

Wrapped Up in Christmas Hope

by
Janice Lynn



"I guess somebody got shot down."

Losing focus on the gruesome aliens he was destroying on the video game monitor screen, Andrew winced. Ben had overheard his conversation with Morgan? He should have known his buddy wasn't nearly so absorbed with cleaning his equipment as he'd pretended to be.

"Your hearing must be messed up."

From the chair next to Andrew's in the fire hall's day room, Ben snorted. "Nothing wrong with my hearing. Major crash and burn—I couldn't miss it, kind of like that alien kicking your butt there."

Andrew made hash of the alien in question. "Crash and burn makes it sound like I was trying to get her to date me, and that's not true. I asked to be her and Grey-son's friend. That's all. Can you blame me? She made me brownies. Who wouldn't want to be friends with someone who makes you brownies?"

"The kid made you brownies," Ben argued as another round of aliens arrived to prevent them from moving on

to the next game level.

“Exactly. I want to be his friend, too. Future firefighter and he bakes me brownies, which makes me like the kid all the more. You, not so much,” Andrew said, never taking his gaze off the game.

“Because you know you’re never going to oust my top scorer position on our favorite video game?” Ben teased.

Andrew snorted.

“You asked Morgan out?” Cole asked, coming near where Andrew pretended great interest in the video game. “How did I miss that?”

“It was when you took Greyson out in the fire truck,” Ben supplied.

“And when you were eavesdropping but seem to have missed the part where I asked her just as friends,” Andrew added.

Ben gave him a knowing look. “Man carries on a conversation in my house, that’s not me eavesdropping.”

“Since when is the fire hall your house?”

“Isn’t it yours?” Ben questioned.

“You have a point,” Andrew conceded. “I’m here almost as much as I am my place, and you guys and Jules are family.”

“Don’t let him send you off on a wild rabbit chase while he completely avoids fessing up to having asked Morgan out,” Cole warned, kicking the leg rest out on the chair he’d settled into to work on a crossword puzzle.

“Is that all you want? A confession I asked her out?” Andrew shrugged. “I asked her out as friends.”

“And she said no,” Ben finished. “Our boy was cracking me up with all his lines. Never known him to get

shot down before a woman even got to know him. Usually, they're asking him out rather than the other way around."

"Even if I had been asking her out on a date, which I wasn't, it wouldn't have been the first time I've been told no." Although it had been a few years since the previous time that had happened. "It's unlikely to be the last."

It was the one that bothered him, though. For so many reasons. Greyson's clear loneliness and desire to be a firefighter called to him, made him want to reach out to the kid. And, Morgan, well, he'd like to be her friend, too.

"Can't blame her for saying no to the likes of you," Cole teased, grinning, then his expression turning more serious, he added, "But to be fair, from what Sophie has told me, Morgan isn't interested in dating anyone."

Andrew was having more and more difficulty focusing on the video game. He wanted to pick Cole's brain and learn everything he could about Morgan and Greyson.

"Why's that?" Ben replied, saving Andrew from having to be the one to ask.

"She's had a rough time the past couple of years. First, she lost her husband. Then the hospital where she'd been working downsized this past summer and she lost her job. Sophie says Morgan felt overwhelmed, and that's why she moved to Pine Hill—she thought being close to family would help."

"That is rough," Ben admitted, then cut his gaze to Andrew. "Sounds as if you're wasting your time with that one."

Had she said yes, spending the day with Morgan and Greyson wouldn't have been wasted time. Of that, he was certain.

"She's not really your type, anyway," Cole pointed out.

"I have a type of friend?" He wasn't ready to give up yet on their being friends. Especially not now that he knew she needed his help to move past her grief and start living life fully again. Couldn't she see that he was someone safe? Neither of them were looking for a relationship, so he could help her and Greyson heal and have fun until she was ready to find the right person to settle down with. Although, the thought of her with someone else didn't sit well and he took out a line of aliens to appease his frustration with the entire situation.

Cole eyed him over his folded back crossword puzzle book. "Give her time. Maybe she'll see things differently after she gets settled into Pine Hill life."

"Like you did with Sophie?" he asked, hoping to put his friend on the defense rather than the offense. Andrew much preferred to deliver the punches than to take them.

"That was a completely different situation. Sophie deserved better than me. Still does. But I'm a lucky man because she loves me, anyway."

Andrew disagreed. Sophie was lucky to have his pal's heart. Still, he made a gagging noise, then elbowed Ben. "Reach over and divest that syrupy sap of his man card, please."

Cole harrumphed. "Man card or no, I can take your sorry self."

“In your dreams,” Andrew countered, although he wouldn’t want to put it to the test. Cole had been a highly trained member of a special forces unit during his Marine days. Andrew had taken years of Ishin Ryu Ju-Jitsu, but he’d never used his skills in real life or death combat, not the way Cole had. Based upon the nightmares his buddy used to have when he would sleep at the station, Andrew knew Cole had seen and done things he’d rather forget.

“By the way, you have two weeks to work on your next comedy routine,” Cole added, causing Andrew to look his way again.

“Watch it!” Ben warned as an alien sideswiped him on the video screen.

“Comedy routine?” Andrew asked, his gaze back on the monitor but his attention divided. At the rate he was paying attention to the game, earth was doomed.

“Asking Morgan out again,” Cole supplied.

“Why two weeks?”

“Cause that’s when you’ll be seeing her again. Sophie said Morgan was volunteering at the Quilts of Valor Foundation Sew-In. That thing the quilt shop is hosting at the church.” Cole settled back in his chair to study his crossword puzzle. “I signed us up. As long as no calls come in, Chief says we can volunteer all day.”

Andrew could believe it. Chief was all about volunteering, as was Cole.

Ben grimaced. “We’re sewing, aren’t we?”

“Yep.”

“Great.” Ben sighed. “Santa Cole has struck again, going around spreading Christmas cheer.”

“Look at it this way, maybe your ‘the one’ will be there and you two can knit a life together,” Cole suggested.

“Stitch, not knit. Two completely different things,” Andrew corrected him. With Sophie running a quilt shop, Cole should know better.

“Whatever,” Cole said, shrugging. “It’s for a good cause.”

Ben was still fussing. Not wanting to seem too eager, Andrew mumbled some complaints, but only half-heartedly as he didn’t mind helping to make quilts for veterans.

Seeing Morgan Morris again would be an added bonus.

Maybe he’d get lucky and she really would have missed him. And, if so, maybe she would have decided that she was ready to be friends. Fourteen days...it could happen.

