



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...



Sliding Home

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FAMILY LAW

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“Oh, just quit whining and take your clothes off.”

Dayna Thompson crossed her arms and glared. She loved Jace, but Gawd, sometimes she wanted to crack his stubborn skull in forty-seven places.

Jace’s brows scrunched so tight they nearly met above his hard eyes. Shaking his head, and with a mutter too low for her to hear, he snapped the back door of the cruiser open and unbuckled his belt. With the vehicle backed up against the tree line, the door to his front, and a huge Winnebago to his side, it was as private as the park allowed.

He handed his gun belt over the door and she took it gingerly, holding it out like snake or a sweaty gym sock. Everyday when he came home, he coiled the belt on top of the fridge where it was easy to avoid. He had more toys on that belt than Batman. The telescopic baton she understood and it didn’t bother her so much. It was easier to look at than an old-fashioned nightstick, smaller too. The cell phone, radio clip and other things she barely comprehended glanced off her. Even the handcuffs she didn’t mind. In fact, after last week when Jace got naughty, she kind of liked those.

It was *that thing* beside them that make her throat tighten. Normally, she just pretended Jace didn’t carry a deadly weapon. Now, face to face with a black-handled Glock, she couldn’t lie to herself.

Jace sighed. “Dayna, it’s not going to bite you.”

“I don’t like guns.”

“They come in handy for a cop. It’s fine. The safety’s on. Just put it in the glove box,” he grumbled and unbuttoned his uniform shirt.

Bright sunshine glinted of the silver badge, flashing like lightning before he tossed the shirt onto the back seat. Dayna quickly but cautiously shoved the belt into the glove box, snapping the panel shut. The Velcro straps of his vest tore open with a rasp and her gaze flew to the hard black armor. Her stomach shuddered as the vest plopped onto the backseat. She hated thinking about what that protection meant. A chill formed in her blood turning it thick and biting. Fear pushed bitchy words out of her mouth.

“I’m surprised you’d trust me to handle it by myself.”

His upper lip flattened over his teeth and he jerked the plain white t-shirt he wore between the Kevlar and his skin over his head. He dropped it on top of the vest. “Dayna, don’t start, alright? You had no business trying to move the couch by yourself.”

“I managed.”

“You could’ve waited until I got home, too.” A spark of irritation blazed in his eyes and he blew a slow sigh. “Look, you could at least pretend you need me every once in a while. My male ego has enough bruises without you kicking it.”

A twitch started in the corner of her mouth. She scowled, propped her hands on her hips and firmed her chin to ward off the smile. “It really bothers you that I changed the oil in your jeep while you were asleep, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.” One devil-black brow angled sharply. He yanked his zipper down and toed off his boots in one smooth motion. “Call me a chauvinist, I don’t care. Certain jobs around the house just aren’t supposed to be done by women.”

Ug, me Tarzan, you Jane.

“Uh huh.” Dayna let the grin erupt as he shoved the black pants to the ground, kicking them aside. She handed his jeans over the door top. “Tell you what, you let go of the Mr. Macho Mechanic attitude and I won’t tell all your little cop buddies you iron a wicked crease.”

His bright blue eyes widened and he glanced around, making sure no one was near them. Though they were far back in the parking lot, people milled around in front of the cars. A high blush kissed across his cheeks as he stepped into the jeans and jerked them up. “That’s not fair. I didn’t ask you to iron my uniform, did I? Doesn’t that count for anything?”

It was impossible to stay irritated with him. Jace Rafferty was just too damn cute when mortified. “I love you, Jace, but you’re stuck in the nineteen fifties.”

Tension bled from him and the smile that turned her insides to oatmeal creased his face. Stretching one long arm toward her, he stroked her cheek. “And you’re too damn independent. I hate arguing with you.”

Tongue to her lip, she held out his tee shirt. “Arguing isn’t so bad if you get to make up later.”

The cruiser door closed with a loud slam and Jace reached for her. “Then let’s make up. Come here.”

His shirt hit the grass while she filled her hands with skin. Sunbeams heated his muscles, the smooth line of his bare back taut under her hands. His low growl warmed her mouth, her lips sliding open to accept his hungry kiss. This is how she loved him best— unarmored, unarmed and undressed. Intense heat scorched her backside as he pressed her to the cruiser side panel. Her ass rested just above the CALL 911 decal and oh yeah, somebody better. She was about ready to molest a police officer. That had to be a felony. And if Jace would give her five minutes, she could see that felony and raise him a misdemeanor or two. Well, she could raise something.

“Rafferty, man, get a room!”

The loud laughing male voice pried Jace's mouth from hers and he grinned. "Go away, Connors, I'm busy here."

The riotous masculine laughter faded. Jace pressed a sweet peck to her forehead and pulled away, snagging his shirt from the grass. Determined to get her own libido under control, she counted to fifty.

In French.

Backward.

He pulled on white socks and his sneakers while she grabbed his uniform pants and boots off the ground.

"We have to swing by my car and pick up the double fudge cake," she murmured.

"I still don't see why you had to bring something. I told you I pitched twenty bucks in the beer fund."

Dayna rolled her eyes. Men just didn't get it. Single men and floozies contributed to the alcohol fund. Women brought food. A woman coming to a picnic empty handed was like Christmas coming with no Santa. Unnatural. It sent screaming signals that A- she couldn't cook or B- she couldn't cook or C- she couldn't cook.

Now dressed, he grabbed his baseball mitt, locked the cruiser and led her toward the multitude of people. Fire engines, ambulances, police cruisers and SUVs filled the gravel lot not to mention personal vehicles from motorcycles to the Winnebago. Dayna spied at least twenty different uniform colors mixed in with the mostly shorts and tee shirt wearing crowd. The 24th Annual Emergency Workers' Picnic and Baseball Game was in full swing.

Pausing only long enough to snag the Tupperware out of the Igloo cooler on her back seat, they angled toward a picnic table under a shade tree. One busty redhead spied their clasped hands and her brows shot into her hairline. She nudged her chubby tablemate with her elbow as her equine-like smile spread to show too-perfect teeth. She held out a red sharpie pen to him. "Hey, Ice. I didn't know you had a new bunny."

"Half-unit, Lori, not a bunny."

Even though he sounded polite enough, an edge crept into Jace's voice, an icy edge. *Ice*. The nickname suited him well. Cold as ice and just as deliberate, he snapped the pen out of her hand and bent over the table. The redhead's gaze dropped to her left hand and Dayna fought the urge to give her a digit to look at. Before she could subtly flick the finger, Jace smoothed one of those stupid *hello my name is...* stickers on her chest. She glanced down then frowned. He hadn't written Dayna. He'd written 33-64 ½.

Questions sat heavy on her tongue but he guided her into a sea of matching blue tee shirts, hailing friends along the way. A grizzly officer with a goatee wore an apron that read *'Don't Piss-off the Cook, he's armed'* and methodically turned burgers and split-chickens on three different grills. Dayna spied a multitude of casserole dishes and serving platters on several pushed together tables. She made a beeline for the dessert section.

No sooner had the lidded plate hit the table than a plump woman with shining silver hair wrapped her arms around Jace's waist. "Hey, stranger, how are you? And where's Gunner?"

Jace chuckled and gave her a quick squeeze. "Hi, Trish, how've you been? Gunner's crated at the station. Dispatch said they'd take him for a walk on their breaks. It's too hot out here for him."

Trish grinned, sending a curious glance to Dayna. "Could this young lady be why you've been squirming out of my dinner invitations?"

"Could be." Jace's smile dazzled brighter than the late summer sun. He winked at her and for some unknown reason, Dayna's cheeks heated. "Babe, this is Trish Mosee."

Mosee. As in Captain T. Mosee.

Dayna took the offered hand, returning the open friendly smile. Jace eyed the ball field, a game already in progress. "Trish, can you keep an eye on her? I've got to hit the field. I'm late, my shift ran over again."

"Hey, I can fend for myself," Dayna protested but Trish was already waving him away. Jace dropped a fast kiss on her lips and sprinted toward the ball field where two distinct teams mulled around, one wearing red shirts, the other the same blue as Jace's.

Trish shook her head, watching his back. "If I was twenty years younger and single, I'd fight you for him."

Dayna grinned. "If you were twenty years younger and single, I'd fight you back."

Trish tossed her head and laughed, the sound rippling over the park like water in a brook. She linked her arm through Dayna's and pulled her to the spectator stands. Precinct 33 defended their championship position against Fire Company 9 and the police were at bat. Dayna took a seat and lost herself to the familiar and rousing taunts of *swing batter batter*. The banter was crude and the rivalry evident when the second batter struck out. The Fire 9 guys offered anatomically impossible suggestions to improve his swing.

When Jace took his place at home plate, swinging the bat a few times before quieting into his stance, Trish sighed. "That boy is something else, ain't he? Every few years, there's a rookie that just needs a big dose of extra love, you know? That was Jace. He was so determined to be the

best he could that he kept tripping over himself. Once he settled down and got in the groove, things were alright. I had him pegged for a flyby but now, now I think he might be a lifer. Only time will tell.”

Jace knocked the ball straight into left field for a double and the third base runner dove for home. A heavy-set man in a white 911 tee shirt pronounced him safe. Trish and Dayna joined in cheering the sliding move. The hot metal bleacher seats burnt through her shorts and Dayna shifted. She glanced at Trish. “Flyby? Lifer?”

“You’ll learn. Cops have a vocabulary all to themselves. A flyby is a hot shot, a guy who likes the *idea* of being a police officer. They are usually really good and really brash but they only last a few years, six, seven, eight at the most. The boring work, shitty hours and lousy pay rubs the shine right off that romantic illusion.”

A bee buzzed by and Dayna instinctively angled away, pondering the older woman’s words. Jace had been on the force seven years now. A sick nausea sprouted in her stomach. Another batter hit a single, Jace rounded to third and Dayna swallowed hard. “So a lifer stays?”

“Yep,” Trish shaded her eyes, watching the game. “There are two types of those— the blisters and the believers. Blisters stick around because they don’t have any drive to do anything different. They’re in a rut and do just enough to get by. The believers, now those are the officers you want. They believe what they do makes a difference. I think Jace just might be a believer.”

“Cap’s a believer,” Dayna murmured and Trish nodded.

“He sure is. I knew the minute he put on the uniform the first day, he was going to be buried in it. I see my Tom in Jace— the goodness, the calm. Why do you think they call him ‘Ice’?”

The ball cracked loud against the bat and Jace sped for home. A diving catch from the shortstop signaled the third out and Jace shook his head crossing the final plate. The teams switched places and he looked to her with a quick grin. She gave one back to him although her mind whirled. He took the pitcher’s mound and her heart jammed in her throat.

“I guess—” Dayna licked her lips and avoided the studious, heavy appraisal she could feel sliding over her “— because he rarely loses his temper.”

“Close. Jace doesn’t mess up often because he takes his time and thinks things through all the way. Each move is slow and precise, controlled. He’s ice cold when other people are screaming and shouting. He doesn’t lose his head and fly off the handle. That’s a good thing.”

Trish didn’t say anything more which was fine with Dayna. She watched the action on the field without seeing it, clapped when Trish did and sat in numbed confusion. The sun peaked high and bright and she lowered her sunglasses, hiding her eyes while Jace pitched.

She had learned so much about him since he moved in. Most of it good, some of it tolerable, a few things irritating as hell. Like he always forgot to rinse the sink when he shaved. She could tell him five times about something and he would forget it anyway if he was watching a ballgame. He had a tendency to put the milk carton back in the fridge when only a half-swallow remained. He carried a gun everyday and she was never sure if he would come home.

Captain Mosee called up to his wife and motioned to the bright yellow water cooler. Trish nodded and lightly smacked Dayna on the knee. “What’s say you and me play waterboy?”

Trish grabbed the empty cooler and in minutes, she and Dayna lugged the heavy, refilled chest back to the player’s bench. Jace met them crossing the field and took it, the muscles in his arms bunching. He frowned at them both, the scold vivid in his blue eyes. “There are a dozen men here. You should’ve asked for help.”

“Good Lord, Jace, I gave birth three times.” Trish blistered him with a motherly scowl. “When you can say the same, then you can play He-man.”

Dayna snorted trying to hide her laugh. *You tell him, She-ra.* She followed Jace to the bench carrying a sleeve of plastic cups, crossing in front of the blue team. All the players were men and their eyes flew to her bustline. Several of the men darted fast looks to Jace but their gaze shot right back to her breasts. Dayna bristled.

“They’re called boobs, gentlemen. Get over it,” she grumbled. Jace burst out laughing. Every masculine eye snapped toward the field. Dayna shook her head. *Men.*

She rejoined Trish on the bleachers, stepping around several seated families. The older woman sat with sparkling eyes, laughing silently at her approach. “You can hold you own, good thing. But they weren’t ogling your breasts.”

Dayna sat with a huff. “Excuse me? You saw them. I’ve been checked out by enough assholes to know the look.”

Trish turned serious and faced her, a scrutinizing slant to her brow. “Lesson number two about cops, okay? In order to do the job, they have to be a bit of a dick. It keeps them arrogant enough to not back down. If they turn into an asshole, they’re a liability and no one wants them around. Everyone loves a little dick, no one likes a huge asshole. These guys, all of them, pricks of highest order. Not an asshole in the lot.”

Feeling like she had just been stood in a corner for failing to play nice with others, Dayna bit her lip. Asshole or dick, whatever, every man down there had checked her rack like a hunter scouting for antlers.

“Dayna,” Trish’s voice whispered low and soothing. “They were looking at your nametag. Jace marked you.”

“Marked me?”

“Yeah. 33-64 *and a half*? He’s letting everyone know you aren’t a bunny and to back off.”

The nausea return with a woosh and an itch began deep in her throat. Dayna didn’t want to know, all curiosity erased by fear but her tongue took off without permission. “Okay, Mrs. Coptalk, explain bunny.”

“A badge bunny, you know, women who date cops for the thrill.” Trish slid her gaze to the ballgame with a slight smile. “Half-units are wives, Dayna or, at the very least, serious contenders.”

Dayna’s stomach ducked behind her liver. Jace was thinking about marriage? Well duh, she knew this. She did. He’d even told his mother that. They lived together. He saw her without make-up and with morning-hair. She knew exactly how disgusting his work-out clothes could get. They were comfortable in their not-newness.

They had designated spots on the couch.

They grumbled about who ate the last of the cereal.

They kissed ‘good morning’ before brushing their teeth.

They shared a bath scrubby.

Sharing a bath scrubby was as deep as a commitment as Dayna had ever made. It was personal and intimate on a level deeper than sex. It was major.

Now Jace was marking her in front of his friends, his coworkers. It made perfect sense. It made it real and pressing. And it suddenly scared her to death.

* * *

Jace shook the tingling out of his arm and rolled his head around his neck waiting for his turn at bat. Pitching after a full shift was going to leave him exhausted. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and raised his face toward the bleachers. Trish and Dayna sat three rows up, staring out at the field. Dayna had pulled on those dark round sunglasses she loved, hiding her eyes.

Warmth that had nothing to do with the August temperature erupted in his gut. *Damn, I love her.* She was sweet and honest and considerate and, oh Christ, did she make him laugh. The smallest thing could get her dander up. If he forgot to pick up bread or left a wet towel on the bathroom floor, she would fuss and complain like it was the end of the world. But when real problems came up, she was a rock.

Her nephew Tyler broke his arm falling off the sliding board at the playground and Mark panicked. Dayna had been the one to talk her older brother through how to fill out the insurance

forms at the hospital. She quietly made sure there was ice cream and Benadryl when the itch under his cast became too much. Her father's business computer crashed and she calmly retrieved everything from a backup system he hadn't even known she installed. A student with a crisis brought out her dedication and loyalty.

He hadn't planned to write half-unit on her nametag until Lori uttered that crack about bunnies. Damn it, Dayna was not some cheap tramp filling his bed for a few weeks. She was...his. He was seriously thinking about making her his forever.

Connors struck out and the teams shifted positions. Jace walked to the pitcher's mound mulling the 'M' word around. Was it too soon? God knew he had zero ability to slow down around her. She made him want everything now. But this, no, he wouldn't rush into this. If he *did* propose, he wanted to make sure it was a one-time deal. Divorce was fine for other people but not him. Was Dayna the right woman? He didn't know. He did know that when they met, lightning struck. The same electric fizzle continued still. No woman had ever made him feel like this.

Through four batters—one strike out and three singles—Jace reviewed his options. When he moved in, things naturally slid into place. It felt right being with her every day. There wasn't much adjustment needed, they just melded. Even Gunner and Sinjin found a quiet truce. The dog liked to play with the cat, the cat liked to hiss at the dog. Still, they had curled up together for a nap a time or two in the bright sunshine of the kitchen.

After meeting Dayna, his mother might as well have started knitting baby booties. She apparently had given Dayna the recipe to her double fudge cake. His older sister, Brenna, half a world away, insisted that was akin to adopting her. His kid sister Callie now called or emailed Dayna more than him. Clan Rafferty had claimed Dayna as their own. Could he?

Even their finances seemed to mesh. They pretty much made the same amount, no one being the major breadwinner. Every month, Jace wrote Dayna a check and she took care of all the bills but the house remained in her name. A cop would never be rich, he knew that. It had never mattered to him. He made enough to live and he loved his job. But now, he loved Dayna, too. The first fluttery shivers and golden shine of a brand new relationship had rubbed off but she still meant more to him than anything ever had. Maybe he should start thinking about building up that savings account for more than a rainy day.

Like, for a diamond?

For a family?

Grinding the ball deeper into his glove, Jace tried to picture his life without Dayna and came up blank. Or rather, came up bleak. A small smile leaked to lift his lip. Maybe that was his answer. Jace looked to the bleachers again and his heart slammed against his chest. Dayna wasn't sitting with Trish anymore. She was in another man's arms.

Dayna?

A furious thundering beat jumpstarted behind his ribcage and his stomach took a nosedive for his knees. He didn't recognize the tall blond guy but he wore the pale green shirt of one of the medic companies. Was it 41? Maybe 12. Whatever, Mr. Medic had his arms around Dayna and damned if she wasn't laughing up into his face.

"Hey Ice, you going to pitch the damn ball or rub the hide off it?"

Jace ripped his gaze from the embrace. *Slow down, don't jump to conclusions, think it through.* He focused his eyes on home plate; the strike zone outlined in invisible red in his sights and channeled all his unanswered confusion into the ball.

Strike one.

His head jerked back to the bleachers looking for Dayna. All he saw was her ass. That damned fine round ass that grabbed his attention the first night when she bent over to pick up toys in the kitchen, the ass that fit just right into his palms, the ass that was slowly walking away from the ball field. Mr. Medic and she had their arms around each other's waists and they headed deeper into enemy territory, sliding out of sight behind two boxy ambulances. The returning pitch smacked into his glove but he barely felt it.

A low simmer of unease churned to a sickening swell. His knuckles tightened on the ball and he glared at the parked equipment. *She couldn't be doing this. I have to be seeing shit. Dayna wouldn't do that to me. She loves me. She's not like Crystal.*

Struggling to tamp down an imagination that turned vividly painful and x-rated, Jace threw every modicum of power into the pitch.

Strike two.

A heavy weight sat in the center of his chest, a bulldozer rumbling on his solar plexus. Jace stretched his arms out, trying to dislodge the sucker but it wouldn't budge. He sucked in a cooling breath and blew it out. *Trust Dayna. You know her. You love her. Trust her.*

She still hadn't reappeared from between the ambulances. Shocked confusion morphed into suspicious doubts and the ball whizzed straight through the sweet spot with a whispered hiss.

Strike three.

The next three pitches followed the exact same path.

Too antsy to sit on the bench, Jace systematically shredded a plastic cup, watching the skinny grassy patch between the bellies of two vehicles. He wasn't going to make a scene and go looking for her. He was honest enough to admit he didn't want to see what he feared was

happening. He'd seen it happen before, to him, knew the signs. Bitterness cramped in his gut and he gritted his teeth. *Not again. Not Dayna.*

If Dayna wanted out, wanted someone else, then she could have it, have them. A yawning scream started in his mind but he clamped down and refused to think about it. Instead, he filled his mind with snippets of her —smiling in the yard, teasing him in the living room, laughing in the shower. No, bad idea, that snippet led to a heated reel of bedroom activity. They'd never had a problem relating in that department.

He'd thought things were going good with them. Granted, they argued. That was normal, wasn't it? Had he missed some huge flaming arrow pointing out she wasn't happy? Every tense moment leapt to his mind, every cross word, every blistering silence.

"Hey, Ice, you okay?" Bill Connors frowned at him, the move pulling the sides of his thick mustache lower around his lips.

"I'm fine," Jace muttered, his eyes searching the pathway again, fingers biting into the chain link fence.

"You suck at lying. What's up?"

"You are. Go bat and shut up." The clipped words smacked the air. Connors raised his brow but turned to grab the wooden slugger.

Dayna didn't reappear for two more innings. The score sat at 12-12 and the ninth inning vibrated with tension, jibes and loud machismo. The rivalry wafted like smoke, thick and choking. Jace didn't give a flying fuck about the game anymore. Once Dayna had rounded the bleacher edge and settled back beside Trish, it took everything in him not to leave the field and ask her what the hell was going on. He wanted to know and yet he didn't. At this very minute, he knew nothing except he loved her and the sudden thought of her leaving scared the beejesus out of him. If he walked over there, then he would know something else. That something might be nothing or it might be the beginning of a shitload of pain.

The grip on the bat was sticky and he wiped his hands on his jeans. Hot dusty air laden with the summery scents of cookouts, sweat and dirt filled his nose when he drew a deep breath. He blew it out slowly. One more inning. He had one more inning— less than half an inning really— before he knew the truth.

Spark Clark, a firefighter with an enormous wad of bubble gum in his jaw, fisted the ball and planted his feet, staring at home plate. Jace twisted the bat grip, waiting, watching, wondering if his life just got knocked off-course. Clark snapped the pitch. For a split nanosecond, Jace eyed the growing sphere then swung. Every hope or dream he'd dared have connected with the ball in a sharp crack.

The infield stared and the outfield just shook their heads as the ball arched high over the fence, sailing toward the back parking lot. Precinct 33 leapt to their feet screaming and cheering as first Stanislawski then Connors crossed home plate. Jace lopped behind them at a slower speed, the back claps and ‘good jobs’ meaningless. The spectators swarmed around their family members and Captain Mosee held the trophy high over his head for the second year in a row.

Jace looked to the bleachers. Trish and Dayna were both on their feet, yelling and whistling. Dayna’s face shone so bright, full of pride and...oh Christ, he thought it was love. Was it still? With his chest heaving more from emotion than exertion, he moved toward the stands without thinking about it.

Dayna bounded down the steps and jumped into his arms with a laugh. Cowardice was a hard pill to swallow but he did it and held her tight. She felt so right in his arms, she always had. Her shampoo smelled like cranberries. It mingled with the coconut of her sunscreen as he buried his face in her hair.

“You did it, honey!” She pulled back and kissed him fast and hard. Panic hit and he grabbed her head, deepening the kiss, probably bruising her mouth. Panic turned to terror but she just gave as much as he took, sliding her fingers into his hair and tugging. She liked running her fingers through his hair. Deliberately, for her, he hadn’t gotten his normal warm weather military-cut, despite being teased by his buddies. He did it for her. He’d do anything for her. He’d have kissed her until sundown if the need for oxygen hadn’t forced him back.

“Wow.” Dayna raised her eyebrows and grinned at him. “If that’s what happens when you hit a homer, you need to spend—”

“Where’d you disappear to?” Damn, the question jumped off his tongue.

Dayna squeezed his neck and hopped in an excited little dance. “Do you remember me talking about Gavin, the guy I dated in college?”

Gavin. Yeah, he remembered. The memory did nothing to soothe him. “Yeah, I remember.”

“He moved to Franklin. He’s a paramedic now with Squad 12.” Great, her ex-lover was a medic he might run into at a random car wreck. *Whoopee!* “He and his wife just had a baby girl. She was nursing her in the ambulance. Oh Jace, you should’ve seen her. She is so tiny. She has these itty bitty little fingernails...”

Dayna babbled on about the baby while Jace mentally shook his brain.

Wait, wife?

Gavin the ex was married?

Invisible iron chains fell away from his chest and Jace smiled. Relief flooded his soul. He should have known better. Dayna would never hurt him like that. She was his.

All through the picnic, he watched her. The way the sunlight picked out the gold in her hair or turned her eyes to grassy green. A faint pink colored her nose and the seven freckles there. Seven exactly. He'd counted them numerous times as she slept. Trish seemed to like her and that said a lot. The guys sitting at the same table all treated her with respect, included her in their conversations and Dayna fell right into place. She belonged.

Jace looked around. Connors was holding his kid on one knee while Becky changed their youngest's diaper on a blanket under the tree. Cap and Trish moved in perfect synchronization from years of marriage. Even Cadwaller bent his ear to his near-teen's whisper before looking to his wife. They didn't speak but silent communication flowed and Lisa shook her head. The kid slumped. Jace grinned. Poor kid, parents were no fun.

Further down the table, the unattached guys, a group he was part of just last year, sat with buddies or bunnies. It was like someone turned on the lights. Jace saw the difference with sparkling clarity. Sure, there was friendship showing or sexual attraction blazing at the other table, but here, at this one, the love is what shone. The committed and calm strength called to him and he turned to Dayna only to find her looking straight at him. He stared deep into her eyes and only saw one thing.

Love.

Real, lasting love.

She was The One.

She slipped her hand over his. "You're quiet."

"Just thinking. Tired." Jace rubbed the back of his hand across her cheek. "You about ready to go home?"

At her nod, they rose and she gathered her empty cake platter, bidding farewell to people he wasn't sure when she'd met and then laced her fingers in his. The short stroll to her car was made in comfortable silence.

"Are you going to be long?" she asked clicking her car locks.

"Nah, I just have to go grab Gunner and then I'll be home. Need something?"

A wicked smile curled her lip. "Just you."

He pulled her close, dropping a light kiss on her mouth. "You got me, babe."

Jace watched her taillights until they got lost in the maze of vehicles before he spun on his heels. Absently, he raised his hand at several people leaving the park. Although a few officers still hovered around, drinking or talking, Cap was scraping the grill with a wire brush.

“Hey, Cap.”

Captain Mosee looked up sharply and grinned. “Hey. Nice move today, saved our ass. If I had to hand that damn trophy over to Kimble, it’d been sideways where the good Lord split him.”

Jace tucked his fingertips in his pockets. “When’s the next sergeant’s exam?”

His captain’s gray head snapped up and the wrinkles on his forehead deepened. He straightened, looking into Jace’s face with a hard measuring stare. Jace refused to look down. “Not for a couple months. You got a reason for asking?”

“Yeah,” Jace said softly, a wealth of information in one word. “Families are a lot easier to support on a sergeant’s pay.”

A grin spread across Cap’s face and Jace swore he saw pride there. “If you’re sure, I’ll put your name in.”

Jace didn’t even hesitate. “I’m sure.”

The men nodded goodbye and Jace turned to leave. He made it twelve steps.

“Hey, Rafferty.” Jace looked over his shoulder. Cap stood beside Trish, both smiling wide. “Bring Dayna to dinner next week.”

Twilight had just begun to fall as Jace headed to the cruiser, the dusky purple sliding into the blue sky. Fireflies darted across the grass. Peace settled into his soul as his feet crunched through the gravel lot. Each step brought him closer to where he wanted to be forever. With Dayna. At home.