

FELICITY  
HEATON



CATCH A  
FALLING STAR



# **Catch a Falling Star**

**Felicity Heaton**

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## **- Chapter One -**

Alex Williams lay on her back on the couch, propped up on her elbows and watching the world flying by outside the tinted windows of the bus. Eleven long months she'd spent living in the large coach with her fellow band mates, and she was starting to feel hollow. She listened to Carrie bickering with Lucie about the music on the stereo and heaved a sigh, her breath blowing her dark hair away from her face.

Lying back down, she flung her arm across her eyes as though by doing that she would be able to shut out the world for five minutes and find some peace. The hollow feeling inside wasn't good. She'd felt like this before. It was a few years ago now but she could still remember it like it was yesterday. It was never going away.

She had all the magazine clippings to prove that.

Closing her eyes, she wanted nothing more than to drift away, to escape the tour now and not wait until she reached Los Angeles. She knew that she should have been glad to be home, being in LA would signal the last date of her tour, but it was still one date too many. The year seemed to have disappeared, slipped through her grasp, and she was sure that she'd not remember any of it. January had become June, that had slipped into September, and suddenly it was December. Christmas was fast approaching and she didn't have anything prepared.

Since Chicago, she'd been desperate to be home, but she didn't know why. Usually she loved to tour, loved

playing all the venues and seeing the crowds waiting for her when she arrived, but over the past two years, it had gradually become soured. Each new city she arrived in felt grey and cold, and it was making her feel that way inside too.

There was a word for this.

Disillusioned.

He'd told her, warned her all those years ago when she'd announced that she was going to LA to be famous, that it would all turn out this way, and she hated that he was right. At the time, she'd wholeheartedly denied his words. She'd believed in the fairytale of being famous and that it was going to be perfect just like she'd imagined. Ten years later, she couldn't even muster a weak denial of it. She was disillusioned, and sick to her stomach of the media world that had tried to bleed her dry.

She really felt hollow inside, like everything that surrounded her was slowly killing her. Each camera click, each premiere, and each tour date, was eating her from the inside out and had started with her soul.

Maybe she just needed a few months off, a little clarity and a long vacation.

Maybe he had been right.

She wasn't made for this.

A loud bang penetrated her thoughts and she yelped as the bus swerved dangerously, its brakes squealing. Thrown to the floor, she cringed when she landed

heavily on the hard ground. Carrie screamed and she looked up to see her friend on the floor too.

The bus finally halted, rocking gently side to side. She scrambled to her knees and then felt hands on her arm helping her up.

"Jesus h, miss Williams, I'm really sorry," the driver said.

She straightened up and started brushing herself down.

"What the hell happened?" she shouted at him but was secretly thankful for the momentary diversion from boredom and her heavy thoughts

"Blew a tyre, I think," he replied in a deep Hispanic accent that seemed to effortlessly convey how sorry he really was.

"It's fine. Can we fix it?" She didn't know whether she really cared about it or not, but it seemed like the right thing to ask in the situation.

"Sure, sure...we can fix it. Town just ahead and she'll limp to there." The driver gave her a wide smile and walked in the direction of the front of the bus.

She went to follow but almost fell to the floor as her knee protested. It seemed the bus wouldn't be the only thing limping into the town.

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She listened to the air compressing as the large coach door moved straight out and then slid to the side,

revealing a gloriously warm sidewalk to her eyes. She'd missed how warm California was. Tying her rich brown hair back into a ponytail, she placed her sunglasses firmly on her face, covering her brown eyes. She heaved a sigh and hobbled down the tall steps of the bus. When her feet were again on terra firma, she hitched her long pale skirt up and looked down at her scraped knee, and then inspected her grazed elbow with a childish pout.

"Coming out?" she asked Carrie and Lucie who were hovering inside the door. Both shook their head in the negative. "I'll bring you coffee then, lazy bones."

She stretched and then let her arms fall limp at her sides when she felt a sudden *déjà vu*.

Only it wasn't so *déjà* and there was no *vu*.

She knew this town.

She was raised in this town.

This was a cruel trick of fate. She'd thought about him, and the things he'd said and somehow destiny had stranded her in the very place she'd run away from all those years ago.

Instinct told her to get back on the bus and just wait it out. The tyre would be fixed in no time and she'd be back in LA in a few hours.

Curiosity, however, got the better of her and she found her eyes traversing the familiar streets. It felt as though she was playing spot the difference on a major scale. At a glance, the town seemed exactly as she remembered it, but on closer inspection, she began to notice how



different things really were. The old magic tricks shop was now a bookstore, the coffee house was exactly as she remembered it, but they had done up the outside of the movie theatre. She waited for a stream of cars to pass by before hurrying across the road to the café.

Stepping inside, she told herself that she would just get the coffees like she'd said she would and then she'd go straight back to the coach.

"Thanks." A clear male voice rang out to her above the quiet chatter of the patrons and her heart skipped a beat.

Her eyes darted around the occupants of the room, trying to search out the owner of the voice she knew so well. When she couldn't see him anywhere, she decided that it was just another one of fate's tricks.

"Now, where's that brave lad gone?" The voice drifted to her ears again and she turned to see a man walking away from the counter, a paper cup in one hand and a band-aid in the other.

She watched him tear the band-aid open with his teeth and place his coffee down on one of the round tables.

Searching his face for a sign of the boy she'd left behind ten years ago, she was shocked to see how different he was now. Her whole body trembled with confused emotion as she looked at him. His hair was black now, swept forwards and gelled on top and short at the sides, but with the back a little longer. It was a distant cry from the brown floppy mess that she'd remembered. She took in the features of his face. His soft curved jaw, bronzed skin, dark brows and steel-grey eyes. He looked

the same but seemed even more toned than he used to be, if that was possible. It was either that or her memory of him had been fading and he'd always looked this good.

Only she'd been too blind to see what she was giving up.

And now fate had decided to offer her a painful reminder.

He kneeled down and it was only then that she realised that he wasn't alone. A little boy appeared in view. He was sitting on one of the chairs and his pale cheeks were streaked with tears. She tilted her head to one side and watched the man she used to know smiling up at the boy.

"Come on now, no croc tears. What is it I always tell you?" He smoothed the boy's hair into place and the child wiped the tears from his cheeks with the back of his hands.

"Courage," the little boy said in a whispered voice that was barely audible.

Her brows furrowed and she smiled at the reminder of Marc's mantra of 'courage and love'. He'd told her one night that it was all he needed in life; courage to do the things he dreamed of and love to make him live. She watched Marc's fingers as he gently placed the band-aid over the scrape on the little boy's knee and she wished that she had someone to do that for her.

That he would do that for her.

She didn't want to go there. Something told her that he wasn't going to be welcoming her back with open arms after she hadn't contacted him in almost a decade. She knew him better than anyone did and she knew he was going to be as angry as hell if he saw her. That's why she was just going to get the coffees and get out of town.

But she couldn't move.

Her feet felt as though they'd taken root and there was no way she could make them work. She just stood near the door of the café watching him as he tended to the boy.

"There...little courage gets you everywhere. Now, let's go find mommy."

Suddenly her heart sank. On his face, she couldn't find any sign of the anger she'd been thinking about. There was just love and tenderness. She watched with growing disappointment as he took hold of the child's hand and began to walk out of the coffee shop.

Her stomach span faster than her head and she tried to deal with what had only just dawned on her. She hadn't even thought about it when she'd been watching them. It was only when Marc had mentioned finding the boy's mother that it had hit her.

The boy was his. Theirs.

She clutched her stomach and leaned heavily against the wall as her knees turned to jelly.

What had she expected? Did she really think he was going to sit in their home town for ten years waiting for her? He'd moved on with his life and she couldn't hold it against him. After all, it was exactly what she'd done.

It still hurt like hell though.

Seeing it unfurling in front of her eyes when she'd been least expecting it made her feel shaken inside, as though she really wanted to be sick. She wanted to close her eyes and make it all go away, but every time she did, she saw all the affection he'd had in his eyes when he'd been looking at the child.

Forgetting the coffees, she walked back out into the bright sunshine. She stared unseeingly at the cars as they passed her by and breathed deeply, trying to calm down and prevent herself from hyperventilating.

She covered her face with her hands and then slipped her fingers into her hair as she leaned her head back and stared up at the sky.

What had she expected?

Had she honestly believed that this town would remain unchanged? That the people she used to know back in high school would be exactly the same as they were when she'd left? It sounded ridiculous, but a part of her had. A portion of her heart had always dreamed of coming home and finding it just how she remembered.

And Marc was always there, awaiting her with open arms.

Sniffing and shaking her head to loosen herself up, she decided to see what else had changed in her absence, if only to rid herself of the notion that anything in this town was really as she remembered it. The quicker she realised everything had moved on and there was nothing here for her any more, the sooner she could leave for home.

Because that's what Los Angeles was, her home. This place was nothing more than a distant memory now. This place wasn't home at all. There was nothing for her here.

So why did she feel so upset that her dream of coming home had been shattered?

Walking down the shady side of the street, she stopped outside the old magic shop and hesitated for a moment before stepping in. She remembered how it used to be and scanned the little store for differences.

Descending the step that led to the lower floor, a wide smile settled on her lips. She recognised the man behind the counter. The last time she'd seen Harry Yates had been in the library at school and he'd been berating her about the state of the books she'd returned because she'd spilt her soda all over them. Now he was in front of her, talking to a customer about a book she couldn't quite see the cover of, and looking no different from how he'd been all those years ago. At least someone in this town was the same.

She took a step towards him and removed her sunglasses, a high beam smile plastered on her face.

"Can I help you, miss?" he said when the customer he'd been serving walked out of the store.

Her heart sank again. Of course she'd changed in her time away, and it wasn't like everyone was going to recognise her, only she seemed to be recognising them, and after all, she was the one in the magazines all the time.

She frowned and her eyes locked with his.

She shook her head in the negative before disappearing into the aisles of books.

This was stupid. No one in this town was going to remember her. She may as well just go back to the coach. Her friends would probably be looking for her. She rolled her eyes at her poor excuse. If they were looking for her then her cell would have rung by now. It seemed the whole world was running smoothly sans Alex.

"Time to face facts, Alex," she muttered to herself and ran her fingers along the spines of the books. "No one needs you. You're just a pretty face on the cover of a magazine, all wrapped in cellophane. You've made yourself into exactly what he said you were back then. Unattainable."

Pulling out one of the books, she idly flicked through the pages and tried to figure out what to do next. Her heart told her to continue exploring the town, starting with all her old haunts. The voice at the back of her mind told her she'd only find disappointment at every turn.

The shop door opened again and she looked up to see Marc walking in, the little boy still in tow. She silently wished it was their boy, not his and another girl's.

Moving along the bookshelf, she peered around the end and then ducked back in when the child looked at her. She moved back a few steps until she could see Marc and Harry through the gap above the books in the bookshelf and felt as though she was on the outside looking in as she watched the scene unfold in front of her. A sense of longing filled her. She wanted to be a part of this little corner of the world she'd left behind.

"Don't suppose you've seen Jenny have you? I can't find her anywhere." Marc let go of the boy's hand and leaned backwards against the counter, resting his elbows on the glass top and drumming his fingers against the front of it.

"No, I haven't. Is he being trouble?"

"Nah..." Marc motioned a dismissal of Harry's question and shrugged. "Just got to get to work soon and I don't want him hanging around the White House."

She smiled at the mention of their favourite haunt. At least some things didn't change—one of them still haunted it.

"I see. Are you playing tonight?" Harry moved out from behind the glass counter and over to the small refreshments area.

He poured two glasses of water and brought one back to Marc, placing it down on the counter beside him.

"Yep, not the usual stuff though. It's all retro piano tonight...pennywhistles and moonbeams...and no, it wasn't my idea, thank you very much Johnny."

She sighed when he smiled and shook his head. A million times she'd watched him do that in the past, and it still got to her now. She loved his little expressions. They all seemed so distinctly his.

The door opened again and her attention flew to it. Her eyes widened and she shuffled backwards slightly when she saw Jenny hurrying down to where the two men stood. The little boy opened his arms on seeing his mother and was instantly wrapped up in a hug.

Jenny brushed her fingers through his hair and clung to him as she closed her eyes. Her hair was a little longer than Alex remembered, and it seemed to have a hint of red in it now. Her old friend still had the perfectly clear pale skin that she had always secretly envied and that same smile adorned her coral lips.

"He had a little trip, but he's all good now." Marc pointed to the little boy's knee and Jenny drew back to look at it, holding the child at arms length.

Alex felt a pang of jealousy over the domestic scene and it was swiftly followed by one of regret. She'd blown it. Seeing Marc again had made her realise just how much he'd meant to her, and just how much he still meant to her. Only now, he was out of reach.

Staring down at the book in front of her as tears of remorse filled her eyes, she didn't hear them leaving until the door closed and a hand was on her shoulder.



“Miss? We’re closing now,” Harry said. She kept her face hidden behind her hair. “Miss?”

Inhaling sharply, she raised her head, looking straight into his eyes. She tried to piece her emotions back together again but they all seemed to slip through her grasp whenever she tried to get hold of them. She swallowed noisily and looked up at the ceiling with her brows furrowed as hot tears spilt onto her cheeks. Turning quickly, she dropped the book and hurried out the door.

Harry looked down at the discarded book and then up at the door.

“Alex?”

## **- Chapter Two -**

Alex didn't stop running until she was clear of the little bookstore and the main street. She gasped for breath and looked at the large wrought iron gates of the cemetery, a place filled with both happy memories and sad ones.

Closing her eyes, she turned away from it, unready to face what it held for her.

She heaved a long sigh, sat down on the kerb and hugged her knees to her chest. A single question ran in circles around her head. What had she expected?

Her chest ached and she struggled to contain the fresh tears it brought to her eyes. On some level, she'd known everything would change, but then she'd hoped that her friends would remain the same and, most importantly, that Marc would. She could still see the man she used to know in him, but now he seemed to be shrouded in mystery, as though there were things about him she didn't know, and her claim on his affections was no longer going to get her a free pass to hearing them.

And she wanted to hear them so badly.

The more time she spent in this town, the more she wanted to find Marc and just make him tell her everything he'd done over the years, in minute detail, down to every last insignificant thing. She just wanted to sit somewhere and listen to him talking. Hearing him in the coffee shop and in the bookstore had made her want to cry. She hadn't realised just how badly she'd missed

the sound of his voice. Its dulcet tones made her feel warm and safe.

But now he was someone else's.

She'd had her chance a decade ago and she'd run away to LA to be a star. Where had it got her? She led a lonely life from fear of seeing everything she did strewn across the papers as it had been so many times, and she always seemed to be touring or spending countless hours in the studio. It wasn't fun any more, it wasn't a blast like she'd thought it would be when she'd first started out, and the end didn't justify the means.

Resting her chin on her knees, she stared down the road to the centre of town, watching the sun slowly setting as she tried to figure out what to do. She knew that if she continued down the route her heart wanted to take it would only end in her feeling hurt, but it was better than running away again. Her chance was gone, but it didn't mean she couldn't find Marc and explain what had happened. She had to do it, if only to put her ghosts to rest. She owed it to him, and to herself. If she wanted to leave this town behind her once and for all then she had to face her fears and put the wrong things right.

Standing up sharply, she brushed down her backside and then clenched her fists resolutely while she kept her eyes fixed on the buildings in front of her.

She'd do the right thing for once. She'd find the courage that was hidden deep inside her and do her best to make amends so she could clear her conscience.

Maybe then she wouldn't feel so wretched.

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She walked quickly back down into the town centre, racking her brain as she moved along in her own little world, barely conscious of those around her. She had to find Marc. A glance up at the darkening sky reminded her of what she'd heard him say in the bookstore. He was going to be at the club.

First, she'd go back to the bus. She needed to explain to the girls what was going on and freshen up. Then she'd head to the club and see if she could get hold of Marc.

She noticed on her way past the back of the bus that the tyre had been replaced and for a moment she considered just leaving, but she knew if she did that she'd never be able to get on with her life.

Mounting the steps, she turned to face Carrie and Lucie.

"We can't leave yet." Her voice was shaking with nerves and it didn't help when everyone looked at her with confusion reigning in their eyes. She hesitated and then took a deep breath, reminding herself that she had to go through with this. "There's something I have to do."

Carrie went to speak, but Lucie held a hand up to silence their friend, placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder and smiled warmly. It made her realise that someone had actually noticed how she'd been feeling recently.

"I saw the welcome sign at the edge of town. I thought you'd need some time. Do what you need to do." Lucie squeezed her gently in a hug and then gave Carrie a look that told her to keep quiet.

Alex felt a little more confident now that she knew someone was on her side. It had been a long time since she'd had someone behind her and she'd forgotten how nice it felt. She nodded in lieu of a thank you, squeezed past the two girls and headed towards the back of the bus.

Stripping off, she picked out a pair of black slacks with a barely noticeable blue pinstripe and a black bra, over which she slipped on an almost see-through dark red blouse. She took a deep breath and ran her fingers through her hair, loosening it before glancing in the mirror at herself. She looked tired. The make-up couldn't hide the rings around her eyes, but it didn't matter. She wasn't going to see him in order to win him over. You couldn't win over someone who was already spoken for.

By the time she left the tour bus behind on the street, the sky was dark and the temperature had dropped considerably. Through the haze of the streetlights, she could see faint pin pricks of stars. She felt sad as she thought about all the times her and Marc had spent in the park, just laying on the grass together and looking at the expanse of the universe above them.

Pulling her little leather jacket tighter around herself, she folded her arms across her chest and quickly made her way to the club. Her feet still seemed to know the way, and she let her eyes study the floor while she moved through the familiar streets. She looked up when she finally reached the alley where the entrance to the White House was, and her heart warmed to see it was the same as it had been when she'd left, right down to the dumpsters. Remembering that it was where she'd last seen Marc, her stomach lurched. They had argued

there when she'd told him she was leaving in order to chase her dream.

"Full circle," she mumbled to herself before walking on unsteady legs to the metal door of the club.

The bouncer smiled at her approvingly while she paid the cover charge. She ignored him and slipped into the club.

It seemed wrong somehow.

She wasn't hit by the loud, thumping music that she'd remembered, and there was a distinct absence of the thick clouds of smoke that had always left her smelling like an ashtray.

Moving deeper into the room, she weaved through the few people that were milling around at the bar and headed towards the dance floor. In place of the throng of dancers that she'd always been a part of, were small tables with couples seated around them. The candles adorning the tables offered a warm light that made everything seemed so romantic that it felt like a poignant reminder of what she'd lost, and why she was here.

Her feet froze when her eyes were arrested by him. The soft spotlights made his golden skin glow and his gentle voice even more touching as he sang the last few lines of the song he was playing on the grand piano.

She leaned back against the column behind her that supported the balcony and sighed. He'd always wanted to be a singer. He'd asked her to wait for him to be

ready to leave too and that they could go to Los Angeles together, but she'd left without him.

Her eyes closed in order to stop the tears as they threatened to well up again. How could she have been so stupid? All he'd asked her for was a few more months, to delay her plans just a short while, but she'd been so stubborn, and the more he'd pressed her the more she'd wanted to leave right then. He'd promised to protect her, but a part of her hadn't believed he would be able to and she'd left him behind.

The crowd applauding caused her to come out of her thoughts and she watched him stand. He smiled and told them he would be back later to round off the night with a song. Her eyes followed him. He moved off the stage and walked to the bar, opening the small waist height door and slipping through it. She watched him for a few moments and built up the courage to go over. Now she wished she'd gone to the bar while he was still playing. If she'd done that she could have had a quick shot of something to calm her nerves and she would have already been there when he'd headed in that direction.

Swallowing her nerves, she wished her stomach would settle down. She pressed her hand against it, willing the butterflies to stop dancing around so violently. They made her whole body tremble. Lowering her eyes to the floor, she moved hurriedly across the room and sat down on the stool at the end of the bar where he was talking to one of the bartenders.

She kept her eyes fixed on the wooden surface in front of her while she listened to him chuckling at something the man had said and bit her lip to stifle her tears. Being in the club and hearing such a familiar happy sound

brought back such sweet memories that they felt like bitter poison to her because there was no way she could recapture those times now.

Raising her head, she took a deep breath and tapped her fingers on the bar. After five minutes of waiting for him to notice her and watching him serving other girls, she felt as though her heart was splitting in two. She was about to leave when she found his attention finally on her and she put on her best smile.

Her eyes met his. Anticipation danced in her stomach and made her heart flutter.

“What can I get you?” The words seemed to take forever to register in her brain and her heart sank when she realised he didn’t recognise her.

Unable to form a reply, she struggled with her emotions and just shook her head sombrely. Out of all the people in the town, she’d truly believed he would be the one to recognise her. It was a crushing blow to discover the man who was once so close to her, now didn’t know her at all.

She laughed bitterly at herself and ignored the way he cocked his head to one side in intrigue.

“Fame and fortune really doesn’t bring you everything,” she muttered to herself and blinked away the tears so he wouldn’t see them.

He leaned against the bar, so close to her that she could smell his familiar aftershave. The scent of it brought fresh tears to her eyes. She remembered how she used to love laying in his arms just breathing him in.



"You famous then?" he said with a frown that betrayed his curiosity. She must have looked a little stunned because he seemed to suddenly feel the need to explain himself. "I don't get out of town much, don't read the girl mags...a little busy to be following people I don't know."

She felt that one in her stomach, a low blow that had her reeling and questions forming in her head. Had he never followed her career?

She couldn't find the strength to laugh it off this time. Her mouth formed silent words that she desperately tried to put a voice behind.

"You knew me once," she said so quietly that he leaned nearer her in an attempt to hear what she was saying.

"I did?" He looked confused.

She met his eyes briefly before dropping them back to the damp surface of the bar. Breathing in deeply, she avoided his questioning gaze and found the strength to carry on.

"Better than anyone...still know me better than anyone." She didn't know why she was continuing now that he'd flatly denied knowing her. A part of her wanted him to say he did, even if he didn't know her now. She wanted to hear from him that he really had been the only one who had known her back then.

"You'll have to refresh my memory. I've known a lot of people." His melodic tones cut into her thoughts and it felt as though his words had cleaved her heart in two.

She let her hair fall forwards so it hid her face and couldn't stop the tears from spilling onto her cheeks. Bringing her hand up, she tried to wipe them away in a manner that wouldn't draw attention to what she was doing. Of course he wouldn't remember her, he had a new life now just like she did, but it cut to the core to hear him actually say the words, because she remembered him like it was only yesterday when she'd last seen him.

Laughing to cover how hurt she was by his words, she raised her eyes to meet his again and smiled.

"We were high school sweethearts...but then I threw it all away on some pipe dream." The last part came out bitterly. His eyebrows knit into a frown and she swore she'd seen concern flash for a moment in his grey eyes before he smiled knowingly.

"Did you attain your dreams?" he said and leaned against the bar on his elbows. She stared at his arms. The sleeves of his crisp white shirt were rolled up past his elbows so they didn't get wet from the counter. He still had the same strong hands she could remember. She nodded slightly. "Then you didn't throw it away, right?"

"I did..." Her tone was grave and she looked at him seriously. "I threw it away."

He seemed pleased by her answer and pushed himself up into a standing position again. Her head tilted back to allow her eyes to remain fixed on his.

“Actually, I do remember you.” His face became a mask of deadly seriousness. She could feel the words coming, could see them in his eyes. He’d been waiting for this moment, had chosen the point where she’d been at her weakest to tell her. “Only one girl has ever broken my heart and I vowed it would never happen again.”

No matter how hard she tried not to let his words appear to affect her, a stunned look settled on her face. She tried to tear her eyes away from his but found she couldn’t. The resolute look he wore told her everything she needed to know. He hated her. She couldn’t blame him after what she’d done to him. She’d broken his heart and her own one in the process.

“I’m probably disturbing you. I’ll let you get on.” Her chest ached and her head span. She pushed against the bar with her hands, holding onto it to steady herself as she stood.

Her whole body shook when his hand wrapped about her wrist and stopped her from moving. She wanted to collapse under the weight of emotions that were flooding her already tired body. Her knees felt so weak that she knew without a doubt that if she took one step she’d fall.

She feebly attempted to get her hand free of his grasp. Tears blurred her vision and she felt as though she was going to be sick. She had to run away, had to leave. She couldn’t do this. She wasn’t strong enough to face her feelings, had always been one to keep them locked inside. She was stupid for thinking she could talk to him after everything she’d done. She didn’t really want to clear her conscience.

She still wanted her fairytale ending, still dreamed of him holding his arms out to her and welcoming her home.

She didn't offer much resistance when he leaned over the bar and caught hold of her trembling shoulders, moving her back to the stool and forcing her to sit down. He spoke words to her she didn't hear and after a while she realised he was saying the same thing repeatedly.

He was frowning at her but she could see in his eyes he wasn't angry. There was only concern showing in them.

"You're not disturbing me. I've always got time for an old friend." His words finally broke through to her and she offered him a shaky smile.

"You're a better person than me then." Her tone was derisive and she looked down at her hands, willing them to keep still.

He paused for a moment and then said, "I am."

Her head shot up and she felt new hurt lance through her when she met his eyes and saw all the concern they had held for her had vanished, leaving only coldness behind.

"I think you could use a drink." He turned away from her and she watched his back as he moved past the people serving drinks to the other end of the bar.

When he returned, she was staring at her hands again trying to figure out what she was meant to say next. They had established that he was angry with her, even if he wasn't showing it, and that he resented what she'd

done all those years ago almost as much as she now resented it. Her eyes widened when his hand appeared in view, his long fingers pushing a small shot glass of golden liquid towards her and quickly following it with a small plate of limes and salt.

Raising her head, she found his gaze instantly locking with hers and she gave him a small smile of gratitude for showing her that he remembered at least something about her and their time together. She turned her smile down at the shot of tequila and played back the memory of him teaching her how to drink it, in this very bar.

It had been a night she'd never forget in all her life.

It had been the night he'd told her for the first time that he loved her.

### **- Chapter Three -**

Alex knocked the shot back quickly, closing her eyes and breathing out sharply as the strong liquor burnt her throat. She opened her eyes to see Marc refilling the glass and she swore his hands had been shaking for just a moment, just a second before he got them under control.

"Marc?"

"Yeah, sweetheart?" He placed the bottle of tequila back down on the counter.

She melted inside over hearing his nickname for her uttered on his lips once more and watched his face closely for a reaction to her next question.

"Why didn't you come to Los Angeles?" She toyed with the shot glass in front of her. Guilt flickered in his eyes, causing her to smile inside. Feeling a little more confident, she continued, telling herself that it was best to start at the beginning if they were going to talk it all out like she'd planned. "I wrote you."

"I know, Alex," he said and her heart skipped a beat as he pronounced her name. "To be honest...I don't know why. It was a combination of things, I guess. Everything back here took longer to wrap up than anticipated and by the time I was ready to move out, you sounded like you were having such a great time without me."

"I wasn't," she confessed and then drank down the second shot to give herself some false courage.

“Pardon?”

Marc looked suitably stunned and confused, and she realised her confession was probably going to make things a lot worse on her, but it was all or nothing.

“I wasn’t having such a great time. Just, I was stupid. You weren’t coming out and your letters were getting shorter and I just wanted to show you what you were missing out on so I pretended I was having a great time out in LA. I pretended so you would come out earlier. I guess it backfired, huh?” She purposefully avoided his gaze when he looked more than a little upset over the revelation of what she’d done.

“I see,” he replied quietly, his eyes falling to rest on the counter just as hers came up to meet them.

She felt wretched inside for what she’d done. The guilt of it had always plagued her and she’d always wondered what would have happened had she been truthful and told him she missed him. Would things have turned out so differently? Would it have all been like she’d planned? It was too late now to change the things she’d done. All she could do was be honest with him and see where it would take her.

A man called his name and he turned away from her. She glanced at his profile and listened to him shout something in response to the question he’d received. Her eyes traced the features of his face and she used the time to refresh the image of him in her memory.

She’d never forgotten him, not in all the years she’d been away. He’d never been lost among the countless

nameless faces of her memory. He'd always stood apart from them and secretly that's where she wanted him to remain. She wanted to cling to the false hope that someday he would return to her and things would be like she'd always hoped they would. She'd finally have the dream that she'd become increasingly aware of recently as never having attained.

Over the past two years she'd been getting more and more disenchanted with her world. The polish had worn off only to reveal the ugly truth of what her life had become. She couldn't move around without being hounded by the cameras, and her latest manager always expected her to be practicing, recording or, better than both of those, touring. Touring brought in the most money and, as far as he was concerned, that's what she was.

She was money.

She was a pretty face.

She was something that sold records.

She'd had it drilled into her so much that she felt that's all she was now. She wasn't a person any more, with feelings and hopes. She was money. No one cared in interviews if she talked about the things dearest to her heart. They wanted to hear the bad times and the cock-ups she'd made. They just wanted to take her picture so they'd sell a few more copies of their magazine. They wanted to see her fall.

She felt as though she was being slowly pushed towards an invisible precipice and all around her were waiting



with baited breath for her to take a tumble, and their cameras were at the ready.

Because boy would that sell papers.

The only people she could class as friends were Carrie and Lucie. They had lived with her since joining her band five years ago and they'd grown closer than she'd ever imagined possible. Recently, however, she'd been growing distant from everyone and she was sad to say that this included them. The feeling of grey emptiness she had inside was causing her to withdraw into herself and now she found that she was spending countless hours just sitting in her room or staring out of windows.

It was as though she was searching for something.

She was searching for the one thing that would light up her world again, and make her see it with new eyes, searching for someone that would make her feel alive like she used to.

Someone like him.

She smiled through the hurt when he turned his attention back on her.

She'd had a lot of practice at pretending she was happy.

"You're sure I'm not disturbing you?" she quizzed him again and the corners of his mouth twitched into a smile, a smile that she'd brought out in him.

"I'm sure."

"Because I'm pretty certain you should be serving or doing something and I don't want to get you into trouble." She didn't bother to disguise her concern.

He looked at her with eyes that were almost black under the low club lighting.

"I'm very sure."

"Really?" She looked past him to the man who was trying to get his attention again.

Marc turned to look at him. "There's a box in the back, below the vodka to the right of the schnapps."

"You seem kinda needed to me. Your boss might get cranky if you don't work." She ran her finger around the rim of her empty shot glass and then widened her eyes when he refilled the glass with a look of steely determination on his face that had her wondering if he was trying to get her drunk. Maybe he really wanted her to talk, because last time she'd been drinking tequila all she had done was talk his ears off.

And that's when he'd told her he loved her.

She'd been sitting on his lap, babbling about god knows what and he'd been watching her with a serene smile playing on his lips. He'd waited for her to take a breath and he'd grabbed hold of her, pushing his finger hard enough against her lips that he'd squashed them. He'd looked straight into her eyes, so deadly serious that she would have fallen silent without him forcing her, and told her that he was in love with her.

She'd been stunned to the extent that when he'd released her mouth she hadn't been able to find the words to express how she felt.

She never had found the courage to tell him that she loved him, too.

Dropping her eyes to rest on the now full shot glass, she sighed. It was another of her regrets. Never telling him how she really felt about him, leaving him behind without an assurance of it. No wonder he never came to LA. In his letters, he had given her enough prompts. He'd even told her that he knew she had a hard time expressing her emotions and that it was probably easier for her to write them down than it was to say them.

She'd still not found the courage she'd needed.

"Alex." His jaw tensed and she remembered what kind of sign that was. It was never good. "Listen to me...I know for a fact that you're not disturbing my work."

"How?"

"Because I own the place."

It was either his statement or the alcohol that made her head spin.

He owned the club? But he played here, and he served people, like he just worked here. He owned the club?

She tried to get it through to herself that he'd done a lot more in their ten years apart than she'd realised. He wasn't just singing down some club they'd spent countless times at all those years ago. He ran the place.

He'd bought the club. She wanted to ask him why he'd bought it in the hopes that it had something to do with the times they'd spent here together, but her mouth backfired on her.

"Really? That's great. I never pictured you as a club owning kinda guy." She realised it had come out sounding a little patronising. The look of contempt that had surfaced in his eyes told her so.

"Well, people change, don't they?" His expression lost the warmth it had been bathed in just moments before. "You think you know someone, and then overnight they're a whole different person."

She pulled a face of discomfort when his eyes locked with hers and she couldn't bring herself to tear them away. After a few moments of seeing just how angry he really was at her, she managed to shift her gaze to her hands and found the strength there to say what she'd meant to.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to come out that way. I just...I always loved coming here with you and I was happy that you'd bought the place."

She heard him sigh. It seemed to express to her in silent words how sorry he was for snapping at her and she mentally thanked him.

"They were going to tear the place down to make way for some new nightclub. Contrary to this town's belief, I have happy memories of this place, just like you do. Couldn't see it go out that way, so I bought it."

She looked at her surroundings. "I'm glad you rescued it. I was starting to think that everything in this town had changed since I left, but here it is, exactly as I remembered it, only with some romantic night going on."

He chuckled at her observation. "It wasn't my idea. Johnny told me it would make a change to have a night once a week where things were a little more relaxed and a little less noisy. He said it would bring in a new crowd, and I have to admit he was right about that."

He scanned the people sitting at the tables on the dance floor.

"I heard you singing." She smiled softly when his eyes came back to rest on her. "It was good. I'd forgotten how good you were."

"Thanks."

"I used to like it when you sang to me. Remember the times we sat out at night by the ocean or in the park? It would get really quiet and we'd be enjoying the silence and the peacefulness, and then you'd start singing."

"And you'd join in." He smiled the first genuine smile she'd seen since leaving a decade ago and her stomach warmed through.

"I miss those times," she admitted in a quiet voice that trembled with nerves.

"Same here, sweetheart." He sighed and leaned against the bar next to her. "So, tell me really, what brought you back?"

She carefully weighed up her answer while watching his hands tracing patterns on the wooden surface. She wanted to reach out and capture them with her own. He was so incredibly close to her now, and his temper seemed to be holding, but she knew how unpredictable his nature was. One false step and he'd fall back on hating her.

"I'm miserable." She spoke to her hands and her stomach flipped as his edged nearer them.

"Is that why you came back?" His voice was soft, a soothing melody in her ear so full of sympathy that it made her want to cry until she'd rid herself of the lingering greyness inside.

"The tyre on the bus blew—" She started.

"You what?" He stood up quickly and glared down at her, his voice filled with disbelief.

"Please, let me finish."

"No...you didn't come back, did you? This wasn't your choice? You're here because the damn bus blew a tyre. I can't believe this. This is too rich. You didn't come back at all, and yet I'm supposed to be pleased to see you?" His tone was laced with anger and he backed away from her, placing a distance between them that made her feel cold inside.

"I didn't mean it to come out that way. Christ, I just keep putting my foot in my mouth tonight, don't I? I guess nothing's changed after all...I'm still stupid Alex that could never make anything work. I can't even tell

you I'm sorry without messing things up even further." The tears that had been lingering in her eyes slipped onto her cheeks as she shouted, more at herself than at him. She was beyond angry at how incapable she was of doing something as simple as apologising to him without making the whole situation worse. She just wanted to let him know how she felt and now he was going to leave and her chance would be gone.

Closing her eyes, she hung her head and waited for him to continue his outburst.

Silence stretched into infinity and she didn't dare open her eyes. She kept her head dipped and hot tears streamed down her cheeks while she mentally berated herself.

"You're sorry?" In place of the derisive, venomous, tone that she'd expected was a soft note of confusion that touched her heart.

Raising her head, she pushed her hair out of her face and gave him a tentative look

She nodded. "More than you'll ever know."

The look of anger she'd seen just moments before had vanished from his eyes, and the lines of his face had softened into a half smile that she recognised as a symbol of truce.

Her breath hitched in her throat when he reached out and brushed the pad of his thumb against her cheek, capturing the tears that had fallen and wiping them away.

"No more tears, okay? Never could stand seeing you cry." He stared at his thumb, seemingly fascinated with it and she looked there also. It was shining with her tears in the blue light of the bar.

"Check, no more tears." She responded with a nod of her head and relished the smile it brought to his lips.

"So, I bet you have questions just like I do. Since you crashed my town, I get to go first." He resumed his position of leaning against the counter opposite her and ignored a drinks request by two girls stood next to her.

"I guess that's fair." She smiled into his eyes, unsure of whether to expect things to be plain sailing from now on or whether to be on her guard against his next outburst.

Something told her that she wasn't going to get off that easily, and when he opened his mouth to speak, she felt her reserve validated.

He gave her a look that was all sweetness and charm, and then grinned as he locked eyes with hers.

"How's the husband?"



## - Chapter Four -

Alex sighed and rolled her eyes, trying to make light of the question he'd asked so pointedly.

"He's not my husband."

"Sorry...*fiancé*," Marc corrected himself. "But if you ask me...pretty much the same thing."

"You *did* follow my career," she said with a smile and watched him falter for a second. "You *know* what happened."

"Maybe I did follow your progress, and maybe I do know what happened...but I want to hear it from you. I think I deserve that." His look was unforgiving and she found herself nodding in agreement. He did deserve to be told by her.

She cast a quick glance at the two girls next to her, overly aware of the fact they were listening in on the conversation and whispering comments to each other. She got the feeling that someone in this town recognised her after all.

"Can we go somewhere...a little...?" She gave another uneasy look to the girls.

Marc nodded.

He corked the bottle of tequila and grabbed two shot glasses. Placing them into her hands, he slipped out

from behind the counter and picked up the rest of their stuff before weaving his way through the crowd.

She followed him in silence, letting him lead the way through the bar. She instinctively knew where they were going. She'd known where he'd take her before she'd even asked.

Her eyes strayed to the balcony above them and she quickly walked up the steps behind him. She waited for him to settle into the dark, secluded corner where they had spent so many evenings together just talking, and then sat down opposite him. Pouring him a shot of tequila, she pushed it across the table to him with a smile.

"Let's hear it then." He knocked the shot back and she filled her own glass.

"It seems like an eternity ago now." She started and leaned back in her chair. He leaned forwards, rested his elbows on his knees, and gave her an expectant look. "It was just after, you know, and my career had just picked up. I couldn't come back, couldn't see her with my own two eyes, not while he was still here. My manager at the time came in my place to put flowers on the grave and to tell me how beautiful it was."

"It was, you know. I heard you'd paid for it all. It was nice to see you were still the same girl at heart," he said sombrely and looked into her eyes.

She could still see in them how concerned he'd been about her back then.

"I was too...emotional...to be here. When James confirmed what had happened I broke down. I told him to give the people responsible for the funeral as much money as they needed to make it as beautiful as it should have been." She wiped the tears from her cheek and wondered if she was ever going to stop crying over her losses. By the time tomorrow came, she'd have eyes so puffy she wouldn't be able to see, and all this crying was going to wreck her voice.

"You don't have to talk about it." His soothing tones made her close her eyes and sigh as she nodded.

She knew he would always be the one to give her time. He knew her better than anyone did. He understood that she couldn't just open up and talk about some things. Some things were just too painful.

"I was broken to say the least. I don't think I left my house for weeks on end. I just sat there, staring at the paintings she'd given to me just a few months before when she'd been to visit. She'd been so proud of me, Marc. I didn't want to face the reality that she was gone." Before she could say another word, sobs choked her and she buried her face in her hands.

Her whole body warmed and her heart melted when she heard him move, and then felt him sit down next to her on the couch, his arm curling around her shoulders.

"Don't go back there, sweetheart...no more tears, remember?"

She leaned into his embrace, wanting to feel just how real he was, but reminding herself all the while that this couldn't be what she wanted it to be.

“Just tell me why.”

She nodded against his chest and then pushed herself up, relinquishing the comfort of his arms in order to continue with telling him everything she’d done.

She wiped the tears from her eyes and gave him a serious look. “James told me you were with another girl.”

He shook his head solemnly. “I wasn’t.”

“I know that now. He used me. When I confronted him after I’d contacted Alice to see if what he’d said was true, he laughed at me. He told me he should have played more on my mother’s death and you being with another girl, he could have married me before I’d found out he was lying.”

Marc didn’t look amused on discovering just how much he’d been used as a pawn in another man’s deceit and she found herself touching his hand. She didn’t even think about what she was doing until it was too late. Her hand was wrapped firmly around his, holding it tightly in a show of solidarity.

What surprised her more was that he placed his hand over hers and held it.

“I’m sorry I was too stupid to see what he was up to before it hit the papers. When I spoke to Alice and she told me you weren’t with another girl I felt so horrible. I knew you would see the articles about me and James. I knew...” Her voice trailed off as his thumb brushed against the back of her hand.

"It's not your fault. Desperate men do desperate things. He saw you were vulnerable and he took advantage of you. I can't pretend I'm not hurt by it, because I am, but I don't hold it wholly against you. I'm just glad you discovered his motive before it was too late. To think of what would have happened to you had you actually married him." His voice was full of concern but she could hear the angry edge to his words.

"I think he wanted me broken. He wanted my money and no sane me to protest against it." She sighed and drank down her shot, sucking the lime thoughtfully as she locked eyes with him.

He was so close to her that even in the darkness she could see in his eyes that he wanted to be angry with her for what she'd done, but he couldn't.

"All in the past now..." His voice was no more than a tender whisper. She could hear the struggle within him. It was visible in the slightly constrained way he trailed off, as though he was trying to stop himself from saying something that would upset them both.

She held her breath when he brushed a long tendril of hair out of her face, and she thanked him with a small smile.

"So, what have you been up to, I mean besides buying the club?" She kept her voice guarded and watched his face for any sign of the child she'd seen earlier really being his. It was a false hope but she could dream couldn't she?

"This and that. Bought this place, continued singing, even taught music for a few years at the elementary school. Went to college and studied literature...the usual."

"Bet you aced that course." She smiled knowingly, showing him that she remembered he was always one for the books and the poetry.

"You could say I was top of the class." He grinned and she rolled her eyes closed, relishing the way seeing it again made her feel inside—happy and warm.

"I was never a book girl. I'm surprised you found me that day in the library."

"You're surprised? I'm sure Harry was having a coronary seeing you there. What was it again, some big test..." He bit his lip and looked pensively at the ceiling.

"History." She put him out of his misery, and he brought his eyes back to hers and nodded.

"Yeah, everything always comes down to history."

"And you walked in...I remember it because when you came into the room the sun shone through the windows and I was convinced you'd brought it with you. The next thing I knew you were spouting all this clever stuff to Harry and I was crush central, albeit...feeling a little stupid."

He smiled. "And Harry turns to me and asks if I can do something with you because he wanted to close the library and you'd been there for almost five hours

straight. I think he was worried that something was wrong with you.”

She sighed at the recollection of seeing him for the first time. “You had your curly hair and geek glasses. What happened to all that? You were so bookish, now you’re all...I mean you were always gorgeous, but what you’ve done really brings it out in you.”

He gave her a toothy smile that reminded her of the schoolboy she’d known and picked at the back of the couch where his hand was resting by her shoulder. She blushed. He shifted to face her and looked her over.

Instantly, she wished she could hear his thoughts. She was wearing over a thousand dollars of clothing and she was sure he knew that, but she wasn’t sure how he’d react to it. He’d never been one for spending ridiculous amounts of money on clothes. He’d spent most of his life having to make do with whatever his mother could afford.

He continued to rake his eyes over her appraisingly for a few more seconds and then raised his brows.

“You haven’t changed a bit. You’ve still got your shampoo commercial hair and cherry red lips...just like you did the day I met you.”

“I look older,” she stated flatly and he chuckled, showing her how ridiculous he thought her words were. She gave him a deadly serious look. “I do. It’s all the hard work. It’s aging me prematurely. I swear.”

“I’m sure you do. You look the same to me, sweetheart.” He flashed her another brilliant smile and this one hit her

hard in the stomach, sending it fluttering like mad. “How about me? I know I look older.”

“Still the same boy I knew back then, at least in my eyes.”

His expression turned pensive once more. “What happened to us, Alex?”

“I was stupid. That’s what happened. I should have waited. I should have come back sooner...I shouldn’t have waited for an act of God to bring me back to y—here.” She dropped her eyes to rest on the couch as his head tilted to one side, a clear indication that he knew exactly what she had almost said and he wanted to know if it was true.

“Why did you leave so quickly?”

She sighed and leaned back into the couch, building up the strength to talk about what her life had been like all those years ago. It was nothing more than a painful memory now and she wished it could remain that way, but she’d promised herself she would tell him everything.

And she would.

“I had to. You know what was happening, what I was going through with my father. Seeing him do those things to my mom, having him do those things to me.” Tears welled up in her eyes and her emotions constricted her throat. She tried to swallow the aching lump but it wouldn’t shift. All the pain and suffering she’d lived with came flooding back to her and she found herself unable to look into Marc’s eyes. She couldn’t bear to see the



hurt and pity in them. It would only make the feeling inside her worse and she couldn't cope with it already.

"I told you that mom had said you could stay with us," he said softly, his voice soothing the pain as she struggled to continue.

"You know I couldn't. He knew where you lived. He would have come after me." She looked at him with wide eyes, her lashes wet with tears.

"I know. I know." He smoothed her hair gently and gave her a look that said he fully understood. "Your dad was a terrible man, Alex. I'm sorry you had to live with that. I'm sorry you had to leave."

The tears that she'd been managing to restrain broke free and her bottom lip quivered. She wanted desperately to feel Marc's arms around her again, to feel him holding her and hear him telling her that everything was fine now.

"I'm sorry I made you choose." She managed to get out in between sobs and saw his eyes fill with tears. "I wish I could have stayed, but it was getting too much."

She flinched at the memory of the time her dad had confronted her just before she'd run away to Los Angeles. She'd dropped a glass in the kitchen and he'd become so angry that he'd taken her hand and forced it into the shards, cutting her palm deeply. The second her father had punished her enough, she'd packed a bag, took the money she'd been saving and ran straight to Marc's house.

He'd been on the porch smoking a cigarette when she'd come around the corner of his drive. She'd seen in his expression that he'd known instantly why she was there. He'd been so angry when he'd seen the damage to her hand. His mother had been in hospital by then for observation and the doctors hadn't held out much hope of her recovering from the cancer. She'd stayed with him that night. They'd lain in his bed like they had so many times before but this time he just held her. He'd tried to convince her to stay with him, had promised he would look after her and he'd die to defend her from her father.

He'd even told her to contact the authorities again, but she'd reminded him that she'd done that twice now and each time her father had got away with it, and every time he got off, he beat her even worse than he had before.

She started when she felt something brush against her skin and she blinked back the tears only to see Marc's shoulder. He held her tightly, his arms wrapping about her in a protective embrace that she'd missed so much. She nuzzled into his neck and tried to stifle the tears but being held by him only made her want to cry harder. Clinging to his shoulders, she sobbed into his neck and tried to let all the pain out, just like she had that night.

"Shh..." Marc purred soothingly at her and ran his hand in gentle circles against her back. "Your dad was a bastard. It wasn't your fault. Don't cry over him."

"I'm not..." She sniffled and breathed heavily against him. He was so close to her that she could feel how warm her breath was as it bounced off his skin.

A beat.

His voice sounded as miserable as she felt as he consoled her. "I'm sorry about your mom."

The words brought fresh tears to her eyes and she didn't care if he was taken any more, she just wanted to feel the comfort he afforded her without thinking about the fact she couldn't really have him. Burying herself into his embrace, she thought about what had happened to her mother and fat, hot tears rolled down her cheeks and soaked into his shirt.

"I'm sorry," he said again, his hand still soothing her as best it could.

She realised that he was saying sorry more than she was and it was her fault that everything between them had been ruined in the first place. Pulling back, she hastily wiped her eyes and caught the glimmer of disappointment in his. For a second, he'd seemed upset over her decision to break free of his arms.

"I'm sorry, for everything," she said with all her heart, trying to show him that she really meant it. She was sorry. She was sorry for everything she did that wrecked whatever chance they'd had to be together. She was sorry that she'd left him behind to deal with his mother's death alone. She was sorry she'd never told him that she loved him. She was sorry she'd never come back.

She was sorry.

He cupped her cheek and smiled shakily into her eyes, and again she found herself wondering what he was thinking and just what was going on with him. Granted he used to fluctuate between being warm or cold

towards her when he was angry with her, but it had never been to this degree.

“Marc?”

He smiled. “Yeah?”

“I know we have a long way to go before you stop hating me for what I did—”

“I don’t—”

She silenced him with her finger, pressing it against his lips and savouring the way they felt under it.

“Could you take me somewhere? I don’t have a car...I have a bus...but, I think I need to be with you. I think you give me the strength to do what I need to do.”

He nodded and stood up, offering his hand to her.

She slipped hers into it shakily and stood on legs that trembled with nerves.

He held her hand tightly, tucked her hair behind her ear and looked down into her eyes.

“Let’s take you home.”

## **- Chapter Five -**

Alex's hands toyed with each other and she kept her eyes fixed straight ahead. She didn't see the road in front of her or the buildings as they passed her by. All she could see was their final destination. It was a clear picture in her mind and her heart ached to recall it. Things there hadn't always been bad. It was only during her last few years of high school that her father had turned violent towards her and her mother.

Sometimes she felt as though he had loved her, and it was purely the pressure of being fired from the job he'd given so much of himself to, and the subsequent alcoholism, that had driven him to lash out at his family.

And sometimes she hated him more than anyone on the planet and was glad he was shut away in the county prison, for life.

She hadn't had the strength to attend the trial. She'd given her statement to the lawyers and told them that she wanted the maximum sentence possible for what he did to her.

For her mother.

She began to clench and unclench her fists as they drew nearer the road she used to live on, and glanced over at Marc.

She'd been surprised to see he still owned the beaten up black Plymouth that they had first consummated their relationship in. When she'd quizzed him about it he'd

simply told her it had special memories and he wouldn't part with it for all the world. She'd smiled inside at that. She was still smiling somewhere.

But on the surface, she wore a mask of nerves, and she knew he could see her apprehension. He could probably sense it in her body language.

"First time back?" he said quietly, breaking the silence that was deafening to her.

She nodded slowly. It was her first time back. She hadn't the strength to even make it this far into town, let alone to the place that had given her the most hurt she'd ever experienced. What she'd been through with James had been a walk in the park compared with this memory.

"I couldn't...I wanted to wait until they'd put him away for good, so I knew he couldn't get to me, but then when the lawyers told me it was safe to go home I found I couldn't. This place...there's too many bad memories."

"So why now?"

"Truthfully?" She turned to look at him, letting her hands rest calmly in her lap as the sight of him so concerned made her nerves fade slightly. "Because you're here."

"Me?" He sounded incredulous and raised his brows. She could see that if her tone hadn't been so serious he would have laughed.

"Crazy as that sounds, you're still the only person who gives me the strength to do the things that matter most, the things I'm scared of doing alone." She turned her

face away from him so he couldn't see the tears of regret in her eyes and sighed out of the window.

The sign for her road passed them by and she braced herself both mentally and physically. She didn't know what to expect. It had been ten years since she'd seen her old house and her memories had begun to fade. Would seeing it again bring them back full force or would she be able to cope with them when Marc was with her?

The house slowly crept into view and she kept her eyes fixed on it as Marc stopped the car directly opposite it. It looked exactly the same. The paint on the porch was starting to peel and the windows were dark, but it was exactly the same. She tried to focus on the happy times she'd passed there, the moments when she'd first met Marc and the nights her father had been out of town on business, giving her and her mother a girly night in.

She sighed and moved her eyes from the familiar front door with its faux stained glass, to the tall trees that towered in the garden. A small smile curved the edge of her lips when she remembered the first kiss her and Marc had shared, hidden behind the widest of the trees so her parents didn't spot them. It had been frantic and passionate, and a lot messier than she'd expected. She could remember how he'd tasted of cigarettes and sweetness, and she wondered if he still tasted the same now. Her eyes moved up to the windows on the first floor and she smiled with the recollection of the times she'd snuck out of the house to be with the man who sat next to her now. Her mother had always known what she was doing, but she'd never said a word.

"I hear you never sold it." A quiet voice stole into her thoughts.

"I wouldn't part with it for all the world," she repeated his earlier words and heard him sigh. "I don't think I'll ever be strong enough to go back inside, but part of me is still hoping I'll be able to, someday. It would be nice to know if my room still looks like it used to, or if my bathroom still has the spot of blood on the rug from the time you got into that fight at the prom."

He chuckled. "Yeah. That was one hell of a night."

"I still can't believe you knocked that guy out. I mean, half the year avoided you from that night on."

"Good. No one says bad things about my girl."

She turned to look at him, curiosity evident in her eyes as she searched his, wanting to know if that's how he still felt about her.

"Not a day goes by that someone doesn't say something bad about me." She looked out the window again and stared at the dark house.

She felt a little crestfallen when he didn't say anything in response to her statement and let out a long sigh, hoping to expel all the hurt she was feeling along with it.

"I miss her." Her voice was distant and she instantly felt his eyes on her, but this time hers remained on the world outside the window. She could feel how close he was, could sense him just inches away from her, and her heart longed to feel his arms around her again, to hear him telling her all the reassuring words she wished to hear.



He didn't answer.

"Remember the Christmas my dad was away? When mom met you for the first time and we all sat up watching festive movies until dawn broke?" She didn't wait for him to answer, she wasn't sure she was even saying all this to him. She wanted to recall the good times in order to alleviate the bad, and she needed to say them out loud so she could air her feelings, making her feel better. "I think that's one of my happiest memories in that house. I think that's one of my happiest memories period. It was the best Christmas ever. I've never had another one like it. I loved that week with you and my mom. No worries, not a care in the world. There was only us."

"Good times." His voice drifted to her ears and she smiled at the house, almost able to see it as it had been, all covered in decorations with warm light emanating from the windows.

"I miss those times. The ones before my dad was fired. We were a happy family once. It's incredible how one thing can change someone so dramatically."

"And yet, you're exactly the same."

She turned to look at him again, her heart leaping into her throat when she thought about what he'd said. Was she exactly the same? Surely he would be the one to know if she was. He'd known her better than anyone—had spent the most time with her—and he'd been the only one she'd really opened up to. His memory of the girl he used to know could be easily compared to the woman she was now, just as she'd compared him as a boy to the man who was sitting next to her.

“Maybe a series of things makes you remain the same.” She smiled and he looked a little relieved to see her making light of something. It was easy to hide the pain. She’d had a lot of practice over the years, pretending that words didn’t hurt her when in reality they cut to the bone.

She frowned and thought about what she’d done with her life in the past ten years, the bad times that had befallen her and the good times she’d had. It was only recently that she’d begun to feel drained and hollow, as though she was just a shell of the person she used to be, but here was Marc telling her that she was the same. Had she always been hollow? No, around him she didn’t feel like that at all. She felt vibrant and full of energy. Even when talking about the bad times, she felt she could smile and he’d smile with her, showing her that it was okay to make light of the bad times if she needed to do that in order to deal with them. Years of weekly therapy sessions hadn’t given her as much closure as Marc had in this one evening alone. Although she knew her dream was lost, she could still look back on the times they had shared and draw happiness from them, knowing they had been the best days of her life because they had been together like they were meant to be.

She mentally paused and went over what she’d just thought. The revelation hit her like a freight train.

Dream.

When Marc had asked her earlier if she’d attained her pipe dreams she’d told him that she had but at a cost. What she realised now sent a cold, prickly chill of fear washing over her skin.

She hadn't achieved her dream at all.

Looking back on the past decade, she could see that she'd been blinded to her dream by her ambition. She'd accomplished her aspiration of becoming a star of the music world but she'd never attained her dream, because she'd never realised until today what her dream was.

And now it was too late.

Her fragile dream of being with Marc was shattered into a thousand pieces by the knowledge that he had a child with another girl, her ex-best friend of all girls.

A single tear slipped down her cheek and she closed her eyes when Marc's finger brushed against her skin and caught it.

"You okay?" His voice trembled.

She shook her head in the negative. She needed to do something else in order to get closure and now was as good a time as any. She couldn't possibly feel any worse than she already did.

"Take me to her." She turned and looked deep into his eyes, tears shining in hers. She gave him a pleading look.

He nodded. "Anything you want, sweetheart, but don't do this if you're not up to it. You've been through a lot today. I know you, Alex...don't push yourself."

"I want to do this," she said with firm resolution.

He started the engine. The sound of it brought nerves that twisted her stomach into knots.

This was the last thing she had to do.

Then she could move on with her life.

She hoped.

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Standing on the dew dampened grass, she took a long, deep steadying breath. She felt cold but it wasn't the low night temperature making her feel that way. She remained motionless for a few seconds, just staring down at the moonlit headstone, but those seconds seemed to stretch into hours. Time meant nothing to the person in front of her now. She'd passed beyond its effect and in Alex's memory she would always remain looking the same as she had the last time she'd seen her.

Kneeling slowly, she gently placed the dozen white roses at the base of the headstone and sighed again. This whole day had been so emotionally draining on her that she hadn't thought it could get any worse but, sitting here in front of her mother's grave for the first time, the emotional roller coaster she'd experienced throughout the day suddenly felt like nothing more than ripples in a pond.

She didn't bother to stop the tears as they silently fell down her cheeks, each one following the path of the previous in a steady stream that soon had them creating twin damp spots on her trousers.

She could feel Marc behind her, and pictured him standing with his black jacket drawn back and his hands jammed into his pockets. It was a sign of uneasiness that she'd always recognised in him.

It was because of the strength he gave her that she was able to do this, was finally able to sit here for the first time and face the hard truth that the beautiful woman she'd known was no longer on this earth. She'd grown so used to her not being around when she'd been living in Los Angeles that it had been easy to fool herself into thinking she was still alive. It was only now that she could see the headstone with her own two eyes that it really hit home.

Her family was gone.

Her father jailed for the brutal murder of her mother.

Her beautiful mother.

She stifled the sob that tried to push its way up from her heart as it ached, making her feel sick to her stomach. She'd lost the two things that mattered most to her in the world and she didn't know which was worse, never being able to see her mother again, or being able to see Marc but knowing he could never be hers.

This time the sob broke to the surface and she wrapped her arms around herself in a comforting hug, unable to ask the man beside her to do that for her any more. She tried to keep her eyes focused on the engraved letters of her mother's name. The date below it was some eight years ago now. If she focused on it, then maybe it would

sink in that all these years she'd been more alone than she'd ever realised.

"I miss her." She managed through the sobs, her body trembling with emotion and her voice hoarse.

"I miss her, too. She always held it against me that I didn't go to you. Last time she went to see you, the time she brought you the paintings, she gave me hell when she came back. She bumped into me down the store and lectured me on how evil I was to leave you in LA alone, without a friend in the world, and that if I still loved you in any way I would at least go to see you, just once." The words were almost whispered and she wondered if he was scared of disturbing the dead surrounding them. He'd often talked of waking the dead, and how she shouldn't walk across graves because it was disrespectful.

"Sounds like mom. She gave me hell, too." She sniffled and tried to force a smile but it wouldn't come.

"She loved you, more than anyone."

"More than anyone?" She dropped her gaze to the roses and waited on tenterhooks for his answer.

"Think she pips me to the post." He sighed.

Her heart leaped into her throat. She was fooling herself by holding out hope for them, but he hadn't used the past tense. He'd said it in a way that made her believe he still felt that way about her, even if it was locked deep inside and he couldn't act on it. She knew she couldn't act on it either, couldn't place herself between him and his family, but it made warmth spread through

her to know there was a chance he still felt the same way about her.

"She was so proud of me, Marc. She went on and on about how everyone back home was talking about me and how I was going to make it big. Then the next thing I know the police are calling me to tell me she's gone."

"She's still proud of you, Alex. She's still keeping a watchful eye on you."

"When granny died, mom told me that you carry people with you always. You make a space for them in your heart and that's where they'll always be if you need them, and you move on." She let the tears fall freely again and ran her fingers over the damp grass, letting it cool them and soothe her, as though being in contact with the earth somehow grounded her.

"Wise words," he said quietly.

She nodded. "Only I don't think I can do that."

"Give it time, sweetheart...give it time." His voice soothed her ears and she felt his hand rest on her shoulder, squeezing it gently, reassuringly.

"We have to go don't we?" She turned her head and looked up at him through her tears.

"I'm afraid so." He glanced at his watch. "By now they'll be having to cover for me and people are expecting me to finish the night with a song."

"Oh...I'm sorry." She had forgotten that he'd only been on a break when she'd started talking to him.

“Never be sorry. I’ve learnt that in life.” He held out his hand to her, offering to help her up.

She placed hers into it and stood quickly, causing her head to spin and making her legs wobble beneath her. She swallowed hard when strong hands tightly grasped her waist, steadying her. The world gradually came to a stand still again and she found herself looking straight into his eyes. They were fiery in the darkness. She could feel his fingers trembling against her and realised her hands were resting against his pectorals. Under her palms, she felt the rapid rise and fall of his chest. Hers raced to match it as his gaze dropped to her lips. The anticipation of a kiss rose up in her stomach, tightening it and flooding it with warmth.

Then she remembered the café and the bookstore.

Pushing away from him, her heart ached when his fingers slipped from her waist and her hands felt cold as they left his chest. She closed her eyes and turned her head away from him, trying to conceal the hurt she’d caused herself by surrendering the opportunity to remember him with a kiss.

“We should go,” he said in a bitter tone. He walked past her and started down the hill to his car without waiting to see if she’d follow.

She watched his back as he walked away from her and sighed.

Letting go was harder than she’d thought it would be.



## **- Chapter Six -**

The drive back to the club was passed in silence. Alex tried several times to find her voice, but repeatedly failed. She couldn't think of anything that would help them move past what had happened in the cemetery. Regret made her head ache and her heart heavy. He'd clearly wanted to kiss her and she'd pushed him away. He'd offered her everything she wanted from him, but now she couldn't bring herself to accept it.

She couldn't hurt Jenny.

She closed her eyes briefly and sighed. He pulled the car to a stop in the alley beside the club. Stepping out of it, she watched him walk inside and gave herself a few moments to collect her emotions before following.

This was it.

This was their final moment.

He'd round up both the club patrons evening and hers in one fell swoop and they'd all go to their separate homes, only she'd never be coming back again.

A lone tear slipped from her lashes and onto her cheek. Her finger rose instantly to discard it and she heaved another long sigh. Running her hand over the sleek black wing of his car as though it was a part of him, she silently said goodbye to it and prepared herself for doing the same to its owner.

Stepping back into the dim, blue light of the club, she made her way slowly toward the spot she'd watched him from earlier that night. She leaned against the metal column and wrapped her arms about her chest. Her eyes followed him, watching him settling into his chair by the grand piano. He offered an apology to the people sitting around the tables, giving them all a smile.

She was so focused on his face that she barely heard the keys of the piano being struck, creating a haunting melody. It was only when his lips began to move and his eyes came to rest on her that she realised he was singing.

She frowned when his focus remained on her, as though he was singing this song to her. Suddenly, she wanted him to hurry the slow melody along so she could see what he was trying to say.

Her arms dropped to her sides when he closed his eyes, his fingers playing out the soft piano of the song as his eyebrows knit.

He was singing about casting spells to make someone realise that they loved him.

She wanted to tell him that he didn't need to put any spell on her for her to realise that. She'd realised it the moment she'd seen him in the coffee shop, but it was too late to do anything about it. So why was he singing this to her? To make her feel bad?

His eyes opened and locked on hers again, and she could see he meant every word he sang.

She nodded, an accession that what he'd said was true, she did realise that she loved him. A brief smile flickered on his lips and he closed his eyes again.

Heaving a long sigh, she told herself that it was time to leave. If she put it off any longer, he would have finished his song and she didn't want to have to say goodbye to him. She just wanted to leave quietly. There weren't any words she could say that could fix things again but her heart didn't want to let go of the hope it was clinging to. She would never say goodbye to him. She took one long, last look at him before turning and heading towards the door.

She was almost at the mouth of the alley when someone caught her arm. She stopped, knowing without looking that it was him.

"Leaving so soon?" His voice was guarded, not betraying any emotion.

She turned to face him.

"I suppose I should," she said quietly, suddenly unsure of whether she really would have preferred to slip away unnoticed or whether it was better to have things happen this way after all. If she said goodbye to him, her heart would give up hope, but maybe that would finally give her closure on this town and her past. Maybe she'd finally be happy with her life and her career.

"Right now?" He seemed a little disturbed by the thought of her leaving so quickly but she put it down to her interpretation of his words.

She nodded and saw a flicker of hurt in his eyes. It only served to confuse her emotions further, stirring them inside of her and re-igniting the false hope in her heart that was refusing to die.

“So this is it?”

She nodded again, but he pulled a face of dissatisfaction.

“I don’t like this alley, it’s a bad place for goodbyes.” He caught hold of her hand and started walking with her. “At least let me walk you to your bus.”

“I’d like that.” She smiled at him and looked down at their hands. Everything around her drifted away. His fingers were threaded into hers and he was holding her hand tightly, as though he didn’t want to let her go.

She savoured the feeling of comfort it gave her as they walked, neither one talking and neither one looking at each other. She wouldn’t be able to take her eyes off their hands even if she tried. All hope of seeing his holding hers again had disappeared a long time ago, long before tonight. She cursed him for keeping her hopes alive. It was torture to her, to have him holding her hand when she knew that it couldn’t progress beyond that. The image of what he’d looked like in the cemetery flashed in front of her eyes. He’d really wanted to kiss her. She knew that without question. He’d had that same fiery look in his eyes the first time he’d kissed her.

She wished she hadn’t pushed him away. The guilt of her actions would have been hard to bear, but not as difficult as living with the knowledge that he’d been a split second away from kissing her, from giving her

everything she wanted to remember him by, and she'd foolishly stopped him.

Her eyes fixed on the tour bus as it came into view, still parked in the same spot she'd left it in that afternoon. She'd been dreading this moment since she decided to speak with him and now it was finally here. She held back the tears, not wanting to make her departure any more painful than it already was. He'd told her not to cry so many times tonight that it was time she finally listened to him. Besides, she couldn't bear to see the hurt that entered his eyes whenever she let her tears fall. When they reached the bus, she turned and looked at him.

He didn't let go of her hand. If anything, she swore he held it a little tighter.

"So, this is goodbye then?" His voice was subdued but laced with hope.

"I guess it is," she replied and looked down at their hands, relishing how unwilling he was to let her go but wishing he would all the same.

"This is cold...I mean, we're friends aren't we? Friends don't say goodbye in such a sullen manner."

She smiled when she realised what he was up to. She'd never forgotten the summer they'd spent lazing in his back garden as he read *Jane Eyre* to her. She couldn't remember the exact words, and got the feeling he didn't either. She wondered if his version would end with something other than the simple farewell that had happened in the book. Modern times surely called for a more modern goodbye.

"No, indeed they don't." She decided to play along and see what he would do. "We could shake hands."

"Pfft." He dismissed her offer with a wave of his free hand and then looked deadly serious. "It's too cold."

"A hug?" She offered and he shook his head. Her heart leaped into her mouth and beat out a sickeningly fast rhythm there. She attempted to swallow it down, but it wouldn't go. Time seemed to slow until it felt as though it was taking him forever to say the words she wanted to hear. She held her breath, resisting the temptation to bite her lower lip as the anticipation became too much for her.

A smile flickered on his lips.

Her heart skipped a beat.

"A kiss," he said in a serious tone and she blushed.

She couldn't refuse him when he'd outright asked for one. A friendly kiss, that's all it would be and then she'd be out of his life forever. It would be nothing more than a peck. It wouldn't ruin his life or hers.

Besides, they used to do a lot more than kiss.

She nodded her consent and then gasped when his arm slid around her waist, pulling him to her. She brought her hands up and pressed them against his chest in order to keep a little distance between them.

He frowned down at her hands and then raised his eyes, narrowing them on her mouth.

She wet her lips, her whole body trembling against his.

Her eyes gradually widened when he leaned towards her at a painstakingly slow pace.

It was just going to be a friendly peck. That's all. Nothing more.

She sighed internally when his lips brushed lightly against hers, and rolled her eyes closed when he deepened the kiss. Losing herself in the gentle way he was kissing her, she remembered all the times they'd spent together, whiling away the hours doing exactly this. Her lips seemed to forget what she'd told herself about it being nothing more than a peck and she didn't realise until it was too late that she'd ran her tongue along his bottom lip. She bit back a squeal when he responded by pressing his body into hers, his grip on her tightening.

Breathing out through her nose, she found her hands moving of their own volition, trailing up his chest. Her arms wrapped around his neck and she leaned into him. A feeling of intense warmth and comfort spread through her.

She was home.

Only she wasn't.

Breaking the kiss, she turned her face away from him and closed her eyes. She frowned.

"I shouldn't have done that." His voice echoed his hurt and she heard him back off a step.

She banged on the bus door and kept her eyes closed, listening to it whine as it slid open. She silently stepped up onto the bottom step and then looked back at Marc.

"No, I shouldn't have done that," she said resolutely and her heart ached to see the hurt in his eyes. "I shouldn't have done any of this...it was wrong of me. You were happy without me. I had no right to come back and expect things to be fine, to expect this all to have no lasting effect on either of us, because I wanted it to. I wanted you to miss me. I wanted that kiss, and I shouldn't have. I'm sorry, Marc. I should have moved on, like you did."

He arched a brow but didn't say anything.

"Will you answer me something, just one thing, and I'll be out of your life. Please?" She paused and looked straight into his eyes.

He nodded. "Anything."

"How long have you and Jenny been together?" Her voice trembled with nerves and she braced herself for his answer.

He frowned in confusion. "We're not together."

Her eyes widened. "You mean you had a kid with her and then you ditched her?"

"Kid? What kid? Oh...you mean Damien? He's a cute little guy but he's not my child, Alex."



She could see how badly he wanted to laugh at her misguided belief and all she could do was stand there in the doorway of the bus staring at him.

“He isn’t?” She’d spent the whole night believing that Marc was out of reach when he’d been right there in her grasp. All she’d had to do was take the plunge and mention her fear earlier and this whole night could have turned out differently.

“We have to get going, miss Williams, we’ll miss the practice,” the driver called to her.

She heard the bus engine start and panic rose up in her stomach.

“I don’t care if we miss practice. I just need a minute. That’s all. I’ll get off this damn bus if you don’t give me a minute here! Then there’ll be no practice anyway.” She looked back at the driver.

Looking down at Marc, she found he was still smiling at her and there was still an amused twinkle in his eyes.

“He really isn’t yours?” She felt so stupid for having to ask him again, but she needed to hear him say the words, needed him to confirm to her that the dream she’d thought was out of reach and lost to her forever, had actually been within her grasp all night.

“No, he isn’t. He’s Jenny and Brendan’s. How’d you know about him anyway?” He raised a brow, curiosity evident in his steely eyes.

“I saw you, in the coffee house, and the bookstore.”

"Makes two of us then." He grinned.

Her face fell.

"You...you?" She couldn't believe what he was saying. He'd known all along that she was in town and that she'd seen him with the little boy. He'd probably realised that she was watching him and that she'd presumed the child was his, and he'd said nothing to make her believe differently. She remembered how sweet he was towards the child. Was that for her benefit? Had he been trying to make her jealous? Or was he always like that with the boy? He'd always been good with children. They'd talked about having a family sometimes, and it always ended up as the same dream—a house, a white picket fence, and a dozen children.

Her eyes searched his, a part of her wanting to see if that dream still lingered inside of him. He gave her a sheepish smile and she realised he was probably thinking she was trying to figure out why he'd not told her that the child wasn't his.

His smile disappeared, his expression becoming earnest. "I'm sorry, Alex. I shouldn't have...just, I thought it was you and then Harry called me to tell me you were in town...but I shouldn't have done that. It was low. Forgive me?"

"Maybe." It was all she could say until she realised that he still looked worried. She tried to think of something that would make him see that she had forgiven him. "It is the season of goodwill after all. Forgive me?"

He nodded and smiled. "In the spirit of the season."

He'd played her, and she couldn't deny that she'd deserved it for what she'd done to him. There was only one thing that she wanted to ask him now. Her stomach flipped.

"You're not with someone?" She held on tightly to the metal grips by the door as the bus moved slightly.

He shook his head. "Nope."

"Oh God...why didn't you tell me earlier?" She furrowed her brows and then glanced frantically over her shoulder at the driver before looking back at him. "I don't want to leave."

"Then don't," he said with a smile.

She didn't know how he could be so calm about this. They were on the verge of being parted again, and she couldn't bear it.

"But I have a concert, in LA," she said and glared at the bus driver, silently warning him not to even consider moving the bus.

"How big is the venue?" He stepped closer to her.

A smile crept onto her lips when she realised what he was saying.

"You always were the clever one." She grinned and fell forwards, wrapping her arms around his neck. He caught hold of her, his hands tightly gripping her waist and then sliding around her back. She looked back over her shoulder at Carrie and Lucie. "Change of plan, girls."

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Alex smiled down from the stage at the crowd gathered below. She took a quick swig of water from her bottle and stepped back up to the microphone. Catching sight of Marc near the bar, her smile became a grin. He was leaning back against it, his elbows propping him up while he watched her intently. He'd watched her throughout the entire set. She swore his eyes had never left her.

"This is the last one, I'm afraid." She listened to the crowd as they half jeered and half booed, clearly unwilling to let her go so easily. "I just want to say how very special it was to be allowed to bring the last date of my tour to this new venue and to have it on Christmas Eve. It's a place very dear to me and one that I've always wanted to perform in, and to be able to be here at this wonderful, magical time of year has been everything I've dreamed of. Sharing this moment with you has been special, thank you all for coming."

She smiled wide and giggled when they all cheered. Her eyes immediately sought out Marc again. She gave him a little wave and he grinned at her and nodded.

Listening to the first quiet piano chords of the song as they washed over her, she took a step towards the microphone. She began to sing, her eyes following Marc when he left the bar and wove through the crowd towards her.

He came to a halt beside the stairs at the side of the stage. His expression was soft under the multicoloured lights, his eyes reflecting tenderness, and her heart begged her to go to him. She forced her feet to remain

still and tried to keep her focus on the song, but she couldn't stop looking at him.

In the past, this song had always left her feeling sad and alone. She'd written it shortly after she'd started feeling disillusioned with her life and it was all about how far she'd fallen. For some reason, when she sang it now it filled her with hope for a better life. She felt as though she was confessing to the entire room just how bad things had become for her and that deep inside she'd never given up hope of them getting better. Just when she'd thought she'd hit rock bottom, her life had taken a new turn, bringing her back to the man she loved and giving her a chance at achieving her dreams.

Marc smiled at her, a little knowing smile that let her know that although she'd fallen he'd been the one to catch her.

She pulled the microphone from the stand and walked slowly across the stage to where he stood below it.

"...In my darkest hour. You've got to be the one to catch a falling star." She sung the last of the lyrics and then let the microphone drop to the stage as she fell forwards and prayed he'd catch her. As strong arms held her safely and scooped her up, she smiled and opened her eyes, only to find his looking straight into them.

"I'd never let you fall. Never." He smiled wide and dipped his head to kiss her. "I love you, sweetheart."

She smiled, letting her nose touch his as their mouths neared each other's.

Closing her eyes, she finally found a voice for her feelings.

“I love you, too.”

She ignored the crowds that were watching her as the final notes of the song were played by her friends on stage. Wrapping her arms about his neck, she lost herself in his kiss and his embrace, safe in the knowledge that she had finally achieved her dream and she would do anything to keep hold of it now that she had it.

Now that she was finally happy.

Now that she was home.

***The End***

### **About the Author:**

Felicity Heaton is a great believer in love at first sight and the romantic ideal. Having grown up reading extensively, she developed a deep love of classical literature, ranking *Jane Eyre*, *North & South*, and *Persuasion* amongst her all time favourite reads. The most romantic moment of her life was when her husband got down on bended knee on the steps of *Sacré Coeur*, Paris, at night in front of several hundred spectators and proposed. She was too drunk on love, and subsequently champagne, to care about the audience. All she could see was the man that she loved. A writer of emotion and life, she always strives to touch a chord of familiarity in her readers and give them characters they can love and a read to remember.

To see her other novels, visit:

**<http://www.felicityheaton.co.uk>**

### **Other Stories by Felicity Heaton:**

#### **Queen of Hearts**

A storm swept night brings a stranger, Colt Tucker, into town. Discovering an advert placed by Jessie Hayden's father, he walks the four miles across pitch-black countryside to the Blue Plains Ranch and offers his services.

Colt reminds Jessie painfully of her brother and he suffers the consequences as they begin to work together on the ranch. He finds himself drawn to her as she continually changes mood, going from gentle to tempestuous in the blink of an eye, and works to unravel the mystery of her past, bringing them closer together.

One fateful night changes everything again, and Jessie finds herself losing the rest of her family and the man she's come to love.

Months later, they meet up by chance and the sparks fly. Will

Jessie listen to what Colt has to say, or is it too late for her to trust in him again?

## **Killing Game**

Young and innocent, Lily Walker finds herself suddenly confronted by the harsh reality of life when the echo of a gunshot reminds her just how dangerous the city is at night. In the space of a moment, in the blink of an eye, she finds herself face to face with Cain.

Cain is a hit man who lost his innocence long ago. Hardened by circumstance and life, he finds himself unexpectedly drawn to Lily. Can a man change his destiny? Will Cain be able to save her, or will his feelings for her draw her into his world...and into danger?

## **The Merciless**

When she is kidnapped by pirates and brought onboard *The Merciless*, Elizabeth Miller becomes unexpectedly embroiled in a tumultuous journey of revenge and love with the captain, Marlin.

Will Elizabeth have to give up what she has found and return to society? Or will she fight to remain with the roguish pirate captain who has captured her heart and earned her love?

## **The Merciless: Vengeance**

The battle rages on for Marlin, captain of *The Merciless*, as the past he thought was laid to rest comes back to haunt him in this exciting sequel by Felicity Heaton.

Marlin, intent on marrying his ex-captive and ladylove, Elizabeth, sets sail for Freeport. But danger and intrigue are abound when Marlin learns that Charles, a naval captain in love with Elizabeth and the enemy Marlin thought was dead, is in fact alive. His reputation ruined and maddened by his thirst for vengeance, Charles has nothing to lose and is out for blood.

**Read more about these and my other stories at my website:**  
<http://www.felicityheaton.co.uk>