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*Petals in the Snow*

**By Trista Bane**

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Sneak Peak:

Read on at the end of this story for an excerpt from

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**Dedication:**

**To my family, who have filled my home and my heart with happiness every holiday season. Especially to my husband, Mack, and supports me and inspires me in all my endeavors, and who fills my life with enough love and romance that I can pass some along to others.**

**And finally, to my dog, Wolfsbane, who was taken from me in an act of violence while I was writing this manuscript. He filled my heart with joy, and helped me to smile through so many tears. Whenever I'd write about werewolves, his piercing blue eyes would inspire me. I love you, Baney, and I'll never forget you!**



**Wolfsbane**

**February, 2004- November 18, 2006**

## Chapter One

“I’m sorry, Ms. Drennon. We have already filled this position.” The manager didn’t look sorry at all. Karyn nodded and allowed her squared shoulders to slump as she walked out of the shop.

The new mall was bright with twinkling Christmas lights and decorations, and packed with people. The hustle and bustle of the season was in full swing. Lovers walked through the mall hand-in-hand, smiling, oblivious to those rushing past them, grumbling because they walked too slowly. Most of these people had but one care, to find the perfect gift, one that would endear them more to a loved one; one that would make a loved one’s face light up with awe and surprise, or one that would impress co-workers with the extravagancy of it.

Karyn’s cares ran deeper than that. Three weeks ago, she’d been like the lovers walking through the mall, happy and oblivious to how cruel people can be. Then, her perfect little world came crashing down around her. Roland, her boyfriend, had visited her at work drunk. He’d punched his boss and lost his job. Karyn still wasn’t sure how it was all her fault, but Roland certainly seemed to believe these words as he hurled her across the room and swooped down on her. She vaguely remembered his knuckles, already broken and bloody, rushing towards her face.

She’d woken up three hours later, in a hospital bed. A doctor quietly told her that she would be fine. She had a broken nose, a cracked rib, but she would be fine. Her baby, however....

She hadn’t even known she was pregnant, yet she mourned until her body was sick with the grief.

The next few days were a blur to her. She vaguely remembered the police taking a report. The emptiness and panic that flooded through her veins, settling at the pit of her stomach when she discovered that Roland had drained her savings and checking account and stolen her credit cards were like a bad memory. None of it seemed real.

Over the last three weeks, her doctor had given her pain pills, sleeping pills, and pills to calm her nerves following a panic attack. She’d filled the prescriptions and bought food with the last check from the daycare. She’d loved her job at Tiny Tots

Daycare, and she'd been good at it. But, her boss visited her in the hospital and informed her, with tears in her eyes, she had to let her go.

Karyn understood. A few of the children had witnessed everything. They could've been hurt... Or worse. Karyn trembled as she realized that those children could've suffered the same misfortune her own child had suffered.

Sadness consumed her. Losing her job... losing her relationship with those children she'd come to love and cherish... was like losing her baby all over again.

She'd thought things could get no worse.

She was wrong.

She'd wanted to let her sorrow have its way with her. She'd needed time to grieve, but with all her money gone, and her bills looming ahead of her, she'd been spurred into action a lot sooner than her broken heart and her broken body wanted.

Every manager eyed her with the same look of disgust and suspicion. Her broken nose and the fading yellow from the bruised eye made her look like a street brawler. No one would hire her. Roland was gone. But he was still ruining her.

Karyn trembled as she pulled a crumpled ten dollar bill from her pocket. It was the last of her paycheck. Her electricity would be shut off when she returned home. Her water would be turned off the day after Christmas... just four days from now.

For the life of her, she couldn't understand why these companies would disconnect utilities from needy people at Christmas time.

She knew today would come. Deep down, she'd known it when Roland hit her. She'd saved her prescriptions... not taking them when she needed them, knowing that the day would come when she needed them worse. Today.

She couldn't face a dark, cold, empty home. She couldn't face the Christmas tree with no lights and no presents underneath. She had no family, no job. No one would miss her.

And *that* hurt.

A slow smile spread across her face. Her worries would be over in a few hours. She could take this ten and buy five minute's happiness. She walked determinedly, with a fast pace, past shoppers, past children sitting on Santa's lap, and past Christmas lights and music, to the bookstore. She picked up the latest *Dark Hunter* novel from a display

stand near the entrance, and headed straight for the coffee shop. She ordered a tall latte and a slice of pumpkin spice cheesecake. Her hand shook as she handed over the last of her money to the stranger behind the bar who told her to wait at the other end of the counter for her order.

Karyn had been so focused on what she knew to be her last indulgence in guilty pleasures that she hadn't noticed the man standing in line behind her. As she turned, she bounced off the solid wall that was his chest. Tears sprang to her eyes, and she dropped her purse as she defensively covered her nose. Vaguely she wondered why she couldn't remember ever bumping her nose or ribs before her injuries, and why now, she seemed to be doing it all the time.

"Oh. I'm so sorry." Panic was evident in his voice as he pulled her trembling hands from her face. Karyn's vision was blurred, but she could tell this guy was the most handsome businessman she'd ever met.

"It's my own fault. I seem to have two left feet lately." She gently pulled her hands from his, feeling uncomfortable at the surge of warmth, and the odd feeling of safety and tranquility that accompanied his touch.

"I was standing too close. I refuse to wear my glasses and can't read the menu without them. This is the first time that's hurt anyone but myself, however." Even as he stammered out an excuse, his voice was like silk. This man was poised, self-confident, and obviously hated the feeling of being out of control. "Here, let me help you." He said, bending to retrieve the spilled contents of her purse.

"That's not necessary." Panic and guilt gripped her as he picked up the prescription bottles and read the labels. He'd be able to tell that each bottle was completely full; he'd know from the dates on each prescription that she should've been taking them for three weeks, and he'd know from the still-obvious injuries that she needed at least the pain medicine, but refused to take them.

It wouldn't take a genius to discern what she was saving them for.

The accusation and disbelief in his eyes made her tremble. She avoided his gaze and gently lifted the pills from his hands and stuffed them quickly in her purse before scooping up the rest of her belongings.

She stood and within a split second, he towered above her.

Karyn continued to avoid the stranger's gaze. "M... my latte's ready." She attempted to make a hasty retreat. He grabbed her hand and spun her to face him. She refused to meet his gaze, and her body shook uncontrollably. Deep inside she knew he wouldn't hurt her the way Roland had. Her body wouldn't listen. She was afraid.

Gently, the stranger tilted her chin and stepped closer to her so that she was forced to look into his eyes. They were so close her breasts brushed his chest as she tried to force her lungs to take in the air it seemed to be rejecting.

*Oh, God. Please don't let me have a panic attack here. Not now.*

His accusing eyes softened. "Don't do it," he whispered. His dark brown eyes searched hers. She saw her own broken reflection in them. His left hand held her wrist firmly, as if he was afraid to let her go, but his right arm encircled her waist and pulled her body against his. His kiss was gentle, warm. Safe.

She could escape in his strong arms.

Karyn melted against him, and for an instant all her worries melted away too.

The clerk at the counter cleared her throat. Karyn broke the kiss, jerked free from his arms, grabbed the plate and plastic cup with trembling hands, and didn't look back.

Her heart still raced as she placed the fork on the empty plate sometime later. What just happened? Things like that don't happen in real life. They happen only in romance novels. She shook her head and smiled. The handsome stranger had felt sorry for her. Nothing more.

She had to stop thinking about him and their brief encounter. She didn't even know his name. She had to stop thinking about the electric bill and the water bill and her late mortgage payment. All of those things made her stomach burn and her chest tighten. She lifted the romance novel from the table and settled herself into her seat. She opened herself to page one and began reading.

*Escape. Just for a little while, she willed herself.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Jared watched the girl walk away with a heavy heart. She reminded him of Janna. His sister had confided in Jared that she often thought about killing herself. Especially when her husband hit her. Janna hadn't taken her own life, however. But she had gone back to the bastard who beat her one time too many.

He thought of the girl as he watched her walk away. How close was her story to that of his beloved sister? And what had possessed him to kiss her?

She was beautiful, despite the bruises. Her sad blue eyes held a warm quality. She'd be a caring friend, a passionate lover, a loving mother.

He ordered his mocha, but his mind never left the girl. Or their kiss. According to the prescription bottles, her name was Karyn.

Why did medical doctors provide depressed clients with the means of committing suicide? Even if he hadn't been working towards a degree in counseling, Jared would've recognized the symptoms of depression in this girl. Yet, her doctor had given her enough medication to help her sleep the endless sleep of death.

Jared was sure that's what she was contemplating. Why else would she save the pills when it was obvious she needed them. She'd moved gingerly, favoring her left side. Her breathing was shallow. Her nose had obviously been broken recently and her black eye was only beginning to fade. So why suffer through the pain?

Christmas is a tough time of year for someone who is depressed. Statistics reported a drastic increase in suicide deaths this time of year more than any other. Jared sipped his mocha and gazed at the girl, wondering what he could do to help her Christmas be more bearable.

A smile spread across his face as Jared's mind formed the perfect plan.

## Chapter Two

“Wake up young miss.” The voice had a sing-song quality and sounded far away. Karyn forced her eyes to open, only to have them fall shut before they could adjust.

“Wake up, I say.” The voice sounded slightly closer, but the high-pitched, happy quality did not change. Karyn opened her eyes and stifled a laugh. The girl standing over her was dressed in an elf costume. Apparently the elf worked with the mall-Santa. But, why was she waking Karyn?

Karyn sat up. She’d slumped down in the comfortable chair and fallen asleep. The book had fallen from her lap and now lay in a crumpled heap on the gray carpeted floor.

“Young miss, Mr. Kringle would have a word with you. Come. Make haste. ‘Tis not often he asks to speak with adults.” Karyn had raised her hand to rub her heavy eye-lids, but the elf-lady snatched it. Karyn found herself being pulled through the mall toward the mall-Santa’s raised platform.

Karyn opened her mouth to protest, but was overcome with such a feeling of warmth and tranquility that she silently took the stool that was offered and sat meekly in front of Santa.

Karyn rubbed her eyes, wondering if she was still dreaming. Surely she hadn’t seen a twinkle in Santa’s eye.

“And have you been a good girl this year?” Santa’s voice was teasing, and Karyn smiled in spite of herself.

“Better than some,” she told him sadly.

“Ahhh. Yes, I know.” He said touching just below her bruised left eye. “What can Santa get for you to make your Christmas brighter?”

The smile slid from her face. “There’s nothing in your red bag that can make my Christmas brighter, Santa.”

“Try me.” Again, Karyn was filled with warmth and peacefulness. She’d give anything to feel like this through the holidays.

“I need... a job.” She told him.

Santa nodded. “What else?” he prompted.



A lie came to her mind, but almost as if she couldn't lie to Santa, the truth came out at the last moment.

"Money." She said simply. Her cheeks burned. She didn't know what prompted her to say that.

She suddenly felt silly sitting up here with Santa as children waited to tell him their Christmas wishes. She scanned the mall, wondering what all the spectators and shoppers thought of her.

She saw him. It was a profile view and he was in a crowd of people, but she knew she was right. It had to be him. For some reason Karyn couldn't quite fathom, her heart did a triple somersault.

"But there must be something else," Santa prompted, following her gaze.

Again, several lies came to the tip of her tongue, but what came out was the truth. "Him. With a big red bow."

The moment Karyn said them, she wished she could have those words back.

To her utter shock, the fat man in the red suit reached into his red velvet bag and retrieve a big red bow. Then he descended the steps and ran through the mall and through the crowd with the speed and agility of a twenty-year-old.

Santa reached the man in record time. With a squeal of mortification, Karyn leapt down from the raised platform, and holding her aching ribs, ran to the nearest sanctuary... the ladies' restroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

Any other day, Jared would feel stupid standing outside the restroom holding a big red bow. Today, the thought made him chuckle. He thought of the girl on the other side of the door. What made her confess to Santa she wanted him?

After just one kiss....

But, Jared couldn't judge on that. He remembered the feel of her breasts against his chest as she melted into him. She'd been more than receptive to his kiss. She'd been passionate. Jared knew she must be lonely. He'd watched her wander around the mall for two days looking for work. Something about this girl captivated him, demanding his attention. She'd managed to enslave his thoughts, stir his compassion and rouse his lust.

Jared wanted Karyn just as much as she wanted him. Undoubtedly more so, he

decided as the restroom door swung open. Her eyes were on the floor. Apparently, she assumed that enough time had passed for him to give up interest and leave. He cleared his throat to get her attention before she walked right into him again, and when he did, she looked up with a horrified expression on her face. Karyn squealed loudly, drawing several stares from passersby, and retreated back into her sanctuary.

Jared chuckled silently and contemplated what to do next. He couldn't hold her hostage in the ladies' room all day. And it was obvious that she wasn't coming out until he left.

He thought of what "Santa" had told him. What she wanted for Christmas was a job and money.

As coordinator of mall events, he may be able to help her out more than she knew. It was time, once again, to talk to Santa Claus.

### Chapter Three

Karyn was absolutely mortified. She never dreamed Santa would run through the mall to tell the tall, handsome stranger he was on her Christmas list.

Her heart raced as she allowed her mind to picture him holding that big red bow.

The silly grin that played across his face for that brief moment she saw him was somehow etched in her mind. He had strong cheek bones and a cleft in his chin that was made more prominent by his mischievous, charming grin, and his lips.... She shook with excitement, fear, and embarrassment. Should she go back out there? Try to regain her composure in his eyes?

What did she have to lose? In a few hours, she'd take the necessary steps to ensure that she never saw him again.

She was free from consequences. She smiled. She would do it.

Rapidly, before she could lose her nerve, she flung open the door and stepped out.

He wasn't there.

Her eyes scanned the crowd. Her stranger was no where to be seen. Disappointment consumed her. She'd lost her chance. And now, she had no more money left. No more job prospects. No more five minute escapes. Her shoulders slumped, and she gripped her brown leather purse to her chest in determination.

She thought of the handsome stranger. If only...

"Come with me, young miss." The sing-song quality of the voice was as familiar as Christmas. She turned to see the strange elf woman, and forced a smile.

"I'm sorry," Karyn told her. "It's time for me to go."

"Nay, child. 'Tis not time. You've not yet been called home. Come with me. Santa wants you to show me what kind of jewelry you would like for Christmas." Again, the elf pulled her through the mall with a speed Karyn would not have dreamed possible in this crowd with an unwilling follower.

"But I don't want jewelry for Christmas," Karyn tried to tell the strange elf, who either did not hear her, or effectively ignored her.

The new jewelry store had only been open for about three weeks, but it had already generated a lot of traffic.

When Karyn was ushered through the store, a loud bell sounded. She stopped dead in her tracks and noticed, moments later that the elf no longer had a grip on her hand. The elf, in fact, was no where to be scene.

Confetti and balloons rained from the ceiling. “Congratulations!” Someone shouted in her ear. “You are our 1,000<sup>th</sup> customer.” Flashes from cameras blinded her. Someone handed her a big piece of paper and shook her hand. More flashes blinded her. She was sure she didn’t understand what was going on.

“Come with me to the office, madam,” the guy shaking her hand told her after countless photos and what seemed like an hour of handshaking. “I’ll get you your *real* check.”

Karyn sat dumb-founded in a tiny office. She still couldn’t quite comprehend what was going on. Was this real? He was going to give her a check? She was going to have money?

The man asked to see her identification. With shaking hands, she pulled her driver’s license from her wallet and handed it over. She watched suspiciously as he printed her name on the Pay to Order line of a check, already made out for \$1,000.

“Congratulations, once again, Ms. Drennon.”

“Will I be able to cash this today?” She asked, still suspicious. She could not believe she held a check for \$1,000 in her hands. She wouldn’t believe it was real until she cashed it.

“Of course. I’ll walk you to the bank in the mall myself.”

Moments later, she held the cash in her hand. She trembled with joy and hope for the first time in weeks.

She looked down at her watch. It was only 3:30; if she hurried, she could have her electricity turned back on, and not pay extra after-hours fees! She could pay her water bill and buy food for a small holiday meal.

She was still alone. There would be no presents under her tree, and she still had to find a job the day after Christmas so she could pay her mortgage. This money was not near enough for her utilities and her house payment, but it was more than she could’ve hoped when she woke up this morning.

She was saved... at least through the holiday.

## Chapter Four

Jared watched Karyn emerge from the mall-bank with a smile on her face. Relief filled him. She wouldn't be smiling if she still contemplated suicide, would she? He'd read that suicidal people were relieved, even happy when they finally decided how and when to end their lives, but did not believe that was the case with Karyn.

No. Her cheeks were rosy, and she appeared elated. She would not kill herself today.

Jared extended his arm, revealing the rose he'd just purchased from a peddler in the mall. The rose was red, decorated with holly and a red and green ribbon.

Karyn stared. He couldn't read anything more than shock on her beautiful face. Would she think him too forward?

"A peace-offering," he explained nervously. "I think we started out on the wrong foot."

"You don't even know me."

"That's something I'd like to remedy."

She smiled and accepted the rose.

"Have dinner with me tonight. My treat."

She looked up from behind the rose. God, but she was beautiful. She hesitated, and he thought for a moment she would refuse.

She sighed. "I... I don't know." The look of confusion on her face testified to that fact. She really didn't know if she should go out with him.

"Just dinner. No strings attached. I'll be the perfect gentleman. You can meet me there or I can pick you up. I'd like to take you to the steak house on Sommersby, if you don't mind." Jared felt like a school boy asking out a cheerleader on a date. Why did it matter if she said yes or no?

But it did matter. More than it should.

"I don't even know your name," she said shyly.

"Hi, Jared." The jewelry store manager had stayed behind to talk to the bank manager. He'd since emerged from the bank directly behind Karyn.

Karyn eyed Jared with suspicion. "You two know each other?"

“Of course,” John said. “Jared’s the event coordinator. Whenever I want to plan an event at the jewelry store, he’s the one I have to kiss up to to get it okayed.”

“Events? Like \$1,000 giveaways?” Karyn asked, looking from Jared to John, and back again.

“Yes. I forgot to tell you, Jared. Karyn here was our 1,000<sup>th</sup> customer.” John informed him.

That explained the elation when he first saw her, and the accusing look on her face just now.

“Congratulations, Karyn.” Jared told her. He was deliberately vague. Let her think he had something to do with it. It didn’t matter, as long as she agreed to go out with him tonight.

“I’ve got to get back to the store. See ya, Jared. Congratulations, again, Karyn!” John called over his shoulder as he made his way through the Christmas shoppers back to the jewelry store.

“I’m Jared Helmsley. Now you know my name and where I work. Will you have dinner with me tonight?”

Karyn’s mouth moved wordlessly for a few seconds. Jared fought the urge to kiss those pouty lips and bury his fist in her blonde hair. His body reacted to the image, warming him despite the rush of cold that wafted in from the recently opened mall entrance door.

“Okay.”

“What?” Jared kicked himself for appearing so dumbfounded.

“Sure. What time?”

Jared’s heart thumped in his ears, and he silently berated himself while attempting to regain his composure. Until a year ago, Jared had been a ladies’ man. He’d dated a different girl every weekend. Nine times out of ten, the girl he woke up with on Sunday morning was not the girl he’d been sleeping next to on Friday night. After Janna died, all that changed. Her death reminded him that every girl was someone’s sister, someone’s daughter. Jared decided then that until he cared about a woman the way someone should’ve cared about his sister, he wasn’t going to fall into bed with them.

Karyn was different than any woman Jared had ever met. He hadn’t asked about

her family, but he sensed she was alone in the world. Karyn may not be someone's sister or someone's daughter. That just meant she needed someone to care for her all the more.

And for the first time in his life, Jared was sure he could be that someone.

"Seven." He answered her finally.

"Okay. But I have a lot to do before then." Her face lit up again, and Jared wished he knew what she intended to do with her money. What could make a girl who wanted death a few moments before appear so elated? He thought of his counseling classes. He liked his job as event coordinator at the mall, but it was just a temporary job to support him through college. After Janna's death, Jared had decided to go back to college and finish the degree he'd started after high school. Only, when he started taking computer courses, he soon realized that was no longer the path he wanted to take. He wanted to help people. So, he decided to become a therapist.

One thing he'd learned in his counseling courses was that suicidal people refused to make long term plans, and any short term plans they made would not interfere with their attempts. He smiled, knowing that, Karyn did not plan to take her life tonight.

If he could just get her through the holidays....

"Great. I'll walk you to your car." He'd turned up the pitch on the end of the statement to make it sound like a question. He wanted her permission. Whoever she'd trusted in the past had undoubtedly taken all control from her. Jared knew it was time to give her back some of the control she'd lost.

Karyn stared at him for a second, as if contemplating her answer, before nodding her head in assent.

## Chapter Five

Jared followed Karyn back toward the center of the mall, where the mall-Santa's stand was. His attention was on Karyn, but her attention, he soon discovered, was on a group of kids waiting in line to see Santa.

"No! I don't wanna see Santa," one little girl squealed as she crossed her arms over her chest and turned her chin up in defiance. The little curls bounced around her shoulders. If Jared had to guess, he'd say the girl was about three or four, and he recognized her as the leader of the small band of children. When the girl refused to see Santa, three other children started crying, all of whom declared they didn't want to see Santa.

The adults with the children all tried to console them, to no avail. The wails got louder. Karyn's shoulders squared in determination. Jared sensed he should stop her, but thought better of it.

"Hi, Susan." The little girl looked up at Karyn and in an instant, she threw her arms around her leg and squealed her name.

"Karynnnnnnnn. I mist you so mush. Are you back to take care of us?" Jared smiled. It was hard to make out the little girl's words. She pronounced her r's as w's, so that Karyn's name came out Ka-wyn. While the little girl's words were difficult to understand, the love she had for Karyn was unmistakable.

"Shhhh, Susan. One thing at a time." Jared noted a pleading look pass from Karyn to another adult before she continued. "Why don't you want to see Santa?" Karyn squatted so that she was eye level with the little girl.

Susan looked at her shoes. "Santa's mean to bad li'l guwls, and I's been a bad guwl all dis yeaw."

"Who told you Santa's mean to bad girls?" Karyn asked, eyeing another adult suspiciously.

"Miss Connie. She says I'm bad ev'wy day."

"You're not bad, Susan. Little girls are not bad. Sometimes they do bad things, like when you bite another child. That's a bad thing. But, that doesn't make you a bad girl. Remember when you gave Michelle your cookie because she was hungry? And



when you picked up the crayons without being asked?" Karyn's voice was soothing as she spoke to the child.

Susan nodded with a proud smile.

"Well, see! Santa knows about those things, too. And he's just as proud of you as I was."

The girl beamed and threw her arms around Karyn's neck. Karyn stood beside Susan until it was her turn to see Santa. Karyn took her hand and helped her up the steps and right into Santa's lap. When the girl started telling Santa about all the things she'd done that Karyn was proud of, Karyn turned and descended the steps, a single tear escaping her eyes.

"Thank you, Karyn. You always were the only one who could handle her."

Karyn turned on the woman, "I was always the only one who tried to understand her, Connie. How dare you tell her she's a bad girl and make her think Santa will do something bad to her?"

"Now, Karyn," another woman said.

"Misty, you're the owner of the daycare, and I know you want to do what's best for these children. But, I've got to tell you, I think you made a mistake. I am what's best for these children." It was obvious Karyn had kept her feelings bottled up for a long time. "If I can't work with them, at least get someone in there with patience. Someone who cares about them and won't ruin their self-esteem by telling them horror stories about Santa to get them to act the way she wants them to act and make her job easier!"

Karyn looked at the children, then turned away, shoulders slumping. Jared could sense regret in Misty's eyes as she watched Karyn walk away.

Karyn watched her feet as she walked. She seemed to forget Jared was there and nearly walked right into him. Jared clasped her arms in his capable hands. She looked into his eyes, then buried her forehead into his chest as if she was embarrassed at letting him see her cry.

He placed his arms around her and held her to his chest gingerly.

"I'm sorry," she said meekly.

"Why? Because you're hurting?"

She nodded in answer.

Making sure his voice was soft and she could hear the sarcasm in his tone, he said, “Yeah. I’d apologize for that, too.”

She slowly raised her head to look at him; her eyes moved back and forth searching his for answers to an unspoken question.

“Never apologize for your feelings, Karyn,” he whispered, kissing her forehead. “They’re yours and they’re real, and you deserve to feel however you feel. Pain, joy, anger, sorrow... they all let us know we’re alive.”

She trembled in his arms. “But... I’ve been hiding my feelings all my life.”

“Because someone made you feel like you were a bad girl when you cried?” Karyn froze, and Jared knew he’d hit the truth.

“God, Karyn, I’m so sorry.” He pulled her in his arms in an attempt to keep her safe. No wonder she reached out to Susan the way she did.

## Chapter Six

“How is it you seem to know me so well?” Karyn cut another piece of smothered chicken and watched the food intently to avoid his gaze. She wasn’t sure she liked someone else knowing the turmoil going on inside of her. She’d spent her whole life keeping her feelings bottled up.

“I listen. To what you say, and what you don’t say. Why are you avoiding eye contact?”

She looked up at him and smiled. “I’m not so sure I’m comfortable with all this.”

“I know. I can tell you’re uncomfortable. Every time the conversation turns to your feelings, you shift in your chair.” Jared took her hand. “But, even though it’s uncomfortable for you, you brought it back up.”

“I did, didn’t I?” Karyn had a fleeting thought that it wouldn’t be so bad being near someone so in tune to her emotions. Jared seemed to understand her. “You know. I’m the only person in Susan’s life who has ever tried to understand her. Her mother abandoned her to be raised by her aging grandmother, who apparently wants her to sit down and shut up until she’s grown. I thought I understood her because...”

“You’ve been through something similar.” Jared said. The cool confidence in which he drew conclusions shook her to the core.

“Yes. But, now, I’m wondering if maybe it has as much to do with trying to understand her?” Her statement came out a question, and she mentally kicked herself. Why couldn’t she be as confident?

“You’re wondering if maybe I understand you because I’m the only person who’s tried to understand you?” Jared sipped his wine as he waited for an answer.

“How do you do that?” Karyn was literally in awe.

“I want to get to know you better, Karyn. And, you’re making it hard for me.” Karyn felt her face flush and opened her mouth to apologize. “Don’t feel guilty about that. It’s just your nature. You don’t talk about yourself. In fact, that’s the one topic you seem to avoid. So, I have to listen closer, that’s all. Once I discovered that you’re reaching out to Susan because she reminds you of you, it wasn’t that hard.”

Karyn squared her shoulders and sighed. Maybe it was time to talk about what

happened. “You’ve yet to ask me about my eye or how I lost my job.”

“I figured you’d tell me... if and when you were ready.” Jared took her hand in his again. It warmed her and gave her courage. For some reason, she didn’t feel like she had to hide anything from Jared. She smiled inwardly as she thought maybe she couldn’t hide anything from him.

“I think I’m ready.” Karyn told him about Roland and the daycare. About losing her child, then losing her relationship with the children she’d grown to love. She told him about trying to find another job, and being turned down because of her appearance. Jared listened and never judged her. He didn’t ask her why she’d moved in with a man she barely knew. He didn’t accuse her, ask her what she could’ve done to prevent it, and he didn’t seem to think it was her fault.

“I’ve been blaming myself.” She confessed, as much to herself as to Jared.

“Do you think that’s where the blame should be placed?” Jared asked, his eyes and his voice were both tender. She knew he didn’t think she was to blame.

“I don’t know what I was thinking, allowing him to move in with me after only knowing him for six months, allowing him access to my checking account and credit cards. But, no. He had no right to do what he did. It’s not my fault.”

Karyn smiled through her tears. She’d cried more today than she had in weeks. She needed to cry. Jared was right. Her anger, her sorrow, they were her feelings and she had a right to them. But, at the moment, she didn’t feel sorrow or anger. She felt... relief. Her burden didn’t seem quite so heavy any longer now that she had shared it.

She enjoyed the rest of her meal, knowing she’d be going home to a warm house with lights and a brightly lit Christmas tree. Jared seemed to sense her change in mood, and was a charming host, making her laugh and smile throughout the meal. By the time the check arrived, her cheeks hurt from smiling so much. She tried in vain to remember another time in her life she’d smiled so much it hurt.

Just as Jared was signing the receipt and putting his card back in his wallet, a man approached the table. Tall and slender, the man was dressed much like the man from the jewelry store.

Jared shook hands with the man. “Hi, David. Karyn, this is a colleague of mine, David Massey. Any luck replacing Joanne yet, David?”

The man sighed as he shook hands with first Jared, then Karyn. “No luck at all. Joanne was special. She really understood children. Those applying know marketing, but don’t seem to know children at all.”

“David’s opening an arcade slash day care at the mall next month, and his manager quit on him without notice.”

Karyn gasped. “Why would she do that?”

David laughed. “Found out she was pregnant and ran off to elope with the baby’s father. He lives in Dallas, though, so she moved there.”

Karyn thought of her own baby and fought back tears. Apparently Jared noticed because he reached beneath the table and squeezed her hand.

“Problem is,” David continued, “apparently the perfect woman was in the mall today, and I completely missed her.”

“Why do you say that?” Jared asked, not taking his eyes off Karyn.

“A group of children came through on a field trip with their daycare to see Santa. According to that elf of his, the kids were crying and didn’t want to see Santa when a woman from the crowd stepped up and consoled the little girl causing the raucous. The little girl then sat on Santa’s lap without incident and the others followed suit. The woman apparently not only cares about children, but understands them.”

Karyn’s eyes met Jared’s and her jaw fell. Her heart raced in her ears. Could this be real?

Jared looked at her and smiled. Karyn’s heart drummed in her ears and she could barely hear his next words. “David, you’re standing next to the woman the elf was describing. I was standing there when she did it.”

“You’re kidding?” David exclaimed. He eyed her with excitement. It was then that Karyn realized that, aside from Jared, David was the first to look at her without disdain or contempt since Roland left. “Would you like to work with children, Karyn?”

“More than anything.” Karyn refused to allow herself to believe it could be possible. “You’re not put off by my bruises?”

“No ma’am. They’ll fade before the arcade opens. I make no assumptions based on appearances. Had a rough life growing up. I don’t hold grudges against the ones with bruises. It’s the ones that deal ‘em I can’t stand.” Karyn felt herself warm at David’s

words. Finally! Someone understood. “I see by the look on your face that your mind is racing. What ideas do you have for the day care/arcade?”

“Well, I’ll have to flesh out the details, but I’d like to see the arcade offer games that will get the kids active. I don’t like places where kids go and just stand. A few pin-ball and arcade games won’t hurt, but I’d like to see games that will get kids active.” Karyn knew her enthusiasm could be heard in every word she said, and she hoped Mr. Massey wouldn’t be put off by her ideas.

“Like the basketball games and the dance game?” David asked, apparently interested.

“Yes. And rope climbing or mountain climbing. Something just to get them active. And those virtual reality games that forces kids to use their whole bodies as a controller rather than just their fingers and thumbs.” Karyn’s enthusiasm was spurred by David’s interest.

“I want to hear more. Here’s my card. Come visit me the day after the holidays, and we’ll talk. We intended to start Joanne at \$30,000 a year, but if that doesn’t work for you, we can negotiate that the day after Christmas. There will be a small sign on bonus, and you’ll start as soon as your references and drug test clear. How does that sound?” She must have had a dumb-founded look on her face because David chuckled.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Jared said, asking the question she was too afraid to ask, “but it sounds like you’ve practically hired her on the spot.”

“I practically have. When I want something I go get it,” David chuckled again. “My date’s waiting. See you tomorrow, Jared,” he shook Jared’s hand then offered his hand to Karyn, “and I’ll be seeing you after the holiday.” Karyn shook his hand and nodded, at a complete loss for words.

*Could this really be happening?*

## Chapter Seven

Snow fell about them as they walked hand-in-hand in the moonlight. The snow crunched beneath their feet, and the snow reflected the moon's beams so that the night was brighter than it would've been otherwise. Jared pulled Karyn to a stop and stepped directly in front of her.

Oh! How he wished he could take credit for the beautiful smile that now spread across her face. His heart drummed in his ears and beat against his chest. His breath caught in his throat at the thought of never seeing her again.

He wanted to beg her to stay with him forever. To beg her not to do what he knew she'd intended to do earlier this morning. Now that he knew her better, the thought terrified him. Not only the thought of losing her. No. The thought of her feeling so desperate, so alone, and so sad nearly brought him to his knees.

There was so much he wanted to say to her. Would she believe him? How can you tell a woman you just met that you loved her?

Words failed him, but actions didn't. He cupped her beautiful face in his rough hands and kissed her tenderly. Passionately. When he broke the kiss, he pulled her into his arms and held her there.

"What's wrong, Jared?" He was amazed that she asked the question without pulling away to look in his eyes. She trusted him.

"Nothing. I... it's nothing." The snow was falling at such a rate now that her hair was covered with a light layer of wet snow. "I guess I better let you go inside. You'll be sick."

The sigh she expelled was visible as a puff of fog in the light of the full moon.

"The temperature's really dropped. I can see my breath," she said, taking his hand. "Won't you come inside and warm up?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"It was my grandmother's," Karyn placed the tray of cocoa on the table in front of the couch and sat beside Jared. "Most of the ornaments are. She made them. One for every year from the time I was born until she passed away. This one's my favorite." She

gently lifted the handcrafted, hand painted ornament from its place on the tree. “I watched her make this one. I had already stopped believing in Santa when she made it, but this ornament was nearly enough to make me believe again,” she confessed.

“That’s beautiful. Look at the detail. Did she use a mold?” Jared asked.

“No. She never did. All of these were hand crafted. Every line, every dimple, every little hair on the teddy bear he’s carrying.” Karyn was amazed by Jared’s obvious interest in her grandmother’s craft.

“I love Christmas. What about the rest of these? They look similar to the one’s your grandmother made.”

“Not nearly so perfect or beautiful. I made these others. One for every year since my grandmother passed, except...” Karyn’s voice trailed off.

“Except this year.” Jared’s voice dropped, becoming tender. He cupped her cheek tenderly. “You were too sad to make one this year.”

A tear escaped Karyn’s eyes, and she nodded.

“And that makes you feel guilty.”

She nodded again.

“Is it too late to make one this year?” Jared ran his hands through her soft curls.

Karyn felt her eyes widen. No. It wasn’t too late. The ornament could be dry and ready to paint Christmas day if she started immediately. It may even be ready to hang on the tree by Christmas night.

“What are you going to make?”

“A dove. It’s a symbol of peace and hope.”

“And love,” Jared added.

Her heart raced as he pulled her into his arms, practically sitting her on his lap. She buried her fingers in his hair and felt his warm hand cupping the nape of her neck. His hand found its way under her sweater and cupped her lacy bra. Her breath caught in her throat, and she turned into the palm of his hand encouragingly.

Jared pressed his head against her chest. She marveled at the feel of his soft hair against her bare skin.

“I want you so bad, Karyn,” he said kissing her gently. Then he pulled away from her. “But I want you for more than just one night. And I don’t want to rush this. I want



no regrets.”

“What if we regret not doing this tonight?” She teased.

“We have plenty of time,” he soothed, kissing her lips gently. “Can I see you again tomorrow?”

Karyn thought she felt him tremble and wondered if he was having as difficult a time controlling his passion for her as she was in controlling her desire for him. She nodded in response.

“If I don’t leave now, I won’t be responsible for my actions.” Jared laughed, but the huskiness in his voice testified that he was not joking.

## Chapter Eight

Karyn watched Jared leave and expelled a sigh. She'd wanted him to stay the night. But, she'd been worried about how he'd perceive her afterwards. She didn't know why; she'd just met him today, but she didn't want to risk losing him so soon.

Karyn wasn't the type to believe in love at first sight, but she couldn't deny her feelings for Jared. What she felt was more than desire, more than lust.

She shivered. Her body wanted him. Deep down she knew that her heart did too. If she gave in to her desires too quickly, she'd fall too deeply, and her heart would be broken when they went their separate ways.

"I've got to get busy doing something, or else, I'll go nuts," she told no one in particular, then went to her cabinets to gather the materials she needed to make her ornament.

Moments later, she was so intent on mixing the ingredients that she didn't hear the kitchen door open and close behind her. It was the gust of air cool air that caused her to turn.

"Roland! Wh... what are you doing here?" Karyn backed away as she spoke.

"It's my home, too, Karyn. Or did you forget that?" His eyes landed on the rose in the vase on the counter. "I see you did forget. You've replaced me already. Who is he?"

Karyn backed into her living room and was nearly to the door when he reached her. Roland had the vase in his right hand as he followed her. He threw the vase, which shattered. Water, glass, and petals were now embedded on her tan carpet. Karyn trembled with fear as Roland picked up what remained of her rose and threw it out onto the snow.

"I see you've completely moved on. Who will your gifts under the tree be for this year? What's his name?" She could smell liquor on his breath as he stalked past her. He took her wallet from her purse, and threw the purse on the floor, spilling the rest of the contents. She eyed the pill bottles, remembering all too well why she'd wanted to take them tonight. Roland opened her wallet and took out the six hundred dollars that

remained after paying her utility bills and buying food for Christmas day. Her heart sank. All of her money—gone.

Roland looked at her maliciously, as if wanting her to beg him not to take her money. “I guess you won’t buy him anything this Christmas.” The evil laugh that followed this statement sent chills down her spine.

Roland began pulling ornaments from the tree and throwing them against the wall. Karyn’s heart sank as Roland chucked her grandmother’s ornament across the room.

“No!” She screamed and cried, throwing herself across the room and picking up the pieces. The delicate, beautiful Santa ornament was now in three pieces. She pressed the three pieces to her chest and rocked back and forth, crying.

In one swift motion, Roland picked her up from the floor with her hair. She screamed and tried to hold her hair to keep him from ripping it out.

Roland slapped her hard across the face and flung her against the far wall. A sharp pain shot through her head, and she slumped to the floor. She had a fleeting thought that maybe he’d kill her this time. Roland hadn’t shut the door, and snow was quickly covering the carpet near her head. She looked up and thought she saw Jared before her eyes fell shut.

\* \* \* \* \*

Karyn’s felt her pulse pounding in her head. A warm liquid, a sharp contrast from the cold air and snow falling all around her, ran down her cheek. Vaguely, she wondered what the thick liquid was before realizing it was her own blood. She opened her eyes wondering how long she’d been out. Apparently, it had been only seconds. A loud crash signified that the rumble in her home brought down the rest of her tree. She turned her head toward the sound to see Jared over Roland. His right knee was planted in the middle of Roland’s chest and he punched him repeatedly in the face. Karyn clung to her grandmother’s ornament and let her eyes again fall.

## Chapter Nine

“Have you been watching over me all night?” Jared looked up from his book and smiled.

“Hey! How are you feeling?” He put his book aside and moved closer to her. It was obvious he was worried about her and probably hadn’t slept all night.

Then it occurred to her. She may have slept for more than one night. Had she missed Christmas?

“What day is it?”

“Christmas eve. The doctor thinks you’ll be able to go home tomorrow,” he pushed her hair back away from her eyes, and she started to cry. “What’s wrong, honey?”

“I don’t want to be in the hospital over Christmas,” she said, burying her face in her hands. She wanted to cook a big dinner the way her grandmother always had.

Then she remembered her stolen money and her ruined Christmas tree and cried harder.

Jared didn’t try to stop her tears. He let her cry and held her while she did so. After a few minutes, she asked, “What happened to Roland?”

“He’s in a room two floors down. A police officer is guarding his room at all times, and he’ll probably be transferred to his jail cell just in time for Christmas dinner. He can’t hurt you anymore,” he said tenderly.

“He’s in the hospital? What happened?”

“He cracked a few ribs, lost a few teeth, and broke a nose.” Jared chuckled. “He’s lucky, though. I almost shot him for what he did to you. Oh!” he added as an afterthought. “They found this on his person. We figured it belonged to you.”

Jared handed Karyn some crumpled bills. She counted it and sighed in relief. She thought she’d never see her money again.

“Oh. And, I have something else to show you.” Jared opened the drawer on the bedside table and took out a small ornament. It was her grandmother’s Santa ornament she’d been clinging to when she lost consciousness. He’d glued the pieces back together.

Tears again sprang to her eyes. “How did you?”

“It was cleanly broken. It needs touching up with some paint. I thought you’d be better at it than I would. I knew it meant a lot to you.”

“It does. Thank you.” She held the ornament to her chest and cried.

“I’m going to talk to the doctor. We’re going to try to get you out of here today.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It was nearly ten o’clock when they finally arrived at Karyn’s home. The nurses took forever getting them the proper forms and bringing around a wheelchair. As much as she wanted to be home, Karyn dreaded seeing the mess... her grandmother’s ornaments scattered on the floor, her tree in disarray, and her vase shattered on the floor. It would all remind her of the terror she felt when Roland was there.

Jared came around to her side and opened the door. He took her hand and helped her out. She was in pain, but Jared had coaxed her into taking pain medicine before leaving the hospital to help on the ride back. She knew her pain would be a lot worse now, if she’d not done so.

She favored her left side and Jared held that side for support. Tears nearly forced their way through her barrier when she saw the rose lying on the snow, several of its petals spread out around it. Roland had left it bruised, broken, and not whole, just as he’d left her.

“It’s okay, honey. I’ll get you dozens more!” Jared told her, and she smiled past the lump in her throat.

“You never told me why you came back.” Karyn knew she was just stalling. She dreaded the tears she knew would be unleashed when she walked into her home.

Jared’s eyes told her he knew what she was doing, but he humored her. “I was going back to the mall to get some paperwork, but when I got to the stoplight down the street there, the elf from the mall stopped me and urged me to come back here. She was so insistent, I turned around.”

“Weird.” Karyn said. “Did she say why?”

Jared chuckled. “She said Santa’s ball said you were in danger. She may be psycho... or she may be psychic. I don’t know.”

Jared helped Karyn limp to the door. He must’ve felt her hesitation, because he

stopped once they reached the porch and asked, “Are you ready for this?”

Tears stung her eyes, but she nodded.

He opened the door, and guided her through it.

Karyn gasped. “Jared! How did you manage to do all this?” Her floor was clean and free of broken glass, water, or petals. Her tree was lit up and new ornaments decorated it along with the old. But, what surprised Karyn the most were the numerous gifts wrapped under the tree.

Jared looked as surprised as she felt. He looked into her eyes and whispered, “I didn’t.”

“But then who?” Karyn asked, still staring at her small Christmas miracle. Karyn’s sad heart was filled with joy. Jared tapped her shoulder to get her attention and pointed up. Her gaze followed his to discover they were standing under mistletoe. Jared tightened his arms around her and pinned her with his stare. The last of her melancholy melted away with the passion of his kiss, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, determined to hold onto him.

Outside, a jingling of bells caught their attention, and Jared and Karyn rushed as fast as her bruised side would take her back through the opened door. A sleigh pulled by eight restless reindeer hovered three feet above their heads. The mall-Santa and the annoyingly giddy elf who had pulled Karyn into the jewelry store looked down at them and smiled.

“Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!” Santa shouted as the reindeer lifted them up and carried them out of sight.

*The End*

*Happy Holidays*  
*from*  
*Trista Bane*  
*And*  
*Twilight Fantasies Publications*

**About the Author:**

**Trista Bane grew up in cotton country, but is not your typical Southern Belle. Trista's been using her overactive imagination to escape from the mundane since she could put pen to paper. She makes her home with her husband and three children in Northeast Arkansas. Trista teaches high school and college courses by day and escapes into the fantasy worlds she creates by night. Her husband, Mack, is her muse and biggest fan.**

**For more information on this author be sure to visit her website at [www.tristabane.com](http://www.tristabane.com).**

Read an interview with this author:

<http://fallenangelreviews.com/Interviews/2006/Oct06-Jayne-TristaBane.htm>

Sneak Peak from *Touch Me, Tease Me*

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(Contains language and situations that may not be suitable for readers under the age of 18)

Gabrielle was restless. She'd had a good day at work, but as she wandered around her small condo, she couldn't get motivated to do anything. It was a Friday night and she was stuck home. Oh, joy. She didn't want to look over Monday's script and she wasn't in the mood for T.V. It was like she was waiting for something to happen.

She shook her head as she put some music on. One of her favorites...*George Benson's Greatest Hits*. The soothing music helped some, but she still felt unsettled.

"*That's the time...I feel like makin' love,*" she sang softly as she stared unseeingly out her window. Problem was...the only man who made her feel like that thought she was a whore.

A knock on the door startled her. Looking at her watch, she frowned. She wasn't expecting anyone. Walking over, she looked through the peep hole. Her eyes narrowed. What was he doing here?

"Gabrielle?" came his deep voice. "I know you're in there. Come on...it's time we talked."

She rolled her eyes. "I think you've said plenty, thanks very much!"

Outside, Clint cursed aloud. She was so fucking stubborn. "And I've tried to apologize. Come on, Gabrielle. Five minutes. That's all I'm asking. Hear me out and then if you want me to, I'll never bother you again."

The door flew open. She stood glaring up at him.

"Promise?"

He couldn't help but grin at her contrariness. But he'd do whatever it took to get her to listen to him. "I promise. Can I come in?"

Grudgingly, she stepped back and he walked inside before she could change her mind. Clint looked around her apartment, finding it colorful and well kept. A wall of books gave away her love of reading, just like the big screen TV and collection of videos



showed him she was a movie buff as well. He walked over and pulled out the collector's edition of *Star Wars*. "Sci Fi fan, huh?"

She grabbed it out of his hand and stuffed it back in its place. "What do you want, Clint?"

He wanted to shake her for her attitude, but he knew that wouldn't be the best way to get back in her good graces. "I...I want to tell you I'm sorry for what I said. I was way out of line. I don't have any excuse."

Gabrielle stared at him, her arms folded across her chest. "You think that makes it better?"

He clenched his jaw, hard. "No...hell. I know I was a bastard. I deserved the cockroach pizza. In fact," he grinned. "I'm surprised you didn't put a dead rat on it.

"They were *out* of dead rats." Her voice didn't hold a glimmer of humor.

He cringed. "Oh, Jesus... Look...I know I fucked up. And I know why you got so angry. After what you've been through, it's a wonder you didn't kick me harder."

Her eyes narrowed. "Just what do you think you know?"

He chanced moving closer. "I read about the lawsuit. You should never have had to go through that!"

Gabrielle went very still. Her emotions went into high gear. "It has nothing to do with now."

Clint snorted. "The hell it doesn't. You went through hell and then here I come along and treat you the same way. You have every right to be pissed at me."

"Fine," she bit out. She hated talking about it. All she wanted was for him to leave. "Then I'm right, your wrong and we're done!"

"God damn it," he exploded, losing his temper. "I was wrong. I'm trying to apologize. At least give me that."

Her eyes flashed. "Don't yell at me! If I don't want to forgive you, I don't have to. It's what makes America great!"

He swore a blue streak. "You have got to be the most stubborn woman in San Diego! Hell...in the whole state of California! I don't know why I even bother. Only one way to get through to you!"

She saw the glint in his eyes and tried to back away, but it was too late. His arms pulled her close and his mouth swooped down on hers.

Was he fucking up again? Clint didn't know and for the moment, didn't care. He drove his tongue deep into her mouth. He figured it would have two benefits, one; she'd shut up and two; he'd get to taste her again.

He groaned, deeply. He didn't care if she was the most stubborn woman on the planet; he needed to touch her. Holding her, ignoring her struggles, he plundered her sweet mouth. His tongue tested, teased and taunted as it danced in her mouth. He nipped and sucked, wanting nothing more than to ease her down to the floor and bury himself inside her.

Finally, when he'd just about given up all hope, Gabrielle shuddered and relaxed. Her body pressed against his, instead of pushing away. Carefully, he reached down and lifted her arms to wind around his neck. Then his lips met hers again and this time they were filled with even more passion.

She knew she was lost as soon as he'd touched her. What was it about this man that made her want to throw all her caution to the wind and take what he was offering? She'd fought, hating what he was about, but even doing so, she could feel the desire lick through her like wildfire. Never before had she needed a man like she needed Clint.

Gabrielle stood on her tiptoes, trying to get closer to him. His body was hard with desire. She could feel the length of his erection pulsing against her stomach. At that moment in time, she wanted nothing more than to pull him to the floor and forget all that had transpired between them.

She was surprised when he pulled away, his chest heaving as he tried to control himself. He took her face in his hands. "I want you more than I want my next breath," he muttered. "But I'm not going to make love to you...yet. Not until we've talked."

For more information on *Touch Me, Tease Me*,  
and CJ's other works visit CJ's website

[www.cjengland.com](http://www.cjengland.com)