

*Heart*  
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by  
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## CHAPTER ONE

“Hello stranger. Where’ve you been?”  
Lane almost dropped the plate of muffins she was carrying. The husky question had come from a table behind her. Butterflies crowded her stomach as she turned to face its occupant, a tall, lean woman with dark brown hair, eyes as green as a summer field, and a genuine smile that completely lit up her face. “Detective Bain, hello.”

Kyle stood up so fast she had to steady her chair to prevent it from toppling. “Do you have a minute to join me? I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“Of course, you’re one of my favorite customers.” Lane’s eyes quickly swept over the woman she had not seen in months.

The detective was never other than immaculately dressed, and today was no exception. Her trousers held a crease that would cut butter, and her starched blue linen shirt only attempted to disguise the strong muscles underneath. When the weather was cool, she typically wore a matching blazer, but today she sat uncloaked, displaying the weapon on her hip and the gold shield on her belt.

Kyle laughed. “You really should raise your standards.” She held Lane’s chair as she sat down. “How are you? I heard you were ill.”

“Just a pesky virus that took a little more out of me than I expected, but I’m better than ever now.” Lane didn’t want people

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to fuss over her or treat her any differently just because she'd been seriously ill. She was the same person she'd always been, with the exception that she now treasured each day she was alive.

"You look great." Kyle couldn't help but move her eyes over the slim body in front of her as if to verify her first impression.

Lane Connor was just as beautiful as ever. Her blond hair was a shade lighter than Kyle remembered and was secured by a bright green ribbon. Her white tank top contrasted with tanned shoulders and firmly developed biceps. She crossed legs that were equally tanned and showed the evidence of hours spent running on the beach. Kyle's fingers tingled with the desire to run her hands over the smooth skin. She tried to drag her eyes away from temptation but instead took another languishing look over Lane's body. When she paused at the radiant face, Lane's twinkling blue eyes told her she'd been caught looking.

Feeling self-conscious, Kyle sat down and picked up her coffee mug to mask her tongue-tied nervousness. As she sipped, she watched Lane swat away an annoying fly. The movement called attention to her left hand, which showed no sign of the ring worn so prominently the last time Kyle saw her.

Lane caught the change in expression as Kyle studied her hand. The detective wasn't the first person to notice the absence of her ring, and the unfamiliar butterflies in her stomach fluttered again. "Thanks, I'm feeling better every day."

It was the truth and just the day before, Lane's cardiologist had given her a conditional bill of good health. Of course the conditions were that she had someone else's heart beating in her chest and she would have to take anti-rejection drugs for the rest of her life. But if she took care of herself, she would have the same life expectancy of any other woman currently in her mid-thirties.

"The body's resilience is amazing." Kyle wanted to kick

herself as soon as she delivered this benign pronouncement. Finally, an opportunity to say something personal and that was the best she could do?

She was surprised at how rattled she felt seeing Lane again. It had been over a year since their last conversation, and theirs was no more than a passing acquaintanceship. Kyle was still a beat cop when she'd first noticed Lane several years ago. She would stop and chat when she saw her. At first she was just doing her job, establishing relationships with the people on her beat, but after awhile she simply liked talking with Lane. Of course, an added plus was that Lane was usually in a pair of shorts, t-shirt, and work boots. Kyle admired the fact that she took a hands-on approach to refurbishing the old building that had become the restaurant she was sitting in now. When The SandPiper had finally opened for business, Kyle was one of the first customers, and she'd continued to stop in a few mornings a month.

She typically sat on the patio quietly enjoying the morning sun and the antics of the people as they walked, ran, and skated by on the boardwalk in front of her. The crashing waves of the Pacific Ocean were strangely comforting as they glistened in the early morning hours. The air was crisp and clear, punctured with the staccato sounds of seagulls searching for breakfast. Early on she had admitted to herself that she didn't frequent the restaurant for its scenic views. She always hoped to catch a glimpse of the owner and better yet, share a cup of coffee.

Kyle had always found Lane attractive, but the two carat diamond ring she wore screamed "off limits," and over time they had shared polite casual conversation with neither of them stepping over the unspoken boundaries. Kyle had been extremely worried when she learned that Lane had been ill, but it was really none of her business. She didn't realize how much she'd missed her until she saw her again after so long.

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“You’re right about the resilience,” Lane said with a hint of irony. “I got sick, almost died, and my girlfriend left me, all in the same week. And here I am, I think the better for it.” She watched the detective’s reaction closely.

Kyle felt as if her world had tilted. *Lane could have died? And her girlfriend had dumped her? Jesus H. Christ.* In the twelve years she had been on the La Jolla Police Department, Detective First Grade Kyle Bain had learned to temper her expressive eyes. It was imperative to the success of her work as a homicide investigator that the criminals she interrogated could not read her facial expressions. However, this was a totally different situation, and she didn’t even try to guard her reaction.

“Makes my broken water pipe seem a little trivial,” she replied flippantly. Cops were famous for their gallows humor, a natural defensive mechanism to maintain their sanity when faced with the ugly horrors of life. Kyle was suddenly afraid she had treated Lane’s situation too lightly.

“You certainly know how to put things in perspective, Detective.”

“Occupational hazard.” Kyle was relieved when Lane laughed. Her smile lit up her face and made her eyes crinkle.

A loud banging sound on the boardwalk drew their attention. A man lay slumped at the base of a light pole, a large metal trash can rolling on the sidewalk beside him. Blood seeped out of a cut on the left side of his face. Kyle suspected he had collided with the pole and that the reason for his distraction was walking toward them now.

Lane watched as Kyle’s attention was drawn to a blonde on rollerblades. Her extremely large breasts bounced beneath less material than a cocktail napkin.

“Ouch, poor guy. I wonder how he’s going to explain the stitches.” Kyle remarked wryly. A cut that bled like that would

need to be surgically closed.

“Something other than the truth, I suspect.” Lane’s eyes were on the woman skating by. “No wonder he crashed. No one has breasts that perfect.”

*Did she just say what I thought she did?* This was new, Kyle noted. During their many conversations Lane had never alluded to anything sexual. Their conversations stayed on safe topics. A chuckle escaped Kyle’s lips.

“Not without several thousand dollars and a good plastic surgeon.”

Lane suddenly wondered what Kyle would think about the average size of her breasts. Or would the nine inch scar snaking down the center of her chest be her point of focus. A knot gripped her stomach at the thought. It was a fear that had started to creep into her consciousness lately. Before her illness, Lane was in top physical condition. She was a triathlete, competing in several Ironman competitions a year. Training made her muscles firm and her skin tan, and she was one of those rare people who didn’t have a freckle or blemish anywhere on her body. She had worked hard in the past few months to be able to regain her stamina to work every day. And even though she could finally run several miles on the beach without gasping for air, the ugly scar would always remind her that she would never be the same person she was a year ago.

“You don’t approve of breast enhancement?”

*Holy shit. What’s going on here?* Kyle had an odd sense that she was somehow putting her foot in it, but she wasn’t sure how. She had never understood why some women felt the need to have breasts larger than life. She enjoyed breasts as much as the next lesbian, but her level of arousal certainly didn’t go higher in proportion to her partner’s cup size. She tried to read Lane’s face before answering, but the woman would have made a good

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detective. Her expression gave nothing away.

“It’s not for me to approve or disapprove.” She looked directly into Lane’s eyes. “I prefer women who are confident enough with themselves as they are, flaws and all. None of us are perfect, far from it.”

Lane held the direct gaze for a moment. “You’ve got a point. However, there are times when surgery is the only solution to fix something that has gone terribly wrong.” She left her comment hanging in the air waiting for Kyle’s response.

“That’s true, but I don’t think that not being happy with the size of your breasts is ‘something that has gone terribly wrong.’” Kyle stopped when she realized how harsh she sounded. She smiled. “I guess I might be a bit more judgmental than I thought I was.”

Lane’s pulse raced faster when Kyle laughed. “That’s okay. It’s those little faults that make us cute.”

Kyle swallowed hard, her skin burning as if Lane could see through her clothes.

Lane watched the pulse in Kyle’s neck quicken. She waited a minute before she stood.

Kyle stood as well and held her chair out. Lane stepped the closest she had ever been to the woman and said quietly as she walked away, “Keep the streets safe, Detective.”

Kyle had to lean forward to hear the parting words, and when she did, she smelled a combination of perfume, sun, and sea air. The odor was intoxicating. Her head spinning, she sat down and stared at the crashing waves. *What in the fuck just happened?*



Lane’s phone was ringing when she stepped into her office. It was her private line and when she answered, she was greeted

by her brother's cheery voice. John lived in Hong Kong and had taken the first flight to Los Angeles when Lane became ill. He had stayed in town until the doctors were certain she was out of danger and had then returned to his wife and children. For the first few weeks after her release from the hospital he'd called every day. Once it became apparent that Lane was recovering, they'd allowed the calls to dwindle to one or two a month, so she welcomed the chance to catch up and exchange family gossip.

As her brother talked, Lane's mind drifted to her conversation with Kyle Bain. Kyle was always confident and self-assured, but she had appeared to be at a loss for words more than once this morning. Lane was intrigued to realize that every time their eyes met, she felt a connection she'd never been aware of before. It wasn't unusual for her to experience a sense of pride when a customer returned, and she'd particularly enjoyed the detective's company. But the flicker of awareness between them was completely new.

Lane had always thought Kyle was attractive, and occasionally she'd had the impression that Kyle was interested in her, but she'd never responded or even mildly flirted; she had a partner after all. After eight years together, she and Maria had been living what she thought was a good life. Their house was within walking distance of the beach, they had good friends, and the restaurant was turning a profit.

Lane drew a slow, controlled breath at the thought. Her illness had taught her many things, one of which was that she refused to dwell on shit she had no control over. Life was too short. Like her diseased heart, Maria was a thing of the past, and Lane wasn't sure who had suffered more pain over the whole fiasco, she or her brother.

John had broken the news to her three days after her surgery, that Maria had packed up and moved out. After she had been

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blatantly absent from Lane's bedside, he had gone to their home looking for her and it was quickly apparent that she was gone. Lane had been hurt and angry, but she knew even then that if she wanted to live, she could not let the shock of Maria's abandonment influence her recovery in the slightest.

"Lane, are you even listening to me?"

The sound of her name jolted Lane back to the present. "Of course I am," she lied.

"Then why have I repeated the same question three times and you still haven't answered me?"

Lane knew her brother wasn't mad at her, but she apologized anyway. "I'm sorry John, my mind was on a customer I had this morning."

"Trouble?"

Lane smiled at her brother's concern. Even though he was several thousand miles away, he would come to her rescue in a heartbeat if he thought there was a problem. "No, on the contrary, it was very nice. Someone I hadn't seen since before I got sick." That was what she called her brush with death—getting sick.

"Do I detect something in your voice?"

"No, John you don't."

"Lane, are you starting to go out?"

"We've already talked about this." Several times as a matter of fact. John had been pestering her to start dating for the past few months.

"And you told me to mind my own business and believe me, I'm trying. But you're my baby sister and I love you. I want you to be happy."

"I am happy John. I'm alive."

"Lane, being happy is more than just being alive. Even for someone who went through what you did."

Lane leaned back in her chair. "I love you too. If it weren't

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for you I don't know how I would have gotten through all this. But I *am* taking care of myself and when I'm ready to start seeing someone, you'll be the first to know."

"Okay, okay, I'll step back...at least for a little while."

They chatted for a few more minutes before Lane sent her best wishes to his family and dumped the phone back in its cradle.

Despite her intentions to get some work done, her thoughts strayed relentlessly to Kyle. *Why did I flirt with her like that?* Word had spread quickly that Lane was single, and she had a never ending stream of invitations. Some were just looks from across the room, some were subtle inquiries and some were downright blatant offers to fuck. She had gone out a few times during the past few months, but none of the women sparked the kind of interest she seemed to have in Kyle all of a sudden. *Good god, I don't even know if she's involved with anyone!* Prior to her illness, Lane had suspected that Kyle was single, but a lot can happen in a year. *Boy, is that an understatement.* Lane felt almost giddy thinking about it. How could such a feeling spring from nowhere?



Kyle was greeted at the door with wet, sloppy kisses. "How's my little sunshine today?"

She picked up the squirming toddler into her arms and closed the door behind her. She couldn't image her life without this enthusiastic greeting. Hollie was the spitting image of her mother, which made her the spitting image of Kyle, her mother's twin. Anyone who saw them together would never think that Hollie was Kyle's niece, but rather her daughter.

Kyle was determined that Hollie would know everything

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about the wonderful woman who had died giving her life.

Sometimes when she looked at her niece the terrible days of the past year felt like just yesterday. She had eagerly anticipated the birth of Alison's first child and was thrilled when her sister asked her to be in the delivery room. The man Alison had been seeing for several years had no interest in fatherhood and had not returned any of her calls since she informed him of the baby. Alison had been crushed but refused to force him into something he clearly didn't want. She went as far as to serve him with paternity papers which he promptly signed relinquishing his parental rights. All that ugliness aside, Alison's pregnancy was a joyous time, one that had changed Kyle's life in more ways than one.

For Kyle, the most wonderful sound in the world is the sound of a newborn baby crying, and that's exactly the way Hollie Elizabeth Bain entered the world. Kyle had never seen a baby so small, and when the nurse handed the squirming bundle to her, she heard Alison laugh.

"She won't break Kyle."

"I know, but she's so tiny I'm afraid she'll slip through my hands." She held the baby close to Alison who placed a sweet kiss on her cheek. Tears welled up in Kyle's eyes at the joy she felt for her sister.

A quivering hand reached out and stroked the baby's soft cheek. "Hello Hollie. I'm your mom." An instant later, all hell broke loose.

After a battery of tests the neurologist confirmed that Alison was brain dead. Three days later the tests were repeated, as required by law, and she was declared dead. The rest was a blur, but there was one day Kyle would never forget.

The pain was unbearable. If not for the innocent, living creature wrapped tightly in her arms Kyle would not have cared

that she was alive. As she looked through tear-streaked eyes at the neatly arranged flowers on top of Alison's casket, she'd thought it ironic that something so beautiful was being used to hide something as terrible as what lay beneath it. The ceremony, pomp, and fragrant beauty could not hide the cold hard fact that the most important person in her life was lying dead in the casket in front of her.

She'd kissed Hollie's head. *Oh, Allie. How will we ever go on without you?*

But somehow they had. One day at a time for Hollie and one minute at a time for Kyle. She was named Hollie's legal guardian and had subsequently adopted her niece. The days immediately following Alison's funeral were filled with diapers, formula, and sleepless nights, and Kyle had found a sense of comfort with the infant. The pain of losing her sister was still with her, but Kyle was finally at the point where thinking about Alison did not bring her instantly to tears.

"She was a joy as usual." Hollie's nanny, Gretchen came to the door wiping her hands on a dish towel. "We went to the park and she loved going high on the swing."

"That's my little daredevil. Big girls aren't afraid to go high are we?" Kyle was rewarded with another sloppy kiss.

"Well, dinner for Mommy is in the oven. You two girls have a good night. See you in the morning."

Kyle said good night to Gretchen and carried Hollie into the kitchen. Gretchen had come highly recommended from the nanny agency, and she and Kyle had hit it off immediately. Kyle had bought a larger house that included a separate guest cottage that was ideal for Gretchen to live in. The arrangement worked perfectly, and knowing that she could count on Gretchen when she was called out to investigate a homicide in the middle of the night allowed Kyle peace of mind.

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She finally sat down several hours later, after bathing Hollie, singing her favorite lullaby, and tucking her in for the night. Much to Kyle's relief, Hollie had been sleeping through the night since she was two months old. When she first brought Hollie home, her mother and father had stayed with her for several weeks to help her adapt to being a new mother. They'd shopped for any of the necessary baby things Alison had not already purchased, and within days the spare bedroom was filled with brightly colored toys and every piece of furniture a new baby would need, including the crib that Hollie now slept in. When Gretchen arrived, Kyle had returned to work and her parents went home.

Hollie was an easy going thirteen-month-old but was shy around people she didn't know. It usually took quite some time for her to warm up to strangers, and even longer before she would allow them to pick her up. Kyle hoped that this cautious nature would continue through her childhood. She prayed every night that she had it in her power to keep Alison's daughter safe.

Since Hollie's arrival Kyle's social life had gone from active to none. Yet Kyle found she didn't miss dating and outings with friends as much as she'd expected she would. To her surprise, she looked forward to coming home after work and spending her evenings playing peek-a-boo and changing poopie diapers. She had remained dedicated to her job, but had gained an entirely new perspective on what was important in life. There was no disputing the fact that Hollie was her first priority.

Kyle stretched out her long legs and a stuffed Big Bird doll fell to the floor as she put her feet on the coffee table in front of her. She sipped a cup of tea that had been hot and steaming twenty minutes ago. The TV was on but she wasn't paying attention to the basketball players running back and forth across the screen. Her encounter with Lane Connor earlier in the day had lingered

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in her mind ever since, and now that she could finally relax, her thoughts drifted once more to the attractive restaurant owner.

Kyle didn't know if she'd been more surprised to see her back at work or to realize Lane had so blatantly flirted with her. Kyle was practiced in the art of sidestepping women who came on to her during the course of her duties, but she was flatfooted when it came to Lane—definitely out of practice. She hadn't gone out on a date or even spoken to a woman on a personal level since Hollie arrived more than a year ago. Even now, she was only barely able to make sense of what happened with Lane.

Kyle tried not to read more into their conversation this morning than what was there. She had an analytical mind and methodically weighed each piece of evidence in the cases she investigated. That knack carried over into her personal life as well. As she relived every word Lane said and evaluated the accompanying body language, she began to tingle. Lane's eyes had sparkled when they looked at her, and she had looked at her that way...a lot. She was definitely interested. Kyle leaned her head back on the couch and frowned.

Hollie was the number one priority in her life, and she could not imagine that ever changing. She had a responsibility to Alison and Hollie, and she was not going to let either one of them down. Her job was demanding, and there was simply no place in her life for a relationship. Maybe when Hollie was older, when she didn't need her as much, Kyle could reconsider. But when would that be? When she got into school? Then it would be homework and after school activities. Maybe when she was in high school and a little more independent? Kyle wasn't so sure about that, either. She'd seen the effects of parental neglect during this crucial stage of development and vowed always to be there for Hollie. Kyle groaned when she counted the number of years till college. She'd

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never sat down and thought this through quite so thoroughly, but the way things were looking, her love life would be on hold for the next seventeen years.

Kyle's eyes grew heavy when the basketball game was replaced with Letterman. Slowly, she rose and began shutting off the lights. She checked the locks on the doors, set the alarm, and checked on Hollie one more time before sliding between her own cool sheets.