



WRAPPED UP IN CHRISTMAS

JANICE LYNN

HOPEFULLY GOD WOULD ANSWER HER prayers and the right person would reply to her help-wanted ad. Otherwise, she'd have to delay her planned Grand Opening of Hamilton House.

The thought of that made her heart hurt a little. She wanted to do this for Aunt Jean.

Please, Lord, let them respond.

The door to the community room opened, and all heads turned to see who'd shown up to join their ornament-making festivities.

Sarah's eyes widened at the unfamiliar six-foot-plus man wearing jeans and a sherpa-lined blue jean jacket. He rubbed his hands, warming his bare fingers from the chill outdoors as he surveyed the Christmas chaos Sarah adored.

Ask and the Lord shall deliver.

Literally.

Okay, so she didn't really believe the stranger was there to answer her prayers, but still, his timing was impeccable. Who was he?

Apparently, she wasn't the only one wondering. It wasn't that one could hear a pin drop—not with the holiday music playing—but there was a collective curiosity pervading the now-muted room that had been loud with chatter prior to his arrival.

"I've been extra-good this year and Santa's delivering early," Rosie whispered under her breath, elbowing Claudia. Her lively eyes sparkled with mischief. "That's exactly what I asked for."

Giving the newcomer a once-over, Maybelle snorted. "You ain't been that good your whole life."

Claudia snickered. "That's the truth."

"That one there makes me wish I had been," Rosie sighed, fanning her face. "He's easy on these old eyes. A few years back, I'd have invited him over for some of my grandma's cinnamon bread. That never fails to warm a man over to my way of thinking."

"Charles didn't think much of your grandmother's cinnamon bread," Ruby reminded, a cheeky smile on her face as she happily sewed white yarn in and out of the plastic canvas piece she now held.

"Only because that was my first attempt at making it," Rosie defended, obviously annoyed at the reminder. "Be grateful I didn't have the recipe down yet or your Charles would've been my Charles."

Knowing better, Ruby just smiled and kept on sewing.

Still amused at the timing of the man's arrival, Sarah's lips twitched. Rosie's grandmother's cinnamon swirl bread was the stuff legends were made of. Women

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had been attempting to copy the recipe for years without success. Rosie closely guarded the recipe, as she swore it was guaranteed to put a sparkle in a man's eye. She wasn't about to let the other town women in on her little secret.

Maybelle's penciled-on brow arched and she made a loud tscking sound at Rosie. "If you really thought you had a chance with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Stoic there, you'd have fired up the oven and started stirring the batter."

Rosie's gaze narrowed but with good nature as she intoned, "I'll stir your batter, Maybelle Kirby."

The women laughed as one Christmas song ended and another began.

With almost every eye on him, the man scanned the room, apparently searching for something, or someone. He didn't look impressed—more like he didn't belong in the room or around happy people in general. With his observant, stern expression, he stuck out like a pumpkin on Christmas morning.

Despite the stranger's serious demeanor, Rosie was right that he was easy to look at. Give the man a smile, and he'd make women of all ages swoon.

Who was he and why was he there?

"You should go say hi, Sarah," Claudia suggested, giving her arm a nudge. "Maybe he's a traveling man and you'll get to see the world."

"Ask if he's single," Rosie added, wagging her drawn-on brows.

"Ladies," Sarah scolded them. "Didn't I just remind you of the reasons why I don't care if he's single or not? Still, as the planner, I should see why he's here."

She started to stand, but another volunteer

positioned closer to the door walked up to talk to the newcomer. With the music and the chatter around the room that had resumed, Sarah couldn't hear what he said, but Carrie turned and was pointing toward Sarah's table.

Sarah's belly did a flip-flop.

"Do you know him?" she asked the woman sitting next to her, wondering if this handsome stranger was some long-lost son.

Maybelle squinted her eyes toward the man, then shook her head. "Can't say as I do, but looks like we're about to find out. He's headed this way. Rosie, you'd best behave."

Rosie pursed her lips at Maybelle. "I'm not making any promises. He offers to whisk me off my feet and carry me to his castle, I'm out of here."

"He offers to whisk you off your feet and carry you off to his castle, then somebody had better call 911, because I'd have a heart attack right here and now," Maybelle warned, her tone its usual dry sass.

Still talking to Carrie, the man nodded, then headed toward her table, too, his gaze settling on Maybelle.

"He looks more like a villain trying to storm the castle than the prince inside," Sarah mused, studying the man's intent expression, his broad shoulders that tapered to a narrow waist, and his proud stride.

He definitely had a "you'd better not mess with me" vibe.

"Ma'am," he said when he reached them, his eyes trained on Maybelle, before taking a moment to visually acknowledge each of the women at the table. His gaze lingered a millisecond when it connected with Sarah's, almost as if he was surprised by her

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presence, perhaps because she was so much younger than the other women. But then his sharp blue eyes moved back to Maybelle.

Sarah gulped, wondering at the tightening in her throat at his perusal. She'd swear she'd just been mentally photographed. That they all had been, to the point where if he was called upon to give every detail of the room and the people in it, he'd be able to do so with vivid detail and perfect accuracy.

"Do I know you, son?" Maybelle never had been one to beat around the bush.

"No, ma'am." His stance was stiff, overly formal. "But I came to Pine Hill to find you."

"Lucky you," Rosie stage-whispered, giving Claudia another elbow to the arm.

It was rare for anyone to surprise Maybelle, but the woman looked shocked. "Why in the world would you want to find me?"

He glanced around the table again, looking a little uncomfortable. That surprised Sarah. She doubted much got under this man's skin. He came across as a guy who had seen a lot during his lifetime.

"Is there perhaps somewhere we could go talk in private, Ms. Smith?"

Four jaws dropped, but not Maybelle's.

Maybelle arched a brow and gave him a look that had been straightening up naughty Sunday school children for years. "Ms. Smith?"

"The blonde at the door pointed me in this direction. You are Sarah Smith?"

Rosie's shoe delivered a swift nudge against Sarah's foot. Sarah knew that any second now, Rosie would be inviting him to join them for ornament making

Janice Lynn

and pointing out Sarah's ringless finger. With her stomach feeling fluttery, Sarah tucked her feet as far back beneath her chair as they'd comfortably go and attempted to use telepathy to get the woman to hold her tongue.

No doubt fully aware of Rosie's soccer tryouts beneath the crafting table, Maybelle laughed. "Looks like your ad in the paper worked this time, Sarah, and found you a man, after all."

