

It's that all important test
of a relationship,
the day Dayna will
finally meet Jace's family.

Will dinner strengthen
Jace and Dayna's love or
will the reality of
loving a cop make her
want to go on the run?



FAMILY LAW

Inez Kelley

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“Ma?” Jace walked through the heavy wooden door as if he had grown up in the sprawling Victorian and well, actually he had, so Dayna just took a deep breath and followed.

Meeting Jace’s family shouldn’t be so nerve-wracking, but it was. It held more significance than him meeting hers. Hers lived in the same city and she saw them weekly. Her brother had even helped move some of Jace’s stuff in. But they had traveled over four hours to spend Jace’s birthday with his mother and sister and THAT meant commitment on a whole new level.

Despite that fact she had spent two days examining her wardrobe, Dayna just knew the casual but flattering sundress she wore was wrong. Maybe she should have braided her hair. Should she have brought a gift? Did she have a sign over her head that says “*I enjoying doing naughty things to your son in bed*” that only mother-vision could see?

Through phone calls she had ‘met’ Nora Rafferty, but coming face to face with the woman who had given birth to the man she slept with every night scared her senseless. Dayna had alternating nightmares about this meeting. In the first one, Nora was some Stepford Mom cast off, perfectly coifed and gracious. She would look at Dayna, find her completely unsuited to be her darling son’s mate and start a silent campaign to turn Jace against her. The second and equally terrifying vision was Nora as the stereotypical grandmother, aproned and rosy-cheeked. She would serve a fabulous home cooked meal, all Jace’s favorites of course, and wither Dayna with dirty glances for despoiling her baby.

Of course, Nora had no idea what her ‘baby’ had done to Dayna in the shower this morning, which was just fine because if she did know that... just, ewww.

Dayna fought the repulsive shudder and stepped into Jace’s childhood home. Just as her foot hit the hardwood entrance hall, a lyrical voice called from the back of the house. “Jacey? In the kitchen.”

“Jacey?” Dayna couldn’t stop the grin from spreading to her lips.

“Drop it, Dayna,” he growled. “Do not call me Jacey.”

Oh, I am so going to call you Jacey. The tease lingered in her brain while she followed him into a sunny kitchen. The fragrance of roast beef grew heavier and her stomach rumbled in a very unlady-like fashion.

“You’re late. If my pot roast is dry, I’m blaming you this time.” A salt-and-pepper haired woman wiped her hands on a dishcloth then turned to smile at them. “Dayna, it’s so nice to finally meet you.”

Despite Dayna’s nightmares, Nora was neither Stepford-like nor a Red Riding Hood matriarch-suit wearing wolf. Cut into a flattering bob, her age-streaked hair matched her time-creased face in a pleasant, soothing package. A generous cushion rested around her apronless

waist and a hopeful glimmer nestled deep in her brown eyes. Hints of family resemblance, the curve of a lip and the shape of a brow eased the tension out of Dayna's spine. This was going to be okay. No woman could raise such a decent man and be a complete bitch herself.

Could she?

"Hi," Dayna swiped her tongue over her teeth to make sure there was nothing stuck there then smiled back. "Jace's never on time. I figured that out the night I met him."

Nora laughed and winked at her, another familial trait. "I know. He was even late for his own birth. Two weeks overdue in June, it was awful."

"Hey, if you two are ganging up on me, I'm going to go watch the ballgame."

"You will not." Nora fixed him with a firm look. "You will get your butt over here and give me a hug though." Jace complied, his easy chuckle filling the room. Nora hugged him back hard. "I fixed the guest room up so you can take your stuff up after dinner, okay?"

"Thanks, Ma."

Guest room? Singular? Did Jace still have a bedroom here? Will there be an awkward 'Dayna sleeping on the couch' discussion? Can I turn around now and just go back home?

A thundering racket pulled Dayna's attention over her shoulder. A blur of dark hair and exuberance bolted down the stairs, flying toward Jace with a squeal. Dayna cocked her eyebrow. *This must be Callie.*

Callie barely gave Jace a glance. "Where is he? Where's the dog? I can hug you another time. I want a pooch smooch."

"Love you, too, sis." Jace laughed. "Outside, hooked to the porch rail. Stay away from him until I introduce you." She made a rude noise and his face stiffened. "I mean it, Cal. No. Do not go out to him. He's not a plaything."

"You are such a cop. Lighten up." She turned her gaze to Dayna. "So is this her?"

An irritated glare darkened his eyes to ocean. "No, I picked up a random woman to bring home. Yes, this is Dayna. Dayna, my kid sister, Callie."

Dayna offered her hand and got a slight squeeze in return. Callie looked over her shoulder with an impish smirk. "Ma busted out all your old baby pictures so I'm bailing after dinner. I can look at your bare ass in Polaroid any time."

Jace grimaced and groaned. "Ma, no."

Nora frowned at them and waved her hand toward a door. “Hush. Dinner’s ready since you’re an hour late. Argue over potatoes.”

Through Jace getting Gunner a bowl of water and introducing him to Callie, washing up and helping to serve, Dayna soaked in the somehow recognizable nuances of Jace’s family. They were relatively normal as far as she could see. No halos, no horns, just down to earth people who knew each other in the most intimate ways.

Family.

And she was the outsider.

Just call me Sodapop. Stay gold, Ponyboy.

A selection of family photos lined the buffet and Dayna easily picked out each member. Jace was definitely the middle child, the peacemaker. His older sister Brenna was stationed in Germany, keeping in contact mostly through email. Dayna got the sense Jace was closer to her than to Callie, but that was most likely an age thing. He and Callie had a bantering relationship that reeked of sibling rivalry. Even at more than ten years his junior, she wasn’t a child, but he still treated her like an annoying brat. She in turn ribbed him with every breath. Nora called them to task with a single stare that screamed MOTHER LOOK.

Dayna resisted the urge to reach out and touch the pictures. Jace had been an adorable child. From his toothless baby grin to the high school baseball picture, each photo made her smile. A shadow crept over her shoulder and his honeyed-glazed tone echoed in her ear. “I wish she’d put these away. Thirteen was awkward enough without having it captured by Kodak.”

“Hush, you.” Nora swatted his arm with the oven mitt she’d used to carry in a dish. “Those childhood pictures stay until one of you makes me a grandmother and gives me other kid pictures to fill the spots.”

“Ma, stop it.”

Dayna didn’t have to turn around to know his brows would be knotted over his eyes. She could feel him stiffening at her back. But Nora didn’t press the issue, simply announcing supper was served. Dayna let her gaze linger a few seconds longer on one photo— Jace’s dad in uniform. Beside it, a matching picture of Jace in a similar uniform, same American flag in the background. When she turned to the dining room table, her eyes flew to the head chair. It sat empty and had for several years. A chill washed up her spine and she shuddered.

The three Raffertys aimed themselves at specific seats and Dayna noticed an extra place setting beside Jace. Deducing that was her designated spot, she joined them. Jace held her chair and she smiled up at him. His fingers trailed provocatively along the curve of her hip when his mother had her face turned away. Dayna scowled at him but got nothing but a snicker.

“Thank you, Jacey,” she crooned evilly.

The snicker stopped.

Despite Nora’s worries, the pot roast was not dry and conversation flowed easily. In spite of Dayna’s worries, the pot roast didn’t appear laced with arsenic and she even managed to take several bites without dropping food in her lap.

“When will you get your holiday schedule?”

Jace wiped his mouth, glanced toward his mother and shrugged. “In November, I guess. Why, is Brenna coming in?”

“No, she can’t get leave for a while yet. I was just wondering. It seems like I can’t ever get you kids together for the holidays or birthdays anymore. Either she’s stationed too far away or you have to work. After complaining about all those dishes for so many years, suddenly I miss them.”

The hint of sadness tugged hard at Dayna’s heartstrings. Nora had to be feeling the same floundering loss her own family went through after her mother passed. Holidays were lonelier, emptier until Mark married and had kids. Marissa couldn’t cook to save her soul, so Dayna had stepped in and assumed her mother’s role as matriarch. The holidays once more filled with joy.

Without thinking, or talking to Jace first, words flew out of her mouth. “Why don’t you and Callie come spend Thanksgiving with us? I always cook the meal and have my family over so it’d be no trouble.”

Jace whipped his head to the right, his eyes wide, gawking at her. Just when she thought he was upset, a slow smile curled the corner of his lip. “Yeah, Ma, why don’t you?”

“Really?” Nora’s brow rose as she considered. “I guess we could do that.”

“It’s settled then. Our place for turkey.” Jace gripped Dayna’s hand, lacing his fingers through hers. Warmth from his touch spiraled through her. Thanksgiving was months away and they’d made definitive plans, like a married couple, about family joining them.

Family. Dayna flashed on Nora and Callie meeting her father, brother and nephews. The smile slid off her face as a game show Emcee blared in her head.

Let’s start the Family Feud!

Meet Jace, Nora, Callie and absentee Brenna, the Rafferty family!

On this side, Paul, Mark, Trevor and Tyler, The Thompson family!

One hundred top experts surveyed answered this: Name two things most likely to happen when two families meet over turkey and gravy.

And survey says... Dayna ends up with a migraine and gets fitted for a straight jacket!

She made a mental note to hide a bottle of Wild Turkey in the bathroom for instant shots of Thanksgiving courage. *Gobble Gobble.*

Talk ranged from Callie's legendary indecision on a college major, Brenna's promotion and Nora's accounting job. Jace had them rolling with laughter with some of Gunner and the twins' exploits. Dayna thanked every star she had ever wished on she wasn't the center of conversation until Nora looked over her water glass.

"So what do you teach, Dayna?"

Of course, she had just forked in a too-big bite of glazed carrots. All three sets of eyes swung to her and she froze.

Blank stare.

All brain function cease.

Flat-line.

Code blue! Code blue!

She sent a pleading look at Jace.

"Dayna taught sixth grade but will be teaching first come next term," he supplied while helping himself to more potatoes. Dayna swallowed the half-chewed lump and nodded. The brown-sugary coating did nothing to help the blob slide down her throat. It felt like she had a football in there.

Gulp.

There, gone.

Ow.

"Why the change?"

Dayna fiddled with the heavy fork handle. "My degree is early education, but the only opening then was for sixth grade. Ellen Burkson is retiring though and now I have enough seniority to shift so I jumped on the chance."

“So you like children?”

“Ma.” The warning in Jace’s voice rumbled across the table, but his mother ignored it with ease. Looking for all the world like the picture of innocence inquiry, Nora grinned at her, hints of that fairytale wolf peeking out of the grandma-wanna-be smile.

A triumphant surge of defiance rushed through Dayna. This question she had prepared for. *Ha! Score one for single-but-shacked-up-gal prep.*

“I love kids. One day, I’d like to have a couple, but for now my students fill that spot.” Dayna risked reaching over to squeeze Jace’s thigh underneath the tablecloth. It was hard as oak. Under her palm, his leg relaxed when his mother resumed eating. Nosy mother question number one dodged. There was probably only about a million and half left for the weekend.

Nora excused herself to refill the ice tea pitcher and Callie lunged forward, dropping her voice to a hissed whisper. “Jacey, buy a me a six pack tonight. I’ll pay.”

Jace carefully chewed his mouthful then leaned closer. “Not while you’re living in Ma’s house.”

“Oh come on,” Callie whined. “I’ll be twenty-one in eight months.”

“Talk to me in eight months.”

His sister thrust back in her chair and glared at him. “I won’t need you to buy it in eight months.”

“Funny how that works, huh?” Jace grinned.

Callie rolled her eyes and flipped him the finger. “God, you are such a cop. Like you never had a beer before you were legal.”

“Didn’t say that. I said no to buying it for you.”

Callie swiveled her gaze to Dayna. “Okay, that’s it. Ask any embarrassing question you want to know. I am a fount of information on things he’d rather nobody in the world knew about. Like has he ever told you about Crystal Michner?”

Jace’s knuckles went white on his table knife and a tick developed under his jaw. “Callie, shut up.”

Mmkay, never heard that name before. Interesting.

His sister laughed a malevolent laugh and wiggled her eyebrows. “Crystal... Monica... Lisa... the other Lisa... Beth... Tiffany the walking boob job... Stephanie... Allis—”

“Callie, stop tormenting your brother in front of his guest.” Nora halted the list with a sharp look. Dayna hid a smirk behind her glass. How many times did she pull the same bratty little sister act on Mark? Her mother usually called her down, too. A pity, Mark was such an easy target.

And who the hell was Crystal Michner?

“I made double fudge cake for you, but I figured once you’re over thirty, you really don’t want the candles.” Nora winked at Jace and he grinned.

Dayna wrinkled her nose at him. “I didn’t think you liked desserts.”

“I don’t except for Ma’s double fudge cake.”

“He’s exactly like his father,” Nora teased. “Forget cookies, pies, candies, all of it. Give them double fudge cake and they’ll eat the entire thing then moan about an upset stomach.”

“I only did that once.” Jace’s laugh was deep, full and loud, filled with good memories. “I learned my lesson. Double fudge cake is to be savored, not inhaled.”

Dayna’s gaze slid to the picture and could almost see a twinkle in those matching blue eyes. “Were you and your dad a lot alike?”

Jace shrugged one shoulder but Nora and Callie burst into laughter. At his blush, Nora patted his cheek. “That is like saying black is a lot like ebony. Whatever Shay did, Jace did. I think it came from growing up with just sisters. He followed his daddy around like a baby duckling, so I wasn’t the least bit surprised when he told me he wanted to join the force.”

The meal that had seemed so appetizing before now congealed in Dayna’s stomach like a mass of lard. Her eyes shot back to the framed photograph then fell to the empty head of the table. *So like his dad...*

“Have you ever wanted to do anything else?” She laid her napkin aside and looked at him.

Jace shook his head. “Other than the normal childhood stuff like a cowboy, a baseball player or an astronaut, nope.”

The lump in her stomach quivered violently. Dayna couldn’t eat another bite. Talk and teases flew around her and she smiled politely, but mostly sat in a haze of jittery fear.

Nora refused to let her help clean up and Callie disappeared so Dayna made a quick bathroom visit to get her trembling stomach under control. Jace’s family was nice. This weekend visit was going to be fine. She nearly had herself convinced of that while she washed her hands. Now if she could just stop thinking about Shay Rafferty, everything would be great.

As long as she didn't vomit.

Her tummy made an ominous watery noise.

Oh, not good.

After half dozen deep breaths, three Tums and a mental head smack, her stomach had calmed down. She barely made a sound leaving the bathroom and hadn't intended to eavesdrop, but her feet froze to the floor when she heard her name.

"Dayna didn't eat very much."

"She's probably just nervous, Ma. Everything was fine."

"She's nervous? How do you think I've felt all day? My only son finally brings a woman home, an hour late, and I'm trying my best to keep the roast from turning into shoe leather. Maybe I should've made pasta."

"Ma, stop. It was great." The rattle and clang of dishware rang loud for a few seconds and Dayna lifted her foot to walk into the room. It stopped mid-step.

"Can Dayna cook?"

"Uh huh. I gained six pounds since my last physical."

"Going to marry her?"

"Subtle, Ma, real subtle," Jace growled.

Dayna flapped her lips like a guppy. Nora Rafferty was as direct as an arrow and just as sharp. She really should move or cough or something to let them know she was in the hall but...well, she kinda wanted the answer to that question herself so she shut up and listened harder, struggling to hear over her hammering heart.

"Stop with the inquisition."

"What? I want grandchildren. Did you really think you could bring a woman home, a woman you're living with and not get my hopes up?"

"I don't know yet. I've thought about it."

"Thinking doesn't make me a Grandma."

A deep sigh sounded and Dayna could almost imagine Jace rubbing his temples. “I love her, I just...I don’t know yet. I mean, I loved Crystal, too. That ended in disaster.”

Dayna’s lips tightened. *Okay, whoever this Crystal chick is, she is really pissing me off.*

“You’ve never brought a woman home before. And, as far as I know, never moved in with any, so Dayna must be different.”

“She is. I just want to be sure, Ma. I want what you and Dad had. So yeah, maybe I’m dragging my feet. I’d rather drag them and be sure then move too fast and fuck up.”

“Watch your mouth but I hear what you’re saying. What about Dayna? What does she want?”

Dayna wants to run away and join the circus.

Come inside and see the latest attraction!

It’s repulsive.

It’s revolting!

It’s a woman slowly being devoured by her own queasy stomach!

She spun on her heels and darted out the front door, making sure it closed without a whisper. Gunner perked up, his big doggy eyes pleading for attention. Ever since he stopped diving snout-first into her crotch, about the time she got Jace to venture below the belt, she liked the mutt a lot more. Kneeling before him, she ruffled his ears and his tail went into overtime, keeping the beat like a one-armed drummer. His fur was warm and soft as she pressed her face into his neck.

“Hey Gunner, want to steal the jeep and head for Timbuktu? No one has to know. I’ll swing through Mickey D’s and buy you a couple burgers—hold the pickle—if you don’t tell the cop on me.”

“Somehow I think the doggy breath would give you away.” Dayna whirled around to find Callie laughing at her. “Ma coming on too strong? She does that. You’ll learn to ignore her.”

“No, I just...” The lie faded away and Dayna groaned. “I told him this was a bad idea.”

“Come on, you can hide out with me. Make them both wonder.” Hiding sounded better than chocolate cover sex right now, so Dayna followed Jace’s sister into the back yard, behind the garage, and parked her rump beside her on the trunk of a battered Saturn. Callie shook a cigarette from a pack, lit in and inhaled. She glanced at Dayna.

“You don’t see this.”

“I see nothing. I hear nothing. I know nothing. I’m the village idiot,” Dayna murmured.

“No, that was Crystal.”

“Okay,” Dayna blew out a long stream of frustrated air. “Spill it. Who was Crystal?”

“Crystal Michner, head cheerleader and, from what I hear, first class BJ queen. Jace started dating her in high school and it lasted all through college. At least for him. She was a slut. She cheated on him more times than I can count and I’m sure I don’t know them all. He finally wised up and dropped her ass like a hot rock. When he did, she freaked. Major stalker bitch, called him all the time, followed his car, shit like that. It was ugly.”

“So how’d it stop?”

Callie slid off the car, leaned on the garage wall and studied her. A wry twist to her lips sailed thin smoke upward. “It didn’t until he joined the academy and moved away. She eventually got knocked up by some local loser and I have no idea where she is now. For a long time, Jace didn’t date anybody more than twice. And now he brings you home.”

“You make me sound like the chicken pox.”

Flipping her long hair out over her shoulder, Callie grinned. “Bawk-bawk-bawk.”

The laughter helped temper the uneasiness and Dayna shook her head. Jace and Callie weren’t so very different after all. Each knew how to diffuse tension with ease. They also threw a wicked-assed curve ball. “So you and Jace... serious, huh?”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

Callie had eyes like a poker player, giving nothing away but measuring, scrutinizing, and far too mature for her age. “He’s been put through hell by one woman. I don’t want it to happen to him again.”

Defensiveness bristled along Dayna’s skin and she scowled. “I love him too much to ever hurt him like that.”

“So is Ma right? Are you—” Callie used her fingers to put quote marks in the air, “—The One?”

Dayna took the coward’s way out. “I don’t know. You’d have to ask your brother.”

“I might just to irritate him. Is he The One for you?”

The one and the only, Gawd help me. “Yeah, he’s The One.”

“See, that whole business confuses the hell out of me. How do you know? I can’t even pick a major let alone a husband.”

Dayna snorted. “You just know. He makes me feel... it’s just right. We blend. We fit. He knows when I need space or when I need a hug. He hears what I don’t say. He can spike a nine point five on the orgasm scale and I love him.”

Callie coughed through a haze of smoke. “Okay, that’s way TMI. I really don’t want to think about my brother in bed.” Callie shuddered. “I think I’m scarred for life.”

“You’ll live.”

“Yeah, okay, so you love him. But aren’t you scared of making a mistake?”

The greatest worries, if they must be spoken, must be whispered. If said too loudly, they gain strength and take on more potential to become a reality. Dayna knew her deepest fear, knew there was no solution for it. Her heart cringed even thinking the words and her tongue would not permit them to escape so she opted for the least dangerous version. “I’m scared of losing him.”

Crickets chirruped loud in the sudden silence. The two women stared at each other, both loving the same man in completely different ways. Understanding breached an age barrier and Dayna felt the first fragile blooms of friendship growing. The glowing butt hit the dirt and Callie ground it out with the toe of her shoe before looking up. An impish light twinkled deep in her eyes. “Want to know a secret?”

“Sure.”

“You can’t tell Jace or Ma yet. I don’t want to deal with all the bullshit about me flip flopping.”

The twinkle brightened and Dayna cocked her eyebrow. This was going to be good. “Okay.”

“I hate accounting, suck at schoolwork and can’t stand the thought of a boring desk job. I enrolled in the Culinary Institute and got accepted for the fall term. I want to be chef.”

Her youthful defiance dazzled just in front of adult decision. Dayna recognized the spark. She saw it in the eyes of every student who struggled to grasp a concept and suddenly had a brain connection where everything just made sense. Callie had found her calling. For her sister it had been the military, for Jace, law enforcement. For Callie, it was cooking.

“I won’t say a word until you’re ready, but go kick cooking ass, Callie.”

When she smiled like that, Callista Rafferty was a breath-taking young woman, not an overgrown teen. “Thanks. I like you. I hope things work with you and Jace.”

“Me, too.”

“Ma likes you, too, I think.”

Elbow propped on her knee, chin in her hand, Dayna sighed. “I hope so.”

“Look, best way to tell, ask for the recipe for her double fudge cake.” Callie flicked a small lighter and lit another cigarette. “She’ll give it to you, but she only tells her secret ingredient to family. If you get that, you’re in.”

“How will I know if she did or not?”

“It’s bourbon. One third cup.”

Dayna digested that as Jace came around the corner of the garage. He looked at Callie and his face hardened.

“Ma’s going to kick your ass if she catches you smoking.”

Callie rolled her eyes. “We have a little pretend thing going on. She pretends she doesn’t know. I pretend to hide. It works.”

“Damn it, Cal. Did Dad’s dying not teach you anything?”

“Yeah, not to hit two packs of Marlboro reds a day. Lighten up. Didn’t you do any rebelling shit?”

“Nothing that stinks like that,” Jace grumbled then turned to Dayna. “I’ve got to take Gunner for a run. He’s been penned all day so I want to put him through some drills, get him moving.”

“Can I come?” Callie pounced and tossed the full cigarette away.

Dayna nodded to Jace and he conceded. “Okay, but leave those things here. It messes with his sense of smell.”

He waited until she disappeared back into the house before stepping between Dayna’s knees, each lithe movement like a panther stalking its prey. He stopped just before her and dipped his head. Her lips opened for his kiss but he bypassed her mouth and let his tongue trail along her jaw, down her neck. A quiver skated up her back and her head fell back. The incredible heat from his body surrounded her, the tantalizing scent he carried intoxicating her. He nuzzled and nipped her neck until her breath came in short, soft pants.

In his embrace, every misgiving and nervous flutter faded away. If she could spend the rest of her life in his arms, everything would be perfect.

His sultry whisper barely brushed her ear. “So, what’s she been telling you?”

“Girl talk and you don’t meet the club requirement. I like Callie.”

“She’s a good kid.”

“She’s a grown woman, Jace. You just have look and see it.”

“I’d rather look at you.”

His lips trailed down her jaw and her eyes slid shut. His tongue was the one deadly weapon she liked on him. It did wicked, wicked things to her. “You’re not looking.”

“Okay, so I’m tasting, even better.” His mouth captured hers.

Hell, yeah, it was better. Jace apparently had a bit of birthday cake already because fudgy perfection flooded her mouth. It was sugar and cocoa and just enough creamy sass to make her knees wobbly and her panties wet. A moan rose from her belly and he echoed it before delving further into her mouth. He pulled her close, deepening the kiss and sliding her across the warm metal trunk lid. The move bunched her skirt around her hips. The flimsy crotch of her panties met with his zipper and his rough palms scraped up her thighs to cup her ass.

Hanes had her way and Jace had his. Dayna definitely preferred Jace’s way.

He groaned into her kiss. “Christ, I love you in a skirt.”

“You just like copping a feel whenever you can,” Dayna teased.

Her lips felt his near silent chuckle. “Well, I get paid to cop.”

That latent slut gene that Dayna fought so hard against reared up and sent shivery, erotic thoughts into her head. While Jace palmed her butt, she worked her fingers between them to pop the button on his jeans. The zipper hissed downward and he sucked in a fast breath. “Dayna, my sister’s coming back in a minute.”

“Then I have forty-five seconds to play. I haven’t wished you a happy birthday, yet.”

His pulse surged as her hand curled around him. Desire dilated his pupils. He never took his eyes off her, never blinked, a wicked dare glistening in his stare. “My birthday’s not until tomorrow. Is forty-five seconds all I get?”

“Shit, Jacey, if all you need is forty five seconds, you *are* getting old.”

Callie's voice shot Jace's spine straight and he yanked his zipper up, nearly catching Dayna's fingers. A laugh scratched her throat as she and Callie shared a conspiring grin over his shoulder. Gunner sat at her feet, panting, furry body coiled, ready to spring into action with the slightest word. Deep crimson stained Jace's cheeks. He whipped Dayna's skirt over her knees. "Damn it, Callie, you could've coughed or something."

"Yeah," she giggled. "I could've. But I didn't. What are bratty sisters for? Besides, you're making out on the trunk of my car."

Jace slid his fingers down Dayna's cheek, the promise of later vivid in the blue of his gaze before he stepped back. "You coming?"

I could have. So could've you. A romp with the dog was not what she wanted right now. "You go ahead. I'm going to go get my fill of Jacey baby-butt pictures."

She waited until she could no longer see the trio before sucking up her courage and going back into the house. Nora was drying a saucepan, the muted roar of the dishwasher rumbling softly in the background, but looked up with an expectant, hopeful smile.

"I started a pot of coffee but promised Jace not to cut the cake until he got back from the park. The cake is better if it sits for twenty-four hours so I wanted to wait until tomorrow, but he already stuck his finger in the frosting. Just ignore the little dent on the side."

"If he likes it that much, I'll have to get the recipe off of you and make it for him sometime."

Nora poured two cups of coffee and motioned Dayna into a cane-backed chair. She jotted the recipe down on a piece of stationery. "I swear, no matter how old he gets, Jace is like a little kid when it comes to his birthday."

"He's been nosing for his present for a week," Dayna offered, using Jace as their connection. "He never found it and it drove him crazy."

Nora looked impressed. "Where'd you hide it then because he found every Christmas present and birthday gift I ever brought home? No wonder he went into K-9 service, he has a nose like a bloodhound."

"I got him third base line tickets to a Braves game. I hid them in my tampon box, one place he'll never venture."

Nora burst out laughing. "Sneaky and yet perfect." She handed over the paper, folded in half. "I love it. Keep him on his toes."

"I will," Dayna murmured, sliding the note to the side. *Did you give me the whole recipe? I can't look yet.*

Over coffee and photos, Dayna learned more about Nora than Jace. Although his naked baby pictures were cute, she much preferred the grown man. But Nora told such lively tales, pouring her love and devotion into each word, that Dayna felt their bond. She stopped her perusal on one page: Jace at the Police Academy graduation, his parents proudly standing beside him. Her finger traced Shay Rafferty's face then slid down to his dress uniform.

"How did you stand it?" Dayna wasn't aware she spoke aloud until the silence grew too long, too tense. She looked up to find rounded perceptive eyes staring back. A connection crackled beyond just loving Jace. It was the sizzling instant understanding between two women who loved men who might go to work and never return.

"You don't think about it. You love them everyday as much as you can and pray you never open the door to find one of their buddies asking you to come with them. The risks are real and scary, but you can't let it rule you or you'd never live."

The sounds of laughing, barking and stomping feet burst into the house and the connection fizzled. Dayna swallowed what tasted of bitter tears but turned her face up into Jace's kiss. He looked at the photo album and closed it with a thump before dropping into the chair beside her. Callie regaled Nora with Gunner's prowess as she sliced the dark chocolate covered cake.

Jace frowned and leaned toward her. "You okay, babe?"

Dayna wanted to jump into his arms and never let him go. Instead, she slid the notepaper closer and unfolded it. A smile curved her lip.

One third cup bourbon.

"I'm just fine."

COMING IN AUGUST! #5 BEAUTY AND THE BADGE: **SLIDING HOME**

Baseball, Bunnies and Badges, oh my! A late summer picnic brings more than ballplayers to home plate and leaves both Jace and Dayna wondering if they can make it in the long run.

Inez Kelley writes what she reads, which is pretty much anything with a romantic flair. Deep in the boonies of the Appalachias, 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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