

Bayout Heat: Howling

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Bayout Heat: Howling

Leah stepped out of the taxi at the gate of the most impressive house she'd ever seen. The sheer size of it ripped her breath away from her. She marvelled at it and wondered why someone wouldn't keep this as a home. Its recent conversion into a hotel and a place for authors to gather to discuss the inner workings of their industry, genre and books shocked her. This small-town girl hadn't thought she'd ever be doing one of these sorts of events, let alone in a house like this.

White pillars surrounded the huge house and she felt her mouth fall open as they glistened like peals in the sun. The pink hue in the sky made the house seem larger than it ever would appear and its pale blue roof seemed to fit into the colours of the sky perfectly. She'd not seen a sight like this before. She'd travelled to Scotland, LA, and New York, but nowhere looked like this, and she wondered if by the end of this week she'd love this place more than Chicago.

Staring up at this hotel, the staff made her feel like she walked into a Mills and Boon novel. She knew the company would be great and the authors

would go home with a list of books breaking the binders of their notepads, folders and leather-bound packs. There wasn't anywhere like this and she knew that one just could not be here and not be inspired.

She might not be as out of place as she feared, and she knew her *"Bayout Shifters of Love"* would be a perfect fit. Leah felt glad she packed a box of those paperback novels in the trunk of her car.

She was there for the seminar on romance and erotica after a spike in her sales had brought her to the attention of the conference's board. Even the publishers whispered about the success she'd managed to tap into. The invitation to join one of the panels at this conference caught her by surprise, and when Bayout Heat's Convention bent over backward to get her here, she couldn't really refuse them. The entire drive down made her nervous and she had no idea how she'd make it through the next three days.

Leah faced an intense three days ahead and she'd need to live up to the position she'd earned; the idea of doing this made her ill. She fought her stomach the whole way there. It twisted and turned with each mile, which brought her closer to this point – coming face to face with the idea of being one of those leading authors of an independent publishing company.

Swinging her satchel over her shoulder, she carried a box in her hands and dragged a suitcase behind her. Leah smiled at the valet as he drove her car around to her parking space for the three-day stay. Feeling like he took away

her escape route, she swallowed hard. She turned back towards the hotel slowly and her stomach plummeted through the floor. Her nerves hit her hard and she wondered now if she'd survive this with her career intact. Something told her that this wasn't going to go to plan. She thought she'd go mad but found her feet taking her into the depths of the house turned hotel, nonetheless.

Leah just hoped this ended better than some of her novels did.

Entering the threshold, she saw a large wooden staircase standing to attention in the middle of the foyer. Its sweeping sides flowed down like a waterfall and it just didn't look real at all. She moved to the reception desk, which sat at the centre of the stairs and at that very moment, every inch of her body wanted to run a mile with her books. Leah fought the urge, tooth and nail, as she struggled to muster up the smile to greet the lady behind the desk. The inner battle grew more intense with each passing moment and for the life of her, she couldn't understand why such intense emotions swirled around her.

“Good morning and welcome to the Cheretien Plantation. How can I help you?” the receptionist asked, and Leah swallowed hard when she realised she had to tell the woman her name. Her heart beat hard in her chest and it made her dizzy. She stuttered when her mouth finally opened but had difficulty forming words as her mouth grew dryer than a desert. She felt the

hair on the back of her neck raise up and her stomach tied itself up in even more knots. She'd either throw up soon or something really strange was going to happen based on how she felt.

Leah hoped she'd not discovered yet another haunted house.

“Leah Clarkson, checking in for the Bayout Heat's Convention,” she spoke, and her voice trembled when she did. For the life of her, she became bemused by this and scolded herself for her reactions towards a simple convention. This was something she should be feeling great about as these honours didn't come by every day. She knew that and saw authors struggle to get invited to some of these conventions, so she did her best to force her mind to go with this.

“Ah yes, Miss Clarkson. Here is your room key,” the receptionist said, dragging the thoughts in Leah's mind back to reality - the kind of reality she hadn't really wanted to face.

Leah took the key and while looking up, she saw a man move across the room behind her. She turned, barely missing him as he was passing her by. Her eyes focused on the image she saw in the mirror's reflection and she noticed that his reflection looked familiar; the kind of familiar which sent shivers down her back.

This was a man she'd done her best to avoid for a while. Her heart stopped and his tattoo-covered arms and blond floppy hair made her become even

more anxious. She turned fully around to look for him, but he'd already disappeared. He hadn't taken away her nerves or her new emotions that were baring down on her like a vicious hurricane. She remembered well what his five-foot-eight figure left behind after the last time they encountered each other. His possible reflection scared her to death.

He was her ghost, the skeleton in her closet and her worst nightmare.

She rushed towards the library and braced herself to see him. When she thrust herself into the room, she met something totally different than what she expected. There wasn't a man who used to fill her dreams with erotica delights. Instead, there was an empty room filled with oak bookcases lining every free wall. The white satin curtains fluttered in the breeze streaming through the open French windows. The old leather chairs looked welcoming to any reader and the fireplace was ready for those cold winter nights. The fur rug in front of it was a lover's delight.

Despite her love for this room, she knew she'd just missed the man who'd shaken her to her core.

"Antony," she breathed his name into the empty room, and it didn't sound so scary. Behind those eyes, he ruled the under belly to her peaceful world. Turning to leave, she had no idea what awaited her during the rest of her stay there or what she'd walk into when she came downstairs to face the world of thongs, pleasure-filled moans and hearts. The minutes ticked away until she

faced what she'd been running from. The part of her past she'd wished to have remained buried.

* * *

In the safety of her bedroom, new emotions hit her like a speeding car. Just when she believed she'd rid herself of him, he reappeared. She was running her hands through her hair continuously as she tried to rid her mind of his image. The memory she had of him, of how she thought she'd found her hero, had all disappeared up in smoke when one woman proved him to not be the man she thought he was.

The story they shared together sealed their fates forever and the wounds which they left on the other wouldn't heal nor disappear for the rest of their lives. How they exploded and left doubt racing through the other person, hadn't helped their great love story. Their breakup seemed to have really clung to them and even now, two years later, they both possibly still wondered about it all, even if they didn't admit it to each other or to their closest friends. Time hadn't healed anything. Rather, it made it worse.

She hadn't truly known how it affected Antony, but she knew how it affected her. The long nights of wondering, not knowing whether they did the right thing or not or if she made their love story have a bad ending. The

intense regret and guilt she felt over how things ended still stayed with her whenever she raised up out of the ashes of her mind. No matter how many books she poured herself into or how many times she poured her emotions into them, it never got easier.

All the memories and the heart-shattering moments returned every time she thought of him. It felt as raw and just as real as the day she left him standing at the altar. Pain lashed her chest, forcing the wind out of her. She felt like her heart shattered into a million pieces all over again and the hurt obviously hadn't eased. It grew stronger over the years and she got a taste of it again.

Slamming her hands into the door, she tried to breathe. The new pain shot through her hands and reminded her just how fragile they were. Leaning there, sucking breaths in through her teeth, she told herself that she must go downstairs to the breakfast to greet and speak with her publishers – preparation meeting before the readers arrived, and everything, sometimes changed at those meetings. It was also an opportunity for the publishers to get to see how the land lay in their corners of the industry.

Politics flowed like good wine, so she had to be on her A-game. Leah knew that these situations made or broke authors' careers. She must make everyone leave with a positive impression and she needed to remember those who talked about their numbers a lot. Some of the boosting that would

go on were companies trying to cover up a poor year or the ones doing well but were in need of new talent. She'd seen enough of this online.

Things completely changed when it came to doing this, in person.

She needed to be focused on that, rather than worrying about a man who broke her heart and almost destroyed her life. He'd left her a wreck and her sweet romances were no longer sweet. Her entire life laid in pieces around her and there just wasn't enough ice cream in the world to fill the hole he'd left in her chest.

Throwing her suitcase onto her bed, she raided it for an office style dress, her smart shoes, and clips for her hair. Her hair now falling in her face annoyed her. Lifting item after item out of her suitcase, she tried to find her dress. When she glanced down at her watch, she started to panic and with each passing second, she panicked more about the meeting.

In exactly 20 minutes, she was needed downstairs for the preparation meeting and her publisher didn't forgive those who turned up late. Her freak-out over a man who no longer had anything to do with her life was about to cost her dearly. She raced to the shower, hoping the water would wash away the thoughts she battled. They tried to overtake her as she was undressing and waiting for the water to heat up.

As her clothes fell and pooled around her feet on the floor, she found herself tied up in a blur. None of it made any sense to her mind, and for

whatever reason, she got caught up with her thoughts. She swallowed hard as she tried to ignore and shove the thoughts out of her head. Thoughts like how Antony loved to sneak up on her in the shower and slip into a warm embrace behind her. He'd stroke his hands up and down her soapy body, while her heart was beating so loudly they could both hear it.

His hands always found her soft, silky velvet centre, and she hated how he loved to tease her with his fingers, making her aware of what he might do or could do to her, yet withholding it with a devilish smile. She missed those nights – the way he made her feel, like she was the most important person who walked into the room.

When she stepped beneath the shower, soaking her hair allowed some of those thoughts to slip away. A tear slipped out of the corner of her eye when she felt how much she missed him. She told herself the truth about him and how she just couldn't have him. Time moved on and it took their lives with it. She looked at the past instead of the future and warned herself about it.

Leah hoped to wash away the effects held over her with the hot shower. Eventually, the hot water started to dance on her skin, easing away her tension and slowly, she forgot her ex-fiancée for a split second. She finally put all the feelings down to just being a result of her high nerves and lack of sleep over the last few days. She desperately tried to make sure that it wouldn't affect her work.

The feel of his lips started to return to her skin and cried out as she threw her hair back out of her eyes. Leah stepped out of the shower and allowed her hand to grip the side of the bath then had to breathe through the sharp stabbing pains this brought out in her. Slowly, her hand found her forehead and tried to rub away the emotions she thought was gone years ago. Nothing made this easy on her. She forced herself to leave the bathroom with the towel around her body. The soap still clung to her legs and her heart screamed things she'd not heard in years.

Leah rushed to get dressed, did her hair and in a moment of surprise, she caught herself struggling to breathe again. She felt stupid to be fighting panic attacks at her age. The room started to close in around her and she found herself rushing towards the window, throwing it open, and poking her head through it. The cooler air made her chest start to return to normal and her body didn't feel so hot.

She hung out her window on her elbows ever so slightly, rubbed her forehead and nose, again hoping this overwhelming feeling would subside. Leah scolded herself for getting in such a mess and her nostrils flared as she still couldn't find any peace or comfort. Rubbing her face, she made herself focus on anything other than passing out. Her entire body quivered and shook with its need to just blackout.

Leaning there, Leah found herself becoming more shocked once more.

The day took another turn for the worst and she felt herself become more lost when she saw Antony's reflection in the lake behind the house. Gripping the sides of her face, she tried to breathe through her new emotions and tried to believe this wasn't happening.

“This can't be happening,” Leah whispered, and she watched the lake's water, unable to drag her eyes away from him. She tilted her head to one side and started to realise the truth. A snippet of the truth she struggled to swallow. Leah realised she wasn't as over him as she once thought and the fact that she only realised this now made her even more angry at herself. “Damn you, Antony.”

Love was her life, romance was her life, and she couldn't see it. *“What on earth was wrong with me and how could I let myself slip like this?”* she asked herself and couldn't think of an answer. There wasn't an answer. In a heartbeat, he came out of the hotel, but he kept his back to her. She took in his muscles and tattooed arms and she knew deep down it had to be him. He'd not changed a bit and as she hid behind the curtains, unable to explain how this made her feel. More importantly, she hoped he'd found someone else.

If he'd found someone else, she'd be forced to move on. She hoped that after everything, he'd make it easier on her. She prayed for strength but nothing came as on her most important week, she found herself struggling

with all of the same issues again. Her time ran out and she must face the future. One which didn't have this man in it.

How could she face the future when she was staring at the past?

Clipping her hair out of her face, she walked out of her hotel room, desperately searching for the strength to face all of the pressures ahead of her. Every part of her screamed at her to go and confront him. Leah rested her head and back against the door leading out of her hotel room then sucked deep breaths into her chest and wrapped her arms around herself. She just stood there for a moment.

She wanted to just scream at him and ask what he was trying to do to her by being there. In guessing his motivation for his attendance, she found those intentions made her far more nervous than she liked, finding herself getting hot with the idea that he'd come there for her. He must have come to find out why she left him at the altar, never speaking to him again.

He wanted her back and knew she would not walk away or take off the second she got a chance. Leah hated how he used her career against her. While there, she had to stick it out and listen to him. The perfect platform for him to talk her around; his job depended on him being able to talk people around. She knew she might just be one of a large number of people who bought into what he said. What scared Leah most of all, was that he was possibly there for answers; the sort of answers she'd not be able to give him.

She only managed to reach the stairs before the thought made her pause.

“Oh God,” she breathed, pleading for His help. She turned her eyes up to the stained-glass windows with a cross glowing in the early morning sunlight, a beautiful sight she'd not seen before. It casted colours down onto the pine stairs and wrapped around the chandelier. The glass light played with the light coming through the windows and sent them reaching across the room.

Leah hated how she couldn't enjoy the sight she saw before her. She forced her feet to start tackling the stairs, even though her entire body told her to run up to the hotel room, lock the door and hide out there. Thoughts of what she did to Antony danced around in her head and her memory haunted her.

She only managed to walk down half of the aisle before she fled out of the church. Leah had locked eyes with him and regretted it instantly. She couldn't allow herself to be selfish and take what she'd dreamt about when someone else needed him more than she did. That thought on her wedding day made her rush out of the church and her brother packed up her house and helped her to escape to a whole other state to avoid what she'd done. The look in his eyes always left her haunted and gave her nightmares: to see and know the pain she dished out and caused him to suffer through.

Chicago welcomed her with open arms and her publishers hadn't been

more excited about having her five minutes away by car. They often visited her and worked with her on other lines for their companies. Her move made the conferences easier to attend and allowed her to fall into the depths of the arms of her work.

She knew, in his shoes, she'd want answers, but her reason for wanting them would be different to his. Her reasons for not giving them were ones she couldn't so easily share, and she knew that she would not have any other choice if he approached her there. Far from it. Those answers were another woman's to give, and she saw by his presence there, that she'd feared to tell him the truth. It wasn't her place to tell him and he'd never forgive her if she did tell him.

No one would.

Going downstairs, she just hoped she'd get through this and it would not blow up in her face after all. Her gut let her know instantly that it didn't share the same thoughts as she did. Even halfway down the pine stairwell, she fidgeted with her blue French Connection dress with blue diamond strap heels. She flitted into the shiny and glowing atmosphere this hotel set up for their guests. A part of her felt like a star walking down those stairs, however, if she were honest with herself, the thoughts of Antony prevented the feeling from taking her over.

Leah just knew she walked into the biggest mess of her life and for once,

it wasn't her mess. She swiped at her nose for a moment as she tried to remind herself of that fact. She wasn't asked to de-tangle her life from this mess, rather forced too. Another woman and the love of her life's mistake. It changed not just her life but theirs too, and she knew neither one of them wanted to face up to the truth of what they'd done.

Antony made it impossible with the history which they shared together for her to just simply forget him. No matter what, she found herself unable to just walk away. He'd force her into a corner and she would still struggle to know what to do about it. The two shared a love story that the novelist dreamt about coming up with. Screenwriters would water at the mouth to have the chance to change their love life into a script and producers would give their high teeth to turn into a feature film.

Her experience with heartbreak made her better understand what it meant. She gave her readers the harsh truth of it in the depths of her novels and they fell in love with her for it. Antony hadn't a clue what he gave her when he made his mistake and what he took from her. Love took more than it ever gave. Her career did do well but the pain she endured for months on end hadn't made it seem worth it.

She always missed him and longed for him to come home but he couldn't go to her house anymore. There was another life set out for him and she'd stand by her morals. After all, no one could take those from her; at least, not

yet.

Never did she think she'd be a best-selling author nor did she think he'd break her heart the way he did. She'd really believed in him and what they shared. She defended love to those who doubted it and those who refused to believe in it. For a split moment in time, she honestly believed in happily-ever-afters and fairy tales. He made her feel safe enough to believe in them. She thought he'd be the only person she'd ever need: the one person she'd shoulder the next 40 years with, have her kids with and make a life with.

Leah couldn't be more wrong.

Taking each step down the stairs, she tried to just do one thing: breathe. Yet her chest wouldn't allow her to. Each step she took used to be about the future but it became about the past; the past she failed to put to rest or bed. She'd been the coward and she knew the truth of this stared her in the face. Other women managed baby mothers and had successful relationships but she couldn't be like that though.

Antony asked her several times, through letters he gave to her brother, emails, and phone calls for answers and she ran from him. Now, she wouldn't have any other choice. She'd stare the truth in the face and must somehow survive it. The truth be told, she held the answers he needed to move on but because she wasn't ready to let it all go, she'd held onto them. Leah just hadn't come to terms with what happened and that she must give up the one man

who used to make sparks go off inside her with just a smile.

Standing at the bottom of the stairs, she saw the members of the board of the Bayout Heat's Convention alongside the attending publishers. In front of them, stood Antony in a white silk and silver shirt with black dress trousers. She'd never seen him look so smart. His dress shoes were great and his smile made the room seem warmer. His million-dollar smile beamed up at her. Being in wrestling, he depended on his smile. He depended on a lot of things and she'd been one of them.

“Welcome Leah,” his voice dripped warm honey and made her feel just as excited as she did the first night she met him. She saw his charms remain just as strong as ever. It was the one part of him which worried her the most and made her hate how weak she got around him. Leah used to fear him never coming back after dying while wrestling. These were the sort of fears every wife or loyal girlfriend met with when they started to realise they just couldn't leave them.

It was the moment one's world came crashing down.

“Antony,” she breathed his name, but nothing felt harder or stranger for her to say. She forced her attention to the unsuspecting speaker, fellow authors, publishers, and friends she shared there. It was only at that point that she guessed why they'd bent over backward to get her here. Antony had put on the necessary pressure to make sure of it. Now, he'd meet the

consequences of those pressures. “Thank you all for having me here today. Antony and I will be joining you in a few moments, so please feel free to go through without me.”

Many of them started to moan, whisper, and grumble; however, Leah never lifted her eyes off Antony as they made their way into the boardroom just down the hall from the breakfast room. Leah saw his blood slowly drain from his face, along with his million-dollar smile. She saw panic strike both his eyes and the corners of his mouth. She allowed the panic to rise steadily and enjoyed it after all the pain she'd endured. The lonely nights and the times she'd been left wondering. It was as though he'd stolen her heart and her soul when she'd fled from him.

Leah had fallen to pieces after she found out about the secret Antony didn't know he had and by his presence and the effort he'd put in there, it assured her he hadn't a clue about it or anything more than she'd told him when she took one of his many phone calls. This weighed her down and even at that very moment, she felt she sank quickly in a quicksand of emotions.

“OK, we are alone. Will you now talk to me?” Antony asked and his voice stuttered. He grew even more uneasy looking her in the eyes. His past flashed in front of her eyes and she saw how honourable he used to be until he slipped up. She wondered how someone couldn't know they had a child roaming the world, fatherless. The second point, which stumped her was

why he stood before her when he must know something. *"At least,"* she thought. *"He must know, deep down. Have sensed something."* It made it easier for her to think like this. She needed anything to make this easier on her.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, and not too nicely. She stared at him with a redness blushing through her cheeks. Her eyebrows pulled down as she tried to hide behind her eyelashes. Leah waited and she almost feared his answer. She held her breath, waiting and worrying over it. She hoped it wasn't going to turn her life upside down so much. After all, he'd done enough damage to her and her heart. She wasn't sure she'd cope with another twist to their tale.

"I'm the head of the conference here," Antony spoke like this wasn't strange at all or wasn't a little bit stalkerish. It was almost like he'd come there on holiday and it frustrated her beyond all belief. No other man managed to pull off this sort of effect on her. He'd always gotten her frustrated and angered her; today wasn't any different. He grew more awkward as he watched her flounder in front of him. The more she floundered, the more awkward and frustrated he became; he felt the same. The two rubbed off each other but not always in a good way.

"Well, I can see that," Leah shot back, and her frustration filtered through her as she pulled him into the conference room. Antony now scratched his neck as the heat of all of this started to prick it. A sweat broke out on his

forehead and she watched him blush a darker red. Even his nose turned a darker shade. He was unable to look up from the floor and she saw the vein in his neck get bigger. She hated how being an author made her see things other people didn't.

She almost felt like saying, good.

“If anyone has the right to be mad, it's me.” Antony's words sent her over the edge with emotions he couldn't even begin to understand. Anger took complete control and forced her into an uneasy decision. The sort of decision no woman wanted to make, let alone her. The more this conversation went on, the more she started to realise she might just have to tell him. There was no other choice. He'd not understand why she'd not stay with a man who held another life with another woman – a better life!

“Oh really. How do you work that out? Did you even talk to Melissa? You know, the one you had the one-night stand with before you were meant to marry me?” Leah's words brought out a pale colour to his skin. He hung his head and scratched his neck more intensely as a redness spread through his cheeks. His nose stayed red and his eyes remained on the floor. He looked at the grains of wood like they'd become the most interesting thing in the world; like they might save him.

The answer didn't need to be said. Leah knew from experience what that look meant. She now made the decision to push him and open his eyes to the

problem he just couldn't seem to face. Sooner or later, he must face up to it or the government would.

“Why would I ever want to talk to Melissa?” he asked, and it caused Leah to throw her head back in the air. Frustration was all she faced now. She seethed at the idea that this woman who ruined her life hadn't told him. A realisation dawned on her and now the truth started to all fall in place, almost like someone tore a bandage off a scraped knee. She felt the instant sting before her mouth opened and words fell out. Not the kind of words anyone found easy to say.

“How could you not want to? She's the mother of your child!” Those words caused an eruption between them. His face no longer looked pale: it filled with several colours. The vein in his neck started to pulse out of it and his forehead also looked like blood prepared to make a break for it through his skin. The information ripped the blissful wool that covered his eyes, which allowed him to dream and believe in those dreams. Leah stood there not knowing what she ripped away from him – the happiness he'd desired with the whole of his heart. She shattered the bubble he'd been living in. He'd done the same to her when this woman came over to her and showed her proof of why she couldn't marry Antony. She pleaded with her to not go through with it and when Leah saw the evidence, she managed to have a faux heart attack. He'd turned her world upside down.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Antony yelled and the moment she went to open her mouth, he cut her off. His voice went through a hundred different emotions and she couldn't possibly describe or fully understand what it felt like to be in his shoes. The moment ripped him apart and the emotions she watched, made her feel horrible. She hadn't wanted this to play out like this. “Is this why you didn't marry me? What this woman said to you forced you to flee me?”

“Antony,” Leah breathed his name and she saw him leap again, his eyes finally making eye contact with hers. His eyes sat coated in tears and started to turn red. Wrinkles clawed at his eyes and his frown grew deeper, sharper and redder. He grew so restless and she couldn't blame him. She'd dropped a large bombshell on him and expected him to freak out.

“I've got a child? Are you freaking kidding me?” Antony asked those questions but Leah knew he'd not been waiting for answers. He expected to already know the answers like an update in a computer. She watched him frantically looking at every nook and cranny of the conference room. Leah wished she could make everything right for him but she wasn't able to work miracles or take back the past. Only Antony could fix things now.

“I wish I was.” Those were the only four words she managed to stomach and hated herself instantly for causing him pain. She saw so much pride and what she used to think of as humour. She tried to tell herself that everyone

made mistakes but really struggled with him. What he did hurt her, and she found it hard to forgive him. She really wanted to forgive him and let all of this go, but how could she? “You shouldn't be here. You should be with them.”

Those words barely left her mouth before she experienced a new intense side of him she had never seen and it made her uneasy. For the sake of Melissa's child, she refused to back down. No matter how hard or uneasy it made her.

“Where should I be? Do you have any idea how many baby mamas I get approached by? How can you be sure she's not another liar trying to pin this on an innocent man?” His anger radiated through her but she forced herself to not show its effect on her. The tips of her eyebrows drew down towards her eyes. She glared at him and was almost sure she caught her reflection in his watery eyes. Her fingers brushed her lips in an attempt to comfort herself. She'd not looked like that since the day of her wedding, where she came face to face with all of this and when she wondered how cruel life must be for her to face this alone.

She must do what she can to face down the life of being a heartbroken author. A journey only a strong-willed woman could face. She hoped she was strong enough to face it alone.

“With your child,” her words fluttered out of her in a steady stream. One she'd wished had come out stronger and sound like she held more control

over her emotions than she did. His anger grew almost like he connected the dots and started to get a better understanding of all of this – of what happened between them and why she had stood at the end of the aisle, unable to walk down it. He realised what made her bolt when he went to meet her at its end. She'd not been as heartless as he had thought, and she watched him work this out from the other side of the room. His face grew lighter and freer like he knew it deep down.

“Is this the reason why you didn't marry me that day?” Antony's question hung in the air between them. Leah stared it down. She hadn't a clue how to answer it and she thought of it as a lion waiting to pounce on her. It might rip her to shreds if she answered this one wrong and gave signs of weakness. Should she tell him the truth or make things easier on him? A lie was never easy for her to say but she did if there wasn't any other choice. She had considered her decision to be her allowing him a way out to his child and to the life he always dreamt of.

A life-changing move for the both of them.

“Just tell me,” he pushed harder and was unwilling to give up on her and them. He still looked at her with never-ending hope in his eyes and his need to know screamed at her from the depths of his eyes. His mouth hung open and when he went to speak, her words flew out of her mouth. She found them making her chest feel lighter and the world seemed to change right before

her eyes. The colours of life looked different to her, and she started to notice things more.

“Yes.” Just one word and it changed so many lives: hers, his and his child’s. She often wondered just how many lives that one word changed every day, year and lifetime. Right now, she counted four, but she guessed that number would triple, depending on how this day continued to play out.

“Why did you let her take this away from us?” Again, he asked an almost impossible question; one she wasn't ready for. She knew only one answer and it was not the answer he'd welcome. Antony wanted her and it touched her, but she refused to keep him from his family or his child. It broke her heart to do this; trying to let him go.

“She was carrying your child and she could prove it to me without a shadow of a doubt. I'll not stand in the way of that, not now, not ever.” Leah's heart broke in her chest at having to lay down the law on this when she just wanted him in her arms; to be kissing him and making love to him. She stared at him and the look in his eyes made her almost melt into the floor. She found herself hoping and she saw his hope as well. She wanted to die believing in it and she almost did at one point in her life but refused to hurt like that ever again or struggle to heal from those sorts of wounds, again.

The moment he crossed the room, she almost disappeared into the floorboards. Despite everything, she still loved him and at that moment, he

looked at her like she was the only woman on earth he ever loved or stood a chance with. Her hope or passing desire to come out of this intact fell apart. She found herself wanting to reach out to him and embrace him. His entire being called out to her and she just wanted to fall into the depth of him, wishing she'd forget everything and just find some inner peace.

"I'd make sure we worked. If what Melissa said was true, I'd not let any of you down." Those were the words she'd been so desperate to hear, but they were far too late now. She thought about what Melissa said and she allowed her words and feelings to drive her on. To do what every woman finds heart to do and every man dread having to do; forcing her to face up to the reality of the situation and live out her days, knowing she did the right thing.

She couldn't have him.

"That's a nice dream Antony, but this can't work." Leah tried to stop her heart from being broken again. There wasn't anything she'd be able to do to stop it from being left in a million pieces and it was only wishful thinking that there was something she could do. Leah managed to hold her tears back when she looked at him. Hot needles pricked the back of her eyes. She tried to breathe through her nose while it burned, and her chin wiggled. It threatened her control over her lava-like tears.

"No, don't cry, please," Antony's voice quickly followed his thick, strong arms, which engulfed her in their warmth. His warmth set her body on fire

and he melted her control over her tears. They poured down her cheeks, cutting through her makeup and brushing her lips. She failed to stop the sob from breaking free. "We'll work this out, just the three of us. I'm not letting you go again."

In a quick moment, Antony turned his head down towards hers. He captured her lips underneath his and she allowed herself to go with the emotions she'd missed for a bit. The world felt warm and welcoming. Anything seemed possible and dreams floated in her mind. She longed for the future and held hope of it but reality soon came crashing in when his passion flowed over his restraints and forced her to remember why this was wrong.

Leah pushed herself free of Antony's eyes, arms and lips. She put as much distance between her and him. She wiped away the black mascara streams which coated her cheeks. Her fingers brushed her lips and she longed for his lips to return to hers.

"We can't do this and never will we ever be able to do this. I'll not take you from your family and that child needs you." Her words caused her and him so much pain. She held the truth in those words and neither one denied it or tried to. They stared at each other for a moment like they'd been suspended in time and space. They floated there almost, and shock slowly sank into their systems. They couldn't believe or drag themselves away from what she'd

said.

“You were meant to be my wife.” The words slipped out of him and he stumbled towards her as if he walked over a high rope. He looked at her like his life depended on making this right between them. She wished she could find something within her to make her meet him halfway and help them to be together but her own morals and personality wouldn't allow her to. Their time of being together passed them by and Leah knew better than anyone that you couldn't turn back time. Once it slipped past, it wasn't possible to return to them.

“Our time together has passed;” she sobbed those words out and turned away from him, not able to stand to stare at him any longer. The more she did, the more it broke her down and she became vulnerable to him. Anything which made her weak right now, made her nervous, since she knew she'd never be able to live with herself if she got tangled up with him again. Too many people needed him to return home and now Melissa must live with the fear he brought into their home from that point on.

“It's never too late for us,” Antony pleaded with her and she started to tug her hair as she started to suffocate under the weight of his attempts. Leah tried to understand if he knew what he did to her or perhaps he just didn't care. Either way, she thought she'd go mad soon and she feared he'd talk her around. When it came to words and selling things, there wasn't a man on the

planet who could do as well as he did.

“It already has.” She felt the words explode out of her mouth and his hands tried to hold her against his chest now. It was as if he refused to allow her to slip away from him again. He'd not stop her from doing what she thought as the right thing to do, so long as it didn't mean her leaving him. Sending him home to his family was fine as long as she was a part of his family. His hands raised her head and he kissed her again. He kissed her this second time, perhaps hoping that she might just go home with him; let him back in and give him a second chance. She saw all these moves too and got lost in the kiss for a moment – in the hope.

“Don't put me in this situation,” he accused her when she pulled away from him and the look of fear of giving in filled her eyes. She responded to him instantly and her anger at being made out to be the bad guy fell out too. She watched its effects on him from within the comfort of his arms, the one place she used to consider the safest in the world. However, it now seemed like the most dangerous place for her to be.

When she tried to do the right thing, he made her feel like she'd turned into the worst villain of all time. To stand by her morals and make sure her conscience remained clear. She rubbed her arms intensely as she tried to warm herself up. Her cheeks and eyes pricked with an intense heat she just couldn't explain. Leah wanted all of this pain to stop and the longer she

stayed in this room, the longer it would go on and the more she'd have to endure it.

“You put us in this situation.” Leah's response made a tear spill out of Antony's eye and as it slithered down his cheek, her breath caught in her throat. Scratching his head, he tried to suck it up and he failed as his strength went up in smoke. His emotions got the best of him and he hated for her to see all of this. She knew this secret thought was why he turned his eyes away from her.

The silence between them grew more intense and thicker. She looked at him with one last look which made it harder on the pair of them. She looked at him with one last look of hope in her eyes and he looked back at her like he wasn't going to see her again. The pain in his eyes made her want to go to him. If he managed to make it work with his family, even she knew he wouldn't do it with her around. She hoped he'd be happy with them and so would his child – a prayer she'd prayed every night to get her through the earth-shattering pain of it all.

“We can't end like this, can we?” He spoke those words more for him than Leah, however, she found words falling out of her. She long ago gave up the hope of ever managing to control the words inside her. Her voice started to tremble when she spoke, and she fidgeted with her hair.

“We ended when you slept with Melissa,” Leah spoke honestly and wasn't

trying to sound mean. The situation changed completely and even the idea of this betrayal didn't sit well with her. She forgave him for his discretions but wanted him to face up to those consequences. When he went to open his mouth, she cut him off and she hoped with her whole heart that what she said would make him see sense. "I forgave you for cheating on me. You now must face up to the consequences attached to this. It's all I ask of you."

Leah let her request fall into the air around them. He blew a deep sigh out of his chest and kept his eyes on her. He searched the depths of her eyes for a clue as to how this might play out.

"I never meant to hurt you," he tried to speak quickly and started to ramble when her hand rubbed down her face. She breathed deeply and tried to speak but he cut her off again. She stammered every time she tried to talk and he appeared to grow more desperate each time she opened her mouth. "I slipped up once and I never expected this to happen. I just wanted to make you my wife and live out my life with you. The way it was meant to be and the way we used to plan our lives together."

His confession made her say the final words she knew would end this. Maybe not for her, but he'd be free of all of this. Leah knew what she thought of as an excuse wasn't one but it was a desperate attempt at distancing herself from all of this. The more she tried, the more she seemed to fail. She lowered her head, hoping to regain some strength or anything close to it.

“You made the mistake, not me. Are you really telling me that with your history of not knowing your father, you'd do the same to yours? Melissa will want all or nothing and you know this.” Leah tried to leave but Antony stopped her with his next suggestion. His words slithered around her waist and pulled her back. She felt like he clipped a leash on her and no matter how she tried, it made her panic, thinking this would never end.

“I'd make sure the lawyers prevented her from doing so. The kid would know all of us. It would have a bigger family.” His suggestion was ridiculous and she knew he thought the same. He continued to stare at her with pleading looks and those hurt her. She stood powerless before him as she'd never be able to undo what he'd done or somehow make all of this be all right. There wasn't a way to make all of this right; times changed them and there wasn't anything they could do.

“Do you hear what you're saying?” Leah asked and the question pulled more frustration out of him. He pulled on his belt loops of his jeans and his face glowed red. Leah knew she needed to walk away or she would actually consider trying to make this work. The pain and heartache weren't worth it though and she needed to remember the many hours she cried in the dim light of her fridge, eating cheese, ice-cream and everything sweet.

“You're right.” Those words set her free and Leah took it as a chance to leave. If only she could leave all of this behind her. He'd opened up things

which weren't easy to close nor move on from. She knew all her books would do well, having been influenced by her past experiences but she would always suffer.

“I love you Leah. I always will.”

Leah forced herself to slip out the door, wiping her eyes as she went. She felt his pressure behind her, so she increased her strides. Her eyes bore into the carpet when she walked towards the breakfast room. Leah fought for each breath and her ears burned with a new heat she'd never experienced before. Her heart screamed at her to turn around and run back to him, to run into the arms she knew were wide open and would welcome her back.

Each step away from him made her heart beat slowly and her mouth grew dry and tears rushed to the rims of her eyes. The end of her nose burned, and she scrambled to remain in control. As she reached the door leading to the breakfast room, she glanced back.

It was a moment of weakness.

Disappearing into the breakfast room, Antony stumbled forward one step. He allowed his hands to rest on his hips as his head hung.

“This is far from over Leah, I promise.”

The End for now...

Books by Kristal McKerrington

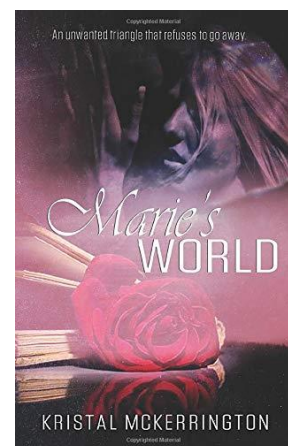
[Summer of Him](#)



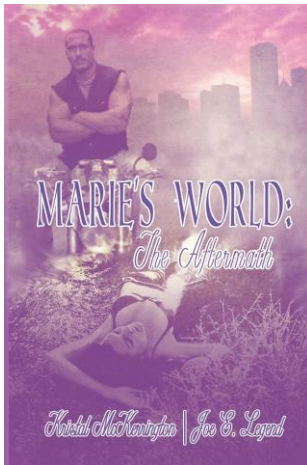
Trace was the man of Kate's dreams. She was the woman he never expected to meet. There are just a few small obstacles; the biggest one being themselves. They are from two completely different worlds. Trace is a cowboy who breaks hearts. Kate is an author who dreams of finding a man who understands her and can be supportive of her writing and modelling career which she's worked so hard to build. Will finding themselves in the same place be the chance they need to give love a chance? Is it possible for Kate to forgive Trace? Can he consider the possibility of a happily ever after? Can he fight for her?

[Marie's World](#)

Sister turns on sister, dance clashes with wrestling. Estrange husbands, unwanted love triangles. Twins who have inherited the sins of their father. Marie will escape to where her story started. She will have a tough time to hold onto the life she has made for herself while her old one is returning to reclaim her.



Marie's World – The Aftermath



Marie finds herself exposed, forced to face the aftermath of having her life turned over to the public. This is not all that she must face as she repairs her relationship with her estranged husband and strained family. She finds herself uncovering a war that will see her betrayed by those she trusted the most. Everything has yet to come to ahead but when it does her heart might never recover.

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