



Renae Johnson

blessed be



Loose Id

BLESSED BE

Renaë Johnson

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Dedication

To all the ones that ever got away, and the women who loved them: This one's for you.

Prologue

“Are you eavesdropping again, young lady?”

The tall, dark-haired teenager jumped at the sound of her grandmother’s harsh whisper, and hastily backed away from her older sister’s bedroom door.

She turned and looked up at her grandmother, chewing on her bottom lip as she did so. “It’s just...I just wish there was something I could do, Grandma. They belong together -- even a non-witch can see that.”

Her grandmother’s gaze darted about before she pulled the teen farther down the hallway, toward the stairs that led to the attic. “Shh. We can’t let your sister overhear us.”

“But why not?”

“Because, dear, your sister does not approve of our abilities.”

The teen barely refrained from rolling her eyes. “It isn’t that she doesn’t approve, but that she just doesn’t understand.”

The grandmother shook her head. “Be that as it may, we still can’t let her overhear us.”

As the two entered the attic and closed the door behind them, the teenager allowed a wily smile to spread across her face. “Do you have something up your sleeve?”

The older woman crossed the room and withdrew a weathered jewelry box. It was one the teen had never seen before, but something about it called to her. The grandmother opened one of the drawers and drew out a thin silver bracelet, which she placed in her granddaughter's left hand.

She felt her grandmother's hand wrap around her own, forming two tight fists around the piece of jewelry.

"This, my dear, is a gift from me to you. One day, you will hand it to your sister. It has been in this family for generations, passed from one woman to another."

She felt the silver warm against her palm and tightened her hand around the bracelet. This piece held power; she could feel it pulsing from the metal into her palm and through her veins, making her heart pound against her chest and her blood buzz.

She swallowed past the lump in her throat, knowing that for the first time, her grandmother was allowing her to feel the true power of their gift. "What is its power?" Her question was barely more than an awe-filled whisper.

Her grandmother smiled and removed her hand from her granddaughter's. "Its power is happiness, my granddaughter. Whoever wears this bracelet will find happiness, love, peace, and contentment."

The teen's brows knitted together. "But my sister's the one who needs happiness right now. I'm fine. She's the one suffering from a broken heart."

Her grandmother's touch against her cheek was gentle. "It is not her time yet. She will find happiness. But right now is your time and you will know when it is time to give this gift to your sister."

She knew better than to question how she would know. Ever since she had been a small child, she'd simply known things. Once she'd realized that her knowledge was more than intuition, and was tied into a power that had been passed down from generation to generation, she'd begun to do everything she could to hone her craft and to sharpen her

vision. Thus she knew that some things simply could not be explained and just were, and that when the time was right, she would have the necessary answers.

She hated to see her sister so hurt, though. “Why’d he have to leave her, Grandma?”

“Because it’s not their time. Not yet.”

Chapter One

Two weeks before Christmas

Leah Montgomery blew an auburn strand of hair out her eyes and once again tried to pull the torture device up and over her knees.

The stretchy fabric clung to her calves, even as she continued to tug at it. After several long moments of butt wiggling, jumping up and down, and doing the Hokey Pokey, Leah finally managed to get the legs of the garment over her knees.

She glanced into the mirror and noticed her flushed cheeks and heavy breathing, and decided that maybe a break was in order.

“How are you coming in there?” Leah’s sister, Bella, called from the living room.

Leah breathed deeply and rolled her eyes. “Whoever invented these things is a sadist.”

Bella peeked into the bedroom and looked at Leah. “They can’t be that bad.”

“They are! Power Panties, my ass. More like Torture Panties.”

Bella snickered and entered the bedroom. “Why are you even wearing them?”

Leah glanced down at her tummy and back up at her sister. "Have you not seen my stomach?"

Bella waved a hand in dismissal. "Oh, whatever. You have a natural-looking tummy. Besides, your bridesmaid dress has an empire waist."

"Which is made from this damned clingy silk material. It's not like it's loose and flowy chiffon, Bella. So your point would be?"

Bella sighed. "My point is that you're beautiful just the way you are. That, and if you don't hurry up and get dressed, we'll be late to my wedding."

"I won't have the proper underwear, though, if I don't wear these."

"So don't wear any."

"Don't wear any panties? Are you crazy?"

"Not at all. It's not like anyone but you and I would know anyway."

Leah shook her head. "You are crazy."

"And you're making us late. Now, hurry up and get your dress on."

"I thought the big sister was supposed to boss the little sister, not the other way around," Leah grumbled.

Bella laughed. "Usually, yes. But not today."

Leah watched as Bella walked out of the bedroom, and then looked back down at the body-shaping garment currently stretched between her knees. Warily, she bent down, grasped the waistband, and tried to wiggle it up her thighs.

The panties were like shrink-wrap and refused to budge.

After a few more minutes of futile tugging and pulling, Leah gave up.

Screw it. I'll just wear regular panties. It's not like anyone will be looking at me anyway.

Frustrated, Leah walked over to her dresser and chose a pair of cotton hipsters. Unlike the Power Panties, *those* slipped on with no problem whatsoever. Once again in her comfort zone -- and simply comfortable, at that -- Leah grabbed the forest green bridesmaid dress off the bed, stepped into it, and zipped it up the back as much as she could without assistance. She turned in front of the mirror and saw no visible panty lines. However, her stomach could've been flatter. Much flatter.

Get over it, Leah. So what if you're fat. No one will be paying attention to you, remember? It's Bella's day. No one ever pays attention to the bridesmaids.

Except the groomsmen who have to dance with them at the reception.

Sighing in resignation, Leah slipped her feet into the gold flats Bella had chosen for her bridesmaids to wear and made her way to the living room.

Bella turned and gasped. "Leah! You look beautiful."

Leah rolled her eyes. "Stop lying to me and get over here and zip me up."

Her sister got up and walked to her. "Here, turn around."

Leah did so and held her hair up off her neck in the process.

"And you do look beautiful. I wish you wouldn't be so hard on yourself."

"I'm not hard on myself, just realistic."

Leah felt Bella place the hook through the eye at the top of the zipper, and let her hair back down.

"You're not realistic, either."

"Yes, I am. I've ballooned from a size eighteen to a size twenty-four in eight short years."

A very unladylike snort escaped from Bella. "You have not ballooned. I call it aging."

"Oh, thanks, that makes me feel so much better."

"You're only twenty-nine!"

“You’re the one who just said I was aging.”

Bella sighed. “I meant that your weight gain is just a natural part of being a woman in your twenties. Physiologically, we’re programmed to gain weight during our child-bearing years. Our hips spread. Our stomachs get a little bigger and we have extra padding in places we didn’t have it before.”

Leah turned her skeptical gaze Bella’s way. “Then why, pray tell, have you not gained an ounce over the past five years?”

“Because I have a fast metabolism? I don’t know. And I have gained weight. I just don’t obsess over it the way you do.”

“I don’t obsess.”

Bella crossed her arms over her chest and raised an eyebrow.

“So maybe I obsess a little bit. But it’s not like I weigh myself every day or anything crazy like that.”

“No, instead you just constantly talk about how fat and ugly you are, which is just as bad if not worse than constantly weighing yourself or sticking a finger down your throat.”

Leah glanced at the clock above the television. “Shouldn’t we get going?”

Bella sighed. “Yeah. Don’t think I’m dropping this for good, though.”

“I wouldn’t think that for a minute, believe me.”

* * * * *

“You ready to do this thing?”

Bella grinned at Leah and nodded. “Oh, yeah. It feels like I’ve been ready my entire life.”

“You always did believe in fairy tales.” A soft smile curved Leah’s lips. Her frustration from earlier was gone, replaced now with a feeling of bittersweet excitement for her baby sister.

“Yes, I did. And I’m marrying my Prince Charming in just a few minutes.”

Leah lifted up the edge of Bella’s skirt and teased, “You didn’t replace your heels with glass slippers, did you?”

“I looked but couldn’t find any.”

Leah grinned back at her sister, trying her hardest not to get misty-eyed.

“Oh, hey, I almost forgot. I have a gift for you.”

“A gift? Isn’t it supposed to be the other way around?”

Bella shook her head and rummaged around in the backpack she’d brought with her. “Here it is,” she said as she pulled out a square, flat box wrapped in gold paper.

“What is it?”

“Open it up and see, silly.”

“You’re not giving me a love potion or anything, are you?”

Bella rolled her eyes. “No, because I know you don’t believe in magic. Just open the box.”

Leah peeled the paper off, tossed it in the trash can, and removed the lid. Inside laid a solid silver bracelet, the ends of which formed the shape of flower leaves. It looked old. She removed it from the box, felt the cold metal against her fingers, and looked at her sister.

“It’s beautiful. You shouldn’t have.” She swallowed back tears that threatened to choke her. The bracelet really was beautiful in its simplicity, and definitely something she would have picked out for herself. She slipped it onto her wrist.

Bella smiled -- one of those secretive smiles she’d worn her entire life -- and stood to hug Leah. “I just wanted to do something special for you. You’ve helped me so much with this wedding, and you really are the best big sister a girl could have.”

“Awww. Shucks.”

Bella saw right through Leah's facade and leaned back to brush a couple of errant tears from Leah's cheeks before brushing away her own.

A knock sounded on the door seconds before their mother stepped into the room. At fifty-two, Elaine Montgomery was still a stunning woman with a lithe body, expertly cut and highlighted red hair, sparkling green eyes, and a dusting of freckles across her always-powdered nose.

Leah sometimes wondered if the stork actually had dropped her off, because there was no way she was genetically related to the two women standing next to her.

"Don't both of my girls look lovely today?"

She leaned in and kissed Leah and then Bella on the cheek before wrapping her toned arms around both of them. It was all Leah could do not to shrink away.

"You look beautiful too, Mom," Bella said.

"Why, thank you, dear." Elaine fussed a bit over Bella's hair before turning to Leah. "That dress is very figure flattering, dear."

Leah bit the inside of her cheek. She knew her mom loved her -- she really did -- but sometimes she wondered if the woman purposely made comments to get under her skin, or if Elaine was simply that oblivious.

The feeling of a sharp elbow poking her in the ribs reminded Leah that she hadn't yet spoken. "Uh, yes, yes it is."

"Let me see it from the back."

Leah barely managed to not roll her eyes, and instead turned in a slow pirouette in an effort to please her mother.

"Are you wearing cotton underwear underneath that dress, young lady?"

She glared at her mother over her shoulder. "So what if I am?"

"Everyone can see the panty lines!"

Apparently her mother was staunchly anti-VPL *and* could see things Leah couldn't.

"No one's going to pay attention to me, Mom. It's Bella's day and all eyes will be on her."

"Yes, but you walk out before she does. Besides, don't you want to look your best? It's such a shame to let a dress like this be ruined by the wrong underwear."

Leah turned back around and caught her sister's gaze with her own. Bella was apparently busy stifling a laugh, so Leah was left on her own to deal with this one. "Mom, I honestly don't care if everyone can tell I'm wearing regular panties. Besides, no one wants to think about a fat girl in a thong anyway."

"How many times do I have to tell you, you're not fat!" Bella exclaimed.

"Now, now, dear." Elaine patted Bella soothingly on the shoulder. "Leah, honey, you are not fat. You simply have curves, is all."

"Curves, my ass. More like rolls," she mumbled.

"At any rate, I still don't think you should walk down the aisle with your panties visibly showing. Do you have any other undergarments here with you?"

"Yes, Mom, just let me go check my other dress first."

"There's no need to be a smart-ass, Leah Montgomery. All I'm suggesting is that maybe you don't wear any at all."

"What is it with you two? First Bella and now you suggesting I walk down the aisle commando. I thought y'all were more cultured than that."

Bella laughed and finally jumped in on the conversation. "Leah, just do whatever makes you comfortable."

Leah was about to hug her sister when her mother held out her hand -- palm up -- and tapped her foot impatiently.

Leah would be so glad when this wedding was over.

* * * * *

“Everyone knows I’m going to be here, right?”

Jack Michaelson adjusted his tie for the fifth time in as many minutes, feeling more nervous now than he had the day he’d pitched a house design to Cameron Diaz.

His best friend, Mark Polaski, clapped him on the shoulder and smiled. “Of course everyone knows you’re going to be here.”

“And everyone is okay with that?”

Mark looked away, and then quickly met Jack’s gaze again.

“Mark, what aren’t you telling me?”

“It’s...okay, maybe not everyone knows you’re going to be here.”

Jack narrowed his eyes and glared. “You didn’t tell her?”

Mark swallowed and at least had the decency to look uncomfortable. “We didn’t have time to tell her. You just confirmed yesterday.”

Jack sighed and tunneled his fingers through his hair. Damn, but this was beginning to look like it had been a bad idea. “So you’re saying that when she sees me as she’s walking down that aisle...” He shook his head. “Hell, she probably won’t even care. The past is the past, right?”

Mark clapped Jack on his shoulder and grinned. “Right on, man. The past is definitely the past. She may not even remember who you are.”

Somehow, Jack had a hard time believing that.

* * * * *

“Do you, Bella Montgomery, take this man, Mark Polaski, to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

Just breathe, Leah, everything will be fine.

As the preacher droned on and on and on, Leah desperately tried to resist staring at the best man.

Jack Michaelson.

Her soon-to-be-brother-in-law's best friend.

Jack Michaelson.

The man who made her mouth go dry.

Jack Michaelson.

The one who'd almost made her trip in shock when she'd seen him while walking down the aisle.

Just breathe, Leah. Why the hell didn't Bella tell me he was going to be here? Just breathe, it'll all be okay. Why did I let Mom and Bella talk me into going commando? No, don't think about that. And Jack? He's history. The past. Just the one that got away.

The one she hadn't seen in eight years, not since he'd graduated from college and moved off to New York or Boston or wherever.

Okay, so he'd moved to Chicago. But she could pretend that she didn't know that. Or that a year later he'd moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, and had been there ever since.

She could act like she didn't know that he was still single and childless, that he got paid a ludicrous amount of money to design houses for rich people, and that he had a soft spot for Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'."

Yes, she could tell herself and everyone else that she hadn't thought about him since the day he'd driven out of Waco in his shiny red Dodge Ram pickup truck. She could tell everyone they'd just been friends, that his leaving hadn't bothered her and that she didn't ever wonder what if.

But she couldn't hide the truth from herself.

Note to self: Take your meds as soon as this ceremony is over with.

And find some panties.

The sound of applause and catcalls drew Leah out of her reverie. Apparently, Bella and Mark were now husband and wife, considering Mark's hands were on Bella's ass and Bella looked as though she wanted to consume Mark.

What would that strong of an attraction feel like?

Unbidden, Leah's gaze drifted back toward Jack. He smiled at her, one of those heartbreakingly sexy smiles he'd always been so good at delivering, and Leah felt all the air rush out of her lungs.

Not that there'd been a lot of air in them to begin with.

Stupid past sneaking up on her.

In all honesty, she knew what that kind of an attraction felt like. She'd experienced it before, at the tender age of twenty-one. And now, apparently again at the age of twenty-nine.

She closed her eyes and tried to breathe deeply.

Crap. This was so not good.

Jack watched Leah from across the aisle as the just-married couple attempted to devour each other. He wasn't sure if the blush that stained her cheeks was from embarrassment over her sister's behavior, or because he'd just smiled at her.

Leah.

He'd tried to forget about her, hadn't really allowed himself to think about the fact that being here meant being near her, not until he'd gotten into town this morning.

The one that got away.

Or, more appropriately, the one he'd foolishly let go.

A lot had changed in eight years. Her hair was now a shorter mass of thick auburn waves. She carried herself differently, with more confidence. Gone were the too-large eyeglasses, replaced now with what Jack guessed were contacts since her vision had always been horrible. Her hips were a little wider than he'd remembered, her body a little softer looking than it had been back then. And her breasts.

Best not to think about those, unless he wanted to embarrass himself in front of the entire wedding party.

Jack glanced at Leah again and felt a brief twinge of regret. She'd been the first girl he'd ever loved. And at the age of twenty-two, armed with nothing more than ambition and a scholarship to one of the top architectural graduate programs in the country, he'd left.

As their gazes locked again, he felt a familiar awareness tugging at his gut.

Eight long years.

He wondered what else had changed about Miss Leah.

* * * * *

Leah gazed out at the mass of swaying couples on the dance floor of the reception hall. They all looked so romantic. So in love. Or lust.

She saw her parents standing in a corner. Her mother wore a beatific smile and her father stood beside her like a puffed-up penguin. Gerald touched Elaine's shoulder, though, with a gentleness and familiarity that Leah sometimes craved.

Mark and Bella were wrapped around each other, pressed so tightly together it would have been impossible to tell where one ended and the other began if it hadn't been for the contrast of white dress against black tux. His hand rested on the small of her back, and Bella's face held an expression of pure bliss.

Jack stood across the room on the other side of the dance floor, looking far too good in his formal attire. Leah's mouth watered and it wasn't for the cake that had yet to be served.

He caught her watching him and flashed an uncertain smile her way. Not sure how to respond, Leah nodded her head and smiled back as she rubbed her palms against the front of her dress. Jesus! One smile and she was acting like a sixteen-year-old waiting for her prom date to kiss her good night.

Except there would be no kisses from Jack. She couldn't allow him to get too close again, couldn't stand the thought of feeling all that hurt and pain. It had taken her years to move on from the past, and there were days when their history still haunted her.

She looked away and back to the couples on the floor. Two of her younger cousins were dancing together, and while eight-year-old Alicia looked to be in heavenly bliss, nine-year-old Kevin did not. Leah smiled as she recalled a conversation she'd had with Alicia a few months back regarding Kevin. The little girl was convinced she was going to marry her cousin one day, and didn't seem to grasp the concept that first cousins marrying wasn't a great idea. Alicia had looked so earnest, though, that Leah hadn't wanted to burst the little girl's bubble. She would figure out soon enough that fairy tales don't always come true.

Leah was jerked from her thoughts by a soft touch on her shoulder.

She turned and saw Jack standing beside her, close enough to touch, and she could smell the subtle fragrance of aftershave and male skin. She resisted the urge to close her eyes and breathe deeply, and instead took a shallow breath and crossed her arms over her chest, waiting for him to speak.

"Do you want to dance?"

His deep voice caused goose bumps to scatter down her spine, and she tried to swallow the lump that had lodged itself in her throat.

"Sure." *Why not torture myself?*

He led her to the edge of the dance floor, and she hesitantly wrapped her arms around his neck. Leah felt Jack's hands settle on the small of her back, and it was all she could do not to melt into a puddle right then and there.

Couples swayed around them, and she felt dizzy, but she wasn't sure if it was because of the fact that she hadn't eaten anything all day or because Jack had his arms wrapped around her.

Probably a little bit of both.

"How have you been?"

His breath brushed against her ear, and a shiver worked through her body. "I've been good. You?"

"Things have been good."

"Good." *Could this conversation get any worse?*

"You look beautiful tonight."

Leah's head jerked up. "What?"

Jack repeated his previous statement, and Leah's brow furrowed. "Um, thanks."

She'd never looked "beautiful" a day in her life. Pretty, yes. But beautiful? Hardly.

And yet he'd somehow always managed to make her feel beautiful.

Like he was right now, looking down at her with heat in his eyes and an enigmatic expression on his handsome face.

He tilted his head toward Mark and Bella. "Look at those two. Who would have ever guessed that Mark and Bella of all people would fall in love and get married?"

"Why do you say that?"

His shoulder moved under her hand. "They're just so different. Bella's the free-spirit, hippy-dippy type, and Mark's an accountant. Admit it; you can't get much odder than that."

"True. They manage to balance each other out, though."

He looked down at her. "We used to balance each other out, too."

Leah wanted to look away but couldn't. His light blue eyes were mesmerizing, drawing her in and refusing to release her.

His fingertips played at the small of her back, and she could feel their warm pressure through the material of her dress. Sparks of lust shot through her body, heating her blood and her skin.

“But we don’t anymore.” Unfortunately her statement came out as a whisper rather than something more assertive.

They danced in silence, the air around them feeling charged with something Leah couldn’t quite name. Lust. Longing. And the remnants of the hurt she’d felt the day he’d walked away.

Bella and Mark swished past them, and Jack whispered in Leah’s ear, “So how long do you think it’ll be until they’re pregnant?”

Leah felt her spine stiffen and stepped out of Jack’s arms.

“What’s wrong?” he asked as he reached for her hand.

She yanked it away and stepped back again. “I just... I need to go to the ladies’ room.”

Confusion clouded his face, and Leah knew her sudden change in mood had to have thrown him off. But she couldn’t be there in his arms, feeling all the things only he had ever been able to make her feel, and hear him talk about the future children of her sister and brand-new brother-in-law.

Her reality was a stark contrast to the reality of those in the crowded reception hall. Hers was a reality that didn’t include a lover’s caress, but rather runny noses and finger paint-stained jeans. The runny noses of children who didn’t belong to her.

She pressed a hand to her belly, a gesture she’d repeated so many times over the years she’d lost count. Leah felt the sting of tears pricking the back of her throat and inside her nose. Crap. She couldn’t get maudlin. Not now. Not at her sister’s wedding.

Not in front of Jack.

Leah walked toward the reception hall’s restroom as quickly as possible, knowing her carefully constructed dam could break any minute now.

Hell, I forgot to take my meds.

Thankfully, the restroom was empty, and Leah made her way to the handicapped stall as the tears began to fall.

Jack waited a few moments before following Leah. He located the women's restroom, looked around to make sure no one was watching, and pushed the door open. The bathroom appeared to be empty, but he heard soft sniffing coming from the handicapped stall and knew it had to be Leah.

Leah. The only woman he'd ever loved. The woman he'd once walked away from for the promise of a better tomorrow, a future he'd been told his entire life wasn't his to dream about.

Not quite sure what he was doing, or even going to say, Jack gently pushed open the stall door.

Leah was leaning against the wall, her forehead pressed against the pink tiles and her hands fisted at her sides. Her red hair had swung down so it covered her face, but even then, he knew she was crying. The sounds of her sniffles were unmistakable.

"Leah."

Even though her name came out as barely more than a whisper, she snapped her head up and turned so that her gaze met his. A couple of stray tears rolled down her cheeks, and her eyes were red rimmed and slightly puffy.

She'd never been a pretty crier. Then again, he'd always told her, who was?

Her lips parted, and she looked at him like a startled doe caught in the proverbial headlights. For a brief moment, Jack was able to see the pain and vulnerability in her eyes. Then she slammed the door closed on her emotions and once again erected the wall between them.

"What do you want, Jack?"

He shuffled his feet, barely kept from stuffing his hands in his pockets like a recalcitrant schoolboy. What *was* he doing? “You looked upset, and I...I guess I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

She turned away from him, pulled some toilet paper from the roll, and blew her nose. “You didn’t care if I was okay eight years ago; why would you care now?”

“I did care, Leah.” Too much. He’d cared so much it had scared the shit out of him. He’d cared so much he’d felt like he was betraying the one person who’d ever loved him. But he’d had a future to think about. A future that he hadn’t thought would include someone like Leah. A future he’d been told his entire life wasn’t his for the taking.

She rolled her eyes. “You cared long enough to get in my pants. Once you got what you wanted, that was it.”

He did shove his hands in his pockets then, to keep himself from reaching out and grabbing her shoulders; whether to hold her or shake her, he wasn’t sure. “You don’t really believe that. You knew I’d already been accepted to graduate school. You knew when we got involved that I was leaving.”

He heard her deep, shaky breath, saw her shoulders rise and fall once more before she turned toward him, a beautiful woman with bloodshot eyes and tear-stained cheeks. A beautiful woman he’d never forgotten, never completely fallen out of love with.

Shit. Maybe moving back hadn’t been such a good idea, especially considering Leah seemed to hate him.

Well, Jack, you know what they say about that thin line between love and hate.

“Yes, I knew you were leaving. Yes, I knew the circumstances before we ever got involved. That doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt.”

“I’m sorry.” He wasn’t sure if his apology could ever really convey just how sorry he was.

She closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead with one hand. “I don’t want to fight with you, Jack. I’m just...feeling a little emotional, I guess. My baby sister just got married, which is enough on its own. And then I show up here and there you are.”

He was going to strangle Mark. “So you didn’t know I was in the wedding?”

Leah opened her eyes and looked straight at him. “I had no clue. I mean, I know you and Mark are still close, and that you’ve come back a few times here and there, and that he’s gone to Knoxville to visit you a few times. I just...it didn’t occur to me that you would be here for the wedding, much less in it.”

So she knew he’d been in Knoxville? Interesting. “I can’t believe they didn’t tell you.”

“Me either,” she muttered as she brushed away the last of her tears.

“Feeling better?”

Leah laughed. “Not really.”

“Do you want me to take you home?”

His suggestion seemed to surprise them both. Where had *that* come from?

“I’m not sure that would be such a good idea. Besides, I kinda have to stay here for the rest of the evening’s entertainment. Just give me a few minutes, and I’ll be okay.”

He wanted to touch her so badly it was all he could do to keep his hands fisted in his pockets. “Are you sure?”

She nodded, her hair falling over her shoulders like a rich red waterfall. “Yeah. I’m sure.”

Not knowing what to do, he just stood there, looking at Leah and wishing for the millionth time that things could have been different.

Leah breathed deeply and tried to make the butterflies in her stomach calm down already. Jack just stood there, watching her as though he were afraid she was going to break.

She wouldn't. If she hadn't broken eight years ago, she sure as hell wasn't going to now.

Not able to stand the silence any longer, she looked at him and asked, "Could you give me a few moments alone here?"

He shook his head, as though he'd been lost in thought. "Oh, yeah. Sorry. I'll just go back out there."

She nodded and waited for him to exit the restroom.

As soon as she heard the door close behind him, she sagged against the stall's wall and breathed deeply.

Jack.

A painful stab of emotion jammed into her belly, almost robbing her of breath.

It had been eight years, and yet in some ways it seemed like no time had passed at all since the day he'd left.

Left her.

Left the baby that had been growing inside of her.

Another spear of pain arced through her body, and Leah knew she was moments away from crying again.

Get a hold of yourself, Leah. It's been eight years. You can do this. You can handle this. Just take your meds, breathe deeply, and make 'em laugh.

Resolutely, she stiffened her spine and exited the stall. She made her way to the sink, turned on the cold water, and splashed a little on her face, knowing it wouldn't help to cover up the fact that she'd been crying.

Oh, well. Her family was used to it by now.

Chapter Two

The morning after

“Why didn’t you tell me Jack was in the wedding?” Leah asked.

Sympathy flitted across Bella’s face. “I honestly didn’t know until Friday night.”

“You didn’t know someone was going to be in your wedding until the night before the event?” Bella was known for being flighty and a little odd -- hell, this was the woman who’d decided to wait until after the New Year to go on her honeymoon for crying out loud -- but this was ridiculous, even for her.

“I know, I know. Mark asked Jack months ago, but Jack’s apparently been busy and didn’t know for sure what his plans were until yesterday. He flew into town and called Mark yesterday morning; said he had his tux and was ready to go.”

“Somehow, I refuse to believe that.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you, sis. You know that.”

Leah sighed and closed her eyes. “I know, Bella. It’s just... It seems a little odd that Jack would just decide the day before the wedding that he actually wanted to be in it. Or hell, even be here in the first place.”

Bella flopped down onto Leah's cream-colored couch and gestured for Leah to sit down beside her. "From what I understand, he was waiting for the closing on his house to go through."

Leah joined Bella, wondering if the situation could get any odder. "He sold his house?"

"From what I understand, yes."

"Why would he sell his house?"

Bella picked at her thumbnail and couldn't quite make eye contact with Leah.

"Bella, what's going on?"

Her little sister sighed, fiddled with her wedding ring, bit her bottom lip -- basically anything and everything to avoid answering Leah's question.

"Just spit it out already."

Bella hesitated before finally saying, "Well, from what I've been told, he's planning on moving out of Knoxville."

"To where?"

"That I don't know. At least not permanently."

Leah raised an eyebrow.

"His grandmother passed away about six months ago. She left him her house out on the lake. He said something to Mark about spending some time remodeling it, adding some updates, and selling it to Jessica Simpson."

"Jessica Simpson?"

"Well, she does have family in Waco, you know."

"Yeah, but that's aunts and cousins."

"So? Maybe she's close to her aunts. Hell, the past two years when she's come here for Thanksgiving, there's been a media circus."

“Well, yeah. Two years ago because she was just getting a divorce, right? And last year because she had Tony Romo with her.”

A dreamy smile curved Bella’s lips. “Mmm. Tony Romo. He could toss me his balls any time.”

“Bella!” Leah felt her cheeks heat up.

“What? Even you can’t deny he’s an attractive man.”

“Well, yeah. And what do you mean, even I can’t deny he’s an attractive man?”

“Sis, you don’t exactly have a swingin’ sex life.”

That might have been the understatement of the century. “What does my sex life have to do with anything?”

“It has to do with everything, Leah. You don’t date, you don’t flirt that I’ve ever seen, and I know you don’t have sex. It isn’t healthy. Hell, it isn’t normal.”

“There is nothing wrong with celibacy.”

“There is when you abstain from life completely.”

Leah’s breath whooshed out of her, as though she’d just been sucker punched. “I don’t...I don’t abstain from life completely.”

Bella grabbed Leah’s hand, and her tone was gentle when she spoke. “Yes, Leah, you do. Ever since Jack left, it’s like you’ve been a shell of who you once were.”

Leah averted her gaze, unable to look her sister in the eye. “People change, Bella.”

“Yes, people change. But most of them don’t become walking ghosts.”

Leah yanked her hand away and shot up off the couch. “I am not a walking ghost. I have a full life. I have a job I love. A family I sometimes love,” she said as she tossed a glare Bella’s way. “And a nice group of friends who are fun to hang out with.”

“But you never hang out with them. At least, none of them except for Sara.”

“What’s wrong with that? You spend all your time with Mark.”

Bella rolled her eyes. “No, I don’t.” A smile suddenly brightened her features, causing dread to pool in Leah’s stomach. She knew that smile, and nothing good ever came of it. “I know! I have a great idea.”

“Oh, Lord.”

“Hear me out. You know my friend Monica, right?”

“The one you work with who sells sex toys on the side?”

“Yes! Well, she wanted to throw me a naughty-themed bachelorette party, but none of our free nights or days were ever the same. We were talking about it the other day, though, and that it would still be fun to throw a toy party, just with a Christmas theme rather than a bachelorette party theme.”

“A toy party?”

“It’ll be a blast, Leah. It’s Saturday night at my place. Mark’s going out with the boys to play poker, and I’m inviting a few of my girlfriends over. You should invite Sara.”

This sounded like it was right up Sara’s alley. Still, though, Leah wasn’t too sure about the idea of a sex toy party. “Um, no one samples the products before buying, do they?”

“Oh, Goddess, no! You really do need to get out more, sis.”

Bella stood and retrieved her purse from the floor, and all Leah could do was stand there, a bit bewildered. “You really want me to come to a sex toy party? Isn’t that going to be a little awkward?”

“Not at all. Who knows, it might be just what you need to kick start your holiday season.”

Somehow Leah doubted that.

Chapter Three

One week until Christmas

“Your sister’s a witch.” Sara’s whisper in Leah’s ear made her grin.

“Do you mean that literally or figuratively?”

“Both.”

“So why, pray tell, is she a witch? Well, other than the obvious.”

Sara nodded toward Monica, who was standing in front of the group of a dozen or so women holding a candy cane vibrator.

“Because all these toys are making me horny.”

Leah rolled her eyes. “Sara, you’re always horny.”

She felt a sharp elbow in her ribs and giggled. Bella had been right; this was kind of fun. Well, in a weird, her-sister-was-sitting-in-the-same-room sort of way.

“And this one, ladies, can be used for D.P.,” Monica instructed.

Leah leaned toward Sara and whispered, “Dr. Pepper?”

Sara snorted. “Double penetration, dummy-o.”

“Double pene -- ohhhhhh.”

“Yet one more thing you’ve been missing out on all these years.”

Leah shook her head and turned her attention back to Monica.

The vibrator was actually kind of pretty and really did look like a candy cane. It was sleek and shiny, with red-and-white stripes, and when Monica turned it on it barely made a sound. And here Leah had always thought vibrators would be annoyingly loud.

“Of course, you don’t want to try double penetration unless you’re using the proper amount of lubricant,” Monica said.

Even Leah could figure out that was a no-brainer.

“So now we’re going to play a little game, and the winner gets to take home this bad boy.”

There were *games* at sex toy parties?

“This game is one where I hold up a letter of the alphabet, and the first person to yell out a dirty or sexy word that corresponds with that letter gets a point. The person with the most points wins the prize.” Monica picked up a deck of alphabet cards and shuffled them. “First letter is...*A*!”

“Ass!” a demure-looking woman called out from across the room.

“One point goes to Maureen. The next letter is...*F*.”

“Fuck!” That from Bella.

“One point goes to Bella.” Monica held up another card, this one with the letter *P*.

“Pussy!” Sara called out.

Leah could feel her cheeks starting to turn red.

“One point for Sara. The next letter is *T*.”

“Tongue!” Cecile called out.

On and on the game went -- for all twenty-six letters of the alphabet -- with Bella winning the grand prize.

Which she promptly handed to Leah. "Here you go, sis. I already have one of these."

Why, oh why had she agreed to come to this party?

* * * * *

He hadn't been able to stop thinking about her.

Jack took a swig of his beer and tried to focus on the cards in his hand. However, every time he saw the queen of hearts in front of him, his mind drifted back to Leah.

She'd looked beautiful at the wedding. Beautiful and strong yet somehow incredibly fragile.

That was one of the things that had drawn him to her in the first place -- her strength that covered up a sense of vulnerability lurking beneath the surface. Well, that and those breasts.

She had the most amazing breasts he'd ever seen. Full and soft, tipped by rosy pink nipples that had been so incredibly responsive when he'd touched them.

He'd been her first. The first to touch her. The first to be inside of her. The first to love her.

At times he wished he could be the last.

"Jack, you in or are you folding?"

Startled from his reverie, Jack looked down at his cards, realized he had nothing, and folded. "I'm out."

He stood and grabbed the jacket over the back of his chair.

"You leaving, man?" Mark asked.

“Yeah. All the work this week on the house is starting to catch up with me.” He turned to Steve, an old high school buddy, and clapped him on the shoulder. “Thanks for having me over.”

“No problem, bud. Maybe next time I’ll get to take you for everything you’re worth.”

Jack laughed and moved toward the front door. “You wish, Steve, you wish.”

On his way back to the house that used to be his grandmother’s but was now his, Jack’s thoughts drifted back toward Leah.

If he were completely honest with himself, she was part of the reason he’d decided to move back to Waco. He just hated that no one had warned her. She’d been almost brittle in his hands as they’d danced at the reception. Brittle and yet still invitingly warm and soft as he’d clasped her hips and realized she hadn’t been wearing any panties under that green dress.

Sensing, though, that she wouldn’t appreciate any flirtatious comments, he’d kept his knowledge to himself. His curiosity had definitely been piqued, though.

The Leah he’d once known and loved would never have gone commando.

And then something had happened, and it was as though something inside of her had just snapped. Jack hadn’t known how to respond to her sudden shift in moods, but he had been worried about her.

Even after all these years, he still felt an uncontrollable desire to make her smile.

He pulled into his driveway, drove into the garage, and parked the truck.

And then he just sat there.

His breath rose in puffs as the cold December air began to permeate the interior of the truck.

He wanted to see her. Needed to see her.

It was overpowering, this sudden clawing need to be with Leah, to make sure she was all right and to simply look at her, to rake his gaze over all those luscious curves and burn the image into his memory.

Jack closed his eyes and banged his head against the headrest.

After long moments, he reached for his cell phone and called Bella.

* * * * *

“Hello?” Bella stepped away from the game currently in progress -- one that included passing a double-ended dildo from woman to woman using nothing but the knees -- and into an empty bathroom.

“Hey, Bella, it’s Jack.”

She didn’t need magic to know that there was a sense of urgency surrounding Jack -- she could hear it in his voice. “Hi, Jack. What’s up?”

He hesitated, and Bella decided to answer for him. “You need to see Leah, don’t you?”

“How did you know that?”

“Doesn’t matter. The real question is *why* do you need to see Leah?”

“I don’t know. I just...do.”

Bella knew the real reason, but also realized that Leah and Jack had a lot of ground to cover before either of them was willing to face the truth about their still present feelings. “So what do you expect me to do about it?”

“Where does she live?”

Bella mulled over her options. She could tell Jack where her sister lived and risk Leah’s anger the next morning. She could keep the information from Jack and suggest to Leah that maybe she talk to him. She could do her best to inconspicuously throw the two of them together, which she’d honestly been plotting in her head to begin with. Or she could give Leah’s address to Jack and continue to dream up ways to throw them together.

After all, they were meant for each other. Both of them were just too blind to realize it. Her mind made up, Bella rattled off Leah's address. "If you hurt her again, I'll turn you into a toad."

Jack chuckled. "I've always liked you, Bella. And thank you. Do you know when she'll be home?"

She glanced down at her watch. "It sounds like things are wrapping up here. Give her thirty minutes or so."

Considering Bella and Leah only lived about five minutes away from each other, Bella figured thirty minutes would give Leah more than enough time to get home before Jack showed up.

* * * * *

Leah set her packages down on the coffee table and shook her head. Along with the candy cane vibrator Bella had given her, there was also something Monica had called the Rabbit vibrator that looked suspiciously like Santa Claus, which Leah had somehow won herself.

All these years without owning or using a vibrator and somehow she'd ended up with two in one night.

She shook her head and walked to her bedroom. Feeling sleepy yet energized after being at the party, she undressed and slipped into a white cotton cami and boxers before heading back to the living room.

She snuggled under the chenille throw she always kept on the back of the couch and flipped on the television. She searched for something to watch, found nothing, so left it on the Weather Channel.

She'd had a thing for Jim Cantore for years anyway.

Curious, she grabbed both vibrators and set them on her lap. She knew theoretically how they worked since Monica had demonstrated both toys. The candy cane, however, looked tame in comparison to the Rabbit.

The Rabbit had to be at least six inches long, roughly the size of an actual penis from what she remembered. Santa's red face stared back at her as she curiously ran a fingertip over the silicone. It was soft and pliant, which surprised Leah. A Christmas tree protruded from where Santa's penis probably would have been, which Monica had explained would be where the "ears" were located on a traditional Rabbit vibrator. Apparently the tree was supposed to be for clitoral stimulation, although Leah still had her doubts. Right below the tree, however, were several rows of beads that twirled when turned on.

That was the part that scared and yet fascinated Leah.

Fumbling with the buttons, she managed to turn the thing on. Santa's head moved counterclockwise and the beads swirled in the other direction. Curious, she wrapped her hand around the base. The feeling of the beads against her palm was interesting, and she wondered what they would feel like inside of her.

She pressed the button labeled Vibration, and the tree suddenly sprang to life. It hummed and vibrated back and forth.

While the toy was a bit loud, the idea of using it kind of turned her on.

Despite what her sister and best friend thought, she wasn't exactly a prude. She masturbated, and there was a reason why she'd installed a massaging, handheld showerhead in her bathtub. She'd simply never used a vibrator, mainly because she'd been too embarrassed to go to Love Video, which was the closest sex toy shop. And while she knew online adult stores existed, she'd never been brave enough to even look at one of their Web sites, much less order something.

What if her mailman figured out what was in the package? That was a bad porno waiting to happen.

As the vibrator twirled and hummed, Leah could feel her body growing soft and pliant. Her nipples hardened under the cami, and heat began to pool between her legs.

Inspired, she got up from the couch, grabbed her laptop, opened up one of her favorite e-books -- an erotic telling of a classic fairy tale -- and settled back into the cushions.

As she read about Beauty fighting her growing attraction to the Beast, her hand drifted over her breasts, settled on one, and pinched her nipple through the fabric of her cami. Arousal shot from her breasts to between her legs, and her clit swelled in response.

Laptop balanced on one knee, her free hand drifted down, under the waistband of her shorts and panties, through the soft curls, and to her clit. Leah's eyes drifted shut as she brushed a fingertip over the sensitive spot over and over again in a circular motion, increasing the tension that had been building in her body ever since she'd seen Jack last weekend.

His image popped into her mind, smiling down at her as he had been last weekend, and then as he'd been eight years ago. She imagined him kissing her, his mouth on her breasts and his hands between her thighs.

Leah wiggled her hips and sighed.

She dipped a finger inside her pussy, felt the wet heat there, and slid it in and out as much as she could, considering she still had her boxers on.

Needing more, she placed the laptop on the coffee table, shucked off her cami, and removed her shorts and panties. She glanced at the Rabbit on the table. "Why the hell not? Might as well try it."

She picked it up and worked it into her body.

Or, rather, tried to work it into her body.

That's what you get for being celibate for eight years.

Determined, though, Leah relaxed her body, positioned the Rabbit so that the tree was against her clit, and turned on the vibration.

Sparks shot through her body, and her knees jerked.

“Jesus!”

Sensation flooded her entire body, and tension gathered in her lower back. The tip of the head pressed against her opening, and she lifted her hips, wanting more. Needing more.

It slid in, and Leah gasped at the sensation of being filled.

She moaned, the sound reverberating throughout the living room.

She fumbled for the button to turn on the head and nearly screamed as an orgasm rocked through her body not two seconds after she found it.

Holy shit.

Panting and spent and yet craving more, Leah lay there on the couch, the vibrator still turned on and inside of her, enjoying the little tremors that shook her body every few seconds or so. Her heart was pounding so hard she could hear it knocking in her ears.

It took her a few moments to realize that the knocking sound was not coming from inside her chest, but rather from her front door.

Jack shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and waited for Leah to open the door. He figured someone was home, since he could hear the faint sound of voices. Hopefully, she was alone and didn't have someone with her. That would just be perfect.

He knocked again and, after what seemed like forever, the door finally swung open.

His gaze raked over her, taking in the disheveled hair, rosy cheeks and bright eyes, barely-there shorts, and hard nipples poking against the white material of a tank top. Oh God, she did have company.

Her eyes widened and her words came out on a gasp. “Jack? But...what are you doing here?”

“I...” How the hell did he explain this? “I just wanted to see you is all.”

She breathed deeply, and her breasts jiggled. It was everything Jack could do not to stare.

“Why?”

Such a simple question, and yet he knew the answer was much more complicated than that. “I just wanted to see you, to make sure you were okay and to try to clear the air between us.”

She looked away. “I’m not sure that’s possible.”

“Why?” He threw her question back at her.

“Because. It just isn’t.”

“Dammit, Leah, talk to me here.”

“I am talking to you.”

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, praying for calm to take over him. After long moments, he opened his eyes and said, “Are we going to have this conversation on your doorstep or are you going to invite me in?”

Her eyes widened, and he thought panic might have flitted across her face, which bothered him. Why would she feel panicky around him?

He watched as she swallowed, then finally moved back and opened the door wider. He stepped in and immediately felt warm and comfortable.

Well, as comfortable as he could with Leah’s eyes shooting virtual daggers his way.

She closed and locked the door behind him before walking to the couch, sitting down, and pulling a red blanket over her. With her white pajamas and the blanket wrapped around her, she looked like a voluptuous candy cane.

She gestured for him to sit and he did so, settling into the cushions at the other end of the couch.

“You want to talk? So talk.”

He didn't recall her voice holding so much anger in the past, and he knew he'd been the one to put it there. "I'm sorry, Leah."

She raised an eyebrow. "For?"

"For hurting you." He sighed and shifted so that he was facing her directly. "You have to know that I never wanted to hurt you."

She looked away and then back. "Deep down, I know you didn't want to, but you still did. What gets me is that you never once called or e-mailed. You knew how to get in touch with me. So why didn't you?"

"Because you deserved something more than a long-distance boyfriend. Because I was young and stupid. I screwed up. Believe me, Leah, I know I screwed up."

She sighed. "Yeah, you did."

Silence descended upon both of them. Jack's thoughts were a jumbled, convoluted mess. All he knew was that he wanted so badly to reach out and touch her, to pull her toward him and hold her and kiss her and make love to her.

Most of all, he wished he could erase the past, and the hurt that clung to her like static.

Leah picked at the blanket wrapped around her, wishing Jack would both go away and grab her and hold her.

It hurt to see him, and Leah shouldn't have been so shocked at the pain his presence brought her.

Pain, and yet pleasure.

She couldn't deny -- to herself, at least -- that the years had treated Jack well. His light brown hair was cut shorter than it had been, and there were slight lines fanning from the corners of his piercing blue eyes. His mouth was somehow harder, and he looked as though he'd put on some weight -- mostly muscle, if the way his shoulders had felt under her hands

the other night was any indication. Stubble coated his jaw and chin, and it was all Leah could do not to reach out and touch him.

Her fingertips itched and she curled them into the blanket, determined not to allow herself to show any sign of weakness around him. She figured she'd done enough of that last weekend with her spectacular breakdown at Bella's wedding.

Thank God she had therapy on Monday.

"What are you thinking?"

His question was one he'd asked her dozens of times when they'd dated. It had been the question that had done her in, quite honestly, because he'd genuinely wanted to know what she'd been thinking.

Leah wondered if he had any idea how strongly those four little words had always affected her.

"I'm thinking, 'I wish he would just go away and leave me alone already.'"

"I think you're lying."

She snapped her head up. "Why would I lie?"

"I think you're kind of glad I'm here."

She rolled her eyes. "Keep dreaming, Jack."

He settled further into the couch cushions and casually crossed one ankle over a knee. "How many times am I going to have to say I'm sorry before you forgive me?"

She didn't know. In all honesty, she knew it was childish to blame him for pursuing his future. She'd known what the situation was before she'd entered into it. She'd known he would be leaving, but that hadn't kept her from wanting the relationship to last.

After he'd left, Leah had felt like a piece of her soul had been ripped out. She'd needed him in those hours, days, and weeks following the miscarriage. She'd needed his strong arms to hold her, to comfort her, to whisper in her ear that everything would be okay. Instead, she'd been alone.

Sure, at first her mother and Bella had tried to comfort her, but their words abraded more than soothed. It had taken her far too long to get over him, and to accept the cards life had dealt her.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. "It's not that I don't forgive you, Jack. It's just that it hurt, and I'm not willing to open myself up to that kind of hurt again."

"Here, give me your feet."

Her eyelids popped open. "What?"

His smile was gentle. "Put your feet in my lap."

She complied, even though she had no idea why he wanted her to do so. Had he developed a foot fetish over the past eight years?

Instead of sucking on her toes or any other absurd thing like that, he instead began to massage the instep of her right foot.

"You want to massage my feet?" Skepticism laced her words.

He shrugged. "I can tell you're tense, and I'm guessing it's been a while since you let someone take care of you."

Not since you.

"Why would you say that?"

"Because I know you. You've always been too busy taking care of everyone else."

He was right, but it unnerved her that he could still read her so easily. "You don't know me, Jack. Not anymore."

His fingers continued to massage her feet as he spoke. "Yes, I do. You love your sister and your mother exasperates you. Your dad still dotes on you, but you sometimes get jealous because it seems like everyone pays more attention to Bella.

"You have chocolate stashed in your cupboard for emergencies only, and a couple of nights a week, you light candles and allow yourself to soak in the bathtub while eating said

chocolate. However, grilled cheese is your comfort food. You have a crush on Jim Cantore and you watch the Weather Channel for fun. You love romantic comedies and can't stand horror films, and every year you watch the *A Christmas Story* marathon on TBS. Oh, and you're favorite color's purple."

"Okay, okay, so you remember the superficial stuff. Point taken."

"What I am curious about, however, is why you don't have a Christmas tree up."

She shrugged. "I don't have enough room. This isn't exactly a huge apartment, y'know."

"But you love Christmas. I figured you would at least have something small up."

Christmas hadn't been her favorite holiday in eight years. "I have a wreath on the door."

His fingers continued to massage her feet, and Leah resisted the urge to melt into the couch. The pressure felt delicious.

"Just let yourself relax, Leah."

"Stop reading my mind," she grumbled.

He smiled, and Leah felt her stomach flip-flop. Their gazes collided, and the sensations in her feet somehow managed to shoot up throughout her entire body.

He wouldn't let her look away, and Leah wasn't sure she wanted to. It felt good to have his hands on her again, to simply have him here again.

She still hurt, but she'd also missed him. More than she'd been willing to admit.

She eventually allowed her eyelids to drift shut and she gave herself up to the sensations coursing through her body. Even though his hands were only on her feet, it felt as though he was touching her everywhere.

Slowly, the tension began to ease from her body. She felt warm, dreamy, like she was floating in midair. He'd always made her feel that way.

His hands moved to her calves, where they continued to knead the muscles. Up and over her knees, to her thighs, his hands moved in circular motions, coaxing the tightness out of her.

“Turn over onto your stomach.”

His whisper startled her out of her floaty sensation. “What?”

“Let me massage your back.”

“Oh.” She hesitated, wondering where this was going. “Maybe you should stop.”

“Why?”

She swallowed and averted her gaze. “Because I don’t think this is such a good idea.”

He gently grasped her chin and turned her head so that she was looking at him. “I’m just giving you a massage. That’s it. You’re tense and I like giving them. So just enjoy it, okay? It’s just a massage.”

Even though she was a bit out of practice when it came to men and sex, she did remember where massages usually led. However, Jack seemed so earnest that she decided to trust him -- for now -- and flipped over onto her stomach. Aware that she must look like a beached whale, she tried not to convey her embarrassment.

Long moments passed before she felt his hands on her shoulders. His fingers worked the muscles there, easing out the knots. She finally began to relax again and stop worrying so much what she must look like from behind or where this was going. He probably wasn’t even attracted to her anymore and was simply giving her the best massage of her life as an apology.

That had to be it.

Her breathing eased, and she slowly began to feel calm in a way she hadn’t felt in years. Jack’s hands continued to work their magic on her muscles, moving from her shoulders to the middle of her back and lower.

He pressed in with his thumbs at the small of her back, rubbing in slow, circular motions that penetrated the tightly knotted muscles there. And then his hands were on her butt, gently kneading and massaging. It was odd, having his hands on her ass, and yet it felt strangely good. Relaxing. Soothing.

Arousing.

Leah stifled a groan and willed her body not to respond to his touch as his hands drifted back up, skimming over the sides of her abdomen and rib cage, almost grazing the sides of her breasts, until his fingertips trailed over her upper arms.

His hands massaged her neck, easing the tension there, before she felt his fingers burrow into her hair. His touch against her scalp sent pleasure racing through her veins, and she bit into the pillow beneath her head to keep from moaning.

She felt soft warmth on the back of her neck, and realized Jack was kissing her. She shouldn't allow it, but right now she couldn't think of any reasons to make him stop, either.

He dropped tiny kisses along the skin exposed by her cami. First on her neck, then her shoulder. Her upper arm. Right under her ear. Across her shoulders and down her spine. When he reached the small of her back, he kissed her right above the curve of her ass. She felt his fingers at the waistband of her boxers, felt the elastic move just slightly before his lips touched her skin. He kissed her and then lightly nipped.

Leah couldn't help it, and her backside rolled against him.

His tongue soothed the sting his teeth had left before moving down her body, kissing her wherever her skin was exposed. He kissed the backs of her thighs, allowed his tongue to tickle and tease the sensitive spots behind her knees, down her calves all the way to her toes.

The feeling of his mouth surrounding her big toe almost caused Leah to jump. So he had apparently developed a foot fetish.

But then all thoughts were chased out of her head at the feeling of his lips around her toe, his tongue gently laving at it while he sucked. The force, the heat and wetness of his

mouth caused heat and wetness to pool between her thighs. Her body was warm all over, her skin overly sensitive and her pussy begging for release.

Oh, God. She wanted Jack. God help her, she wanted him even more now than she had before.

After long moments, she felt cool air hit her toe and realized he'd stopped his ministrations. Curious, she turned her head so that she could see him.

He sat there, staring at her, his blue eyes now dark and clouded with arousal. She remembered that look, except now something else tinged it. Something more powerful, more potent, and more adult.

He met her gaze with his own, and Leah knew he could feel her arousal, that the need and longing were written all over her face. And she didn't care.

She missed the slippery slide of skin against skin, the feel of a man's stubble abrading her cheek, the feeling of a hard cock inside of her. More than that, she missed Jack.

"Sit up."

She did so, kind of liking this new, more demanding Jack. The old Jack never would have commanded her to do anything. And the old Leah would never have liked it.

"Take off your shirt."

She swallowed and drew the garment up and over her head. She tossed it to the side and immediately covered her stomach and breasts with her arms.

Jack shook his head before reaching out, grasping her wrists and tugging them away from her body. His gaze raked over her, and the naked passion in his eyes made Leah feel feminine and sexy.

He touched her breasts, played with them, tested their weight in his palms before grazing his fingertips over the tight tips of her nipples. "You have the most amazing breasts."

Leah's cheeks grew warm, whether from embarrassment or passion she wasn't sure. "Um, thanks."

He smiled. "Stand up."

Curious, she did so, and he reached out and drew her boxers and panties down her hips and legs until they hit the floor. Standing in front of him like this, he was at eye level with her stomach. Which he kissed. Repeatedly.

His tongue dived in and out of her belly button, his teeth nipped at the flesh there, and his fingers pinched her nipples.

Leah's breathing quickened and she pressed her thighs together in an attempt to relieve the pressure building there. As if sensing her discomfort, Jack moved one hand from her breast to her thighs, which he coaxed apart.

Leah felt his fingers in her curls before easing between her lips and meeting the moisture pooled there. His finger slid up and down, back and forth, teasing her until she thought she would scream. "Jack, please."

He slid a finger into her pussy, and Leah moaned. *Oh, God.*

"Sit down on the coffee table."

She wasn't sure the coffee table could hold her weight, but Leah complied anyway, making sure she didn't accidentally land on her laptop.

Her new position put them eye to eye, and Leah's breath caught on a quiet gasp at the desire reflected in Jack's gaze. He leaned in and touched his lips to hers, allowing them both to slowly sink in to the kiss rather than dive right in.

His lips against hers were gentle yet insistent, never yielding. She felt his tongue press against her lips, and she opened her mouth wider and met his tongue with her own. Her hands sank into his hair and fisted against his scalp as she fed greedily from his mouth, needing to take as much as she could, as much as he would allow.

Their movements turned more urgent, and her mouth grew more insistent. She needed Jack. Needed him inside of her, on top of her, beside her, with her. She simply needed, and

that need made her hungry. Hungry for him, for his mouth and his touch and his body. His love.

Her hands moved to the buttons of his shirt, but before she could get the first one undone he grabbed her hands and broke the kiss. “This is about you, Leah. Let me. Let me take care of you.”

The rough need in his voice nearly melted Leah’s bones. Instead of letting him see how his words had affected her, though, she leaned in and kissed him again.

“Lean back on your elbows,” he whispered against her mouth, “and put your legs up on the edge of the couch.”

The thought of being spread so open to his gaze and to his touch both scared and excited her. Trepidation and desire skipping equally through her body, Leah did as he’d asked.

He slowly perused her body, his gaze lingering here and there in curiosity and desire, but never in disgust.

“You are so beautiful.”

“No, I’m not.”

He pressed a kiss to her knee. “Yes, you are. You’re soft and beautiful.”

“I look like a Rubens painting.”

“Exactly.”

She swallowed. “I have rolls and cellulite and stretch marks.”

“That just means you’re a real woman.”

“I’ve gained weight since you last saw me naked.”

“It looks good on you.” He pressed another kiss to her knee. “Now stop worrying and just let me love you.”

Let me love you. Leah closed her eyes and played his words over and over in her mind.
Let me love you.

She felt his mouth move from her knee and up her thigh, felt his lips feather over the sensitive flesh at the juncture of her legs before his tongue snaked out and touched her clit. She pushed her hips toward him in a silent plea for more, and he complied.

His fingers spread her lips wide, and he ate at her pussy, licking and sucking, his teeth occasionally nipping at the sensitive flesh. He slipped a finger inside of her and pressed upward.

“More, Jack, more,” Leah begged

He slid a second finger inside of her as he continued to tongue her clit. Leah’s breath was coming out in short pants, and her body was straining for release.

“I need you, Jack. It’s not enough. I need you.”

He looked up at her from between her thighs, and his blue eyes sparkled with desire and some other emotion Leah couldn’t quite name at the moment.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his hand land on the candy cane she’d forgotten to put away before answering the door.

“What’s this?”

She swallowed. “A vibrator from tonight’s party.”

“You were at a sex toy party?”

She rolled her eyes. “Bella made me go.”

He studied it before asking, “Have you used it yet?”

“Uh, no.”

“I think now might be a perfect time.”

“Oh, I don’t know about --”

“Shh. Just relax and enjoy.”

She watched as he turned the toy on and brought it to her clit. The vibrations against her body nearly made her jump off the table.

“You like that, don’t you?”

Leah nodded.

“I wonder if you’ll like the rest of it, then.” He moved the vibrator down her slit and slid it into her pussy, in and out, over and over again.

“What’s the curved end for?”

“Ummm...” She looked at him and he raised an eyebrow. “According to Monica, it’s for double penetration.”

Both of Jack’s eyebrows shot up at that comment. “Have you ever tried that before?”

She shook her head and then felt the other end of the vibrator against her ass.

“Wait! She...she said...she said you need plenty of lube for that.”

“Honey, you’re dripping wet right now, and this vibrator is soaked.”

Leah’s cheeks warmed in embarrassment.

“Do you have any idea how sexy that is?”

She felt the curved end rub against her ass again, and willed her body to relax. Jack’s head dipped and once again she felt his tongue against her clit, laving at it and sucking. Her muscles began to relax one by one, and before she knew it, she felt the second end of the vibrator entering her virgin territory.

She gasped at the initial pain, and Jack stopped. “You okay?”

Leah nodded her head. “I’m okay. It’s just...different, is all.”

Jack’s smile was all knowing and sexy as hell, and this time he didn’t drop his gaze from hers until the toy had made its way beyond the initial barrier of her body.

Slowly, Leah became aware of the sensations coursing throughout her. The shaft was brushing against her pussy walls, and the other end was vibrating in her ass. Jack’s thumb

was playing over her clit, and as she stared into his eyes all of the sensations became too much to bear.

Her body exploded in orgasm around the candy cane, a low moan escaping from her lips, and Jack continued to apply pressure to her clit.

As she came down, he slowly removed the vibrator from her body and stopped his ministrations. The humming stopped, and Leah realized he'd turned the candy cane off.

Jack dropped a kiss on her pubis before pulling her toward him.

Limp and sated, Leah went easily, and when he curled her onto his lap, she didn't even complain or express concern she might break his leg with her weight.

Her head rested against his shoulder, and Leah felt more relaxed than she had in years.

Jack wrapped his arms around her, and Leah felt her eyes droop shut as peace and warmth stole over her.

* * * * *

Leah woke up the next morning and closed her eyes against the glare of the cheery yellow sunshine pouring into her bedroom.

What have I done?

She groaned and rolled from her side to her back, wincing at the twinges of pain that moved through her muscles.

Well, at least I know I had a good time.

Not willing to face the harsh daylight of reality just yet, Leah pulled the covers up over her face and wished like hell she could turn back time.

Had she really spread herself out for Jack like some wanton buffet?

Yes, you did.

She groaned again and finally pushed the blanket away and got out of bed. She pulled on a pair of panties and a cami before groggily making her way to the kitchen and preparing coffee.

Leah walked back into the living room and nearly screamed when she saw all six feet and one inch of Jack stretched out on her couch.

This could not be happening.

Jack woke to the realization that someone was staring at him.

He opened his eyes and stared back, his gaze greedily taking in the sight of Leah wearing nothing but a white cotton tank top and a pair of bikini underwear.

Jesus, she made his mouth water.

Although his lips wanted to curve into a smile, something about her facial expression warned him against doing so.

“What are you doing here?”

He sat up and raked a hand through his hair. “You passed out on my lap last night, and I didn’t want to wake you just so you could lock up; it was the most relaxed I’ve seen you since I’ve been back. So I just carried you to bed and slept on the couch.”

“Oh.” She tugged the tank top down, drawing his attention to her legs. “Well, thanks. And I’m up, so you can leave now.”

He was up, too, but he didn’t think now would be a good time to apprise her of that situation.

Even through the haze of arousal brought on by morning wood and the sight of Leah half naked, Jack could still sense the uncertainty pouring off her in waves. “I think we need to talk.”

“Isn’t that supposed to be my line?” she asked.

He could no longer restrain the grin that spread across his face. “Typically, yes. But I really do think we should talk.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “There’s really nothing to say, Jack. Thanks for the orgasm, nice to see you, the door’s right there.”

“It’s nice to know some things never change.”

“Like what?”

“You still get defensive when you don’t know how to handle a situation.”

She rolled her eyes. “If you say so. Now, please leave so I can get on with my life.”

“What if I told you I wanted to be a part of your life?” Nerves danced along his spine as he awaited Leah’s response.

“So you want to be a part of my life now, when you didn’t want to when --” She stopped midsentence and walked back into the kitchen.

Even though the conversation was serious, Jack couldn’t help but notice the sweet curve of her ass and the sway of her rounded hips. He also couldn’t miss the stiffness in her spine.

Resolute, he pushed himself off the couch and followed her into the kitchen. Although small and set up galley-style, it was well lit with black-and-chrome appliances and brightly colored cup towels.

He noticed a crayon drawing on her refrigerator door and went to take a look. “Who’s Scott?”

Leah stirred sugar into her coffee. “One of my kids.”

His eyebrows -- along with his blood pressure -- shot up. “You have kids?” Maybe he didn’t know her as well as he’d thought.

The spoon clinked against the rim of the coffee mug, and Jack realized Leah’s hands were shaking.

Without tearing her gaze from the cup in front of her, she said, “N-no. He’s one of my students. I’m a preschool teacher.”

So that explained the drawing, but that didn’t explain the apprehension coursing through his body. “A preschool teacher, huh? You always did love children.”

She nodded and took an unsteady sip of coffee.

Jack pressed on, feeling an overwhelming need to do so. “I’m actually kind of surprised you’re not married to some lucky bastard with a passel of your own by now.”

She shrugged. “I guess I just haven’t found the right guy yet.”

For some reason he wasn’t buying that. “Maybe not. Then again, there aren’t a whole lot of men worthy of having you, either.”

“And you think you are?”

He mimicked her earlier shrug. “I think there’s still a lot of chemistry between us, and I know I never stopped caring about you.”

She turned and walked out of the kitchen. “Don’t lie, Jack. It’s not very becoming.”

Beginning to feel more than a little exasperated, Jack followed her into the living room. “Why are you so determined to hate me?” God, he sounded like a woman.

“I’m not determined to hate you, Jack. I’m just...” Her words trailed off.

“You’re just what, Leah?”

She looked up at him with those big blue eyes before looking down to the coffee table in front of her. In a voice so quiet it was almost a whisper, she said, “I’m just determined to not get my heart broken again, is all.”

Chapter Four

Even Mondays get the blues

“You’re off work today, right?”

“Well, hello to you, too,” Leah said to Bella.

“Oh, sorry. Hi. So, you’re off work today, right?”

“Yes.” She was always off work the week before and after Christmas. It was her private time to remember, to mourn, and, on occasion, to look forward.

She had a feeling the next two weeks would be spent doing a whole lot of looking back.

“Great! I’m going this afternoon to pick out our Christmas tree, and thought you could come with me.”

“I have therapy this afternoon.” Plus, she really wasn’t feeling in the Christmas spirit -- despite her intimate knowledge of candy canes and Santa Claus.

“What time?”

Leah sighed. She could lie, but Bella would see right through it. She always did. “One o’clock.”

“That’s perfect. I can’t get away from here until two thirty, so that’ll give you time to do therapy and then meet me at my place.”

“I don’t know that I feel like being in the Christmas spirit right now, Bella.”

“Oh, whatever. You tell me that every year, and this year you’re getting out of your apartment and participating in Christmas rather than sitting by on the sidelines.”

“I don’t sit on the sidelines.”

“Yes, you do. Christmas used to be your favorite holiday. And I know it can’t be easy on you, but wallowing in depression and Ben and Jerry’s hasn’t been working so well for you for the past eight years, either.” Bella’s tone was gentle, but even so, her words grated.

“I don’t wallow.”

“Okay, so maybe ‘wallow’ wasn’t the best word for me to use. My point, though, is that you need to start living again. So I’ll see you at two thirty at my place, and if you’re not there, I’m just going to track you down and drag you with me.”

Leah closed her eyes and breathed deeply. “Okay, okay. I’ll see you at two thirty. Bye.”

She hung up her phone and tossed it onto the couch beside her before resting her forehead in her hands. Maybe Bella was right; maybe she did need to change up her usual routine and get out a little more. She looked at her stomach. And Lord knew she could use a little less Ben & Jerry’s.

Unfortunately, they’d been the only two men consistently in her life for the past eight years.

* * * * *

“Hello, Leah, how have you been?”

Leah sat down in the chair across from Tina Jones, her therapist, and sighed. “Well, I was doing okay until Bella’s wedding.”

Tina’s eyebrows rose. “What happened at Bella’s wedding?”

“Other than the usual family drama? Nothing other than Jack Michaelson showing up.”

“Jack? As in the one you were in love with eight years ago?”

“Yes, that Jack.”

“Wow. That must have come as quite a shock.”

“That might be the understatement of the century. I had a bit of a nervous breakdown during the reception and ended up bawling my eyes out in the bathroom. It was just so strange seeing him again. Strange and kind of exciting and yet it hurt like hell. I hadn’t expected it to hurt so much.”

“Where do you think that hurt came from?”

Leah picked at the edge of her thumbnail. “He left me. He just left me and I never heard from him again. Until Bella’s wedding. And all of a sudden he’s there, still looking like a tall drink of sin with whipped cream and a cherry on top. He told me he missed me and that he never stopped caring about me and that he hadn’t contacted me because he didn’t think a long-distance relationship would have been fair to me.”

Tina raised a perfectly waxed black eyebrow. “He didn’t call you because he thought a long-distance relationship would be unfair to you?”

“That’s what he said.”

“Do you believe him?”

“I think he’s full of shit, to be frank about it. Yes, when we met we knew that we had a finite amount of time together. And, yes, we’d agreed from the beginning that long-distance relationships never worked. But when we first met we didn’t know how things would end up, that we would end up falling in love.”

“Or that you would end up pregnant.”

“Well, that, too, obviously.”

Tina crossed one leg over the other. “It sounds to me like you’re not quite sure how you feel about him not contacting you, and about him being back now.”

“Well, that’s because I’m not. On one hand, I can’t blame him. We had an agreement. On the other...I just wish we’d talked about it later, right before he left. I feel like we should have had a chance to see what we could have been, because now? I’m not sure we can be anything.”

“Not even friends?”

Leah squirmed in her seat and felt her cheeks warm. “Um, I don’t think friendship is possible between us.”

“Why is that?”

She couldn’t meet Tina’s gaze, so she looked down at the thumbnail she’d managed to obliterate in the past ten minutes. “Because apparently the attraction has not gone away.”

“You don’t think you could ignore it, or will it to go away?”

Leah shook her head. “No, I don’t. Actually, I know I can’t. I tried. God, did I try. But then Saturday night there he was, looking all handsome and kind of vulnerable and like he *had* to see me right then and there or he would go mad. And my pump was, well, already a bit primed, considering I’d been at a sex toy party with Bella and Sara and had just tried out a vibrator I’d somehow won. He gave me a massage that started out innocently enough -- I swear! But...you know how massages are. And, well, one thing led to another, and then he was kissing me and I was on the coffee table and -- we didn’t have sex. In fact, he wouldn’t even let me touch him except to kiss him. Afterward I fell asleep on his lap, and when I woke up the next morning, he was still on my couch because he hadn’t wanted to wake me up to lock the door and... I don’t know what came over me.”

“How did you feel with Jack?”

Leah tilted her head and considered Tina’s question. How *had* she felt with Jack? Other than horny. “Tense, at first. Really nervous. But I felt safe in a way. When he touched me, it just felt good and right and I didn’t have the energy to keep him at arm’s length. I wanted him to touch me. I wanted him to kiss me and hold me and, yes, make love to me. He’s really

the only man I've ever wanted, which explains at least a part of the celibacy. I felt overwhelmed, like it was almost too much all at once and yet at the same time not enough. I worried about my body at first, that I was too fat because I've gained weight since he left. But then he made me feel not fat. Beautiful, in a way. I felt...worshipped."

"So you trust Jack with your body, but not with your heart is what I'm hearing."

"Well, yeah."

"And yet you haven't trusted anyone else with your body since you've been coming to see me. Why do you think that is?"

Leah shrugged. "Familiarity, I guess. Plus, I really haven't been attracted to anyone since Jack. At least, not enough to want to do anything about it."

"Do you have any plans to tell him about the baby?"

"Do you think I should?"

Tina nodded. "Yes, I do. He has a right to know, but you also have a right to share your pain and get it off your chest."

"I don't know if I can do that."

"You can, Leah. You've done a lot of things you didn't think you could do, like teaching preschoolers. Do you remember how scared you were when you got that job offer? I remember you telling me that you were afraid you would get too attached to them, or that seeing healthy children every day would cause you to hurt more. You've done it, though. You've been successful."

"I know. It's just, what if he hates me for not telling him eight years ago?"

"If he doesn't understand why you didn't tell him and hates you for it, then it's his loss."

* * * * *

Jack pulled up to the curb behind a blue Honda Civic and wondered if he'd somehow gotten his times mixed up.

Looking at the clock, he checked his text messages and saw that Bella had indeed told him to be at her place at two thirty. Apparently she needed his help -- and truck -- to haul a Christmas tree.

He got out and walked up the sidewalk to the front door, where he rang the bell and waited patiently for Bella to answer.

When the door swung open and he saw Leah instead, he almost swallowed his tongue.

Her cheeks were pink, blue eyes sparkling, and her red hair a tumbled mass around her head. God, she was stunning. Her warm smile quickly turned into a frown, though, and Jack barely restrained his sigh.

"Mark's still at work."

"I know. Bella asked me to come over and help her haul a Christmas tree."

Leah closed her eyes, and he thought she might have been counting to ten as she breathed in and out. "Fine. Come on in."

She moved to the side, and Jack stepped inside. Even though there was plenty of space in the entry hall, he couldn't help but brush against her, just enough to make her fully aware of his presence. She jumped and looked up at him.

Even with her gaze narrowed, she still couldn't quite hide the attraction simmering between them.

They walked into the living room where Bella was busily chatting with someone on the phone. When she finally snapped it shut and turned to look at them, her grin was mischievously unapologetic. "That was Mark. He needs to take his car in for an oil change, and if he doesn't get it in within the next thirty minutes, he won't be able to get it done until after New Year's. He needs me to meet him over at the dealership so I can take him back to

work. Is there any way the two of you could go pick out a Christmas tree for me and bring it back? I would really appreciate it.”

While Jack could barely contain his grin, Leah looked like she wanted to hit her sister. Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, Jack took hold of Leah’s elbow and smiled at Bella. “No problem, Bella. Leah and I will just go pick you out a tree, and maybe I’ll get one for my place while we’re there.”

Leah tried to jerk her elbow away, but Jack held fast.

“Thank you so much, Jack. And Leah, you know what kind of a tree I’m looking for, so I know you’ll be able to pick out the best one on the lot.”

Jack ushered Leah out of the house as quickly as possible, knowing she could resist and change her mind at any moment. As soon as they were both in the truck, he started the engine, put on his seat belt, and pulled away from the curb.

“You sure were in a hurry to get out of there.”

He gave her a sideways glance. “I didn’t want you to change your mind and bail on me.”

Leah sighed and propped her elbow up on the window ledge. “With Bella there is no changing your mind. She suggests and you simply do whatever she wants.”

“So where are we going?”

“Bella’s insisting on a completely organic Christmas tree, so we’re headed out to Mexia.”

An hour each way in the truck with Leah? That could be either heaven or hell.

* * * * *

The past hour had been hell.

Leah stepped out of the truck and breathed deeply. They’d been too close to each other. She could feel him beside her, with less than three feet separating their bodies. She could feel

the heat pouring off of him, and even though she'd been cold huddled next to the door and had wanted nothing more than to burrow into his warmth, she hadn't.

Instead, she'd replayed her conversation with her therapist along with images from the other night. So along with being cold and confused she was also hot and bothered.

Go figure.

Since it was a Monday afternoon, there were only a few other cars in the parking lot. Leah was willing to bet Bella had had something to do with *that* too.

They wandered around the farm in silence, Leah aware of Jack's every move beside her.

"See anything you like yet?"

Leah shook her head. "Not yet. Bella wants something specific."

"Like what? Tall and skinny? Short and fat? Tall and fat? Something like the tree from *A Charlie Brown Christmas*?"

She snorted. "It's not so much a look, but a feeling. But no, she definitely does not want a tree like Charlie Brown's."

"I always felt sorry for that tree. It looked like it had been so neglected."

"I don't know. Maybe Schulz was making a commentary on global warming way ahead of his time."

Jack stopped and stared at her.

"What?"

He smiled. "I think you might have just made a joke."

She shrugged. "I tell jokes all the time." She'd learned long ago her sense of humor was a defense mechanism she'd developed in order to cope with her emotions.

"Yeah, but you haven't joked around with me."

"Well, I can stop if you want me to."

They continued walking, and Jack said, "I was just teasing you. And for the record, I don't want you to stop."

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye and almost stumbled. Sunlight filtered in through the trees and cast his face in a glow so golden it was breathtaking. It illuminated the planes of his face, the defined cheekbones, straight nose, and firm lips. As usual, she could see the faint shadow of stubble along his jaw. He was, quite honestly, the most beautiful man she'd ever seen.

And for whatever reason, he wanted her.

She hadn't been able to figure it out back then, and she sure as hell couldn't figure it out now. "Why are you here, Jack?"

He thrust his hands into his jacket pockets. "Because Bella asked me to help her with a Christmas tree."

She stopped and waited until he turned and looked at her. "No, Jack. I mean, why are you *here*. In Waco. Back home."

He glanced away and back again. "I had a good life in Knoxville. My business was doing well, I had a nice group of friends, and a house I'd designed myself. I wasn't happy, though. I missed my parents. I missed hanging out with my closest friend. When Mema died and left me the house, I realized I'd missed a lot there, too. So I decided to move back."

"I thought you were only here until you'd finished remodeling the house."

"That had been the original plan. But things change, Leah. Plans change."

He was staying here? For good? Her head felt as though it was spinning, and her body tingled all over. Why, after all this time, had he chosen now to come back home and stay for good?

"What are you thinking, Miss Leah?"

She drew in a quick breath. "I'm just wondering why now."

He'd been the only person to call her "Miss Leah" until her students. And they sure as hell didn't cause shivers of anticipation and desire to snake down her spine.

"Because it feels like the right time. You say you'll know Bella's tree when it feels right, I say moving back permanently feels right."

"I didn't think men believed in that sort of thing."

"Some of us do."

A gust of wind stirred the leaves around them and caused Leah's hair to blow across her eyes. When she finally got everything righted, Jack was standing closer to her, intensity burning in his light blue eyes.

"I can't do this again," she whispered.

He lifted his hand, reached and cradled her cheek. "Can't do what?"

"Allow myself to love you again. To like you again."

He kissed the tip of her nose. "You're cold."

"Do you mean that literally or figuratively?"

"Literally. 'Cold' is the last word I would use to describe you."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close to his body. Leah felt his body heat through his jacket and her coat and sweater, and instantly began to feel warmer. "What word would you use to describe me, then?"

She wasn't sure why she'd asked, but something about the moment made her feel like a different person, like the person she might have been if she'd only allowed herself.

"Not word, but rather words."

She lifted her eyebrows.

"First, I would have to say sexy."

He kissed the tip of her nose again.

“Smart.” He kissed her left cheek.

“Funny.” He kissed her right cheek.

“Warm.” His lips landed on her forehead.

“Caring.” Her jaw.

“Soft.” Her mouth.

Leah’s eyelids drifted shut and she allowed herself to be carried away by his kiss. His lips were warm and inviting against hers, soft and undemanding. She fisted her hands in the material of his shirt under his open jacket and kissed him back, enjoying the feel of his mouth on hers, the gentle slide of tongue against tongue, the rise and fall of his breath under her hands.

He didn’t demand, didn’t take or plunder her mouth with his own. He kept the pace slow and cradled her head in his hands as though he were holding a precious gift instead.

Leah’s breath hitched and she pulled away.

Jack tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and smiled tenderly. “The real reason is you, Leah. It’s always been you.”

Making a sudden decision, she said, “I have something I need to tell you.”

Chapter Five

Dirty little secrets

She was a nervous wreck the entire drive back into Waco. Leah fiddled with the bracelet around her wrist, taking comfort in its warmth.

Come to think of it, the bracelet stayed warm. Well, at least when Jack was around. Then again, her entire body was usually warm when Jack was around, so it made sense that her body heat would warm the bracelet, too.

In an effort to keep her mind off of the conversation she knew she was going to have with Jack, she contemplated the bracelet Bella had given her.

She recalled Bella's smile when Leah had put it on, that secretive smile her little sister had always had. Especially when she was up to one of her tricks.

Curious, Leah took the bracelet off and studied it closely. It looked like an ordinary -- if not old -- bracelet. Nothing magical or special about it, really. Except Leah knew her sister, and Leah had a feeling the bracelet was anything but ordinary.

Now, though, was not the time to confront Bella. She glanced at Jack from the corner of her eye. No, now was the time to think about Jack, and herself, and the baby she'd lost. Now was the time to think about what she was going to say and how she was going to say it.

Jack turned into Bella and Mark's empty driveway and stopped the truck. He'd been silent for the past hour, tension lining the planes of his face. Finally, though, he turned to Leah and spoke. "I'm just going to carry the tree to the front porch and leave it there. Meet you at your place?"

She nodded. "That sounds good. I'll see you in a few."

She got out of the truck and walked over to her car.

Anxiety poured through Leah during the five minutes it took to get to her apartment. As she waited for Jack, she willed her body to calm down. She did her breathing exercises, taking deep breaths and counting backward from ten to one in order to calm her racing heart. When that didn't work, she closed her eyes and lay down on the couch, trying to convince her stomach that she really wasn't going to throw up.

Instead, though, a feeling like ice water through her veins coursed through her when she heard Jack's brief knock on her front door. She took a few more deep breaths. *You can do this, Leah. You're strong. You know you're not going to be sick. Just breathe.*

She got up and answered the door.

His mouth was set in a grim line, and Leah wondered if he somehow sensed that what she had to say wasn't going to be of the happy, fluffy bunnies nature. Silently, she closed the door behind him and waited until he sat down on the couch.

Nerves caused her to pace across the floor. Back and forth. Back and forth. She wrung her hands, twisted the bracelet around her wrist, and finally came to a stop in front of him.

"I was pregnant when you left."

Of all the things Jack had expected to hear, Leah's proclamation had definitely not been on the top of his list.

"You were pregnant?"

She nodded. "I didn't know it when you left, but yes, I was pregnant."

"*Was* pregnant." A sudden chill stole through him. "You didn't have an abortion, did you?"

"No! You know I couldn't have done that. I love kids too much."

The chill began to abate, but Jack still couldn't shake the feeling that something about this story was very, very wrong. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know how to contact you! If you'd just called or e-mailed or written or something I would have told you. I looked for you online, you know. Do you know how many Jack Michaelsons there are in the United States? And there weren't any listed in Chicago."

"You could have gone to my parents. They would have given you the phone number. Hell, they would have dialed me themselves had they known the situation."

"I honestly was too embarrassed to go to your parents. I didn't want them to think poorly of you, or of me. And truth be told, a part of me didn't want to ruin your life and cause you to drop out of grad school because our birth control failed."

She looked down at the bracelet on her wrist, the same one he'd noticed her fiddling with all day, and he saw her throat convulse as she swallowed.

A part of him wanted to go to her and hold her. He could feel the anxiety pouring off of her in waves. The other part, though, didn't even want to look at her. How could she have kept this from him?

Leah couldn't look at Jack as she dove into the rest of the story. She could feel his anger, and that more than anything caused her to keep on going.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, remembering those months in the fall of 2000 all too clearly.

“I didn’t even realize I was pregnant until early November. When I didn’t get my period, at first I thought it was just stress and depression. I cried a lot after you left. My grades dropped and some days I felt like I had no real reason to keep on going. I loved you so much; it was like when you left my heart just got ripped right out of my chest.

“When I went in for my annual exam, though, my doctor told me I was pregnant. At first I didn’t believe her. I mean, I was on the Pill and we’d used a condom every single time. We’d been responsible and done everything we were supposed to do. Apparently, though, you have some really determined sperm and there I was, twenty-one, in my junior year of college, single, and finding out I was pregnant.

“I panicked at first. I thought, ‘No, this can’t be happening. What am I going to do? How am I going to finish school? I can’t raise a child on my own. Oh God, my parents are going to kill me.’ My OB discussed my options with me, and told me to think about it for a few days before making a decision.

“That’s when I searched for you. I tried every Web site I knew of to try back then, and nothing. By that point I was starting to show signs of being pregnant -- morning sickness and the like -- and my mom picked up on it. Grandma was still alive at that point, thank God, because if it hadn’t been for her I’m sure Mom would have strangled me.”

A tear slipped down her cheek, and Leah absently brushed it away. “They were so disappointed in me, Jack. I’d always been the good daughter, you know. The one who’d always been on the straight and narrow path, the one who’d always done the right thing, been responsible, made straight A’s, and got a full tuition-paid scholarship to Baylor. They were so disappointed and so afraid that I would get kicked out of school for being pregnant out of wedlock.

“They” -- she took a deep, shuddering breath -- “they tried to talk me into having an abortion. Mom even drove me down to the clinic, but I couldn’t do it. Despite everything, despite the consequences and the fact that I knew that life would never be the same, I couldn’t get rid of your baby. Of our baby. It was the only part of you I still had with me. Plus, I was already in my second trimester, and they wouldn’t have done the procedure anyway.

“So I called my doctor, and the day before Thanksgiving I got in for an appointment. It was amazing, Jack, hearing the heartbeat and the beginnings of a little life inside of me. I was scared and yet excited. I’d always wanted to be a mother, and even though it was happening a little sooner than I’d expected, I was going to embrace the cards I’d been dealt and love this baby with everything in me.”

Tears were now falling freely down her cheeks, and Leah knew there was no way to stop them. The anxiety was still roiling through her body, and she felt like she was freezing. Her heart was beating too fast and she could barely swallow past the dry lump of panic in her throat, but she knew she had to get the rest of the story out. She owed that to Jack. She owed it to herself.

She pressed a hand to her belly without thinking and continued. “And then, a week before Christmas, I woke up one morning with really bad cramps. The pain was excruciating. I got up, and there was blood on the sheets. I panicked, started yelling for Grandma and Mom. They ran into the room, saw the blood and, I guess, the look on my face, and rushed me to the hospital.

“By the time they got me into a room, though, the baby was gone. She -- the baby was a girl, by the way -- was just gone.

“After that, things got a little fuzzy. They had to do a D and C since I was so far along when the miscarriage occurred, and so they gave me some drugs to numb the pain. Everything went well, until I developed an infection a few days later. I went back into the hospital, and the infection was so bad it was a danger to my entire body. They’re still not

sure what caused it, but they pumped me full of antibiotics. The infection eventually cleared up, but after the miscarriage and infection, my doctor told me I was facing the possibility of never being able to have children. Since I was so young, though, she ran some tests and, while the possibility isn't completely shot down, the odds are not in my favor."

By now, the tears were rolling down her cheeks like a flood. She wrapped her arms around herself and finally managed to look at Jack. Her voice barely a whisper, she asked, "Do you hate me now?"

Of all the emotions tearing through Jack's body, hate was most definitely not one of them.

He looked at Leah, standing across from him, holding herself tight and looking for all the world like a lost little girl rather than a confident twenty-nine-year-old woman. He wanted nothing more than to get up and hold her, but he wasn't sure Leah would let him.

"I don't hate you, Leah. I could never hate you. I --" What did you say to someone who'd just told you a story like that? Somehow, "I'm sorry" just didn't seem to cut it.

He raked a hand through his hair and tried to find the right words. "I just wish I hadn't left you alone through all of that."

Her eyes widened, as though in shock. "You had no way of knowing, Jack. I should've tried harder to find you, but...I was young and stupid and desperate not to look, well, desperate. I didn't know what to do, and after the miscarriage I didn't care. I didn't care about anything. My grades dropped and I failed a couple of classes. I almost lost my scholarship, but luckily my advisor took pity on me and explained to the board that I'd been going through some difficult health issues." Her hands fisted at her sides. "I just felt so lost and alone."

He did get up at that, and walked over to where she was standing. Her body felt stiff as he wrapped his arms around her. He rubbed her back, hoping like hell he could help to ease

her tension and pain. Finally, she wrapped her arms around him and allowed her head to rest against his chest. His chin settled on the top of her head, and they just stood there, wrapped in a silent embrace.

Her body trembled against his, and he could feel moisture seeping through the front of his shirt. She sniffled, and he continued to hold her, to rub her back and let her cry it out.

Jack couldn't imagine what it must have been like for her, twenty-one and going through that alone. He should've been here, should've been at her side holding her hand and lending her his strength.

He would have been a father.

The thought stole through him, wiggled through his brain and his heart. A little girl. He would've been someone's daddy.

He closed his eyes and continued to rub Leah's back.

After long moments, her sniffles slowed, and she eventually pulled away from him enough to look up into his face. "Make love to me, Jack."

Had she really just asked Jack to make love to her?

Leah wanted to clap her hands over her mouth as soon as the words were out.

She saw his Adam's apple bob up and down before he spoke. "Is that really such a good idea right now?"

Of course he would turn her down. Now that her secret was out, he probably didn't want anything to do with her. "Probably not. I'm not even sure where that came from. Forget I asked."

He looked down at her, understanding clouding his piercing blue eyes. "Leah, if anything, I want you more now than I did before."

She blinked as he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "You really don't hate me?"

“No, I really don’t hate you. I admire your strength and your courage. Do I wish I’d been here? Hell, yes. But I don’t hate you. I could never hate you.”

Feeling on the verge of tears again, she ducked her head. “Thank you.”

He placed an index finger under her chin and tilted it up so she was looking directly at him. “If you really want me to make love to you, I’m more than happy to oblige.”

Instead of speaking, she answered by pressing her lips against his. Even though she knew she was vulnerable right now, she also realized that she wasn’t hurting as much as she had been. Instead, she felt as though places inside of her were waking up and coming back together, and she knew that telling Jack and being with Jack again were partial causes for that.

His lips moved against hers, and Leah allowed herself to be swept up in his embrace. Their tongues danced and dueled, and when he put his hands on her ass and drew her closer to his body, his erection pressed into her stomach.

She broke the kiss, took his hand, and led him into the bedroom.

So turned on he couldn’t even think straight, Jack allowed Leah to lead him into her bedroom.

They reached her bed, and Leah’s hands wrapped around the bottom of his shirt. He helped her pull it up and over his head before removing her sweater.

She stood before him in jeans and a pink bra. “You’re so beautiful.”

A blush stained her cheeks. “You keep saying that, and I might eventually believe you.”

He smiled and traced the skin along the edge of her bra, causing goose bumps to scatter across her chest. “In that case, I’m going to say it as often as possible.”

He dropped a kiss on the swell of one soft breast before running his tongue along the seam of the fabric. “You’re wearing too many clothes.”

He reached around and unhooked all four clasps of her bra. It dropped to the ground, and he groaned at the sight of her breasts, naked and rosy tipped, the large nipples already hard and pointing toward him. Unable to resist, he bent and took one nipple into his mouth, sucking greedily until Leah was squirming against him.

“Jack. Please.” Her words came out on a pant.

He moved to the other nipple, biting gently before laving it and sucking the pain away. Leah’s hands burrowed into his hair, holding him where he was.

He let go of her nipple with a gentle *pop* before standing upright again and reaching for the button of her jeans. Her eyes were passion glazed, and a pink flush was beginning to infuse her skin.

He felt her hands on the waistband of his jeans, fumbling with the button slightly before managing to get it undone. She lowered the zipper and pushed his pants down his legs.

He mimicked her movements with his own, until they were both standing there with their pants around their ankles, caught by their shoes. “I think we might have a problem here.”

She laughed, and sat down on the edge of the bed. “It’s been a while since I’ve done this, and I guess taking off shoes kind of slipped my mind.”

He sat down beside her to take his own off. “How long is ‘a while’?”

She tossed one shoe across the room before pulling off the other. “Eight years.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

She nodded, tossed the other shoe in the same direction as the first, and turned to him. “I haven’t been with anyone since you.”

“That’s a long time to be celibate.”

She smiled, leaned in, and kissed him lightly. “That’s because I haven’t found anyone who made me want to not be celibate.”

“I guess I’m one lucky guy then, aren’t I?”

“Eight years of pent-up sexual frustration? You’re either going to be lucky or sore.”

He shucked his pants and climbed fully into the bed, pulling Leah with him, which caused her to fall slightly off balance and land against him sideways. She laughed, and he silenced her giggles with his mouth.

He fed from her hungrily, greedily, needing to take as well as give as much as he could. God, he’d missed her.

Their hands were everywhere, touching as though they’d been starving and had suddenly been placed in front of a banquet. He found his way to her nipples, tweaking the hard points until he felt her moan against his mouth.

He lifted her so she was on top of him, straddling his cock with her breasts swinging down to brush against his chest. He continued to kiss her, allowing his hands to roam from her breasts to her ass, which he gripped firmly in his hands.

She’d always had a great ass.

He felt her hands against his chest, and then the scrape of a fingernail against one hard nipple. She broke the kiss and began to trail a pattern of kisses down his neck and chest. She stopped to kiss and then tease his nipples with the tip of her tongue, lightly nipping here and there and sending sparks of pleasure throughout his body.

She continued to make her way down his chest to his stomach, until her head was between his thighs. Looking up at him from her position between his legs, she grinned and took his cock into her hand. He hissed at the pleasure seeping through him and groaned when her mouth closed over the head.

Her tongue moved back and forth, and even though her movements were awkward at first, he enjoyed every second of her ministrations. Her hot, wet mouth sucked him in, and when his cock bumped against the back of her throat, he fisted his hands in her hair to both

keep her there and to push her away. She continued to bob her head up and down, her tongue working magic along the underside of his dick.

Tension gathered in his lower back, and Jack felt his balls tighten. "Leah." His voice was hoarse.

She looked up at him without stopping her pace. Maintaining eye contact, he said, "I'm about to come."

She held his gaze with her own and swallowed as much of him as she could. The feeling of all that wet heat and the sight of her sucking his cock were all too much and he moaned as he felt his semen spurt out of his dick and into her mouth.

Her throat convulsed around the head of his cock, and he kept coming, long shudders that left him spent and sated.

With one final suck and lick, Leah let go of his dick and moved back up his body.

"You are the sexiest woman alive," he said, seconds before bringing her head down to his and kissing her roughly, passionately, as if there were no tomorrow.

Leah kissed Jack back, reveling in the feel of his body against hers. She could still taste the salt from his cum, and the fact that Jack was kissing her after she'd gone down on him only served to turn her on even more.

He suddenly flipped her over so that she was lying on her back and he was on top of her. His grin was mischievous and his eyes twinkled, making him look like some hot, way-too-sexy-for-his-own-good Santa Claus about to deliver a very naughty gift. "My turn now."

Leah couldn't hide the smile that crept across her face as he kissed his way down her body. When she felt his tongue on her clit, she wrapped her hands in the sheets and pressed her hips toward him, silently begging for more.

He spread her lips with his fingers, opening her up to his gaze. His tongue darted out and licked up and down her slit, over and over again until she was writhing in desperation.

“Jack, please.”

“Please what?”

“More. I need more.”

“More what?” His voice vibrated against her pussy.

Feeling slightly embarrassed and yet much too close to the edge to care, Leah finally answered. “Eat me out, Jack. Please.”

“I suppose that’ll do for now.”

And then finally, his mouth was on her clit, his tongue moving in tight little circles that made her hips jerk and her pussy clench. He teased her, tormented her, built the pleasure until she could stand no more.

“I need to come, Jack.”

“Do you want to come by my mouth or my cock?”

She didn’t remember him ever talking dirty to her before, and even though it was odd, she kind of liked it. “Ummm...”

“Don’t be embarrassed, Leah. My mouth or my cock?”

She swallowed and finally allowed herself to look at him. “Your cock. Fuck me, Jack.”

Within seconds, he was above her. He leaned over and reached for something on the ground, and when he straightened Leah saw that he’d grabbed a condom. He quickly tore the package and rolled the latex on before leaning down and kissing her.

Leah met his tongue with her own, so turned on and needy that her kisses were sloppy and wet, teeth bumping against teeth and hands everywhere. She needed him, and she needed him right now.

She felt him press against her opening and wrapped her legs around his back, widening herself for him. As he pressed in just a little bit, sensation swirled through Leah’s body. Every

nerve ending felt like it was tingling and on fire, and she could barely breathe from all of the overwhelming sensations.

“You’re so tight.”

She rubbed her cheek against his, the feeling of his constant stubble only serving to turn her on more. “Eight years of celibacy.”

“I know.”

Slowly, he pushed the rest of the way into her, inch by delicious inch, until she felt as though she was completely filled. She luxuriated in the sensation of being so full, of his cock inside of her teasing the tip of her cervix.

Just as slowly, he eased back out, the friction causing goose bumps to tingle over her entire body.

His movements were slow and sensuous, teasing her pussy with every long, drawn-out stroke. She wrapped her legs tighter around his waist and pulled him in closer, harder, needing more.

Her nipples brushed against the mat of hair on his chest, the friction abrading the sensitive flesh and causing desire to spiral from her breasts to belly to pussy to toes.

He pulled back, grabbed her legs, and pressed her knees back so that they were almost to her shoulders. “Hold them.”

She did as he commanded, and was rewarded by one long stroke coupled with the feeling of his finger circling her clit. She was wide open, and he stared down at where their bodies were joined.

The sight of him watching their coupling, along with his finger on her clit and his cock sliding in and out of her pussy was too much to bear.

“Jack! I need...oh, God...more...harder...more.”

He pushed into her harder, faster, his finger on her clit moving furiously. He reached up with his free hand and pinched one hard nipple. The pleasure-pain shooting from her

breasts to her pussy combined with the friction from his cock sliding in and out of her, and her body exploded around him.

Her pussy milked him, squeezing and convulsing as he drove into her one, two, three more times before closing his eyes and groaning. She could feel his cock throbbing in time with her own muscles.

After long moments, she released her legs, and Jack slipped out of her body. He went to the bathroom to dispense with the condom, and when he came back she was still lying there, spent and more relaxed than she'd been in years.

Jack climbed into bed with her, drew the covers up over their shoulders, and pulled her close. When he dropped a kiss on her shoulder, she snuggled her backside against his and admitted at least to herself that she still loved him.

Chapter Six

Christmas Day

“What are you doing here?”

Jack set an armful of gifts down in front of the tree and frowned at Leah. “Well, hello to you, too.”

She tried not to blush. “Sorry. I didn’t mean for that to come out the way it did. I just figured you’d be at your parents’ is all.”

They hadn’t seen each other since Tuesday morning, after she’d opened up and then had the best sex of her life -- not once, but three times. He hadn’t called, either, and she sure as hell hadn’t called him. Of course, Bella hadn’t seen fit to warn Leah of Jack’s presence today, which Leah was beginning to think was becoming a bad habit of her baby sister’s.

“My parents are on a Caribbean cruise, so Mark and Bella invited me over.”

“Oh.”

An uncomfortable silence descended upon the living room, the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree a stark contrast to the confusion swirling inside of Leah.

Why hadn’t he called?

Jack shifted from foot to foot, looking more like an unsure eighteen-year-old than a mature, confident thirty-year-old. Leah crossed her arms over her chest, her discomfort growing stronger by the moment.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call.”

She shrugged. “It’s okay. You didn’t stick around eight years ago, so it’s not like I expect much from you now.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed before he turned his head away, his profile hard as granite and equally unyielding. “What happened last week is a bit different from what happened eight years ago, Leah, and you know it.”

She sighed. “I shouldn’t have taken that shot at you. I’m sorry. My point, though, still stands -- it’s not like I was expecting roses and chocolate at my door the next morning. It was what it was, and that’s that.”

He turned back toward her, his mouth set in a hard line. “You don’t even like roses, and I wish to God you would stop putting up this wall between us.”

“I’m doing what I have to do, Jack. Every time I let you in you walk away. Eight years ago you walked away. Tuesday morning you walked away. And every time you leave, I don’t hear from you until you decide you want to talk to me.” The force of Leah’s anger reverberated throughout her entire body, making her hot from head to toe. “I’m tired of feeling...so...just...so.”

At a loss for words, she turned to leave. The feeling of Jack’s fingers on her shoulder stopped her in her tracks, though.

“I’m sorry, Leah. For everything. I didn’t think to get your phone number before I left the other morning, or to give you mine.”

She somehow resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Is it just me, or are we acting like teenagers rather than adults?”

His grin was lopsided and just a little sad. “I think you might be on to something. But every time I get near you, all I want to do is hold you tight and love you and then get you naked. It’s all I can do to think, much less think straight.”

“You want to love me?” She didn’t try to hide her skepticism.

“I never really stopped.”

She turned her head and moved so that his hand slid off her shoulder. “I’m not quite sure I believe that, Jack Michaelson.”

Jack dropped his chin to his chest as Leah walked out of the room. He’d screwed that one up. Then again, it seemed like all he was capable of doing was screwing things up with Leah.

First eight years ago.

Then last weekend.

Then Tuesday.

And now today.

He would have thought that by thirty he would be able to handle his feelings where Leah was concerned, that both of them could move on from their past and explore what was between them now.

Leah, however, seemed to have other plans.

He understood her hurt, and he knew he’d been an ass by not contacting her after he’d left for graduate school. In his defense, he’d been young and stupid where love was concerned, and completely overwhelmed by his feelings for Leah. He hadn’t expected her, and he sure as hell hadn’t expected to love her as much as he had. At twenty-two, he hadn’t been prepared for Leah, or for a happily-ever-after sort of relationship.

That being said, leaving had nearly killed him. He'd hated to go, hated to see her cry, and hated living without her. But he'd had a future to think of. A scholarship and a commitment he'd made long before Leah had walked into his life.

He regretted being such a jerk, but at the time he'd honestly thought that a clean break would make things easier on both of them.

Knowing what he did now, he realized a clean break had only made things worse, for Leah especially.

She kept running hot and cold. One minute she was warm and pliant in his arms, the next she was erecting that invisible barrier and looking at him as if she thought he was the lowest kind of scum on earth.

He wasn't giving up, though. Even if the changes in Leah hadn't been enough to intrigue him, her mercurial reactions would have done the trick. If she didn't care, she would be indifferent. And "indifferent" was not a word he would ever use to describe Leah Montgomery.

* * * * *

Leah locked herself in her sister's bathroom and reminded herself to breathe deeply.

What she really wanted to do was climb out the window and run away.

She couldn't deal with Jack.

Sure, opening up to him last Monday and telling him about the baby had helped. She no longer felt so lost, so hurt and all over the place. For the past eight years she'd felt a lot like a bag of popcorn that just kept on popping and never stopped. However, for those few hours when she'd finally told Jack the truth, and afterward when he'd made love to her and then held her in his arms, the popping *had* stopped.

She breathed deeply and gripped the edge of the sink until her knuckles turned white. *You can do this, Leah. You can be near him, talk to him, sit beside him without everyone knowing you're still in love with him.*

Just breathe.

In and out.

In and out.

Slow.

Inhale.

Exhale.

"Leah, are you in there?" Bella's voice made Leah jump.

"Yeah, hold on a second." She walked over and unlocked the door.

Bella stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind her. "Are you okay? You look panicky."

"That's because I am panicky."

"What's wrong?"

Leah turned on the faucet and splashed some cool water on her cheeks, which felt warm as a bonfire. "I just wasn't expecting to see Jack today, is all."

"I know, I know, I should've told you we'd invited him over. It totally slipped my mind, though."

"Yeah, a little warning would have been nice."

"Are things okay?"

Leah turned a skeptical eye toward her sister. "Bella, we both know you know exactly how I'm feeling right now, and you probably know how Jack's feeling, too. So stop with the twenty questions already."

Bella's smile was just a bit mischievous. "Well, I know you're still in love with him, and that he's still in love with you. And I don't need magic to tell me something has happened -- the chemistry between the two of you is palpable. Then again, it always has been."

Leah sighed. "He's not still in love with me. I mean, he's still attracted to me, but I don't think he loves me. Not anymore."

"You told him about the baby."

Leah nodded.

"If I know Jack the way I think I know Jack, he understood the situation, and probably felt pretty crummy for not being here and for leaving you high and dry the way he did."

Leah shrugged. "So he says."

"Why are you having such a hard time believing him?"

"Because I don't have a gift of sight like you do, Bella. I can't perform spells and make magic and read people's minds or auras or whatever the hell it is you do. All I can do is have panic attacks and finger paint and help kids learn how to color inside the lines."

Bella clasped her hands on Leah's shoulders and gave her a little shake. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Right now. Right this minute. Do you have any idea how lucky you are? Sure, you got dealt a pretty shitty hand when you had the miscarriage, and everything that happened in those five months or so would have been enough to drive any woman over the edge. And you handled it remarkably well, all things considered."

"But you're still *alive*, Leah. You're still alive and breathing and getting to help shape other children's lives and turn them into decent human beings. Do you have any idea how special that is? No, you may not have my gift of sight, but you do have a gift where children are concerned, and just because you may not be able to have your own doesn't mean you can't still be a loving, caring influence in another child's life."

"And now you have Jack again. Women drool over that man, Leah, and you know he could walk out this door, throw a stone in any direction, and have it land on a woman who

would be more than willing to date him. And yet he wants you. *You*, Leah. Not some skinny model he's designed a house for or his secretary or anyone else. He wants you. And yet you seem determined to just throw that all away. Wake up, sis. Happiness is staring you right in the face, and you're too blind to see it."

Leah swallowed and rubbed her wrist where the bracelet lay warm against it. She took a deep, shuddering breath before speaking. "You're right. I've been far too busy looking at the past, and I haven't liked the person I've become for a while now. Then again, it's hard to like yourself when you're depressed all the time.

"I'm just scared to let him in again, Bella. Love is such a risk, especially now. When you're young, you think you're invincible, and love is the most exhilarating feeling in the world. But now? Now, after everything I've been through, it's scary as hell. My heart broke when he left the first time, and then when I miscarried I felt like I could never be whole again."

Bella wrapped her arms around Leah, and hugged her close. "Don't you think eight years is long enough to carry around all that pain?"

Leah nodded against Bella's hair. "Yeah, I'm getting a little tired of it."

Bella stood back and smiled. "So what are you going to do?"

Leah stood back and fingered the bracelet, which seemed to be growing warmer by the second. "Well, first I'm going to ask you what the hell is up with this bracelet."

Bella managed to keep the smile plastered on her face. "What do you mean?"

"It keeps getting hot. Like right now, it's so hot it's almost burning my skin. And every time I'm with Jack it gets like that, too."

"Maybe you're just hot natured?"

Leah narrowed her eyes, and Bella knew her sister was on to her.

"You know that isn't the case, Bella. What kind of magic does the bracelet hold?"

“Why does it have to be magical?”

“Because I know you, that’s why.”

Bella sighed, and knew she couldn’t escape this one. “Okay, it is magical -- to an extent. See, it’s a family heirloom, passed down from generation to generation, and it brings the wearer happiness and love.”

“So you’re saying none of this would have happened with Jack if you hadn’t given me the bracelet?”

Bella shook her head. “No, not at all. Remember, Jack was already coming back before I ever gave you the bracelet. In fact, he was already in town when I gave it to you. Jack came back on his own.”

“But what about everything else? The kissing? The really hot sex? Me feeling better now than I have in a long time?”

“It’s all you, Leah. The bracelet...it kind of opens the wearer up, helps them to see and act on opportunities that may arise. But it can’t cause anything to happen that wasn’t meant to happen in the first place. It’s more like a clarity charm than anything else.”

Bella could tell Leah was mulling that over, and thanked the Goddess her older sister had finally begun to accept Bella’s magic.

“That doesn’t explain why it gets so hot, though.”

“It’s fueled by emotional energy. It acts as a filter, if you will. It takes the negative emotional energy and filters it so the good can get in. When I was wearing it, the bracelet always got hottest when I was with Mark or practicing my craft.”

“Since it’s really hot right now, does that mean you make me happy?”

Bella laughed. “I guess so. Who knew, right?”

Leah snorted. “Although, come to think of it, I was really hot the other day when Jack and I...well, when we had that really hot sex.”

Bella wiggled her eyebrows. "Have you tried the vibrators yet?" Leah's cheeks turned pink, which was answer enough for Bella. "You've got some decisions to make, sis."

Leah nodded. "I know. I just hope I make the right ones."

* * * * *

"They sure have been in there a while."

Mark shrugged and took another drink from his beer. "They're women. They're probably talking about shoes or something."

"Right." Jack crossed one leg over a knee and tried to force himself to pay attention to the football game currently on TV.

Instead, all he could think about was Leah.

His gaze was drawn to the Christmas tree, where the packages he'd brought over were placed, and to the bag containing Leah's gift. He wanted to go over and grab it out of fear of what her reaction might be.

He left it there, though, knowing that it was now or never.

When Leah and Bella finally came back into the living room, they were both giggling and whispering like schoolgirls. Thank God Leah seemed to be in a better mood now than she had been when he'd first walked in. He didn't know what Bella had said or done, but he could kiss her for it. Well, in a very platonic sort of way, of course.

"Since Mom and Dad won't be joining us today -- they decided it would be more fun to take a surprise trip to Vegas, apparently -- how about we get around to opening gifts and then eating dinner?" Bella said.

Nerves jangled in Jack's stomach, and Leah walked over to the couch and sat beside him. She leaned over and whispered in his ear, "I left your gift back at my place."

His eyebrows shot up, and then she winked at him. Actually winked at him.

“Y’all weren’t getting drunk in there, were you?”

She giggled. “Nope. Not at all. It’s just amazing what a conversation with your sister can do for you.”

He looked at her askance and then turned his attention back to Bella, who was currently going through the small pile of gifts on the floor in front of the tree. When she touched his present to Leah, he saw her eyebrows lift. She turned her head and looked at him, a secretive smile curving her lips and something like tears glittering in her eyes. She nodded her head, and then turned back to the brightly wrapped packages.

She divvied them all up, putting each person’s gifts in separate piles on the floor in front of them. When she was done, she turned to everyone and said, “All right, start opening.”

The sounds of ripping paper filled the living room, followed by oohs and aahs and thank-yous and how-did-you-knows. Mark and Bella had given Jack a new tool belt, which he thanked them profusely for. His old one was so battered and worn-out it was about to fall apart.

Leah reached for the gift bag, and Jack held his breath in anticipation.

It was now or never.

He watched as she moved the tissue paper to the side and then pulled out a small, black velvet box. Her brows furrowed, and he could see she was chewing on her bottom lip. Slowly, almost cautiously, she opened the box. Her dark blue eyes widened, and seconds later she turned to him.

“This is from you, isn’t it?”

He nodded, and she leaned over and kissed him right on the mouth.

“What is it, Leah?” Bella asked.

Leah pulled away from him and turned the box toward her sister.

Confusion crowded Bella’s features seconds before clarity dawned. “Ohhh. Ruby and pearls. Red and white. I get it.”

Jack watched as Leah’s cheeks turned pink and she snatched the ring box back from her sister.

“Get what?” Mark asked as he busily studied the golf club Jack had given him.

Bella turned to her husband and kissed him on the cheek. “Nothing, sweetie. Just that I think Leah and Jack might have some news they want to share.”

Jack swallowed, and finally gathered the courage to speak. “I’ve felt empty for the past eight years, Leah. Until I came back here and saw you again. You filled up the empty spaces and reminded me that there’s more to life than work and building houses and chasing goals. There’s you, and there’s love, and a future -- a future I hope you’ll share with me.”

A tear tumbled down Leah’s cheek, and he kissed it away. “I love you, Leah. I never stopped loving you. I know I’ve screwed up. I know I’ve made mistakes. But let me love you, and say you’ll love me too.”

She nodded, and as he took her hands he realized they were shaking.

She sniffled and smiled. “I’ve made mistakes too, Jack. But I never stopped loving you, either. It’s always been you. Deep down inside, in the places no one could see, it’s always been you. So, yes, I love you, too.”

Happiness bloomed inside of him, and he slipped the ring from the box and onto her finger.

“So red and white, huh?” she whispered in his ear.

“Well, I figured this way we would always remember that candy cane.”

She snorted and buried her face in his neck for long moments. “I love you, Jack. And I swear to God, if you ever leave me again, I will hunt you down and drag your sorry ass back here and have you begging on your knees for mercy.”

“Honey, I’m already there.”

He kissed her then, letting her feel all of the love that had been inside of him for the past eight years and since he moved back to town. It was a kiss full of promise, full of hope, and most importantly, full of happiness.

When he finally broke the kiss, Leah smiled at him and then turned to Bella. “So do you need this bracelet back now or do I keep it?”

Puzzled, Jack asked, “Am I missing something here?”

Bella giggled and Leah grinned.

“Just a family tradition, is all.” Bella’s smile was enigmatic, and the look the sisters exchanged was secretive enough to make most grown men shake in their boots.

Mark warned from his position in the chair, “While I’m glad you’re going to be my brother-in-law, I really hope you know what you’re getting yourself into with this family.”

“I’m aware. At least, I think I am.”

Bella laughed again and wrapped her hand around Leah’s. “Jack, you’ll figure things out eventually. And, Leah, you keep it. You’ll know when it’s the right time to pass on the tradition.”

Bella then grabbed Jack’s hand with her free one, looked at them both, and smiled before turning to Leah with tears shining in her eyes. “Blessed be, sis, blessed be.”

Leah hugged her sister, and Jack met Mark’s gaze over the women’s heads. The look on Mark’s face clearly said, “I warned you.”

As the two women broke apart, though, and Leah cuddled up beside him, Jack couldn't help but think that no amount of warnings in the world could keep him away from Leah now that he had her.

None at all.

 THE END 

Renae Johnson

Being a full-figured woman in a society obsessed with thinness isn't always easy, and big girls often get the short end of the stick (or no stick at all). Sick of reading stories where only the skinny women had hot sex, Renae Johnson set out to change the erotic landscape -- one luscious curve at a time.

Along with giving big girls their happily ever after (or at least multiple orgasms), Renae also enjoys making people laugh, reading and spending time with friends and family. She received her Master of Arts in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University in June of 2008.