

Mistletoe in Juneau

by
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“Sarge... Sarge, we have a...” The female voice on the dispatch radio hesitated. “What is the code for guys jumping in the ocean fully clothed?”

“Idiots,” Declan Mathias answered. It amused him just a little that he left the military at the same rank and nickname.

“Polar plunge, and there is no call sign.” The second voice was Mateo, Declan’s friend and fellow Alaskan State Trooper for Auke Bay. “It’s usually done for charity, but we didn’t get any paperwork for permits or anything.”

“So, my first assessment was correct.” Declan pressed the button on the radio attached to his coat. “Meet me out there, Mateo, I’m thinking a party got too hearty. Jess, is it off the north pier?”

“Yes, Sarge, it is,” she answered. “Maybe we should give it a call code.”

“It doesn’t happen often enough to make one,” Mateo replied.

“I’m just going to call it a PP4,” Jess announced.

“What’s the four?” Mateo’s voice was filled with humor.

“For...people being crazy jumping into the cold Pacific this time of year,” Jess replied.

“Ah, well Sarge, we’re going to a PP4,” Mateo said.

“Copy, we’ll take care of it.” A smile spread across his usually stern face.

Declan looked left and right before pulling the Trooper’s truck out onto the main road of Auke Bay. This was home, in its quiet winter perfection, but that didn’t mean it couldn’t become dangerous fast. Alaska was one of the last great pieces of wilderness, and it was easy to underestimate. Even the most professional hikers and military people sometimes got lost or ran into trouble. The water’s freezing temperature should’ve been a deterrent against this erratic behavior. He was more concerned about their welfare than the overall nuisance of the call.

At the north pier, instead of a group of guys in search of an adrenaline rush, there was a wedding party cheering on and offering assistance to those who’d taken the plunge. He parked his truck just as Mateo pulled up. Declan zipped his own coat against the cold breeze while they walked out to the pier.

“Hey guys,” he called out. “Are congrats in order, or are we trying to nullify a marriage the hard way?”

The bride turned with a smile. “Good afternoon, officer. The guys in the wedding party made a bet.”

“Ma’am, you can’t have an impromptu polar plunge in this area,” Declan explained. “The water temperature here gets frigid fast, and right now it has to be below forty degrees. And with the riptides off this pier, one of your guests could get pulled out and freeze before they can find their way back to shore. Then we have to get the Coast Guard out here to perform a water rescue.”

“It’s all in good fun, Officer,” the groom said with a grin.

“Trooper,” Declan corrected him. “Please get your people out of the water and go back to your reception

venue. I don't want to have to write you a hundred-dollar citation as a wedding gift."

"A hundred isn't so bad." The bride laughed. "What better way to celebrate our wedding? We came all the way from Fort Lauderdale for this."

"Per person," Mateo clarified.

That number erased the smiles quickly from the wedding party, and they all started to help the men out of the water. Declan watched them walk shivering back to the waterfront lodge where the reception was being held.

"That number made them re-evaluate this situation quickly," Mateo noted.

"I figured they weren't from Alaska, because people around here know better," Declan said as they walked back to the trucks. "Amy doing okay?"

"She's convinced the baby is setting up house in her stomach." Mateo laughed. "But guess what? Her best friend from New York is coming out for Christmas. She'll be here for a few weeks."

"Sounds fun." Declan pulled his knit cap down further around his ears.

"You should come—"

"No."

"You don't even know what I was going to say," Mateo grumbled.

"Yes, I do. Come over for dinner, hang out, meet the friend, socialize," he said. "It's going to still be a no."

Mateo rolled his eyes. "Fine, be a hermit, Scrooge."

"I will, thank you." Declan grinned. "Even though I'm practically on call for every committee for the Northern Lights Festival."

"That's completely different. These are people you know," Mateo argued. "Anyone new, you become a ghost

and fade into the background.”

How could he explain to his friend that new situations or people made him uncomfortable? There had been a period, after he'd been injured, when he wouldn't leave the house for weeks at a time. The job as a state trooper in Auke Bay pulled him out of that stagnant existence, but it was still slow going. He figured that new people, especially women, would either be put off when they learned about his prosthetic leg, or they'd get involved and he'd end up being hurt. Not if, but when, the relationship didn't work out. There was no way he was setting himself up for that. Never again.

Mateo went on to say, “I swear, they gave you camouflage technology when you were in the Army.”

“You'll never know,” Declan teased. “I'm going back into town to get the hottest cup of coffee.”

“We should probably talk to Jess about creating new codes. This could go completely awry with her.”

“Maybe. Hey, is the kitten family still living in the back cell?”

Mateo nodded. “Yep, there's a litter box and one of those cat climbing houses in the cell now. Mel and his brother were sleeping off their pre-Christmas celebration on the other side. Next thing I know, both of them are tucked in, napping with kittens.”

“I'll talk to her.” Declan shook his head. “You know what, leave her be. Maybe the kittens will get adopted.”

“You have a soft, squishy heart, Declan.” Mateo opened the door of his police squad car.

“Stop it,” he muttered.

“All ooey-goey and tender!” Mateo got in the vehicle before Declan could scrape snow off the car and throw it at him.

Even with the foolhardy choices people made in the

winter or the constant snow, Declan loved this state. He could even fish in the wintertime on frozen lakes, where his only companion was silence. Never once did he miss living in the lower forty-eight.

He was neither ooey or gooey, but he did have a heart, and in the center of it was the small community he policed. For a moment, he wondered about this best friend who would be visiting the Azure family, and then promptly put it out of his mind. This was their house guest, not his, and he would make every attempt to avoid this woman. There was always a bit of match-making going on in Auke Bay and usually someone tried to set him up. Declan wished they all would see he was okay by himself, and that love was nowhere on his Christmas wish list.

