



LOVE COMES FOR
VALENTINE'S DAY

JENNIFER CONNER

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Chapter 1

Kara Hayward stifled a yawn. Things were tough all over, and she was happy she had a job. Actually, she had three. She had to do what paid the rent and right now that included working part-time at Make-Me-A-Bear in the Southbridge Mall.

She pinned on a bright smile and drew her attention back to the round green kiddie table. She sat with a boy and a girl she guessed to be around six. Bear making and babysitting. It was a service the store offered. For an extra fee, parents could leave their precious little ones for up to two hours of peaceful shopping at the mall. The area was cordoned off to resemble a medieval castle and was run on a check in-checkout system with matching ID wristbands for the parents and child.

The red-headed boy tugged on her gingham print apron and asked, “Are you married?” Not waiting for her answer he added, “You’re pretty.”

“Thanks.” It wasn’t that she didn’t like little kids; she’d never been around them enough to feel comfortable. “No Billy, I’m not married.”

“But it’s almost Valentine’s Day!” the blonde girl exclaimed. She was missing her two front teeth so her words came out with a lisp. “You need to be married if you’re a big person and it’s Valentine’s Day!”

Kara laughed. “You don’t need to be married. You are just supposed to have someone special to spend the day with.”

“Do you?” the girl asked.

“What color eyes should your bear have?” Kara tried to distract them with a change in the conversation. “And then after that, you get to stuff your bear and pick out an outfit for them to wear.”

There was a commotion out in the mall. Kara tried to see over the castle wall but her view was partially obstructed by grey blocks of Styrofoam. Angry voices filtered in, making her and the kids jump up from their seats to see.

A crowd formed around two young men yelling at one another. One swung his fist and punched the other in the face. The crowd held their cell phones high to capture the event and egged them on. One clutched the other’s coat and swung him around and into the Make-Me-A-Bear store. He crashed through the flimsy castle wall and landed on the floor next to her and kids.

Kara cried out and grabbed the children by the backs of their shirts. She yanked them behind her just as the man fell across the table. “What are you doing?” she yelled at the two fighters as one came after the other. “Stop!

There are little kids here!”

They ignored her pleas and escalated the fight.

Brittany, her co-worker screamed and ran behind the counter that held the cash register. The store was small and crowded with merchandise so there wasn’t much room for the fighters to maneuver as more people streamed in. One of the fighters hit a table filled with bear merchandise and it flew into the air.

The little girl next to her was crying. Kara turned the kiddie table over on its side and pushed the two kids behind it for protection. “Stay there!” she ordered. The dark-haired man tripped over the collapsed wall and tumbled towards her.

She shoved with all her might at the man’s back as he stepped closer. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Brittany’s red apron. A second later spray missed the man, who’d dodged to the side, and hit her square in the face.

The burning and gagging sensation was instant. Pepper spray. Brittany told her she’d bought it for protection. But not from her!

Someone in the crowd yelled, “Let’s get out of here, the cops are coming.”

“I have an outstanding traffic warrant!” Brittany screamed again and, in her blurred vision, Kara saw her run out into the mall with the can still in her hand. Kara stumbled back and fell to her knees coughing and choking. Her eyes were on fire and she couldn’t breathe.

She patted her hands across the carpet and crawled across the floor until she found the two children. “Are you okay?” She had to rely on what they said since she could barely see them through her hazy vision.

The girl choked back a sob. “I want my mommy.”

“I know honey, but for now I want both of you to hold onto my skirt and not let go until I tell you to, okay?”

“Okay,” two little voices said.

Kara wanted to rub her face, but didn’t want to get any of the pepper spray on the children. Her body quivered as she fought for restraint. She reached down and felt the two little hands clutched tight in the material of her skirt.

At least the kids were okay.

Chapter 2

Jack Hartman heard the commotion of people running and shouting before he saw it. Having eyes in the back of his head, his cop's instinct took over.

Something was wrong. He broke into a run.

Seeing the turmoil was inside Make-Me-A-Bear, his heart stopped. He reassured himself he hadn't heard gunfire. He grabbed a teenager and demanded, "What happened?"

"Fight. But it's over. I missed it." The teen looked disappointed as he shook Jack's hand off and went back to his friends.

Jack pushed his way through the crowd. Two cops, Brad and Fred from the precinct were huddled around a young woman, a boy... and his niece, Ada. Thank God. He let out the breath he'd been holding for the last few minutes.

The woman had a protective arm around the kids.

"Uncle Jack!" his niece cried out.

"Are you okay?" he asked, and dropped to his knees to hug her.

Jack started to take the girl's hand but the woman stopped him. "Sorry, sir. No one is taking these children until I can verify that your security bracelets match."

He held up his wrist. "It's right here."

"Yes..." she paused. "But, that's the problem, sir. I have pepper spray in my eyes and I can't see your bracelet." She sniffed, and broke hold of the little hands only long enough to wipe her running nose.

"Hey, Jack," Brad said when he spotted him. "What are you doin' here? This is you day off. You go lookin' for trouble?"

"Isn't this your sister's kid?" Fred asked as he pulled a pad from his pocket to take notes.

"Yeah," Jack mumbled. "She was here making a bear... I thought she'd be safe."

"I'm safe." Ada pointed to the green overturned table. "The lady tipped that circle over and told us to hide behind it. And then she pushed the guy in his back that was fighting."

Jack glanced over at the destroyed section of the store.

"Why don't you take your niece home," Brad said. "We'll deal with this."

"I can't tell if they're police?" the woman whispered, more to herself. "I can't see them." Panic slid across

the young woman's face as she grasped the kids' hands tighter.

Jack looked at her. With her blood-red eyes and running nose, she was in pain but stayed with the children. His respect for the woman went up tenfold. How could he be upset? This is exactly what he would have done in this situation. Being half blind, she had no idea who they were from Adam.

He turned and answered Brad, "Ada and I are going to stick around here until the boy's parents come back. With children this small, you can never be too careful with their safety."

"These bad men came in and broke up the castle, and then another lady screamed and sprayed icky stuff in her eyes!" Ada wagged a finger.

Ada tried to pull her hand free and run to him, but he stopped her and stepped back. "Ada. Everything's fine. I'm here and it looks like this nice lady helped you too. I want you to stay with her for a few more minutes."

"Ma'am." He touched the woman's arm. "What's your name?"

She flinched and blinked. He knew she was trying to focus her eyes as she dabbed at her running nose. "Kara. My name's Kara."

"I know your first priority is keeping these kids safe. Do you have a back room with a sink?"

She nodded.

He bent down and asked the little boy. "What's your name?"

"Billy."

"Ada and Billy, I want you to keep hold of Ms. Kara's apron... just like you are. You're doing a great job."

The two little faces beamed after receiving the praise. He smiled down at Ada and fought to keep his voice steady. Ada was so little... God, she was so young and helpless.

Jack reached for Kara and said, "Take my arm. The kids are attached to your skirt and not going anywhere." The four of them wound through the destroyed store and into the back employee lounge. He led Kara to the sink and turned on the water. "I'm going to guide you over the sink."

He spotted the small refrigerator in the corner and mentally crossed his fingers as he opened the door. The antidote he needed, a half-gallon of milk was there.

Jack tried to keep the conversation light. "So who's the healthy eater here? Milk and a salad?"

"It's mine," Kara admitted.

"Lean over." He guided her head down toward the sink. "I'm going to pour milk over your eyes to clean out the pepper spray."

She followed his instructions. He emptied the jug over her face and then used his hand to scoop a stream

of water.

They did this for a few minutes until Kara said, “It helped. Thanks.”

Jack lifted a clean towel off the counter and handed it to her to dry her face.

She blinked again. “It still hurts, but I can see slightly better.” She looked down at the kids who were still clutching her apron.

“They’re fine,” he said.

Kara nodded, and he thought she was going to cry but instead, she tipped her chin up. “Can I see your bracelet, sir?”

“Jack.” He held up his wrist. She stared at his bracelet for a long moment and then the girl’s. “They match. I’m sorry I didn’t believe you before, sir... but...”

“Jack, and that’s fine. Under stress, lots of people would have just let them go.” He looked around. “Are you the only one working today?”

Kara shook her head. “No. My co-worker, Brittany, freaked out when the fight started. She’s the one who shot me with pepper spray.”

“You got sprayed by your co-worker? Man— that’s messed up.”

She smiled. Even with her red nose and eyes, Kara was pretty. Her hair was a deep auburn and her face a perfect heart shape. “Brittany doesn’t deal well under stress. I’m sure she’s still running.”

“I’m happy Ada was here with you and not your ditsy co-worker.”

Brad stepped into sight. “Miss, if you’re ready, I need to take a statement.”

They turned when they heard an agitated voice from within the store.

“Where’s my baby?” They came out to find a large woman waving her hands in the air. “Billy!” she shouted and ran towards the boy to scoop him up.

“Can we see your bracelet, ma’am?” Jack asked. “The lady here needs to match them for security purposes.”

The woman harrumphed as she held out her arm. Kara checked the bracelets and nodded.

“You’ll be hearing from my lawyer! What kind of a place is this?” the woman yelled and took a step toward Kara.

Jack stepped in front of her. “It’s a place that kept your child out of harm’s way when a random fight broke out in the mall. Instead of suing, I’d be thanking this woman.”

“And just who the hell are you to be telling me what I should do?” The woman glared at him.

“Detective Hartman, ma’am.” He reached in his back pocket, pulled out his badge and flipped it open.

“Would you like a piece of paper to write down my badge number? The little girl here with your son is my niece.

I can tell you, this woman did everything she could to put the children’s safety first.”

She coolly eyed him before her gaze slid to Kara. “I asssuuume I get the bear for free.”

Kara looked even glummer, if possible. “Billy didn’t get a chance to finish the bear. We were just about to stuff them when....”

The lady grabbed her son’s hand and grumbled, “Don’t bother. We won’t be coming back and I’ll tell my friends to stay away.”

“I’ll give you a free certificate...” Kara started to say, but Jack cut her off.

“Let her go. It’s not worth it,” he said under his breath as they watched the woman stalk off. “Some people. I swear.”

The two officers called mall security and made a sweep of the mall, but the fighters were long gone. Kara would need to give descriptions.

He thanked Kara again, took Ada’s hand and led her out into the mall. He wanted to get away from this place as quickly as possible. It was Sunday night, and the mall was closing in about fifteen minutes. He’d take Ada to the burger and ice cream place next door.

Ada could forget about her afternoon and drown her bad memories in hot fudge. He’d spend the time trying to figure out what he was going to tell his sister.

Chapter 3

By the time Kara finished with the police questions and gave a description of the two men, the mall was deserted. The officers offered to escort her to her car, but embarrassed to admit she didn't have a car, she refused and headed out on her own.

Lifting her cell phone from her pocket she verified her guess, she'd missed her bus by five minutes. The next one, this time of night on a Sunday, was in two hours. Rain pelted her face as she looked up. "Really..." Kara said to the skies. "You got anything else today... because... really."

She shouldn't have said that. Murphy's Law always proved her wrong. A car slowed as it approached the deserted bus stop. Great. What now? A serial killer?

The Audi's back electric window lowered and a little body struggled with the straps of a child's car seat. Ada's face popped into view. "Miss Kara. Uncle Jack saw you sitting there and said we're giving you a ride home."

The window in the front of the car slid down. Jack smiled. A dimple creased the left side of his face. His dark hair and the shoulders of his jacket were damp from rain.

"I couldn't ask you to do that. I live a ways out of town."

The little girl screwed up her face with an exaggerated frown. "That's silly. You're not going to sit out there in the rain when you can get in Uncle Jack's car and be warm and dry."

"I didn't say it." Jack laughed and shrugged a shoulder. "From the mouths of babes. But I was thinking the same thing."

Kara tipped the screen of her phone to read the time again. It hadn't miraculously forwarded. Out of excuses, she asked, "Are you sure? It won't be an inconvenience?"

"I think after your day, it's the least I can do. And, if you say it was all in the line of duty... you are taking my line." He shifted the car into park, got out and came around to her side.

Kara slowly stood and looked down at her ruined outfit.

"Leather seats," he said. "You can't harm them. Ask destructo back there, even crayons, McDonalds orange soda and play dough comes out."

"Pepper spray?"

"Yep." He smiled a charming grin, and she felt something flip in her stomach. She must just be hungry.

"You'll be doing me as big of a favor as I am doing for you. First, I have to drop Ada off at her house. My

sister will be home from work. Ada is going to be full of stories about what happened. With you there, you can tell Theresa, first hand, what happened. Then maybe she won't lop off my head." He braced his hand on the top of the driver's door.

"Today, I'm not the person you want protecting you."

"That's where you're wrong." Jack grinned as she slid into the car and he closed her door.

When they brought Ada home, it played out like he'd expected up to the part where his sister would be angry.

Kara explained in detail what happened. Theresa understood, and even thanked her.

His sister looked tired. She'd pulled another double shift at the hospital. But, she still found time to sit on the couch next to her daughter and listen to her long drawn out six-year-old's story with even more details.

He asked Theresa if he could help with anything. She turned down his offer and said she was giving Ada a bath and then both were off to bed.

Jack drove Kara to her apartment at South Hill. He parked and followed her up the sidewalk and cement steps to her apartment door. She thanked him for the ride as he watched her reach in her pocket for keys.

Her hand shook as she tried to get the key in the lock. He took the key and opened the door for her.

"You have a friend who can stay with you tonight?"

"No." She looked at him. Her eyes were still red rimmed from the spray.

He sighed. "Don't take this wrong, and I swear I don't want this to come out weird. But I would feel a lot better if you let me come in for a little bit until you are settled in. No monkey-business, I swear."

He could tell she was fighting to try and make the right decision. "I really don't want to be alone... but I..." her words trailed off.

"I owe you for taking care of Ada this afternoon. I'll only stay an hour."

"Sure."

Kara opened the door, flipped on the light, and tossed her keys in a cup. Jack followed her into the living room. It was homey with hand-crocheted throws and pillows scattered about the furniture.

"Have a seat." He motioned to the couch. "Let's give us a minute to unwind. Do you have anything to drink?"

I'll pour us a glass. My nerves are a little frayed too."

"There's a bottle of wine over the refrigerator and the glasses are on the side."

He poured two glasses and came back into the living room. She hadn't moved from where she'd sat.

"Let's take off your coat. It's soaked."

Kara pulled her arms free and he draped it over a chair to dry. She picked up the glass but didn't take a drink and stared into the dark liquid.

"It was fearless what you did today." Jack tried to think of something to say to make her feel better, but his words didn't work.

Instead her chin quivered and a tear slipped down her cheek, followed by another. Her hands trembled. He removed her glass and set it on the coffee table.

She looked at the ceiling and shook her head. "I told myself I wasn't going to cry. Damn it. And here I go..."

Jack scooted close and wound an arm over her shoulders. "Hey, it's okay."

She looked at him as more tears streaked her face. "Do you understand? It could have been so... bad. Those kids were scared. Ada was crying! What if I hadn't been able to stop the fighting and the kids were hurt? They were in my care."

He took her chin and tipped her face until their gazes met. "But they weren't. You can't play the what-if game."

"I don't understand," she said.

"I'm a cop. I am telling you, you can't play the what-if game. If I'd arrived five-minutes sooner, the guy wouldn't have been shot. Or, I could have helped get that lady from the car. Superheroes help everyone. Everyone else helps those we can. We thank the powers that be for letting us get there on time. It's not easy, but the rest is out of our control." He leaned forward and took out Kleenex so she could wipe her eyes. "Be careful. There could still be pepper spray on your face."

He got off the couch and wandered into the kitchen. He opened a cupboard and removed a large bowl and then filled it with warm water. He put in a few drops of dishwashing detergent then got Kara from the living room.

He held her hair back. "Dip your face in the water it will help clean off any spray we might have missed."

She looked over her shoulder. "You seem to know a lot about pepper spray."

"I've gotten it in my eyes a few times too. It's no fun."

"You had a rampant co-worker?"

"Nothing that dramatic." He lifted her hair out of the way while she dipped her face. He lifted a dish towel

and patted the water off her face. Most of the redness in her eyes was gone leaving them a warm chocolate brown with long, dark lashes. He swallowed. Kara was more than pretty, she was beautiful. "I'm going to flip on the football game. Go take a shower and I'll wait to make sure you're doing okay before I leave."

She took the towel from him and folded it. "Do you do this for all your crime victims?"

"Nope. None." He smiled when she did. "Have any chips?"

"Will tortilla chips and salsa do?"

"I'd love it, thanks."

He turned on the game and waited until he heard the shower turn off. In another minute Kara emerged from the bedroom in yoga pants and a zip-up hoodie.

"Feel better?" he asked.

She sat next to him. "Any other tricks you know for pepper spray? Now, I have a headache."

"I bet you do. Adrenalin wearing off will do that. Why don't you sit down and I'll get you a glass of water. Aspirin?"

"Already took two. I have to warn you. I'm not much of a of a football fan."

"That's okay. Not much of game. I'll shut it off." He pushed the button on the remote and the screen went dark.

They sat in the quiet room until Kara said, "Thanks for staying. I'm a big baby."

"You had a really rotten day. Everyone needs someone. Ten years came off my life today when I ran towards your store knowing Ada was inside. Theresa's had some hard times since her divorce. She won't take money, but family's family and I need to be there for her. She's been through a lot. You know. Rotten ex-husband who doesn't want any involvement in Ada's life. I take Ada as often as I can when she's at work. Theresa trusts me with her daughter... and..." He drew in a deep breath.

Kara took his hand. "This guy I know said not to play the what-if game. You seem to be a person who always makes sure others are safe, that's why you left Ada at Make-Me-a-Bear. It's usually safe. I think it's more than your profession, it's who you are or you wouldn't be here and I would still be standing waiting for the bus."

He nodded, not sure what to say. Kara said what he needed to hear, and hopefully earlier he'd done the same for her. It had been a long time since there was a woman he felt he could open up to.

They sat and listened to the rain patter on the windows. In a few minutes Kara's head slumped down to rest on her arm. She'd fallen asleep. Jack drew her onto his shoulder. He didn't want her to be cold.

Chapter 4

As she slept, Jack tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She mumbled something and frowned. He wanted to wipe the frown from her face. It was a good thing he hadn't been at the store earlier. He would have broken those numb-nuts' heads for scaring her and the kids. This woman had no police training to handle situations like she'd been thrown into, but Kara did everything he would have. She put the kids' safety before hers.

Kara was someone he didn't see every day. Brave. Different. Special.

He'd just stay awhile longer until she woke up, he didn't want to disturb her sleep.

Kara looked forward to the evening with her girlfriends and telling them what happened over a pitcher of chocolate raspberry martinis at Shillings.

"That is a crazy story! Who would think Make-Me-A-Bear was a dangerous place to work? I think we should drink to that," her best friend, Zoe, exclaimed as she raised a toast her direction.

"I don't want to think about bears or fights or... anything." That wasn't true, because she didn't want to stop thinking about the tall, handsome detective who came to her rescue. "Let's talk about a more pressing issue. Our Valentine pact."

The four women nodded solemnly.

Kara fished in her purse, pulled out a headband, and pushed it over her hair. The band was red with a feather in the middle and a metal wire with a dangling piece of greenery. "Mobile mistletoe. I was the first one to make the pact." She crossed herself and brought her hands together.

They all laughed and took another drink from their martini glasses.

"But now it's close to Valentine's Day, not Christmas!" Jess exclaimed.

"I know. But, because of our pact, I am forced to wear this damn thing until someone kisses me." Kara spread out her arms and tipped her head in a bow.

"All year?" Jane asked as she raised an eyebrow in question. "You're telling me if you don't find a man to kiss you, you're going to wear that thing ALL year?"

"Yep." Kara let go of a sigh. "That's what I said, and I'm good to my word... unless of course I find a man, then... who gets it next?"

"Me!" Zoe shouted. "I'm all in on this man-or-bust game!" She waved down the waiter, but he walked by.

"Good. But I think I'll have it awhile longer, so you're safe." Kara thought of Jack. Could he be the deal breaker for her? What kind of kisser was he? Tender? Or would he be strong and demanding? He seemed like a man who took what he wanted, but she would never know because there was no call.

She gave him her number so he obviously hadn't wanted to see her again. She checked her answering machine a dozen times from work making herself a little crazy. It was only a day since she's seen him, but he should have called by now. "What's wrong with me anyway? Even when you think you've found a potential Mr. Right, he never calls."

"Wait a minute, back up. Did I miss something? You found Mr. Right?" Jess asked.

“Did I say that?” Kara tried to back step as heat flushed her cheeks. “No, I meant I was looking for Mr. Right, and with Valentine’s Day just around the corner, it looks like all the good ones are taken.”

Kara’s gaze drifted over the dance floor when the beat from the D.J.’s music stopped. The tall man next to the stage turned. Jack? Why was he here? That giddy feeling of seeing him again shot through her. “That’s him,” she whispered loudly to her girlfriends.

They all swiveled in their seats to stare.

“Don’t look!”

“What do you mean don’t look. That’s him is always followed with us looking,” Jane said cocking a perfectly shaped black brow.

“You mean the Mr. Right that you denied having a minute ago?” Jess stated. “There are two guys over there, but I’m guessing you are referring to the tall, drop-dead gorgeous one and not the one who looks like a bowling pin and old enough to be your father,”

Kara licked her teeth to make sure there was no lipstick or chocolate streaked on them. She ticked back to remember if she’d combed her hair before she left work, and then straightened her sweater.

Jack and the man he was with turned and headed toward them.

She pasted on her best smile and attempted a nonchalant girly wave with the tips of her fingers.

Something flicked over Jack’s face, but nothing else changed. His face was a sheet of stone.

No recognition. No smile. No dimple.

“Do you know that woman?” the man asked Jack.

“Nope,” Jack said. “She must be waving at the guy behind us.” Without breaking stride, he and the man walked by her table and out the door.

Her smile slid from her face like hot fudge off cold ice cream.

“Oh-oh...” she heard Zoe mutter and felt her friend’s arm around her shoulder.

Kara realized that’s what girlfriends are for. They try to force you to make lemonade out of life’s lemons. Which reminded her, lemonade was not what she needed. She stuck fingers in her mouth and whistled. “Hey! Buddy! Can we have another pitcher of drinks here?” Her shoulders slumped forward. “What is wrong with me?”

“Nothing. There is nothing wrong with you or any of us.” Jane shook her head making her sleek dark hair wave. “We’re all in the same boat, so no pity parties from you.”

“It’s hopeless.” Kara waited for her glass to be refilled, and then pointed to the headband. “Here’s to mobile mistletoe and being single. Cheers!” She downed half of her drink.

Jack’s concentration broke when he saw Kara at the bar. He had to get Kildergard out of there as fast as possible. He’d been in the field the last two days under deep cover. Kildergard was the ex-manager of the bar and talked the current manager into letting him use the adjacent storage facility to sell ‘Bath Salts’. Last week, a local girl showed up at the hospital and had to have her arm amputated after injecting the crap. The use of Methylone was on the rise. After finding where the girl got the stuff, Jack knew Kildergard’s operation needed to be shut down. Now.

He’d worked with the DEA on this case for months, trying to get into the inner circle and convince Kildergard he was a legitiment buyer for a major operation. Now, he was close enough to be shown where the main supply was stashed.

Jack ran a thousand scenarios through his head to how this night would go down. Not one of them involved seeing Kara with her friends.

He glanced at his watch to verify the set up would be in place. Just as Kildergard pulled out the case and opened the lid, Jack said the code word, “ice.”

His words through the wired mic he wore signaled the DEA unit. The door crashed open and heavily armored men streamed in with guns leveled.

“What the...” Kildergard shouted, as he stumbled to run.

Jack grabbed him by the back of the shirt and yanked him back.

The DEA officer slammed him to the floor and pushed his knee in the middle of Kildergard’s back. Reaching in his back pocket, he pulled out cuffs. “Thanks, Hartman. Good work. We got it from here.”

The sooner the DEA took this loser off his hands, the sooner he could go over to Kara’s and TRY to explain his actions.

Should he buy her flowers... or candy... no flowers.

Hell, he doubted she’d even talk to him.

Chapter 5

Jack called a few times on Kara's cell phone, but she didn't answer. It was eleven when there was a knock on her door. She glanced around her apartment thinking Zoe forgot something when she brought her back.

Kara sighed, flipped off the T.V. and made her way to the door. "What did you forget, Zo."

"It's Jack. I know it's late, but can I talk to you for a minute?"

Kara slid the chain on, and opened the door a few inches. It was raining again, and his dark hair was wet.

"I know..." Jack said and held up a hand. He looked miserable. "I have a lot of explaining to do."

"Go on."

"Can I come in for five minutes so I can explain? If you still think I should go, I will without an argument."

What am I doing? Kara slid off the chain and stepped to the side to let him in.

"I was going to bring flowers or Valentine candy, but decided, instead, on the truth." He hooked thumbs in the front pockets of his Levi's and rocked forward.

"Valentine's Day isn't until tomorrow." She crossed her arms. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

"Oh, yeah, I do. Because back at the bar, you cannot believe how sorry I am for putting that look on your face."

"We spent a couple hours together after I was pepper-sprayed." Kara shrugged a shoulder. "It wasn't a lifetime commitment and it wasn't even a 'date'."

"When I left, you gave me your number, and then I didn't call. I can only imagine what a creep you think I am, and then the bar..." He blew out a breath. "I was working undercover and couldn't call. Nothing in my life ever seems to be timed right. It's crayons or meth dealers... as I said, my life's not easy. I wanted to ask you out the first night, but you'd just been traumatized. It wasn't right."

"You wanted to ask me out... on a date?" Kara asked.

"I like you. You're down to earth and have a level head. I like that in a woman. You made me feel something I haven't felt in awhile... and you're beautiful."

If he wanted to, he could stop there. "Go on."

He continued, "Half the time, I don't even think it would be fair to ask someone out on a date. I can't keep track of my own life, it changes so suddenly."

"I can imagine between your job and helping with Ada, it must be a little crazy."

"I ask a girl out, and then I need to cancel to go pick up Ada. It's a real deal breaker when you have a

precocious three year old tagging along. In the last six months I haven't gone out with anyone."

"I like Ada. And, I like that you're willing to postpone a date to help your sister."

"Really?" He looked surprised.

"You also take your job seriously. That was why you blew by me at the bar. You were working. I understand."

Kara couldn't help but smile. "Did you catch him?"

"Yeah, we caught him. What I really wanted to do was bounce his head a few times off the cement for showing up the same time you did. What are the odds?"

"That wasn't his fault."

"Everything tonight was his fault. Air is his fault," Jack grumbled.

"I forgive you. Though, I think my ego may take a few days of heavy recovery."

"Could any of this recovery time include dinner with me tomorrow night?" He smiled. The dimples were back too.

"You're asking me out? Tomorrow? On Valentine's Day?" Kara's heart stuttered. Jack's smile combined with the shadow of a beard, made him look rakish.

"Tomorrow it's just the two of us. No misunderstandings, undercover jobs in the way, or Ada... hopefully."

"I'd like that," she admitted.

"I'm past my five-minutes, but I have one more question. Why were you wearing that funny looking headband back at the bar? Did you lose a bet with your girlfriends?"

Kara felt her cheeks flush with heat. "No actually, I made a bet with them."

"You can't leave it at that. Now you have to tell me."

"I made the bet a few months ago. This couldn't be any more embarrassing if I tried." She paused and bit her lip. "It's mistletoe. It was for Christmas, but since I didn't get a guy to kiss me, I swore I would wear it the rest of the year until I did."

"You haven't kissed a guy since Christmas?"

"No."

"Good to know. Is it still in your purse?" Jack asked.

Kara looked around, spotted where she dumped her purse and pulled out the headband.

"Put it on." The twinkle in his eyes was mixed with male assurance. He strode to her and stopped, then tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. "I'm thinking it's time for you to ditch this headband. What do you think?"

He leaned in and kissed her.

The simple press of his mouth to hers quickly turned into something amazing. Bracing his hands against the wall, he pressed his body against hers and deepened the kiss. Whatever she was forgiving him for; she was ready to forgive him again.

Jack wrapped one arm around her waist from behind and pulled her even closer. With the other hand, he reached up and slipped the headband off. “Does this get passed on to the next friend who made the pact?”

“Zoe. She’ll get it,” Kara whispered. His mouth was inches from hers.

He kissed her again as he tossed the headband off on a side table. He drew her hair back on her neck and nuzzled his nose to her ear. “I like passing things on. It’s repurposing at its best.”

Kara sighed, relishing the feel of his lips against the oh-so-sensitive neck. Every bone in her body melted. If he didn’t have her by the waist she would have slid down the wall. Jack was tall and strong making her feel delicate and desired.

When he finally broke the kiss, he stepped back. “I have to warn you again, I have a crazy life and a crazy schedule. Not everyone can handle it.”

“I’m willing to try. How about, instead of going out to dinner, I make something here. Then if you get called to work, I can throw it in the crock-pot. And, if you have Ada, I’ll stock up on chicken nuggets.”

“You’d do that?”

Kara grinned. “I’d do it for another kiss.”

Jack’s gaze dropped to linger on her mouth. Dinner-in may be the best idea she’d had in months. She kind of hoped Ada wouldn’t be with him this time.

He caught her face in his hands and covered her mouth with his. They were both breathing rapidly when they broke apart.

“How about before dinner, we deliver the headband to your friend?” Jack said.

“It’s mobile mistletoe. It’s time it traveled to someone else’s care.”

As Jack kissed her goodnight, Kara wondered how many holidays they would celebrate together.

Valentine’s Day would only be the beginning if she had a say.

Zoe dipped her spoon in the carton of Haagen-Dazs, and sighed. She was spending another Valentine’s Day

with Chunky Monkey and not a hunky. There was a knock. She swung her legs off the couch and looked through the peep-hole.

She opened the door. “Kara? What are you doing here?”

Kara stood next to a tall, handsome man who had his arm around her waist.

“Hey,” Zoe said. “Isn’t this the guy from the bar?”

“This is Jack. Let’s say he broke the pact and now it’s all yours, babe.” Kara held the headband and dangled it between two fingers. “I’m beginning to think it’s lucky, and not a curse after all. By the way, happy Valentine’s Day.”

Kara slipped the dangling mistletoe headband over Zoe’s hair and pulled her door shut.

About the Author Jennifer Conner

Jennifer Conner is a best-selling Northwest author who has sixty short stories, books, and audiobooks. She writes in Christmas Romance, Contemporary Romance, Paranormal Romance, Historical Romance, and Erotica.

She has hit Amazon's top fifty authors ranking and her books have been #1 in sales.

Her novel *Shot in the Dark* was a finalist in the Emerald City Opener, Cleveland, and Toronto RWA contests.

Jennifer is an Associate Publisher for the indie e-book publisher, Books to Go Now who resides in the Seattle area. They pride themselves in helping new authors get their foot in the door with well-edited manuscripts, professional covers, and platforms uploads.

She lives in a hundred year old house that she grew up in. Her semi-small town holds an interesting mix of resident hillbillies, yuppies and Navy Seals. And of course Seattle, only a few miles away, is the birthplace of Starbucks so coffee is always on the check list. She blows glass beads with a blow torch, (which relieves a lot of stress and people don't bother you) and is a huge fan of musicals.

She loves to hear from her readers. Please email her at jenniferconnerwriter@gmail.com

For Updates about new releases as well as exclusive promotions, visit Jennifer's website and sign up for the VIP mailing list. <http://www.jenniferconnerbooks.com/>



WANT ANOTHER?

The Mobile Mistletoe Series

*Love Comes for Valentine's Day, Saint
Patrick's Day, The 4th of July and
Halloween.*

Love Comes for Valentine's Day

At Christmas, Kara Hayward makes a pact with her girlfriends She's wearing a headband of mobile mistletoe until a man kisses her.

The problem is it's now Valentine's Day.

Will Kara be stuck wearing the headband of shame the rest of the year, or will she find Mr. Right in a place she never expects?

Love Comes for Saint Patrick's Day

Zoe and her best friends make a pact to wear a Christmas mistletoe headband until a man kisses them. It worked for Kara, and Zoe's next in line.

Now it's Saint Patrick's Day. Zoe's met handsome Irish businessman, Carrick Kelly, but can she lay her heart on the line for someone who may be gone in a few days. Her job depends on Carrick signing a contract with her advertising agency, but he doesn't think much of her boss's ideas.

Torn between growing feelings for Carrick and work commitments, will Zoe get a little luck of the Irish to help her make a decision?

Love Comes for the 4th of July

Jess Caldwell is the third in line to wear the mistletoe headband until she's kissed. But it's her best friend Kara's wedding, Jess needs to keep her mind on designing the flowers and not on the fact that Kara's older brother, Darrin, who she's had a crush on for years will be there.

Darrin's happy to be moving home, and what is even more of a pleasant surprise is seeing her again. Jess isn't the geeky girl he remembered when he left. But after all the mean things he said in the past, will she give him another chance?

When things go wrong, more than fireworks fly for this 4th of July wedding. Will love be in the air?

Love Comes for Halloween

Now it's her turn.

Until she's kissed, Jane, is the last one of her girlfriends to wear the Mobile Mistletoe. Feeling pressured by her friends, she jumps on her dad's motorcycle and heads out on the open road. But she doesn't get far before it breaks down. What else can go wrong? Will she be eaten by a bear? Gage has a past he wants to forget. Retreating to the mountains, where he can build custom bikes and cars in seclusion, he wants to give back for the mistakes he's made.

Neither Jane or Gage are looking for a relationship, but isn't Halloween the perfect time of year to scare up some love?





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