

Chapter One

Day 1 ...

When I first stepped into this hotel, my heart was a broken mess. I thought that I would simply do what I came here to do and leave. No complications, no feelings. Besides, I didn't have much left in me to feel anyway. That's pretty much the default when you are dealing with grief though, right?

Some people see it as a fact of life, they say: *we will all die one day*—it doesn't mean that they don't care. On the other hand, some people take it harder than the others. They live with a broken heart, a piece of them lost forever—it doesn't mean they are the only ones who care.

So, while I'm not claiming that I'm special, that my grief was more tangible—some days it did feel like I was sorrow itself, that who I lost did mean more, and that I would never feel a love like I'd been lucky to feel for twenty-five years.

When I first stepped in to this hotel, I could have never known that this would be the place I would fall in love with an impossible man. My pain would become tolerable in his arms, only to be replaced with another sort of agony strong enough to take my breath away. In this place I would feel whole again, even if it was for the short time I had him.

I didn't care how I looked when I exited the elevator because I had no idea I was going to meet *him*—the man I would never get over, not until my last breath.

No matter how much I bundled up myself, I could still feel the cold seeping through my thick coat. Winter is my second favorite season, behind spring. I grew up playing in the snow, collected so many happy memories. However, coming to New York in February wasn't the smartest decision I have ever made, especially in a time like this.

“Good evening, Miss Hart. How may I help you?” asked the desk clerk.

“Hi, Juliet. I really hate to do this, but I think I need you guys to change my room, again.”

“Oh, no. Is there something wrong with the new one? I thought the noise issue would be handled when we moved you down the hall.”

I sighed, already feeling bad about asking for a room change—the second time in the same day. Usually, I could ignore and live through just about everything. But this time, it just wasn't happening. I desperately needed the luxury of breathing. Thankfully, Juliet didn't seem annoyed with me at all.

“I know, and I thank you for that, really. But I think this time you put me in a smoking room. I tried to ignore it, but whoever occupied the room before me probably smoked quite a few packs of cigarettes in there and I'm having trouble ignoring it. Even the walls and bed smell like smoke.”

She asked for my room number and checked a few things on the computer in front of her.

“I'm sorry, Miss Hart. There must be a mistake. I made sure to check your specifications before changing your room the last time. It should've been a smoke-free room. I'm so sorry; this is completely my fault. We'll clear this up in a minute.”

She kept looking up at me and smiling nervously as if she were trying to gauge my anger. Working in such a big hotel couldn't be easy, especially when they had an almost full house. She was probably afraid that I would want to speak to her manager about the mistake. I, however, put the blame to the couple that was having monkey sex next to my room—the first one—which I had only managed to endure for two hours. And as I left my room, I could still hear the screams and the not-so-sexy grunts echoing in my ears. They were the reason I ended up coming downstairs to ask for a room change in the first place.

It had only been six hours since I'd landed in New York City, and I was already dead on my feet. If I didn't get some sleep soon, I was pretty sure I would pass out from exhaustion. It was just sheer stubbornness keeping me up at that point.

And the promise I made to my Dad.

Smiling to put her at ease, “Please, it's okay,” I said. “I truly feel bad for coming down here again, but I couldn't breathe in that room. I'll take whatever you can find. The floor doesn't even matter.”

Her lips tipped up; her posture relaxed. I watched her movements as she checked for other available rooms for me. Hoping she could find me a room sooner than later, I glanced around the lobby. It was almost 2 am, yet there were still people hanging around.

Couples were laughing loudly, filling the night air with chatter. Despite the cold outside, the night was still alive—almost as if the time was in a loop, never a moment to rest in New York City.

The soft music they were playing shifted my attention from the people, and I focused on the familiar notes.

I knew the song. I *loved* this song.

Stevie Wonder, I Just Called To Say I Love You ...

It was a piano cover and that was enough to make my eyes well with tears as I thought of my dad in front of his old piano.

It was a beautiful song, but the memories surrounding it were even more beautiful than the song itself could ever be.

Watching everything around me with tired eyes, I felt so alone. This trip wasn't supposed to be like this. I wasn't supposed to come here by myself. Hell, I didn't even want to come here in the first place. Still, regardless of how I felt about the situation, I had to find my only living relative and give him the letters he rejected for so many years from my Dad.

But first, I needed a peaceful night of sleep.

Maybe if everything slowed down I would be able to catch up with my emotions. As I closed my eyes and tried to block everything and everyone out, a deep and smooth voice jolted me out of my momentary peace.

"Good evening, Juliet. A friend of mine should have left something for me."

"Yes, Mr. Ross, he was here an hour ago."

Juliet turned around to get whatever was left for the guy, and then remembering me, whirled back to us.

"I'm sorry, Miss Hart. This will be just a second."

"That's okay," I answered back, but she was already gone.

I felt his heavy gaze on me, sizing me up, leaving me vulnerable. I wanted to match the voice with a face, so I turned my head and gave him a small smile.

"Hi," I uttered quietly.

He looked like he was a few years older than me. Early thirties, maybe? His features, his posture, the way he held himself would make you turn around twice to take in the sight of him. Everything about him was attractive.

It was his eyes that had struck something inside me first, though. They were a beautiful shade of hazel, blue with brown specks around the iris. It was extraordinary,

so vibrant, as if they had a life of their own. There was a different kind of power behind them, a power that could easily render you speechless. Unfortunately, he didn't have a beautiful smile to match the eyes. Forget about a beautiful one, he didn't have one at all.

When I could finally manage to pull my eyes away from his lips and look into his eyes again, I saw his frown deepen, and just like that my own smile vanished. His eyes never leaving mine, he gave me a curt nod and turned his focus to Juliet again.

She returned with a huge smile on her face—I'm assuming a special one for Mr. Ross—handing a big envelope to him.

He muttered a dry *thank you* in a raspy voice that didn't sound like he was thankful for anything at all and left.

I could hear and feel his authority, his cockiness, and his indifference. That cold, unattached; *I'm better than each and every one of you* act. He sounded just like a jerk who knew who he was, *what* he was and didn't care one bit for anyone other than himself.

In that brief moment, it didn't matter that I haven't even met the guy, my dislike for him was for the way he acted as if he owned the place, and the people in it for that matter.

As hot as he was, with that attitude, I wouldn't waste a second glance on him.

Could it really be that hard to offer someone a small smile or even wish them a good night?

Ignoring Juliet's apologies for keeping me waiting, I watched him greet a gorgeous blonde near the elevators. Though he didn't find Juliet or me worthy enough for a smile, he did offer her one. And other than the unfortunate fact that it made him even more swoon-worthy, that small smile also managed to soften the intense frown on his face.

As soon as he was next to her, she leaned over and captured his lips in an intimate kiss.

They somehow managed to look even more attractive when they were standing near each other. I could easily count more than a few eyes on them; women fantasizing about being the focus of his attention, men wishing they had a woman like her in their arms.

His perfectly tailored, probably expensive, black suit made him look even more powerful, and you didn't need to think too hard to imagine what kind of a body was

hiding underneath. Add the gorgeous white dress the blonde was wearing to the mix, and you simply had the perfect couple.

I kept watching as the blonde put her hands on his chest, threw back her head and laughed at something he said—her blonde locks shining under the soft lights. Then he leaned down and kissed the corner of her lips, his arms possessively wrapping around her waist to pull her against him.

As they waited for the elevator to come down, she reached up to loosen his tie, her dainty little hands stroking his chest through his white button-up shirt.

I couldn't take my eyes off of them. All I could see was her back—and those long and smooth legs—but whatever she was saying to him made his small smile vanish and a bigger, more genuine one took its place. An obvious spark illuminated his eyes, and he leaned down and kissed her as if there was no one else but them in the world.

I blushed and turned around to find Juliet staring dreamily at the same scene. Angry with myself for watching other people's private moments, I cleared my throat.

“So, is there another smoke-free room for me? I think I'm about to drop here and fall asleep.”

She smiled at me. I know she was envious of them as much as I was, and for some reason knowing that made me both angry *and* sad.

“I upgraded your room. I think you'll really like this one. And I hope you can accept our apologies, so far we haven't been the best hosts. A number of our suites on the top floors are being remodeled, so this was the highest upgrade I could make. I hope your stay will be much more enjoyable.”

“Oh, thank you. That wasn't necessary, but still, thank you.”

I took the keycard she slid toward me and handed her my old one.

“I think there is a very comfortable bed calling my name in...” I checked the number on the card, “room 2460.”

Her eyes warmed. “Have a good night, Miss Hart. Please let us know if there is anything else we can help with. I'll make sure they bring your bags to your new room.”

After thanking her and promising to call if I needed anything else, I turned around and headed for the elevators.

When I saw the perfect couple still going at it, my steps faltered. What the hell were they still doing there? There was no way they were still waiting around for the

elevator. And there was no way in hell I was going to get in the same small box with them.

Even though my eyes were about to close, I slowed down my steps and acted like I was randomly admiring the marble floors and the furniture in the lounge area.

Yes, I could've taken the stairs, but I didn't believe I could make it up forty-something floors without having a heart attack on the tenth floor. Not tonight ... or ever.

As I ran out of things to admire around me, reluctantly I had to walk toward them and ready myself for a very uncomfortable elevator ride.

Just as I quickened my steps and neared them, the elevator doors pinged open, and the girl seductively pulled him in by his tie. At least they were not in a lip-lock anymore. So, there was that.

I stopped a few steps away, not sure if I should intrude. As my eyes involuntarily followed her hands unbuttoning his shirt, I caught sight of his muscular chest. When the hairs on my neck stood up, I forced myself to look away, only to find him staring right back into my eyes.

His scowl was back, that much I could see. In addition, his eyes were sparkling with anger, and they were focused solely on me.

I felt my face heat up and quickly averted my gaze to the marble floor. Definitely not getting on that thing. I shivered and hugged my coat more tightly. A few people bumped into me as they hurried to get in, which made me stumble, but I couldn't lift my eyes from the floor until I heard the ping, indicating the closed doors.

My new room was huge compared to the room I'd just left. Floor to ceiling windows, and the gold, white, and black furniture was the first thing that captured my attention as soon as I stepped inside. Even though the city looked gloomy with snow-covered rooftops, it was still an astonishing sight. A comfortable sitting area led to the bedroom with a king bed covered with snow-white sheets. I groaned, dying to jump in and snuggle under the covers.

Even though it was difficult to do, I ignored the bed and walked straight to the window. I pressed my palm to the cold glass, then my forehead. I was desperate to feel alive, desperate to feel *something*.

How was I supposed to enjoy myself when the only person I cared about wasn't here with me? How was I supposed to breathe in this city when I was on the brink of losing myself in grief?

"Oh, Dad ..." I whispered. "I already miss you so much."

I exhaled a warm breath, steaming the window as I tried to pull myself together. I could still see his face, still remember his warm smile.

The way he made me laugh, the way he made sure I knew I was his world...

I heard a knock on the door and forced myself to hold it together for a few more minutes.

"Hey, James," I read his nametag and smiled warmly as I opened the door wider for him to come in. It was the same guy who brought my bags to the other room.

"Good evening, Miss Hart." He smiled in return. "Where would you like these?"

"Anywhere is okay. I feel really bad for all the trouble I've caused you guys," I said as I searched for my wallet in my bag.

"It's my job, no trouble at all. This is one of our best suites, have you seen the view yet?"

"It's hard not to. It's breath taking, really."

He placed the last bag in the corner and turned back to face me again.

"I hope you enjoy the rest of your stay here."

"I'm sure I will. Again, thank you for everything."

After tipping him, I closed the door and rested my back against it. Day one down, nine more to go.

I was about to open my bags when I noticed another door next to the bedroom area. Curious, I tried to open it, but it was locked. Since the bathroom was next to the entrance, this one probably opened to the adjoining room. Hoping it was locked from the other side too—and I wouldn't have a surprise visitor—I undressed. After adjusting the heat in the room, I grabbed my iPod and walked to the bed.

Other than having the best view of all time, it also had a phone docking system on the bedside table—basically the only other perk I cared about.

Facing the view, I sat down on the left side of the bed and hugged my naked legs to my chest. Even though it was eerily silent in my room, I was already shaking—knowing what I was about to hear.

Regardless of where I was or what I was going through, I felt the same excitement rush through my body that I did every time I heard him play. And readying myself for the heartbreak didn't get any easier.

When my breathing was under control again, I popped my iPod into the dock and found the song I was looking for.

Ravel - Pavane pour une Infante défunte, piano solo.

Just before the music began—in that few seconds of dark silence—I swear my heart stopped beating. Then, the precious notes of the song filled the room; penetrated my body and soul as I remembered the day my father recorded it for me. It was just a few months before I had lost him.

He had said, “*When I'm gone if you ever feel like you have no one, I want you to listen to this, Maya. I want you to remember that wherever you go, whatever you do, you'll always have me with you. You'll never be alone my little star.*”

I remembered every moment of that day—what we talked about, how I cried in the bathroom just so he wouldn't see me and get upset. How many times he smiled at me—even though he knew what was to come in just a few short months. I also remembered how hopelessly I tried to fit minutes into seconds, hours into short minutes, and years into those precious moments.

I remembered every little moment that counted for something. And I was beyond scared that one day I wouldn't be able to remember them all. That they would fade away in time.

Maybe at first it would just be his words I would have trouble recalling. The sound of him saying *I love you, my little star*.

Then in time maybe I would forget his smile, the lines around his eyes, his laughter.

I was scared that I would forget it all. That somehow my memories would be taken away from me.

As my body started to tremble with the force of my memories, and the tears I was trying so hard to hold back came rushing on me, I curled up in bed and closed my eyes, letting it overwhelm me.

I pictured his smile, heard his laughter echo in my heart. I could almost feel the warmth of his hand as I desperately held onto him. I still had all of him. Our memories were still mine to keep.

I could even see the sorrow etched on his face as he played this very song every single night. This was his escape. This moment, this song, was his way of remembering and honoring his wife.

And now, it would be mine to remember him.

I used to sneak out of my room, and secretly watch him lose himself in these very notes. Oh, how I admired him in those moments. How hauntingly beautiful it was to listen to him. To see the power he created by pushing a few keys.

There was always a small smile on his lips as he re-lived his memories with the woman he loved. He would close his eyes, and his fingers would finish the piece with perfection, with the kind of emotion I was able to understand only now as an adult.

Finally, I surrendered myself to sleep, my tears dropping soundlessly on my pillow.

As his precious music filled the night, my little world, and everything in between, I found a little solace in knowing that he was watching over me.