

SOLO

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By Sherzahd

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Note from the Author This book was written as a Valentine's Day gift to all of my readers as proof that romance is still alive in our hearts. Thank you for your support. Please note that the songs in here are pretty darn awful - mostly because they are intended to be that way and likely also because it's my first attempt at writing romance. *** The bar was packed to capacity, revellers jostling for space as the band started to set up for the Valentine's Day show. Alicia pushed through the throng, trying to make her way to the bar. They had been there for over an hour and had not seen a waiter the entire time, so she had been elected – undemocratically as it may have been – to get some drinks for herself and her friends. Truth be told, she had been relieved to escape the chatter about the hot new guy at work and their favourite soapies; it had started to become tiresome. Finally, at the bar, she stood and waited to be noticed – story of her life – by a barman, tapping one foot impatiently as everyone around her was served. “Excuse me!” She waved at the barman closest to her. “What can I get for you tonight, sweetheart?” Alicia had prepared a snippy remark for when she finally got service, but it tapered off mid-thought as she swooned at his Irish lilt and flirty smile. “Uhm... I... hi...” She felt herself grinning like a love-struck teen. “Yes, hi... I’m sorry for the wait, sweetheart.” His eyes were dark; it was hard to discern their exact colour, but there was something about them that both excited her and sent nervous shivers down her spine. “Oh it’s no problem; I can see the place is busy tonight and it really wasn’t that long.” Why could she not stop grinning like an idiot? “Yes, that was rather a long wait.” He glanced at his watch. “Hmm... it was exactly... Ah bugger; I never was any good at math. Let’s just say that you’ve been standing here a while. I would have to be blind to not have noticed you, sweetheart.” He winked. Alicia blushed. “I... That is very kind of you to say. I’m here with friends and we’ve been here over an hour now and...” “And no waiter.” That smile again. “I know, it sucks. It’s Valentine’s and the owner is a bit of a nutcase. He’s given everyone who has a special someone in their life the night off.” He smiled again, but this time it was for effect. “I’ll take four beers.” She needed to get the drinks and go; her friends were not known for their patience and, more than likely, the barman flirted with all the girls – how else would he earn his big tips? “Beers? You’re not a beer kinda girl, sweetheart.” He continued to serve people all around Alicia as he spoke. “I know, it’s just hard to carry four glasses of wine through that...” She gestured to the crowded area separating the bar and the table her friends were sitting at. “Hang on. I have just the thing for you.” He knelt to rummage under the counter and came back up holding a bottle. “Oh I don’t know. Veuve Clicquot? Not sure there is anything to celebrate tonight.” She was no wine expert, but she could tell that the bottle of French champagne he held would exceed her measly budget for the night. “I was saving this

for a special occasion. So here, it's on the house." He pushed the bottle and four glasses toward her. "You were saving it for your special occasion, so I'm afraid I ca—" "It's the night I met you. Save me a glass." He winked at her again and moved toward the other end of the bar before she could protest again. She elbowed, bumped, banged and apologised her way back to their table. *** Aidan watched the young woman make her way across the room, clutching the bottle of champagne under her arm while gripping the four glasses by their stems with both hands. He could hear her hasty apologies as she collided with practically everyone in her path, which included stepping on a few toes. Not waitress material, that is for sure. He smiled and, for the first time in four years, his smile reached his heart. *** "Where the hell have you been? To Franschoek to pick grapes and stomp on them?" Veronica asked, her tone matching her expression. "I uhm... n-no..." Alicia stammered. She was dying to tell her friends about the hot barman, but she was feeling too good about herself to risk anyone stomping on her moment. "Champagne? Nice!" Trinity exclaimed. "And not the cheap stuff you always buy for us, Ronnie." "I would buy better champagne if I had a better crowd to entertain," Veronica stated calmly. "How did you afford that anyway, Alicia?" "I uhm... I didn't. It was a gift." "Bollocks! A gift from the loveless fairy? Or maybe the pity bunny?" Veronica sneered. "Do any of you uncouth savages have any idea what this bottle costs? Of course you don't; what was I thinking? It's effin' Le Grande Dame." "Oh leave the child alone, you big bully." Jacques took the bottle from Trinity and popped it expertly, not spilling a drop. "Well, it pops just like regular champagne. Thank you, Ali. Tonight, we celebrate." "What are we celebrating?" Trinity's excitement was infectious; not much ever dampened her spirits. Her eyes sparkled as she watched Jacques fill their glasses. "Let's drink to all of the losers who are missing out on spending a wonderful night with us." "Or maybe just drink to all of you being losers." Veronica raised her glass and took a sip. "Last time I checked, you were right here with us, sister. Or would you like me to ask a waiter to pull up a chair for your imaginary date?" Jacques had always been the only one brave enough to stand up to Veronica. He paused and raised a quizzical brow at her before lifting his glass. "Let's drink to good times with good friends." "I'll drink to that any day of the week and twice on Sundays." Trinity clinked her glass to his and the rest of them followed suit. "Mmm... this is the good shit!" Jacques eyed Alicia suspiciously over the rim of his glass. She pretended not to notice. *** Alicia. He liked the sound of her name inside his head. It belonged there. Aidan found that he liked her friends too, even the acidic blonde one. Sometimes he felt pangs of guilt for being able to listen in on private conversations, so he turned his attention back to the rowdy crowd at the bar instead. *** The band started a warm-up song, not really a song, more a case of them testing their instruments and sound equipment. Everyone in the bar gradually started to settle down, as if a magic wand had swept across the room. "I hear they do this every year," Trinity said. "I can't believe I've never even heard of this place before." Alicia sighed, enjoying the guitar intro to the band's first song, every band member taking a turn at an instrumental solo. "Yes, the best anti-Valentine spot in the city." Jacques swept his hand theatrically. "And, by the turnout, I would say that I am seriously starting to be concerned about this city... I mean, it looks like losers are out in full force tonight." He eyed Veronica over the rim of his glass. "Exactly! Can't you just smell the desperation in the air? A bar full of lo..." Jacques' eyes narrowed and his jaw tightened – never a good sign.

Veronica feigned an expression of shock, then contrition. “Oh you weren’t being serious, were you? I meant singles. A bar full of effin’ singles .” “They say the owner does this every year because he is a sworn bachelor. And not in the Cliff Richard song kind of way. If you know what I mean. No offence, Jacques.” Trinity leant across the table, her voice raised so she could be heard above the escalating metallic sounds of the electric guitar. “Apparently his fiancée left him at the altar.” Her eyes moved from side to side as she spoke, reminding Alicia of the way Mr. Milton used to tell what he considered to be scary stories around the campfire at night when she was still a young girl. “For another man. The best man.” “Ouch!” Jacques tutted and shook his head slowly. “There aint no Band Aid big enough to cover that bruise.” “Well that explains why the man surrounds himself with I...” Veronica’s smile challenged Jacques to say something. “...Like-minded people on days like these .” Alicia could not have cared less about the bickering between Jacques and Veronica; they were all used to it. She was enjoying the music and the gentle tingling every time she thought about the charming barman. She strained her neck a few times to catch a glimpse of him, but the bar area was too crowded. She was thankful when the band launched full swing into its first number, the sultry tones of the lead singer – who had introduced herself as Lilah during the introductions – drowning out the babbling at their table. Within minutes, the band had the entire room under its spell with poignant lyrics that struck a chord deep inside Alicia. Words slice like a double-edged knife; my heart cannot endure So watch me bleed, tainted blood pouring from my soul I tried to save you, but it was all in vain You cut me down, to ease your own pain Now here I stand... wounded, broken and alone... Here I stand... yearning, bleeding; I’ve come undone... Broken mirror on the wall, watch me tumble as I fall Refracted light blinding me to the truth A shattered reflection helps me see The strength that’s left inside of me Now here I stand... wounded, broken and alone... Here I stand... falling, flailing; I’ve come undone... You’ll only die a dream... I’ve found my salvation... This is my Heaven... Watch me stitch my own wounds... Alicia was not used to drinking champagne, so, two glasses later, the room began to tilt just a little off centre and a strange buzzing filled her head. When the band took a short break after the fourth song, she took the opportunity to visit the bathroom, partly because her bladder felt like it would burst, but mostly so she could wash her face. The cold water helped; she felt instantly refreshed after splashing herself, even though her cheeks retained their rosy glow. The tiny bathroom was crowded, so she did not linger. He was leaning casually against the wall outside the bathroom as she exited. She was not sure if it was the bubbly or if she just needed to get out more often and meet people, but it occurred to her that his smile could light up a small city. “Thought I’d find you here, sweetheart.” He nodded toward the ladies’ room. “Oh!” Alicia felt the slow blush spread from her neck up to her dark hairline. Why was she blushing? Was that even a blush-worthy comment? Was blush-worthy even a word? “Yes, I... Are you stalking me?” “Guilty as charged.” He reached for her hand; she tried to pull back as if his touch scalded – the tingles from his touch and the effervescent liquid in her system made her feel giddy – but his grip was firm, thumb stroking her palm softly. “I have to confess... I knew the champagne would bring you here. It was the only hope of me seeing you again tonight. Well, aside from coming over to your table and doing what I’ve been dying to do all night.” Alicia opened her mouth, but no sound formed; her mouth felt dry, her palms moist. OhmyGod! He is

holding my sweaty hand; how disgusting. She eventually found her voice, but it seemed to come back alone, no coherent thoughts attached. “Wha...? I don’t know what you m...” He lifted her hand and touched his lips to the inside of her wrist, the contact sending sweet sensations rushing through her. She could have sworn that his eyes darkened the moment his lips touched her pulse, but it could have been a play of light or the tiny fact that she was wholly distracted by the way his lips felt on her skin. Does this qualify as a kiss? Holy shit! If his lips feel this good on my wrist, imagine... Shut up, Ali. Oh God! His head lifted and he released her hand, those dark eyes burning right through her as he leant back against the wall casually, observing her as if to gauge her reaction. Alicia did not want to have a reaction, but her traitorous knees buckled as they fought to regain their strength. He reached out with lightning-swift reflexes, pulling her firmly against his chest. “Steady there, sweetheart. You okay?” His words were touching, but his eyes twinkled mischievously. He had done this before, she could tell. Her heart was racing and she felt a hot flush spread through her at the thought of him feeling it through the flimsy fabric of her blouse. “I... Yes. I’m fine. You can let go now.” His lips lifted into a half smile that could only be described as cocky, his eyes creased with mirth. Was he laughing at her? He released her and she swayed unsteadily, but he did not reach out to steady her again. “Uhm... thanks.” Thanks? What the hell was she thanking him for? Shut up and walk away, Ali. Shut up and walk away right now! And she did. She gathered what little dignity she could still find and made her way back towards her friends on wobbly legs, with a swarm of butterflies fluttering around inside her tummy. “By the way... I’m Aidan,” he called after her, his voice dripping with quiet amusement. She did not turn back to look at him. *** Aidan fought the rising urge to go after her and do what he had really wanted to do – kiss her luscious lips. You’re a fucking vampire, Aidan. You could have any woman in here, if that was what you wanted. Life had been a lot more fun when he still had the gumption to act the part. And that right there was the problem. He did not want any woman who was with him because she was compelled to be. He wanted a woman who could surrender herself to him unconditionally, one who would remain with him unbridled. The delicate smell of apple blossoms had invaded his senses since the moment she had sidled up to the bar earlier that evening; it was the scent of her hair. She was not wearing perfume, yet he would be able to sniff out the fragrance clinging to her soft skin even if he was blindfolded – that unmistakably feminine smell that every woman had that could never be replicated. Even the rhythm of her riotous heartbeat played itself over and over in his mind, the way a song sometimes got stuck in his head, but this was one song he never wanted to be free of. He returned to the bar; the crowds were becoming restless, everyone wanting to order drinks before the band came back from its break. “What’s a girl gotta do to get served around here?” It was Lilah, the lead singer of Quixotic Tangent, the house band. “Depends on how far you’re willing to go to quench your thirst.” He filled a tankard of beer and slid it across the bar without looking up at her. “Depends on what’s on offer... not beer on tap, I hope.” She leant over the bar, her face so close to his he could feel her breath on his lips. “Well, sweetheart, you’re in luck. Tonight, and for one night only, I offer you the thing you’ve always coveted. Me.” He flashed his most charming smile. “That explains why I could hear your heartbeat from clear across the room.” She laughed. Aidan’s eyes drifted towards the corner table across the room, a wistful smile his only reply.

“Special night tonight, then; you think it’ll end with us popping that special bottle?” She grinned sheepishly. Everyone knew that Aidan had a bottle of champagne tucked away for the day he found the woman who could touch his heart. “I mean, it’s not every night you offer me you.” “True. However, I was merely offering you my talents, sweetheart. I will join you in a song or two... I did, after all, promise the patrons an entertaining evening; nothing more entertaining than me attempting to croak out a tune.” He winked at her, his heart threatening to beat its way out of his chest. “I can hardly wait.” He could tell from the look she gave him that she sensed his anxiety; he could also tell that she had misinterpreted it, but he did not set her straight. The band started the intro to the second set; she took a long drink of her beer, then winked and left to join them. He was fond of Lilah; everything about her oozed confidence and raw sexuality, not to mention that she was one of only a few of his kind left in the city. There was a time when he would have jumped at the chance to sleep with her; in fact, there was a time when he did, but that had been a long time ago, back when he had been a different man. He had changed a lot over the years; some would call it maturing, but he preferred to think of it as an awakening. *** “I thought you’d left.” “I wasn’t gone that long, Ronnie.” Jacques leant in close to her and whispered, “I saw that.” “Saw what?” Alicia blurted, louder than she had meant to. She hated being tipsy. She had never been able to hold her liquor well, which was why she avoided drinking whenever she could. “Saw what?” she whispered back, but it was too late; everyone at the table was staring at her. “Yes, pray tell; saw what, Jack-arse?” Veronica asked, using her pet name for Jacques. “Err... nothing,” Jacques said. “And mind your own damn business, you damn nosy troll.” Veronica laughed. Her laugh was as beautiful as she was; it was a shame she did not do it often enough. There was a tap on her shoulder. She turned to find one of the other barmen standing behind her, balancing a tray laden with four glasses, a bottle of Dom Perignon, a bowl of nuts and a single red rose. “Sorry to disturb; I was asked to bring this over.” “Asked by whom?” Veronica asked, flashing the young man her sweetest smile. “I’m sorry, ma’am, the gentleman wishes to remain anonymous. For now.” He set the tray down on the table. Veronica smiled as she reached for the rose, but the barman was quick to the draw, clutching the stem delicately between his calloused fingers, lifting it and offering it to Alicia. “For you, miss.” Alicia blushed. Trinity giggled, her eyes scanning the room for the mystery man. Jacques smiled. Veronica snorted with disdain. “You’re not serious.” Veronica’s eyes widened as Alicia accepted the rose with a shaky hand. “Oh you’ve got to be effin’ kidding me. Who would send her a rose?” Her eyes darted from side to side as she searched. “It’s that pudgy guy at the bar who keeps staring at us, isn’t it?” She pointed at the man in question; he smiled and waved. “I knew it. That explains it.” “Can you please shut the fuck up and allow her to enjoy her moment?” Jacques looked ready to explode as he spoke through a clenched jaw. “And it’s fucken’... F... U... C... K... en. Not effin’... Grow the fuck up.” Alicia touched his arm. “It’s okay, Jacquie.” “No, it’s not okay, Ali.” He took a deep breath and his tone softened as he lifted her hand to smell the rose. “Enjoy the moment, poppet. No one deserves it more than you do. And just so you know, this is the wine talking; in the morning, I will hate you for snagging the hottest guy in here.” He winked at her and they laughed together. “Hottest guy?” Veronica wore a puzzled expression as she continued to ogle the gentleman at the bar. “You’re right. You’re effin’ drunk.” “I’m

not interested in any guy. Okay. Besides, I'm here with my friends and we're here to have fun. That's what tonight was supposed to be all about, celebrating being single and blissfully content. No guys. It's all about going solo, right?" Alicia put the rose down, picked up the bottle of wine and started to fill their glasses. "So let the fun begin." "Sweet girl, you're only on an anti-Valentine's date until somebody wants you. And girl, somebody waaaaants you. Uh huh... you're waaanted!" "I don't wa..." Alicia started to protest. "He reminds me of the penguin guy in that bat movie." Veronica was still eyeing the man at the bar. "Tiny little creepy eyes. He is your type, totally." "Ignore her. Now drink up and go get your man." Jacques seemed more excited about the prospect than Alicia. "Yes, go get him, Ali. Ohhh what an exciting night this is turning out to be," Trinity piped, then shook her head in confusion. "Who are you going to get again?" "I don't want another drink." Alicia eyed the glass of wine with suspicion. "And I am not going out there to get any man." "Girl, if you play your cards right, tonight will be the best F... U..." "Ohhh Jacques! Oh you're so bad." Trinity giggled. "Whaaat? I was going to spell fun." He winked at Alicia, the wicked gleam in his eyes belying his feigned innocence. The song had ended and the husky voice of the sexy songstress filled the room. "And since tonight is a special night, we have a special guest star joining us. We've not played together in oh... forever, but some sparks just never die." Her expression left little to the imagination. Wolf-whistles came from a few guys in the audience. "Okay, I'm going to shut my mouth now... or at least this side of my mouth after I welcome a good friend onto stage. Ladies and gentleman, please give it up for the ultra-sexy Aidan O'Shea..." The crowd broke out into raucous applause; clearly, most of the regulars knew him. Alicia had no idea why, but a sharp pang of jealousy stabbed at her heart as he walked onto stage, a guitar slung over his shoulder, and hugged the lead singer, her hands resting intimately on his arse. The band started up immediately, Lilah rocking slowly to the beat, her eyes never leaving Aidan, while he strummed away at his electric guitar, his focus on his very talented fingers. Oh how good those fingers would feel strumming my... Stop! Damn Jacques for putting those wicked thoughts into her head. The promise in his eyes was my anchor His lips against mine fed my soul Our desire like firelight against a dark sky I was holding my breath Our bodies moving as one And when I opened up my eyes He was gone He was gone I was captured by her unflawed beauty Skin like silken heaven to my touch Hunger raging as we feasted on each other I was holding my breath When the lights came back on Found I was feasting on lies Blinded by love Blinded by love I was the air that you breathe How do you breathe now... How do you breathe now... How do you breathe now... There was a brief dramatic drum intercession in which Aidan rocked to the music, his eyes closed, and fingers strumming with expert ease. Alicia tried desperately to make sense of the rising jealousy she was feeling at the sight of Aidan singing to the stunner up on stage. You have no right to feel anything, fool! She could no longer watch. Does he hum to drown out the sound of my broken heart? Are memories of me fading slowly into nothingness? I cannot erase what my soul will not forget His lips so soft on mine How was I to know He was kissing me goodbye The end felt like death The end felt like death I was a lone traveller with a suitcase full of dreams Perfectly black night found her waiting at a crossroad Searching for my nirvana, I found a demon instead Trapping me in a shallow pit In a war nobody could win My air was running out She was salt in my wound She was salt in my

wound They looked good together, voices complimenting each other, bodies gyrating against each other intimately. Alicia did not miss the subtlety with which Lilah rubbed up against Aidan every chance she got, or the sly smiles they exchanged as they berated each other lyrically. I was the air that you breathe How do you breathe now... How do you breathe now... How do you breathe now... Moving into separate tomorrows Our journey was at an end His kisses laced with promises of goodbye We were no longer wasting time Only ourselves... Only ourselves... *** Aidan's eyes drifted towards the table Alicia had been sitting at, but her seat was empty. Where could she have gone? Had she left? Fuck! How could he have been so stupid? Lilah was looking at him expectantly when he eventually snapped out of his buzz... Shit! He had missed his cue and the lead guitarist had tossed in an impromptu guitar solo; luckily, the crowd had not noticed. He shrugged and mouthed 'sorry' to a puzzled Lilah. They launched into the final rendition of the chorus and the song ended on a high note. The crowd roared their appreciation. Lilah grabbed his hand and lifted it seconds before they bowed together. That was when he noticed it... the smell of apple blossoms was back. *** Alicia kept her eyes on the ground as she made her way back into the bar. The song had ended, but he was still up there; she could hear it in the way the audience was chanting for an encore. She should have followed her gut and hailed a taxi while she was outside to clear her head. Why could she not vanquish the thoughts that were running through her head? Thoughts of her in his arms, of his lips paying homage to every inch of her body, of their bodies intertwined in the throes of passion. Throes of passion, Ali? Seriously? What did she know about the throes of passion? She had never lost herself to her desires before, not to any man. The only sex she had ever had was with her high school sweetheart, Jensen. He had been a jock and she had been chairperson of the chess club; they were a match made in comedic heaven. He had a reputation for being a douche, but that had never bothered Alicia, since he was always the perfect gentleman with her; that was, until the night she surrendered her innocence to him. He had taken what he needed from her with reckless abandon, dropped her off at home and then proceeded to treat her as if they had never met before. She had spent the entire final term of her senior year trying to ignore the sniggering every time she passed any of his friends. The entire experience had soured her to relationships, the mere thought of sex making her shudder every time she remembered the burning pain of that night, both physically and emotionally. Until now. "Horse walks into a bar and sits down. The barman looks at him and guess what he asks?" Jacques asked. "I don't know. What does he ask?" Alicia smiled, but her heart felt inexplicably heavy. "Why the long face?" His eyes softened, his concern for her evident. "He's a guy, Ali... We're all douche-bags. Trust me." He squeezed her hand gently. Another song started; they were singing about fairytales and frogs and damsels that did not need saving. Their voices were a perfect blend of sultry allure; she was sure they could be singing about folding laundry or taking out the trash and it would still sound sexy. The song ended with a flourish, Aidan on his knees with Lilah leaning in close enough for their lips to touch briefly. Alicia looked away, pretending to be occupied with the bowl of nuts on their table. *** Lilah slapped Aidan's arse as he took a bow after the song had ended, which made the audience cheer loudly. "Isn't he just precious?" She laughed and hugged him. Aidan smiled, his eyes darting toward one special table in the room. He could sense Alicia's unease,

the way she shifted in her seat, the tension in her body, the way she fidgeted with the bowl of nuts and the way she avoided looking up at the stage. The woman had him under her spell like no other had before. He covered the microphone with his hand and leant in close to Lilah. "I need a favour. I need to borrow the stage for a few minutes." "Oh." She looked surprised, but her usual nonchalant attitude returned almost immediately. "Do you have a Valentine, Aidan O'Shea?" "Maybe." He winked. "Okay. We'll take a break. Drinks on the house?" she asked. He laughed. *** "I would like to beg your indulgence..." Aidan's voice stroked Alicia like an ethereal hand stroking a troubled soul. "There is someone special here tonight and I would like to perform a song I wrote a long time ago..." He looked out across the room. Alicia felt as if he was staring directly at her, but it must have been her imagination. She was sure that he was about to serenade the beautiful singer who had just taken a seat at the bar. The room had fallen silent. He lifted his guitar and strummed, his eyes closed as he wove the most wistfully beautiful tapestry of sound she had ever heard. What a lucky girl Lilah was to be the one who inspired such soul-searing music. The skies up above were tainted with lies, The gloom smothering me, beating me down. Want to get back up, Lift my face from its shroud, But my heart's wrapped in stone, And it's weighing me down. Ohh it's weighing me down. Stone heart weighing me down, stone heart... Searching for something I lost along the way, Searching for something that never was mine, Searching for something that's nowhere to be found, Nowhere to be found... He jumped off the stage, the audience clearing a path as he made his way toward the centre of the room. He played his guitar expertly, his words chipping away at her heart, his voice dripping with the rawness of his pain. Every night is another night in a strange bed, Because I'm never alone, doesn't mean I'm not lonely. Another warm body, Another cold soul, Thoughts trapped inside, As I dream with a broken heart, Trying to melt a heart frozen in stone, A heart frozen in stone, stone heart... Searching for something I lost along the way, Searching for something that never was mine, Searching for something that's nowhere to be found, Until she found me... He looked up as he sang the last line, and Alicia felt the soft sounds filling the room with a magical air of romance, the huskiness of his voice stirring something long forgotten inside her. "That's what I wrote a long long time ago, but tonight... tonight the sky is sparkling with diamonds. Tonight a different song has taken hold of my heart, no more rhymes without reason, this part of the song is still writing itself." His voice trembled slightly, his eyes darkened by an emotion she could not define. Night I first saw her; I was blessed by the heavens above. The look in her eyes reminding me how to love, Memories we're still to make invading my head, Awakening something inside of me long since dead, The final note to an unfinished song, Final touch to an unfinished song... Apple blossoms in her hair A beauty beyond compare Eyes filled with angelic light Tonight a magical night The final note to an unfinished song, Final touch to an unfinished song... "That first part was really good, but this bit is the worst song I've ever heard," Jacques said, his expression one of amusement. "Does anyone even write rhyming songs anymore?" Veronica laughed. "Sounds like a twelve-year-old's Valentine's Day card to his first love." "Well, I would say that she's a very special girl. No guy would make this big a fool of himself for just any girl." Jacques looked at Alicia. He was passing the bar area where Lilah sat. Alicia glanced in that direction and noticed the slight frown on the beautiful star's face. He was coming toward their

table. Oh my God! He was looking directly at her. He was singing directly to her. Mesmerised by the way that she smiles Heart beating like I've been running for miles You're a precious gift I'm no longer adrift The final note to an unfinished song, Final touch to an unfinished song... Sounds of laughter and giggling ran through the crowd as he paused while trying to rhyme the last words. Somewhere in the room, someone was booing, another moaning about it being an anti-anti-Valentine's song. Searching for something I lost along the way, Searching for something that never was mine, Searching for something that's nowhere to be found, But now I've found you... He was, by then, standing in front of their table, gently strumming the guitar, his head slowly lifting to meet her gaze. Alicia felt woozy, her fingers gripping Jacques' hand fiercely as his words spoke directly to her soul. There was no mistake this time; he was singing for her. He was singing to her. Her face was suffused with heat; the room seemed to have grown unbearably hot. She had a vague awareness of Jacques trying to pry his trapped hand from hers as Aidan put the guitar down and took her free hand. She was rising from her seat, but it all felt like a dream – maybe she was drunk and passed out and this really was all a dream. You melted a frozen heart, You nourished a parched soul, No more running in circles, Now that I've found you, Now that I've found you, Now that I've found you... He sang softer with each new line, until only she could hear him. *** A hush had fallen across the room; Aidan could hear the held breaths. He could hear Alicia's heart beating to the same rhythm of his own. Her scent intoxicated him. "Kiss the girl!" came a voice from the back of the bar. *** His face loomed close to hers, too close... Her last thought before his lips touched hers was, I could drown in those eyes.... His lips were soft, touching hers tentatively, his thumb caressing her palm, his other hand resting lightly against the small of her back. Everything around them faded away in that moment, the soft buzz of the crowd, the people jostling about, even the lights dimmed, a soft glow surrounding him just before her eyes closed and she surrendered herself to his kiss. The kiss ended as abruptly as it had started. He was still holding her hand, looking into her eyes, intoxicating her. He lifted the rose from the table and held it up to her. "Will you be my Valentine?" The crowd murmured their approval, some even applauding. It was all too much for Alicia to absorb; it felt like the walls were closing in around her. She couldn't think clearly with him standing that close to her. She couldn't breathe. She did the only thing she had ever been good at. She turned and ran from the bar. *** "She will be fine." The man built like a brick wall who had been sitting with her, the one they called Jacques, was standing in front of Aidan. He looked apologetic. "I will go check on her." All Aidan could do was nod dumbly. "You have a really nice voice. And this place is great." The olive-skinned beauty looked apologetic too. Was he really that pathetic that everyone took pity on him? Jacques added, "I... we need to go check up on her. Oh, but don't worry, she is fine." "You need better taste in women." The blonde bombshell winked at him as she passed him on the way to the door. Halfway there, she turned back, grabbed his arm and scribbled on it. "Her number. Her name's Alicia." She winked at him again. The crowd was still hushed. Aidan felt like he was in a fishbowl. He turned and marched toward his office. He had just made the biggest fool of himself in his own bar, and in front of his staff. More importantly, he had just embarrassed the only woman he had felt anything more than lust for in the past four years. *** Alicia struggled to balance the bag of groceries and her handbag while trying to unlock the

door to her apartment. The key slipped into its slot, but refused to turn; she gripped it tightly and twisted hard, cursing softly as she felt the key turn a split second after hearing the metal snap. She stood there for close to a minute just staring dumbly down at the silver head still clasped between her fingers. "Great! Good to know your own strength, Ali," she whispered to herself as her eyes travelled from the useless lock to the even more useless half key in her hand. Her bag buzzing against her hip broke her stupor, so she deposited the sliver of silver between her lips to free her hand so she could dig through her bag to find her phone. The ever-elusive phone continued to buzz angrily as she dug through wallets and tissues and old bills and make-up bags and myriad useless paraphernalia that had no place being inside a woman's bag, but somehow had found their way there anyway. She pulled her hand back as a sharp pain ripped through her finger, droplets of blood oozing slowly from her throbbing digit. "Argh! Ffffuck!" she mumbled, with the broken key still between her lips. She grabbed the offensive sewing kit; a fresh droplet of blood still clung to the tip of the needle as she threw the half-open box to the ground. She watched as a crimson bead pooled around the tiny hole before running down her finger and dropping onto her brand new Carducci shoes. "Noooooo..." she moaned as she bent to wipe it before it dried, gripping the grocery bag tighter to keep it from falling. Still, the phone continued to buzz. "Not the shoes... Not the shoes... Ohhhh God! Please not the shoes!" she chanted as she dabbed the spot with her fingers, cringing as she realised too late that she was rubbing the blood from her pierced finger onto the cream suede as well. "Half my salary down the drain!" she babbled almost tearfully as she straightened up. The brown paper bag split along the side as she hugged it tightly to her chest; the French loaf broke and half of it dangled awkwardly from its brown paper sheath, and the salami spilt from the side and rolled across the hall, followed closely by two onions. She heard a crunch underfoot as she stepped on the discarded sewing kit, the grocery bag tearing further as she instinctively clutched it harder. She gulped hard as a can of tomatoes dropped onto her foot, then grabbed for her throat, her eyes popping comically as her mouth formed a huge 'O' as the chunk of silver she had dangling from her lips slipped into her throat, making her gag and let go of the bag. She coughed and spluttered, hardly noticing the pain of the heavy bag dropping onto her foot, bottles and cans rolling in all directions, the bottle of olive oil popping its top from the impact and spilling over her other shoe. Still, the phone continued to buzz. She grabbed for the door handle as she lost her balance. The impact of her weight made the door swing inward, causing her to rock unsteadily before tumbling belly down into the apartment, the contents of her bag spilling everywhere. The force of the fall dislodged the stuck object from her throat and she felt it slide down her oesophagus, swallowing hard before gasping for air. She lay panting on the wooden floor, trying to catch her breath. She reached for the phone that had landed half an arm's length from her, but, just as her fingers slipped around it, it stopped buzzing. She looked at the screen; the missed call was from an unknown number. She dialled her voicemail, then listened intently as her anxious heart thumped loudly. She smiled as she recognised the deep male voice with the Irish lilt on the recording, "Hi... I mean hello. I don't know if you remember me; it's Aidan. Strike that... Of course you remember me... I'm the one who made a complete arse of myself last night. I... I erm... I was hoping to buy you a drink or maybe dinner. If you agree, I promise not to sing or do any

other asinine thing. I promise. Call me? Or I could call back? I... erm... yes, I will call back. Bye. Did I mention that it's Aidan?" *** If you enjoyed this book, please look out for the sequel – Unfinished Song. Will Aidan call Alicia back? Will she find the courage to put her trust in a man again? All this and more will be revealed in the next instalment of this tale of love and adversity.