

WRAPPED UP IN CHRISTMAS JOY

JANICE LYNN

“I’M A FIREFIGHTER. THAT DOESN’T sound too far-fetched to me. Have you heard about some of the rescues we’ve assisted with in this town?”

As they wound the lights around the tree, then began placing ornaments, Cole told Sophie a few stories of the more unusual rescues he and the guys had made. He’d never been much of a talker but recounting the tales to Sophie was easy.

“I know I shouldn’t laugh,” she admitted as he told her about a person they’d had to rescue who’d gotten stuck on Halloween when he’d tried to slip through a narrow row of metal fences so he could surprise his pregnant wife. “But the image of you and Andrew having to rescue a grown man wearing a diaper, bonnet, and booties strikes me as hilarious.”

“Once we knew he was okay, we found it funny, too. Apparently, his wife had found out she was pregnant a few days before, and he hadn’t taken the news so well, initially. He was trying to make it up to her with the costume and gifts he’d stashed in his goodie bag.”

“Strange man.”

“We thought so, too, but hey, by the time we got him out, his wife wasn’t mad at him anymore, so I guess it

worked out for him in the long run. What about you? Any funny tales at the quilt shop?"

"We have some interesting customers, but none who get stuck in iron fences."

"Just trees?"

"That would be our workers," Sophie corrected with a smile flashed his way.

While talking, they finished the lights and made a good dent in the ornaments on the table.

Sophie stepped back and surveyed their work. "Hmmm, we need more near the top."

"Plus, the star."

"The star is last, the icing on the cake, so to speak." She climbed back up the step ladder and rearranged an ornament that Cole had thought looked fine the way it was. "Hand me that box of ornaments, please."

She pointed to a plastic tray that held half a dozen big red balls adorned with gold flecks.

"This would work better if I was on the ladder and you just handed me what you wanted hung higher," he suggested, not liking that she was balanced precariously on the ladder again, leaning toward the tree.

She stretched to straighten an ornament. "How would that be better?"

"You know which ornaments you want put where and I don't. If I was up there, you could supervise me from down here."

"That's not a problem. You will know which ones to hand me because I'll be telling you. I have no problem ordering you around. Now, get me that box, Marine," she purposely made her voice deep and harsh. "Snap to it or I'll make you drop and give me twenty."

Snorting, Cole glanced at the array of ornaments still

on the table, then picked up the box she'd indicated. "Auditioning to be a drill sergeant?"

Eyes sparkling, she asked, "You think I'd cut it?"

He gave her a get real look. "Nope. Too soft. You'd go down as the nicest drill sergeant in history."

"Apparently, my tough voice wasn't nearly tough enough." Sounding a little self-conscious, she laughed. "But I'd be okay with being known as the nicest drill sergeant in history."

Studying where she'd placed the ornament and rearranged it on the artificial tree, she decided she didn't like where it was hanging and removed it.

"I'd cover the whole world in niceness if I could," she continued when she finally got the ornament positioned just as she wanted it.

At least, Cole thought she had. Instead, she leaned back to get a better look.

"Be careful, Sophie."

Turning, probably to assure him she was fine, she lost her hold on the top of the stepladder, then lost her footing.

Grateful he'd always had quick reflexes, Cole caught hold of her waist and put her firmly on the ground in front of him. Just as her hand had lingered against his earlier, his did now at her waist.

She'd grasped his shoulders to stabilize herself. How could catching her steady him and make his knees wobble at the same time?

Her gaze locking with his, Sophie swallowed.

She had that look again. The one that conveyed things she shouldn't think, shouldn't feel. The one that clouded his good intentions.

"Sophie," he began, his hands leaving her waist to

cup her face as he stared down into her eyes. “My beautiful Sophie. What are we doing?”

The emotions swirling in her gaze branded his soul.

“I’m no good for you,” he insisted.

She shook her head. “You’re wrong.”

“Sophie.” They couldn’t do this. Only, as Sophie stretched on her tiptoes, intending to touch her lips to his, he didn’t move away or make any attempt to stop her.

Just held his breath in anticipation of her lips against his—

“How’s it coming in here?”

At Isabelle’s voice, Cole jumped back from Sophie.

Or had it been Sophie who’d leapt away?

Cole inwardly grimaced. What was he thinking? Of course she was embarrassed. He wasn’t a “bring home to meet the family” kind of guy. He was a guy who was so messed up in the head that he still occasionally had nightmares that left the sheets sweat-drenched. No wonder her sister was giving him an evil eye.

He didn’t say anything, just met Isabelle’s unhappy gaze and braced himself for whatever condemnation she hurled at him. What could he say in his defense? Nothing. He didn’t blame her for not being happy about what she’d walked in on.

Sophie had almost kissed him.

Would have kissed him had her sister not interrupted.

And him? He would have let Sophie kiss him.

Thank goodness Isabelle had chosen that moment to walk in.