

HEARTS AFLAME

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Music and laughter echoed throughout the crowded restaurant bar. Friday happy hour was in full swing. Krista Wyler sat alone, elbows on the worn wooden bar, wishing she had taken up smoking so at least she would have something to do with her hands. Across the room, she watched a man and woman smiling and talking. They kept their eyes trained only on each another, ignoring everyone else. They inched closer, his hand finding the small of her back. The woman tossed her head in laughter, exposing her pale neck, an unspoken offering. The man leaned in, whispering something intimate in her ear. She gripped the arm of his expensive suit as her eyelids grew heavy with desire. Her lips trembled for a brief instant before she mouthed the word *yes*.

And just like that, another two connected.

The sight depressed Krista even though she knew it could easily be *her* engaging with an attractive woman. She could have another meaningless tryst, but she wasn't in the mood. Sighing, she fiddled with a matchbook and tried to unwind from a hectic week spent trying to sell homes in the midst of a dark pit of a market. Even though current times were tough going, she loved her job. She set her own goals and punched her own time clock. Problem was, she rarely punched out. When she did, like right now and only at her best friend's insistence, she didn't know what to do with herself.

She dropped the matchbook and tapped the bar impatiently, resisting the urge to dwell sullenly on her life. She had only just started her beer so her mind was top notch, sharp as a tack, and brutal with its realities: The loneliness she worked long, hard hours to avoid facing. The happiness she fooled herself into believing she had, buying material

things. The success she shared only with coworkers, people who, like her, were all about competition rather than compassion.

A heavy sigh shook her body at the discomfoting thoughts. She sipped her beer and mindlessly began to peel at the wet label.

“Hello, Krista.”

Krista glanced up from another tasteless sip.

“It’s been a while.” The voice was husky and familiar, the face flawless with detailed, high-priced beauty.

“Megan, hello.” Krista kept her own voice low in indifference, but as Megan raised her eyebrows, it was obvious she mistook this for seduction.

She held that intrigued, predatory look for a long moment and then signaled the bartender for a drink. She flipped her hair as she waited, purposely allowing Krista ample time to take her in. When Krista didn’t rise to the bait by voicing an interest, Megan took charge without missing a beat.

“You’re looking well, as always.” A knowing smile accompanied the self-assurance as her eyes slowly swept up and down Krista’s fit and curvy body. She slid onto the neighboring bar stool and cupped a hand over Krista’s. “I was hoping you would be here tonight.”

Krista studied the well-manicured fingernails and wished she felt more than just the warmth of another human’s touch. She sipped her drink and fought off disappointment. This had been her reality lately. Her lack of interest in available women, her nonexistent sex life. As much as she went over and over her situation, only one thing seemed certain. She wanted more. She wanted sparks. But she was beginning to wonder if such a thing even existed. Up until now she’d led her life based on what she did know. Sex and lust. She’d experienced those all too well. She knew for certain what they were all about.

Megan, obviously clueless as to her mood, leaned in closer, whispering in her ear. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Krista felt the gentle pressure of the breath against her skin. It caused a reaction, a quick ignition of her flesh. She closed her eyes and willed the rush of awakening nerves to remain for longer than a few seconds. But this was wishful thinking, a hopeless, romantic dream.

Insistent and unperturbed, Megan tightened her grip and brushed her lips across Krista’s cheek. The contact sent flashes of their last encounter to Krista’s mind.

A posh hotel room, dimly lit, with the scent of the fresh linen sheets and hungry, wet sex tingling her senses. Megan atop her, peeling off a black teddy and tossing it aside, her body covered in a thin sheen of sweat, her long brown hair clinging to her skin. Panting and moaning, she undulates, with Krista's fingers up deep inside her.

"I'm going to come," Megan whispers, biting her lower lip. "Make me come." Her body jerks and waves, slow then hard. Her eyes open with fierceness, full of flames, and the tendons in her neck strain. She reaches out, grasping Krista's free hand, linking their fingers, pinning Krista against the bed. She comes like lightning, bright and furious, charged and fast. A long cry finds birth from deep in her chest as she rides out her climax, clinging and grinding and taking and holding.

Krista watches in wonder, her fingers long ago sweetly pained and numbed. As the last of the orgasm escapes her body, Megan collapses. She breathes hard against Krista's chest, her body moist and pulsing. Krista turns her head and focuses on the hand that she can still feel. A sharp, stabbing pain registers as something presses into her finger. Megan squeezes their hands tightly together, intensifying the sensation. Krista squints. In the dim light she catches the source of the pain as their hands separate.

A marquise cut diamond, twinkling in the moonlight. Megan's wedding ring.

Krista blinked herself back into the present and trained her eyes on Megan's hand. The ring was still there, doing all it could to stake its claim. Krista wondered if Megan's husband had any idea of her philandering. She met her colleague's eyes and wondered why she suddenly cared.

"I can't. Not tonight." She turned on her stool to examine her numerous coworkers. A sea of people moved about, laughing, socializing, boasting about their latest month of sales.

Megan turned alongside her, not seeming the slightest bit fazed. "Got other plans?"

Krista considered the question as she continued to observe some of the other women around her. Real estate agents, mortgage specialists, and loan officers occupied the large party room of the popular Mexican restaurant. She knew most of them, having worked with them on a daily

basis for the past six years. Some she considered friends, but most she considered mere acquaintances. And a small, select few she used to consider one-night stands.

“No, I’m just not in the mood.” *Not in the mood? What the hell is going on with me?* She downed the rest of her beer, confused by her own behavior. She could feel Megan’s eyes on the side of her face.

“You sure?” Megan’s warm hand found its way to Krista’s thigh as she tried one last time.

Krista felt its intent and registered its warmth and pressure, but the sensation didn’t shoot up her leg like it should have. “Yeah.” She offered a regretful smile. “Maybe some other time.”

Megan touched her cheek, smiled in return, and then stood. “You have my number.”

She left Krista at the bar along with the lingering scent of her expensive perfume. Krista watched as she mixed into the crowd, a hungry hawk focused on the hunt.

“What are you still doing here?” another familiar voice asked, and an elbow rested on Krista’s shoulder. “I thought for sure you and Miss Thing would be long gone by now.”

Krista smiled genuinely at Suzanne Key, her closest friend. “Not in the mood.”

Suzanne studied her with concern. “You feeling okay?” She felt Krista’s head in search of a fever.

Krista laughed. “Fuck off!” She swatted the hand away, only mildly offended.

“No, I’m serious! You look like shit.”

“Thanks.”

“You need some color. You’re locked up inside that office of yours too much.”

Krista rolled her eyes playfully, knowing Suzanne really did care. As the bartender slid Suzanne her cosmopolitan, the duo observed the crowd with mock interest. Suzanne sipped her drink and sighed.

“So, what’s going on?” It wasn’t really a question, but rather a bored series of words spoken aloud.

“Nothing,” Krista responded.

“I can see that.” Suzanne worked on the plastic swizzle stick, happily chewing it down. “When’s the last time you got laid?”

This time Krista sighed. “I don’t know. Sometime before Christ.”

It really hadn’t been that long ago, had it? She thought back,

unable even to remember who she'd been with the last time. Maybe it was a good thing she was no longer interested. Casual sex had become way too, well, casual.

"Why's that?" Suzanne knew Krista had her flings and knew she could have them anytime she wanted. She was obviously just as confused as Krista was.

"I don't know."

But that wasn't quite true. Krista had her suspicions about the lack of interest she'd felt recently. Sex was the same old game, just played with different pawns from time to time. No fireworks, no heartfelt emotion. Just fucking. And Jesus, more than half the time she didn't even enjoy her encounters, leaving with her shirt wrinkled and untucked, her libido still starving with need.

"Maybe that's what's wrong. Maybe you need to get some." Suzanne fussed with Krista's hair as if she were readying her only daughter for a prom date.

"Maybe," Krista whispered, mostly to herself. Sex used to cheer her up, keep her level.

Megan came into view again and Krista studied her fit body and gloriously long legs. But desire didn't tighten her throat or turn in her gut. The sparks she longed for might as well be figments of some delusional fairy tale. They weren't happening, and she was starting to wonder if she would ever feel them again.

As if she sensed Krista's sudden somberness, Suzanne slung an affectionate arm around her. "I still love you if even you do have better hair than me."

Krista laughed. "Gee, thanks." She'd always hated her auburn hair but everyone else seemed to love it. So she left it shoulder length, and when its thickness got in her way she simply pulled it back into a ponytail.

Suzanne settled in next to her and changed the subject altogether, like only a true friend would. "Rich Hamilton is all over me tonight."

The two watched as the short, stocky mortgage banker worked his way through the crowd, flashing his best smile.

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh. What do you think?"

"You could do worse." Rich wasn't a bad-looking guy and he made a good living. Important qualities to a single straight woman, according to Suzanne.

“What about you?” Suzanne asked. “You gonna be all right tonight?”

Bless you, Suzanne. Always there for me. I don't deserve you. Krista was about to tell her so when something caught her attention. Her cell phone was vibrating on the waistband of her slacks. She unclipped it to identify the caller, expecting a client, as usual. A realtor doesn't know the meaning of “time off.”

The name Judith flashed on the screen. Quickly, her mind flew, registering both simple fact and thorny possibility. There was only one Judith she knew. Her *aunt* Judith.

Oh, fuck.

A dark, thick mist settled over her insides, churning her stomach. Krista rarely heard from family and when she did, the news was never good. Judith was her one and only local relative too.

Damn it. Suddenly, she wished she was hard at work, calling back clients, showing a house, or doing paperwork. Too busy to pay attention. Too busy to think about why the aunt she hadn't spoken to in over a year was suddenly calling. Krista pocketed the phone and paid her tab, nerves on edge.

“Something wrong?” Suzanne asked.

Krista averted her eyes, not wanting to alert Suzanne to her sudden change of mood. After all, at least one of them still had a shot at a good night.

“I'm not sure. But don't worry, I'll be fine.” She gave her best friend a peck on the cheek and rose from the bar stool. “Go talk to Rich. I'll call you later.” She waited for Suzanne to nod and wave before she wound her way out of the bar.

The fresh February air felt good against her skin as she strolled to her car. She climbed inside the BMW Z4, let the top down, and started the engine. The sun continued to fall behind her, watching as the cool wind played with her hair. A series of beeps called from her pocket as she braked for a stoplight. She retrieved the phone and stared at the voice message light, deep in contemplation.

“Shit.”

The traffic light turned green. She floored the gas pedal and flew down the road, cell phone to her ear.