

Is Jace and Dayna's relationship bound for the grave?



TRICK OR CHEAT

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Trick or Cheat/ Kelley

Title: TRICK OR CHEAT!

Heat: SWEET

Author: INEZ KELLEY

A trick? A treat? Or did someone cheat? Is Jace and Dayna's relationship bound for the grave?

“Trick or treat!”

The chorus of childish giggles and squeals filled the night as miniature princesses, Power Rangers, and furry animals crowded around the opened door. Decker out like the Queen of Hearts, Dayna doled out mini Snickers and M&Ms from a huge Tupperware bowl, commenting over costumes and conversing with parents for a few minutes. She waved her glittery wand and proclaimed them all adorable. When she closed the door, the smile fell from her face.

“Any luck?”

“Nope, it’s toast,” Jace grumbled from behind the pulled-out refrigerator.

The white side-by-side appliance had been humming too loudly for a while but she hadn’t expected it to give up the ghost on Halloween night. She didn’t dare open the freezer, praying the seal would hold the cold in long enough for Jace to perform some sort of Frigidaire-séance and raise the dead. Two ice-filled coolers were jammed with everything she could salvage from the fridge, but the trash overflowed with things that had gone belly-up.

There just hadn’t been room in the small coolers for much else. Jace would have to deal with his beer warming on the counter, the sale she’d hit at Shopco last week was too valuable to lose. She didn’t even want to hazard a guess what that fuzzy green thing in a plastic dish had once been so she buried it bowl and all, under a pile of wilting leftovers. Gunner cast a careful eye around before sticking his snout in the can. Dayna waved her wand, shooing him away and he hunched guiltily back to his food dish. Once assured the mutt wasn’t going to be digging in thirty bucks worth of spoiled lunch meat and cheese, Dayna blew out a frustrated breath.

“Perfect, just perfect.”

She fisted her hair. This was not an expense they had budgeted for. And with Christmas coming up, she had no choice but to dip into her savings for her half of a replacement. This was going to suck big time.

The doorbell chimed again and she headed back down the hall, plastering a welcoming smile on her face. The door swung open to reveal a harried mother and five little kids ranging from a carried toddler-lion to a half-grown Darth Mal.

“Trick or treat! Hi, Ms. Thompson!” the sing-songed call rang and Dayna dropped bits of candy into pumpkin buckets while oohing-and aaahing over each child. All week, her first

graders had been ansty, over-excited about the childhood ritual, and she delighted in recognizing a number of kids from her class. Tomorrow they would either be exhausted whiny brats or over-hyped sugar monsters, but tonight they were cute. She'd have enjoyed them a lot more if she wasn't worried about several hundred dollars worth of groceries slowly dying in her kitchen.

Jace's hair stood on end from running his hand through it several times in the past few minutes. Seated on his rump, staring at the huge white box, he blew out a slow breath. "It's official, babe. It's a goner. We need a new fridge."

She shoved the plastic crown higher on her head. "Great. I guess we go appliance shopping tomorrow. It's going to be ouch-worthy for both our savings accounts."

Jace froze. Nothing huge, just a minute stilling of every muscle in his body. She rolled her eyes. Okay, so Jace hated shopping, but damn it, this was not a frivolous venture here. It wasn't like she was asking him to hold her purse while she tried on clothes. She'd only done that once and how was she supposed to know his Lieutenant would happen to be in the store? She hadn't meant for him to get stuck holding her flowered bag while she checked out her own ass in a six-way mirror.

He hadn't minded the skinny jeans she'd bought though, had he? No siree, he'd liked them just fine. Liked peeling them off her a few hours later even more. He lived here, ate here and kept his beer here. They needed a refrigerator and his ass was coming with her. Period.

Despite her irritation, her eyes were drawn to the breadth of his back as he pushed to a stand. He'd walked in the door from work and found her frantically shoving condiments into the cooler, plastic tiara falling from her head. In his typical macho chauvinism, he'd moved her out of the way and started poking into the back of the fridge, as if he knew what he was looking for. He hadn't taken his uniform off and the black fabric molded in all the right places. She had a sudden urge to go bobbing for...something.

Before a flirt could form, the doorbell rang again.

"I got it," he offered, darting past her like he had a lit jack-o-lantern in his pants. Gunner started to plod after him but Jace pointed to the floor. "*Pfui. Sitz.*"

The dog stopped and parked his ass. Dayna quirked her eyebrow. Jace was a Halloween-Grinch. He hated carving pumpkins, hated candy and refused to even consider dressing-up. A big old Halloween poop, that's what he was. He'd been firm about not taking part in her annual treat

giving, yet now all but ran to the door. More power to him. At this minute, her butt was getting chafed. She twisted and tugged at her thong creeping far too high and the tight corset bit into her side painfully.

Her costume was a two-fer. She was all Queen of Hearts on the outside, Queen of Tarts underneath. Jace had a serious obsession with her in stockings and garters and she was going to indulge his every fantasy. The skimpy, strappy red lingerie was not meant for frolicking with children, but she had a few licks planned for Jace later— an adult version of trick or treat. A saucy grin bowed her lips. Jace Rafferty was one trick she loved turning and she always got a treat for it.

A purr of expectation formed in her throat and her tongue flicked out to her lip. It was a night for grown up bewitching. If witches could ride broomsticks, surely the Queen of Tarts could ride a certain cop's 'nightstick', right?

Trick or treat

He smells so sweet

Give me some lovin' heat

Treat or Trick

Long and thick

Wanna ride his big nightsti –

A commotion at the door halted her naughty mental charm.

“Wow, cool costume. You look like a real cop,” exclaimed one little boy.

“Thanks,” Jace murmured with none of his usual good humor.

“Can I see your gun?”

“No. Have a Snickers.”

“I'm allergic to peanuts.”

“Fine, take the Starburst then.”

“I can't eat sticky stuff with my retainer.”

“Then you're stuck with Lifesavers, kid.”

No sooner had the latch caught than the doorbell pealed again. Even from down the hall, Dayna heard Jace mutter a curse. He had no idea the four letter word he uttered was exactly what she planned to do to him later. She giggled but went in search of her laptop. Fridge first, fun

after. She brought the computer into the kitchen, plopped her rump at the table and started searching appliance models, prices and features. She was idly scratching Gunner's ears when Jace stomped back up the hall.

"Somebody's in a grumpy mood."

He had no answer, which probably meant he was biting his tongue. She almost offered to do that for him but bit her lip instead. He cracked the top on a beer from the counter, took a swig then grimaced, yanking the bottle back to stare at it.

"It's warm," she warned even though it was too late. He moved to pour the beer down the sink, keeping his face turned away. Her gaze traced over his shoulder, down his spine and across the curve of his ass. *Mama Mia, what the man did for those uniform pants.*

"So how much money are we looking at?"

Dayna blinked, ripped from her visions of candy-coated cop. She was sitting in a lust-fired puddle and he was thinking cold cash. Cold, she needed to think cold or they would end up with botulism from spoiled food. A few clicks and she spun the laptop to face him.

Jace bent close to peer at the listing and she stole a quick whiff from the crook of his neck. The autumn wind, full of fragrant leaves and harvest spice, blended with the seductive scent of Jace Rafferty and her mouth watered. A jolt of instant warmth flooded her panties. Without consulting her brain, her nose leaned forward and nuzzled his neck. Jace cocked his head, giving her access but his low whistle disrupted her mood.

"Damn, babe, I've owned cars that cost less than some of these."

"Yeah, refrigerators are expensive, but we really don't have much choice."

Rising slowly, Jace took a slow even breath. He turned and walked to the sink, his spine perfectly straight. "Why don't we just put it on a card and pay it off in a couple installments rather than bleed out our savings?"

Dayna's brow shot up so quickly she marveled the tiara didn't pop off her head. "Oh, a little thing called interest? And I thought we were trying to pay those off and not add any more to them."

"Yeah—" He shrugged one shoulder with too much nonchalance. "— but this is something neither of us planned for. I'd rather use plastic for this."

There was something off about that statement, about his behavior. Jace hadn't looked her in the eye once since he declared the fridge dead. In fact, she's seen the backside of him more than his face, which was no hardship, just odd. Now he was insisting on using a credit card when less than a week ago he'd talked her out of using hers to pay for dinner. Why would he want to charge anything rather than just pay for it outright?

It made no sense.

Her blood turned colder than the warming box dripping water with a metronomic pulse. Unless Jace didn't have the money in his savings. But if he didn't have it, where had all his overtime pay gone? He was regularly clocking twenty plus hours extra a week at time and half, had been since late summer. That was a serious chunk of change to be missing. Despite how much she loved Jace, trusted him, a red flag frantically waved in her head.

"You don't have it, do you?"

His shoulders slumped. "I could swing it but it would pretty much wipe out my savings right now."

Too many thoughts rushed her mind and she couldn't catch a single one to make sense of. Money wasn't something they argued over. When he'd moved in, they just had fallen into a calm routine. They split household expenses fifty-fifty and kept their own checking and savings accounts. He never asked for an explanation where she spent her superfluous cash and she'd never thought to ask him. But in the past few months, he had worked so many extra hours, she assumed he was banking it, saving it for a rainy day, a newer jeep or a busted refrigerator.

Jace didn't gamble. He didn't drink if he had to work that day, rarely went out with the guys anymore. There hadn't been any expensive computer equipment purchases or anything like that. She paid all their bills, down to his car insurance and Fraternal Order dues. She even bought his socks when he needed new ones. He was like the anti-spender.

As much as he loved his job, if he was working, he should be getting paid for it. Where was his pay going?

Unless there was no overtime pay.

Unless he hadn't been 'working' those extra hours he was away from her.

She'd believed him when he said he was working but she didn't 'know' it. She rarely called him when he was on duty, always too afraid she would catch him at a bad time. Kinda irritating

to be arresting a shoplifter and have your girlfriend calling you at the same time. If a man wanted to get away in secret, claiming extra duty time was a great alibi. But why would he want to get away? Most of his extra shifts were evening and night duty...when she was home. The few weekends he was off, he sometimes worked as a bouncer for a friend, was paid in cash money. From a bar. Where single women went looking to pick up a guy.

Did someone pick up her guy?

Was there...someone else?

The pulse in her neck tripled, sending shooting pain to her temples. Her breath stuck in her lungs and spots swam in her eyes. Jace had to be working. He had to. He'd come home too tired to see straight after the sixtieth hour a week, chuck off his uniform and collapse into bed. He fell asleep on the couch at least once a week and she'd been letting him sleep through dinnertime, nuking a plate when he woke up late at night. There were circles under his eyes that never had a chance to completely go away. It was one reason for her under-Queen slut costume. Their sex life had been suffering. When it happened it was hot, but the frequency had fallen off.

Something twanged deep in Dayna's belly. Maybe he wanted it that way. Maybe he had moved in too fast and now was feeling pressure to...be more committed than he was ready for. Gawd knows her family was enough to drive a sane man to Prozac in one visit. Hell, his mother called weekly to remind him she wasn't a grandmother. That type of strain had to mess with a guy's head, right?

Maybe Jace was pulling away. Maybe he'd found someone else, someone who didn't wear ratty men's slippers and actually paid attention when he talked RBIs and errors or whatever baseball stuff she tuned out. Maybe he met someone who didn't have freckles or mumble in her sleep or...

Last week, he'd come home smelling like beer and perfume. He said it was because of the drunk college girls he and Cadwaller had arrested. What if it wasn't? A few weeks ago, that mysterious scratch on his back, the one he claimed was from a fencepost during a foot pursuit? Could it have come from a woman's fingernail? Why hadn't she paid more attention to it?

Was she losing him?

A sharp twinge forced her to breathe. The wide expanse of his shoulders blurred wetly in her eyes and she blinked until they cleared. Her chin started quivering. Licking her overly painted lips, she steeled for a blow.

“Jace.” Her voice cracked and she had to start over. “Jace, are you seeing someone?”

He whirled to face her so fast, the silver of his badge winked like a camera flash. The blue of his eyes pinned her with a sudden glare. “What?”

The sparkly hearts along her skirt shimmied and shuddered as her knees knocked together. The glittery plastic tiara weighed twenty pounds and bore down on her skull like a brick. She interlocked her fingers to keep them from shaking off her hands.

“Are you... Is there someone else?”

The thick line of his brows angled sharply, nearly touching. His body froze, not even breathing. His chin lifted and his nostrils flared as he drew in a long slow breath. Never once did he blink or take his glowering eyes off her. The honeyed tone she loved turned bitter with his whisper.

“Is that what you think?”

“I don’t know what else to...”

Dayna lost her voice. She couldn’t have whispered her own name from the tight clench of her throat. The complete silence in the room magnified the soft shuffle of Gunner in the mudroom, pawing at his bed. She never wanted to be a dog in her life but his obliviousness now tempted her. The K-9’s only concern was getting the dog pillow just so before he plopped down on it. His heart wasn’t breaking.

“I can’t be here right now.” Jace spun on one heel and headed for the hallway, for the door. Icy waves pulsated as he crossed in front of her. He didn’t touch her, deliberately angling his body to not brush against her. *Ice*. So cold, he was so cold, so emotionally frigid she almost expected to see his breath in the air.

“You didn’t answer me.”

Her quiet whisper stopped Jace’s trek but he didn’t turn. One hand on the doorknob, the other tightly fisted at his side, he didn’t speak for a long minute. “No, I didn’t and I’m not going to.”

Jace swung the front door wide and her stomach plummeted to her knees. “Jace! Where are... Are you... Are you coming home?”

Some of the stiffness eased from his shoulders and she waited for him to close the door, to turn around, take her in his arms and tell her it was all a huge mistake. But his head just slowly shook. “I don’t know, Dayna. I don’t know.”

He didn’t slam the door. He didn’t gun the engine. His tail-lights just faded out of view while she stood there, torn apart and numb at the same time. A group of costumed children lumbered up on the porch and, on automatic, she grabbed the huge mixing bowl of candies. She dropped mini-candybars into pumpkin buckets and cloth sacks but her vision was trained on the empty street where he’d driven away. A chorus of *thank yous* tugged her head down.

A little boy in a policemen costume brought a wave of salty tears that stung her eyes. He was a freckle-faced red-head with deep brown eyes and two missing teeth. He looked nothing like Jace at all. But he was here and Jace wasn’t. For the second time in three minutes, she watched a uniformed back leave her porch.

She called her father. Paul commiserated over the fridge death and brought over more bagged ice for the coolers. He didn’t ask where Jace was, but chuckled at her costume. Her belly cramped. The thin hold she had on reality lasted through him loading all her perishables to take to his house, the chest freezer in his basement a salvation. He drove away and Dayna flipped off the porch light. She couldn’t face another round of trick or treaters.

Gunner stood beside her like a shadow. Her hand dropped to his head. The ultra soft fur and wide pleading eyes were her undoing. Her shoulders shook as she slid down the door, landing in a pile of glittery skirt. Hot tears coursed over her cheeks and Gunner whined. She pretended to soothe the dog by burying her face in his neck and bawling like a baby.

When enough dog hair clung to her to make a sweater, she wiped her wet face on her hands and pulled the bowl of Halloween candy from the deacon’s bench. Chocolate wasn’t good for dogs so she ate that herself, but she did slip the K-9 pieces of banana taffy.

Jace had to come back. He would need Gunner. But did he need her, the Queen of Broken Hearts?

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“You in the doghouse or what?”

Jace looked away from his beer, a cold one this time, and into Bill Connors’ smirking face. “When are you going to shave that stupid-assed mustache?”

Connors straddled the chair, turning his back on the four other men in his kitchen. The not so quiet poker game muffled his chuckle. “First, you never come play poker. Second, you look like someone kicked you in the balls and third, you’re still in uniform even though you signed off three hours ago. Whasup?”

Jace shrugged and downed the last of his third beer. Technically, he wasn’t in uniform. He’d stowed his Glock in the locked glove box, left the body armor in the back seat and sat with his black shirt unbuttoned and loose, white tee shirt peeking through. He wasn’t even sure what he was doing here. After Dayna dropped her little bombshell, he’d just had to leave. His mind had slipped into auto pilot and driven him here, to Connors’ monthly poker game that didn’t rest for any holiday except Christmas. Becky would kill him if he tried to hold the card game on that day.

“You and Dayna have a fight?”

“A fight? No.” The sardonic grunt escaped before he could catch it. “We didn’t fight. I left before that could happen.”

Connors nodded. “Figured. You know the guest apartment over the garage is yours if you need it, but it’d be better if you slink your ass home and apologize. Trust me. After fourteen years, I’ve yet to win an argum—”

“Dayna thinks I’m cheating on her.”

The deep male laughter from the card game filled dead space as Connors stared. “Are you?” Jace snapped his head up and glared. “She has to have some reason to think that, Ice.”

“The fucking fridge died.”

That bushy mustache twitched. “Of course. Most women automatically assume a broken refrigerator means their husbands are cheating.”

“We’re not married,” Jace spat.

“Riiiiight. You’re as hitched as a western horse. You just don’t have the papers. Come on, spill it. You go dipping and get caught?”

“No. Replacing the refrigerator is going to wipe out what’s left of my savings. She thinks I spent it on... I don’t know what she thinks, actually. But it starts with my dick hanging out.”

Connors frowned. “You’ve been racking up the OT. You betting on ballgames or something?”

Disgust pushed at Jace and he yanked a box from his pocket. He pitched it hard enough to *SMACK* when Connors caught it. The lid creaked open and Connors’ eyes went wide. Jace knew exactly why. All day, he’d been cracking the case and stealing glimpses of the three rings on a bed of gray velvet. The jeweler had offered the matching wedding bands at a discount if he bought the complete set. What had seemed like a prudent move mocked him now.

The sip of beer tasted sour in his mouth. He’d never admit to anyone, but he’d tried on the largest ring, wore it for a few minutes. The gold band inlaid with diamond chips wasn’t as flashy or sparkly as its smaller counterpart but he thought it suited him. All day, he’d formulated words and plans, tried to figure out the best way, the best time to propose.

“Damn, Ice. Why didn’t you just ask her?”

“I planned on it. Instead I got accused of having an affair.”

The oblong box closed with a clack and Connors handed it back. Jace took it and tossed it on the counter beside him. He couldn’t stand being close to something he’d wanted more than air for so long. Damn it, he’d been working his ass off, sometimes pulling a double three days in a row and Dayna thought he was cheating on her? Wasn’t she supposed to trust him? Maybe he hadn’t been as chipper as she’d liked lately but it wasn’t because of another woman. He was tired. Hell, he even dreamed about working.

Sleep was an afterthought or when his body just shut down. His life was poised for change but change took hard work. He’d taken the sergeant’s exam, but kept piling up the hours, trying to replenish what he’d taken out of his savings while waiting on the results. He knew he passed but the rank and higher pay wouldn’t kick in until he got the damn slow-assed letter telling him his score. Was it wrong to want to be on more solid financial ground before proposing?

Weddings don’t come cheap. Neither do kids. But if his girlfriend thought he was stepping out on her, a wedding wouldn’t come at all and forget a family.

He ran a hand across his gritty eyes. What the fuck was he doing sitting here in a room with a bunch of off-duty cops while his life crumbled around him? He needed to figure out what the

hell he was going to do now. Were he and Dayna through? If she couldn't trust him then it wasn't right to stick around. But how was he supposed to live without her?

The slide of denim on wood brought his gaze back to Connors, but the glimmer deep in those hazel eyes confused him. His former trainer leaned forward and dropped his tone to a private level but the command there was as strong as ever. "Don't think. Just answer. Do you love her?"

"Yes." Jace shook his head and snorted. "Yeah, I love her. But I don't know how to fix this."

Connors grinned, teeth shining under that tuft of lip hair. He leaned back and grabbed the handset off the phone base on the counter and dialed. With his eyes locked on Jace, he brought his finger to his lip. Jace frowned. *What the hell's he doing?*

"Hey Dayna-bug, it's Bill." Jace sat straight up but Connors pointed, reminding him to keep quiet. "You okay? You sure? Okay. Look, we have an odd number. Feel like letting Jace out to play a few hands? Oh, he's not? Damn. Well, tell him I called, will you? Oh, and Dayna, tell him I said thanks. Oh, nothing just... well, you know what it's like with kids, I came up a bit short and he bailed me out. Tell him I'll pay him back as soon as I can. Okay, see ya." Connors punched the off button and grinned at Jace. "You owe me."

Jace sat, mouth hanging open as the magnitude of his buddy's words set in. "You just lied through your fucking teeth."

Connors laughed. "Yep. And pulled your miserable ass out of the fire. Look, forget all that bullshit about honesty. Straight up, from a married man to one who should be, sometimes you gotta lie. The problem is figuring out when it's the right time. This is the right time. You can explain it all after she says yes."

"So you covered my ass about the money. Doesn't change the fact she thinks I'm cheating."

"She's crying, Jace." He flinched but Connors didn't stop. "Women don't cry over men they don't love. Go work it out."

Those words clanged in Jace's head like a gong the entire drive home. Home. Christ, they had to work this out. He didn't think he was strong enough to walk away from her. Or to live through her walking away from him.

The house was dark, not even the porch light was on. Had she gone to bed? He killed the engine and sat staring until the warm motor stopped pinging in the cool night air. He opened the jeweler's case. Two months of busting his balls and a healthy portion of his saving lined the velvet in glittering gemstone. 'A diamond lasts forever' the commercials promised but he knew better. Diamonds were just polished rock.

What lasted forever was the feel of her hand when she stroked his back in her sleep or the sound of his name on her lips. Forever was the twinkle in her eyes when she teased him about stealing the pillows or the taste of her kiss. It was the way she made him feel as if he could accomplish anything just because she believed in him. Dayna made him a better man because he had to be worthy of her. That was what lasted forever.

He opened the glove box and pulled out his gun belt. Shoving the jeweler's box in his pocket, he went inside. Dayna hadn't locked the door. Damn it, how many times did he have to tell her... He just wanted her safe. If he could wrap her in cotton, he would.

"Jace?"

"Yeah, it's me." He laid his gun belt on the deacon's bench and walked into the living room. Curled up on the couch in the dark, the near empty Halloween bowl beside her, Gunner at her feet and a butt load of sparkly red skirt around her legs, Dayna stared at him with wide wet eyes. *Damn, I hate when she cries.*

He leaned on the wall and struggled to find words in his jumbled head. Every word he'd ever learned to speak fought for dominance. Only the most basic came out. "No, there isn't anyone else, never has been. I don't want anyone but you."

"I'm sorry." Her liquid sob clenched his gut. "I know you better than that."

"Dayna, about the money. I wan—"

"Bill called. He told me about the loan. I jumped to conclusions, bad ones. I just... I got scared."

"Scared? Of what?"

"Of losing you. And instead, I just insulted you...and hurt you. I'm so sorry, Jace."

Sometimes, when you love someone more than anything else in the world, 'I'm sorry' is enough. The invisible band around his lungs let go and he drew a deep breath before kicking off the wall. "I don't want to lose you, either."

She sobbed again when he sat on the couch and took her in his arms. Candy wrappers crinkled under his boots and her dress rustled as he shifted around to pull her tighter to his chest. Nuzzling her temple and pressing soft kisses on her brow, he shut his eyes. This had been close, too close. His bones were still rattling in fear.

“Hey, shhh, it’s okay, babe. We’re okay.”

“Love you.”

“I love you, too.” For a hundred heartbeats, he just held on, and she never let go. Gunner nosed in the candy bowl but sat back down, looking at her expectantly. Jace grinned. He’d bet his next raise that Dayna had been slipping Gunner taffy. She was as bad as the boys about feeding the K-9’s sugar addiction. He raised his head and looked at all the candy papers. He let go of her long enough to tip the bowl and look inside. There wasn’t one candy bar left.

“Dayna, did you eat *all* this chocolate?”

Her snuffle was guilty and impish. “Kinda.”

He couldn’t stop his laugh and she smiled with him. He ran one knuckle along her damp cheek. Love squeezed his heart so hard the breath choked in his throat. The rounded edges of the box bit into his thigh and he almost reached for it. *No, not yet. Not when we’re both so emotionally wrung out. I don’t want this to be the aftermath but the beginning.*

Dayna leaned close, brushing her mouth along his then she climbed onto his lap. Her lips parted eagerly under his. Her knee was jamming the box into his leg, so he gripped her thigh to shift her. His palm hit bare skin and an edge of lace. Stunned for one split second, he slowly glided his hand up her leg. His fingers hit nothing but ass. All the blood pounding in his head reversed direction and headed south. He whispered hopefully against her kiss.

“Dayna? Stockings?”

Her mouth curved wide but never left his.

“Trick or treat, honey.”

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.