

Don't Fall For Mr. Hart –

C 2 Grief

Grief

I didn't remember driving back to New York City's Washington Heights until I found myself opening the door to the apartment I rented with my bestie, Emily. She leaped to the corridor as soon as I turned on the lights, and I saw her welcoming grin slowly fading as she scanned my most likely translucent face. She was wearing a pink tee and shorts—her favorite pajama-like outfit. She had her blond curls tied in a messy bun on top of her head. It was obvious that she stayed up late waiting for me. Usually, I would tell her everything the second I opened the door, but right now, I couldn't find my voice. I stared at her silently for a while, most likely increasing her concern beyond bearable limits.

Question marks painted her expression. "Did you get caught?"

I shoved off my sneakers and shook my head.

She stepped closer, her eyes squinting at me. "Did the bitch show up?"

I nodded, slowly pulling the hoodie over my head.

"Was she alone?" She rubbed her hands together, awaiting an entertaining story. I shook my head again, and she screamed in excitement. "So, did you get the pictures?"

I stared at her numbly and shook my head. Her hands fell to her sides, and a wry twist formed on her lips. "Does it mean that you are fired?"

My head moved up and down, and my shoulders slumped. I seriously couldn't care less about my job at the Bombshell News at that moment, but I didn't know if I had the strength to tell Emily.

My best friend sighed and scratched her head. "Red or white?" When I shrugged, her eyes widened in realization. "Something else happened, right?"

My mouth opened, and the words flew out by themselves. "Julienne... She's dead."

Not a second passed, and Emily pulled me into a tight hug. "I'm so sorry, Charlie." Her voice cracked as she stroked my ruffled hair. "You can cry if you want to," she muttered, and with her permission, my tears began to flow.

Two hours later, we were sitting on the carpet in our so-called living room, replenishing our tears with wine. Emily met Julianne only once, but she shed just as many tears as I did. I think she wanted to split my grief between the two of us, and I seriously loved her for trying. Once my throat became less tight, I told her everything that happened, from the awkward time I spent sitting on the tree to the call I got from Bastian.

"So, let me get this straight." She paused and took a deep breath. "Bastian, the shy guy who you went to the prom with is now an FBI agent. And Julianne, who worked for a large company, contacted him a week ago, telling him that her company is involved in illegal activity. A few days later, Julianne has been found dead, and now everyone says it was a suicide?!" Emily frowned and hurriedly downed her glass.

I nodded and poured us more wine. "It doesn't make any sense, but apparently, they dragged her old documents from the mental health clinic."

Emily blinked her big hazel eyes at me. "Julianne—that sex bomb Julianne—was in the mental clinic?"

A bitter grimace curved my mouth. "She was eleventh then. She was a fragile girl. Her parents were getting divorced, and she was having certain puberty problems..." I gestured, marking far too large swells on my chest.

"Oh," Emily murmured, narrowing her eyes on me. "Let me guess... She was bullied, and you were her hero?"

I laughed nervously and dragged my brown strands behind my ears. "Something like that." I cleared my throat. "Anyway, someone decided that the fact that she was having some minor problems when she was eleven would be enough to prove that she was mentally unstable over fifteen years later." Even repeating this type of bullshit made my fingers curl tightly around the wine glass.

"So, what now?" Emily looked at me closely. She knew me well enough to know that I hated injustice. "Oh-oh, you have that look on your face," she said, leaning closer.

I frowned. "What look?"

She sighed. "The daring look." Then she grabbed my hand. "Charlie, I know that Julianne was your friend, but..." She stopped herself for a moment and drew a deep breath. "Don't do anything stupid."

I laughed awkwardly and took a big gulp, emptying my glass. "Emily, please. I'm not that reckless..."

I lied to my bestie, and she knew it. I tended to be reckless on many occasions. Once I ran after a thief who stole an old lady's purse... I got the purse back, but I ended up in the hospital with a broken arm and several stitches. What could I say? I was a policeman's daughter.

After my Momma died of cancer when I was five, I was raised by my Dad and older Brother who followed in our father's footsteps and became a police officer when I was thirteen. I wasn't always getting into trouble, but I was always their warrior princess. Nonetheless, I was wise enough to know the fights I could win and those I should call my Dad or Brother to fight instead of me. I was the smart kid with skills. For starters, I knew how to load a police gun when I was seven. Not that my Dad knew about it. I would have surely given Lieutenant Samuel Madison—a.k.a. my Daddy—a heart attack if he had any knowledge of what my Brother, Jackson, taught me when I was a kid. I might have grown up without a mom, but I would never say that I had an unhappy childhood.

I had never grown from being a daredevil, and I was never afraid of asking questions. As I grew older, discovering the truth, even one that was carefully hidden, became my habit and sometimes addiction. That was something Bastian and I had in common since we were kids—the need for justice.

The day of Julianne's funeral was cold and rainy. It felt as if the whole sky mourned her, mixing the thick raindrops with the tears of those who would forever miss her. Since the ceremony was organized by Julianne's family, neither Bastian nor I were officially invited. Mrs. Abigail Monroe, Julianne's mother, was kind enough to inform us that we wouldn't blend well with all the wealthy guests she and her husband, Donston, invited to present her perfectly practiced grief. Of course, it had nothing to do with "blending in," since we all kind of "blended" together, wearing black coats and hiding under black umbrellas. Bastian and I simply reminded Abigail of her past, of the time when she was a poor divorcee and not the wife of a wealthy company owner.

"I hate that bitch and that rich prick she married," Bastian bit out as we watched the Monroe couple receive condolences at the cemetery, standing several feet from them.

I sighed. "Well, she never liked us. I didn't expect that to change after Julianne died."

Bastian smiled wryly. "I guess we should be grateful that Abigail didn't chase us away when she saw us here."

I shrugged, and couldn't help my sarcastic tone. "Perhaps she didn't want to cause additional drama on the day of her so-called beloved daughter's funeral."

I doubted that Abigail had ever loved her daughter from the first marriage. She used to treat her as living proof of her failed relationship. I wondered if she even wasn't relieved that Julianne died... As I watched her pretend to wipe her tears in between shaking

hands with elegant ladies and well-dressed men, all I wanted was to walk over there and punch her. Perhaps then she would have a few real tears to shed.

"I heard that they have signed a settlement agreement with the company where Julianne worked," Bastian said, making my head snap in his direction.

"What?! The company paid them?!" I burst out.

"Hush!" Bastian frowned. "Not so loud. I guess the grand Hart Global Corporation sweeps their dirt under the carpet." His tone seemed even, but his fists were clenched so hard his knuckles whitened.

Then we saw three black Bentleys parking at the cemetery's side road. Inborn curiosity shifted my gaze to the group of four identical-looking bodyguards rushing out of the first and third car, and surrounding the two men in black three-piece suits who exited the one in the middle. I could see Abigail running toward the two and bowing as if they were royalty. I squinted my eyes, trying to look at their faces.

"Oh. My. God." I almost choked on the air I was breathing.

"What is it?" Bastian asked, following my line of sight. "Do you know who they are?"

I nodded, taking in the dignified posture, the movements, the aura of absolute authority around HIM—the man from Angelica Butterfly's mansion. Acknowledging that fact, I couldn't help the hysteric laughter that built in my throat. "I saw the one with black hair before," I admitted. "Except, when I last saw him, he was half naked..."