

Christmas at the Home Farm Vets

Suzanne Snow writes contemporary and uplifting fiction with a vibrant sense of setting and community connecting the lives of her characters. A horticulturist who lives with her family in Lancashire, her books are inspired by a love of landscape, romance and rural life.

Her first novel in the Thorndale series, *The Cottage of New Beginnings*, was a contender for the 2021 RNA Joan Hessayon Award and she is currently writing the Love in the Lakes series for Canelo. Suzanne is a member of the Romantic Novelists Association and the Society of Authors.

Also by Suzanne Snow

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To Jen, with love.

Chapter One

Until this week, the first in December, Erin Hardy had thought she'd forgotten all about her first kiss. Or at least she tried not to think about it because there simply wasn't any point, so it was ridiculous for those memories to be distracting her now. The kiss had been a late one, in her first term at university, and all these years later, Oli Sterling was still her best. It wasn't as though she hankered after a repeat performance either, she'd given up that idea long ago. But now he was about to land back in her life, she couldn't get...

'Ow!' She gave the squirming kitten on the examination table in her consulting room a wry smile and glanced at a thin scratch forming on the back of her hand. Her own fault for allowing her thoughts to drift back to Oli again when she ought to be focusing on her patients. Cuddling baby animals was usually one of the perks of her job as a vet. This tiny tortoiseshell kitten and her brother were especially cute, their fur shades of dark marmalade with splashes of white.

'Nearly done.' She held the kitten with a gentle and experienced hand as she examined eyes, teeth, ears and heart to ensure all was well. A boy was hovering anxiously with his dad, and she offered him a reassuring smile before administering the necessary vaccination and then a micro-chip into the skin at the back of the kitten's neck. Erin

gave her a final stroke and handed her back to her young owner.

‘So have you chosen names yet? Your dad says you’re keeping them both.’ That pleased her, even though she was long used to treating animals still searching for their forever home. After qualifying seven years ago, she’d spent a year in private practice before six months in a temporary role for an animal charity, and she’d found it heartbreaking to treat pets without a loving family of their own. This boy couldn’t be more than nine or ten and she had a sharp reminder of herself at the same age; the longing for a pet while understanding it was an impossible dream because they simply couldn’t afford another mouth to feed.

She and her mum had moved in with her grandparents when Erin was five, after her father had abandoned them for the dubious prospect of an acting career once he’d tired of family life and an ordinary job. She adored her family, and even though her nan and grandad bickered constantly, they still couldn’t bear to be without each other after fifty-five years of marriage.

One day she’d share her home with an animal companion she could cherish, but right now her career and the house she’d bought when she’d moved to Hartfell three months ago were keeping her busy. The thought of sharing her home brought another memory of that startling spring evening in Cambridge twelve years ago; sun glinting above their heads and still unable to heat her skin as much as Oli had; the intent and desire in his unwavering stare as she’d stripped off her ruined white shirt and swapped it for his.

‘Nala and Simba.’ The young boy spoke shyly. ‘We like *The Lion King*, and my mum said they were good names.’

‘I think they’re brilliant names. So this must be Nala?’ Erin hastily dragged her mind back and pointed to the female kitten the boy was cuddling against his chest. ‘It really suits her. If you have any concerns just call us, and Elaine in reception will make you an appointment for their booster in three weeks’ time.’

‘Thank you.’ The little boy carefully encouraged Nala back into the carrier and Erin said goodbye as they left the consulting room. She cleaned the examination table and washed her hands before going to a screen on the wall and the keyboard beneath it, adding her notes so Elaine could follow up. A nice, easy consult for a Monday afternoon; two gorgeous and healthy kittens with a loving home and years ahead of them.

She wasn’t looking forward to her next consultation and read through the spaniel’s notes with a feeling of dread. She didn’t really need to be reminded of his recent medical history; she’d been treating Mungo for two months now and his results weren’t improving. He was only ten and she knew a difficult conversation about his quality of life was on the way. It was the worst part of the job, and one she’d never quite got used to. She took a deep breath and pasted on a welcoming smile as she opened the door to the waiting room and called her patient’s name. The once-lively spaniel lumbered to his feet and her heart plummeted as she caught the anxious gaze of his owners. A jolly and glittering Christmas tree in the corner of reception seemed far too cheery in the face of her clients’ despair.

‘Come through,’ she said quietly, bending down to give Mungo a pat. He wagged his tail, tongue lolling in greeting. ‘How’s he been?’

Ten minutes later it was all agreed. Erin had taken more bloods, and she'd run the tests. If the results were as expected, then she'd carry out his owners' wishes to put Mungo to sleep in his own home, surrounded by his family. They thanked her as they left, eyes swimming with unshed tears. She took a moment to compose herself as she labelled the bloods and wrote up her notes. The practice didn't often make house calls for companion animals, but she was always willing to make those last moments as comfortable and peaceful as possible. Her new boss, Gil Haworth, was of the same mind, and he was just one of the reasons why she loved working in Hartfell so much.

Yorkshire born and bred, she'd been aware of his brilliant reputation and had leaped at the opportunity to join his expanding practice. When she'd arrived for her interview at the end of August, he'd outlined his ambition to keep the practice at the heart of the local community and adapting to meet new challenges. They'd spent the morning seeing farm clients in the spectacular Dales landscape he'd loved all his life, and he'd laid bare the best and worst aspects of the job. He'd stood aside so she could examine the animals, talk with the farmers, and offer her own diagnoses and treatment plans.

Afterwards he'd taken her to lunch in the village pub, and over plates of outstanding fish and chips he'd offered Erin the job, explaining that her instincts coupled with experience and an ability to work under pressure as part of a team were exactly what he was searching for. She'd found it difficult to hold back a gulp of emotion as she'd thanked him and tried to grasp the swift turn her life was about to take. It would mean a move away from home, her first since returning after university, and it was only the worry about her family that made her hesitate before

she'd reached across the table and shaken Gil's hand in acceptance.

The first person she'd called to share the news with was her mum. Hartfell was too far from the town where they lived for Erin to commute or be on call out-of-hours as required, and at thirty-one, it was time she moved out anyway. So the newly re-branded Home Farm Vets would be her opportunity, and her mum had offered congratulations and her usual loving support in whatever ways she could manage.

Erin called her final patient of the day, relieved that this consultation would be less emotional than the previous one. Ten days ago she'd examined a lump on a guinea pig and had been happy to discover it was nothing more sinister than an abscess. It was successfully removed under general anaesthetic and today was a final check-up to make sure all was well. The brown-and-white guinea pig was lively and inquisitive, and she was glad to discharge it and send the patient on her way with two chatty young owners and a thankful mum.

She left the consulting room as spotless as she'd found it, ready for tomorrow. The practice had grown since Gil had taken it over in the summer and the full-time staff now numbered six, with their evening and some weekend out-of-hours work divided between two regular locums. Companion animal patients were increasing as they gained more clients, and he'd discussed with Erin his intention to appoint a third full-time vet in the new year. But until then they were managing with locum support, with a new one joining them tomorrow.

She loved being part of the team and building on the history of the practice. Founded on Home Farm by Gil's grandfather, who'd been a tenant of the estate, eventually

the practice had merged with another one in town after both original partners passed away, and Gil joined after qualifying. He'd applied for planning permission to extend into the remaining farm buildings and develop the practice to offer more specialised care and improved facilities, and he was hoping for a decision before Christmas in three weeks' time.

Erin made her way into the waiting room and Elaine, their receptionist, who had put off retiring for another year, paused mopping the floor. A pair of blue glasses suited Elaine's auburn colouring, and her short hair was finally turning grey. 'All set for your house guest?' she asked brightly.

'As I'll ever be,' Erin said, caught unawares by the question. She registered Elaine's surprise at her unusually glum reply and found a smile. 'No, it's all good. I've made the bed and everything.'

She couldn't change her mind about hosting now and let Gil down just because the new locum in question was Oli Sterling and they had history. She hadn't told anyone about Oli, other than her friend Carys from university, who also knew him. Not even her mum, Heather, with whom she shared most things. Heather had once thought the world of him and would probably get straight on the next bus when she did find out, which was the last thing Erin wanted. Her mum still occasionally inquired if she knew what Oli was up to these days. Erin made a point of not finding out, so she was always happy to reply that she had no idea.

She also intended to keep her personal connection to Oli at university private if she possibly could. She dreaded her professionalism ever being called into question, so she fixed her mind instead on the rent she would earn and

not the man whose presence at Cambridge had dominated her first year almost as much as the never-ending hours of study had.

Until two days ago she'd been expecting a different locum, someone more experienced and older than her who would slot temporarily into the team. Oli Sterling, as she knew all too well, was neither. But when she'd offered to host, no one could've foreseen that the woman who'd originally accepted the job would be forced to change her plans due to a family emergency.

'I was a bit surprised Gil took him on, to be honest.' Erin used her foot to nudge the mop bucket closer to Elaine. 'Oli doesn't have much farm experience, from what I saw on his CV.'

'Well, Gil was a bit stuck, what with us finally losing Wendy to retirement and Christmas around the corner. Gabi said this new chap comes highly recommended.' Elaine mopped briskly at a muddy patch until it disappeared. Gabi was their practice manager, who'd moved to the Dales from Poland fifteen years ago. She had a fierce eye for detail and was putty around a puppy. 'Apparently she knew someone who'd worked with him, and suggested Gil look him up.'

Erin nodded vaguely. At least January would soon be here, and Oli would be gone, removed from her life a second time. As always she just needed to focus on work; she wouldn't allow him to intrude into her personal life, not this time. But sharing a home with him was a coming reality she hadn't got her head around yet.

As first year undergraduates they'd been allocated rooms in the same building at St Catharine's College, known as Catz, two of the handful of veterinary medicine students the college accepted each year. Since their first

meeting she'd always been aware of the pull that existed between them, the exhilarating sense they were always on the brink of something more.

But Oli belonged to a group of students which excluded Erin without even trying – the coolest boys, the effortlessly beautiful girls, all drawn together by an innate confidence she simply didn't share. There existed some invisible thread that bound their backgrounds as clearly as it defined their futures, and even when her social life had overlapped with his, she'd felt separate from him still.

'Look at this!' A ravishing young woman burst into reception. She was brandishing a phone and thrust it urgently at Erin. 'I've just found Oli Sterling's Instagram, have you seen him surfing in Costa Rica? Erin Hardy, I'm thinking we should swap houses for Christmas, like in *The Holiday*.'

'Yeah, but there'll be no Jude Law swigging brandy in mine.' Erin took a step back before her colleague actually rammed the phone into her nose, wondering if they really could swap. Jess, their third-year student nurse, was the most naturally elegant woman Erin had ever met. She made every outfit look stylish, even ordinary green scrubs and black safety trainers, and always added a touch of sparkle. Today it was a jewelled flower clip in her hair, glinting amongst the dark lengths. Her face was a perfect oval, with well-defined cheekbones and evenly spaced brown eyes, ones that Erin always thought of as memorable and striking.

'No, but you've got Oli Sterling instead, and he's way hotter. Look!' Jess tried again with the phone and Erin feigned disinterest, refusing to be distracted. She'd lost nearly a whole evening doing exactly this, and she'd already seen quite a lot more of her new colleague in those

shots than she'd planned to. Her mind was tugging her back to the May Ball again; Oli's determination when he'd seized her hand and hurried her away from everyone else, their very last chance beckoning.

'Jess, as of tomorrow he's going to be working with us, and therefore his social media is off limits as far as I'm concerned.' At least it was now. Erin moved to Elaine's desk and pretended to stare at the screen to avoid further scrutiny. Jess had become a good friend since Erin had moved here, and she didn't often take no for an answer when her mind was set on a course of action.

'You could throw a party to welcome him?'

'For a lodger who's only staying three weeks? Are you kidding me?'

'Movie night, then,' Jess said airily, giving Elaine a grin. 'Don't forget we're all coming round to yours to binge Christmas Netflix. Starting with *Holidate*.'

'Oh yeah. I love that film.' Erin had forgotten it was coming up, and quickly tried to recall the details as Elaine chuckled. 'Sorry, remind me again which Saturday we said?'

'You're hopeless, all you think about is work.' Jess exaggerated her eye roll. 'It's two weeks on Saturday, six p.m. You're doing the food and I'm on drinks. Are you going to invite Oli or shall I?'

'Let's just see how it goes. He probably won't want to socialise with us seeing as we'll all be working together.' Erin could but hope. 'I'm sure he'll have his own plans, he's literally just borrowing a bed.'

'Maybe it'll be yours,' Jess said, laughing at the flustered look Erin shot her. Once Erin had wanted that as much as her hard-won Cambridge First. 'Just think, there you'll

both be, squeezing past each other in that tiny kitchen and sharing a bathroom. You lucky girl.'

'Not especially.' Erin was imagining it too and her cheeks turned pink; such thoughts were way too close to the surface. She needed to get Jess off the subject of Oli before her friend began to suspect something was amiss. 'Listening to you, anyone would think you're not loved up with Noah now you've bought your first home together.'

'Yeah, but a girl can still appreciate beauty, can't she?' Undaunted, Jess finally pocketed the phone. 'I'm off, you can tell me tomorrow all about your first evening together. Night, Elaine.'

'There won't be anything to tell.' Erin also said goodbye to Elaine and headed outside to her red pickup. She loved her company vehicle, even if it was always full of mud, the multitude of equipment she carried for work, and spare wet weather gear for any eventually. She was making a full and happy life here, and the prospect of Oli Sterling's unwelcome presence was the only cloud on the steady horizon she'd worked hard to establish.

When she'd landed the job, finding somewhere to live was a priority and it was her mum who'd encouraged her to consider buying. For Erin, taking on a home of her own had been a huge leap and she'd worried about leaving her mum too, but they both knew it was time. Gil had let her know about a place that was for sale in Hartfell, and she'd fallen instantly in love with Bramble Cottage's quirky corners and cosy nooks when she'd gone to view it. She already had a mortgage agreed in principle and a decent sum for a deposit after years of saving, and the sale was swiftly agreed. After she'd moved in, the thrill every time she arrived home had still not diminished. Until now, with Oli's arrival imminent.

Frost was glittering on the cobbled lane when she got out of the pickup and crossed the few stone flags which formed her tiny front garden, dotted with pots and plants she hadn't yet got around to replacing. Her neighbour Edmund, a couple of doors down, was a keen gardener and he kept them replenished with winter bedding for her, a favour she reciprocated in cake. Baking, along with the music she didn't play as often as she'd like, were her two main passions outside of her career.

Erin opened the front door and stepped straight into the sitting room, grateful for the heat enveloping her. The previous owners had replaced the windows and central heating a few years ago, and she was very thankful for that and a compact stove on which she burned logs sparingly. Having grown up in town, she'd always imagined herself in some neat new-build, not this two-hundred-year-old cottage with scraps of evidence still speaking its history, like the initials carved into the rough beam for a mantel above the fireplace, level with her chin, or the handwritten recipe books she'd found in a kitchen cupboard and couldn't bear to throw away. It didn't bother her in the least that she could touch the banister at the bottom of the stairs in the kitchen with one hand and the sink with the other – not a selling point the estate agents had thought to include in the details.

A small Formica table and four plastic chairs from a charity shop sat in front of the sitting room window, and her ancient two-seater sofa and matching armchair were chintz. Not exactly the style she was after, but the deposit and legal costs had swallowed her savings, and she couldn't afford to be choosy when she'd been offered them for nothing. They were comfy, which Erin appreciated when she curled on the sofa after a long day of consultations or

a difficult call-out. This curious little place was hers now and she adored it, aware of how fortunate she was to be here.

At least Oli's rent would help with the new bathroom she planned to install next year. The current one was wedged beside the kitchen off a squat hallway separating the kitchen from the sitting room. The bathroom dated from the 1980s, the shower a later addition fixed to the tiles above a turquoise bath. Paying the mortgage was her first priority each month and she carefully portioned out the rest of her salary once that was safely taken care of. There was no getting around the fact that repainting, choosing accessories and nicer furniture was on hold for now. But she couldn't wait to celebrate her first Christmas here and decorate the cottage until it sparkled with the joys of the festive season.

She pulled her work boots off and left them on the rack behind the door, her feet in thick socks sinking into a cheerful floral rug over the stone-flagged floor. Three antique hooks hung above the boot rack, and she draped her coat from one, a tremor on her skin reminding her that soon Oli would be doing the same. She was still thinking about making a cup of tea or having a shower before he arrived when she caught sight of a sleek SUV pulling up outside her window.

She'd know his profile anywhere; she'd spent too many hours trying not to be distracted by it when they'd studied together at Catz, sitting up late night after night. So, he was early. Her pulse skittered as she took a hasty step back in case he spotted her staring. His head was bent, presumably checking his phone, and then he got out of the car with that easy, long-limbed elegance she thought she'd forgotten. Her palms were clammy as he went to

the open boot, the light illuminating his face. He grabbed a leather bag and, as the boot glided shut, she wondered wildly why she'd ever thought his feet wouldn't reach the end of her spare bed.

She took a long, steadying breath when he rapped on the door, wiping her palms on her legs. Memories of the May Ball were dancing through her mind again, taunting her with the promise they'd held then. She couldn't think any more of that first kiss, his mouth hungry and demanding on hers as he'd slid an arm around her waist to pull her into him, how she'd kissed him back just as urgently.

She blinked hurriedly, trying to force those thoughts away. Oli was facing the lane, and he spun around as she opened the door, the familiar grin she remembered so well already in place. He'd always been able to unbalance her without even trying, and her body was reminding her again about his touch and what it felt like to be in his arms, to have him stare at her with desire and something more. Something she'd never allowed herself to name.

'Hey, you must be Elaine. Great to meet you, I'm...'
Oli's mouth fell into a gape as the bag in his hand crashed to the ground and Erin saw his face pale beneath the fading suntan. His smile dissolved as his eyes locked onto hers and a few moments dragged by before he muttered her name. 'Erin? Seriously?'