

# JUST KATE

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## *Chapter 1*

The exchange was so blatant, so audacious that Kate Blake couldn't believe she'd seen it. It was intermission and the lobby was crowded. People swirled past her, laughing and talking as they waited for the opera to resume. Kate stood frozen in their midst, fingers curved around her glass of orange juice, her indigo eyes wide, afraid even to blink.

She hadn't imagined it. Brad had handed another man a packet of white powder and taken money in return, right there in front of half the population of Seattle.

Perhaps, she thought desperately, it was all a mistake. Perhaps she had only imagined that the packet contained cocaine, and that Brad, the man she'd meant to marry in less than a month, had just accepted money for it.

In the next instant, Brad turned, tucking a folded bill

into the pocket of his coat as he moved. His eyes met Kate's, and it was clear that he knew she'd seen. There was no apology in his gaze, however, only defiance. Then he was looking at his companion again, and Kate might not have existed at all.

She felt dizzy, and then claustrophobic, and she knew she had to get out into the fresh air fast. She set her cup aside and hurried toward the main door.

Outside, Kate gripped the stair railings in both hands and dragged in deep, clean breaths until the choking sensation passed. A glance back over one elegantly bared shoulder told her that Brad hadn't followed. He probably hadn't even noticed she was gone.

She looked up at the dark, star-speckled sky aglow with city lights, and her vision blurred as tears filled her eyes. She was torn. One part of her wanted to go back inside, grip Brad by the lapels and demand to know why he'd thrown everything away; another preferred to pretend that nothing had changed.

Kate inched down the stairs, still grasping the railing with both hands. Brad was the man she'd planned to marry. He was her father's campaign manager. And she'd just seen him break the law in the most brazen of ways.

A thousand thoughts whirled through her head. This wasn't new behavior for Brad; she was certain of that. And yet she hadn't known. She'd been engaged to him and *she hadn't known* what kind of man he was! How could that be?

There were no cabs lined up in front of the theater, since the opera would run another full hour. Kate looked back again, knowing she should go inside, call for a taxi and wait in the lobby until it arrived. But something

within her demanded action. She needed to walk, hard and fast, with the cool, clean night wind blowing against her face. She started out in the general direction of her downtown condominium, chin held high, her grandmother's antique brass evening bag swinging at her side.

Hard-eyed street people watched her pass, but there was none of the usual panhandling. Kate supposed that in her present mood she didn't look approachable.

Moments later, as she passed a popular department store, her pace slackened. The breeze had dried her tears. Kate's reflection in the windows regarded her forlornly as she took in her own tall, slender body, the sleek designer gown that had cost the earth, the soft and loose arrangement of her dark hair.

"So who wanted to marry Bradley Wilshire anyway?" she demanded aloud. As she rounded the corner, Kate was careful not to look at her image in the glass, fearing it might answer, *You did*.

Kate pulled her silk shawl around her bare shoulders and shivered. In just a few minutes, she reminded herself, she would be home in her small, elegant condominium overlooking the harbor. She would turn on some classical music, pour herself a glass of low-cal Chablis and spend the rest of the evening soaking in a bubble bath.

Was it possible that Brad was a pusher?

Trying to forget what she'd seen would be useless, she knew, but the ramifications were more than she could deal with, too big to take in all at once.

She was nearly home when she noticed two men standing in front of the cash machine. Kate considered crossing to the other side of the street, but they

seemed so engrossed in conversation that they probably wouldn't notice her, anyway.

The man facing Kate was tall and well built, familiar in a disturbing sort of way. In the dim light of the cash machine, she could see he was wearing a tuxedo, and his mouth was curved into an ingenuous smile. She sensed he was aware of her presence, though he gave no sign of it.

"Take it easy now, mate," he said in a thick Australian accent. "If it's money you want, you'll have it, but the machine will only give me so much in a twenty-four-hour period."

An almost dizzying sensation of mingled despair and excitement filled Kate. The voice, the accent—it couldn't be!

It was then that Kate spotted the glint of a switchblade in the second man's hand.

She was filled with instant ire. Thanks to Brad, she'd seen her share of crime for the day, and she was fed up. Without considering possible results, she spun her grandmother's purse on its chain and threw it. When it struck the mugger in the side of the head, he dropped the knife. In the same instant, his knees folded and he sank to the sidewalk in an unlikely position of prayer.

The tall man collected the knife, recessed the blade with an unsettling expertise and tucked it into his pocket. "Nice work, Katie," he said, reclaiming a gold credit card from the slot on the cash machine, "but you shouldn't have taken a chance like that. The bleeder might have turned on you."

Kate sank against the rough concrete wall of the bank, not trusting her knees to support her. "Sean," she whispered.

His white teeth flashed in the night. The mugger started to rise from the sidewalk, but his would-be victim pushed him back down with a light, deft touch of one foot.

Kate thought she was going to be sick and put one hand to her mouth.

“Surprised to see me, are you?” Sean asked.

Kate lowered her hand. Holding her knees rigid and her backbone straight, she started to walk away. “I’ll call the police,” she said woodenly.

Sean stopped her by taking a light but inescapable hold on her elbow. “No need of that, love,” he said in a gravelly tone that made sweet chills ripple over Kate’s soul. “They’re here already.”

Kate glanced toward the street. Sure enough, a patrol car was pulling up to the curb. She considered having herself taken into protective custody until Sean Harris had gone back to Australia, where he undeniably belonged.

“What’s going on here?” asked the older of two officers.

Sean explained, and the moaning mugger was hauled unceremoniously to his feet. Kate listened numbly as his rights were read, her teeth sinking into her lower lip. Sean’s grasp on her arm never slackened.

“You and the lady will need to come to the station and swear out a complaint,” said the younger officer.

“And if we don’t?” Sean asked, arching one dark eyebrow.

“They’ll have to let him go,” Kate answered.

“Can’t have that,” Sean replied lightly. “My car’s just up the street—we’ll follow you.”

Both policemen touched the brims of their hats in a deferential fashion before hustling the prisoner into the back of the squad car. Sean fairly hurled Kate into

the passenger seat of a late-model sports car parked half a block away.

“Well,” he said, when they were following the police, “fancy meeting you here, Katie-did.”

Kate folded her arms. First Brad’s drug deal, then the mugging and now this. Boy, had her horoscope been off target this morning. “My parents would have appreciated a telephone call,” she said stiffly, doing her best to ignore her former brother-in-law. “They worry about Gil, you know.”

The reference to his young son did not visibly move Sean. At least Kate didn’t catch him reacting, though she was watching him out of the corner of her eye.

“They know where we live,” he replied, and this time his voice was as cold as a Blue Mountain snowfall.

Kate unfolded her arms and tried to relax. It was almost incomprehensibly bad luck that, of all the muggings she might have stumbled upon, it had to be Sean’s. She hadn’t seen him since Abby’s funeral, and she’d hoped that she would never lay eyes on him again.

She drew in a deep breath and let it out again slowly. “Did you bring Gil with you?” she asked.

“Now why would I drag the poor little nipper from one hemisphere to the other like that?” he countered.

Kate suppressed an urge to wind up her purse again and let Sean have it. “Maybe because his grandparents would like to see him,” she said.

“Because they’d like to take him away, you mean,” Sean answered, “and turn him into a proper little Yank.”

“He’s half-American,” Kate pointed out, daring at last to turn in the car seat and look directly at Sean. His profile was rugged, like the outback he loved so much. “What’s wrong with that?”

They had reached the police station, and Sean was spared having to answer—for the moment.

The next hour was consumed by the dubious process of pressing charges against the mugger. Kate seriously considered turning Brad in for pushing drugs while she was there, but she knew she couldn't do that without consulting her father. An unforeseen scandal might ruin his chances for reelection to the Senate; Kate had to give him time to prepare.

She went to the telephone when she was through issuing her statement and dialed the familiar number.

Her mother answered; it was late enough that the staff was off duty. "Blake residence."

Kate braced herself. "Mother, it's Kate. I'm at the police station and—"

"The police station!" The horror in Irene Blake's voice was unmistakable. "Good heavens, what's happened? She's at the *police station*, dear!"

At this, the senator himself came on the line. Kate winced, just as if she'd been there to see him wrench the receiver out of her mother's hand. "What's this business about the police? So help me, Katherine, if you've been arrested, I'll fire you in an instant."

Kate made an effort to control her temper. "Of course I haven't been arrested, Daddy," she whispered into the phone, embarrassed. "I happened to witness a mugging, that's all."

"Are you all right?" the senator boomed. Now that he knew his career was safe, he could afford to be concerned about his daughter. Kate had never had any illusions about his priorities.

"I'm fine," she answered. "Daddy, the reason I'm calling is that—well—I ran into Sean."



“Sean who?” demanded the senator.

Kate felt a sweet, shivery sensation from head to foot, and looking to one side, she found that the handsome Australian was standing mere inches away. She reminded herself that he’d been Abby’s husband, that he was a liar and a womanizer, but the tremulous, taut-bow feeling didn’t subside. “Sean Harris,” she finally managed to reply, her cheeks burning.

Sean’s green eyes danced as he watched her color rise. Apparently he heard her father’s question, for he took the receiver from Kate and spoke into it, his tone flippant and cool. “You know, Senator. That no-gooder from down under—the one that married your elder daughter.”

Kate squeezed her eyes shut as she heard a burst of profanity explode on her father’s end of the line. After a moment’s recovery, she jerked the receiver out of Sean’s hand and sputtered, “Daddy, remember your heart!”

The senator went right on swearing. He finally hung up with a crash, but not before blurting out a nonsensical sentence that ended in, “...bring that bastard here no matter what you have to do!”

Sean had heard that, too. He rocked back on his heels, his wonderful eyes full of laughter. “There’s a welcome for you,” he said.

Kate had a headache. She sighed and opened her purse, but there was no sign of the little metal box of aspirin she usually carried. All she found were her keys and a credit card. “He wants to talk to you about Gil,” she said wearily. “That’s all.”

Sean didn’t look at all convinced of that, but he offered Kate his arm and inclined his head to one side.

“All right, Katie-did,” he said, “I’ll face the lion in his den. But I’m only doing it for you.”

Kate assessed this man who had caused her family so much heartache and shook her head. He didn’t look the least bit remorseful to her.

“Thanks a whole heap,” she said.

The lights of Seattle glittered and danced in the rear-view mirror of Sean’s car as he and Kate drove toward the Blake mansion. Even in the dim glow from the dashboard, she could see he was no longer amused. His jaw was set in a hard, unyielding line.

The confrontation between Sean and the senator would not be a pleasant experience for anyone.

Unexpectedly, Sean reached out and caught hold of Kate’s left hand. His thumb pressed against the large diamond in Brad’s engagement ring. “Who’s the lucky man?” he asked. His tone was gruff, as though he was trying to be congenial and finding it difficult.

Kate’s heart ached as she remembered the scene in the lobby at the opera house. She opened the lid of her antique purse, slid the ring off her finger and dropped it inside. “There isn’t one,” she said sadly.

She felt rather than saw Sean’s glance in her direction. “Funny. Abby always said you’d be the one to settle down and have a family.”

He couldn’t have known what pain that remark would foster—could he? Kate didn’t know Sean Harris very well; it had been ten years since he’d married her sister in the garden behind the Blakes’ house and five since Abby had driven her sports car off a cliff north of Sydney.

Kate’s mother still believed Abby had died deliber-

ately, unable to live with the unhappiness Sean caused her. Kate didn't know what to think.

She'd visited her sister in Australia several times, the last being when Gil was born seven years before. Although she'd watched Sean carefully, Kate hadn't seen any evidence of the emotional cruelty Abby had written home about. Oh, Sean might have been a little distant where Abby was concerned, but he'd been crazy about his infant son. Anyone could have seen that.

"Kate?"

The prompt from Sean brought her back to the present with a start. She pointed one finger. "Turn right on this next street."

Sean took a new hold on Kate's hand. "I remember," he said. "Katie, what happened?"

Kate lowered her eyes. "I thought I was in love," she confessed. "Tonight I saw Brad do something terrible."

He squeezed her hand. "You're better off out of it if you have any doubts at all," he said.

Kate had no doubt that was true, but she still wished she could go back in time and wave a wand and alter reality. In the new scenario Brad would only be making change for a twenty-dollar bill or giving someone his business card.

They had reached the foot of the Blakes' long brick-paved driveway, and the gates opened immediately. Of course, the senator had been watching for their arrival from inside the house, the gate controls in his hands.

"I don't know why I'm doing this," Sean muttered.

Kate sighed. "And my horoscope said I'd have a good day," she said as they passed through the gates.

"You don't believe in that rot, do you?" Sean asked, and he sounded short-tempered. He couldn't be blamed

for dreading what was ahead, Kate supposed. She wasn't looking forward to it, either.

"Not anymore I don't," she answered.

Senator John Blake was standing on the front porch when they reached the house, his hands shoved into the pockets of his heavy terry cloth bathrobe. Even in slippers and pajamas, Kate marveled to herself, he looked imperious—every inch the powerful politician.

And he was powerful. Careers were made and broken on his say-so.

Sean shut off the headlights and the engine and got out of the car. He walked around to help Kate, but she'd pushed the door open before he reached her.

"Where is the boy?" the senator demanded. No hello. No "What brings you all the way to America?" It was clear enough that Sean wasn't welcome in his own right.

"He's in school in Sydney, where he belongs," Sean answered. He'd never been the slightest bit intimidated by the senator, and Kate suspected that was one of the reasons her father disliked him so intensely.

Senator Blake doubled one hand into a fist and pounded it into his palm. "Blast it all, Harris, that child belongs with his family!"

"I'm his family," Sean said quietly. Kate felt a certain admiration for his composure, even though she wanted her sister's son to visit the United States on a regular basis as much as her parents did.

Kate's mother, Irene, appeared in the massive double doorway behind the senator. "Let's not stand outside, making a public spectacle of ourselves," she scolded. "There may be reporters from those awful tabloids lurking in the shrubbery."

Despite everything, Kate had to smile at that. The

tabloids didn't pick on dull men like her father. They fed on scandal.

Then her smile faded as she stepped into the light and warmth of her parents' house. Once word of Brad's profitable little sideline got out, there would be scandal aplenty.

"What are you doing here?" the senator demanded of Sean the moment they were all inside his study with the doors closed. He sounded for all the world as though he thought Sean should have had his permission before entering the country.

"I've been in Seattle for a week, if it's any of your business," Sean answered evenly. "My company is thinking of placing an order with Simmons Aircraft."

Kate saw the sudden interest in her father's face. Simmons Aircraft was one of the largest employers in the state, and the company was a pet concern of the senator's. "You're still with the airline, then?"

"You could say that," Sean replied. A forest of crystal decanters stood on the bar, and he helped himself to a snifter of brandy, lifting it once to the senator before raising it to his lips. "But you didn't have your daughter drag me up here so we could talk about Austra-Air, did you?"

Kate felt a flash of resentment. Sean made it sound as though her father orchestrated her every move.

"No," Senator Blake responded. "It's about my grandson."

Sean set the snifter aside, then brought a thin leather wallet from the inside pocket of his tuxedo jacket, opening it and extending it to his former father-in-law. Kate caught a glimpse of a handsome blond boy smiling up from a photograph.

It was no secret that Gil resembled his late mother, but surprise moved in the senator's aging face all the same—surprise and pain. "He's a fine-looking lad," the old man said in a strange, small voice. "Does he do well in school?"

"Mostly," Sean answered quietly. "He's got a weak spot when it comes to spelling and the like."

Mrs. Blake hovered close behind the senator's shoulder, peering hungrily at her grandson's picture. "Abby was the same way," she said.

The air in that large, gracious room suddenly seemed to be in short supply. Kate went to the window behind her father's desk and opened one side a little way.

"The boy has a right to know his mother's family," said the senator.

"A few years ago I might have agreed with that," Sean replied, pulling the photograph out from behind the plastic window in his wallet and extending it to Mrs. Blake.

"What changed your mind?" the senator wanted to know. It seemed to Kate that he was having trouble meeting Sean's gaze, but she was wrong, of course. Her father was virtually fearless.

"When a man's son is nearly kidnapped," Sean answered, "it tends to change his mind about a lot of things." He tucked his wallet back into his pocket and glanced at Kate once before telling his late wife's parents, "You're welcome to visit Gil anytime you want to, but I won't send him here. Not until he's old enough to take care of himself."

Kate was staring at Sean, hardly able to believe what she'd heard. Gil had nearly been kidnapped? That in itself was news to her, but it had actually seemed, for a

moment there, as though Sean thought the senator might have been behind the attempt.

When Sean walked out of the study, Kate followed, partly because she didn't want to listen to another of her father's tirades and partly because she had to confront Sean. He couldn't go around accusing good people of a crime and then just turn and walk away!

Kate said a hasty goodbye to her mother and father and followed Sean outside.

"I assume you want a ride home," Sean said as he opened the car door on the driver's side. It was the first indication he'd given that he was aware of her presence.

Kate answered by getting into the car. "What the hell do you mean by implying that my father would abduct a child?" she demanded the moment Sean was behind the wheel.

He ground the key into the ignition, and the engine started with an angry roar. "He wouldn't try it personally, of course," he snapped. "He paid someone to steal my son off the playground."

"That's a lie!"

Sean stopped the car without warning and glared at Kate. "Is it?" he rasped. "The man the police picked up admitted everything—he said he was working for a powerful American politician, and I guessed the rest."

Kate felt the color drain from her face. "No," she whispered, stunned. Her father would never do a thing like that. He was honorable and good, the kind of man who belonged in a Norman Rockwell painting. "I don't believe you."

"Believe what you like, love," Sean sighed. "I don't really give a damn."

Kate stiffened in her seat. "If my father was guilty,"

she challenged, “why didn’t you take your case to the press? That would have ruined his career.”

Sean didn’t look at her. He appeared to be concentrating on the road, and his strong hands were tense where they gripped the steering wheel. “I couldn’t,” he answered in a low voice. “I once loved a daughter of his, you see.”

Kate sat back. This had been one hell of a day. “So now you’re just going to fly back home and forget that Gil has a family here in the States?”

They had reached the bottom of the driveway. “Yes,” he replied. “If you want to see him, you’ll have to pay a visit to the land of Oz.”

Kate remembered the nickname Australians had given their country from her sister’s early emails. The later ones had been filled with anger and fear and a wild, keening kind of despair. “I might just do that,” she said. It would be good to get away from what Brad had done, away from her father’s campaign.

Sean gave her a quicksilver glance, one she nearly missed. “Really?”

“I’d need to get a visa,” Kate told him. “But, with my father’s connections, that shouldn’t take long.”

Kate couldn’t tell whether Sean was pleased at the prospect of a visit from his former sister-in-law or not, since the car was too dark and he revealed nothing by his tone or his words. “Where do you live?”

She gave him the address of her building, and he nodded in recognition. It was near his hotel, he said.

“How long are you staying?” she asked as the expensive car slipped through the dark city streets.

He moved his powerful shoulders in a casual shrug.



“Another few days, I suppose. I want to take the plane up at least once more before I make my recommendation.”

Kate knew he was testing the airliner his company was considering buying from Simmons Aircraft. “Just how many planes are we talking about here?” she asked.

Sean favored her with a grin that might have been slightly contemptuous. She couldn’t quite tell. “You’re definitely your father’s daughter,” he said, and Kate felt as though she’d been roundly insulted. Her cheeks were throbbing with heat when Sean finally answered her question. “Roughly a dozen, give or take a plane. We’re phasing out our old fleet.”

A dozen airliners. A contract like that would mean prosperity for a good many of her father’s constituents.

“What do you do, anyway?” Sean asked.

Again Kate felt vaguely indignant. “I work for the senator.”

“I gathered that much,” Sean retorted, bringing the car to a sleek stop in front of Kate’s building. “Do you actually work, or do you just stand around agreeing with everything the old man says?”

Kate’s color rose in anger, and she reached for the door handle, but Sean caught her hand in a swift grasp and held it prisoner. She trembled as he stroked the tender flesh on the inside of her wrist with the pad of his thumb.

“Cold?” he asked, knowing perfectly well she was practically boiling.

She gave a little cry when he tilted his head and melded his mouth to hers, but she made no move to resist him. The old attraction had returned to shame her.