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With sleep still clinging to my eyelids, I found myself cocooned in the coziness of our bedroom. Beyond the penthouse windows, New York City was in the icy clutches of a pre-dawn December morning. Despite being wrapped up in the warmth of our modern heater, I couldn't help but shiver as I glimpsed the frosty cityscape. Winter was here, its arrival as silent and unannounced as a thief in the night.

Our bed, a vast cloud of comfy goodness, was a mess of ruffled white sheets — telltale signs of a good night's kip. My gaze drifted to a shadowy corner where Salem, my stubborn black fur ball, was curled up tighter than a Danish pastry, his soft purrs composing a soothing morning symphony in the tranquil silence.

My eyes landed on the dreamy face sleeping next to me — Richard, deep in Dreamland. Carefully, I traced his lips with my fingertips, soaking up the warmth of his sleepy exhale. A hint of a smile danced at the corners of his mouth, as if my touch had tickled a happy nerve in his slumber.

I could spend hours studying that face and never get bored. His jawline could have been chiseled by Michelangelo himself, and his dark, tousled hair only added to his boyish charm. Hidden behind closed lids were his stormy blue-grey eyes, so intense they could give the dawning city skyline a run for its money.

This handsome man beside me wasn't merely a Hollywood and British heartthrob; he was a human hurricane that set box offices, TV ratings,

and endorsement deals ablaze. But his looks? That was just the tip of the iceberg. Richard was as brainy as he was beautiful, with a love for books that matched mine and possessing an understanding of art that would make any art scholar green with envy. This combination of brawn and brains had me head over heels, irrevocably and passionately in love with him.

So there I was, taking a trip down memory lane, thinking about our first date — talk about an unexpected plot twist! We were supposed to be at this big shindig celebrating the wrap-up of *Back In Time* (a pretty snazzy TV series now airing on ABC, with yours truly as the scriptwriter, thank you very much). But instead, it turned into an impromptu matchmaking session. Who would've thought?

The next day, Richard, being the charming devil he is, surprised me with the first edition of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. I mean, come on! How am I supposed to resist a man who knows his classics? That book now sits pretty in our home library downstairs, rubbing spines with other first editions that Richard has hoarded over the years.

Fast forward a year, and we're still together, riding this emotional rollercoaster they call love. We've had our share of highs, lows, loop-de-loops, and everything in between. We've weathered everything from shared laughter and hushed whispers to facing the heartbreak of losing our pregnancy. And through every twist and turn, our bond has only gotten stronger, like superglue on steroids.

As I lay there, watching Richard sleeping beside me, a wave of gratitude hit me like a ton of bricks. Despite the whirlwind of city life and the crazy world of showbiz, we've managed to create our own little sanctuary. Sure, we've had our fair share of trials, but the laughter, love, and unwavering support made every bump in the road worth it. Life with Richard? Now, that's a script I'd write any day!

I nuzzled into Richard's hair with a sigh that could've rivaled the wind outside. His scent wrapped around me like a *Snuggie*, a comforting blend of his cologne and something uniquely him. He stirred, reaching out for me in his sleep. I planted a soft smooch on his lips and whispered, "Go back to sleep, my love." Even in his slumber, he smiled and drifted off again.

The Last Snowfall

* * *

I picked up Richard's crumpled white shirt from the pile of clothes on the floor and wrapped it around my naked body. Donning Richard's shirt, which, let's face it, looked good on me in a post-sex moment, I walked over to the mirror and gave myself the once-over. Standing at a not-too-shabby five feet seven inches, my body and long legs were toned from regular yoga. My skin wasn't the typical New Yorker's alabaster complexion — it was a delicious caramel, courtesy of my Filipino dad and American mom.

My facial features were like a cocktail of East and West — Mom's high cheekbones and sharp nose, complemented by Dad's rich brown eyes. I often wished I got my mother's eyes, which were green with specks of grey. My hair, a cascade of chocolate waves, tumbled to my shoulders while my bangs played peek-a-boo with my forehead. My teeth, as straight as a ruler and as white as fresh snow, were the crowning glory of my teenage years spent in braces. You could say I was like a human United Nations, a blend of the best bits from both sides of the globe.

Despite being 28, people often mistook me for someone in their early thirties. My best friend Erin joked that I was trying to level up to Richard, who, at 44, still had the charm and looks of a thirty-something heartthrob.

One last glance in the mirror, I couldn't help but smirk. I could just imagine how Richard would react if he woke up seeing me wearing his shirt, which always drove him mad with desire. With a wink at my reflection, I tiptoed over to the window.

Outside, Mother Nature was putting on a show. Snowflakes were falling like confetti, each a tiny work of art, turning the city into a giant snow globe. It was like watching a ballet, only with snowflakes instead of ballerinas. They twirled and pirouetted in the air before settling down on the windowsill, creating a frosty masterpiece that sparkled under the glow of the streetlights.

My breath fogged up the glass as I peered outside. The streetlights cast a soft glow on the pavement below, illuminating the otherwise deserted streets. New York City, the city that never sleeps, had hit the snooze button. The usual soundtrack of honking taxis and wailing

sirens had been replaced by the soft whispers of the wind and the crunch-crunch-crunch of boots in the snow. Watching the city morph into a winter wonderland, I felt a wave of peace wash over me. This was our little slice of heaven amidst the concrete jungle, and as long as we had each other, we could weather any blizzard.

Curled up on our white couch, so plush it could double as a cloud, I was completely engrossed in the snow show happening outside. The city was slowly waking up, its usually vibrant palette replaced by shades of white. The city of technicolor dreams was now a black-and-white postcard, a picture-perfect moment of serenity.

All of a sudden, I felt something plop onto my lap. Salem. And he promptly began his morning grooming routine. Afterward, he gazed at me and blinked his yellow eyes — his way of kissing me. Then he turned toward the window, his ears dancing at the sight of the snowfall. He let out a tiny meow, sounding as disappointed as if saying, 'I hate it here.' I scratched his ear and replied, "I know you can't enjoy your usual outdoor activities today. Too chilly for your daily shenanigans."

We sat together, watching as the city woke up from its slumber. I could almost hear the sound of muffled laughter and chatter floating up to us. The miniature-like people emerged from their warm apartments, bundled up in coats and scarves, their breath visible in the chilly air — a gentle reminder of the life buzzing below. The snow continued to fall, blanketing the streets and rooftops in a pristine layer of white. It seemed as though the city had been granted a fresh start — a clean slate on which to write the next chapter of its story.

Throughout the day, the cityscape will change. The pristine sheet of snow will quickly be marked by endless footprints and tire tracks, like an artist's canvas coming alive with each brushstroke. But at this moment, up in our penthouse with Salem on my lap and Richard in our bed, it was as if New York City had hit the reset button, its usual hustle-bustle giving way to a moment of calm.

A feeling of warmth spread through me as I thought about the change in seasons. Each one came with its own set of surprises. What would spring bring? Or summer? Or fall? The mystery of the four seasons

made me feel like a kid on Christmas Eve.

After one last look at the snowy spectacle outside, I returned to our bed as Salem followed. The choice between the aroma of coffee and a hot plate breakfast or snuggling back into Richard's arms was more challenging than picking a favorite pizza topping. While the latter seemed more appealing and was definitely my ultimate choice, I also knew that going back to bed meant not wanting to get up... just staying within Richard's arms. But adulthood called, and I had to answer.

As I stroked Salem's soft fur, I whispered, "Keep an eye on Richard while I'm gone, okay?" Salem gave me a look that seemed to say, *'Why would I do that? That fellow is the reason why my life is so miserable now!'* before jumping off my lap and strutting off to find Leticia, our housekeeper, and make her day a little more... interesting.

I stood from the bed and covered Richard's naked body with a blanket. His peaceful face made me smile; a silent promise of love awaited me when I returned. As I shut the door behind me, I couldn't help but feel grateful for the life we've built — a little piece of paradise amidst the city jungle, filled with love, laughter, of course, and a dash of feline drama.



As I walked into the dining room, I could sense the tension, so thick you could cut it with a butter knife. There was Salem, the feline prince of drama, perched on the windowsill like a jilted lover in a soap opera. His tail flicked back and forth like a metronome set to agitated while his eyes, as yellow as a pumpkin soup, stared longingly at the winter wonderland outside.

I knew he was missing our old neighborhood on 89th Street, particularly Charlie and Victoria Sung, who owned the flower shop downstairs but also fed him treats. Before we moved in with Richard, Salem was the king of his little jungle, chasing butterflies and climbing

trees like they were going out of style. But ever since we moved into this swanky penthouse on the Upper East Side, his wild adventures had been reduced to epic naps and occasional cloud-watching sessions from the window.

Across the room, Leticia, our housekeeper and resident cat skeptic, was busy giving our kitchen shelves a thorough dust-busting workout. The furrow in her brow was deeper than the Grand Canyon as she tried to ignore Salem's theatrical sighs and longing glances.

"Salem, for Pete's sake, knock off the drama!" Leticia finally snapped as Salem let out a meow that could shatter glass. Watching them — my brooding cat and our equally grumpy housekeeper — was like watching a sitcom. Funny and endearing but also a stark reminder of Salem's struggle to adjust to his new life.

"Leticia, let's cut him some slack," I said, jumping to Salem's defense. "The poor guy is just having a tough time adjusting."

Leticia let out a sigh that made Salem's dramatic sighs look like amateur hour. She put her duster down, disappeared into the kitchen, and re-emerged with a plate piled high with bacon, eggs, toast, and roasted tomatoes. "Alright, I get it," she conceded, "but he needs to understand that this is home now. No more sulking."

As she set the breakfast plate before me and filled my glass with fresh orange juice, my stomach did a happy dance. Leticia was right. We needed to help Salem stop dwelling on the past and start enjoying his present.

I walked over to Salem, giving him a comforting scratch behind his ears. "Hey," I whispered, "I know you miss our old digs, but we've got to roll with the punches here. You'll grow to love this place, pinky promise."

Salem looked up at me, his big, yellow eyes full of hope and confusion. He purred softly, but the sadness still lingered.

"Maybe we could make things a bit more comfortable for him," I suggested to Leticia as I returned to my seat. "How about a new cat

tree, which we can put at the promenade on the kitchen side, or some toys to keep him entertained?"

She mulled over my idea for a moment before nodding. "That might work. I'll pick something up when I go grocery shopping later."

With that, Leticia returned to her chores, and I went back to consoling Salem before returning to my breakfast. I knew it would take time for him to settle in, but I was ready to move mountains to make him feel at home. And who knows? Maybe one day, Leticia would crack a smile when Salem struts into a room.

Richard emerged from our room upstairs, looking like a Greek god on a casual Tuesday. The sunlight transformed into his personal spotlight, his hair still damp from the shower. The droplets glistened as they caught the morning light. I paused for a moment, unable to resist admiring how handsome he looked.

"Mmm... good morning, beautiful," he drawled, his voice smoother than a Barry White track. He leaned in to kiss me, his lips soft against mine. They tasted of mint and carried a heavenly scent that made my heart race.

"What did I miss?" Richard asked, his blue-grey eyes twinkling with mischief. He glanced between Salem and Leticia, picking up on the frosty vibes quicker than a weatherman. At the sound of Richard's voice, Salem's ears perked up, and he turned to face us. His yellow eyes narrowed as he hissed at Richard, seemingly holding him responsible for all the changes and upheavals in his life.

"Salem's been grumbling again," I explained with a sigh. "He's missing the Sungs and their endless supply of treats."

Richard's eyebrows shot up to his hairline at the mention of our treat-hoarding neighbors. His gaze landed on Salem, who responded with a hiss that screamed, *'You're dead to me, human.'*

"Yikes, tough crowd," Richard quipped, raising his hands defensively, feigning shock at Salem's reaction. "Didn't know I was playing the villain here."

* * *

I laughed at his dramatics, grateful for the comic relief. "Don't take it personally, Richard. Salem is just being... Salem."

Leticia joined in, her voice laced with amusement. "Just give him some space. He'll come around... eventually." She punctuated her words by popping more bacon and tomatoes into the oven, filling the room with the mouthwatering aroma of breakfast.

Richard ran a hand through his tousled hair, looking thoughtful. "It's funny," he mused, "I managed to win over you and even your parents, but Salem? That cat is a tougher nut to crack." His face showed an exaggerated apologetic look, and I burst into laughter.

As Leticia placed a plate of steaming breakfast in front of Richard, he turned back to me. "So, what's on your to-do list today?" He was off filming duty and planning a trip to London to renew his US work visa, which was set to expire in a few weeks. He hadn't asked me to tag along, knowing that London and I had a complicated history after my harrowing kidnapping incident last year.

"Well, it's Tuesday, so I have a management meeting at the office, and later, I'm meeting with a tech firm to discuss our new expansion into film production," I told him, sipping my coffee. "Want to play the supportive boyfriend?"

Richard flashed a charming smile but shook his head. "Darling, as much as I'd love to, I don't want anyone to think I'm guarding the lady boss," he said with a playful smirk.

I rolled my eyes, chuckling. "Oh, please! As if the entire universe isn't already aware that you're sleeping with the lady boss," I retorted, unable to hide my amusement.

Richard joined in my laughter, his eyes filled with mischief. "True, but no need to rub it in their faces. I still don't want to make your colleagues uncomfortable. Plus, I trust you can handle everything on your own — you're a powerhouse. But how about dinner tonight?"

I stood up, planting a quick smooch on his lips. "Sounds perfect. Jeffrey

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can play chauffeur for you, and I'll stick with the twin goons," I teased, referring to our bouncer-like security detail, Chen and Arthur.

"Do you need me to guard the shower, darling?" Richard winked, his grin cheeky.

"Dream on, Richard. I'm running late!" I called out, leaving him laughing and cooing at Salem, "Now, I see where you get your attitude from, buddy."

2

Stepping out of the sleek black town car, I plunged into the pulsating heart of Manhattan. The skyscrapers were like lofty giants, stretching their necks to kiss the sky. And among them, my father's newly remodeled building stood tall and proud. This was the nerve center of the US and European expansion of his global real estate empire, and now, it housed the new headquarters for my publishing and film production company.

I took a deep breath, feeling a surge of excitement and anticipation course through my veins. My heels clicked against the pavement as I approached the grand entrance, the sound echoing through the busy streets. The sun glinted off the glass facade, casting a warm glow on my face. I couldn't help but smile — this was the beginning of a new chapter, and I was ready to embrace it with open arms.

Chen and Arthur, the formidable twin goons, moved in perfect synchrony as they followed closely behind me. They're not actually twins — both Asians who dressed exactly the same as Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith in *Men In Black*. Their poker faces and bulging muscles screamed, "Don't mess with us!" They were now officially my bodyguards, assigned by my father to ensure my safety. In addition to them was Jeffrey, employed by Richard, who always had my six.

Before I discovered I wasn't just a regular Jane but actually an heiress to Daddy Warbucks, Chen and Arthur had been my secret guardian angels since my university days. Back then, I was blissfully oblivious to my VIP status and happily living in la-la land. It wasn't until last

year, while working as a screenwriter for the TV series *Back In Time*, that our paths crossed again. That's where I bumped into Richard, the smoldering lead actor who turned out to be more than just a pretty face.

Once upon a time, I was just a girl next door, sharing a cramped apartment with my furball, barely scraping by. Now? Well, let's just say things have changed quite a bit. There were moments when I yearned for the old days — the freedom to walk down the street or hop on a subway without the fear of being papped.

Sure, I missed the simplicity of my past, but I'd be lying if I said this new chapter didn't have its own perks. Making my way across the marble-floored lobby, I felt the weight of my new world settle on my shoulders. I wasn't just an ordinary girl anymore — I was Oliver Ortega's sole heir and a budding powerhouse in my own right. And so, the adventure begins...

Stepping through the revolving doors, I caught my reflection doing a little dance on the glossy marble walls. My long, wavy brown hair framed my face, accentuating my high cheekbones and brown eyes. I looked more American than Asian, a unique blend of my heritage. Today, I opted for a tailored navy blue pantsuit, exuding an air of confidence and professionalism. The fabric hugged my figure just right, making me feel powerful and elegant. I accessorized with a delicate gold necklace that lay gently against my collarbone, matching earrings that sparkled in the light, and the four-seasons Tiffany charm bracelet Richard gave me.

The lobby was abuzz with activity, but as I walked in, there was a noticeable shift in the atmosphere.

"Good morning, Ms. Ortega," chimed one of the receptionists, sounding like a star-struck fan. I'm still trying to acclimate myself to being addressed as Ortega. I was Hope Williams for 27 years, proudly bearing my mother's family name. But last year, in an unexpected twist, both my parents decided that it was time for me to adopt my father's last name. This ensured no one would question my place in the world and aligned my identity with the name emblazoned across every facet of Ortega's Holdings.

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Meanwhile, the private security guards, who probably moonlight as bouncers at some swanky nightclub, were busy playing 'Elevator Traffic Control.' They were making sure no one dared to invade my personal space by sharing an elevator ride with me. I mean, come on! It's not like I've got cooties or something. I really don't mind rubbing elbows with other humans in an elevator. Heck, I've survived riding the subway for decades, so packed you could smell what the guy next to you had for breakfast!

As I strutted across the lobby, I could feel a million eyes on me, their gazes bouncing off my invisible shield of determination and poise. My father had built an empire, and now it was my turn to make my own mark on the world.

I stepped into the elevator, and Chen pressed the button for the top floor. The ascent was smooth, and the panoramic views of Manhattan took my breath away. When the doors finally slid open, I was greeted by the familiar sight of my office.

"Good morning, Ms. Hope!" Hillary, my secretary, was someone in the executive office assigned to assist me and do some heavy lifting in my administrative functions. "Here's your coffee, soya milk, half sugar." She handed me the usual Starbucks coffee on the go.

Hillary was a blond, petite woman, very energetic and capable of working magic on logistics. "You have a management meeting at 11 AM, which I already canceled because your father's secretary informed me that he wants to see you at lunch. Ms. Yumi will join you at the meeting with Star Communications at 3 PM. Jenna Huey called and asked for a return call. I will dial her number as soon as you're settled. Do you want me to close your schedule for today?" She asked, her pen poised over the day planner.

"Yes, please. And pencil in my dinner with Richard," I said as we walked into my office. "Oh, and can you ring him up and give him a hand with the table booking?"

"Of course, Ms. Hope! I'll take care of it right away," she chirped back, flashing me a grin that could outshine the sun.

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“You’re a star, Hillary!” I exclaimed as I took a sip from the paper cup. Hillary was a walking, talking efficiency machine, I swear. As she left to make the arrangements, I settled into my chair and prepared myself for the day ahead.

It may be where I worked but my office served as a sanctuary, reflecting my personality and passion for the creative arts. Floor-to-ceiling windows bathed the room in natural light, showcasing the rich mahogany bookshelves filled with my extensive collection of novels and scripts. Framed movie posters and original artwork from some of my favorite films and authors adorned the walls, including the promotional poster of Richard dressed in 1920s attire for *Back In Time*. “Hello there, handsome,” I whispered to the framed poster.

In the cozy nook, a neat stack of my very own novel, both paperback and hardcover editions of *Fleeting Embers*, were proudly displayed. This is my pride and joy — this baby of mine was more than just ink on paper, it was a gut-wrenching saga of love and loss, a poignant reminder of the fleeting nature of joy. *Fleeting Embers* painted the lives of two young hearts, Sarah and Martin, who found a haven in each other amidst the whirlwind of their personal battles. The backdrop? An idyllic, postcard-perfect town that added its own charm to their story.

Flashback to last year, I remember the sting of reality as I pitched this novel to an array of agents and publishers. They didn’t want my novel; they wanted me. More specifically, they wanted an autobiography — a tell-all tale of my life with Richard, or rather, Richard’s life with me. It felt like a punch to the gut, but then, Astral Ink came to the rescue. They saw the potential in my novel, published it, and voila! A successful launch!

During my book launch, after months of separation, Richard surprised me and returned to New York. In front of the press and guests, he slipped my engagement ring back onto my finger, and from that moment forward, he never let me go. Every time I glance at *Fleeting Embers*, it serves as a sweet reminder. Despite owning a publishing and film company, at heart, I will always be Hope Williams, the writer.

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At the heart of the room, a sleek glass desk symbolized my aspirations and the work I still had to accomplish. A plush, high-backed white leather chair beckoned me, inviting me to immerse myself in the realm of storytelling and imagination.

The office phone rang, and I switched it to speaker mode. It was Jenna. "I didn't call your mobile because I know Richard's in town, Esperanza. I don't want to intrude," she said, skipping any pleasantries and diving straight to the point — typical Jenna.

Jenna Huey, a bestselling author known for her romantic fiction, was my boss once. I was privileged to work as a book editor and character developer for her novels. Things took an exciting turn when one of her books, *Back In Time*, was selected for a TV series adaptation. This opportunity propelled me into the world of screenplay writing. My career took an unexpected turn, and suddenly, I was thrust into the glitzy world of screenplay writing, and boy, was it a wild ride!

And the best part? Jenna and I hit it off somewhere along the line of plot twists and character arcs. We went from sharing professional critiques to sharing inside jokes and going on café hunts. Yes, you heard it right - I became pals with THE Jenna Huey. Crazy, huh? But hey, that's just how the cookie crumbles in the writing world!

"You know you can always reach out to me, whether Richard's around or not," I replied.

"Anyway, I'm calling to pitch Season 2 of *Back In Time*," she announced.

I paused, confused. "But, Jenna, we're already committed through Book 3, right?"

"That was during your father's time, when he was the producer. Now that you're in charge, I thought it proper to pitch it again," she asserted.

I laughed. "Come on, I wrote the script. It's done. You just need to work on the production timeline. Besides, Season 1 is rating well as we speak."

"Aren't you going to head the production for Season 2?"

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"Jenna, I want to focus on screenwriting. That's where my interest lies," I clarified.

"Esperanza, you never change. You're still my favorite girl, with better clothes and a handsome fiancé now," she laughed.

I smiled, glancing at the silver-framed photo of Richard and me on my desk — a candid shot he'd posted on my Instagram account and our very first photo together. We weren't even a couple then, but we already looked so happy. Returning to the present, I told Jenna we'd have lunch the following day before saying our goodbyes.

I ended the call just as Hillary slipped into my office, reminding me about my lunch meeting with my father. "I've already notified Arthur and Chen to meet you in the lobby," she informed me. "And don't forget about your four o'clock meeting with the tech firm."

"Thanks, Hillary," I said as I collected my phone and bag, preparing to meet my father.

As I stepped into the lavish Manhattan restaurant, I immediately spotted my father, Oliver Ortega. He was comfortably seated by a window, looking every bit the influential figure in his customary dark pinstripe suit. A handsome man of 50, his Filipino-Chinese lineage lent him a unique charm. His 5'11" frame was topped with hair that was a handsome blend of dark and salt-and-pepper shades, while his intense brown eyes held an allure few could resist. He had a natural ability to be the center of attention, even when he wasn't consciously making an effort. I strolled over and claimed the seat opposite him, eager to catch up and discuss our plans.

"Hope, sweetheart! You look absolutely stunning," he exclaimed, his eyes sparkling with delight as he kissed my cheek affectionately. "How does life treat you these days?"

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"Busy but good," I replied, smiling. "The Quill Quest Publishing is taking off."

Our waiter approached, and we quickly ordered a delicate lobster bisque for me and a hearty steak for my father. We both opted for glasses of rich, velvety Bordeaux, knowing it would perfectly complement our meals.

The sommelier filled both our glasses. As we savored our wine, my father dove straight into business talk. "Tell me more about your publishing firm," he asked, reclining in his chair. "Are you planning to expand?"

"Dad, you've seen the reports. You're aware of everything happening at my firm. Our updates go to the executive committee, and I'm certain they relay everything to you," I replied, idly spinning my wine glass.

"I do. But I want to hear it from you," my father insisted.

"Okay!" I nodded eagerly. "Dad, we're contemplating diversifying into other media. We're exploring film, television, and even podcasts. The opportunities are limitless!" I told him about my meeting with a tech company about developing an app for writers all over the world to pitch their books or scripts without needing to travel to Hollywood in Los Angeles.

"An app for writers to present their work without traveling? That's an excellent idea, Hope. It'll create numerous opportunities for undiscovered talent."

I grinned, a wave of pride washing over me. "Precisely. We aim to provide a platform as accessible as possible for creative minds to showcase their stories to the world. With the right guidance and support, we might just discover the next bestseller or blockbuster hit."

My father nodded, impressed by the concept. "And how do you plan to monetize this app? Will users need to pay a subscription fee, or will you rely on advertising revenue?"

"We're still working out the details," I admitted, "but we're considering

a freemium model. Basic access would be free, while premium features like personalized feedback and priority pitching would come at a cost. We believe this approach will strike the right balance between accessibility and profitability."

My father's eyes sparkled with excitement. "That's fantastic, Hope. I always knew you had a keen eye for business. It's in your blood."

Our food arrived, and we eagerly dug in. The lobster bisque was divine, its creamy texture and hint of sherry made my taste buds dance. My father appeared equally delighted with his perfectly cooked steak, accompanied by a mouthwatering peppercorn sauce.

Pausing between bites, he asked, "How do you plan to manage all these projects? It's quite a lot to take on."

I thought for a moment before responding. "We intend to hire more staff and partner with other creative agencies. Having a strong team in place is crucial for supporting our growth."

Dad nodded, taking a sip of his Bordeaux. "True. And what about financing? Expanding into new territories can be expensive."

"We're casting a wide net," I responded with an air of assurance. "We've entertained overtures from potential investors while simultaneously considering the route of crowdfunding campaigns. I'm confident that we'll secure the necessary funds."

"I want Ortega's Holdings to retain majority ownership. If necessary, only offer a 20% stake to outside investors," he instructed. "Maintain as much family control over the business as possible and limit outsider involvement to a minimum."

"Dad, you've already poured so much into this. This venture is a small fish in your vast sea of holdings – it barely makes a ripple, let alone a significant contribution. At least not yet! I'm so excited about our future but I don't want to impose on you, especially now that my firm is finally out of the red," I asserted with pride.

"All the more reason for me to invest further in you," he pronounced

with conviction.

"Thanks, Dad. By the way, how long are you in town?" I asked, dabbing my lips with the linen napkin from my lap. My father was primarily based in Manila and Singapore, where our main headquarters were situated.

"I'm jetting off to London on Wednesday. I've heard Richard is heading there this week; he could accompany me. It's high time I spent some quality time with my future son-in-law," he remarked with a smile, then promptly followed up with, "When is the wedding date?"

"That sounds like a great plan!" I replied. "As for the wedding, we're still in the process of finalizing the date."

He savored the final bite of his steak before remarking, "You know, your mother never ceases to inquire about it."

The revelation that my parents were in consistent contact took me by surprise. When my father left New York to oversee their businesses, I was just two years old. My mother was so heartbroken, she severed all ties with him. However, after my heartwarming reunion with Dad last year, she found it in her heart to forgive him. Mom now led a contented life with my stepdad Steve in sunny California, while Dad remained a bachelor. "Dad, when Mom broached the subject, she actually wanted you to discuss it with me," I explained, rolling my eyes playfully.

He responded with a hearty chuckle. "I'm aware of that." He seemed to hold onto a thought momentarily before choosing instead to say, "Your mother appears genuinely happy with her life now, and that fills me with joy."

Reaching across the table, I gently clasped his hand and asked, "Do you still have feelings for Mom?"

"I never stopped loving her. But ensuring her happiness has always been my foremost concern. Seeing her find it with Steve is more than I could have ever hoped for," he confessed, returning the squeeze on my hand.

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Then, without missing a beat, he deftly steered the conversation in a new direction. "Hope, I understand this is a delicate matter, but we need to address it. Regardless of your choice, I will respect it." He paused for effect before proceeding, "You are my only heir. I feel a certain unease at the thought of you not presenting Richard with a prenuptial agreement."

"I'm still unsure about the best way to broach that subject," I admitted, fiddling with my wine glass. "Richard had already dismissed his prenup agreement before your re-entry into my life and all that came with it. He did note that my circumstances are significantly different now and recommended that I formulate a prenuptial agreement to safeguard myself — not just from him, but from any potential threats."

"Hmm... I've never questioned his intentions. I've seen the depth of his love for you and how he almost lost his mind when we couldn't locate you." Dad's voice faded as if he wished to erase the last phrase, a painful echo of my traumatic experience at the hands of Richard's ex-wife. We both sank into a contemplative silence.

During the previous summer in London, I had uncovered Richard's disturbing past — how Emilia Grant, a celebrated fashion icon in Britain, had emotionally tormented him. Instinctively, my hands cradled my stomach. At that time, I was 20 weeks into my pregnancy when Emilia abducted and tortured me. I miscarried my baby — my precious little bean. Sensing my shift in mood, my father gave my hand a reassuring squeeze, reminding me that I was safe now and Emilia was behind bars.

"Are you still keeping your old apartment?" He asked, steering the conversation away from my haunting memories of London.

"Yes, I can't bring myself to let it go. That place was a part of my identity," I confessed.

"Well, that's good news. Because I've asked Yumi to negotiate for the purchase and renovation of the building to provide better homes for the tenants," he declared.

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"Oh my God, Dad!" I exclaimed. "The Sungs will be thrilled!"

Once our plates were cleared, we ordered a delectable chocolate soufflé to share. As we relished the warm, molten dessert, my father lifted his glass.

"To the future of your publishing and media enterprise," he proposed a toast, his eyes sparkling with pride. "May it continue to scale new heights."

I tapped my glass against his, brimming with excitement and gratitude. "Thank you, Dad. Your support has been indispensable."

As we finished off our dessert, we exchanged our farewells. I was set to return to my office while he was chauffeured to his subsequent meeting outside New York City. As I watched him stride towards his car, I couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude for having reconnected with him and getting to know him as my father. More than two decades of separation may have been a formidable gap, but we were both committed to bridging that chasm. I took a deep breath and allowed Chen to usher me into the back seat.



I exited the conference room promptly at 6 PM, leaving Yumi and the rest of my project core team to finalize the details with the tech firm. As I stepped into the hallway, my eyes widened in disbelief — there he was, Richard Collins, the Hollywood heartthrob and the love of my life, right in the middle of the floor lobby. He casually unbuttoned his navy blue suit jacket, revealing an immaculate white shirt underneath as he emerged from the elevator. The moment he appeared, the entire space seemed to brighten as if illuminated by a thousand stars. Every woman on the floor blushed or giggled, stealing glances at him from their desks while trying to maintain composure.

I approached him, my heart pounding with excitement. His eyes sparkled as he caught sight of me. "There you are, darling. Are you ready for our dinner date?" Richard asked, his voice smooth as silk. He leaned in and gently kissed my lips, causing my heart to race faster.

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"Almost. Just give me a moment," I replied, sounding calm and collected as we walked toward my office together.

"Good evening, Mr. Collins. Can I get you anything, like water or coffee?" Hillary greeted him warmly.

"There she is, the superwoman! Thank you for helping me with the reservation. But don't worry, I'm all set," he replied, offering her a charming wink that likely sent her heart fluttering.

I allowed Richard to explore my office as I quickly retreated to the bathroom to change out of my business suit and into my exquisite Vivienne Westwood black pencil dress – the perfect outfit for a night out. The dress featured a flattering, structured bodice that beautifully accentuated my curves, while a tastefully plunging neckline added a touch of allure without being overly revealing. The classic cap sleeves provided just enough coverage for a chic and polished appearance. Falling just below my knee, the dress exuded timeless refinement. A hidden zipper closure at the back ensured a seamless and secure fit.

As I fumbled with the zipper, Richard appeared behind me. His strong hands gently intervened, effortlessly zipping me up. "You look absolutely stunning, darling," he whispered into my ear, our eyes meeting in the mirror, sending shivers down my spine. Richard's blue-grey eyes seemed to transform into a mesmerizing smoky grey shade. Suddenly, he unzipped my dress and let it fall above my waist. His breath was hot as he pulled down my black lace bra to expose my breast. He cupped them, and my nipples hardened at his touch. His gaze from the mirror never left mine. He held my eyes as if taunting me to watch him make love to me. He pinched my nipples and pulled them gently, and I cried from a frenzy.

"Oh, Richard..." I murmured. He planted one last kiss on the back of my neck — a real toe-curler. Then, with a sigh that sounded like a deflating balloon, he fixed my bra and zipped up my dress. Talk about a party pooper, right?

"Later, my darling. As much as I want to take you now, I look forward to having those legs wrapped around me," he whispered, his warm breath sending shivers down my neck, creating a familiar longing. He

then gently turned me around, and our eyes locked for a brief moment, filled with an intensity that took my breath away. Richard pressed his lips against mine, kissing me with a tender and fierce passion as if our souls were merging instantly.

I could feel my heart pounding against my chest, the rhythm echoing through my entire being, overwhelming me with excitement and vulnerability. Overcome by the intensity of our connection, I rested my head on his chest, seeking solace in the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. The warmth emanating from his body enveloped me, providing comfort and reassurance.

Richard held me tightly, his strong arms wrapping around me like a protective shield, making me feel secure and loved. As we stood there, wrapped in each other's arms, it felt as though time itself had come to a standstill, allowing us to savor this precious moment before embarking on the night ahead.

Hand in hand, we walked out of my office, leaving the starstruck employees behind, their eyes glued to us as we made our way through the room. As we prepared to step outside into the cold winter night, Richard assisted me with my long coat. Once outdoors, despite the chill, I barely noticed it as Richard's arm wrapped protectively around me, providing a warm shield.

Richard pulled me closer as we approached the posh restaurant, our breaths visible in the frosty air. "I've been looking forward to this all week, Hope. I can't wait to spend the evening with you."

"Me too, Richard," I said, my heart swelling with happiness.

And with that, we entered the restaurant, ready to enjoy a magical evening together, away from the admiring glances and giggles that had filled my office just moments before.

3

SATURDAY.

Today, we marked the day when we would finally make pivotal decisions for our wedding. At the very least, we aimed to settle on critical details such as the date and venue, enabling us to engage wedding planners who could handle the remaining logistics. As I stepped into the living room, excitement surged through me. The sweet aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled our penthouse apartment while sunlight streamed through the windows. The melted snow outside cast a warm glow upon us as we lounged on the plush white couch, surrounded by stacks of bridal magazines and wedding planning books.

"Let's kick things off by picking a date," I suggested, my eyes glinting eagerly. "How about December 15th? The festive decorations create an enchanting atmosphere."

Richard nodded approvingly. "That sounds splendid, darling. I'm looking forward to the day I get to call you my wife." He slid closer to me and lovingly tucked a few stray strands of hair behind my ear.

We shared an affectionate gaze before plunging into the next agenda – the wedding entourage. I had always envisioned having my nearest and dearest by my side on my special day. I retrieved a notepad and began to scribble down names.

"Let's see, for my bridal party, I'd like Jenna to serve as my maid of

honor. As for the bridesmaids, I'm leaning towards Jane, Lizzie, and of course, Brittany, who's been quite keen to be involved," I said, glancing at Richard for his affirmation. Jane and Lizzie were my friends and former roommates from university, while Brittany Ginger was Richard's co-star in *Back In Time*. She was the first to witness our whirlwind romance; since then, we've become close friends.

"That sounds like a strong lineup, darling. As for my groomsmen, I'm considering Tom, Jack, and Robin. I want Henry to stand as my best man." Henry was Richard's son from a previous marriage. He also happened to be a friend of mine. At 25 years old, he was closer in age to me than Richard was. As for Tom and Jack, they were yet to cross paths with me. Robin, however, was a familiar face; he was the director of our current TV series.

With the entourage settled, we moved on to the most crucial detail — the location. Both Richard and I were avid readers, and our shared love for literature held great significance in our lives. It seemed only fitting that we chose a venue that represented this passion.

"Richard, I've thought about it a lot. When Carrie Bradshaw planned her wedding with Mr. Big, I dreamed of having something similar," I said, but before I could continue, Richard interrupted me. "Who are Carrie Bradshaw and Mr. Big?" He asked with a puzzled expression.

I laughed heartily. "For someone who's into Hollywood, you're unfamiliar with these two? *Sex and the City*, remember?" I raised my eyebrows.

"Ah, I see," he responded with a smirk.

"Come on, Richard! It's impossible that you missed such a popular TV series," I argued.

His laughter echoed, "Of course I know, darling. I was merely joking." He flashed me that smile, the one that never failed to melt my heart.

"So I would love to have our wedding at the New York Public Library. It's such a stunning and historic place, symbolizing our love for books and reading," I said, my eyes imploring.

* * *

Richard's face brightened at the suggestion. "That's a fantastic idea! Look who's excited now. I thought you just wanted to wed at the registrar's office?" He teased.

Before I could counter his teasing, my phone rang – it was Yumi. I put her on speaker. "Yumi, you're on speaker. Richard is with me."

"Well, good!" Yumi was my father's right-hand woman and often guided me in business and, occasionally, my personal life. "Our PR department just informed me that *Vogue* wants to feature you as the Winter Bride."

"What?! Yumi, I can't. I don't want to. I want my wedding to be intimate. I don't want to turn this into a circus!" I protested, glancing at Richard, who was already smiling, knowing how much this situation was beginning to torment me.

"This will give *Back In Time* excellent publicity and boost your reputation as the new production and publishing lady boss. Plus, it could skyrocket the sales of your book. Don't you want that?" Yumi countered. "Richard, help me out here."

"Yumi, this might be a bit overwhelming for Hope. Perhaps we should cut her some slack; this isn't the world she's accustomed to," Richard suggested.

"Well, it is now — given that she's about to marry you and she is Oliver's daughter. She has a role to play," Yumi retorted. She had a knack for pushing her agenda to benefit the business, even if it meant overshadowing the joy of my impending wedding. "What's so daunting about posing for a few photos in designer outfits? Millions of women would jump at such an opportunity for their weddings."

"But we both know that she's not just any woman; she's one in a million," Richard responded calmly, enveloping me in his arms to offer comfort. I shot Richard a pout, to which he responded with a smile, revealing his flawless white teeth.

"We need this publicity for our new project, Hope. Trust me when I say

I know what I'm doing. Our PR head will reach out to you shortly," Yumi said with an air of finality. Then, as if a lightbulb flashed in her mind, she added, "Oh, and I've just sent a new script to your email. I'd like you to review it; it's promising. You might want to consider getting James King on board for it. His current movie is on the top chart and the list of nominees for Oscar."

"Would you like to decide on our wedding cake as well?" I asked sarcastically, and Richard chuckled at my cheekiness.

"If you can send the cake samples to my office, I can do it," she replied, a tinge of amusement in her tone. Yumi was really good at winning arguments and getting her way. I rolled my eyes and ended the call.

"This isn't bad, darling. I'd also love for my bride to grace a fashion magazine for our wedding, and on their website, too! Millions of people will see my girl. But if you don't want it, I can make Yumi squash that," he said, kissing my lips.

What I cherished most about Richard was his ability to lift my spirits. So, if he desired to have me in the magazine feature, so be it.

"I will do it, Richard, but on one condition," I declared.

"Anything, my darling," he replied, embracing me tightly against his chest.

"I want George and Catherine at our wedding," I whispered, my voice trembling slightly. I knew that this request was not an easy one for Richard. He still held his mother responsible for what happened to me in London.

He hesitated, his voice tinged with a mixture of sadness and anger. "You're asking too much."

"She is still your mother, and I want her to like me. This is our chance to extend an olive branch," I reasoned, gazing into his eyes. "It's a monumental day for their only child — in the same way, I want to be a part of our children's weddings someday. I don't want to deprive her of that, Richard."

The Last Snowfall

* * *

Richard remained silent, but he tenderly kissed my forehead. Though he didn't give me an answer, I felt confident that he would eventually invite his parents.

With the date, entourage, and location settled, we eagerly delved into other aspects of our wedding, discussing catering, music, and floral arrangements. The room hummed with excitement and joy as our dream wedding slowly came to life. As we planned, I couldn't help but feel that our love story was indeed one for the ages.