t mean he was here. He’s most likely out celebrating with his friends the way I should be, but now I have you to take care of, little mister.”

She turned away from the clinic, not sure what to do next. In her mind, she pictured showing up at Eric’s door, saying something witty, and presenting him with the puppy. The streets were thronged with last-minute shoppers. Relentless Christmas music traveled on the air.

Just then, a familiar red pickup truck rumbled down the street, headlights cutting through the gathering dusk. Mindy’s pulse hammered as Eric parked on the street and stepped out, his eyes finding hers, surprise on his face.

“Mindy?” Eric hurried over, his breath forming white clouds. “What are you doing here?”

Mindy clutched the puppy to her chest. “I was looking for you.”

His gaze landed on the yellow lab. “Is something wrong with the puppy?”

“No.” She glanced up, meeting his piercing blue gaze. “He’s a gift.”

“For me?” Both his voice and his eyes softened, gentled.

“Yes, if that’s okay. I know you shouldn’t buy someone a dog out of the blue, but your mom told me to do it.” She thrust the puppy at him, feeling weird about the whole thing. “He’s been at my house all morning. Peaches adores him, by the way.”

“Oh, hey, little guy.” Eric took the puppy in his arms, and the lab wildly licked his face.

“It’s love at first sight,” Mindy whispered.

He shifted his gaze to hers. “What’s not to love? A wiggly bundle of joy. Thank you. This is an awesome Christmas gift.”

“You’re welcome.” She searched her mind, trying to figure out what to say next. “What about you? What are you doing here? Are you on call? Do you have an emergency?”

“I came here to find you.” His eyes never left her face. “I went to your house and your neighbor told me you’d taken the dog for a walk. I thought she meant Peaches.”

Mindy pulled the leash from her coat pocket. “We tried that. He’s not quite leash trained yet.”

They stared at each other as “Christmas Kisses” played over the outdoor speakers. So much lay unspoken in that loaded moment, the frosty air thick with all the things left unsaid. The happy puppy wriggled in Eric’s arms.

Finally, Mindy spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’m sorry I didn’t return your texts. Della told me you were with Cassandra tending her horse, so I thought... I assumed...” She trailed off, unable to vocalize her insecurities.

Eric’s eyes softened with understanding. “Cassandra is firmly in my past. She’s nothing to me,” he said, his voice absolute. “The only woman I want is you.”

Mindy’s heart stuttered. She searched his face, afraid to hope. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Oh, my.”

“Hang on just a sec.” He sprinted to his truck and nestled the puppy securely inside, then turn and ran back to her.

Mindy’s knees wobbled, and her hands were shaky.

Eric took her chilly hands in his warm calloused ones. His breath heated her face. “Being with you these past few weeks, getting to know you... you’ve come to mean so much to me, Mindy.” He swallowed hard. “I don’t want to hide my feelings anymore. I’m falling for you.”

Mindy’s eyes prickled with sudden tears. Her frozen heart melted. “I’ve been falling for you too,” she confessed in a choked whisper.

Jubilance broke across Eric's handsome face. Unable to help herself, Mindy smiled back.

"Can we start again, for real this time?" Hope shone bright in Eric's eyes.

"I'd like nothing more." Mindy exhaled her joy.

Overcome with emotion, Eric pulled her into his arms.

Mindy's senses swam, the heat of Eric's body, his woody scent, the silly song spilling out into the twilight. She clutched him tightly, as if she would never let go.

And there on the streets of Kringle, their lips met in a kiss that conveyed everything left unspoken between them. It was a kiss of forgiveness, healing, and new beginnings.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER...

MINDY STOOD on tiptoes to straighten the sparkling star atop the towering Christmas tree. She stepped back to admire it, inhaling the scent of pine mingled with cinnamon and cloves.

“This might be the most perfect tree ever,” Eric said, coming up behind her and slipping his arms around her waist.

Mindy leaned into him, her heart brimming with love and holiday joy. This time last year, she’d been lost and confused. Now here she stood, happier than she’d ever dreamed possible, celebrating with the man she loved.

“It’s perfect,” Mindy said. Outside, snowflakes drifted down for a rare white Christmas in Kringle, the twinkle lights from the town square visible through the frosted window.

They were celebrating at Linda’s house on Noel Lane. The fire crackled merrily in the hearth. Her dad and Linda sat cuddled on the couch, admiring the tree. Mindy’s father had moved to Kringle shortly after New Year’s. He and Linda had married in the spring on a flower-filled Texas hillside.

Peaches and Benji Two frolicked around the presents piled under the tree, tails wagging furiously. Benji fit right into their family.

Mindy’s older sister Carly was curled up in an armchair, her husband Phil sitting on the armrest. Their two daughters, ten-year-old Amy and seven-year-old Hannah, were playing a board game on the rug.

Mindy's brother Dwight and his wife Sophie sat nearby, keeping an eye on their four-year-old son Sam and six-year-old daughter Lily. The kids were picking up the packages from underneath the tree, raising the boxes to their ears and rattling them, trying to guess what was inside.

"Hot cocoa, anyone?" Carly asked.

After a chorus of "yeses" they all gathered in the kitchen, chatting and sipping, simply enjoying each other's company. Eric slipped his arm around Mindy, meeting her eyes with a smile that warmed her from head to toe.

After the cocoa was finished, Eric stood. "Before we exchange gifts, there's something I want to do. Mindy?"

"Yes?"

He took Mindy's hand, guiding her to stand before the twinkling tree. Then, to her astonishment, he sank to one knee.

Eric pulled out a ring box.

Mindy's breath caught, and she pressed a palm to her hammering heart. She'd been hoping for this particular Christmas gift but now that it was happening, emotion overwhelmed her.

He opened the box. Inside glittered a diamond ring.

"My life was so one-note before you came along," Eric said, his eyes shining with sincerity. "You fill my heart with joy, Mindy. Will you marry me?"

With happy tears in her eyes, Mindy nodded, too overcome for words. Eric swept her into his arms as their families broke into cheers and applause.

"Merry Christmas, sunshine," he whispered and gently kissed her.

In that sweet moment, newly engaged, surrounded by family and the holiday spirit, it was the most perfect Christmas kiss of all.



Dear Reader,

Readers are an author's lifeblood, and the stories couldn't happen without you. Thank you so much for reading. If you enjoyed *A Perfect Christmas Kiss*, Pam and I would so appreciate a review. You have no idea how much it means!

If you'd like to keep up with our latest releases, you can sign up for my newsletter @ <https://loriwilde.com/subscribe/>

To check out our other books, you can visit me on the web @ www.loriwilde.com.

Much love and light to you!

—Lori and Pam

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Before teaming up with Lori Wilde, Pam Andrews Hanson co-wrote more than fifty novels with her mom, including romance and cozy mysteries. She is a former journalist and currently teaches freshmen composition in a university English department.



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