

Demolition of the Heart

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Complimentary Excerpt



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“Now, ladies and gentlemen, I have lot number fifty-two—two exquisite paintings in oils, Seascapes by Australian pioneer artist Eloise McLeod. Do I have an opening bid?”

Kayla stared. The familiarity of the paintings slapped at her as she was sucked into a vortex of disbelief. The room receded. The chatter silenced. All that existed was the paintings.

Her paintings. They belonged on the walls of Ainsley House. A roiling surge of emotion swept over her. The best two seascapes of all Grandma Eloise’s paintings had held pride of place in the reception area of her artist’s retreat. They were the treasured gems of her private collection.

“What is this, Jessica? Those paintings are mine,” she blurted in her friend’s ear.

“What are you talking about, Kayla?” Jessica asked in an urgent undertone.

Kayla grabbed her friend’s arm in a vice-like grip and practically dragged her onto her lap. “Those are mine...from Ainsley House. It says they were donated anonymously, but they can only have been stolen to get here. I would never—do you hear—never sell any of my grandmother’s paintings.”

“Shhh, Kayla, please keep your voice down. People are starting to notice.”

Jessica frowned and lowered her head a little, as if to hide.

“Don’t shhhh me, Jessica Newman. How did your charity come to have my paintings?” Kayla asked.

“I don’t know, Kayla. All I know is the staff of Douglas, Moore, and Associates came in to help catalog everything and they brought the paintings and several other items with them,” Jessica replied, her tone soothing.

“Well, they’re mine. I need to pull them from the auction,” Kayla snapped in reply.

“You can’t, Kayla. They have been legitimately donated.”

As Kayla rose from her seat, Jessica dragged her back down.

“You can’t make a scene, Kayla. Remember who’s here, and you don’t even know how they got them. You’ll have to bid on them,” Jessica said, her words short and sharp with a sense of urgency.

“Opening bids, Ladies and Gentleman? There we have it—at the back of the room—one thousand dollars. Come on, people. These are superb paintings by an Australian artist. They will provide a fantastic, classy, and elegant talking piece on your lounge room walls. Any advancement on one thousand?”

Kayla stood and proffered her card. “Eleven hundred.”

“Beautiful—off to the right. The bid is with you at eleven hundred. From the left, any more on eleven hundred?”

Kayla dropped back into her seat. Her legs were trembling, her throat dry and constricted.

“Twelve hundred.”

“Thank you, sir. To my right?” the auctioneer asked looking straight at Kayla.

Kayla waved her number. “Thirteen hundred,” she announced.

Then she heard another voice from directly behind her. “Fifteen hundred.”

She didn’t turn to check. “Sixteen hundred,” she said. Her voice wavered. She didn’t care how much she had to pay to retrieve the paintings.

The unknown rival behind her bid seventeen hundred and the other eighteen hundred.

She scrutinized the auctioneer and raised her card. “Nineteen hundred.”

“The lady in green has bid nineteen hundred. Any advancement, gentlemen?”

Both the others placed bids, and it was now in her court again at twenty-two hundred. She stabbed the air with her card, feeling sick as she did it. “Two thousand three.”

“Thank you. Gentlemen in the back?” the auctioneer asked as he indicated Kayla’s two rival bidders.

Kayla waited.

“Two thousand four.” The man on the back right said.

Now it was back to her. She raised her card. “Two thousand five hundred.”

“The bid is with the lady in the green.”

The man on the side said firmly, “Two thousand six.”

“Any further bids?” asked the auctioneer.

Kayla gripped the card tightly and flashed it over her head. “Two thousand seven.”

Silence weighed the room down for a long moment as the auctioneer indicated the two other bidders. “Gentlemen,” he asked.

The silence hung heavy. Even the waiters stopped moving in respect of the tension.

“No further bids. The lady in the green has it. First call, second call, and...”

“Three thousand,” announced a male voice.

She tried to see who continued to bid, but the crowded room blocked her view.

“Three thousand. Against the lady in the green—any advancement on that, Miss?”

She signaled her new bid by flashing her card. “Three thousand, one hundred,” she said, hoping all the time the others would quit bidding.

“Gentleman at the back?” the auctioneer asked. When he was greeted with silence, he surveyed the crowd, paused, then said, “As there are no further bids, we are all done, first call, second call, and third and final call. Sold, to the lady in green. Congratulations, Miss. Please see the cashier after the auction. Thank you, everyone, for your spirited bidding. Now we have lot number fifty-three, a framed, signed AFL Guernsey...”

The auctioneer’s voice faded as Kayla covered her face with her hands, fighting to keep tears of shock, and fury from flooding her cheeks.

“I could’ve lost my grandmother’s paintings. Oh Jessica, how could they have got here?” Kayla wailed.

“I’m sorry, Kayla—really I am—that you had to buy your own paintings.”

Kayla gave her friend a tight hug. “Don’t fret, Jessica, it’s not your fault, and the money is going to support a good cause—especially little Robbie.”

Jessica nodded.

As Kayla made her way toward the cashier, Wade intercepted her and held out his hand. “Another dance?”

She shook her head.

He continued to smile. “Don’t tell me you have to rush off—even Cinderella had until midnight.”

“Sorry, Wade. I have to sort something out.” She tried to smile, but it was a very insipid effort.

“Hey, Cinderella, you have tears in your eyes.” Wade moved closer, a slight frown forming on his forehead.

She pulled away from him and swiped at the moisture lingering on her eyelashes. “I don’t,” she said.

“Kayla, seriously, can I help?” Wade asked.

“No, Wade. Sorry, but I have to go.”

She dashed past him into the cashier’s office. While the cashier processed her payment, she tried to peek at the list he was working from, but the name of the donor was blank. “Can I ask you who donated the paintings?”

“I have no details on the donor. He has requested to remain anonymous.” The clerk was pleasant but firm in his reply.