



Chapter One

Kayla slipped on her new gown, feeling the sensual swish of the satin lining slide over her freshly washed skin. The tight bodice clung to the fullness of her breasts and the delicate green chiffon drapes swirled around her knees in feather light caresses. With the current heat wave, she was glad she had chosen a short dress with a low neckline and little beaded cap sleeves. She pulled her long auburn tresses up into a neat chignon, attached her sassy little fascinator with its sparkling peacock feathers to the side of her head, and slipped on her strappy slides. *There. All done.*

Despite the remnants of jet lag that still clung to her mind, she was determined to enjoy herself today. Her early return from Scotland and attendance today at the annual Melbourne Cup Luncheon meant a lot to her dearest friend, Jessica. She wanted to express support for her as she struggled to find a positive outcome in her younger brother's cancer diagnosis. While her parents dedicated their lives to supporting Robbie, Jessica worked tirelessly to raise funds to support the organization that had supported her family during their crisis.

When they arrived, the function room was buzzing and Jessica held her arm tightly as they made their way through the swirling crowd. They were barely seated when a short, matronly woman rushed up and hugged Jessica.

"Oh, my dear, it is so nice to see you here today. How's our darling, Robbie?"

"He's doing okay, Mrs Lindsay-Jones," Jessica replied.

"And this is your friend..." Mrs Lindsay-Jones waved her hand slightly to indicate Kayla.

"Yes, this is Kayla Mackenzie. Kayla, Mrs Lindsay-Jones." Jessica smiled from one to the other as she made the brief introduction.

"Well I hope she won't mind, but I am going to steal you away for a short time. There is someone I want you to meet."

"Kayla?" Jessica inquired.

"You go, Jessica. I'll have a look at the silent auction while you're gone and see if anything takes my fancy."

While Jessica was dragged into the milling throng by the older woman, Kayla made her way to the silent auction. There were some impressive items, and this was just a sideline to the main fundraising auction to be held between the main course and dessert.

Keen to make a contribution she picked up the pen and bent over the bidding sheet for a couple of bottles of good Barossa wine. She sensed someone close behind her.

"A nice drop." The male voice was deep and well-modulated.

With her name signed she straightened and his tangy aftershave wafted tantalizingly around her. She felt the heat radiating from his body as she turned and looked up into a pair of golden hazel eyes that were attractively emphasized by fine lines crinkling the corners.

She held out the pen. "It's for a good cause. Are you going to place a bid?" she asked.

He reached out and took the pen, his fingers brushing delicately over hers as they closed around the writing instrument. Kayla stared up at him, her light-hearted animation shimmering into a liquid shower of awareness under the mischievous spark in his eyes. He slowly let his gaze slide from her face, over her breasts, and down the length of her body, right to the strappy slides on her feet.

"Of course," he replied. His grin blossomed into a genuine smile that tugged his wide, shapely mouth into a generous curve that accentuated the fullness of his bottom lip and molded the slightest of dimples on his cheeks.

The deepening lines on both sides of his mouth added strength to his angular jaw that was lightly dusted with designer stubble. He stepped around her, sliding past in a sinuous dance step, not touching her, but so close the force of his movement ruffled the chiffon of her skirt. Involuntarily, she stepped back as he bent over in front of her to reach the bidding sheet and scrawl a bid. The masculine aura that emanated from him held her entranced as she openly studied the muscular curves of his back and shoulders and his neat derriere,

stretching the seat of his trousers before they hung lightly over long muscular legs. There was something familiar about this man, as if she should recognize him or had met him before, but she couldn't put a name to the face.

Frustrated by her inability to recall where she knew him from, she dragged her blatant ogle away from his derriere just in time to meet his when he straightened and stepped to the side of the table. "Now that I have completed my obligations to the cause, perhaps you would indulge me in a circuit of the dance floor," he asked.

"I'm not much of a dancer..." she murmured.

In response to her trailing silence, he held out his hand. "Wade Faxton—a client of Douglas, Moore, and Associates."

She flinched and almost snatched her hand from his. Of course...Wade Faxton, the gambler and loan shark's son—the one she had the hots for in university, but stayed away—not because he was the boy from the wrong side of the tracks, but because she had still been smarting from her bitter break up with her childhood sweetheart.

She took a deep breath and slipped her hand into his warm, encompassing palm. "Kayla Mackenzie," she announced.

His clasp was firm and the shake controlled, but there was no overly masculine posturing that had in the past left her with numb fingers. As he shook her hand, she studied him—the impressive height, his unruly, collar length hair, the designer stubble that accentuated the square chin indented with the slightest of clefts, and the gold earring in his left earlobe. He was an assured, confident man most women would sneak a second glance at. As she looked back up into his eyes, she realized he had not released her hand.

"Ah, *the* Kayla Mackenzie, the one who wouldn't date me in uni because my pedigree wasn't prestigious enough..."

Her face seared hot. "That's not true, Wade. It had nothing to do with who you were..."

He raised his eyebrows. "Really, but that's what all the society girls said," he murmured. A sardonic grin distorted the line of his mouth ever so slightly.

"Well, in my case, it's true," she said. "I was nursing a bitterly broken heart. It was a bad time in my life. I didn't have any room for romance in my heart when I finally snapped out of it, you'd graduated."

He gave a genuine beam of pleasure now and a little bow. "Well, seeing it is bad manners to argue with a lady I will accept your explanation but in exchange, will you indulge me in a dance or two? Just to show there are no hard feelings," he asked.

In an effort to break the spell he seemed to have cast over her brain, she laughed lightly, glanced at his shoes, then back to his face. "If you do not value your toes, Mr Faxton, the answer is yes. I will join you on the dance floor."

"Never mind my toes, and please, call me Wade. I think we go back far enough to dispense with formalities."

She smiled and nodded as she allowed him to lead her toward the dancers.

His palm rested with deceptive lightness on the bare skin of her back as she reached up to his shoulder. With practiced ease, he clasped her hand in his as he swept her onto the crowded floor. With ease they glided between the other dancers in perfect rhythm, he drew her closer until their bodies touched with the lightest of contact. A glowing spark of uncertain sexual awareness slipped uninvited through her body and she found herself nestling into his embrace as they moved as one.

The band transitioned seamlessly from one tune to the next. They floated across the floor under the mesmerizing blur of the swirling lights. Kayla was drawn inexorably under the spell of his masculine sensuousness, the smooth lithe movement of his hard body in time with the rise and fall of the music. Held so close to him, she magically found it easy to follow his movement, like floating on air as her feet moved of their own volition, somehow smoothly following his expert lead.

The warmth of his breath ruffled her hair, his fingers curled around hers, tightening ever so slightly each time their hips slid, with whisper gentleness, against each other. She wanted this man, badly. She had always wanted this man.

The silence was deafening as the last note echoed hauntingly around the room. Their gliding halt seemed abrupt and brutal when they stopped moving and applauded the band. Her knees threatened to sag and her back still sizzled with the imprint of his hand, and her fingers spontaneously reached to be entrapped in his clasp again. She peeked up at him and offered her arm so he could escort her back to her seat, just in time for soup.

"Thank you, Kayla. I will be back shortly and would be very happy if you would grant me another dance...as you can see, my toes are perfectly intact."

She smiled up at him as she sank into her chair, knowing full well she could not refuse his request—didn't want to refuse his request. "Of course, Wade...that would be lovely," she said.

Then he was gone across the room and through the doors that led outside. She watched him go until he disappeared from sight.

Jessica slid in beside her. "Sorry I was gone so long, but at least you seemed to be getting taken care of. Who was that hunk you were cuddling up to on the dance floor?"

"I wasn't cuddling up, Jessica. You know me." Kayla laughingly replied.

"Well, some would believe you, Kayla. Anyway, who was he?" Jessica asked.

"His name is Wade Faxton."

Jessica shrugged screwing her face up into a perplexed expression. "Nobody I know. Did you give him your number?"

Kayla shook her head.

"Silly girl. Anyway, let's eat. I'm starving."

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Her bowl had barely been removed when Wade was by her shoulder.

"Another dance, Kayla?" he asked softly.

She took his hand and rose from the chair. She smiled at Jessica by way of apology for leaving her alone. Her friend just grinned back.

Wade guided her into the circulating dancers and pulled her close. Every inch of her began to tingle with awareness. His hard masculine angles caressed and teased her feminine curves—every move, an invitation to dance a more intimate dance. Her body hummed with desire, her pussy already molten with heat. Her mind shied away just a little at the suddenness of her capitulation, but she wanted him. In reply to his suggestive caresses, she moved closer her acquiescence obvious.

Still moving to the music, she was aware they were gradually drifting toward the edge of the dance floor and the wide glass doors to the foyer. With just the slightest of fumbles, Wade opened the door and guided them through. He continued to dance with her, but he was closer now. She felt his arousal as his body pressed against hers. She turned her face up to his. He smiled down at her. It was a hungry smile. Then his lips were on hers—hot, moist, and delicious. It was a commanding kiss that explored her whole mouth—caressing, demanding a response. The sparks flashed between them. Her body flushed with sexual warmth and her pussy became liquid fire.

They paused a moment until the lift doors slid open. The moment they closed behind them Wade hauled her hard against him and began to kiss her neck and cleavage. Kayla was barely aware they had exited the lift and were weaving erratically down the corridor. She heard a click and they gracefully swayed into a luxury suite with a king-size bed. The urgency between them imploded into a frenzied battle to find naked skin, to join and satisfy a long awaited desire.

He lifted her skirt, cupping her buttocks as he pressed her against the wall. His kisses were hotter, more invasive, and she responded, hungrily devouring all he had to offer. She fumbled with his belt and fly, but finally managed to release his cock from its enclosure. She grasped his hard length firmly, feeling the heat radiating from the turgid flesh. Her body ached with the need to have him inside her—to feel the length and heat filling her. She was wet, hot, and very, very needy. He pressed her hard against the wall, covering the swell of her breasts in his hands through the thin material of her dress and bra.

“Oh God, Kayla, I have wanted you for so long,” he moaned against her mouth.

Wade fumbled with one hand to lower her knickers. Then he eased his hand between her legs, feeling her wetness and caressing her clit for a brief moment.

She pushed her hips toward him. She was on the verge of climaxing. Her body sizzled and throbbed. “Take me, Wade. Now. I want you,” she muttered.

He ran his hands over her hips and lifted her slightly. She opened her legs. The head of his cock pressed against her opening. Her body quivered in anticipation of the hot length entering her. He paused just a moment to slip on protection then thrust swiftly into her. His solid hardness slipped easily into her tight wetness. She shuddered with desire as it filled her. Her legs quaked and she rocked toward him. She moaned against his mouth,

struggling to breathe as he sank his full length into her heat she gasped. The unbearable tension in her pussy disintegrated into a series of all-encompassing waves of sensation that shook her body. She cried out and clung to his shoulders as her flesh convulsed again and again. He penetrated deep, withdrew, and went deep again. She felt his climax shudder into hers. She gasped for air. The intensity of her release shook her and melted her bones. He was pressing against her, holding her and himself upright, with hands pressed hard against the wall as their joint release sapped their bodies of substance. Wade was struggling to catch his breath as nuzzled into the curve of her neck.. She clutched his shoulders and buried her face in the sweet silken layers of his hair. She was aware of her perspiration blending with his and the smell of sex wafting between them.

Wade lifted his head and peered down at her. His eyes were filled with a dark and mysterious expression, a slight smile danced on his mouth. He leaned in and kissed her very lightly then pulled away. "All right, Kayla?"

She stared directly into his eyes. She knew he wasn't asking if the sex was good. He wanted to know if she had any regrets, fucking the notorious kid from the wrong side of the law.

She smiled, stretched up and kissed him lingeringly. "No regrets, Wade," she said firmly.

He pulled away from her then. She nearly slumped to the floor, but he held her steady.

"We better get back to the party before we are missed," he said quietly.

The small edge of regret in his voice echoed hers. She would've loved to stay and explore the explosive awareness that simmered between them. Even now, it shivered along her skin.

It took her barely a moment to smooth her ruffled persona back into cool, calm elegance, but she couldn't quite eradicate the sparkle that shone in her eyes. Wade appeared perfectly composed as he escorted back to the function room and through the twirling dancers and back to her table.

The main course was delicious and accompanied by the opening patter from the auctioneer. He was one of Australia's best, having won the Golden Gavel Award the last two years. He was entertaining, funny, and had a knack of wangling a few more dollars out of each bidder's pocket with his witty one-liners and undeniably persuasive and cajoling chatter that was aimed directly at any potential big spender's wallets. There was plenty of heckling and good natured bantering back and forth as the bids came thick and fast for items such as Bradman cricket memorabilia, collectable wines, and overseas holidays.

"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.

She arranged to have the paintings delivered to her flat, and seething with frustration and rage, she retreated to her seat. Back at the table, Kayla stared at her dessert, frustration bubbled up at the multitude of unanswered questions. She just couldn't face it and pushed away from the table.

"I'll see you at home, Jessica."

Jessica grabbed her arm and pulled her back into her seat. "Don't leave, Kayla, I will go and ask Mrs Lindsay-Jones. She will tell me who donated the paintings. She knows all the gossip."

Kayla watched as Jessica made her way across the crowded room to where Mrs Lindsay-Jones sat. Her friend leaned in close and after a few minutes of animated conversation, Jessica placed a polite kiss on the older woman's cheek and headed back.

As Jessica slipped into her seat, she searched the room. "You are not going to like this, sweetie. Apparently the paintings were donated by Faxton Constructions—run by none other than your gorgeous hunky dancing partner."

Kayla felt sick, her insides sank with an ungainly thud. No. Not the gorgeous sexy man she had just had hurried, but frenzied, sex with. *Oh my God*. She felt a right idiot, but now his identity was revealed, she was not all that shocked. Just furious.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"No mistake. Mrs Lindsay-Jones says he has been a long-time supporter of the charity. Apparently it is a cause very close to his heart." Jessica seemed disconcerted by her revelation.

"Close to his heart...*really*. That does not cut any ice with me. Dear to his heart or not, he has no right to use my property to show what a wonderful philanthropist he is. Where is he?" Kayla asked as she scanned the room.

Jessica wriggled in her chair. "I saw him go out onto the balcony while you were in the cashier's office," Jessica replied.

"Well, he better have a damn good explanation ready for how he came to be in the possession of two stolen paintings." Kayla's words were barely a cracked whisper as she jumped out of her chair and marched across the room. Without slowing down, she barged through the balcony doors, sending them flying fully open with reckless abandonment. Blinded by the rage and frustration that consumed her, she stormed forward until she unexpectedly crashed hard against an immovable object.

"Oooff!"

She felt the eruption of breath rather than heard the grunt from the broad chest of the man now pressed hard against her breasts. Her clutch purse tumbled to the floor. Winded by the force of their collision, Kayla fought for balance and the mental focus to cope with the sudden halt to her rage-driven charge. One shoe fell off as she skidded and slipped on the polished tiled floor, but she didn't fall, as she was immediately steadied by a strong, supportive grip.

She struggled to regain her balance, acutely aware of how close she was being held by Wade Faxton. His jacket hung open and the warmth of his body radiated through the thin fabric of his shirt—the steady beat of his heart was going about half the pace of the out of control cadence of her own. His warm breath stirred her hair and a shiver of sensation raced across her skin. The hardness of well-toned muscles crushed against the softness of her breasts was both titillating and disturbing at the same time and she struggled for a split second with the instant desire to cuddle closer and the need to push away.

Warily, she locked gazes with his deep set hazel eyes, fringed by long, dark lashes. His eyes now sparkled with amusement, the corners crinkling ever so slightly. The tangy scent of after-shave assailed her senses.

"Oh! I..." she said before she fell silent.

She was still clinging to his neck and he had made no attempt to release her.

"Ah, Cinderella, you have taken pity on Prince Charming and granted him another dance after all," he said. The husky timbre of his voice vibrated through his chest—driven by barely suppressed laughter.

Kayla stiffened and pulled back. He let her go.

She glared up at him in an attempt to regain her composure. His amusement died under the red hot force of her palpable hostility.

"Kayla?" His voice was hesitant, her name rolling off his tongue like honey.

She glared up at him. "Don't you 'Kayla' me, Mr Faxton, of Faxton Constructions. You explain to me right now how you came to be in possession of my property. How you came to donate two of my grandmother's irreplaceable, priceless paintings to a charity auction?" He cocked his head slightly to the left but continued to stare right back at her. "I donate a lot of things to charity. That is my right to do so," he responded.

"But not stolen property! Not *my* stolen property. Is that why you donated them anonymously—so you could conceal your ill-gotten gains?" she snapped.

He held up his hands as if to fend off her angry tirade. His defensive action simply added fuel to her rage.

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Kayla. I have never stolen anything in my life," he said with just a touch of heat in his tone.

"*Liar!* Those two paintings by Eloise McLeod are mine—have always been mine, and I did not sell them, nor did I give permission for someone else to sell them. How did you get them?" she screeched.

"They came with the house," Wade said calmly.

She grabbed his bicep and tried to shake him. "House? What house? They were hanging in Ainsley House," she yelled at him.

He resisted her manhandling with ease. "Correct, they *were*—along with a number of other extremely good artworks that will also be donated to charity as Ainsley House is soon to be demolished." He spoke slowly now, as if to a child.

"It is *not*. Ainsley House is *mine*. Well, it belongs to the McLeod Family Trust. I think you have made a very serious mistake, Mr Faxton."

"I'm sorry, Kayla, but I have not made a mistake. I took possession of Ainsley House at settlement of my father's estate four weeks ago. It was payment in full of a very large gambling debt. The house is scheduled for demolition within the next two weeks," he announced.

She glowered up at him but really didn't see him. Her mind was turbulent mush as she tried to grab onto one thought that made sense. The one solid thought to bring everything back to normal. "Ainsley House is an artist's retreat, gallery, and museum. It has two managers, and artists and students from around the world come to paint and—"

He cut her words off. "The retreat has been closed since July or August last year. I took vacant possession of the building," he stated calmly.

"But you can't have... Where are Pierre and Abrial?" she shouted at him.

He shrugged "I have possession of the house and who the hell are Pierre and Abrial?"

She froze. The world stopped then spun in and out of focus. She opened her mouth. She felt her throat move, but no sound came out of it. Her knees dissolved. She grabbed the balcony rail for support and finally forced the words out. "No! No! No! Ainsley House is *not* going to be demolished. It's *mine*. It's protected by the family trust."

He stood there shaking his head at her vehement denials, a mild expression of confusion, irritation, and pity shadowing his face. Something inside her snapped—the physical pain of fury out of control. She leaped forward, her hand swung back to deliver a stinging slap—anything to wipe that expression from his rugged features.

He raised his arms and latched onto her bare forearms. "Don't, Kayla. I can see you have received a shock—a terrible shock, apparently, but I do not tolerate violence upon my person. And hysterics and temper tantrums will get you absolutely nowhere."

The roiling rage whooshed away from her and she sagged, her face burning with the heat of embarrassment. "You gangster. You thug," she cursed at him. "You fuck me while you are blithely selling off my property. The apple didn't fall far from the tree, did it?"

His face flushed a deep red. "Damn it, Kayla, our little interlude had nothing to do with it. I had no idea the paintings were yours or that you would have an issue with the house..."

She silenced his excuses with a vicious snarl of words. "You used me," she cried.

"For God's sake, don't go there, Kayla. It wasn't like that at all and you know it," he muttered.

Behind them, the balcony door creaked open.

"Kayla?" Jessica asked tentatively.

At the sound of her friend's voice Kayla turned and fell into her friend's open arms, tears welled up and poured down her cheeks. "Someone has shut the retreat and sold Ainsley House. Only they can't..." she wailed.

From behind them, Wade spoke. "Ladies, this is not the time, nor the place, to get to the bottom of this fiasco, so I would suggest that, Kayla, you attend my offices tomorrow morning. Bring any relevant paperwork and we will have a civilized discussion. Here's my card."

He was almost snarling. Kayla glanced over her shoulder as Jessica took the proffered card, and was shocked to see the deep frown distorting his handsome features and the dark shadows in his eyes that could be mistaken for hurt, if she didn't know better.

She sighed. "I owe you an apology, Wade, but you have given me some unbelievable and horrific information that is intolerable to me personally, and if true, as you say, will have a number of very grim consequences. It must have already had some intolerable outcomes for my friends who manage the retreat, the two elderly caretakers. What has become of them? Why has no one contacted me? I was in Scotland, for God's sake, not Mars." Her voice began to crack as her throat choked up again.

"I have no answers for you, Kayla, but I will accept your apology and be happy to help you sort out the facts."

"I didn't mean what I said Wade, about...about..." She fell silent.

He nodded in acknowledgment of what she was trying to say, but the grimness of his expression didn't soften. She knew he was angry, but so was she, and the sex had nothing to do with it at all.

"Come, sweetie. We will work it all out tomorrow," Jessica said, as she ushered her toward the door.

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Back at the flat, Kayla tore off her gown and slipped on some shorts and a halter neck top. She wasn't sure where to start, what to look for, who would have answers.

She dialed the main number at Ainsley House. It rang out. She dialed the private number of Pierre De' Longni, Master of Arts, who ran the retreat and gallery for her. Her call was answered by a trite message saying the retreat was closed. She dialed both Pierre's and Abrial's mobiles. They both went to voice mail. She then called the retirement village where her Uncle George had been residing since his health had deteriorated last year. As one of the trustees of the McLeod Family Trust, he should have some answers.

The nurse said she could not put her through to Mr Mitchell and for further information, she would have to contact Mr Mitchell's son, Phillip.

Even though she was loath to call him because of his ongoing antagonism toward her since childhood, she dialed his number because he was the obvious choice.

"Phillip, I have a problem. I need to talk to Uncle George urgently."

"What? Lost your return flight ticket?" he sneered.

"You're such a shit, Phillip. Actually, I am already back," she said.

"You weren't supposed to get back until after New Year," he accused.

She heard surprise and something else in his tone. He didn't seem at all pleased she was back early.

"That's right, but things change. Is it an issue for you?" she asked.

"Why would your early return even be of interest to me, little cousin, let alone an issue?" he snapped.

"Good. Then you won't mind giving me the okay to speak to Uncle George. Some of Eloise's paintings came up at an auction today. I want to know how and why."

"I would have thought you already had enough of the old girl's art work on the walls of that hideous mausoleum you call an artist's retreat," he responded. His voice was hard and contemptuous.

Kayla took a deep breath in an effort to control the urge to scream at him. She hated that he was so scathing about the house. "That is not the point, Phillip. The man responsible for their donation also says he now owns Ainsley House, and he is going to demolish it." She was almost snarling as anxiety sharpened her tone and reduced her patience.

"Oh come on, Kayla, you pull me out of my sickbed because of some rumor. It's locked up safe as Fort Knox," Phillip drawled.

Kayla ignored his dismissive response. "This is much more than a rumor, Phillip. We need to stop them."

"We, Kayla? I seem to remember through my flu fogged brain that Ainsley House is yours—not ours, or mine. Perhaps you don't remember Great Aunt Eloise disinherited me." His tone now was outright burning sarcasm.

"She did *not* disinherit you, Phillip. That is a gross exaggeration. Now, as you are my sole cousin, I think I have the right to your support, regardless of who actually owns Ainsley House. Then again, I could go directly to Uncle George—"

"No, Kayla, I don't want Father disturbed. I am sure we can sort this out without putting any extra pressure on him. He's very unwell. Then again, have you considered it might be your Master of the Arts – Pepé La Pew – who has done the dirty on you? Sold up the paintings and pocketed the money," Phillip mocked her.

She knew immediately he was trying, with a clumsy attempt, to cut through her absolute trust in her managers.

"For God's sake, Phillip, I wish you would not use that term for him. Besides, this is not just about the paintings, it is about the house."

"Never mind about the house. Nothing can happen to the house unless you authorized it... Can you be absolutely certain, little cousin, that your precious manager hasn't sold you out?" Phillip sneered.

"Pierre is dedicated to his craft –"

"Have you spoken to him?" he asked.

"Not yet. He has not answered my calls." Her voice faded, uncertainty draining it of expression.

"Well then, what other explanation do you need?" Phillip sniped.

"I want to speak to Uncle George about it, but the nursing home wouldn't let me, apparently under your instructions." She knew she sounded accusing but then again, perhaps that was how she felt.

"That's right. My father is not well at the moment and does not need people bothering him, including you, especially over a couple of lousy paintings and unfounded rumors," Phillip snarled.

"Fine, be uncooperative, Phillip. I won't disturb your father for now, but I will not allow anyone to demolish Ainsley House either. Do you hear me?"

"Have fun, little cousin." Phillip snorted down the phone.

She heard him chortling in the distance then he was gone.

"And of course you wouldn't offer to help, would you, you lousy bastard..." she muttered as Jessica handed her a fresh coffee.

Jessica frowned. "No help from him?" she asked.

"The thing that does puzzle me though, is that I was away for a mere ten weeks. I don't understand how this has happened without Uncle George or Phillip knowing it was happening – or the other trustee, Frederick Carven. It was a complicated trust. There would have been no loopholes," she muttered, more to herself than her friend.

"Could it happen without them knowing?"

Kayla sipped her hot coffee. "I wouldn't think so because it is all tied up legally, but Uncle George has been unwell of late. I know Phillip resents me, but surely he would have contacted me if he knew about it."

"Well, there is nothing you can do until you've spoken to Wade Faxton," Jessica said.

Kayla fired up the computer. “Perhaps not, but I can at least get the low down on Wade Faxton before that happens. I know his background and it is not exactly squeaky clean. His father was a high rolling gambler and loan shark to other gamblers. He was always just a touch inside the law,” she said. While she waited for her coffee to cool, she typed in ‘Faxton Constructions’.

It resulted in several million hits. She sipped her coffee and scrolled through, instantly realizing she needed to narrow the search. She typed in ‘Faxton Constructions, South Australia’. There were plenty of articles—many with photos of Wade shown squiring around a bevy of beautiful women with headlines that ranged from *Playboy Faxton* to *Womanizing Executive Director breaks another Heart*. She ignored them and skimmed through until she found one with some historical information.

Wade Faxton is the epitome of the self-made man, rising from an illicit background of gambling and family tragedy to business success. His younger brother died of cancer at the tender age of seven and, unable to cope, his mother took an overdose. His father, stricken with grief, turned to making bigger gambling deals that were closer and closer to the criminal element. Wade has overcome huge odds to make Faxton Constructions one of the biggest, most respected, construction companies in South Australia.

No wonder the Childhood Cancer Foundation is close to his heart. Then she found one tying Wade to Ainsley House.

Faxton Constructions has signed a secret multi-million dollar deal with Seville Investments to build a convention center and multi-story hotel resort on the twenty-acre waterfront site of the recently acquired ...historic building, Ainsley House, and the land adjoining the block. Ainsley House was built by Hamish Campbell in the 1840s as a tribute to his wife, Ainsley Jones. It will be bulldozed to make room for the project, which is expected to bring tourism and jobs to the struggling fishing and

farming town. Wade Faxton, Executive Director of the company, said work is expected to begin immediately. The valuable heritage contents and renowned art collection were auctioned.

Her breath caught in her chest as she struggled to fill her lungs, but all she could manage were tight little gasps. She clutched the mouse so tightly her fingers cramped, and the cursor scrolled down the page. The full meaning of the article was all too clear. She shook her head. There had to be a mistake.

“They can’t do this! They can’t!” she cried.

She printed off the articles and dug out her copies of the will and the trust deed ready for her appointment with Wade. Sleep did not come easily when she finally gave in and went to bed, but it wasn’t the house she thought of as she drifted off, but the sex they had shared.

BLURB

Kayla Mackenzie is shocked when she finds out the man she has just made passionate love to is responsible for her priceless paintings being in a charity auction and intends to demolish her beloved family home.

Wade has no idea that his inheritance of historical Ainsley House has been carefully orchestrated and he is just a pawn in a complex plot that will not only deprive Kayla of her beloved family home and her inheritance, but also her life. The thing he hadn't counted on was the impetuous fiery tempered Kayla stealing his well-guarded heart before he even knew it was at risk.

Their confrontations are fierce and explosive as they both determinedly maintain joint residence of the historic house, but they find themselves fighting an entirely different battle as the smouldering attraction between them erupts into an inferno of desire and sexual attraction.

They finally get to the truth of how the house came to be in Wade's hands and Kayla claims her inheritance and strikes a business deal with Wade that will save the House.

Demolition of the Heart

<http://amzn.to/2r47OEh>

Blood Ties a Broken Heart

<http://amzn.to/2r4Q1yD>