

Church Bells

by h_vic

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: A big thanks to LucillaJoanna over on MNFF for beta-ing.

Katie Bell looked across at Oliver Wood as they stood there awkwardly in his living room. It was very much a man's room, a bachelor's room. It had the feel of a gentleman's club the warm smell of leather along with the roaring fire.

'So now what?' was what she wanted to ask, but that seemed unfair. She doubted he had any more clue than she did of where they should go from here. She hadn't expected to see him not like this, not on Christmas Eve. Now she was here, she didn't have the faintest notion what she was supposed to do.

Her eyes swept the room again and fastened on the lone stocking hung above the fireplace. She opened her mouth to tease him for his childishness, but then shut it abruptly. The tragedy of the situation hit her. The stocking only served to highlight his solitude. Last Christmas they had been together. Now his stocking hung alone in a room that lacked a woman's touch.

She wondered why she had even agreed to come. It never did anyone any good to drag up the past, especially a past like theirs.

"Ooh, that would be perfect, George," Katie said, staring at the thief-proof-jinxed jewellery box the red-haired man had just suggested for her sister's present.

"I told you I'd have something kicking around," George said with a grin. "Even if you do leave everything until the last minute."

"It's just as well I know where to come at the last minute then," she joked as George rang her purchases through the till.

"Have a good Christmas, Katie," he said a few minutes later, giving her a hug as she left the shop. "You deserve it after the year you've had. Oh, and by the way, I still think the boy's an idiot for giving you up!"

Katie gave him a watery smile as she kissed his cheek. "Thanks, I don't know what I'd have done without you and Alicia the last couple of months."

"Anytime."

It's good to see him smiling again, Katie reflected. He had been lost in the darkness for so long, maybe they all had. But, as the world continued to turn, the wizarding world had slowly rebuilt itself from its losses, patching over the holes... and Alicia had worked her magic on George, finally helping him to see beyond his grief. Alicia had made him, if not exactly whole again, at least more than the half a soul that Fred's death had left him as.

"Enjoy your first Christmas as an old, married man and send Alicia my love," she cast over her shoulder as she walked out into the chill December air.

"Hey, less of the old! I'm in my prime, I'll have you know!" George's complaint followed her as she collided with something solid just outside the doorway.

The something solid made a loud and disgruntled "Oumpf!" and Katie stepped backwards quickly in embarrassment, rubbing her forehead where it had collided with the man's chest and lamenting the bag of roasted chestnuts which had spilt from her hand to litter the floor.

"Katie?"

Katie's heart stopped at the familiar voice that had uttered her name so many times before. She swallowed hard, her throat suddenly dry, as she glanced up to meet his achingly familiar, brown eyes.

"Olly." Katie cringed inwardly at the breathless sound of her voice and wondered how he still had such an effect on her.

"I'm sorry," Oliver said quickly, reaching out to brush her forehead with his fingertips, but she pulled away quickly, afraid of the power his touch would have over her. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"I should have been looking where I was going," she replied curtly. Somehow responding with, 'You broke my heart. Does that count?' didn't seem like the wisest plan.

Oliver shook his head slightly. "Sorry, that was a stupid thing to say," he said. "How have you been? ... Stupid again!" he interrupted himself before she could answer.

"I have to go..." she blurted out. She couldn't stay; it was too painful to be this close to him the memories swarming around her were unavoidable in his presence. But as she turned away, he grabbed her wrist.

"Wait, I"

Katie whirled back to face him in anger, shaking her arm free. "What gives you the right" she demanded, her eyes burning with the heat of all the tears she'd cried over him. How dare he! How dare he presume to have any control over me!

"I missed you," he said softly, his words draining the fight out of her. "I know I don't have the right to say that; I know I was stupid and I know you don't owe me anything... but I missed you."

Katie just looked at him. There was nothing else she could do, nothing else she was capable of in that moment.

"Please, Katie, just give me half an hour... please?"

She nodded mutely, feeling like she was not in control of anything anymore.

"Come for a drink at my flat," he begged her. "We can Apparate there; it'll be one brief drink. I know it's Christmas Eve and you'll want to go back to your family but..."

She was there because she had no willpower, not where Oliver was concerned. Being near him again, she hadn't been able to think for herself. She had suppressed it all her grief, the loss, her need of him but it was still there and as raw as it had been three months before when the door had swung shut on his retreating back.

"I have some mulled mead..." Oliver suggested awkwardly to fill the silence that had settled between them.

"That sounds nice," Katie agreed, her tone carefully formal, as she sat in a heavy armchair by the fire and leant forwards to warm her hands. It was odd she hadn't noticed how cold she was in Diagon Alley. It was only now that she was somewhere warm that she had become aware of it. Maybe she had just been numb for too long. Oliver had always said her hands were like ice, but now she didn't have him to warm them for her.

"Cold hands?" Oliver asked as he summoned the mead. Something in the intimacy of his comment made Katie flush. He knew her too well. He knew her habits and her failings, and yet here they sat in awkward, stilted conversation.

She looked away from him to find a less demanding spot for her eyes to rest on. She let them slide over the solitary stocking and settle on the cards arrayed on the mantelpiece, hoping that their ordinariness would offer her back the solidity that she had lost in his eyes.

"I'm sorry I didn't send you a card," he said, as he watched her study the nearest watercolour robin. She cursed herself silently for unwittingly highlighting yet another topic best left untouched and wondered whether there was anything in the blasted room that was safe. She hadn't really expected a Christmas card from him, but its absence had still stung. "I bought one," he continued. "I just couldn't write it; I didn't know what to say."

Katie unwillingly glanced down from the cards again to meet his eyes, as even that was preferable to staring at the mockingly familiar card in the middle of the display. He handed her a glass of mead, and she cradled it between her palms, gazing into the amber depths of the liquid. "It seemed so impersonal just to write 'Merry Christmas', but I didn't know what else to say either," she said, embarrassed by her own attempt at civility.

"What did you want to say instead?" Oliver asked, studying her intently.

The rapid fire of anger flashed through her once again. "Oh no, you don't get to do that! You don't get to be the one to ask that! You were the one who walked away!"

Something closed behind Oliver's eyes, dimming their warmth and excluding her. "And it was the biggest mistake of my life," he said quietly.

The world shattered into tiny pieces all around Katie, like a bauble knocked from a Christmas tree. This wasn't fair. She hated that he still had this much power over her emotions. She wanted desperately to just fall into his arms and feel safe and protected from the world, but she couldn't... because she couldn't forgive him.

"I needed you," she whispered as a lone tear broke through her barriers and slid unheeded down her cheek. "I needed your strength, and you left me to face it all alone." Her gaze slid down to the fire and she lost herself in the flickering flames. It was easier to focus on the light, the movement, the shapes that formed there, than on the cold realities of her life.

"I know." The sincerity in his voice caught the breath in her throat. "It was stupid and selfish of me. I should have understood you were hurting too, but I couldn't see past my own pain and every time I looked at you, all I saw was what we had lost... All I could picture was a child that would have had your eyes, your laugh... The longer I stayed, the more unbearable it became."

Katie looked up and met his eyes, which held a reflection of the firelight, but the light of defiance sparked in hers. "You never even wanted the baby!" Bitterness raked through her voice as she recalled the horror on his face when she had first told him. Her hand moved unbidden to rest protectively on her stomach, even though there was

nothing now to protect.

"I didn't know what I wanted." He stoically bore the deserved brunt of her anger. "I thought we were too young, that we weren't ready, that I couldn't be a father. I didn't realise that none of my doubts mattered because in here I knew it was right." He slapped a hand against his chest in illustration. "And then it was too late... you'd lost the baby, and I'd lost you."

Katie swallowed convulsively. Her thoughts whirled senselessly in her mind. This was too much. It was too much to take in, too much to deal with. She just wanted Oliver to hold her and make it all stop hurting. *No, I don't*, she decided she should just leave now. *Oh*, it was definitely too much and she really didn't know what she wanted either.

"I'm sorry," Oliver said suddenly, the words falling heavily into the silence between them. "I know that words can't change anything, but I need you to know that. I was a coward, I know. I should have been there for you."

Katie felt as if the poison within her was beginning to leach away. She could see in the deep lines etched into his face how much those words had cost him. She took a deep breath and her fingers tightened around the arm of the chair, as she began to realise that perhaps not all of the blame could be laid at Oliver's door.

"I'm sorry too," Katie said slowly. "It took both of us to bring our relationship to an end. You may have been the one to walk away, but we were both already gone long before that really. I guess somewhere we just stopped letting each other in. That was my fault as much as yours. I used to lie next to you in those last nights and feel so alone..."

"I wanted to reach out to you; I just didn't know how," Oliver said, causing the full force of what they'd given up on to crash over Katie. It never had to have been that way...

Amidst her tumbled thoughts, she became aware that Oliver had gotten up from his chair and gone to root around in an old-fashioned bureau that stood in a corner of the room.

"I bought this long before... before, well... everything," he explained as he hunted through the drawers, but I never found the right moment. Then I was afraid you'd think I was only doing it because you were pregnant, and in the end... in the end I screwed up and missed my chance."

He'd obviously found what he was looking for. He turned away from the bureau with something clasped in his hand, but instead of walking back to his seat, he went to her. "I've missed you, Katie, more than I thought possible. All I've been able to think is what a mess I've made of everything. I feel like this is a second chance to let you know how I feel, and this time I'm not going to let it slip away. You'd have every right to throw this back in my face, I know, but..."

Katie stared at him without comprehension as he stood in front of her, but then she gasped wordlessly as he dropped to one knee and held out a small, midnight blue, velvet box towards her. She reached out a shaking hand and hesitantly opened it. Firelight sparked on the myriad facets of a diamond solitaire. Oliver slowly lifted his eyes from the ring to find hers.

"Katie Bell, will you marry me?"

Katie stared at him. Somewhere in the distant silence, a church bell rang, marking the hour.

"Merry Christmas, Olly," she whispered.

A/N: This was originally a response to the *By the Fireside* prompt of the *Winter's Tales Challenge* on MNFF and had to involve a festive reunion in front of a fire with roasted chestnuts, a stocking, a missing card and church bells.