

Mistletoe in Juneau

by
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“You are always so prepared.” Danni used the lighter he gave her and together they watched as a small tendril of smoke curled up as the fire caught. “Look at me, I’m making a fire outside.”

Declan chuckled. “You find joy in the simplest things.”

“Isn’t life supposed to be that way?” Danni sat back on the thick log under the shelter.

“Maybe so. I think I’ve forgotten how to be that whimsical.” He piled the wood neatly until they had a roaring crackling fire and the warmth radiating off it could be felt.

“You still have it. I saw it today when you played the illustrious Saint Nicholas,” she teased.

“It comes easy then. Life is... I’m trying to navigate it the best way I can,” he admitted and sat beside her. Declan opened the basket that sat at his feet. “So, we have soup, sandwiches and hot chocolate.”

“Still warm?” Danni asked in surprise. “I can’t believe we forgot to eat.”

Declan winked. “I had Brody warm it back up and the hot chocolate is in a twelve-hour thermos that keeps drinks hot. It even comes with an extra cup.”

“Well bring it on,” Danni said with a laugh.

He gave them both a cup of hot chocolate and then large mugs with soup. The sandwiches were of course for dipping, and they ate in companionable silence while watching the sun go down completely. The best part was always when the last line of orange combined with the twilight blue sky. The stars then popped out in the clear sky and were so close Danni felt

like she could almost touch them.

“This is really good, thank you.” Danni had finished the last of her meal and was now sipping from the thermos cup.

“Just a small thank-you for being my assistant today.” Declan smiled.

“I had so much fun and took tons of pictures.”

“My mom and Cooper are getting married,” he blurted.

“That’s so wonderful,”

“I don’t know how I feel about it.” He added with a sigh, “I still see her with my dad, but Coop loves her and she’s happy, so who am I to complain?”

“My parents are still together so I can’t imagine how you feel. We aren’t as close-knit as you and your mom are, though,” she said. “I always felt like I was on the outside looking in and didn’t quite fit.”

“But they love you.”

“They do and I love them. My sister is just like them, I mean, living in the same cookie-cutter house across the street. I wanted to do my own thing, not the set plan they had for me. But my family thinks my career is a house of cards while they thrive in stability.”

“You have to do what’s right for you,” Declan said.

“I know, I always just wanted to fit in with them, somewhere.”

“You fit in here,” he said gently. “Perfectly, like you always lived here.”

“Everyone made me feel welcome,” Danni held her hands out to feel the warmth of the fire. “But you and your mom have the best kind of relationship. When you talk, she listens. She doesn’t expect you to be anything you’re not.”

“There’s a downside that she thinks she knows everything.” Declan chuckled.

“That’s all mothers, Declan.” She nudged him with her shoulder. “I have heard the words ‘because I’m Mom or Dad’ as a solution to an argument without either of them even listening to what I have to say.”

“If I had a sister, I think she and Mrs. Susie Mathias would butt heads too.” He used a stick to poke at the fire as he spoke. “When my mom came to Walter Reed after I got hurt, I think even the doctors were afraid of her. You don’t say no to a Colonel’s wife, and she traveled for forty-eight hours bouncing from connecting flight to connecting flight to get to me. She’s that kind of woman, so I know if she loves Cooper it’s real.”

“When is the wedding?” Danni asked.

“New Year’s.”

Danni sighed. “I’m sorry I won’t be here to see it.”

He cast a sidelong glance at her and hinted. “You could extend your trip.”

Her shoulders slumped a bit. “I can’t. I have work obligations, and if I’m out of the game for too long, it moves on quickly. Plus, I have that contract with the makeup line I need to follow up on. Then there’s Austin...”

Declan’s heart dropped. “The boyfriend.”

“Not really, we are on a break, I needed to think while I was here...” Danni shook her head. “He doesn’t listen to me either. It’s like everyone thinks their plans for me are better than the decisions I make for myself.”

“The question is, what do you want, Danni?” Declan faced her. “Nothing else matters and people will have to accept your choices.”

“There you go being a wise man again,” she teased.

“Remember when I told you there was a surprise.”

Declan inclined his head toward the horizon. "Look."

She turned to face the picturesque scene spread out before them. Christmas decorations in Auke Bay combined with the lights of homes peppered the night, creating a beautiful tapestry. The gazebo with the massive fir tree could be clearly seen. Beyond that the sky was a blanket of stars, and the horizon was illuminated as the first color of the northern lights danced their way into the night and slowly moved forward, outshining the constellations. He heard her gasp and Declan watched her face alight with wonder and joy as she watched nature's own light show.

A shooting star flashed across the scene and a wondrous laugh escaped her. Was fate making this all too perfect? He watched Danni glowing with happiness next to the campfire. Why did his heart squeeze with a painful sweet ache just from being around her? She turned to see him watching her and time stood still. Declan moved in and kissed her gently, watching her lids close as their lips touched. Quick and full of promise...

He pulled away to gaze into wide amber eyes that held so many questions. None he could answer, not even for himself. Declan sighed inwardly, knowing he had to break this perfect bubble they created.

He cleared his throat. "The fire is burning down. I should get you home before the temperature drops more."

"Okay... Deke," she teased and began to pack away the items back into the basket.

He threw some snow at her and she squealed. "That's what you get for teasing me."

"Come on, it's cute," Danni laughed. "I know your mom is the only one who calls you that."

"And Cooper...and now you," he answered with a smile.

“Thank you, I consider myself lucky.” Her smile was pleased and that in turn made him happy.

Declan made sure the fire was completely out by banking it with snow and then they made sure the trailer was secure. He helped her back onto the snowmobile and headed the rest of the way into Auke Bay. Parking in front of Amy and Mateo’s house, Declan made sure she was safe and sound without getting off the machine. His leg was stiff, and he didn’t know if he had taken a step too far by kissing her.

“Danni I...”

“This was...”

They spoke simultaneously and stopped with a small laugh.

“You go first,” Declan encouraged.

Danni moved closer and hugged him before speaking. “Thank you for one of the most amazing days of my life.”

“You’re welcome.”

She turned to walk away but stopped and faced him. “What were you going to say?”

He grinned. “The very same thing. Night, Danni.”

“Goodnight... Deke.”

He made sure she got inside safely and with a small wave from the door Danni was gone. Loneliness washed over him all at once; today was the longest he’d spent in her presence, and he missed her already. What had he gotten himself into? Like the aurora borealis, Danni would be gone soon, except his heart wouldn’t let him forget her.

