

A Teddy Bear For Christmas



Missy Jane

A Samhain Publishing Freebie

To my readers, for those of you who have read my first paranormal release, *They Call Me Death*, you will be familiar with Bjorn Berendsen. He is a character that has stayed with me over the past year, wanting to know when his story will be told. *A Teddy Bear for Christmas* isn't his entire tale, but it is a taste of what's to come. Hopefully it will whet your appetite for more.

A Teddy Bear for Christmas

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A Teddy Bear for Christmas

Bjorn Berendsen probably wasn't the smartest, strongest or most handsome man in the room, but damn! The way he filled out his designer suit had Jane's mouth watering and her knees quivering in anticipation of his touch. Just a handshake. That's all she was guaranteed from him in this setting but she would take what she could get. Too bad no one had thought to hang mistletoe in the conference room. She quietly snorted a laugh at that thought. Rumor had it the shifters didn't even celebrate Christmas anymore. Their differences didn't matter at all to her. Never in her life had she thought she could fall for a man she barely knew, but there was just something about him.

After three months of emails, phone calls and web conferences, finally meeting Bjorn face-to-face was mere minutes away. She'd seen his picture and knew all the pertinent facts her company had compiled into a neat manila folder marked with his strong name. But none of that could've prepared her for his masculine presence. In the flesh, Bjorn was the epitome of all she'd imagined a male bear shape-shifter to be.

His deep voice rumbled and his lips quirked into the hint of a smile. Jealousy shot through her as Maxine, Jane's boss, threw her head back and laughed. The throaty purr brought other male attention Maxine's way and Jane cringed. Next to that blonde beauty Jane was as plain as a brown paper bag. She looked over Bjorn's muscular physique, from his shoulder-length auburn ponytail down a strong torso to his thick thighs. She envied the slacks that encased his perfection so intimately and couldn't help a sigh of defeat. Maxine's pixie-like physique was definitely better suited to such a fine male specimen than *Plain Jane* ever could be. She'd long ago grown used to being the least feminine woman in the room.

Regardless of what he might think of her as a woman, Jane still had a job to do as lead on this project. Maxine would oversee this first face-to-face meeting and then disappear into the background. Jane would have to see Bjorn every day until it was done. She was known for her professionalism and tenacity on difficult projects. It was time to prove both. After a deep, calming breath she shoved her insecurities aside and waited to meet the man whose deep voice had haunted her dreams for months.

Bjorn noticed her the moment she'd entered the meeting room and it had taken all of his control to remain where he stood. She was exquisite, much better than their few video conferences had revealed. Dark brown hair fell in loose curls over her shoulders to the middle of her back. Her navy blue business suit accentuated her form, feminine but not at all fragile, strong enough for a shifter's attention. He only wished she wore a skirt rather than slacks so he could admire those long legs. She was tall for a human woman, perhaps six-foot. He would barely have to bend to meet her luscious lips. His gaze dropped to her shapely hips and a primitive growl of approval formed in his chest. He fought the urge,

concerned he might frighten the human woman at his side who was trying so hard to keep his attention. She didn't hold a candle to the beauty across the room, but since she was head of the Human Council for Environmental Rejuvenation, he was forced to speak to her for the moment.

"Ms. Smyth—"

"Maxine, please. I insist you call me Maxine, or even Max as all of my closest friends call me."

She laughed as if it was a grand joke, pulling the room's attention her way. Bjorn forced a smile and cleared his throat. He didn't like overly flirtatious human females. With every word out of her mouth she seemed to inch closer until he wondered if she planned to jump on top of him soon.

In contrast, the brunette stood in an empty corner, head down and hands clasped in front of her. She waited patiently as a dozen conversations fluttered around the room. Bjorn wanted to grab her and carry her away from this meeting, away from this building and into the woods where he made his home. He wasn't comfortable in a suit, especially in a high-rise surrounded by humans. However, he was here at his Alpha's bidding and it was a miracle the humans had allowed him into their country at all. Sandulf would not be happy if Bjorn messed this up.

"Maxine, the Alpha sends his apologies at not being able to attend this auspicious event. He hopes you will forgive his absence and allow me to speak on his behalf. Speaking to me will be as if you are speaking to him and I have his full authority."

She blushed and waved a hand in front of her face. "Oh, you're so proper and formal. There's really no need for an apology, Bjorn. Any member of Sandulf's cabinet is more than welcome here."

Bjorn bristled at her use of the Alpha's given name more than his own. He'd spoken to her half a dozen times by phone and twice that by email, but never in person. As far as he knew she'd never met Sandulf either. It was a distinct show of disrespect to address him so familiarly, but as a human she wouldn't know that. He took a deep breath and glanced at the brunette to calm his emotions. She was looking at him and their gazes locked. His heart pounded in double-time as he admired the flush filling her oval face.

Maxine laughed again and stepped into his line of sight, blocking the brunette and annoying him. Without thought he frowned down at her and she took a step back.

"Oh, uh...I see Jane has arrived. She's the project manager. Have you met her in person yet?"

"No."

"Well, let's take care of that."

Bjorn fought for control as he silently followed Maxine across the room. The urge to shove her and everyone else out of the way was great, but he controlled it and hoped the intense desire clawing at him wasn't visible in his gaze. Jane looked like a deer caught in headlights once she realized they were headed her way, but her spine straightened and her chin lifted. Bjorn admired her courage after the fear he'd originally glimpsed.

"Jane, there you are. This is Mr. Berendsen from the Shifter Council, the man in charge of this little project."

Jane's eyebrows went up and Bjorn stifled a laugh. This project was many things, but little definitely wasn't one of them. Over the next two years the people in this room would be working on a series of buildings at all of the major checkpoints along the wall that separated the Combined Human States from the Federal Nation of Therianthropes. They would be crossing points where both species could meet in neutral territory. They would also serve as community centers for the general public. It was a massive undertaking already two years in the making, though Bjorn had just come on board a few months back. The humans were pushing to open the first one on Christmas Eve.

Jane stepped forward and extended one elegant hand. Bjorn took it into his much larger palm and turned it, raising it to his mouth for a simple kiss. He kept it light and quick to keep Jane from possible embarrassment. Though he'd instantly known he wanted her, many human women scoffed at the idea of being with a shifter. He had to tread carefully until discovering how she felt. She gasped and blushed again, but didn't pull her hand away. He took that as a good sign.

"It is my greatest pleasure to finally see you in the flesh, Jane."

Maxine huffed and crossed her arms but he barely noticed. Nearly all of his attention was on the beauty before him and what her reaction would be. A tentative smile graced her perfect mouth and he breathed easier. She bit her bottom lip and glanced down at where he still clasped her hand.

"Thank you, Bjorn. It's a pleasure to meet you too."

Hearing his name on her lips had lust spiking through him. He smiled back and stepped closer to her before releasing her hand. As he'd suspected, she barely had to tilt her head to look him in the eye. Maxine, realizing she'd been forgotten, simply turned and walked away.

"You didn't answer my last email," he said quietly.

Confusion lit her face for a moment before she shook her head. "I'm sorry. I was certain I'd responded to all of them before this morning's meeting."

He tsked and looked around to be sure they had privacy. No one seemed to be paying any attention to them as Maxine had already engaged another man in conversation.

"I'm not referring to a work email, Jane. The one I sent you last night was of a more...personal nature."

She blushed again and he considered how lovely her pale skin appeared in that shade of pink. Her whispered reply created added intimacy between them and tightened his body to full awareness.

"But you just wanted my picture. I knew we would meet today."

He chuckled and couldn't resist running a finger down one of her well-pressed lapels.

"All suited up for this very proper business meeting. You know that's not what I asked for."

Amazingly she blushed harder. "Bjorn—"

"Everyone ready? Please have a seat."

Maxine's voice broke through the thin veil of seduction Bjorn was weaving and irritated him, but he had a job to do. Unfortunately, the lovely Jane Ridding wasn't his main concern. He sighed and motioned toward the conference table. She stepped past him and he settled a hand at the small of her back. She looked up at him in surprise before immediately turning her gaze back to Maxine. Bjorn didn't give a damn. He planned to make Jane his and the sooner everyone knew that the better.

Jane sighed in relief as she left the conference room. The meeting was finally over. Seven hours, with only a thirty-minute break for lunch, and they had finally settled some major disputes between Sandulf and the human president. Now that the papers had been signed, more work could begin. Construction on the first building had begun a few months back when Bjorn stepped in for the shifters. It was scheduled to open in two weeks, on Christmas Eve, with a huge celebration. She couldn't wait. Bjorn had hinted at staying in CHS until after the holidays, with a not so subtle request to spend his free time with her. Tingles shot up her spine at the thought.

The meeting had been sheer torture as she'd been sitting beside his overwhelming presence the entire time. At first it had been hard to concentrate when she thought about his request. A picture of her *at play*. She hadn't replied because she was afraid of how he would take it. Could she handle a man like Bjorn? Today had proven she could sit through seven agonizing hours of arousal just from his masculine scent. Even without a shifter's enhanced sense of smell, he made her mouth water.

She had left him in the conference room talking to one of the engineers. The hot promise in his gaze nearly had her running, but she'd been sure to say goodbye rather than slip out unnoticed. She paused and let out a short laugh. As if that were possible. He'd kept her well within his sights all day, going so far as to wait outside the ladies' room for her after lunch. The only one who had seemed to notice was Maxine but Jane didn't care. She certainly couldn't deny that his attention was welcome.

The elevator dinged and the door slid open for her entry just as warmth covered her back. The hair on the her nape stood on end as a hot breath whispered across one ear.

"You weren't going to just leave me, were you?"

Bjorn's deep voice made her shiver. She paused in the act of stepping onto the elevator to turn and answer him, but he gently nudged her forward.

"Bjorn, I—"

"Come on, my beauty."

He corralled her into the elevator with his larger body. She turned to face him as he pressed a button and the door slid closed. Then his full attention was aimed at her and Jane's breath caught in her throat. She nervously licked her lips and his gaze focused on the slight movement. He leaned in until she was pressed against the wall. She never thought to refuse him as he covered her mouth with his. An involuntary moan escaped as his tongue slid over hers in a sensual duel. She wrapped her arms around his neck and slid the fingers of one hand into his thick hair. He grunted as his ponytail loosened but held tighter when she attempted to pull back.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled.

He kissed her rather than respond until the elevator dinged again. She froze but he stepped out of her arms, straightened her jacket and turned to stand sedately at her side. The door slid open.

"Jane, how are you?"

She pasted on a smile to cover her nervousness and nodded at the two men from the Research and Development department.

"Ned, Bill, good to see you. This is Bjorn Berendsen. We're working on the shifter project together."

Both men shook Bjorn's hands before moving to the opposite wall. The elevator was average size, but the human men were able to keep a few feet of open space between them and Bjorn. Jane hid a smile and wondered if they'd even realized they were doing it.

It took no time to reach the ground floor and exit the elevator. Bjorn immediately grasped her elbow and walked to the exit if was the most normal thing in the world. Her pulse sped up at his touch, but she continued to smile and nod at passersby as if she was in complete control. Her house was near the outskirts of the border city of Liberty, Oklahoma. With the roads still being rebuilt, she normally stayed at a hotel during the workweek rather than trying to drive back and forth every day. The streets were nicely paved downtown but once you left city limits they were still in ruins. She had once mentioned this to Bjorn but didn't know if he remembered.

"Where are you staying tonight?" she asked.

They stopped on the sidewalk and he pulled her to him. There was a definite chill in the air but being so close to him warmed her. He ran his hands up and down her arms, over her thin sweater. She'd forgotten her jacket in her dash to leave the conference room.

"I'd like to stay with you," he said quietly.

Her head jerked up and she looked at him in shock before looking around to be sure no one else had heard him.

"Bjorn...we barely know each other."

He frowned and ran the backs of his fingers down her cheek.

"Shifters see things differently than humans, Jane. I want you and I'm not afraid to say it. I've known this since the first time your image graced my computer screen. Getting to know little bits and pieces of you has only reaffirmed that knowledge. If you don't feel the same I will leave you alone, but I suspect that you do."

Confusion warred with her desire. She did want him and couldn't think of a good reason not to act on it. As far as her job went, there were no set rules about this type of situation. Working with shifters was not the norm and Bjorn wasn't employed by the human government like her. He worked directly for the Alpha of FNT. Basically he was a diplomat.

"Bjorn, I don't know what to say."

He leaned closer until he was only a breath away. "Say what you feel. I'll never ask for more."

The sound of a throat clearing close by shattered their moment and she pulled back to look past Bjorn's shoulder. Of all the people she didn't want to see right then, or ever again, Flint topped the list. She tensed and Bjorn reacted, spinning to face the unknown while keeping her securely behind him. Flint stepped back when he saw the look on the larger man's face, but he didn't leave as she had hoped.

"Uh, Jane? How you doing?"

A low growl rumbled in Bjorn's chest and Jane threw her arms around his waist. The last thing she wanted was for him to attack Flint out on a public street. He would be shot dead before she could even get word to his Alpha.

"Bjorn, this is Flint. Flint, Bjorn. Now, what do you want? This isn't exactly your neck of the woods."

Bjorn chuckled and even seemed to relax a bit at her comment. Perhaps he'd thought she was expecting Flint to show up? Nothing could be further from the truth. She had ended things over six months ago with the lying, cheating asshole. The sooner he disappeared, the better.

"Uh, I was wondering if we could talk. Just you and me."

Jane rolled her eyes, though neither man could see it. "No, thank you."

Flint sputtered and Bjorn turned to face her again as if that was the end of it. He cupped her face in his large palms and kissed her.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

She smiled and nodded just as Flint stepped closer.

"Hey! What the fuck, man? I'm trying to talk to my girl."

As if that wasn't stupid enough he went one step further and grabbed Bjorn's shoulder. Jane gasped and tightened her grip but it was like trying to hold a mountain. He gently pushed her away and spun back to face the stupidest human male on earth. Jane heard Flint sputter again and could barely make out him moving back, but it was too late. Bjorn growled again, this time loud enough for the whole street to hear, and closed the distance with one large step.

"Your girl? You think to call the *woman* with *me*, yours?"

"Uh...I...uh..."

"Human, you are sorely mistaken."

An hour later, Bjorn released a pent up breath as they finally stepped into the hotel room. It had been years since he'd felt such intense anger well up so quickly. If the human patrol hadn't shown up when it did he might have seriously harmed that idiot, Flint. What kind of name was that anyway? He sighed as Jane's delectable derriere preceded him into the lavish suite. She was angry and rightly so. He usually had better control, but being near her had shot that all to hell. Now he needed to apologize and hope he hadn't ruined their evening.

She stopped at the wet bar and put her purse down before turning to face him. Her neutral expression gave no hint of her mood. He stopped a few feet away and slipped his hands into his pockets to keep from grabbing her.

"I'm sorry," he said simply. One elegant eyebrow shot up and she looked honestly surprised by his apology. He decided to continue. "I didn't mean to lose control like that with your...friend. I'm sorry if I upset you by acting like an animal."

She frowned and closed the distance, raising her chin to stare directly into his eyes.

"First of all, Flint is not my friend. It's been months since he was my anything and I just want to forget he even exists. Second, I didn't see it as a loss of control and it didn't upset me." She slipped her arms around his neck and pressed her body into his. He held his breath. "And third, you are part animal, Bjorn. I know and accept that and all it entails. If anger makes you growl I can live with that."

He couldn't help the feral grin her words evoked, but she didn't even flinch.

"That's not all that makes me growl."

"Oh? Are you willing to tell me what else does?"

He chuckled and turned to pull her into the bedroom. "Perhaps you can discover that for yourself before tonight is over."

She giggled as he led her to the side of the bed. "Perhaps. You know, I've always wanted a life-sized teddy bear to share my bed with."

He kicked off his shoes and placed his hands on her waist, lifting her effortlessly to the bed. She let her shoes fall to the floor to join his.

"Did you now? Well then I'll have to be sure to share your bed often so you don't feel the need to replace me."

He straightened and unbuttoned his shirt. She leaned back on her elbows and watched as he quickly removed his clothes. Once he stood completely naked before her, he began to undress her at a much slower pace.

"What happened?" she asked breathlessly. "You seemed to be in a hurry to get naked."

"I was in a hurry to get my clothing out of the way. But, you I want to unwrap slowly. I prefer to savor my treats."

He proved his point with kisses and nips at each inch of exposed flesh. By the time he had her completely naked, she was writhing and panting beneath him. His animal instincts warred with his human conscience. He fought to go slow and not frighten or hurt her in any way.

"Bjorn...please...make love to me."

He looked into her eyes and his heart melted. So much trust and caring reflected back his own feelings. She may not love him. They simply hadn't had enough time to establish that yet, but he was hopeful about their future.

"Don't worry, precious, I plan to make love to you many times tonight and perhaps again in the morning."

She laughed and shook her head. "Just remember I'm only human. I don't have your stamina."

He smiled and looked over her gloriously naked body, a light sheen of sweat making her appear to glow in the lamplight.

"Only human," he chuckled. "I find absolutely no fault in that."

She smiled back as he leaned in to kiss her senseless and make good on his promise.

Jane held the package carefully as she tried to decide on how to open it. Bjorn laughed and shook his head.

"If you like the paper that much, I'll buy more."

"Patience, Mr. Berendsen. I'm getting there."

He just grinned and watched as she found the edge of the tape and peeled back a flap of paper. It took no time to get to her Christmas present. She laughed out loud and pulled it from the box.

"Oh, Bjorn, I love it!"

She held the black teddy bear against her chest and leaned in to kiss him. He allowed the kiss and then turned the bear so she could see the bag around its neck.

"This is so you'll never have to sleep alone, even if I'm away. But in here is something else."

Her smile faded but despite her trepidation she opened the velvet bag. Her relief was instant when her fingers didn't find the familiar round shape she wasn't quite ready for. Someday soon maybe, but not after only two weeks. Here it was Christmas Eve and she was with the man, no...the shifter of her dreams. With a slow exhale she lifted a flawless diamond bracelet from the velvet pouch.

"Oh, Bjorn! It's absolutely beautiful."

He kissed her before taking it from her hand to put on her wrist.

"Not nearly as beautiful as you are. Maybe in a few months you'll have a matching ensemble." Before the butterflies could settle in her stomach, he leaned in and kissed away her protests. "But for now, let's just enjoy tonight."

She smiled in agreement and let him slip her arm through his. After one final kiss, he led her to the festivities. Tonight was a historic event for humans and shifters alike. Jane wanted to laugh at the irony. It very well could be a historic event for her love life as well.

About the Author:

Ms. Missy Jane is the alter ego of a Texas mother of four who has been married to the same wonderful man for fourteen years. About seven years ago Missy finished reading a book by Mercedes Lackey and thought "Now, what if..." and a monster was created. Missy now spends most of her time lost in worlds of her own making alternately loving and hating such creatures as vampires, shape-shifters and gargoyles (to name a few). When not writing, she spends her time reading, taking photos of her beautiful daughters and training her husband to believe she's always right. Excerpts from Missy's work can be found at www.msmissyjane.com.

Also by Missy Jane from Samhain Publishing:

They Call Me Death

Humans are no longer at the top of the food chain...

My name is Alexia Williams. In my world, North America is divided between north and south—but not the way it's taught in the history books.

After losing my family to the shifters, I joined the Combined Human States Army. Now I find myself on the front lines, defending the wall between my species and theirs. My mission is simple: keep the animals on their side by whatever means necessary—and I'm good at it. I don't talk to them. I don't sympathize with them. I sure as hell don't admire them...until one saves my life.

Andor isn't like any shifter I've ever met. He's a three-hundred-year-old golden eagle asking for help finding missing shifters who may be in my lands. I just have to decide between helping the animals or ignoring signs that my fellow humans aren't what I thought they were. But how can I help a species I hate and fear? Even if Andor makes me feel alive again?

In the land of the shifters...they call me Death.

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