



MAYDAY! MAYDAY! / Kelley

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“Ew, gross, are you two kissing *again*?”

The high-pitched complaint accompanied the twins’ gagging and choking noises. Mentally, Dayna Thompson gritted her teeth. Jace sighed heavily, his hot breath skating across her cheek. His hands loosened around her waist and Dayna stepped from his embrace, a sharp reply hovering on her tongue.

“Aren’t you two supposed to be playing on the porch?”

Trevor and Tyler rolled four identical brown eyes and looked far too bored for non-teenagers. At six, they should have to wait years before perfecting that *whatevah* look. “We want to help paint the fence.”

“No,” Jace said firmly. Ebony brows crashed together over his eyes and his jaw tightened. “No way are you two little...kids getting anywhere near a paintbrush.”

A brief mental image of what damage the Beelzebub Brothers could inflict with white oil based paint sent a shudder up Dayna’s spine. “You heard him, no painting. If you want to help, you can help me finish planting the petunias.”

“Aww, Aunt Dayna, flowers are girl’s stuff,” Trevor whined.

“Yeah,” Tyler mimicked, “We’re bored. Can’t we at least let Gunner out to play?”

At his name, the dog barked from inside the living room and the scrape of paws on the door peppered the air. Dayna looked at Jace under her lashes. It was his dog; he had to make that call.

Jace’s jaw clamped so tight she heard his teeth scraping against each other. His lips barely moved with his soft question. “Tell me again why we get stuck with these two on the last day of your spring break; the only full day off I’ve had this week.”

“Because their Daddy is a jerk who happens to be my brother and their Mommy is a Barbie-wanna-be who wants more child support. I didn’t want them to have to sit in a court room and listen to their parent argue over them.”

Jace’s jaw softened slightly and a harsh exhale blew from his lips. “Alright, boys. Let Gunner out, but don’t let him near the fence. Take him around back, okay?”

The twins’ whooping joy mingled with excited woofs. A scrambling bundle of German shepherd darted out the door and down the steps, a bright lime tennis ball

between his teeth. He pranced in canine bliss in the grass, looking more big puppy than trained K-9. Jace whistled and the dog froze. The ball fell from his mouth and he sat at perfect attention.

Strolling to his four-footed partner, Jace picked up the ball and held it out. A grimy little hand reached for it. “Which twin are you?”

“Tyler.”

“Okay, Tyler, you’re in charge.”

“Hey, I’m nineteen minutes older!” Trevor spat.

“Congratulations,” Jace offered. “But Tyler is calmer, so he’s in charge of Gunner.”

Dayna fought to hide her smile as Jace knelt in front of her nephews. He might seem tough and gruff, but he’d been listening to her tales of the boys so long, he knew Tyler needed the confidence boost of being chosen over his more outgoing twin. Jace just handled the matter in a different manner than she would have.

A funny tickle began in her belly watching her lover’s dark head bent close to Tyler’s golden hair. Jace had such an ease around kids, a natural style that wasn’t forced or feigned but a genuine enjoyment of teaching and helping. Tyler looked up at him in awe and Jace’s face creased in a smile. Crazy thoughts popped into her head and her brain held up a surplus of flashing traffic signs.

*Stop.*

*Danger.*

*Proceed with Caution.*

*Sharp Curve Ahead.*

*Reduce Speed.*

She shouldn’t be thinking of him in the terms that sprang to mind. It was too early, too permanent, too... Well hell, no sense in denying the truth. He would make a great dad. She saw so many kids who didn’t have that guiding influence but rather an anti-role model—men who were too selfish or immature to raise guppies let alone children. Jace’s kids would never have that problem.

Without her brain’s approval, Dayna’s heart whipped out the red pen and added another check mark to her secret *I WISH* list:

*Decent father material- Check*

*Good-looking- Check*

*Sense of humor- Check*

*Job security- Check*

*Sexual chemistry- like Chernobyl, Check*

*Great in bed- Check. Okay, double check*

White paint smudged along his elbow and frayed jeans washed to near colorlessness hugged his thighs. The faded tee shirt with the police academy logo stretched across his chest as each detail seeped into her mind like water through a sponge. He spoke a foreign word, waited until Tyler shyly repeated it then called the dog over. His instructions were simple and straightforward, not dumbed down and patronizing. When Tyler whispered a command and Gunner didn't move, Jace encouraged, not berated. A more forceful tone sprang from the child's mouth and Gunner barked. Tyler smiled and Jace ruffled his hair.

He looked up and caught Dayna's gaze. A slow, sultry grin peeked out, lost to the twins but turning her insides to Jell-o.

*See it wiggle, see it jiggle*

Dayna turned and grabbed her dirt-caked gardening gloves, blowing away the lust like pollen. Damn, he was fine. Maybe she should add another check mark or seven to that mental list. They had been together nearly four months now and were slowly sliding from new couple into committed relationship. Hearing him say *I love you* still thrilled her, darting through her blood with soda bubbles of happiness. They didn't fight often but when they did, it was never the ugly, shouting, name-calling matches she saw her brother go through. No, Jace got stubborn and stern but rarely raised his voice. The angrier he got, the quieter he got, as if he pulled into himself and only allowed out exactly what he wanted.

Control, Jace embodied slow, methodical control.

*I want a man with slow hands.*

*I want a lover with an easy touch.*

*I want somebody who will spend some time...*

She could use a little of that control herself about now. He'd been on night shift for two weeks, she taught during the day. Their contact had been limited to phone calls and

hastily stolen sandwich meals squeezed in between the crackles of his police radio. She missed him. Forget that he hadn't been in her bed in two weeks; she missed his lazy smile when he pulled her close or the naughty way he had of making any innocent statement sound like a flirt. She missed the smell of his skin in the middle of the night and the feel of his hand sliding across her back as she made dinner in his apartment. She missed the slow drawl of her name in a buttery voice that never failed to weaken her knees.

If he ever gave up being a cop, Jace Rafferty had a great future as a phone sex operator.

*Just dial 1-888-FRISK-ME.*

Late April sunshine beat down on her, intensifying the heat that flamed every time she got near Jace. At this point, she was grateful she hadn't spontaneously combusted. *Poof.* Little piles of Dayna-ash all over the place. Grabbing the last tray of pink petunias, she knelt beside the walkway, determined to get her over active imagination firmly in hand. At least while the twins were here. Then she'd take something else in hand and let her imagination play.

She had a plan. With Jace's help, she was going to de-winterize her yard and make it all spring-n-summer ready. He'd shown up bright and early and was cleaning the gutters when the boys had shown up. Her ex-sister-in-law, Marissa, had taken one look at Jace and her eyes had rounded, botoxed lips falling open into a gape. Her predatory gaze slid over Jace's ass high up on the ladder. Her eyebrows rose and she straightened, thrusting her ample cleavage higher in her push-up bra, like they needed the gravity boost. Helium didn't float like those suckers.

"Dayum, Dayna, where'd you find him, the mancandy aisle at Wal-Mart? Aren't you going to introduce me?"

Dayna felt horns pop out on her forehead, a wicked green-eyed beast swooping in with fanged claws. Gawd, wouldn't she love to deflate those double D perky puppies. Instead, she'd plastered a sweet smile on her face and quipped, "Nope, I met him at the Anti-Fake Ta-Ta Convention. All natural for him so you're S.O.L. Tell Mark I said good luck."

Marissa's perfectly proportioned face soured into a scowl that would have sent her plastic surgeon into hives. She wiggled her surgically-lifted fanny walking down the porch steps. She stopped beneath the ladder and called up to Jace, singsonging hello in a saccharine sweet voice that raked across Dayna like nails on a chalkboard. Bless his ever-lovin' heart, Jace had politely responded then called, "Babe, can you get me a glass of lemonade?"

Assured he was sending out all the proper *'Hands off, I'm taken and she has claws'* signals, Dayna had led the boys to the kitchen and basked in her *'in yo' plastic face, Barbie'* moment. Just because she was so happy, Jace got a sprig of English mint and French kiss with his lemonade. The ice melted in the tart drink as she got a sugar high of the Jace Rafferty variety. He'd caught her between his body and the ladder, pressing her against the metal, melting her bones with a scorching kiss. Her butt would probably have ladder-rung bruises but it was well worth it.

A shadow fell in her path, ripping her from her memories and she looked up. Jace stood shaking the second pint of white paint, a wicked grin on his lips. "Hey, do me a favor."

"What?"

"Move to the other end of the walk and work backward. That way I can watch your ass while I finish the second coat on the fence."

"Jace!" Pleasure soared through her, but she hastily looked around his knee. "The boys might hear you."

His laugh simmered like caramel—thick, luscious and tempting. "Nah, they're wrapped up in playing fetch." One devil-dark brow arched. "So are you going to turn around, babe?"

Planting her balled dirty fists on her hips, Dayna shook her head and pasted a mock frown on her lips. "What's with this 'babe' crap? Babe is a pig, not your girlfriend. You calling me fat?"

Both of his brows shot high and the paint can stopped mid-shake. "No! I just...I mean...shit, Dayna, you call me *honey* half the time."

"Honey is sweet. Babe is bacon."

Jace gaped at her, his jaw hanging loose. “You seriously don’t think I’m calling you a pig, do you?”

The pretense was too hard to hold and he was too scrumptious to pick on, so she shook her head with a grin. He chuckled at her, bent to drop a fast kiss on her brow and then strolled to the fence.

“Brat.”

“Hey, honey?” she called, tonguing her lip.

“What?”

“Do me a favor. Work on this side of the fence first so I can watch your ass while I plant the flowers.”

“Smart ass.”

Laughter lurked in his grumble, but he did kneel before the gate, his back facing her. Jean pockets toward her. His faded, tight, broken-in-just-oh-so-right jeans and a damn fine ass toward her. She really should move to get a better view, er, to plant the last of the flowers, yeah, that was what she meant.

*Nothing comes between me and my Calvins, but, damn, wouldn't she just love to right now.*

Jace popped the paint can lid and dipped the brush, dragging it along the slats in the front pickets. Dayna found a great rhythm; dig, look up, petunia in, look up, pat the fertilized soil, look up. He knew exactly what she was doing. He kept looking over his shoulder and grinning. When he had done the front of the two dozen pickets, he turned and stared.

Like a starving man.

And she was a buffet.

All you can eat Dayna Smorgasbord.

Two weeks was a long time and he was as hungry as she was. The fervent gazes darting across the grass should have blazed a brown swath in the newly mown lawn. At some point, Dayna realized every time she bent to plant, her blouse fell down and gave him a straight visual shot at Vicky-Secret enhanced cleavage. Burying her fingers in the soft earth, she raised her head and locked eyes with him, neckline hanging low. Hunger skyrocketed to starving.

*Clear for lift-off.*

*T-minus four*

*Three*

*Two*

*One*

*Houston, we have ignition.*

She tugged off the grimy garden gloves seconds before he pounced, reached her, pulled her to a quick stand. The force yanked her into the hard lines of his chest, spring heat not the only reason her cheeks flushed. Her hands shot out automatically, gripping for balance and landing on the sun-warmed cotton of his tee shirt. The smooth, faded gray molded to solid shoulders that begged her fingers to slide up along the seam to the damp skin of his neck. God, she loved getting hot and sweaty with him. If she could bottle his unique seductive scent, she'd make a mint. And most likely have an orgasm every time she opened the bottle. Just the whiff she took in now sent tingles through her.

Jace curved his hands around her waist, pressing her against him tighter and she leaned in to meet his mouth. *Red Rover, Red Rover, bring Jace's kiss over.* Searing velvet lips danced across hers, nibbling and nipping until her heart pounded. Her hands slid into his hair, gripping tight and deepening the kiss. A sigh parted her lips and his tongue snuck inside, inviting hers to come out to play. Play turned wicked. Tag, Hide and Seek and Kickball had never had this kind of inducement.

Simon says *'kiss your girlfriend into a quivering puddle of panty-pudding'*.

His hands slid down her waist, over her hips. *Green-light, green-light...*

Palming her ass, he tugged her closer. *RED-LIGHT, RED-LIGHT! Ollie ollie oxen free!*

“You’ve got your hands on her butt. Teacher says that’s bad touching. I’m going to tell!”

Trevor’s voice grated like hard cheese. Dayna popped her eyes open to find Jace’s just as wide, his brows angled sharply. Pulling his mouth from hers, and his hands from her ass, he sucked in a calming breath. She could nearly see the numbers one through

ten appearing in his brain. He didn't even bother turning his head to reply. "Kid, who are you supposed to tell?"

"A teacher or a policeman or your Mommy."

"Yeah, well, your Aunt Dayna's a teacher, I'm a policeman, and your mother...go ahead, tell her. Call Ken and Skipper with an update, too."

Nearly choking on the snort that rushed from her belly, Dayna buried her face in Jace's neck. Peeking out, she watched Trevor ponder Jace's statement. He quirked his mouth and scratched his cheek. Shrugging his little shoulders, he apparently gave up trying to figure out who Skipper and Ken were. He wandered away and Dayna burst out laughing.

"You are so bad. Damn, I've missed you."

Jace pulled back, fixed a firm look on her and sighed. "Me, too. I just..." He drew a deep breath and held it. "I didn't want to do it this way, but maybe...I have missed you, Dayna, missed us, this. I hate not seeing you every day. Phone calls and ham and swiss on rye in a cruiser aren't enough."

"I know." Leaning in, she wrapped her arms around his neck, her forehead against his. "But summer's coming and I'll be out of school and—"

"Then what? September brings it all back. There are going to be weeks like this again and it sucks. It's either too late because you have to get up in the mornings or too early and my shift runs over. It's getting harder to be away from you for days on end. I just..." He swallowed, closing his eyes. An intense fire glistened in their depths when he opened them. "My apartment lease is up on May first."

Pressed close to his chest, her heart skipped. Mr. Clean waltzed in with his Magic Mental Eraser and wiped her brain board with a fast swipe. All intelligent thought got erased and she was left with Polly Parrot.

"May first?"

*Awwrrrk, Dayna wanna cracker, awrrrk?*

Next thing she knew, she'd be sprouting feathers and her nose would grow a hook.

"Yeah, May first. So I got to thinking... Dayna, what do you think about me moving in here with you? Once again, my timing's for shit and I'm probably moving too fast but there it is. I love you, babe. I think we could make this work."

It was the third week in April and *now* he tells her his lease is about to expire?

On May first. The first day of May. May day. Mayday.

*Mayday! Mayday!*

*Alert! Alert!*

*Life change ahead.*

*Hard to port.*

*Reality overboard!*

The April air turned to glue. Elmer's as ozone. Her lungs stuck together. The sides of her throat adhered to one another. Her tongue pasted to the roof of her mouth. Prying it loose, she tried to swallow and the breath got trapped, mired in goopy stickiness.

*Holy hot glue, Batman, was that out of the wild blue yonder or what?*

*Precisely, Robin, I believe that was from the OMG sector, just south of the 'HOLY SHIT' quadrant.*

"Here? Live here? Like full-time?" Her voice really didn't sound that much like chipmunks on steroids normally, did it?

"Yeah, not such a good idea, huh?" Jace snorted softly and shook his head, "Look, forget I mentioned it. I can just resign the lease, that's not a problem."

"No, I just..."

Dayna mentally shook her brain snow globe and waited for her flakes to clear. Under her ribs, her heart plugged in a bio-iPod and started rumba'ing around her chest cavity. Living together? The very phrase screamed commitment.

*Sharing a closet.*

*Sharing a bathroom.*

*Sharing a... life.*

She wouldn't lie to herself. She didn't want a live-in boyfriend for Gawd-only-knows-how-many years. She wanted a committed relationship that progressed into a marriage. Not that she was sure—yet—that was where they were heading but, yeah, all the signs pointed that direction. Big honking neon signs.

Did she want it? Hell yes, she wanted it, wanted him. But she also didn't want to cut off her marital nose to spite her move-in face.

What was that old saying, a man never buys a cow if he's getting the milk for free? Did that even apply here? They'd had sleep-overs, sure. Sometimes his place, sometimes hers, whenever days off and schedules allowed. But they also had their own space, their own retreat, their own lives.

*Waking next to him every morning.*

*Falling asleep beside him every night.*

*Knowing he would be coming home to her at the end of every shift.*

*Feeling his presence in the house even if he wasn't there.*

Sunlight dappled in Jace's eyes, starbursts of gold on an ocean wave and she got lost, drowned in the sea of hope. She had learned one vital thing about Jace early on. He was a brash flirt but, underneath all that *your place or mine* crap, he was an old-fashioned man. He wanted the American Dream: a wife, kids, a dog, a white picket fence. Her gaze drifted over his shoulder. He'd just painted her white picket fence.

*Her fence.*

Shock and mortification double dated with horror and disbelief and her jaw dropped, her eyes bugging out so hard that her eyelids snapped. Jace cocked his head quizzically at her then started to turn around. She gripped his chin with her hand, keeping his face toward hers.

"Tell me you love me, Jace."

"What?"

"Please, just...tell me you love me."

"You know I love you. Now what—?"

"And when did we meet?"

"Dayna, what are you—?"

"Tell me."

"New Year's Eve."

"Right. And who was responsible for our meeting each other?"

Understanding firmed the jaw in her hand. Tension poured into the shoulder under her other hand and he seemed to grow an inch as his spine straightened. "What did the Little Rascal Rejects do now that you don't want me to see?"

“Just remember they are children. Okay? Just little kids.” She let go of his chin and he slowly turned around.

Trevor and Tyler grinned in identical cherubic innocence, pride oozing from every cell of their little bodies. “Look, we helped!”

Helped they had. White pooled around four pickets, staining the grass with big milky splotches. Each child had at least half a dozen smudges on his face and white coated hands. Trevor had the paintbrush clenched in his fist, a drizzle spiraling to the grass like a cotton thread. Tyler, oh boy, Tyler had his arm around his new best buddy, Gunner, the ghost dog. Uneven streaks of paint skimmed the brown and black fur along both Gunner’s sides, highlights in Alabaster Shine by Sherwin Williams. Atop his black nose, a fine coating like he’d been sniffing baby powder bled up toward his ears, both of which were white. Tongue hanging out, goofy expression on his canine face, he sat and basked in Tyler’s wet handed attention. His tail wagging excitedly made snowy arcs on the grass.

Beside her, Jace started to shake. Knowing it was too much to hope the trembling came from suppressed laughter, Dayna grimaced and peeked at him. His nostrils flared, his lips pinched tight, air whooshing like a diesel motor, Jace could not, in any way, shape or form, be described as a happy camper. Nope. Not a way in hell.

Volcanic, yes.

Volatile, definitely.

Vehement, no doubt.

But not happy.

Not even slightly amused.

Spinning on his heel, Jace stalked to the concrete steps of her porch and sat, glaring at the tainted trio. The fisted knuckles on his knees went from white to red to white. Just when Dayna thought he would explode, he buried his face in his hands and shook his head.

“You okay?”

He peeked over his fingertips before drawing his hands down his cheeks. “Yep. My fault. I left the damn paint can open and then got distracted.” Clipped short and terse, his words were feather soft. “The kids will clean up. Gunner...well...I’ll call the vet,

but I'm thinking I'm going to have the break out the clippers. He'll look pretty stupid but, it's fur, it'll grow back."

"Jace, I'm sorry."

"No sense in crying over spilled...paint." Taking her hand, he pulled her to the step in front of him, her back to his chest, his chin on her crown. The hard stone bit through her denim Capris and she shifted, eyes trained on the Pint-sized Picassos and Pooch. Her grass now had a snowy sheen around the fence base.

"Shouldn't we, like, you know, stop them?"

"Probably. But the damage is done. Unless they start eating it, they can wait a second. I need to calm down a little more."

Dayna angled her head, leaning harder into him, and his jaw dropped along side her temple. "I really thought you were going to yell or something."

"Don't tempt me, Dayna." The baritone warning vibrated against her back and she snapped her mouth shut. Jace sucked in and blew out several breaths. "So, how big of a cow is Marissa going to have when her kids smell like turpentine going home?"

"Oh, big bovine, huge heifer, Bessie the Wonder Cow size," Dayna giggled.

"Good." Jace's chuckle joined hers. "If I get a shaved K-9, then she should have to deal with smelly kids for while."

"You are so bad." Dayna laid her head back on his shoulder and looked up. His gaze was trained on the fence and the boys, but the smile in his voice didn't quite reach his eyes. She pulled back a little more, concern stealing her laughter. "What?"

His chin dropped but he wouldn't look at her. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push."

"Push?"

"The lease thing. I get a little single-minded when I know what I want. I didn't mean to pressure you. Sorry." Angling back, he stood and stepped around her. "I better go tie Gunner up and break out the turpentine before the paint dries too much."

Watching Jace stroll away, his back stiff and his shoulders squared, it dawned on Dayna she'd hurt him. She hadn't meant to. Hurting Jace was the last thing she wanted. She hadn't said no.

But she hadn't said yes, either.

April took on a chill that seeped into her heart despite the sunshine streaming down on her. Things with them moved so fast, too fast maybe, but...it had always felt right. Jace felt right in her life. She was in love with him, didn't want to imagine her life without him. She belonged with Jace.

Dayna jumped to her feet and darted in the house. The tension arm in the screen door prevented it slamming behind her and she darted back out before it clicked to a close. Her heart shuffled the bio-iPod and the pounding rhythm of rap music shimmied through her stomach but her feet never faltered. Gunner was now leashed and tethered to the dry part of the fence line. His big brown eyes were locked on the side yard. Trevor and Tyler sloshed under the garden hose, creamy puddles beneath their feet. She suspected they were doing more playing than washing off wet paint but they could wait a minute. At least they weren't destroying anything.

Fingertips tucked into the front pockets of her pants, she stopped a few feet from Jace kneeling by the fence. He concentrated on recapping the paint can, a sticky handled brush in one hand, the paint smearing along his palm.

“Hey, Jace?”

“What?”

“Catch.”

His clean hand clasped the thrown metal to his chest. He pulled it away and stared for a long moment. Somehow, her extra house key—now his key—just seemed right in his hand. A grin tickled her mouth as he looked from the key to her. Surprise and love shaded his eyes a deep azure and her smile rounded her cheeks.

“Welcome home, honey.”

Inez Kelley has her debut romantic comedy titled *JINXED* available through Samhain Publishing on June 9th, 2009. Mark your calendars! Visit Inez at <http://samhainpublishing.com/authors/inez-kelley> and <http://inezkelley.com/>

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