

Mistletoe in Juneau

by
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Declan's mother pulled a box from under her desk and rummaged through the neat index cards that held her recipes. "This one has a secret ingredient that makes it amazing. And it's as simple as it gets."

He plucked it from her fingers and went through to the kitchen. "Thanks, Mom."

"I have to go for a little bit and help Cooper with some Christmas shopping. Lock up when you're done." She took off her apron and looped it over his neck. "Godspeed, Deke."

"I can handle this," Declan muttered while looking at the card.

After gathering the ingredients, he mixed together the sugar and the mayonnaise. Mayonnaise must've been the so-called secret ingredient, and he had serious doubts about it, but he trusted his mom. He added the water and vanilla extract, then sniffed the bottle and added a bit more. *It smells good, so more favor*, he told himself. The recipe didn't say to turn off the mixer before adding the flour and cocoa powder, and it got everywhere.

But finally, he had a chocolate-y batter that he scooped it into the cake pan and slipped it into the oven. *Turn on the oven*. He turned back around and set the temperature that was listed on the card. He'd made a bit of a mess. Mayonnaise, sugar, and in fact, all of

the ingredients were on the stainless steel counter, and there was a definite flour handprint on the fridge door.

Making a mental note to clean it before he left, Declan set out the ingredients to make the frosting. The cake came out over thirty minutes later, and by the time he looked at the clock it was after nine. It was semi-cool, and he tried to use the frosting but it melted, so he added a second coat. He appraised his finished work. It wasn't as good as the actual cakes at Baker's Dozen, but it was the thought that counted.

Is it lopsided? Nah, it's fine. Declan looked around and knew he would have to come back and clean up after he dropped off the cake gift. He wanted to apologize before Danni fell asleep. The thought of having her go to bed with hurt feelings made him feel worse. He locked up the bakery and with his creation in a box and sitting on the passenger seat of his car, drove to make his apology, hoping this wasn't an even bigger mistake.

Danni opened the door when he knocked. The house was already dim except for the crackling fireplace. The television was on, and the house was decorated for Christmas. It reminded Declan he hadn't even put up a tree. *When was the last time I celebrated Christmas? Or any holiday?* He always took the work shift so his deputies could have the day off. They always made him a plate, and he was slowly becoming accustomed to fireworks that went off around the summer holidays. At one point he would have to drive into Fairbanks and stay in a hotel to avoid the commotion.

"Declan?" She wore thick pajamas and a penguin hat.

"Penguin?" He couldn't take his eyes off her headwear, or her, for that matter. It was as unique as her personality.

She put her hand on her head. "Peter and I were

playing before. I forgot to take it off. How can I help you, Sarge?”

It was cute and refreshing that she didn't try to drag the hat off in embarrassment.

The formality of his title made Declan wince, and he held out the box. “I made this for you, to say I'm sorry. For what I said to Mateo. I didn't mean any of it, Danni.”

“You did,” she surmised. “You think we are from two different worlds. Maybe we are but I'm not the flighty person you seem to think I am. I may make videos and be part of the nightlife of New York and California but when I'm at home, I'm plain old Danni from Brooklyn, wearing mismatched socks and watching TV.”

He smiled at the mental image. “Can I come in?”

“You have a chocolate cake, of course you can.” Danni opened the door wider. “I'll get us some milk, and you can have a slice with me.”

Declan hesitated before entering. “Everyone asleep?”

“Amy went to bed as soon as we got back.” Danni went around the kitchen island to the fridge and removed the milk. “Regular cold milk or hot chocolate?”

“It's cake, cold milk.” Declan sat down at one of the tall chairs in front of the granite countertop.

Danni pointed at him. “You, sir, know how to eat dessert.”

After filling two glasses she took from the cupboard over the sink with milk, Danni sat down beside him. She opened the paper cake holder that was barely keeping the cake together to reveal his very lopsided cake.

“I'm sorry it's not better. I tried,” Declan apologized. “I did not inherit my mother's expertise.”

Danni took two forks. “It's perfect. It may not hold up to cutting. Let's eat.”

He watched as she put the first forkful into her mouth

and chewed thoughtfully before speaking. “*Mmmm*. As a cake connoisseur, this is definitely not bad.”

“Really?” Declan asked, pleased.

She smiled and nodded. “Most positively.”

He never knew he would find such contentment eating cake straight from the box. Combined with talking to a gregarious woman and her huge merry laugh she had to stifle once or twice, wearing a penguin hat, Declan felt like he won the Christmas lottery at that very moment.

“Can I ask you something?” asked Danni.

“Sure,” he asked around a big bite of cake. It was actually really good.

“When Mateo was talking to Amy, he called her *Ax já*, I hope I’m saying it right. Then he said *Kusaxán*. What do those words mean?”

“That is one of the languages of the indigenous tribes who make Alaska their home,” Declan explained. “*Ax já* is sweetheart, and *kusaxán* means love.”

“They sound beautiful when he says it.” Danni sighed. “Then again, what they have is amazing. A love like that is what we are all looking for.”

“Even you?” Declan asked. “How would it fit in with your career?”

“I guess it would have to be with someone who wants to embrace the life I lead, or someone so worth it, I can change it around.” She took a sip of her milk. “I can’t eat any more. This is really good, Declan, thank you.”

“Does that mean you forgive me?” he asked. “I’m rough around the edges, but I don’t go around hurting people’s feeling for no reason.”

“I forgive you...friends?” Danni held out her hand.

He shook it. “Great, I don’t need Amy hunting me down and calling me a cad.”

Danni laughed. “We wouldn’t want that.”

Declan stood. “I’ll be heading out now. Thanks for the talk.”

She embraced him suddenly. “Thanks for caring about my feelings.”

He held her, a little longer than necessary, because for such a long time, nothing had felt so right. Declan stepped away, unsure of his feelings, not understanding what it was about this woman that made him forget all his rules and past promises.

“Goodnight, Danni,” he said huskily as he walked to the door.

“See you tomorrow at the gala.” Danni grinned. “I’m excited to experience exactly what the Plaid Shirt Gala is all about.”

“Another video for your channel?” Declan asked.

“You know what? I have barely even remembered that, since I’ve been here,” she admitted. “G’night, Sarge Mathias.”

She closed the door, and as he walked to the car, his phone buzzed in his pocket. Within the warmth of his car, he looked at the text.

Declan Monroe Matthias! The MESS!

He sighed. One more chore before he could go to bed.

