

WRAPPED UP IN CHRISTMAS JOY

JANICE LYNN

SNUGGLED BENEATH ONE OF THE quilts the Butterflies had delivered to the sledders, Sophie took a sip of cocoa and stole a look at Cole over the rim of her mug. They'd stripped out of their wet outer snow gear prior to coming into a fully-decorated Hamilton House. A dozen or so people had come in with them, and Bodie had gotten a fire roaring in the living room fireplace.

Now, the fire was blazing, and the majority of guests were in Sarah's kitchen, with its large built-in dining nook, waiting while she threw a batch of cookies into the oven. But a handful had brought their drinks to the living room to warm by the fire, Sophie among them.

She huddled on the hearth, quilt draped around her shoulders, drinking her cocoa and letting all of it warm her insides.

Truth was, her insides were feeling pretty toasty already. All thanks to the man sitting in a chair near her, drinking his cocoa. Unlike her, he was blanketless as he'd denied needing one.

Of course he'd say that when the Butterflies had claimed they were fresh out and suggested he could share with Sophie.

Could they have been any more obvious?

She'd seen the extra blankets—had known there were plenty for Cole to have one to himself—but he hadn't been shivering at all, so she hadn't insisted. The cold probably had been no big deal to someone who'd been in the military and seen and done the things he had.

It was so difficult to imagine this handsome, relaxed-looking man sitting in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and socked feet being the same one who'd written the anguished journal. Her brain struggled to connect the person who'd played in the snow with her with the journal writer who'd been tormented by the images in his head, and likely still was.

Yet, they were the same.

“Warm?”

He must have caught her watching him. Well, of course he had. He was a highly skilled former special ops Marine whose senses had been honed to pick up on things far stealthier than her. And as he'd said, subtlety wasn't her strong suit.

Which made her feel pretty proud she'd gotten those few snowballs in...although, she suspected he'd let her. She couldn't recall ever having so much fun playing in the snow.

“All warm except my toes—they still feel frozen.”

Instinctively she wiggled them in the thick, fuzzy socks Sarah had loaned her to replace the slightly damp ones Sophie had pulled off with her boots on the front porch.

Concern flickered in Cole's eyes. “Do I need to rub them to get circulation going again?”

Stunned, Sophie blinked. “Would you?”

In response, Cole put his mug on a coaster and knelt beside where she sat on the fireplace hearth, clearly intending to take her feet into his hands.

“I didn’t mean that you should,” she clarified, tucking her feet as far back against the hearth as she could. “I was just surprised that you would be willing to do that for me.”

“If your toes are cold, then the best way to restore circulation would be for me to rub them. It’s not a problem.”

He sounded logical but she’d...well, she hadn’t been logical at all at the thought of Cole rubbing her feet. The mere idea of him massaging them, even through her socks for therapeutic purposes, melted her insides.

“I thought you just wanted to play piggy with me,” she teased. This time it was him who blinked, looking thrown by her comment. “You know, this little pig went to the market? This little pig stayed home?” she prompted at his continued silence.

“I knew what you meant.”

Enjoying teasing him, she arched her brow. “But that wasn’t what *you* meant?”

He shook his head. “My intentions were medicinal only.”

Smiling, she took another sip of her cocoa, then gave a little shrug. “Good job. They say laughter is the best medicine.”

“Seems I recall hearing that somewhere.”

“If it’s true, then I’m doing my part to improve your health,” she mused, proud she had made him laugh.

Cole’s lips twitched. “Is that what you’re doing? Improving my health?”

“I’m trying, but you don’t always cooperate.”

Then he smiled.

Warmth spread throughout her chest in ways that had nothing to do with her cocoa or the fire and everything to do with the man kneeling beside her, smiling at her with what could only be described as tenderness shining in his amazing eyes.

Emotions erupting inside her like a Fourth of July firework finale, Sophie smiled back, thinking that tonight, in her butterfly-embossed diary, she'd write that today had been the best day of her life.