

WRAPPED UP IN CHRISTMAS JOY

JANICE LYNN

“THE COMMITTEE AND I HAVE been working to ensure this year’s drive is a smashing success,” she continued, glancing toward her table that must be the committee. Made sense, given that Chief was seated there.

No surprise Sophie was there, either. Ben had taken great pleasure in telling him about goody-two-shoes Sophie Davis and her volunteering at the church. No doubt she had more than a few gold stars in her crown.

“We appreciate each of you for being a part of this wonderful work.” Maybelle smiled at Chief. “We’re excited to announce that we’ve paired up with the fire department this year and will be using the firehall as an additional drop-off point for toys. Sophie, you and Sarah pass out the information sheets.”

Sophie and the brunette stood and began handing papers to each volunteer. Cole had hoped the brunette would make her way to their table, but it was Sophie who stopped there, pausing mid-sentence when her gaze met his.

“So glad—um, Cole, uh, yeah, hi.” She sounded as breathless as someone he’d just pulled from a burning building.

Seeing him flustered her. Because she'd read his journal, or because he'd been a jerk to her?

He hadn't wanted to see her again. Still didn't want to.

Only...

Knowing any show of friendliness would be exaggerated a hundredfold by his two friends, Cole barely acknowledged her as he took a flyer. As an added bonus, it meant he didn't have to see the pity or disgust that he knew had to be reflected in her eyes.

How humiliating that she knew so many things about him—things he'd never wanted to share with anyone. Best thing he could do was let her go on thinking him a jerk. It would make her less likely to want to cross paths with him again.

He'd seen her, what, a handful of times since moving to Pine Hill? If each of them tried to avoid the other, maybe their paths would cross only rarely.

"Anyone not have a paper?" Maybelle asked when Sophie and the brunette returned to the front. When no one responded, she continued. "As I mentioned, we're doing things differently this year. We're breaking into three committees responsible for covering different needs."

Breaking into groups? Cole had thought he and the guys would just pick up toys around town, put out a few collection boxes, wrap a few presents, and maybe deliver them to some kids.

"If you look at the top of the page, you'll notice a number written on the stocking in the upper right-hand corner. That's your committee number. Those with a number one are in my group, naturally. We'll be handling media for the drive and getting word out via the lo-

cal paper and online sources, as well as being a contact point for the kids involved.” She smiled at the crowd, then at the chief. “Chief Callahan, you’re in my group.”

Cole’s boss nodded at Maybelle. Cole couldn’t be sure, given the distance between them, but he’d swear Chief’s cheeks had gone pink.

Maybelle smiled at him, then moved on. “Groups Two and Three will be working together within the community. The group leaders have lists of businesses who made donations or collected toys last year. Each group is responsible for contacting all the businesses on their list. Charlie and Ruby Jenkin will lead one group.”

“Maybe we’ll be with your Grandma Ruby and she’ll feed us,” Cole leaned over and whispered to Andrew when the couple in their early seventies stood, holding hands as per usual, and smiled first at each other, then at the other volunteers. Andrew’s grandmother had welcomed Cole to her fold and invited him to all their family’s get-togethers since he’d come to town. He’d actually gone to a few, as well as the Fourth of July picnic. He still remembered the fancy dilled potatoes that were, according to Andrew, Grandma Ruby’s specialty.

“Theirs is group two.”

Cole glanced at the number three on the stocking in the upper corner of his paper and sighed. No edible perks for him.

“Group Three will be led by Sophie and Sarah.”

Naturally.

“Trade with me.” He reached for Andrew’s paper to snatch it out of his hands, but his friend evaded him.

“How come?” Andrew’s eyes twinkled. “You in somebody’s group who you want to avoid?”

Deciding to ignore Andrew, Cole focused on Ben.

“I’ve got a three,” Ben said, showing his paper, and chuckling. “You’ve got it all wrong, Andrew. Ole Cole’s trying to trade *into* someone’s group.”

Glaring at his friend, Cole held up his paper, displaying the three so Ben would know he was trying to avoid Sophie, not be forced to be in her company.

Seeing the pity in her eyes when she looked at him left him raw and uneasy. And even before he knew she’d read his journal, he’d been committed to giving Sophie a wide berth. He knew her by reputation and he had no doubt that, given the chance, Little Miss Do-Gooder would try to make him one of her many pet projects and attempt to fill his world with snowflakes, gingerbread houses, and Christmas cheer.

A green candy cane forcing him into being Santa was more than enough Christmas for Cole.

He turned back to Andrew. “Come on.”

At first Andrew shook his head, then, finally, taking on a more serious expression, he shrugged. “Okay. Fine. Since it’s important to you, I’ll trade. What are pals for?”

Relief flooded Cole.

That is, until he noted the humor in his friend’s gaze and glanced down at the paper Andrew had handed him. A three was in the upper right-hand stocking on his friend’s paper, too.

Great.

Cole would be collecting toys with Sophie.