



IF ONLY IN OUR DREAMS/ KELLEY

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Mrs. Jace Rafferty.

Dayna bit back a giddy smile but her gaze was drawn time and time again to her stocking. She knew what was inside. Jace had been dropping way too many hints. Before he left for work, he'd slid a ribboned box in the holiday stocking and made her promise to leave it alone. No peeking, he'd admonished with a twinkle in his eye to rival St. Nick. She hadn't peeked. She wanted tonight to be perfect.

Dozens of brightly papered gifts oozed from under the tree and she slapped a bow on a last minute find for Marissa. She and Jace would pack all the presents over to Mark's house in the morning and watch the boys unwrap them before his shift started. But tonight, Christmas Eve, was for her and Jace. His shift didn't end until eleven but that just put a more magical spin on the night. Her first present of Christmas would be a question. His would be an answer.

Her eyes were drawn again to the heavy toe of her red stocking. Jace's matching green one hung crammed full beside hers on the bookshelf. So she'd gone a little wild with Christmas presents. She wanted to spoil him. They'd outlined a budget but what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. She seriously doubted he stayed under budget, either, despite his mysterious grin.

Old holiday classic songs filled the air with a soothing, timeless feel. Dayna gathered up the last of the tape, bows and wrapping paper, stowing them in the hall closet. She didn't really cook for herself tonight, but had a late supper ready to shove in the oven before Jace got home. If she moved that ugly brown recliner he'd brought with him, they could eat in the living room, picnic-style in front of the tree. The romantic setting appealed to the picture-perfect end of the night.

She was tugging on the recliner when the doorbell rang. Cold, wet rain drizzled on the door glass, smudging the outline of a tall man in a red windbreaker. She opened the storm door and smiled.

"Cap! What are you doing out on Christmas Eve? Did the grandkids get too much for you?"

The lines along his forehead grooved deeper and his back was board-stiff. "Dayna, I need you come with me."

Her blood turned to ice. Her feet weighed sixty pounds and her head swam.

"No."

The world warped. The edges of her vision bent and twisted until she saw through a tiny fishbowl. Cap's solemn eyes fixed on her face and his hand rose toward her. She took a step back. *He's fine. He's coming home. He's asking me to marry him and I'm saying yes.*

"Come on, Dayna. I need to take to you to th—"

"No." Although firm, her voice sounded far away and echoed in her mind. It overlapped the whispered memory of Nora in her kitchen, the scent of fudge thick in air. *Pray you never open the door to find one of their buddies asking you to come with them.*

"Yes. We need to go now. There was an armed rob—"

"No!" She clamped her hands over her ears so she wouldn't have to hear.

"Dayna, listen to me. Jace was—"

"No!" The screamed word reverberated off the entry halls. Then the world went black.

*

Dayna hit the ER at a dead run. Her palms smacked on the rain-soaked bar, thrusting the door open. A nauseating stench of antiseptic cleaner and vomit slapped her in the face. Panic buzzed through her veins like a poison, churning miserable pain with each harsh beat of her heart.

Bill Connors stood just inside the door. He took her elbow, directing her toward the elevators. "He's up in I.C.U. Come on."

Once in the elevator, he did not let go of her arm. His hands were cold but the chill she felt didn't come from his touch. She couldn't feel her lips and her vision kept blurring. *Intensive Care? That meant it was bad, right?* Cap slipped into the metal box behind her and jammed his thick finger at the panel. The machinery groaned and her stomach rose with the movement. Neither man looked at her. Above the sliding doors, the lighted numbers pinged at every floor.

"What happened?"

Bill looked at Cap but didn't speak until the older man nodded. "We got a call for an armed robbery in progress down at the QuikStop. Jace was back-up. I got there just as the suspect tore out of the parking lot."

Dayna wanted to laugh. She couldn't give two shits about the convenience store.

“There was a chase. Up around ninety miles an hour in places. I was lead, Cadwaller behind me and Jace took Old Furnace Road to head the truck off. He laid out the spike strip, then waited.”

His fingertips gripped her arm, digging deeper into her flesh. It took a second for Dayna to realize he was holding her up, that she had started to curl into a ball. She forced her spine straight.

“The truck didn’t slow down even though Jace’s lightbar was on. It hit the strip and...you know how bad that old road is and with the rain turning to ice... It hit a mother of a pot hole and flipped into the cruiser.”

Dayna blinked. “What? So how did he get shot?”

Bill looked at her with a quizzical frown that turned to guarded concern. “He wasn’t shot, Dayna. The truck crushed the cruiser with Jace in it.”

Dayna’s knees buckled. Bill wrapped his arm around her waist as the door slid open. She wasn’t conscious of anything except her heart’s scream. Someone led her toward a chair and she collapsed, legs shaking. Her head wobbled, the sickly green tiled floor looming larger then smaller. She gripped the seat edge.

No. I will not pass out. Stop this.

Forcibly sucking in a huge noisy breath, she demanded her stomach stay in one place. Jace needed her now. There was no time to fall apart. Shock would just have to wait until she had time to deal with it. She pushed up her sweater sleeve and pinched her arm until pain shot through her muscles. The throb gave her something else to focus on. Just to be sure, she did it twice more, until she could feel the pinch tingling down to her fingertips.

Stronger now, more in control, she searched the small waiting area. Cap and Bill stood a few feet away. They had their heads bent, low murmurs of conversation whirring in her ears. She shoved to a stand and walked toward them.

Bill had his back to her and didn’t see her approach. “I don’t know if she can handle it.”

“Handle what?”

He spun around, his eyes wide. Guilt flushed his face and his mustache twitched. He straightened his back, his hands resting on his radio and his telescopic baton. Bill was on guard, police-ready and detached. A shiver began in her spine. How many times had she seen Jace

stand in that same position? Was that something they learned in the academy? No, it was the vest. It made putting their arms straight down uncomfortable. Why hadn't she realized that before?

"Dayna," Cap walked around behind her, his gruff voice low and smoky. "It's going to be a little while before you can see him. They took Jace for a CT scan."

"CT? Why? Tell me what's wrong."

With an officer on each side, she was escorted back to the chairs. Cap sat beside her and Bill squatted, taking her hand. Terror twisted her gut like a dishcloth but she refused to look away from his face.

"He's banged up pretty bad. The fire guys had to cut him out of the cruiser and that took time. He was out cold when I got to him but he did wake up. He was talking to me for a while. But then he passed out again. When they took him for the scan, he hadn't woken up yet."

"Okay." She couldn't process. *What had he said? Jace was unconscious? What did that mean? Was he in a coma?* "It's bad, isn't it?"

Cap patted her shoulder. "Yeah, it's bad. But he's alive and he's as stubborn as a bulldog so he'll be fine. Just keep thinking that."

Bulldog. Dog. "Gunner? Where's Gunner?"

Bill dipped his head. "Cadwaller took him to the emergency vet. He's not doing so good."

"Should we call his mother?" Cap asked.

"Nora's in Germany with his sister. Callie went skiing. There's nothing they can do. I'll call them...when we know more."

"For Rafferty?"

The deep voice jerked all three of them to their feet. A dark-skinned doctor approached with a comforting expression. All Dayna could think was that his pale blue scrubs were wrinkled but his face was unlined. There was not one touch of gray in his close cropped hair. He was too young to be a good doctor. She wanted an old man with a million years experience who knew exactly how to make things better.

"I'm Doctor Kimble. Are you Mrs. Rafferty?"

I wanted to be. "Close enough."

He cocked his head, sympathy in his dark brown eyes. “Actually no, it isn’t. I’m sorry. I can’t discuss anything with you.”

A sucker punch of shock pushed the air from her lungs. Cap pulled his neck chain from the wind breaker. His badge and captain’s bars sparkled in the harsh lighting. He leveled a commanding look at the doctor. “I’m his superior. This was duty related. I have written authorization to act as his medical power in such a case. Paperwork is already on its way if you’ll check your fax machine.”

Dr. Kimble’s lips went tight. Dayna almost thought he was hiding a smile. He looked from Cap to her then nodded. “Okay. Then I’m talking to you, sir. Who you have beside you is your business. Sergeant Rafferty presented with a GCS score of twelve after an interval of lucidity. There was a suggestion of posturing in the ambulance. We’ve administered Mannitol, Dilantin, and bouquet of steroid and antibiotics. The hema—”

“Wait.” Dayna held her hand up, closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. “I don’t understand. Please, go slowly, and use English.”

“What she said,” Cap grunted.

Bright white teeth appeared when the doctor smiled, a sheepish look that was boyish enough to irritate her. “Sorry. Let’s go smallest to biggest worry, okay? Bumps, bruises, scratches, he has them all. His left leg and chest are bruised more severely, probably from the crush and the seatbelt pulling. His body armor distributed that force. He was lucky. If that was all, I’d send him home with Tylenol.”

Taking her hand, he pointed to her forearm. His fingers were long and smooth-skinned. “But he has a broken left ulna, one of the bones here. He has a powder burn along his face and neck from the air bag deploying. Again, I’d send him home, probably with codeine.’

Bumps, bruises and a broken arm. Dayna nodded, a small smile inching out. *Okay, this is do-able.* Dr. Kimble continued, squeezing her hand.

“The x-rays and CT scan showed his neck and spine are fine, no fractures. So below the neck, he’s battered but good.”

“Below the neck?” Cap asked cautiously. “What about above? He was out like a light.”

“Ah, there is where we have a problem.” Kimble dropped her hand. “He has an epidural hematoma— basically his brain bounced around his skull and got bruised. It’s not huge but even

a little blood in skull's cavity is a bad thing. A bruise on the outside can heal but inside the skull, there's no room for swelling. The blood can't go anywhere so it compresses the brain. The pressure builds up and strangles the vessels, cutting off oxygen and blood supply. Not enough food, the brain cells die. That's where he's at now. And he's getting worse."

The ICU waiting room floor slanted. It pitched to and fro like a pirate ship at high tide. Dayna gripped her own hands so tightly her nails bit into her skin. Someone needed to sue the building contractor. "You're saying...he has brain damage?"

Compassionate brown eyes flicked from her to Cap then returned. "I don't know yet. His pupils are sluggish but reactive and he responds to moderate painful stimuli. Those are good things. But his intracranial pressures are rising, quickly. That's bad. It can get very bad very fast if we do nothing. If we act now and everything goes well, he could improve just as rapidly as he's declining."

"Those medicines? What you gave him? Will they help?"

Dr. Kimble shrugged. "Some. But not enough. Those were more preventive than treatment—steroids, diuretics, antibiotics, anticonvulsants to keep him from seizing, which becomes more of a risk the longer we wait. He needs more and he needs it now."

A heavy arm went around her shoulders. Dayna leaned into it. "Whatever he needs."

Cap nodded and the doctor echoed the move. "Good. I want to do an intracranial drain to relieve the pressure —"

"You're going to drill a hole in his skull?"

He suddenly looked older, wiser and very serious. "Yes."

"He needs brain surgery?" Cap's gruffness couldn't mask his horror.

Dr. Kimble shook his head. "No, we're not touching the brain itself. It's like pricking a blister to drain off the excess fluid. This blister just happens to be on the inside and made of bone."

The floor had specks of white and cream in it. The tiny flecks crawled in her vision, swirling together like ants on hill. "Will he wake up then?"

"The odds are better." Unspoken words hung in the air. *I don't know.*

"And the brain damage? Will this prevent it?"

"That's what we hope for." *I don't know.*

Dayna sucked in a liquid breath, stiffened her frame and pulled from Cap's support. "Do it."
Cap raised his chin. "You heard her. Do it."

*

Even the water smelled like disinfectant. Dayna splashed cold water on her face and dried it with rough brown paper towels from a metal dispenser. Her brain felt like mush and her chest ached. She rubbed her sternum, readjusted her bra and tried to breathe deeply but nothing worked. The tightness would not go away. The bitter coffee Bill had brought her from some machine left a foul taste in her mouth so she dug in her purse, looking for an antacid. Her fingers brushed across Jace's badge.

They'd brought her his clothes, everything in a white plastic bag, from his shoes to his shirt. Bill had secured Jace's Glock at the accident scene so his empty holster made the belt unevenly weighted. Fingering the void, she'd grimaced. She'd been worried about a bullet taking Jace from her. She'd tucked it back in the bag and picked up his shirt.

There were damp sticky places on the cut-to-pieces black material that smelled like copper. Unseen blood. She'd carefully unpinned his badge, his nametag and his sergeant's chevrons, the sharp points biting into her fingertips. He'd studied so hard to earn those three silver arches. Salt stung her eyes but she forced it back. The clothes, belt and body armor Cap had taken down to the car but she kept Jace's wallet, his badge and his pins in her purse.

She looked up and didn't recognize herself in the mirror. The make-up she'd so carefully applied a lifetime ago was gone. Her eyes were huge and vacant. Her skin mimicked the pasty white walls. A maniacal laugh cramped her belly. It had been hours. It was after midnight. It was Christmas morning. She was supposed to be lying sweaty and naked in the arms of the man who just proposed to her. Instead he lay unconscious with a burr hole drilled into his skull while she held his silver pins.

Pins are better than a folded flag.

Bill waited outside the washroom. "He's back from recovery. They said one visitor, fifteen minutes at a time, once an hour but not for a while yet. Cap's pulling some red tape strings so the docs will talk to you."

“Okay.”

Okay. She was so not okay. But she had no choice right now. She could be not okay later. For now, she had to be okay.

Time did not exist. There were no minutes, no hours, nothing, just the endless *swoopclick* of the second hand on Cap’s old-fashioned watch. Bill disappeared, but came back with red eyes and a beaded rosary sticking out of his pants pocket. His lips moved in silent prayer. Dayna called Nora in Germany, deliberately keeping her voice as optimistic as possible. Her heart still wept when Nora broke into sobs but her eyes stayed dry

The nurse took her back, down the hall, around a corner. Behind an ivory curtain, a white blanket covered his feet. Dayna closed her eyes and stepped to the bed. Her heart slammed into her ribs. She’d expected bruises. She’d expected wires and bandages. She’d expected beeping machines. No one had mentioned he was on a ventilator.

Jace never lay on his back. He was a side sleeper. Even on the couch, he would shift until he was on his side, one arm across his chest in a self hug. Now, he laid flat, one arm wrapped in a hard blue cast, more wires and tubes than a chemistry lab snaking around him. A small patch of ebony hair had been shaved away and taped gauze pads hid the monitor in his head. She fingered the front of his hair. It was soft and cool.

Bright burgundy burns and scrapes discolored his left jaw, down his neck and disappeared under the thin gown. A jagged row of black stitches sliced across his brow. The circles under his eyes had never been this deep, this dark. Essentially, he had two black eyes. Sooty lashes cast shadows on his cheek. Her fingers shook as she traced the right side of his face. He was so still.

“It looks scary, I know, but he’s doing very well. His pressures are down dramatically.” The nurse smiled. “If he keeps this up, we’ll remove the vent soon after he wakes up.”

“Is he in pain?”

“We’re giving him pain meds.”

So he was hurting. Dayna lowered to the hard chair, her hand skimming down his uninjured arm. He was a right-handed pitcher. The break was on the left. That was good. Jace would be irritated as hell if anything messed up his pitching arm.

The nurse left her alone. Scooting the chair closer, she gripped Jace’s good hand. “Hey, honey. You have to wake up now. Please, Jace, open your eyes for me.”

Only the wheeze and beep of machinery answered her.

“It’s Christmas. You promised me a surprise. Know what I want? I want to look into your eyes and say I love you. I want you to wake up and bitch at me for leaving the door unlocked. I want you to wake up and laugh at my ugly shoes. I want you to wake up...and remember me. Please Jace, wake up.”

His eyelids twitched and Dayna held her breath. He didn’t open his eyes. She rose and pressed her lips to his cheek. Spiky hidden whiskers bit into her lips. He didn’t smell like Jace. He smelled like blood, something sour and antiseptic.

“I’m right here. Can you feel me holding your hand? Can you feel how much I need you? Can you feel how scared I am that you’re leaving me? Open your eyes, please.”

Jace didn’t move. She sat back in the chair, brought his hand to her lips and prayed. “Don’t you leave me, Jace. Don’t you dare.”

Dayna, you do know I’m not going anywhere, don’t you?

Her head snapped up, but he was still unconscious. A frown tugged at her mouth. She’d heard that caramel-rich tone loud and clear. He’d said those words to her before. Shaking her head, she moved closer, gripped his hand harder. “Jace? Can you hear me? I can’t lose you.”

I don’t want to lose you, either.

The tubing prevented speech even if he had been awake. It didn’t matter. Her memory supplied his voice.

Her eyes were dry and her hands still when the nurse came back. Dayna pressed a soft kiss to his knuckles, smoothed the hair from his forehead and left the room. Jace would be fine. That was the bottom line. She could accept nothing less. He would wake up and she’d take him home, safe and alive. It didn’t matter one iota what the doctors said. Jace spoke to her heart.

Cap and Bill waited, searching her face and she forced her mouth into a small smile. “Well, he’s rough looking and he’ll need a haircut. And a shave but with those scrapes...He’ll be fine.”

They nodded, not buying her lie for a minute. She looked to Bill. “The truck...the other guy...what happened to him?”

Bill chewed the corner of his mustache. “ER. Cussing the whole time. He’s banged up but he walked out...in cuffs. He got a mind-boggling ninety-eight dollars and shot the clerk. If Jace—”

He snapped his mouth shut and looked away. Charges were in limbo, she understood that. More depended on Jace's recovery than her sanity. She glanced at her watch. Forty-eight minutes until she could see him again. She went back to her pacing, hugging her arms to her stomach. She drank numerous tiny cups of too hot bitter coffee and looked down the short, wide hall. The I.C.U. hall droned with machinery, white noise that occasionally screamed. No visitors occupied the room except for them. There were no Christmas carols, no twittered laughter, no muted conversation.

The elevator pinged and the whoosh of the doors turned her head. Mike Cadwaller was a skinny man with deep acne scars on his cheek. When he looked at her, he swallowed then walked to Bill and Cap. Whatever he said dropped Bill's head forward. With his eyes closed, he reached for his radio mike and pressed the button.

"33-42 to Dispatch."

"33-42, go ahead."

"Be advised, 33-64 K—" His voice broke and he clicked off the mike to draw a breath. "33-64 K-9, Piermont Veterinary Clinic, 10-7, 10-42, Signal 5 Bravo."

Silence pulsed for a brief moment then a scratchy, soft voice responded. "*33-42, 10-4. All units... Final call for 33-64 K-9, ...33-64 K-9, standing down, December twenty-fifth, 2009.*"

"What?" Thick soured coffee rushed to Dayna's throat.

Cap strode to her with his mouth in a grim line and cupped her shoulder. "Gunner's gone."

Gunner? The pointy-eared crotch sniffing mutt with a taffy addiction was gone? He died? Oh Gawd, how could she tell Jace? Gunner was more than his partner; he was his pet, his friend. This would kil—

No. Jace was strong. He'd be fine. He'd be sad, mourn and grieve but he would be fine. Everything would be fine.

Fine.

Gawd, how she hated that word.

The elevator door whooshed again. Paul Thompson said nothing. He simply wrapped his arms around her. Dayna buried her nose in his chest. "Daddy, how did you..?"

"Jace's captain called me. It'll be okay, princess. That boy's head is harder than a brick. Before you know it, he'll be home and bugging the hell out of you."

Her father never lied. If he said it, it was true. She took solace in those words, firmed her lip and stepped back. The men stood in a loose knot, watching her. Their scrutiny tripped over her skin like bug feet, all itchy tickles she wanted to brush away. Mike and Bill were in uniform. The familiar medley of black and silver were too vivid right now. She thrust her jaw forward.

“It’s Christmas. Bill, your kids are little. Go home. Cap, you’ve got a house full of grandchildren who’ll be awake in a few hours. You should be there. Mike, you’re on duty later tonight. Go get some sleep. I’ll call if anything changes.”

A few rounds of protest rang out but she stilled them with a look. “I mean it. Go. I’m fine. Jace is going to be fine. I need you to go.”

The reluctant officers looked at each other then nodded. Bill kissed her forehead, Mike squeezed her arm and Cap hugged her. After they left, Dayna deflated into the chair beside her father. The familiar scent of Old Spice soothed her.

“There’s a ring in my stocking.” Her words held no trace of tears, no hint of joy.

“It can stay in a sock for a bit more. It’ll be on your hand for the rest of your life.”

It was just the sort of blunt, basic talk she needed. A sad smile lifted her lips. “You didn’t like him.”

“He grew on me.” Paul sniffed. “No, that’s not fair. He’s a good man who wasn’t afraid to stand up for you or stand by you. You could do worse.”

High praise from Paul Thompson.

For several minutes, they sat in silence. Dayna’s hand throbbed. It was clenched, the skin stretched tight over her fist. Prying her fingers open, she stared at the tiny silver sergeant’s chevron lying in her moist palm. Deep red marks grooved into her skin from the corners. She’d been gripping it since she left the bathroom, holding onto a piece of him.

She couldn’t let go.

She wouldn’t let go.

“I called his mother. She wanted to fly home tonight— I mean today, but I talked Brenna into keeping her there.”

“We’re his family now. We’ll take care of him. Call her again when there’s good news.”

Loud buzzers and beeps combined with fast movements jerked their attention down the hall. Nurses hurried around the corner. Dayna's stomach shivered. No, there were several beds in the I.C.U. It didn't mean anything. Jace was fine. He would be fine.

Fine. Fine. Fine. Fine. Fine.

They wouldn't let her back when time came. The nurses stalled her, told her to wait, frankly told her to go sit down. Dayna refused to budge from the desk. Paul stood behind her. Finally Dr. Kimble strode down the hall.

"He's awake. That's very positive. He's agitated, confused and a little combative. It could be normal or there could be some losses, only time and weaning him off the drugs are going to answer that. He needs another CT so we can assess a few things and get some answers. Give us a couple hours."

He didn't wait for a response, just turned around and clipped back the hall. Dayna squeezed a tiny silver pin.

*

They removed the ventilator tube and the wires on Jace's chest. The IVs and monitors remained. The nurses' shift changed, Dr. Kimble signed off and Dr. Bushani signed on. She remarked on Jace's progress in positive tones. When she mentioned moving Jace to a room on another floor, Dayna had a moment of panic. He needed to be here, in I.C.U. in case something went wrong. Dr. Bushani calmly explained that they had done all the work, now it was up to Jace to keep improving.

Paul brought her a fast food sandwich that grew cold in its paper wrapper and a cup of decent coffee she inhaled. Christmas morning bled into Christmas afternoon and Jace slept. He'd open his eyes occasionally, mumble a few incoherent words then drift back into slumber. The doctors warned her it was the medications and to not be alarmed. She wasn't. No matter how long it took, she was going to be there. But no one would answer her questions about brain damage. They wouldn't know until he woke up and could answer their questions. If he could.

She held her breath when they moved Jace from I.C.U. to a private room. No matter how well they said he was doing, she couldn't believe it. Not until he told her himself. The hard chair

was replaced by a too low fold-out thing that squeaked when Dayna shifted. Paul left and Cap stood beside her. Mark took his place around three. Bill replaced him a few hours later. Dayna never left Jace's side.

This floor was not as quiet, not as bleak. People talked, some laughed, one woman cried. The soft strains of carols could be heard near the nurses' desk and a tiny tree sat above the computers. Curled in the chair, Dayna rubbed her itchy eyes, burying her head in her arms. The holiday melody was just loud enough to hear and her fuzzy, exhausted mind filled in the words.

Christmas Eve will find me

Where the love-light gleams.

I'll be home for Christmas

If only in my dreams.

Her dream night had turned to a nightmare and she could not wake up.

"Dayna?" Jace's voice rasped, gruff, scratchy.

From his slouch on the wall, Bill jerked his head up. Afraid to hope, Dayna peered over her arms. Jace had mumbled her name a few times before. His eyes were closed but she reached for his hand as always. "Here. I'm here."

"Got a bitch of a headache."

Her fractured laugh sobbed out. This was Jace, groggy but awake. "I bet you do. Do you know where you are?"

Slowly, as if they weighed too much, his eyelids cracked open. The sapphire of his eyes was vivid against his sallow pallor. His glassy eyes looked around the room. "Hospital?"

"Yeah, Mercy General. Do you remember what happened?"

"No. Where's Dayna?"

Every line in her body went rigid. "Bill, go get the nurse."

"Right." He stood stricken for a minute then bolted like a sprinter.

Dayna licked her lips and moved closer, settling beside Jace's hip. "Here, Jace. I'm right here. Can you see me?"

His head turned by minute degrees until he looked at her. Nodding, his eyes slid closed. A swallow worked his throat and she glanced around. There was no water pitcher. She wasn't sure he could have anything by mouth, anyway. The doctors would be coming in. They'd poke and

prod, test and speculate. But Dayna needed her answers now. She had zero medical knowledge but she had a ton of Jace experience. She knew him better than anyone.

“Jace, wake up. Tell me your name.”

“Just said it.” He slurred the S.

“Tell me anyway.”

“Jace.”

“Jace what?”

“Dayna, don’t nag me.” He blinked then looked at her. His eyes began to focus. “Why am I here?”

“You were in an accident.”

A wrinkle tugged at the stitches below his hairline. “I don’t remember an accident.”

“It’s okay. What’s the last thing you do remember?”

He sighed, looking to the side as if dredging his mind for thoughts. His voice was stronger with his reply. “Traffic stop.”

Dayna shifted to look full into Jace’s face. “Prove to me you’re all there. Talk. Tell me my middle name.”

Jace lifted his hand then stopped, staring at the IVs. He lifted the other one and looked at the cast. Confusion etched along his brow line but he lifted the casted arm until his fingertips could stroke her cheek.

“I can’t...Dayna, what’s wrong with me?”

“You hurt your head. You were out for a while, but you’re awake now and everything is going to be fine.” The blue cast raised toward his face and he skimmed the powder burns. His hand drifted toward the back of his head. She caught and lowered his hand.

His head tipped back. “I feel like a truck ran over me.”

Dayna bit her lip. Later, when he was more aware, she’d tell him how right he was. And about Gunner. But not now. Now she needed to tell him something else.

“I love you.”

Jace angled his head to look at her and a sleepy smile curled his lip. Although gravelly, his voice was confident. “Marie. Dayna Marie Thompson. Your birthday is March fourteenth. You

like Frosted Flakes with extra sugar. You have seven freckles on your nose and a surprise in your stocking.”

For the first time since Cap rang the doorbell, Dayna allowed her tears to fall. They slipped silently over her cheeks as his eyes drifted closed. A fierce trembling racked her body. The fingers laced with hers tightened and tugged. She went willingly, sliding up beside him in the elevated bed. He leaned down until his temple pillowed on her shoulder and his casted arm slid onto her lap. She dropped a fast kiss to his hair.

“Love you, Dayna,” he murmured. “I’ll never forget that.”

Dayna pressed her lips tighter to his skull. Her eyes pinched closed but her heart sang.

Christmas Day will find us

Where the love-light gleams.

We’ll be home for Christmas

If only in our dreams.

“Merry Christmas, Jace.”

*

It has been one year and one emotional ride! I hope you have enjoyed the Beauty and the Badge freebie series. There is only one installment left, the final farewell to Jace and Dayna. Thank you for reading. Read the last installment of Jace and Dayna’s story at <http://inezkelley.com/funstuff/>

Inez Kelley writes what she reads, which is pretty much anything with a romantic flair. Deep in the boonies of Appalachia, she lives with her hero and three spin-offs. They make finding a time to write a challenge but she’s never bored with life.

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