



# WRAPPED UP IN CHRISTMAS

JANICE LYNN

**A**FTER MONTHS OF SWEAT, GRIT, and sheer determination to get to the picturesque Kentucky town he'd only recently heard of, Bodie Lewis had finally arrived in Pine Hill.

He turned off his pickup's engine, ruffled his dog Harry's scruffy black and white fur, and let out a long breath. Put him on a dangerous overseas mission, and he was in his element. Searching out a little elderly lady in the civilian world to express his gratitude? Not so much.

"We made it," he told the dog who had been at his side nonstop for the past few months.

A dog and a quilt.

Not exactly things he'd expected to call his own, nor to have made such an impact on his life.

If he added the just-purchased truck he was sitting in and a rarely touched bank account, he'd be listing

all his worldly possessions. Until recently, he hadn't been in one place long enough to justify his own transportation and had always driven government-issued vehicles when the need arose.

He ran his hand over his dark hair. Although an average length by most standards, the strands felt out of place. He'd worn a crew cut most of his adult life—a cut he was no longer required to maintain, thanks to his honorable discharge.

The “honorable” was enough to gut him.

There had been nothing honorable about the demise of the rest of his unit.

Pain shot across Bodie's chest. Pain of grief and emotion so raw he longed to scream. His ever-present anger, threatening to boil over into rage, constantly simmered at the loss of his brothers-in-arms, and at the loss of his career.

All he'd ever wanted was to be a soldier. To serve and protect his country.

So much for dreams.

He glanced around the town square. Mom-and-pop storefronts provided a fresh facelift for old brick buildings. That's what he had to do—give his old dreams a fresh makeover. Surely his upcoming job with iSecure would fill that driving need inside him, wouldn't it? His need to do more? To be more?

He had been more, and now...

His gaze shifted to a flag that whipped in the November wind atop a pole in front of the stately brick courthouse. The material stretched and stood at attention within the wind's invisible fingers, saluting him.

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Bodie nodded his head in silent acknowledgement of that flag and all it represented.

Of what he'd been willing to give to defend that flag.

In acknowledgement of what many had given.

Feeling the pain tighten his chest again, he sucked in a deep breath and stopped his mind from going where it went too often. Wasn't that what the therapist the military had required he work with told him? To refocus when his mind wandered into dark places?

Fine. He concentrated on the reason he was here in Pine Hill: to find the elderly woman who'd affected his life with her kindness.

His task shouldn't be too difficult for someone used to tracking down terrorists. Pine Hill, Kentucky, wasn't exactly the mecca of booming civilization.

Even though he'd never stepped foot in the town, he'd pictured it so clearly. Sarah's description was burned in his mind, offering him a safe space to escape when memories overpowered him. So, seeing his safe haven come to life brought him an unexpected sense of belonging. Apple-pie America at its best.

And a far cry from his childhood home in Houston, where he was headed after this slight detour.

Not that there was much of a home in Texas. Just his mom, stepfather, and a couple of much-older stepsisters he'd never been close to.

He wouldn't be there long. The moment he got the go-ahead to start his new job, he'd provide top-notch protection to the rich and famous around the globe. Not the life he craved, but staying in the same place for very long made his feet itch. Always had.

Janice Lynn

Which was why he'd turned down the Army's offer of a desk job. A desk job? For him? Never.

He glanced toward the quilt in the passenger seat. He'd be starting his next journey as soon as he'd had the chance to thank Sarah Smith for pulling him out of a dark, dark place.

He'd never heard of Quilts of Valor prior to being presented with the special gift. But that red, white, and blue quilt had given him something to hang on to—literally and figuratively—while he was recuperating.

Which was why he was in Pine Hill, to thank the quilt's maker in person.

He owed her more than a simple thank-you could convey, but that's what he'd come to give.

A thank-you, and then he'd be on his way.

