

# Mindy's Healing

By

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## Prologue

*The squeal of tires, that's what she remembered. Not the massive gray metal of the overloaded cattle trailer, or the cherry red semi pulling it. Both she'd seen later in photographs. All she recalled was the horrible wail of rubber on asphalt, deafening her as the speeding rig jackknifed at the sharp curve, smack into her path.*

*Afterwards, the screams of her horse, her prized Quarter Horse stallion Remington, drowned out all else. The absolute love of her life, her partner of ten years, they were a few competitions away from a guaranteed National Championship. The bawl of wounded cattle mixed with his terrified cries, but she couldn't reach him, her dually truck a twist of inescapable wreckage. She recalled no pain, only the crushing weight of the dashboard and struggling to get free so she could help her horse. Then dizziness swamped her and she fell into blackness.*

# Chapter 1

Mindy Sweet clicked to the next slide on her laptop, the overhead screen flashing a new chart. The darkened room felt like a cocoon, hiding the mix of bored and curious faces in the conference room of the office building. The usual lecture she gave droned in her own ears, the practiced words needing little attention on her part. Though it may seem dull she felt it necessary to give her seminars to any company who'd welcome them. They covered sensitivity towards employees with disabilities, and helped pay for her riding program.

Today the De Luca Corporation had requested her services. It owned a growing chain of discount grocery stores and had a reputation for being good to its employees—something atypical for retail in her opinion. She'd spent many years working in retail shops to help pay for competition and boarding fees in her late teens and early twenties. It'd left a bad taste in her mouth, and doubly grateful for the life she'd been granted instead.

A door at the back of the room opened and a large figure stepped into the room. Tall, broad shouldered, dressed in a tailored suit, he stepped to the side of the doorway, before closing the door. Hidden in shadow, he remained standing at the back of the room, leaning against the wall with his hands shoved into his pockets. She felt his scrutiny though his eyes weren't visible.

Mindy sipped from her water bottle and continued, keeping the man in the corner of her vision. Her skin prickled, and she stumbled over her words several times. Usually she didn't mind the stares, but having this man watch her so intently set her on edge.

The first hour wrapped up, and she nodded to have the lights flipped on. "Okay, let's have a thirty-minute lunch break, before we go over our handouts and exercises."

A mix of groans and sighs answered back while people milled around the room, stretching and yawning. The gentleman at the back of the room straightened, exchanging low words with the HR woman who'd set up the seminar. His attractiveness struck her: dark close cropped hair, strong jaw line, and dark eyes. He was dressed in a finely tailored suit that looked like it'd cost a small fortune. She normally didn't go for business suits, preferring the boots and dirty Stetson type, but something about this man struck a chord with her. Pinpricks of sexual awareness teased her, and had her shifting uncomfortably foot to foot.

Mindy nibbled her bottom lip and wondered over his identity. Maybe the company's CEO Michael Davis had made a special appearance? She hadn't seen photos, but knew he worked out of this office.

She set out the coming exercises she'd have the group do, trying to ignore the piquing curiosity drawing her eyes again and again to the stranger. He looked familiar, but her memory offered no details as to why. Oh well, if he wanted an introduction he'd find her. Just as the thought formed, he turned her direction, his lengthy strides covering the floor between them.

Her heart rate jumped and she swallowed, squaring her shoulders, preparing for the meeting.

"Ms. Sweet, I'm Nicholas De Luca." He extended his hand.

Her mouth fell open, *no way*. “Er, yes.” She swiped her palms over her dress slacks, shocked into a momentary stupor. “Good to meet you, sir,” she finally managed. “I’m Mindy Sweet.”

She cringed; obviously he knew her name already. God, did she sound as awkward as she felt in the presence of the owner of De Luca Corporation? She didn’t stand in the presence of a self-made billionaire every day. She thrust her hand out, and he closed his long fingers around hers, his grasp warm and solid. Little tremors settled inside her as she met his dark chocolate colored eyes. Those tremors could easily be misidentified as attraction on her part if she wasn’t careful.

“I understand you have a therapeutic horseback riding program?”

His rich baritone voice made her insides flip flop and her cheeks heated. She forced a smile despite her mounting attack of nerves. “Yes, *Striding For Kids*. My seminars support the program.”

He returned the smile. A dimple appeared in his left cheek, heating her to her toes. She hadn’t realized she still gripped him until he glanced down to their joined hands. She jerked her hand free of his, feeling a mad blush spreading to her ears.

“I’m interested in putting my son, Jason, in it.” He stuffed his hands inside his pants pockets again. “He has...some behavioral issues. I think your program might help him out. He might not be like the kids you normally work with but I’m hoping you’ll still meet with him.”

Her professionalism perked up, giving her something to focus on outside of the swirl of butterflies in her middle. “I’d be happy to meet with the two of you and go over the program. I personalize it to my students’ needs. What challenge is your son facing?”

Mr. De Luca shifted then ran his hand over his hair. A couple of people had drifted back into the room. Obviously, he didn’t want to discuss his son in front of others—understandable.

“It’s okay, sir,” Mindy quickly said. “We’ll chat about it later.” She dug inside her handbag for a business card and brochure and handed them to him. His fingertips brushed hers as he took the information. The light touch sent a sizzle all the way to the spot between her thighs she really needed to ignore at the moment.

“His pediatrician recommended *Striding For Kids*. I’ve tried different therapists and a few afterschool activities without much success. I’d like to try everything at my disposal.”

His voice wove deep inside her into places she long thought dead. Areas which hadn’t seen the light of day since her accident and it left her off balance. She licked her lips. “Well, regardless of what Jason is facing, it’s good to try different therapies to see what works best for your child. And having him in a variety of them is a wonderful way of keeping him engaged.”

“Nicholas, can I speak with you for a few minutes?” A woman had poked her head inside the room.

Mr. De Luca nodded. “I’ll be out in a minute.” He turned back to her. “I’ll call you later in the week and set up an appointment to visit your facility.”

When he disappeared, Mindy breathed a sigh of relief. Anticipation for his call already built, even though she tried to squelch it. Best not to let her forming crush bloom into something distracting and unneeded.

The rest of the afternoon sped by in a blur, and by the time she got home she was ready for a cold beer—or a shot of good Kentucky bourbon. She grabbed the beer, but before relaxing, she went out and checked the horses, finding them grazing on the fresh growth of green grass. Early evening was always a peaceful time on the farm. She took her time, speaking with each of her horses, letting them know how much she appreciated them. They wouldn’t understand the

words, of course, but they'd understand the kindness behind them. Each had its own way of returning her affection. Some nickered or nuzzled her arm for attention. Others simply stood close by, absorbing her softly spoken sentences with eyes half-closed.

The volunteers had left for the night and she had the whole place to herself. She walked through the barn which stood empty. In nice weather her horses stayed outside in the fresh air. Pride swelled as it always did when she took time out of her day to walk her property. She'd worked hard for what she had, and it hadn't always been easy.

At one time, Mindy had thought she lived in the worst of circumstances, but now viewed it as only a bump in the road. She still missed her horse, Remington, or Remy as she affectionately called him. The old ache always twisted a sensitive spot within her heart. But out of tragedy, she'd risen and served the greater good. She'd survived when others thought it impossible.

She walked back to her home as her thoughts drifted back to Mr. De Luca. Curiosity set in over his son, Jason. Having a new kid in her program always left her excited; she loved the kids and families she served. Another spot twisted inside of her—the idea of never having her own children. Before the accident she'd wanted kids, a whole houseful of them, but since that day.... Mindy yanked open her backdoor and stepped inside her kitchen, leaving that dead-end train of thought outside.

\* \* \*

The sleek, black Audi sedan stuck out like a sore thumb. Mindy set aside her rake, and nudged the brim of her straw hat up with her thumb, eyeing the expensive car making its way down her drive, not an everyday occurrence on her country back road. White dust billowed into a cloud as it came to a stop down her drive, settling on the windshield and dulling the metallic sheen to a chalky gray, making it hard to see the driver behind the wheel. She squinted, studying the large figure inside the car.

No doubt, her afternoon appointment had arrived, Mr. De Luca. His call earlier in the week had been exactly as awkward on her end as she'd expected it to be. Even over the phone his masculinity was unmistakable, his appeal undeniable, sending her mind into all sorts of wrong directions. Once upon a time she liked men, really liked men, and might have even gone for a business suit. But those days were long behind her, replaced by a protective layer of awkwardness when it came to sexual interest. It usually sent interested men packing.

Kathy materialized, nudging her in the side. "I hear he's quite the heartbreaker and single to boot."

She glanced to her friend and farmhand. "I wouldn't consider dating the dad of a client. You know that."

Kathy swiped a curl of silver hair behind her ear, and her brown eyes crinkled at their corners. "A pretty thing like you needs to date more, that's all I'm saying."

"Hush," Mindy chided in a friendly manner. Kathy didn't understand why Mindy had no interest in men, but she really didn't have time to date. At least that's what she reminded herself when she felt lonely on long nights. Her left leg ached, a phantom pain that seemed to appear whenever she needed to be reminded of the other, uglier, reason why she didn't date.

Mindy's heart beat a rapid staccato as she gazed at the Audi, betraying her interest in the handsome business tycoon nestled inside it. She'd done a bit of online homework on the man, learning he had a reputation as womanizer. Disheartening to the budding crush she had, though not all together destroying it. Not that she'd pay attention to any physical attraction for a

student's father, she reminded herself. And not that he'd pay much attention to her, he had any number of eager social climbers to date.

The car door opened and out stepped Mr. De Luca, wearing a tailored suit similar to the first one she'd seen him in, and dark sunglasses. He had a cellphone glued to his ear as his strides carried him toward them. Everything you'd expect to see in a high-profile businessman right down to polished black loafers that'd suffered the same dust coated fate after stepping from the Audi. She couldn't help but look down to her scuffed boots with a fresh layer of horse dung caked on the outer soles. A moment of panic hit. *I should've cleaned up before he got here....*

Kathy gave a low whistle and a quick wink to Mindy, before walking off to the south pasture. Left alone, Mindy's stomach flip flopped. *Holy cow, heartbreaker's right.* And he couldn't be more misplaced on the farm. Men like him didn't care for animal hair, horse poop on shoes, and the various other daily hazards in her world.

Normally, insecurity around clients didn't happen. She believed in the program and her role in it, and didn't worry about someone's opinion of the farm, as long as they were eager for their children to benefit from it. But having Mr. GQ walking her way provided a whole new horse to ride. And she hadn't been in the saddle in years.

He shoved the cellphone into an inside pocket of his suit jacket, stopping a few feet before her. She tilted her head back, looking into his face. His looks alone screamed no nonsense business persona, and she doubted many challenged him—no wonder he'd made a fortune. She caught sight of her slightly slack-jawed reflection in his sunglasses, and snapped her mouth shut, her ears burning in embarrassment.

"Ms. Sweet, good to see you again."

His deep voice sent a shiver of heat straight through her, and she licked her lips.

"Yes...." Several seconds passed. He'd removed his sunglasses and his dark chocolate eyes had rendered her mute. He cocked an eyebrow. "Yes, Mr. De Luca, sir," she said, shaking free of the spell he'd cast over her. "You're here for a tour of Striding For Kids."

She yanked off her work glove, fumbled with it and dropped it in the dirt. She started to kneel down to reclaim it then reconsidered and left it where it was. *God, get it under control, Mindy.* Her hand shook as she wiped it against her jean leg and extended it. He took it, his warm, solid grasp lingering, grounding her shaky nerves.

"I think you'll find our program is one of the best in the nation. Our kids show wonderful improvement on both physical and emotional levels."

Directing her wayward thoughts to her therapeutic riding program, she released his hand realizing she'd clung to it. If awkward could seduce a man, he'd be putty in her hands.

She turned, waving toward the south pasture. "We keep our therapy horses out there. The big spotted horse is our Clydesdale mix, Roger. He'll be your son's mount."

Hearing his name, Roger plodded to the white board fence, and thrust his giant head over. He gave a soft nicker of greeting, long wisps of hay trailing from his mouth.

Mr. De Luca's lips thinned, she'd seen the concern before. Non-horsey people usually feared for their fragile children around such huge animals. Unfounded worries. Her choosing process for mounts was the most particular of any organization in the nation as far as she was concerned. She spent a lot of hours on training suitable horses, until she felt they were used to anything and everything kids, strangers, and the environment could throw at them.

"Come on over and meet, Roger. If he could curl up on your lap he would." She gave Mr. De Luca a reassuring smile and walked toward the fence. She caught Mr. De Luca's quick look and the slight downward quirk of his mouth as he noticed her limp for the first time.



She rubbed Roger's forehead, digging her fingers into his thick white forelock, inhaling the equine's wonderful comforting smell of hay and warm sunshine. People's curious looks meant nothing to her now, only a normal part of life she'd accepted years ago.

"Roger, this here is Jason's dad, Mr. De Luca. I was about to tell him how you're a retired police horse, and completely unflappable."

Pride swelled in her heart, her pasture of horses somewhat resembled the *Isle of Misfit Toys*, being mostly rescued, retired, and "useless" equines, but the children related to them. Even massive twenty-four-year-old Roger, who had the mentality of a doting puppy despite his years as a New Orleans police mount. A horse that'd shoved his way through Mardi Gras riots had infinite patience with enthusiastic children and anxious parents.

She turned to Mr. De Luca, meeting his concerned gaze. "Feel free to give Roger a pet on the forehead, he likes it."

\* \* \*

Mindy turned her big blue eyes towards him and he couldn't help the surge of attraction he'd felt since meeting her in the conference room. Instead of business casual, today she wore a straw cowboy hat, a pair of Wranglers that hugged her in all the right ways, topped by a black t-shirt, and dusty cowboy boots. She was every bit the country girl, and he suddenly decided he had developed a taste for cowgirls.

Redirecting his thoughts—and his firing libido—he ran a hand over his cheek, sizing up the massive animal she'd introduced him to. Its head alone was the size of the woman at its side, and that wasn't an exaggeration. His misgivings grew; perhaps this wasn't the best idea for his small, shy son.

"Really, this horse has been through riots, nothing fazes him," Mindy continued, seemingly reading his mind. "The kids love him, and he loves the kids and attention. He's what horse people call a babysitter; you could put your children on him and go about your daily farm work and he'd watch over them. Nothing spooks him and he's never in much of a hurry to get anywhere. I spend months preparing my carefully chosen mounts before kids ever get on them."

Her bright smile reassured him, and he couldn't help but return it. A pink flush colored her cheeks, perhaps a result from the growing heat of the early summer day. He wanted to shed his jacket, but felt the need to keep a professional appearance for the woman. More for his benefit, and keeping his mind on business, than for hers.

He cleared his throat. "I haven't been around horses, so this is all new to me. I never imagined there was anything like this, until Jason's pediatrician mentioned your program. He thought it'd help Jason reconnect with the world."

Wanting to make a positive impression, he reached his hand forward, letting his fingertips slide down the horse's nose, a little afraid he may lose them in the process. The dinosaur-sized animal seemed to like the attention, its eyelids drooping closed before it huffed out a breath.

"Many children with different challenges in life respond well to animal assisted therapy. I can't explain why, but they seem more comfortable opening up to the horses first, before they open up to us."

*Open up*, what he wouldn't give to see Jason opening up. Respond to him in a positive way, instead of ignoring him, and living in his quiet world. He'd never seen his five-year-old son laugh, or smile, in the year he'd had custody. He'd shut down the minute he'd been unexpectedly dropped on his doorstep, and hadn't spoken a word since. When he'd set up today's appointment

he'd explained what had happened with Jason—at least the pertinent details. He'd gotten custody of his son, and it'd left Jason, an incredibly bright, but sensitive child, traumatized.

"I'll show you the riding arena," Mindy said. He followed her as she walked toward the barn. She continued on, explaining her process with the children. When he'd investigated Striding For Kids, he'd learned much of what Mindy told him about the program. Plus, she held dual degrees in Child Psychology and Special Education. Smart and pretty, a winning combination for him.

Of course, she was off limits, as all women were these days.

"Come out Saturday and watch a lesson, you can talk with the other parents and watch their children ride. If you'd like Jason to join us, we can set up a private lesson next Tuesday evening. I do this so the kids can get used to riding and the horses. I can better understand his needs and we'll talk about my ideas for his therapy."

She stopped at what he assumed to be the arena, chatting about various horses used on the farm, retired or rescued from bad circumstances. It spoke of a woman with a big heart, and it tugged the maleness in him. Pretty and compassionate, everything a man could want in a woman. If he was interested in dating, which he wasn't, not with his son taking so much of his time. Which he willingly and wholly gave; he'd never regret a minute he spent on his son's care.

A small paddock sat off to the side of the arena. Inside it, a donkey grazed with a goat nearby.

"That's Monkey the donkey, and Goober the goat," Mindy explained. "Come over and say hi."

He followed her to the pair of animals. "Interesting choice of names."

Mindy laughed, the musical sound doing funny things to him.

"Monkey and Goober come from a petting zoo that had to close. During lessons, they entertain family and siblings of students who come out."

The two animals perked up when they approached, coming to the fence, the goat bleating. Both stuck their heads between the fence rails.

"They're begging for treats." She gave him a smile that brightened her eyes, before stroking the goat's head. "You two have your yummy alfalfa, now go eat it."

Following her lead, he patted the donkey's head.

"He likes that," Mindy encouraged. "You're a natural."

Feeling oddly pleased, he rubbed between the animal's ears. It blew through its nostrils and a fine spray of green goo splattered over the front of his suit jacket. He stepped back, hands out, staring at the mess.

"Oh god." Mindy stepped in front of him. "Oh god, Mr. De Luca, sir, I'm so sorry." Her gaze raked over the damage. "It's just chewed up hay if that's any consolation. Geez, okay, look I'll get this dry cleaned for you." Her fingers shot to the buttons on the jacket. "It should come out."

He watched the first button give way beneath her slim fingers and sucked in a breath. Her ripe peach scent filled his lungs, and a shudder washed through him. When the second button came undone, he nearly did so, too. He knew it was time to end her ministrations or risk his body giving away the direction of his thoughts.

He placed his hands over hers, giving her a reassuring smile. "It's okay, I'll get it cleaned. No harm done."

Her gaze darted to his, and her mouth opened then closed. He'd never seen someone's face take on such a vivid shade of red, and he stifled another grin.

She backed away. “Um, yeah, if you’re sure, but I don’t mind. Really.”

The green spray looked set into the fine gray wool, but he wouldn’t tell Mindy. He had a feeling she’d insist on replacing it, and he had a dozen more in his closet.

“I’ll see you Saturday.”

“Right, Saturday.” She lifted her hand in goodbye, before he turned to walk back to his car, shedding the jacket.

The heat of the sun beat through the cotton of his tailored shirt, mirroring what went on within him in Mindy’s presence. He’d chosen her for Jason, he reminded himself. Only for Jason.

A few days later a cheerful sun shone overhead, a beautiful warm Saturday afternoon promising enjoyment for other parents. Nicholas blew out a breath, other parents who’d had a lot more practice at parenting.

Jason’s first four years were spent mostly with his grandparents, while Nicholas lived unaware of his existence. His mother, Sarah, had been a summer romance. When she’d left the state without explanation, he’d chalked it up to fear of commitment—not that he’d been prepared for anything serious. Unbeknownst to him she’d gotten pregnant, and had moved in with her brother and sister-in-law two states away. He couldn’t understand why she hadn’t told him about the pregnancy. Perhaps she’d been ashamed, or doubted his empathy toward the situation.

Natalie watched Jason for the afternoon while he came out to watch the program. Thank god for his sister who’d moved in to help care for Jason while Nicholas ran his company. She and his son had taken to one another, but she’d always had a way with kids. Unlike him, who felt at a complete loss, though he did his best.

He caught Mindy’s gaze and his insides did the funny thing from a few days before. She laced his system like a drug, and the side-effect had been a rather unpleasant first night with a hard-on that wouldn’t be ignored. Though he’d taken care of it in the shower, the simmering interest nagged him. His usual self-control danced this way and that; Nicholas could barely keep his head on straight. He steeled himself against the feelings Mindy elicited as best he could. He couldn’t afford distraction. Once, women had been part recreation, part distraction from a stressful career, but now they were off limits. He had another priority that required every second of his free time.

Mindy waved him over. He felt a wide smile cover his face, an automatic response to the woman. She was again dressed in her straw cowboy hat, Wranglers, and boots. He licked his lips and willed his cock to behave.

“Mr. De Luca, how are you?” Mindy asked.

He didn’t miss the pink that dotted her cheeks when she accepted his offered handshake. The formality wasn’t needed at this point, but he’d wanted an excuse to touch her. His self-control laughed in his face again.

He cleared his throat. “I’m doing well, and please, call me Nicholas.”

He kept hold of her hand longer than needed until she broke their contact.

“Okay, Nicholas, I want to introduce you to Betty and Carl. Their daughter, Abigail, is one of my students with autism.” She tipped her head toward a middle-aged couple grouped around a brown horse in the arena. They turned at hearing their names, then came over.

“Betty, Carl, this is Nicholas. He’s considering putting his son into the program.”

Betty clapped her hands together, a huge smile lighting up her face. “Wonderful, you’ll love it. We are so grateful we put Abby in Striding For Kids. I can’t say enough for this lovely woman and her horses.”

“I can’t take all the credit,” Mindy replied, her cheeks turning a deep rose. “Abby is an eager student. And you two have been supportive of her efforts.”

Carl’s bushy eyebrows waggled up and down. “She’s being modest like always. When we put Abby into the program she barely responded to us, and we dealt with meltdowns nearly every day. Now she acknowledges us, has more confidence with herself, and is better able to communicate with us when she’s upset. And she waits all week to see Bonnie.”

He recognized Bonnie as the blind horse Mindy had mentioned during his tour. He cast Mindy an appreciative look, and her gaze darted from his.

“We have five students in class today, and if I don’t get started some of them will call me out for being late. Grab a lawn chair, Nicholas.” Mindy pointed toward a cluster of chairs, several which were already occupied, before waving her hand off to the left. “We have cold bottled water and soda pop in that cooler over there.”

Though Jason didn’t suffer from autism, it seemed impossible he would make an improvement like Betty and Carl’s daughter, but it didn’t hurt to try. Keeping Jason engaged in as many activities as possible seemed a logical approach. Outside of school, he wanted Jason occupied, and this would be good for fresh air and exercise if nothing else.

After watching the hour-long program, he had to admit to being impressed with Mindy’s knowledge and professionalism. She anticipated trouble, such as when a student became frustrated, and she helped the boy with his confusion quickly. The children all seemed to enjoy their time, some laughing, others with only smiles. Imagining Jason making such progress left a warm, hope-filled spot within him.

He rubbed his chin, noting Mindy’s limp again. Her left leg appeared stiff. Riding accident, maybe? He’d read on her website that she’d competed as a barrel racer in her youth and into her early twenties. After the class Mindy met with him. He considered asking about her leg, but held his tongue.

“How do you like the program?” she asked, leading him to a private place away from milling parents and children.

“What do we need to do to get started?” he asked.

Her blue eyes twinkled in the sunlight. “Let’s go into the barn office, I’ll have some release forms for you to sign.”