Spring Cleaning

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Cover Art: Lisa Amrine

Leah took a deep breath and then another sip of her drink before pasting a smile on her face. Sean didn't seem to notice it any more than he'd noticed she'd stopped talking mid-sentence. She bit her lip and again fought the urge to look over her shoulder. She knew who he kept gazing at and it hurt, but she was a big girl. Leah had grown used to being overlooked by boys as soon as her sisters entered the room. Now that she was a woman it was no different, but she was able to hide the pain a lot better.

"Well, it's been fun, but I better get going," she said more cheerfully than necessary.

She briefly wondered if Sean could tell by her voice.

"Um, yeah…okay." He didn't even bother looking at her.

Leah sighed and walked passed him, placing her empty wine glass on a table, as she wove through the crowded room. She loved her family's art gallery and spent most of her free time there. Her mother was a well known artist and Leah and her twin sisters had been attending openings just like this their whole lives. As she approached the door she considered turning back to see if Sean had noticed her departure yet. The thought that he wouldn't care once he did kept her moving purposely forward. She took her coat and walked out into the cool night, knowing the bone-deep chill was from the inside out.

The cab that pulled up to the curb was immediately snagged by an older couple who stepped out just before Leah. She looked up and down the street, but it was empty of any other traffic. The gallery was in a great location for daytime events. During the upcoming spring months, they would make a killing with the tourists. Unfortunately there was no nightlife in close proximity. Any cabs that came their way in the evenings had either been called or were lost. She sighed and turned toward home. It wasn't a long walk, but she was tired and depressed. The eight city blocks would feel like twenty.

Three steps away from the gallery door a hand on her elbow stopped Leah from her arduous journey. She froze and looked up, as she was turned to find Sean looking down at her with a slight frown and an apology in his eyes. Leah smiled gently and held up a hand before he could speak.

"It's all right, Sean. I have an early morning and need to get home."

He sighed and let go of her.

"I'm sorry, Leah. I know I seemed distracted, it's just that—"

"No Sean, really. You don't have to explain yourself. It's not like we're dating or anything, right?"

He closed his mouth and nodded, as he slipped his hands into the pockets of his well tailored slacks. Leah fought the urge to look him up and down, admiring the image of strength and virility he exuded. She'd been admiring Sean for a long time, but he'd never noticed. They'd been friends

since high school and she knew everything about him, including the fact that he was in love with her sister, Lily.

"No, Leah. It's not all right. I came tonight with you on my arm, but then ignored you. I'm really sorry. You deserve a hell of a lot better than that."

Leah gave a little laugh and looked away so he wouldn't see the moisture in her eyes. He'd been there for every heartbreak. He alone knew how everyone treated her in comparison to her beautiful twin sisters. They'd never talked about it because Leah knew of his feelings for Lily. However, Sean had offered Leah friendship when everyone else pretended she didn't exist.

She cleared her throat and swallowed down her tears. This wasn't the first time and it wouldn't be the last. She just had to get out of here without falling apart and everything would be okay. She turned back to face him with a smile.

"No biggie, Sean. I'll just have to work on my conversational skills." He frowned and opened his mouth to reply when a cab pulled up to the curb. Leah immediately reached for the door, grateful for the means to escape this awkward conversation. "I'll call you tomorrow, okay? Goodnight."

Sean sighed and let her go.

"Goodnight, Leah."

She shut the door and gave the driver her address before leaning her head on her hand. A headache was forming and Leah fought it with thoughts of her current project. She didn't have the skill with paint like her sisters, or the patience for sculpture like her mother, but she was a photographer. Capturing the essence of emotion with the camera's eye was her outlet and she lived for it. The pictures she'd taken of Sean for his mother filled her mind and her heart hurt again. She sighed and closed her eyes. It was going to be a long night.

Sean watched the receding taillights of the cab taking Leah home to her empty loft and wanted to kick his own ass.

I'm such an idiot.

He'd sworn he wouldn't do this again, promised himself to pay more attention to her. She was his best friend and he treated her like dirt every time Lily entered the room. Ten years they'd been friends and nothing had changed. He still drooled over Lily, who never gave him a second look, while Leah stood patiently on the sidelines waiting for him to remember her. He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, wondering if he should just call it a night.

"Did you run my sister off?"

Sean's head snapped up at the soft feminine voice he'd heard in more dreams than he could number. Lily stood in her tight black dress and four-inch heels looking like a wet dream, and smiling at him like he'd always fantasized.

"She has an early morning," he replied, amazed that he could form a coherent thought.

Lily laughed and took a step closer, putting her hands on his arm.

"Does she now? Well, I don't and this shindig is just plain boring. Would you like to take me dancing?"

Sean felt his heart speed up and hoped it didn't give out before the night was over. Silently thanking whatever gods were listening, he nodded and gave Lily the grin that always made Leah blush. Lily didn't blush, but she smiled back and placed her hand in his.

"I'm parked right over there," Sean said, pointing across the street to his pick-up truck.

Lily frowned.

"Oh, a truck. Well, if that's what you've got…"

She shrugged and pulled Sean behind her as she stepped off the curb and crossed the street. He didn't like her tone when speaking about his baby, but decided to give her another chance. After all, she hadn't seen the inside yet, or heard the engine. He helped her into the passenger seat then quickly walked around to the driver's side.

It's about damn time.

Sean had been hoping for a chance like this for ten years, asking Leah to tutor him so he could go over to her house on a regular basis. The way he looked at it, not only did he gain a best friend, he might also gain the woman of his dreams. He took a deep breath as he slid into the driver's seat and started his truck.

"My, it sure is loud."

He looked over at Lily and grinned. This was going to be the best night of his life.

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Leah woke with a headache and rubbed her puffy eyes as she sat up. It was Saturday and she had absolutely nothing planned all day. She'd hated lying to Sean, but knew he didn't care one way or another. Her lies helped him feel like everything between them was all right and kept him happy. With a sigh she began to wonder why she was so concerned with his happiness.

He certainly doesn't give a damn about mine.

She slapped her hands over her face as if that would block out the nagging voice of her conscience.

"This is ridiculous. I refuse to feel sorry for myself a second longer."

She pushed back the covers and got out of bed, heading for a hot shower to clear the last of the cobwebs. It only took twenty minutes for her to shower and dress, but the second she finished there was a knock on her door. She went to answer it while running a brush through her wet hair.

"Good morning, sunshine."

Leah frowned as she stepped back to let Sean into her loft. He was still dressed in the clothes from the night before and there was stubble on his chin. A feeling of dread filled her stomach and she was thankful she hadn't eaten yet.

"Hey. You're up awfully early. What's going on?"

He turned to face her with a smile and she noticed his eyes were a bit red.

"I haven't gone to bed yet. Just thought I'd drop in to tell you about my amazing night out…with Lily."

His grin went from ear to ear and Leah turned away as she fought to catch her breath. They told each other nearly everything and his feelings for Lily were no secret. However they didn't usually kiss and tell. Not that she had much to tell in that department.

"Oh? You and Lily, huh? Wow, Sean, that's great."

Leah was amazed at how steady and sincere she sounded. She started brushing her hair again, closing her eyes to keep from seeing his happiness.

"Yup. Right after you left she came outside and asked me to take her dancing. Can you believe it? Finally! After ten years the woman finally noticed me and we had a blast. I'm spending the rest of the weekend with her."

Leah took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She finished brushing her hair and finally opened her eyes. Sean was still grinning, his happiness clearly overriding his obvious exhaustion.

"That's really great, Sean. I'm happy for you."

He walked toward her and it took all of Leah's willpower not to step away. He hugged her and she felt her heart breaking.

"Thanks, Leah. Here you've had to put up with me for all these years."

He laughed and Leah frowned. She wasn't stupid. She knew every guy in school who talked to her only wanted to get to her sisters. But this wasn't high school anymore. Surely Sean didn't still feel that way.

"We're friends, Sean. I don't mind spending time with you."

His smile faded and he looked apologetic for a moment.

"Uh, yeah, of course. I know, Leah. I'm just kidding."

He turned away before she could analyze his expression and walked over to the sofa. He dropped onto it with a sigh and let his head fall back.

"Hey, do you mind if I crash here for a couple of hours? I don't know if I can make the drive across town right now. I'm friggin' exhausted."

She actually thought about saying no to him, just this once, but she knew if he left she would just fall into a million pieces and wallow in self-pity. This was the end. He'd finally gotten what he wanted and she would lose him to one of her sisters. Leah had become used to that by her sophomore year of high school, but prayed it never happened with Sean. Determined to nip the pity party in the bud, Leah straightened her spine and lifted her chin. At least if it got serious between Lily and Sean, Leah wouldn't have to worry about her next boyfriend…maybe.

"Sure, Sean. Why don't you take my bed? I'll be in the darkroom all day anyway."

He lifted his head and winked at her before rising and walking silently up the stairs to her bedroom. Leah watched him disappear before heading into the sanctuary of her darkroom.

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Sean rubbed his forehead and fought the headache brought on by the pounding bass drums. He looked around the club and wondered why he was the only one who seemed bothered by the flashing lights and too loud music.

I must be getting old.

Four feet away, Lily and Rose were gyrating to the music while all around them men watched like a pack of wolves. One misstep and he wouldn't be the only one to know Lily wasn't wearing any panties. He'd wanted to take things slow, but she groped him every chance she got. She'd whispered into his ear the moment he picked her up that she was ready for him. He blew out a breath before downing his drink.

Three weeks had passed since their first night together and he hadn't spoken to Leah in all that time. He'd woken to find her making lunch but hadn't stayed to eat with her. His thoughts had been on Lily and not wanting to miss a second with the woman he'd dreamed of for so long. Now, as he stood here feeling uncomfortable and out of place, he came to a realization. He missed Leah…a lot. His eyes found Lily once again as she laughed along with her twin sister, Rose. They were identical in every way but the color of their hair. Both women were beautiful and loved to flirt and have fun, but they were polar opposites of their little sister, Leah.

Sean thought about the past three weeks and the time he'd spent with Lily. He'd always admired her from afar, never really taking the time to learn anything about her that he couldn't easily see. She was beautiful, with her long blonde hair and hazel eyes. She kept in shape by going dancing several times a week, her artist's lifestyle allowing for many late nights. He'd yet to see her without make-up and wondered if her delicate bone structure would give her the fresh pixie-like appearance Leah's did.

Lily was spoiled and expected exactly what she wanted, how she wanted it, when she wanted. Leah was the epitome of patience. Lily had embarrassed him the first time they ate out by her persistence on perfection. She'd been more than rude and he'd left a very generous tip to make up for it. Leah went out of her way to say thank you to anyone who served her. Lily was a bitch, and after only three weeks he knew he was already tired of it.

She'd made it obvious she wanted to have sex with him, but he hadn't made a move in that direction. Sean kept telling himself it was because he wanted to take things slow with her so they would last. Now, as he stood and watched her act like a slut on the dance floor, he finally admitted the truth to himself. He felt as if he was cheating on Leah, and sex with Lily would be the ultimate betrayal. He just couldn't do it. He couldn't do this anymore. Sean wanted Leah, not Lily, and it was finally time to grow up and let his adolescent fantasy go.

Sean inhaled a deep breath and took the few steps to Lily, taking her by the arm and pulling her from the dance floor.

"Hey, I was dancing!"

"We need to talk," he shouted over the music.

Lily rolled her eyes, but let him lead her out of the club. He took her to his car, mentally cursing himself for letting her talk him into trading in his truck. He'd loved that damn truck. The sleek sports car was nice but it wasn't him, and apparently neither was Lily. He helped her into the passenger seat then slid into the driver's side, knowing this was going to be a long ride for a short conversation.

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Leah watched the image of a sea of Bluebonnets appear on the wet paper and smiled. It felt odd on her face, and she knew she hadn't been doing enough of that lately. She fought the thoughts of Sean that wanted to surface, and removed the eight-by-ten sheet of paper from the developer.

"Almost done," she said with a sigh, feeling the usual surge of satisfaction that always came with the completion of a project.

This one hadn't felt like work at all. She loved Texas wildflowers and the quick trip into the hill country had helped clear her mind. Three weeks was the longest she'd spent without contact from Sean since they'd met. Even when they had attended different colleges their senior year, he'd called her every night.

As soon as this last photo dried she would mount it and arrange the display. She shared the gallery with her mother and sisters, but they rarely let her have the main show room. This was a big deal for her and she hoped the showing went well. Her stomach rumbled making her laugh.

"I must be feeling better."

She'd lost nearly fifteen pounds in the past three weeks. After navigating the light-tight door, she stepped into the open space of her loft and blinked. The track lighting was brighter than the red light of her darkroom. It took a few seconds of adjusting before she realized she wasn't alone. She blinked again, but the image of Sean sitting patiently on her sofa didn't disappear. He was watching her with an unreadable expression, dressed as if to go out on the town.

Leah stood transfixed by the familiar sight of his broad shoulders and athletic build. His long legs were stretched out before him, crossed at the ankles. He'd cut his dark brown hair from the usual shaggy mess into a more modern spiky cut. It looked good on him, but made him look like every other guy at the clubs. She knew it was something Lily would like, as was the outfit of dark slacks and a buttoned up shirt. Leah preferred him in t-shirts and jeans.

"Hey."

Leah almost jumped when he finally broke the silence. She had no idea how long she'd been staring at him.

"Hi."

He smiled briefly and leaned forward, placing his feet flat on the floor and his elbows on his knees. He clasped his hands and rested his chin on them. The sight was so familiar it made Leah's chest ache. She turned away and he abruptly stood.

"No, don't go. Please. I really need to talk to you, Leah."

She sighed, but didn't look back at him. Thoughts were swimming through her head and she prayed he wasn't here for advice. Lily and Rose were twins and as close to each other as could be expected, but Leah barely knew either of them. She was three years younger and so far on the outside she might as well have been a distant cousin. She'd been a "surprise" her mother said, but Leah knew she was really an "accident", or maybe even a "mistake". She'd always been on the outside looking in.

"I'm kind of in the middle of something, Sean. I need to finish up this project. I was about to work on the arrangement."

"Can I watch?"

Leah did look at him then. He'd never seemed interested in her work, never went out of his way to ask about it or see what she was working on. She bit her lip in indecision, feeling this would definitely be a conversation she didn't want to have if he was so insistent. But she just couldn't seem to say no to him. She nodded and walked across the room to the area she used as a studio, blocked off from the rest of the room by three eight foot bookshelves overflowing with books. She walked through them without looking back.

Sean followed Leah feeling more nervous than he had when he took Lily out for the first time. Leah had lost weight and there were dark circles under her eyes. She was wearing dark, baggy clothes that made her look like death incarnate. He wanted to kick himself and strip those ugly clothes off of her. He knew she had a low self-esteem and the reasons for it. The thought that he'd contributed to it pissed him off. There had to be a way to win her back. He just prayed he wasn't too late.

He stepped through the shelves into her studio space and froze. All around him, Texas wildflowers bloomed in full color and black and white, creating a garden of beauty on film. Leah hadn't even arranged them yet and he was already impressed with her expert eye. He'd always admired her work, but rarely said so aloud. That thought made him frown and he wondered what the hell had been wrong with him for the past ten years.

"So, what did you need?"

He looked up at the sound of her voice, so different from Lily's, and realized that was the voice of his dreams. All this time the woman of his fantasies had been right beside him and he'd been too busy looking across the room to notice. He took the few steps to her, but she was busying herself with the photos. He ran a hand through her silky black hair and she froze.

"You, Leah. What I really need is you. Can you forgive me for being too stupid to realize it until now?"

Sean watched in fear as Leah bent her head and stepped away from his touch. Her shoulders dropped and he wished he could read her thoughts.

"This isn't funny, Sean. I don't know what Lily said to convince you to play this prank, but…it's really not funny."

He heard the tears in her voice and anger filled him, for himself and for Lily. What had Leah's sisters done in the past to make her think this was a prank? How could she think he would stoop so low? He gently grabbed her arm and turned her to face him, pulling her into his embrace. Tears ran down her face and took his breath away. How did he go all those years without realizing how beautiful she was?

"Sweetheart, this isn't a joke. I left Lily with Rose and headed straight over here. I couldn't stand spending another second without you. I'm, sorry it took three weeks for me to realize it, but I swear it's no joke. I need you in my life. You, Leah, not Lily. You."

She didn't pull away, but her tears began to flow more freely. Sean didn't know how to stop them, so he did what he'd been wanting to do since he saw her walk into the room. He pulled her closer and bent his head,

kissing her with every ounce of passion in his body, praying she would feel it too. Leah responded immediately, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him back. Relief filled him and he stopped thinking. He let Leah set the pace and felt the passion between them grow.

Within heartbeats they were on the floor, wildflowers surrounding them. Sean unwrapped Leah like a present, happy to find the soft sweet body she hid was just as tantalizing as the one Lily proudly showed off. Leah sighed as he kissed his way down her torso, stopping momentarily to worship her breasts with his tongue. He loved the taste of her skin, loved the sounds of ecstasy coming from her mouth, loved…her.

Sean paused with his lips just above her curls, listening to her panting as the realization flowed through him. He truly loved Leah, and because of his own stupidity he almost lost her. He shut his eyes and inhaled the scent of her skin.

"Sean? Uh…are you okay?"

Her softly spoken words couldn't hide the uncertainly in her voice and he cursed himself for it. He raised his head to look her in the eye. She stared back warily.

"I love you, Leah, and I plan on trying to make you happy for the rest of my life. Do you forgive me?"

Leah gasped and tears began to fall again. Sean had a moment of panic until she smiled.

"I love you too, Sean. I always have."

He sighed out a breath in relief and pulled himself back up her body to kiss her on the mouth. She kissed him back and they made love among the wildflowers. They laid in a tangle of limbs on the hard wooden floor, but neither wanted to move an inch. Sean looked around at the photos, once again admiring Leah's obvious talent.

"These photos are beautiful, sweetheart. I can almost smell them."

Leah giggled and hugged him tighter.

"I can't decide what to call the show. The first day of spring was two weeks ago and Texas Wildflowers just sounds too plain."

Sean looked around thoughtfully.

"What about Spring Cleaning?"

"What?"

"You know, out with the old and in with the new? Spring is a time of rejuvenation. We should celebrate that."

Leah smiled at him, the smile he now knew she reserved just for him, and he felt as if his heart would burst.

"I think we just did, Sean."

He smiled back and kissed the tip of her nose.

"Yes, my love, we just did. Would you mind if we tried it again, in your bed this time?"

She giggled again as he rose from the floor. Then Sean lifted her into his arms and took her to bed, celebrating a new beginning with the true woman of his dreams.

Biography

Ms. Missy Jane is the alter ego of a Texas mother of four who has been married to the same wonderful man for thirteen years. About five 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.

Missy's first book, They Call me Death is available from Samhain Publishing. http://samhainpublishing.com/romance/they-call-me-death