

Use protection:
sleep with a cop.



POLICE PROTECTION

Inez Kelley

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CRAAAAAAAAAAAAAASH!

Dayna's heart jumped to her throat before she was fully awake and sitting upright. Jace bolted straight up beside her, his body automatically shielding her. The loud echo of shattering glass and the muted drone of hushed voices faded under Gunner's frantic barking. Jace pushed the blankets aside and swung his feet off the mattress.

Gunner went silent and the sudden stillness coiled her fear tighter. Her fingernails bit into the blanket. There was a thump and more whispered voices.

"Jace?"

He held up a hand to quiet her, all his concentration focused on listening. The pouring rain muffled any further noise, beating against the windowpanes in a sharp staccato. Before she could swallow, Jace leapt out of bed and yanked a handgun from the nightstand drawer. "Stay here, babe. Keep the light off and call 911."

Oh hell no, he is not leaving my fraidy-cat ass now, is he?

Dayna gawked at the firearm. First, when did Jace start keeping his off-duty piece in the nightstand? Second, what idiot tried to break into a house with a police cruiser parked in the drive and third, why did Gunner stop barking? Jace slipped silently out of the room and Dayna froze at the quiet click of the door latch.

Panic grabbed hold of terror's hand and they tap danced up her spine. She pulled her knees to her chest and huddled under the blanket, as if the flannel could offer protection. Jace was wearing nothing but his pajama bottoms, what was he thinking? There could be a huge gang of drug-crazed clumsy thieves out there and he was going to face them with a handgun and black cotton pants with tiny skulls on them?

Please be careful, Jace.

The sheet held the warmth from his body as she scooted across it to grab the phone. The press of three little buttons seemed overly loud and she mentally stretched her ears to hear any new sound from downstairs.

"911, what's your emergency?"

Dayna clutched the cold receiver like a lifeline. “This is Dayna Thompson at 4372 Sycamore, uhm, Officer Rafferty’s residence. Someone is downstairs. I think they broke in.”

“33-64? Okay, Dayna, are you alone?”

I am now. He freaking left me!

“No, Jace went downstairs to check.”

“Is he armed?” *He’s barefoot, in his pajamas and Gunner’s not barking. Why would the dog stop barking? Did they do something to him? Oh Gawd, Gunner. Please, Jace, be safe.* “Dayna?”

“Yes. Please, send someone.”

“We have units dispatched, Dayna. Stay on the line with me. What did you hear?”

“Uh, I’m not sure really. I was asleep and it woke me up. Maybe glass breaking and people talking. There was—”

“Dayna!” Dayna jerked at Jace’s shout, spinning toward the closed door. “Get down here!”

“Hold on,” she told the dispatcher and scrambled out of bed. The door squeaked as she cracked it open. “Jace? I’ve got dispatch on the line.”

“Tell them to 10-22, everything’s fine and get down here.”

Whatever was fine put a thin thread of irritation in his voice. Dayna repeated his words, tossed the phone on the bed, and scurried down the stairs, her bare feet slapping the steps. The kitchen blazed with too bright light glinting off the shards and pieces of glass dotting the tile. Rain and wind sucked at the wet, torn curtain, flapping it like a dragon’s tongue. Annoyance slashed Jace’s brows into tight lines as he hauled two dripping wet intruders into the entryway. Neither stood over four feet tall.

“Trevor! Tyler?” Dayna dropped her jaw and stared. “What in the hell is going on?”

“We’re running away,” Trevor spat. “We don’t want to live with Mommy anymore.”

“Or Dad.” Tyler sniffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve. “Can’t we live here? We’ll be good.”

Dayna caught Jace’s look above their heads. Exasperation slid into resignation. An indulgent look lifted the corner of his lip and he shook his head. “You deal with them. I’ll clean up the glass.”

A dull throb formed behind her eyes and she massaged her neck. Jace stepped sockless into his sneakers, dirty loose strings slapping the ground and went back into the kitchen. Gunner’s nails

clicked loudly on the floor and she sighed in relief. She'd actually grown fond of the big bag of fur. He nosed at Jace's leg and Jace dropped a quick affectionate rub on the dog's back. Glass sparkled all over the floor and Jace shut Gunner in the mudroom before grabbing the broom.

The right side of Jace's pajama pants pulled low, the pocketed weapon dragging the waistband dangerously close to slipping off his hip. He crossed the room, stored the firearm on top of the refrigerator with his duty belt. Dayna ripped her gaze away. She could watch him move all night long and be happy but she had two burglary bunglers to deal with.

Dayna directed both boys into the bathroom where she towel dried their wet hair. The friction seemed to turn a verbal switch and they talked at once, cramming words into the tiny room like grapes in a jam jar. Mark pumped the kids for information on who Marissa was dating and Marissa picked each boy's brains for what their father was up to each week. Tonight they'd simply had more than their seven-year-old bodies could handle and set out for quieter pastures on their bikes.

Mark and Jace had only taken the training wheels off last week, running behind wobbly first dual-solo rides. She doubted the scabs were even healed on Trevor's knees yet. The boys were not exactly expert riders. Dayna shuddered to think about them on two wheelers in the rain after midnight peddling three miles.

"Sorry about the window, Aunt Dayna." Tyler wrapped his skinny arms around her neck and squeezed. "We got in okay but then it crashed down and broke."

"We'll worry about the window later. Right now, you two get out of those wet sweatshirts while I call your father."

"Aww, Aunt Dayna, do you have to?" Trevor's voice was muffled as he tugged his soggy shirt over his head. "Can't we just live here with you and Uncle Jace? He doesn't yell all the time."

Dayna froze with her hands buried in damp fleece. Uncle Jace? When had the kids started calling him Uncle Jace? A pleasantly warm tingle brewed under her sternum. It sounded nice, complete...permanent.

Aunt and uncle.

Family.

Family as in parents who would be worried.

The glow continued through calling her by now frantic brother, throwing the boys' jackets in the dryer and making hot chocolate. Jace unlocked the front door, pulled on a red tee shirt and finished clearing away the broken glass. He dropped two bath towels on the puddled water still blowing in then let the dog out so he could inspect Gunner's feet. The K-9 sat loudly licking his chops over and over. Jace frowned.

“Did you boys feed Gunner something?”

“Taffy. He likes banana.” Trevor slurped his cocoa and Jace wheeled around, eyes wide.

“You fed my dog candy?” That explained why the barking stopped so suddenly. He’d been too busy chewing.

“He likes it.” Tyler shrugged chasing a marshmallow with a spoon.

Jace rubbed his temples and sighed. “Yeah but taffy doesn’t like him. He’ll have an interesting time tomorrow trying to pass banana taffy.” Rubbing Gunner’s head with a grimace, Jace directed him back to the mudroom and shut the door. He looked to Dayna with a rueful snort. “I’m going to see what I can do to block this window for the night.”

He disappeared down the basement stairs and Dayna’s front door burst open.

“Trev? Ty?” Mark’s dark hair plastered to his skull in thick clumps and water dripped down his chin but he dropped to his knees and pulled his twins into his embrace. “Are you two okay? Don’t you ever do this again, do you hear me?”

Words, tears and hugs bounced around the kitchen like spheres in a pinball machine and Dayna smiled. Mark tried to be a good father. A warm hand slid around her neck. “Hey Princess.”

“Daddy!” Dayna whirled and gawked. “W-what are you doing here?”

A nervous fizzle twisted her gut. *Oh boy, this could get ugly.* Paul Thompson had taken one look at Jace and promptly decided he was trouble. Dayna couldn’t figure out what her father’s problem was. Jace should have been primo son-in-law material. He had a steady job, didn’t go out drinking or knock her around. He was polite and respectful, even going so far as to offer to help her Dad in his dry-wall business when a deadline was looming fast and his crew came down with food poisoning. Nothing he did seemed good enough for her father.

Which sucked because Jace was the best thing that ever happened to her. Although Paul had never said point blank he didn’t like Jace, the disdain was evident. Jace tried to pretend it didn’t matter but Dayna saw how hard he tried to get her father to like him, to just give him a chance. Paul never did. Dayna’s heart broke every time her father turned away.

Paul shrugged, “Mark came to my place first. We were hitting the playgrounds and school yard when you called.”

Jace chose that instant to come up the stairs carrying a piece of plywood and the hammer. His pockets drooped on one side and a jingle of nails rang loudly. His mouth tightened into a thin line seeing Paul. Paul stood a few inches taller, his gaze hardening. Both men nodded to the other

and Dayna bit her lip. Her father knew Jace lived here but he had never really seen him here in the middle of the night, in his nightclothes, obviously fresh out of bed.

Suddenly, she felt like a naughty teenager. Last night, they'd done nothing more than snuggle and still she felt caught with her panties around her ankles. Fathers liked to pretend their little girls were pure snow-white virgins and well, it was pretty hard to meet his gaze right now. Jace wouldn't look at her, either. Her father scoured her nightshirt with a bitter glance then shot a hate-filled scowl at Jace. Oversized and far from revealing, her novelty white tee read USE PROTECTION: SLEEP WITH A COP.

Dayna clamped her arms over her stomach.

Major oops.

Personal foul.

Offsides.

Unnecessary flaunting.

Fifteen-yard penalty.

Her front door burst open once more and she whirled around. Marissa, wearing no make-up and the rattiest sweatpants Dayna had ever seen barreled through her entryway. Stark terror lined her lifted-and-tucked face. "Where are they?"

"Mommy." Tyler broke into sobs, Mark stood and pandemonium jumped into the room.

"How could you let this happen?" Marissa screeched. "They could've been hit by a car or kidnapped or caught pneumonia in this weather."

Mark sneered. "Oh please, get off the high horse, 'Rissa. They came here, they're fine. I'm not the one filling their head full of crap, confusing them."

"No, you're just pawning them off on your sister every time you get them so you can bang some cheap tramp."

"Look who's talking! How many dates have you had this month, huh? Ever stop to think what growing up with a slut for a mother is going to do to them?"

Behind the closed door, Gunner started barking. Mark and Marissa argued, her father glared, the boys bawled and Jace scowled. He shot an irritated look at the battling parents but shook his head and used his knee to steady the awkward wood. It slid to the side. He caught it seconds before it crashed down.

Marissa sucked in a loud breath and whirled on Jace. “You pulled a gun on them?”

He sighed but didn’t turn around. “Marissa, give me some credit. Yes, I had my gun in my hand. No, I did not point it at six-year-olds.”

Mark raked his hand through his hair and sent droplets flying. “For God’s sake, ‘Rissa, it’s not like he used them for target practice. They were breaking into his house.”

“They’re babies!” Marissa shrieked at a harpy-level decibel.

“They committed a felony!” Mark’s eyes bugged out of his head.

“Not his house,” her father grumbled.

“We’re seven,” Trevor mumbled.

Dayna snapped. “Okay, enough!”

Every set of eyes jerked toward her. Even Gunner quieted. She fisted her hair, resisting the urge to start yanking it out by the roots and sucked in a breath. “All of you, shut up! It’s two thirty in the damn morning and this is my house. Marissa, calm down. Mark, stop shouting. Boys, dry up the tears and Daddy, for Gawd’s sake, go help Jace before he drops the wood and I end up in the ER tonight from a nervous break down.”

Paul moved first but grudgingly. He held the scrap plywood in silence and Jace secured it, each nail only needing two frustrated whacks to be seated. Dayna ran her hands down her cheeks. *This is my life. How sad is that?* Her eyes flew to Jace. This was embarrassing. How could she expect him to ever considering jumping in the gene pool with her if this was how her DNA manifested?

Dayna Thompson, let’s play Make a DNA Deal.

Behind curtain number one is the idiotic brother with the big mouth and plastic ex-wife.

Behind curtain number two is the father with his knickers in a knot because you’re no longer a sixteen-year-old virgin.

Behind curtain number three are two identical midget trespassers who fed taffy to a K-9.

All of these are in your kitchen at two thirty in the morning! Which will you choose to deal with first? As a bonus, there is half a bottle of bourbon in the cabinet.

Somehow becoming an alcoholic recluse seemed like a wonderful but cowardly idea. Steeling her lip, she grabbed the reins of her runaway imagination. Somebody had to be the voice of sanity around here. That job usually fell to her. It was a role she seemed born into and couldn’t step out of if she wanted.

“Trevor, Tyler, get your stuff out of the dryer and play with Gunner for a while, okay? It’s grown-up time.”

When the twins were in the mudroom, she closed the door and whirled on her fucked-up family. “Alright, Daddy, you take the boys home with you for the night and let these two idiots fight it out anywhere but my kitchen. Mark, you’re an ass. You and Marissa... If you’re so worried who the other is boinking, maybe you two have more to talk about than child support.”

Mark glanced at Marissa, Marissa studied her shoes and Paul hid a smile. Jace winked at her.

A brilliant blue and red strobed light flooded the room and a knock sounded on the front door. Rolling her eyes, she growled in frustration. Jace laid the hammer on the table and headed toward the hall, squeezing her arm as he passed. “It’s just the night guys. They had to check in. I’ll take care of it.”

Dayna glared at her chagrined brother. “It’s the middle of the night and there are police officers at my door. I got woken up from a sound sleep by two second graders breaking into my house. This is not how I wanted to spend the night. Fix this, Mark, before you screw up your kids completely. I don’t want to be posting bail for them in ten years.”

He had the decency to look embarrassed. He turned to Marissa. “We need to talk, without lawyers.”

Marissa sniffed and looked up. “Yeah, I guess we could... go get a coffee or something.”

“Want to split a bagel?” The seemingly stupid question held some hidden meaning and softened Marissa’s botoxed face. She nodded. Mark’s mouth boasted a ghost of a smile when he looked at her. “Thanks, D. Tell Jace I’ll come by tomorrow and help fix the window.”

“You’ll pay for it, too.” Dayna muttered as he walked Marissa up the hall.

Paul waited until they left the room then stepped in front of her and rubbed her arms. “You did good, Princess. Just like your Mom, get straight to the point and solve the problem. I’ll keep the boys for the weekend and hope those two get something lined out so we can all sleep at night.”

“Daddy,” Dayna closed her eyes and prayed for strength. “Get over this Jace thing.”

Eyes as green as hers bored into her and he bristled. “I don’t like him.”

Paul and Elizabeth Thompson had not raised their daughter to back down from a challenge, not even when it came from the first man she’d ever loved. She held her father’s gaze. “Well, that hurts but you don’t have to. I love him, and that’s what matters.”

Paul's low voice carried a firm tone. "You're both playing house. If he were any kind of decent man, you'd have a ring on your finger before his ass was in your bed. You deserve better. We didn't raise you to be a tramp."

The insult stung and her nose started to burn. Throwing up her hands, Dayna spun and caught Jace's frown as he came down the hall. She turned to the mudroom door and muttered, "Don't go there, Daddy. Just...don't."

On the enclosed porch, Gunner stretched on his bed, the twins using his stomach as a pillow. Tyler had his thumb in his mouth and Trevor curled against him like a wrapper to a Popsicle. It was hard to believe these two slumbering angels were the demons of destruction when awake. She took a step closer and Gunner lifted his head. Deep brown eyes looked at her then slid to focus on Paul.

Gunner growled.

"*Platz.*" Jace's voice held soft but firm command. "*So ist brav, Gunner.*"

The soothing warmth of Jace's palm stroked up her back, hidden, private but exactly the comfort she needed. Their eyes caught over her shoulder. Blended in the blue she loved, tenderness battled something feral, something primal and nearly primitive. His gaze held the same warning Gunner's did. The look was as comforting as his touch and she leaned against his chest. *Oh Jace.*

Jace pulled his eyes from Dayna with effort and glanced at Paul. Gunner's growl returned when Jace did not relax his stance. Jace knew exactly how the K-9 felt. He had the urge to sink his teeth into Paul Thompson, too.

"Gunner's in protect mode. The shouting put him on guard. He won't let you get close so I'll help you carry the boys out."

Trevor snaked an arm around his neck and snored softly as Jace carried him out of the house. He wasn't sure when he started being about to tell the twins apart but he could easily now. They might have the same face but they were two totally different people. Tyler was more likely to break into tears when troubled. But not Trevor. Jace hefted him higher, cradling the child closer to his chest. Trevor was all bluster. He got mad, got forceful and struck out when uneasy. Jace eyed the man in front of him and wondered how much like his grandfather Trevor was.

Paul buckled Tyler in the back and Jace slid his brother beside him. The boys burrowed deeper into the seat and sighed. He smoothed a lock of blond hair off Trevor's forehead and his eyes cracked open with a yawn. "Night, Uncle Jace."

The breathy whisper stammered his heart. "Night, buckshot."

Uncle Jace. The boys already considered him part of their family. Mark treated him like a brother. Even Marissa had stopped flirting and now just accepted him. Paul, he doubted, ever would.

The drizzling rain dampened the shoulders of his tee shirt and misted along his cheekbones. The breezy kiss of late September wind and water did nothing to tamp down his irritation but he waited until Paul reached for the car door. “Hey, Paul?”

“Yeah?”

Jace caught the driver’s door on its opening swing, gritted his teeth, and stared directly into Paul’s face. He wasn’t about to back down on this. “You don’t have to like me, I’m okay with that. But don’t *ever* call Dayna a tramp again or you and I will have problems. Back off and stop making her choose between us.”

Paul glared at him with the angry burn Jace assumed only a father could summon. “Then quit thinking with your dick and make an honest woman of her.”

“I plan on it.”

Those four words fell like a bomb. Something shifted in Paul’s eyes before they narrowed. “Sometime this century?”

“Sergeant’s exams are in two weeks. It’ll take a couple more weeks to get the results but I don’t plan on failing... the test or Dayna. The pay’s better and...” He sucked in a damp breath. “Get used to me, Paul. I’m not trying to take her from you but I’m not going anywhere, either.”

Dayna’s father drove away without another word, his mouth pinched tight. Jace dropped his head back and let the cool spray dot his face. *Well, that went okay. I didn’t end up decking her old man, always a plus.*

By the time he relocked the front door, let Gunner out back for a leg-lift and climbed the stairs, it was well after three o’clock. Dayna had the side table lamp on and lay on her side under the blankets waiting for him.

She smiled when he came in. Jace tossed his tee shirt onto the dresser and slid beside her, shooing a miffed Sinjin off his pillow. The cat growled but darted off the blankets. This was one area they argued about. He hated animals on the bed. Dayna didn’t care, laughed if *he* was in her bed, he was animal enough so what was one little Siamese. Her damn cat’s ass was as wide a semi but he wasn’t about to tell her that. He just kept moving the feline. Eventually it would learn.

He clicked off the lamp and her cheek found its resting spot on his shoulder. He loved how she curled up like a cat next to him, not smothering but close enough that he could feel her breath on

his skin. The tiny curls at her temple tickled and he rested his jaw on her crown. Just the feel of her warmed him from the inside.

Low and hushed, her whisper fluttered across his chest. “Well, that was an adventure I could’ve lived without. I’m glad you were home. If you’d been on duty, I swear I’d have just crawled under the bed and whimpered.”

“Well, thank Cap. He’s the one who took me off schedule tonight and tomorrow.”

Stupid overtime rules. So he’d maxed out the week on Thursday, big deal. They needed the coverage and he needed the extra in his paycheck, at least for a while. It wasn’t easy skimming money when Dayna paid the bills but so far, he’d managed. He was careful to put the same amount in the house-account every two weeks, keeping out only his overtime-pay. A few more pay checks and he could settle his bill at Leiberman’s Jewelers. Of course, Dayna knew nothing about that, nor had she missed her college ring disappearing for a few days from the cherry box on the dresser.

He was feeling pretty damn self-satisfied when Dayna’s foot slid across the bed to stroke his calf. Sure, extra shifts left him tired but it was harder to be away from her at night. Now that school was back in session, their days were no longer theirs. She had every weekend off, he never would.

Didn’t matter. He’d just learn to maximize the time they had together, even if it was a few stolen hours in the middle of the night after a botched family break-in. Lifting and shifting his arm, he rolled to face her. “Dayna, did you know the boys are calling me uncle?”

The mattress betrayed her stiffening. “Yeah, I caught that. If it bothers you, just tell them.”

“It doesn’t. I like that they accept me. I just wish Paul did.” Reaching out, he slid one arm across her hip. “I don’t mean to, babe, but I irritate your dad by breathing.”

She snorted. “Your breathing’s not his problem. He’s pissy because I’m not some untouched princess. You had nothing to do with that. He should be angry with Scott, my high school boyfriend.”

A jealous burn scored Jace’s throat and he tightened his hold on her. “Dayna, can we please not talk about your old boyfriends when we’re in bed?”

The sheet rippled with her quick laugh. “Jealous?”

“Yes, now stop it.”

“Sorry.” A long sigh echoed as she moved to stare up at the ceiling. “Daddy’s just really old-fashioned when it comes to women... kinda like you, actually.”

“Hey,” He propped himself on one elbow. “I want to take care of you but that doesn’t mean I want you barefoot and pregnant, walking three steps behind me.”

“Which is a good thing since I just refilled my birth control and bought new shoes.”

A chuckle shook his chest. “Smart ass.”

Moonglow sparkled in her eyes and a gnawing hunger started in his belly. The laughter faded and his voice softened four degrees. He let his hand drop to her thigh and trace upward. “But since you did fill that prescription, it’d be a shame to waste it.”

A carnal smile tilted her lips. “Well, I *am* wide awake and have all this...extra adrenalin running through me. Maybe we could find some way to get rid of it.”

Before he could blink, she sat and tugged her nightshirt over her head, pitching it into the darkness. Her mouth took his with a force that stole his breath and forced him backward. She wasn’t kidding about that adrenalin.

She straddled him, circling her hips, rubbing against him until he pulsed hard and firm. Her hands slid between them, under his pajamas, stroking until his hips bucked to meet her touch. Then she stopped and smoothed her fingers up his ribs with an erotic tickle. Light scrapes of her nails on his chest sent shock waves through him and her tongue slicked down his neck. She punctuated her kisses with a stinging nip to his Adam’s apple.

Hardened nipples skimmed his chest, the heaviness of her breasts taunting him. His hands aimed for her breasts but she caught them, pulling them away and settling his touch to her thighs. Stroking both palms up her legs, he cupped her ass and tugged her tighter to him. He sought her mouth and she avoided him.

Low laughter tripped over his skin, skittering with invisible fingertips as she kissed everywhere but his mouth. Damp heat massaged him through too many layers of sleepwear and she simply rocked her hips harder. Just before he went insane, she licked across his top lip. A sharp pinch to his nipple made him gasp and she plunged her tongue inside his mouth.

Jace loved when Dayna was like this— playful, just a bit naughty and hungry for him. He growled into their kiss. He’d let her play a while and then he would tease her until she begged for mercy. For a brief second, he regretted his handcuffs were downstairs. Next time, he promised himself.

The window spilled shimmering pastel illumination across the bed, tingeing everything in a ghostly blue-white glow that shifted with the rain current. Dayna leaned back, her tongue licking across her now kiss-swollen mouth. His gaze locked on her face as she pushed her hair back, shaking it loose to hang across her shoulders. A swallow tightened the cords in his neck at her crossed arm hiding her nipples from him. Under her arm, the bottom curve of her breasts tempted him. She peeked beneath her lashes, a siren’s promise lurking in the wanton gaze. The tips of her

fingers trailed down center of his chest, dipping into his navel and sinking lower. His pulse throbbed in aching glory as she traced his shape with lingering touches. She skimmed from his groin to her thigh, up over the band of her panties, across her stomach and higher, dragging his eyes along her creamy skin.

Through some twisted, cruel talent, she switched arms but never revealed her nipples to his eyes. Her free hand caressed down her ribs, over her belly button and slid to a stop at the junction of her thighs. The noisy breaths he sucked in were meant to cool him, to slow his brewing lust but she smiled a wicked smile and arched one brow. His gaze dropped and latched onto her languid caress over her damp center. He bit back a growl when her touch slipped under her pale cotton panties, circling in slow, hidden strokes. *Christ, I love when she does that. She knows I love to watch.*

Her fingers never stopped but she rocked against him. “What do you want, Jace?”

She knew damn well what he wanted. She only taunted him like this when she wanted him fast and hard. Far be it from him to deny her a single thing. He forgot all about letting her play. Her gasp ripped through the room as he grabbed her hips and rolled her beneath him. Both her hands went to his shoulders and he grabbed them, licking the taste of her from her fingertips. Her soft exhale brushed his skin and he paused just long enough to kiss her lips before sliding down.

In the rain-soaked moonlight, her pebbled nipples were darker than the normal pink he loved but rasped just as tightly against his tongue. Her fingers shot into his hair and her back arched, rounding her breast deeper into his mouth. His nibble brought a moan, his bite a hiss, his lick a whimper.

Jace sank lower, feathering his mouth along her stomach, dipping his tongue into her navel, warming her skin with kisses across her hip. Hooking a finger at each side of her panties, he yanked them off in one swift motion. She wanted fast and hard, he’d give her fast and hard...but on his terms.

Feminine silk and shadows blended into a heady tonic of creamed moonlight and she bucked under his mouth. He braced one forearm across her hips, holding her still for the onslaught he planned. His tongue sought and found the tiny nub hidden in her satin folds. Heated honey slicked across his lips and he delved deeper, drawing the hardened knot in a not-so-mild suckle. His name whispered and the muscles in her thighs trembled but he didn’t relent. The tugs in his hair grew to almost pain as her grip tightened. Her breath caught. Every line of her body tensed, waiting, waiting, waiting. He held her there as long as he dared then, with just a gentle lick, he tipped her over the edge.

Jace watched. He’d love to think it was all skill but honestly thought it was at least half luck. Tonight, he was cocky enough to court both. The peak of her climax jammed her head back into the pillow and he waited, poised, unmoving until the deepest shudder slowed. He thrust two fingers inside her quivering warmth and flicked his tongue. Dayna sucked in a scream as he curled and tapped his fingers.

He caught her descent as it began and launched her back up into a series of hard, jerking climaxes. It might have been his name she shrieked— it was so garbled he couldn't tell— but the pounding pulse against his tongue and the frenzied flutters around his hand were victory enough. The duration shocked him, fed an untapped masculine pride.

Pure ego tempted him to try again, to take her even higher, but his own body demanded attention. To control his feral need, he kissed a path from her center to her neck, slowly allowing her a recovery and drawing out his own pleasure. He shed his pants one-handed, kicking them off and moving higher, never breaking his lips' contact with her body.

Her chest still heaved in expended fervor. Flushed and damp with passion-sweat, her face personified bliss. All milky-moon and glistening glow, Dayna was beautiful. Wonder struck hard under his solar plexus and he froze, staring at her. Maybe it was because he had diamonds on the brain or maybe just because he loved her, but she looked dipped in diamond dust. His fingers trailed over her cheek in near-veneration. This was Dayna, the woman he wanted to make his wife, the only woman he would be with for the rest of his life.

His wife.

His life.

One letter different and yet, they meant the same thing.

Love.

Forever.

Dayna.

I promise, I'm going to ace that damn test and marry you. I want to give you the world. I'll start with a diamond and end with a vow, I swear.

Her lips brushed his and her knees crept long his legs, opening, cradling him, urging him and his desire swept in like a tornado— all fierce consuming power and concentrated hunger. Grabbing her knee, Jace jerked one leg higher on his hip and poised right at the brink. In just the past month, they'd stopped using condoms and now, nothing separated them. Christ, he loved the skin on hot, moist skin glide when he entered her, wanted to revel in the intimate connection. Sharp bites from her nails jabbed into his hips and he shook his head. *No. Not fast in this.*

Dayna's eyes popped open as he yanked her hands from his skin and pulled them over her head, lacing his fingers in hers. Their ragged breaths mingled and mated, lips nearly touching, eyes locked. He shifted in one slow, smooth motion. Hot silk wrapped around him and he gritted his teeth against rushing. *Slow.* He never blinked, watching her face as he made them one. At first,

her lips parted. Then her eyes widened. At the last second, her lids fluttered closed and she moaned.

Jace forgot to breathe. Perfection existed in the moment and he did nothing but soak in the glorious, almost reverent union. Then she moved. Somehow, she curled her spine and took him even deeper. Her ankles crossed in the small of his back and she rocked. Starbursts crackled in his sight when a quake rippled deep within her. Oxygen rushed his brain and he simply let the tidal wave of want overtake him. His first thrust dissolved any control he had. The second stoked a primitive instinct. The third ripped all civility away. His snarl was more animalistic than human and Dayna echoed his call.

The bed rocked and the phone crashed to the floor and he couldn't stop. A fire raged inside him. Dayna was kindling, her touch enflaming him. With each downward thrust, he shifted, catching that pulsating nub between them, feeding her pleasure. A feminine moan split the air. Her fingers shot through his hair, dragging him down to her kiss. Their tongues danced like flames, flickering and licking. Her heels dug into the top of his ass as she vaulted to meet his every punishing stroke.

A high-pitched keening wailed from her. Planting her feet back on the sheet, she arched and trembled, pulling at his hands still gripping hers. The convulsive clasp around him tightened and she called his name. Without warning, a trigger sparked with volcanic explosion. A woosh of immense and oxygen-sucking power blazed out of control, scorching him. Lightning scored down his spine and ricocheted through his body until it tremored as badly as hers. His soul shattered. Burying his head beside hers, the pillow absorbed most of his hoarse cry.

Dayna tugged her hands and he let go. He didn't have the strength to hold them anymore. He wasn't completely sure he could blink right now. Only the soft caress of her hands pulling him closer unlocked his elbows enough that he settled his weight across her. Clarity returned in fractions. Her fingers were running through his hair. A rich, sensual fragrance permeated the room. Under his heart, hers thudded just as strongly.

He'd been reborn in Dayna's arms. "I love you."

Her fingers trailed along his nape. "I need to call Mark."

Her breathless murmur furrowed his brows. "What?"

"Trevor and Tyler can break every damn window in the house anytime they want."

Silence reigned for a half-second then her giggle tickled his shoulder. His laugh barked out. That was Dayna, his comedian. They both had tears streaming by the time the laughter stopped. Jace looked down into her eyes and fought the words burning his tongue.

Not yet.

One knee.

Ring in hand.

The whole nine yards.

I promise.

Soon.