



DEC

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12							
13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31

31



**POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS**

The year ticks to a close and Dayna faces a painful decision.

She can't live her life with a man who could be taken from her, but how can she let him go?

# Over And Out

INEZ KELLEY

OVER AND OUT/Inez Kelley

OVER AND OUT

Copyright 2009, Inez Kelley

Cover Art: Wordsugar Design

This is a work of pure fiction. The names, places and incidents are products of Inez Kelley's imagination. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locations or organizations is entirely incidental.

Jace jerked awake in a cold sweat. His heart fought his ribs, trying to escape his chest. *Where am I?* He couldn't see. His hand stretched into the darkness, reaching for Dayna. She wasn't there, hadn't been there, wouldn't be there. Soft feline snores drew his gaze to her pillow. Sinjin was curled into a knot, oblivious to the frantic rush of Jace's blood. *Stupid cat.*

His head pounded like a base drum, underscoring the snatches of memory just out of reach. The accident, as Dayna called, was blurry in his mind, large chunks of it obscured by blackness. The doctors said it was normal. It felt anything but normal to him. What he could recall were sensations: adrenalin pumping through his veins, his foot heavy on the gas pedal, the strobe of barlights through a shattered windshield, the warbled scream of an ambulance siren.

Sinjin cracked one glowing eye and yawned as Jace shifted, pulling himself up. He didn't have the heart to remove the cat from the bed. The Siamese was still lost, meowing around the house, nosing at Gunner's bed. Jace understood that feeling.

*Gunner.* A flash of huge brown eyes and rambunctious energy slammed into him. He hadn't been there when the end came. Dayna hadn't even told him until two days later. Although he understood it, it hurt. What the hell kind of partner left his K-9 to die alone?

Guilt and loss twisted hard in his gut. His entire body ached. He went to palm his forehead and his cast cracked his skull with a light thunk. He was getting his strength back, faster than he would have thought, but he wasn't complaining. A dark brown medication bottle sat beside the lamp with a bottle of water but he ignored it. That shit took the aches away but made him fuzzier. He was damned tired of living in a fog.

The bathroom light glared harshly and he squinted, downing three Excedrin with a slurp of tap water. After taking a leak, he awkwardly splashed cold water on his face to help banish the chaos in his head. His reflection still shocked him. Jace had never considered himself vain. He'd never had to work too hard to attract women but he wasn't a metrosexual man-diva with a beauty routine. Soap, shave and shampoo and he was out the door normally. Now he looked like something Sinjin would throw up on the rug.

His healing skin peaked through the shaved patch of hair and itched like bitch. The sutures had come out but left an angry pink line below his hairline. It contrasted with the purple-green healing bruises and mottled yellow and rose powder burns along his jaw and neck. The discoloration stopped abruptly at his collar bone but his ribs let him know they didn't appreciate

being abused. Deep breaths were beyond him right now. At least his black eyes had mostly faded.

He'd felt better after a four-day drunk.

Hell, Dayna wouldn't let him have a single beer.

*Dayna.*

Jace snapped the tap off with a quick twist. She'd stayed in his hospital room every night, lying on that ridiculous pull-out thing with a plastic-crackling pillow. Every single time he'd woken, she watched him with anxious eyes. He doubted she'd slept more than an hour at a time in a week. Shadows grew under her eyes and her mouth took on strained lines. He'd begged her to go home and get a decent night's sleep but she wouldn't leave him.

Until she brought him home.

Now she slept in the guest room.

She'd said she was afraid of bumping him, causing more pain but an uneasy thread weaved through her words. Something was off kilter. When the doctors talked about releasing him, Dayna went into orbit, arguing he wasn't ready. He sure as hell had been ready. He'd wanted out of that place. It took her father to calm her down, to assure her the doctors knew what was best. He shook his head in amazement that Paul of all people had become his champion.

Dayna had become his warden. She stood guard while he showered—his first real shower since Christmas Eve—then helped him figure out the stupid electric razor he had to use until his burns healed. It was embarrassing when she'd insisted on helping him pull on the cotton pajama pants. All but pushing him toward the bed, she'd fluffed and tucked until he had to bite his lip. He was perfectly capable of walking down the stairs for dinner but she insisted on bringing a tray to the bedroom. The fact she'd cut up his pork was humiliating.

His dignity had finally cowered and whimpered in the corner when she plugged in the twins' night-light. He was battered, not a baby. He'd waited until she left to flip the little lightbulb off. It had been that way for two days. If he so much as set foot out of the bedroom, she was prodding him back in, tucking him in and clucking over him like a child. Grumpily, he wondered if a bedtime story was next on her list.

Limping as quietly as he could, he avoided the hallway floorboard that creaked and glanced into the open guest room. The double bed had the blankets flipped back but Dayna wasn't there.

Extremely muted voices and music pulled at him from downstairs. Halfway down the steps, the New Year's Eve program startled him. Was it really New Year's Eve? His accident had erased the measurement of time. He'd missed Christmas and the following days were so muddled, he had trouble wrapping his mind around the fact.

He landed on his left foot too hard and winced as pain shot through his leg. This he could deal with. He'd had enough sprains and strains playing ball to grin and bear that. Mixed with every other ache and twinge, he was a bruise cocktail. Which wasn't bad considering what could have happened. His body wasn't what worried him now. It was the woman huddled on the floor in front of the TV, fuzzy purple socks peeking out from her night shirt.

Dayna's eyes weren't fixed on the television but on the darkened Christmas tree. She hadn't left the hospital long enough to take down the decorations and they provided a grim reminder of what they had missed. Mark had distributed the family gifts but dozens still waited. It wasn't the presents she looked at. A vacantness shaded her gaze, untouched by the shiny reds and golds. She'd been doing that a lot lately, staring into space. When he'd say her name, she'd slap that fake smile on her lips and act like nothing was wrong.

Something was very wrong in Dayna-ville, he just didn't know what it was.

"Dayna?"

Her head snapped around and she shot to her feet. "Jace, what are you doing up? Are you hurting? The painkillers are by the bed. You should've just called for me."

"Babe, I'm fine. I just needed to move. Why are you on the floor?"

"I didn't want the TV to wake you. You need to go back to bed."

An ironic grunt warmed his mouth. Three months ago, he was so damned tired he'd longed to spend an entire day in bed. Now, he was sick of being in bed...especially since she wasn't there. Sex was pretty far down on his list at the minute, but he needed to feel her next to him. He reached for her hand. Too wide green eyes flickered to his face then slid away. She moved toward the kitchen, avoiding his touch and he went cold.

"Becky sent over a couple casseroles and Trish dropped off a deli platter. Do you want a sandwich?"

"No."

She ignored him, grabbing the loaf of bread. "Roast beef or turkey?"

The only light came from the dim bulb in the range hood, leaving the rest of the silent room in shadows. Her face was too pale, her voice too distant. His concern layered thicker. At some point in the Academy, they talked about this. He hadn't paid much attention then. He'd been stuck in the juvenile mindset of being immortal, where nothing bad could ever happen to him. Still, those lessons leapt forward. Delayed shock after an injury was common. You had to confront it. If not, it could destroy a family.

He caught her hand as she reached into the drawer for a table knife. "Dayna, I'm not hungry. Talk to me."

"I think there is some salami left."

*Okay, we do this the hard way.*

Jace gripped her chin, raising her face until she had no choice but to look at him. He made sure to be blunt. "Stop. I'm okay. Yeah, I'm sore and stiff, but I'm alive. I'm not going anywhere."

"This time."

Her flat whisper chilled him. This was not shock. This was...something worse.

Her eyes slid closed and she tugged his hand from her face. Her fingers shook, a fine trembling that quickly spread through her whole body. Dark strands of hair escaped her ponytail and danced to the erratic rhythm. Although she only took one step away from him, it felt like a hundred. She never opened her eyes. "I can't do this."

"Do what?"

Dayna sat on one of the kitchen chairs, pulling her knees up under the floppy nightshirt and wrapping her arms around them. A strange sense flooded over Jace, like he was back in the cruiser, frozen, watching the spinning truck flying toward him. He braced for impact. Where had that memory come from? Why now? Fear sank sharp claws into him and he couldn't suck in air. The sudden gallop of his heart thumped against his sore ribs. His voice was low and scratchy.

"Dayna?"

"If I asked you to do something for me, would you?"

He squatted in front of her and put his good hand on her knee. "Anything, babe, just name it."

"Quit."

He blinked. “What?”

Tears lined her eyes but hadn't fallen, sparkling in the pale moonglow. Her fingers gripped the chair edge. Urgency spiked her voice to a higher, more frantic octave. “You have a degree. You could get another job.”

“Dayna, I majored in beer and baseball. My degree is in general Business. It's useless unless I go back to school.”

“You could. There are grants and scholarshi—”

“I don't want to go back. I have a job.”

“That nearly killed you,” she spat. There was no other way to describe the venomous hatred in her tone. Emerald fire replaced her unshed tears and her jaw clenched. “Do you know what it's like to wonder every day if you're coming home? Wonder if this the day your luck runs out? I can't live like that, Jace. I can't.”

A deep sigh bowed his head. He'd actually wondered if this conversation would ever happen. He'd been prepared for it months ago but she'd never said a word. Had she been wondering, worrying all this time? How could he have not known that? He squeezed her knee. “Babe, you can't think like that. You have to—”

“I have to what? Forget? Pretend it won't happen? I did that and it bit me in the ass.”

She reached to touch him, maybe stroke his face but she pulled back and lowered her hand back to the chair. The move panged deep in his marrow. When was the last time she touched him other than to give aid? The night he woke up, maybe? He couldn't remember and it scared him.

“Look at you, Jace. You're a walking bruise. They drilled a hole in your skull. Gunner died. If Bill hadn't been right there, you would've died with him. You were lucky this time.” He knew that, had no argument to fight her there. His sad exhale blew out slowly. Her eyes slammed closed and her breath stuttered. “Please, Jace. If you love me, please quit. I'd do it if you asked me.”

“I'd never ask you to because I do love you.”

“I don't have to wear Kevlar in school. No one is going to try and kill me.”

“Tell that to the kids at Columbine.” Her gasp rang out loudly and he tried to pull back, to soften his abrasive words. “Listen to me. I know the risks. I'm trained for this. The accident was a fluke thing. I don't take stupid chances and the odds are actually really slim that anyth—”

“Don’t try to feed me a bunch of bullshit about odds.” Anger tightened the muscles in her legs and she unfolded them, slapping her feet to the tile. Her spine jerked straight. “You want statistics? One hundred and eighty-two officers were killed while on duty last year. Hundreds were injured, some of them disabled for life. Do you realize how close you came to being a statistic?”

Jace groaned and pressed his head to her knee. “Babe, stay away from Google. You’re just going to drive yourself crazy with things like that.”

“Is it worse than going crazy every time you walk out the door? Is it worse than having to call your mother and tell her that her son might have brain damage, *if* he wakes up? She broke down, Jace. She thought she was losing you, too.”

*Damn, talk about guilt.* His mom had been calm by the time he talked to her but he could imagine what it was like for Dayna to make that call. With his good hand on her leg, he tried to rub his tense brow with the casted one. It did nothing to alleviate his headache. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Quit.”

“Dayna, you knew I was police officer. Hell, we met while I was on duty. I don’t put the uniform on, babe. I *am* the uniform. I can’t change who I am.”

“You are your father’s son.”

Jace stared. His eyebrow dropped, pulling at the healing flesh around it. Her whisper made no sense. Maybe this is what he was like when his brains were scrambled. Or maybe they still were and he missed something. Fighting the urge to shake either her or his bewildered head, he squinted at her. “What?”

“Your dad was a cop. He died.”

“My dad had a heart attack,” he protested. “He smoked two packs of cigarettes a day.”

“You’re just like him.”

“I don’t smoke.” Jace reached for her hand. Recognizing she was on shaky ground, Jace softened his voice, trying to coax her to calm. He brought her knuckles to his lips. “Sweetheart, you’re not making sense right now. I know this week has been bad. But things will get better, back on track and—”

Sniffing and glaring at the same time, she shook her head and thrust off his hand. “You don’t get it. I’m serious, Jace. I cannot do this. I *will not* be a police widow. I *will not* raise a family alone.”

“You won’t.”

“I know I won’t. That’s what I am saying.”

Her bitter declaration jolted him. The new refrigerator clicked on, a low soft hum he barely heard over the blood hammering in his ears. A chill wafted up his bare back and a shudder worked at his muscles. His lungs burned with his held breath as he anxiously searched her face for something, for one hint of understanding.

“Are— are you giving me an ultimatum?”

A twitch dipping her brow, she looked away. “I don’t have to. You already answered me.”

Disbelief sagged his shoulders and he dropped to his knees, a cold spike jabbing into his belly. “Babe, don’t do this.”

“It’s done, Jace. I’m sorry.”

Her words fell like glass— thin, fragile, shattering. They sliced with a fiery sting. The room spun. Everything whirled by in swirls of gray except the blank contours of her averted face. She couldn’t mean... No, his head must still be screwed up. He had to have heard her wrong. He had to try twice before his voice would work.

“Dayna, are breaking up with me? Are you...are we finished?”

The kittens on the front of her night shirt heaved in rapid rhythm. Her upper lip quivered then she flattened it tight to her teeth and blinked. She didn’t turn to face him but jerked her head.

“Yes. We’re finished. I need... I need you to leave.”

Shock was supposed to be a numbness, a disconnected sense of detachment. Jace felt none of that. Instead, an invisible force kicked him in the gut, the face and balls all at once. Every cell in his body screamed. Through a haze of searing misery, he focused on the one thing clear in his sight, her right ear.

She had on those little gold hearts he had given her for her birthday. It was twisted, hung upside down, point angling toward the shell of her ear, rounded humps sitting on her earlobe. The irony of a twisted heart that he’d given her wasn’t lost to him.

One year.

They made it one year exactly.

Now it was over.

Thoughts whizzed through his mind like cars on a speedway. What did he need to do? *Think. Think.* Wiping a hand across his face, he nodded. “Okay. I...uhm, I’m going to go...uhm...I’ll go stay with Connors until I can...it’ll take a few days.”

Jace pushed to a stand. Her harsh soft breaths filled the room and she shook as if she were freezing cold. He stretched out his hand, intending to stroke her cheek with the back of his fingers but she turned her head. Swallowing hard, he stepped toward the hall. Dizziness swamped him and he reached for the doorframe. His stomach revolted and heaved but there wasn’t anything to lose. He’d already lost everything.

Hot stinging anger crashed into scorching pain. His buddies called him Ice. Under pressure, he kept his head. He never went off, never gave free rein to the emotions running through him. He bottled it, stored it for later. This would not be bottled. It was too raw, too deep, too excruciating. It seethed. Just like ice dropped into boiling water, Jace cracked.

\*

Dayna was dying. Nothing else could tear through her soul with this much agony. Unless it was watching him die. Too many solitary hours spent at his bedside, listening to the whirr and beep of machines, watching drugs drip into his broken body had taken their toll. If life were perfect, there would never be a need for those who kept the peace. There would never be a single tear shed. There would never be a widow given a flag and badge.

Ninety-eight dollars. For ninety-eight dollars, a store clerk would have a permanent limp. For ninety-eight dollars, Gunner died in a painful, broken agony. For ninety-eight dollars, Jace nearly lost his life. Ninety-eight dollars couldn’t buy Braves tickets but it destroyed their future. They got so close, so close to making it work. Gawd, she loved him so much, too much to live her life waiting for him to be snatched out of her arms, waiting for that torment to hit.

Jace’s hand reached toward her face and she had to turn away. If he touched her, she’d break, crumple into a devastated pile. His pain was nearly palpable. Hers twisted near

unbearable. But even this cruelty, this shoving him away, was better than standing over his grave.

He stopped on the threshold. The shadows licked at him, surrounded him in a blanket of night. Only the line of his back was visible in the darkness, catching the range light's faint glow. Bowed shoulders straightened and muscles rippled as his spine went rigid. His ribs expanded with a breath.

And then he roared.

A wordless primal scream ripped through the quiet house with the force of a hurricane. Surprise knifed into her chest, carving a sob from her. Pulling back his good hand, Jace punched a hole in the hallway wall. Her body jolted and jumped as drywall cracked and splintered. The torment on his face hit harder than his fist.

Jace never lost his temper. He was Ice. Now his body shook. Fury and misery curled his lip, tightened his jaw and he pulled back to swing again. The dim light caught a flash of dark blood welling on his knuckles and her stomach dropped.

"No, Jace," she whimpered. Dayna grabbed a paper towel and leapt toward him. No more blood. No more cuts. No more hurt. She reached for him but he jerked away.

"Stop it! I don't want your fucking sympathy."

"It's not sympathy."

"Isn't it?" He stepped closer. Hot, ragged breath fanned over her face, cooler only than the sting of her tears. Anger emanated from him, a heated recklessness that flushed his face, darkened his scrapes and glittered his eyes. "Christ knows it isn't love. You don't push love away like that."

"No, you don't," she snapped. "You push pain away."

"You're holding on to fear! The job's not going to kill me. *You* are killing me, Dayna!"

China blue eyes rimmed with pink glared at her. For all the menace in his body, the vehemence and violence that raged through him, Dayna wasn't afraid. But the ugly horror of his words slapped at her and she retreated, her back pressing against the stairwell.

Jace advanced. "You're letting 'what if' and 'what might be' ruin this. I thought you were stronger than that. But you're not. The first time the chips fall hard, you're buckling, giving up without a fight."

Resentment washed over her and dropped her jaw. “Oh no, you do *not* get to call me weak, you arrogant son of a bitch.”

Jace’s head yanked back and his eyes widened.

“You think it was *easy* to hear you’d been hurt? You think it was *easy* to let them bore a hole in your head? Maybe it was *easy* to wonder if you were ever going to wake up.”

The shrill, harpy grating in her voice should have shamed her. On some level, she recognized the careening descent that obliterated her control but it was too strained to hold her back. Everything she had so carefully tucked away, hidden from even herself, welled up, pushed through the cracks in her heart and rushed at him in a lava flow of agony. Tears blinded her and words scratched from her throat with a spitting cry.

“Oh yeah, watching Bill try to be strong was child’s play. Calling your mother was a piece of cake. Holding your fucking pins so hard my hands bled was nothing. Not knowing if you’d remember your own damned name let alone mine, yeah, that was simple. Hating myself for even thinking about which funeral home to call was damn breeze!”

The most shameful of her emotions exploded. *Jace* chose his job. *He* put himself at risk for strangers. *He* was the one who got hurt. He said he loved her but *he* would have left her behind. Dayna pushed against him but it wasn’t enough. Balling her fists, she banged them both on his chest.

“Damn you, how could you do that to me? You were going to leave me. Alone.”

Jace tried to grab her wrists but she was uncontrollable now. Panic, fear, shock, rage—every emotion from the past week scored through her veins, tore through her skin and erupted in a frenzied outburst. She was barely aware of her hands smacking at his shoulders, her feet kicking at his shins, the words streaming from her lips. Incomprehensible vocabulary spewed with consuming fury, intermingled with tears and curses.

“Bastard! I thought you were dead! I— I wanted to go with you.”

“Dayna, no.” Jace’s horrified whisper feathered on her brow. Catching her arms, he pulled them above her head, stopping their assault and leaned his body against her. She struggled, pushing against him until the feel of him, so warm, so heavy, so alive forced the anger from her bones. Consuming sobs sapped her strength. She hung there, pinned by his frame, his fingers imprisoning her wrists, his cast biting into her skin.

A half-tick above a prayer, voice frayed to a shred, Jace pleaded along her ear. “Stop. Don’t, Dayna. Don’t do this to us. Please, Dayna...”

The electric razor wasn’t sharp enough and his beard shadow scraped across her wet cheek like sandpaper. His kiss was hard, deep and begging, forcing her lips open. The buried fear, that she would never again taste his kiss, had left her broken. The bitter burn of salt stung as she nipped him back. He swallowed her sobs, his lips bruising hers. Unbridled need replaced finesse. Teeth scrapped on teeth, lips crushed on lips, tongues fought for dominance.

She dragged in a fast breath and a familiar and welcome scent burst into her bloodstream. *Jace*. A desperate hunger thrust her tongue deeper into his mouth. Her thin nightshirt peaked as her nipples tightened to aching points. They grazed his chest and she pressed closer. A low growl vibrated into her mouth. She pulled at his hands holding hers but he didn’t let go. One knee shot between her legs and he ground his hips into her.

His growing erection surprised her and an emptiness throbbed deep in her hips. A cautious tremor rippled in her mind.

He was just out of the hospital. They shouldn’t.

She’d just broken up with him. They shouldn’t.

They were both angry. They shouldn’t.

But she wanted to.

The lusty, wanton slut inside her purred beneath his punishing mouth, drowning out all whispers of warning. The strength of his grip, the power of his kiss, the fire in his touch proved he was healing. Dayna needed healing. She needed Jace. She needed to feel him alive.

His tongue slicked down her neck and she tugged at her hands. He let one fall, releasing his casted grip. Her fingers immediately shot into his hair. Fisting the soft black, she brought his mouth back to hers. There was no gentleness as he palmed her breast. The hard blue wrapping rubbed across her nipple, his fingers curving around the swell. The ruthless squeeze shot through her with a whip crack of longing. She bit below his jaw and he dragged his cheek along her face, scouring a trail of tingling skin. His hips rocked harder.

Jace abruptly let go of her trapped hand and gripped her ass. Bending his knees, he hefted her higher, raising her toes off the floor. Her hands went to his shoulders, gripping, clinging. The weight of his body pinned her against the cool wall, and fully hard, he bucked into her. A frantic

nip to her throat accompanied his snarl. Her nails raked from his nape to his waist, bowing his spine. The slide of her thighs whispered on his cotton pants when she wrapped her legs around him. His teeth clamped into her neck and his injured hand shot between them, between her legs. Foreplay was forgotten. Raw need took hold. Jace shoved down the front of his pants, wrenched her panties to the side and thrust deep.

Dayna's head snapped back. She wasn't wet enough and his entry burned. Heat surged through her on waves of hedonistic pleasure-pain. She arched, her body stretching, accepting, moistening. Jace didn't pause, driving inside her with a furious rhythm, his mouth pressed to her throat, his fingers biting into her ass. Wild, unleashed need sharpened the night to a fine blade. It sliced everything away until nothing existed but Jace in her arms. The wall had no give and his every deep, brutal stroke ricocheted through her. His body shook with exertion. Sweat slicked his back under her hands and she strained to get closer, feel more of him. So warm, his skin vibrated with vitality, pulsed with life.

*He's alive.* He hadn't left her. He was here, with her, whole and in the most intimate of ways, loving her with every jagged breath. She held him tight, terrified to let him go and allowed the tears to roll off her cheeks and dampen his hair.

They had made love, had sex, romped naked and fucked until they were exhausted but this was different. This was basic human need fueled by fear – the fear of losing each other. This was a reaffirmation that they were still alive and there. This was without finesse, without grace, without tenderness. It was pure, raw and primal. It was love, stripped bare and aching.

A swift, unexpected orgasm ripped through Dayna— short, intense and savage. Her body clenched and she cried out. Jace stiffened, then thrust hard. Wet heat filled her as his groan blasted moist air against the curve of her neck. He sagged into her, gasping for breath.

Her legs trembled, his arms quivered, but neither let go. All the harrowing dread of the past week fell away and left a yawning emotional void. Physical need had been appeased but the soul still ached. The only sound was the drum of his heart next to hers, their desperate gulps of air and a low murmur from the forgotten television. Dayna froze.

“Listen.”

Jace lifted his head. An announcer began a countdown and memory rushed in. They were in the hallway where he'd first kissed her, one year ago tonight. A fragile smile quivered on her

lips. His eyes were closed but a sad little curl lifted one corner of his mouth. He remembered. She joined the countdown.

“Three...Two...On—”

“Marry me.”

A gasp sobbed from her trembling lips. An ache exploded in her chest as her heart slammed to a stop. Celebration music tripped through the room with a jaunty beat that mocked her terror.

“What?”

Jace opened his eyes and she got caught in the swirling intense sea of yearning hope. Drowning, she was drowning in his gaze.

“Marry me. I can’t promise you anything, Dayna, except that I’ll love you until my last breath. Maybe that’s tomorrow, maybe it’s a hundred years from now. I don’t know. I just know that I’m alive but I can’t live without you. Marry me.”

The night hugged him, cast his face in shadows and brightened the sheen in his eyes. It darkened his bruises. Doubt crashed through her with a tidal wave. Nothing had changed. Nothing was going to change. A future with him would always be clouded with risk, with fear. The threat lurked like a ghost, the lingering reminder of what could happen.

Uncertainty tore her gaze from his. She focused on the bookshelf, on the still-filled Christmas stockings that hung untouched. There was a diamond ring in her stocking. Below it, his body armor and cut-off uniform sat forlornly where Bill had dropped the bag. Two symbols of what could be her future with him— one joyous, the other terrifying. Marrying Jace meant marrying a badge, meant she could hold him forever or until someone took him from her, violently and suddenly.

Dayna turned her face back to his, a refusal burning her tongue, stabbing her heart. The words wouldn’t come. Jace had his eyes closed. A bead of sweat glistened on his forehead. His jaw was locked tight, lips thinned. She knew that look. This was Jace bracing for bad news, preparing himself for failure. The look twisted her breaking heart.

Behind him, brighter than the darkness, the faint kitchen bulb haloed his hair in gold with a memory of sunshine. Dawn always came, banishing the shadows of deepest night. The festive music continued in the background as partygoers celebrated. They celebrated hope for the future. There was nothing guaranteed in the New Year expect for that wispy dream of what could be.

A year ago, she'd silently wished for his kiss and he'd given it to her. Now she wanted more. She wanted him. Her heart shuddered, stretched and fluttered with a lighter beat. It was the first minutes of a New Year. The old faded away and the new held the promise of hope.

She could lose him now by saying no... or she could keep him for however long granted to them by some higher power. They could have a week, a year, a decade together. Maybe more. Dayna choked back a sob. She'd lost so much time with him over Christmas. She couldn't bear to miss one more precious moment with him. Life didn't come with guarantees, but if you were lucky, it came with love.

"Yes."

"Yes?" Jace's eyes snapped open, wild and rounded. "You're saying yes?"

"Yes." Touching his cheek, she tried to put every ounce of her love into a smile. "Last week was... I can't lose you, Jace. A year just isn't enough. I want more. I love you."

The lines of his neck tightened in a swallow. "I thought... Christ, Dayna, I love you. I want to give you the world in a box."

A giggle born of hysteria formed in her belly and Dayna let it loose. It tripped over her salt-stained lips with a joyous sound. "I'll take it... with a gold ribbon...from my stocking."

Jace chuckled. "You got it, babe. You got me, forever."

His kiss echoed the one given a year ago, given with a smile, a hope and a wish granted. The future was theirs, together.

\*

Dear Readers,

I hope you have enjoyed a year of peeks into Jace and Dayna's life. They wormed their way into my heart and planted roots, determined to have their story told. Saying good-bye is hard but they live forever in these words and phrases. So I bid them a fond farewell and say *'Thank you for letting me tell your tale'*.

2010 is just on the horizon and you never know what it holds. Come visit me again. There is a new story I'm dying to tell. Happy Holidays!

~Inez Kelley