

*Four Seasons*

# 1

## *Autumn, New York City*

Groaning, I buried my head under the pillows. My phone was ringing non-stop and I knew it wouldn't end until I picked up.

"It's Saturday, for Pete's sake! It's supposed to be my 'no-phone-calls' day!"

Of course, Salem, my two-year-old black cat, was the first one up, and she meowed at me impatiently from the foot of the bed.

"You, too, go away!" I shouted back.

Salem knew I'd been putting things off on finishing some book editing and was trying to motivate me. But all I wanted to do was stay in bed just a little longer. It was too early for anything else right now.

Unfortunately, Salem wouldn't let it go so quickly this time, and after several more minutes of constant meowing, I yelled, "Okay, I'm coming!" I looked at the yellow-eyed, black-furred menace at the foot of the bed, "You're supposed to be on my side and not working with whoever is on the other end of the line."

Salem gave me a look of disapproval and disbelief. It was almost like he silently said: *'You have got to be kidding me. You have got to be the laziest human in all of existence.'* Salem was quite the character. He loved socializing with humans and other cats, although he can sometimes be

aloof and stubborn. He was out most of the day but always returned home after a long day of chasing butterflies or hunting for birds and other critters. Salem, for all his gregariousness, had a tendency to complain and hiss at the slightest provocation, giving him an air of entitlement and hostility. It was as if he believed the world revolved around him, and any deviation from his expectations resulted in a barrage of grumbles and complaints. But no matter what, Salem will always be a loyal friend. Not today, though, as he threw loyalty out of the window and wanted me to settle what caused the noise resulting in the chaos early in the morning.

I sighed in exhaustion as the sound of my phone ringing echoed around the room. Reluctantly, I reached out to pick up the call and blinked at the caller ID. Jenna Huey. Of course. She and her relentless demands for her project to finish yesterday, if not sooner.

"I don't want to sound like a buzzkill, but I'm supposed to start working on my manuscript, and I need the characters for my story," Jenna exclaimed, breaking the peaceful silence of the morning.

As I rubbed my eyes, attempting to shake off the lingering drowsiness, I couldn't help but ask Jenna, "Why do you always wake up so early on weekends?" My voice sounded muffled since I was still lying under the covers.

"Why do you ask?" she retorted sarcastically, implying that she had a deadline to beat with her publisher.

I tried to listen carefully to what she was saying, yet all I could make out were fragmented sentences that seemed almost distant and stifled—like they were coming from another dimension. I forced myself to leave the bed with an exasperated sigh. I put her on speakerphone as I said, "I got your back, Jenna. I'll take care of it." I got to my kitchen and reached for the Nespresso machine—a small piece of luxury that served me well on days like this when reality refused to let go of its grip.

"I know you will. Hope, I would love to see you at my place when you have the time," she said before ending the call. Finally, some peace and quiet!

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The aroma of freshly brewed espresso filled the air as my realization became clear. This morning would be like most days — more writing, taking care of bills, and constantly questioning what the future has in store for me.

I slumped on one of my mismatched chairs in my tiny kitchen-slash-dining room. The room certainly didn't look fit for four people, or even one plus a guest, yet here I am, using it as my virtual conference room setup. I sipped coffee alone at an equally tiny table-chair combo plastered with postcards from Paris which I bought from the old bookshop in Lexington. Over the years, I have learned how to deal with demanding clients, and sometimes it was best just to listen and to give assurance that you will work on it as soon as possible.

Working alone definitely has its advantages. There was no need for second-guessing decisions or discussions on how to work more efficiently. When you're alone, you have complete control over the project, tackling it the way you think best without worrying about compromising with others. I could fully immerse myself in the task without worrying about others interfering with my creative process. I could work at my own pace, set deadlines, and put one hundred percent of my effort into every detail.

Of course, working alone also comes with its own set of challenges. No one will bounce ideas off or help solve the problem when you encounter obstacles. But for me, the benefits of solitude far outweigh the drawbacks.

Ultimately, it was all about finding the right balance between working alone and collaborating with others. Sometimes, the best outcomes come from combining both, and switching between the two is a valuable skill.

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I forced myself to switch into action mode. However, it seems like today isn't productive, considering how tired I still felt from staying up late last night working on some pending projects. Rather than diving straight into work mode as Jenna probably expected me to, I think taking a breather and getting some fresh air would help me shake off the grogginess. And perhaps I should grab some more caffeine.

"Salem, hop in. We're going Dunkin!" He perched happily atop my shoulder, and off we went to our favorite coffee-on-the-go spot at the corner of 89th, enjoying all the new sights around us while we made our way to our destination.

The morning chill of Autumn in New York was like a gentle reminder to the city-dwellers that winter was on its way. It wasn't too severe — just enough to make you want to bundle up and take an extra minute under the warm sheets before getting out of bed. On this particular day, it seemed every citizen had received the memo because the streets were almost eerily quiet for such a bustling metropolis.

As Salem and I walked down the street, I watched as steam rose from maintenance hole covers and people slowly emerged with their coffee cups in tow. The pedestrians moved at a plodding pace.

I got my Midnight Dunkin' while Salem was content with lying on the coffee table. We spent a few minutes staring out the window, knowing this peaceful scene wouldn't last long. Soon enough, cars and cabs began honking, and buses filled up with commuters heading into work for another day's grind. A couple of minutes more, people walking their pets around the neighborhood appeared as the autumn's chill began, along with its beautiful golden hues adorning every street corner. All these reminded me why New York City was such a fantastic place, even during its most mundane days!

As Salem and I made our way back home, I noticed how different it looked during this time of year. The trees were bare, and leaves were scattered about on the sidewalks rather than rustling above me. Autumn always feels special amid all this commotion. There was still something so calming about embracing this seasonal change in New York City — something that reminded me how much beauty can be found in these small moments throughout life if we only take a

moment to notice them.

My neighborhood was a charming mix of quaint shops and bustling streets. Nestled along my street lies everything one could possibly need for a comfortable life. From the old-fashioned diner, Millie's Place, serving up classic American fare, to the Wishy Washy laundromat where I can clean clothes with ease, and even Betty's Baked Goods where I get my daily bagel fix — all are just a few steps away from my doorstep. And when I feel like my apartment needs a pop of color, Victoria's Bloom is a hop and a skip away. The vibrant blooms and luscious greenery bring a sense of tranquility and peace to my dwelling, transforming it into a sanctuary in the middle of the exciting and noisy city life. Every day it comes alive and I love it. People going about their business, chatting outside doorways, or simply taking the time to appreciate each other's company. Even in its hustle and bustle, something undeniably beautiful about this unique area made me feel so connected to my home. It reminded me of why I fell in love with New York City in the first place.

"Hey Salem, would you like to make a quick detour to Charlie's place?" I glanced back at him, hoping he would be up for it. He was always delighted to visit Victoria's Bloom, situated on the ground level of my old yet charming apartment building. The floral shop was owned by my favorite neighbor, Charlie Sung, a 56-year-old immigrant who managed the store with his 22-year-old daughter, Victoria. Entering the shop is like stepping into a fairytale with its vibrant pink walls and rustic wooden shutters that let in the sunshine. Inside, bouquets of brightly colored flowers filled every corner, creating a perfume that envelops you as soon as you open the door and see Charlie's bright smile. Charlie is always friendly and welcoming, taking time to chat with every customer, no matter how busy he is.

Today was no different. There are already people gathering in front of his shop. I spotted Charlie by the flowerpots and Victoria operating the counter. Though his silver grey hair was receding and he had a noticeable bald spot on the top of his head, he had a distinguished look reminiscent of the original Mr. Miyagi from *The Karate Kid*.

I stepped out onto the street, feeling the cold wind on my skin and the gentle breeze in my hair. As I walked towards the flower stand, I could

see Charlie's smiling face beaming at me from behind rows of bright tulips.

"Hi, Charlie! How are the tulips today?" I called out, feeling my mood lift even further at the sight of the colorful blooms.

"Hey there, Hope. They are still as lovely as ever, just like you," he said with a grin, reaching out to pet Salem as he perched on my shoulder. "I have something for Salem in the kitchen, by the way."

As if on cue, Salem jumped off my shoulder and wasted no time darting off toward Charlie's kitchen knowing that he'd always find a treat waiting for him there. I couldn't help but chuckle at the sight of his black tail disappearing around the corner. He'll probably spend a few hours with Charlie like usual and find his way back to our place.

When I first moved into this building, I stumbled upon Charlie's flower stand and was immediately drawn to the beautiful blooms in the window display. As I stepped inside, Charlie greeted me with a warm smile, and I could tell that he was more than just a florist — he was a kind soul who had a story to tell.

I soon discovered that Charlie had left Vietnam two decades ago, seeking a better life in the United States. His journey had been anything but easy, and he had faced many challenges along the way. Yet, despite everything he had been through, Charlie remained an optimist, always ready with a kind word and a generous gesture.

As someone with a mixed background — my mom is from New York and my dad originally from Manila — I immediately felt a kinship with Charlie. We bonded over our shared love for Asian folklore and tales of adventure, and our conversations quickly developed from simple pleasantries to deep, meaningful exchanges.

Before I knew it, I had become a regular visitor to Charlie's home, popping in for a cup of tea and an hour of conversation. There, I met his daughter, Victoria. Despite only being five years younger than me, she was a force to be reckoned with when it came to politics and social issues. Her opinions were strong and well-informed, making her seem older beyond her years. She possessed a rare intelligence that set her

apart from her peers, captivating all those who had the pleasure of conversing with her. From the moment Victoria and I met, we hit it off instantly. We found ourselves spending more and more time together, talking and laughing on some Tiktok videos, or binge-watching *Queer Eye* and gushing over the charming Antoni Porowski until the early hours of the morning. Soon enough, she was hanging out at my apartment regularly.

I couldn't help but think that Charlie and Victoria had become like family to me, the kind of people who made this city a little bit more like home.

Salem had taken a liking to the Sungs. Whenever he was upset with me, he often sought refuge at Charlie's home. He and Victoria loved having Salem around, and I think Salem enjoyed the extra attention and treats he got from them.

"How's your book coming along?" Charlie asked.

"I don't write books, Charlie," I replied. "I create characters for the books."

"Come on, Hope. You're very talented. Why don't you write your novel instead of working on someone else's?"

"I know, but this job pays well," I said. "At least I can afford the rent and a little extra for Salem and me."

"Don't let economics dictate what you can and can't do," he said with a smile.

"Don't worry, I'll write that book someday," I reassured him. To be honest, I was reassuring myself as much as him. Publishing my book has been my dream since I started reading — it's been my favorite thing to do since childhood. Reading books and writing stories—there's nothing quite like it! Despite my best intentions, I found myself constantly creating story characters or editing someone else's work. It seemed that my own dreams always took a backseat, as if they were not worth pursuing. As time went on, I realized that my plans did not go as smoothly as I would have liked. Obstacles seemed to crop up at



every turn, making it difficult to pursue my own passions and desires.

Charlie and I chatted for a bit longer, catching up on the latest news and gossip from the neighborhood. As always, he had a kind word and a warm smile for everyone who passed by his stand. I patted Salem's head while he enjoyed his treats from Charlie, then I gave Charlie a quick peck on the cheek before heading toward my flat. I left the flower stand with a spring in my step, feeling grateful for the simple pleasures of life and the kind souls who brightened up the world around them.



As I settled into my modest room, I opened my laptop and got ready to work. I designed this room for writing: a couple of books on the corner shelves, memos and post-its scattered over the walls like stars in the night sky — it was perfect. What I loved most about this tiny, pleasant one-bedroom apartment was its ideal size. I loved the large windows that let in plenty of natural light, the cozy balcony from which I could breathe the fresh air, and the open floor and the space with an air of grandeur that belied its actual size, allowing me to imagine for a moment that it was much larger than it appeared to be. What this apartment may have lacked in luxury, it more than made up for in character. I picked most of my furniture at garage sales. The built-in bookshelves near the balcony created a cozy corner to curl up in with a mug of coffee and a good book. I love how my books were crowded in by my favorite art pieces, photos, and mementos. No matter how small or humble my apartment may be, these shelves reminded me of everything I needed.

As I picked up the old silver-framed graduation photo, nestled amidst a yellow teapot and my collection of Hilary Mantel novels, a wave of nostalgia washed over me. There we were, my friends and I, forever captured within the glass panes — eternally young and carefree. Life in those days revolved around part-time jobs to cover shared-room rent or apartment expenses. For the fortunate ones, parents' credit cards provided a safety net, covering costs without a second thought — no rat race, no student loan repayments. The three of us were

college buddies, all grappling with our shared struggles while working at Starbucks between classes.

Jane, the fiery redhead to my right, had married two years prior and now enjoyed a jet-setting life in Florence. Lizzie, my math companion, had chased her dreams by attending law school, ultimately becoming a junior associate at one of Chicago's top law firms. As I gazed at the photo, a sense of disappointment began to loom over me. Reflecting on my own journey, I couldn't help but feel that I had fallen short of the expectations I had set for myself. It appeared that everyone around me was accomplishing their goals and living their best lives, while I remained trapped in a cycle of indecision and uncertainty.

At 27, I was still living a fairly ordinary life and hadn't accomplished as much as I should have for someone in their twenties. I graduated college with honors and briefly worked at an advertising firm as a copy editor before moving to a book publishing firm. Then I found myself working independently with some writers or ghostwriting for them. As the product of an American mother and Filipino father, I looked different, not too American but not entirely Asian. My hair is long and dark with wispy bangs framing my fair complexion, while my brown eyes reveal just how shy I truly am. I resembled my mother in many ways but her green eyes and blond hair were the glaring difference. Sometimes, I wished I had inherited her eyes —hers were bright green ones with specks of grey.

My love and sex life were sadly non-existent, as I hadn't prioritized dating until now. But even so, my little corner of the world gave me solace and peace. Growing up in the diverse city of New York instilled an appreciation for different cultures that I would carry with me to adulthood. While it could not replace what I might be missing elsewhere, perhaps it was a small way of making up for it.

I quickly fixed myself a mug of coffee and brought it to my table, curling up into my chair as I prepared to write. Salem had gone away for his usual afternoon jaunts so, enjoying the quiet respite, I slowly took a sip from the steaming mug. The warm liquid filled me with renewed energy and determination to tackle the task ahead. I turned on my laptop, ready to begin.

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I started working on Jenna's book characters — this is one of my most fulfilling writing jobs. It was like having my own witching hour, when I summoned magic and breathed new life into the pages. With every keystroke, I crafted characters that came to life, captivating readers and leaving them spellbound. I wrote until almost sundown and took a break to prepare a peanut butter and grape jelly sandwich. As I munched away at my very late lunch but too early for dinner, Salem returned home like clockwork — just as he always did around twilight. He padded calmly through the door with an air of magic, almost like he had been out casting spells all day. He meowed as if asking what I'd been up to while he was gone and, after giving me one last curious glance, hopped onto his bed in the corner of the room —ready for another evening nap.

I looked at the crisp autumn twilight. The sky over New York City was breathtaking. From my tiny balcony, I can glimpse the horizon far into the distance — a timeless backdrop of soft pink and orange hues against an expanse of deep blue sky. Above me was a sparkling carpet of stars stretching endlessly; and beyond them were fluffy white clouds floating lazily. In the middle of a bustling city, it was serene, with an almost magical quality that never fails to fill me with awe.

It didn't take long before Salem's gentle purring filled up every inch of space in our tiny apartment —how we both liked it: cozy and peaceful.

## 2

As a freelancer, I've experienced the highs and lows of life away from the 9-to-5 grind. While embracing my independence has its advantages, there are also times when I miss the comfort of having a regular job with a steady income, not to mention the security of paying all those bills on time each month. But ultimately, I don't regret the freedom freelancing affords me. I can work flexible hours, explore new opportunities, and eventually do what I love without constraints or expectations. It's worth more than money, except when unpaid bills are staring at you. So when I received a call from Jenna offering me the opportunity to work with her, I eagerly accepted. Collaborating with Jenna involved various tasks, including character development, copy editing, and occasionally, a touch of developmental editing. Completing a book with Jenna typically took at least five months, sometimes even longer. With this project — in addition to others I was already working on — I could comfortably cover my rent for the next five months!

With my coat draped over my arm, I made my way toward Jenna's place. Despite its outdated transportation system, one of the things I love about New York City is that it's still easy to get around without relying on cabs, Ubers, or Lyfts. It only takes me 7 minutes to walk from 89th to the 86th Street station, where I can catch the 4, 5, or 6 train. The best part is the short walk from Lexington Avenue to the Upper East Side neighborhood — it always feels like a special treat, like a visit to Argosy bookstore, one of the oldest independent bookstores in the city. Of course, today isn't one of those days. With Jenna's deadline looming over my head like a red light, I couldn't

afford any detours — no matter how tempting they may be.

Jenna lived in one of the luxurious buildings on the Upper West Side, complete with a marble lobby and doorman. I had always been envious of the people living in this glamorous neighborhood. I passed all the chic shops and bakeries, watched nannies taking care of toddlers, and dog sitters walking their dogs, and I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to live like them.

What does it feel like when life is nothing more than brunch dates, shopping sprees, and social events? Would my days be filled with peace, or would there also be moments of stress? After all, they say money can't buy happiness! Then again, I bet having a luxurious lifestyle has its perks. This really swanky neighborhood, for starters.

Just when I was about to reach my destination, suddenly, a voice broke through my thoughts. "Welcome to our little piece of paradise!" It belonged to a silver-grey-haired older man wearing a suit uniform.

"Good afternoon, Fred!" I chirped.

Fred opened the door and ushered me inside the building, which looked even more impressive than its facade. There were marble walls everywhere and crystal chandeliers illuminating every room. The lobby looked more like a fancy hotel than an apartment building. Fred was probably on an afternoon break. Otherwise, you wouldn't see him outside of the building. During my first visit, he guided me around the hall while sharing stories about what he calls 'my hood.' Fred belonged to the 70's era and had great respect for the residents of New York, particularly the Upper East Siders.

Now he stopped mid-sentence, and with a mischievous glint in his eye, he said, "Do you want to know why so many people envy us rich folk? Come follow me." He always joked about being part of New York's rich and famous, and I couldn't help but laugh as we rode the elevator up to the 7th floor.

As we stepped out onto the observation deck, we were immediately greeted by a breathtaking view of Manhattan. The sun had just set, setting the city aglow with a golden-orange hue that stretched for

miles everywhere.

"You know, Hope," Fred began, his voice filled with wisdom, "Money brings freedom, but not happiness. It can provide access to places that would otherwise be inaccessible, but only if you use it wisely. True joy comes from within, no matter your status in life."

I couldn't help but feel grateful for Fred's insight as we basked in the beauty of the sunset. Yet, despite our peaceful surroundings, my mind wandered to the people who often idolize and envy the wealthy. "Sometimes I wonder," I said, watching the city below us come alive with twinkling lights, "if these people deserve your admiration, Fred."

He took a deep breath when our conversation took a turn to the profound. "I just realized how fortunate these few are and why they deserve such admiration. I would like to believe that most of them, no matter their success, remain humble and appreciate where they came from while trying to make sure everyone around them is happy, too." Fred said as we walked back to the elevator. He pushed the 11th button for me as he returned to the lobby. "So, whenever someone asks what living among wealthy people was like, my answer was always the same — it's simply beautiful."

I smiled at Fred and kissed his cheek good-bye as I stepped onto Jenna's floor. Taking my phone out of my bag, I said, "Hey Siri, open Note. Write 'include Fred as a wizard character in the next book project.'"



Jenna answered on the first ring of her doorbell and opened the door to greet me, I couldn't help but notice her poised and elegant demeanor. At 52, she exuded a sense of confidence and grace that seemed to come effortlessly. Her auburn hair, with hints of silver, framed her face in soft waves, accentuating her high cheekbones and bright green eyes.

She was engaged in a conversation on her mobile phone, yet still

managed to acknowledge me with a warm smile and welcoming nod and signaled me to proceed to her office. Her outfit was a perfect reflection of her stylish and sophisticated personality. She wore a tailored navy blazer over a crisp white blouse paired with well-fitting black trousers that fell above her black leather ankle boots. A delicate gold necklace adorned her neck, adding a touch of refinement to her ensemble. Despite being in the midst of a phone call, Jenna's presence commanded attention, making it clear that she was a woman who knew how to balance both work and style.

I trailed behind her down the hallway towards her office. I couldn't help but take in the surroundings. The room was tastefully decorated with a blend of modern and classic elements, creating an inviting atmosphere. A large, vibrant painting of a London cityscape dominated one wall, showcasing iconic landmarks like Big Ben and Tower Bridge.

As I was admiring the artwork, I was drawn to the striking 24 x 32-inch black and white photograph of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation. The image, encased in an intricately etched silver frame, hung proudly opposite her sleek, minimalist glass table. The British influence in Jenna's office was unmistakable — a subtle nod to her roots and proof of her love for her homeland's rich history and pop culture.

Jenna Huey was born in England and moved to America when she was in high school. She had been writing for thirty years, but unfortunately, not all her novels ended up on the bestseller list. However, her last two books finally received excellent reviews. She had wanted to start on her new novel for months, but something was missing until someone suggested she call in an expert to help jumpstart her story. That's how I came into the picture —a “creative genius” (as Charlie called it) specializing in creating and staging characters in stories.

“Perhaps I'm selling myself short,” I murmured, as I reflected on my ability to create characters with depth and purpose during the writing of the story.

As I reminisced about the first project I worked on with Jenna, I couldn't help but recall how I immediately got to work crafting characters that would draw readers in and make them feel like they

were part of the adventure. Jenna watched with wide-eyed wonder as I carefully created intricate backstories and personalities for each character, making sure every detail fit perfectly into place like pieces of a puzzle.

"You're good at it, Hope," she said admiringly. Jenna was thrilled to start working on her novel using the new characters I had created. In the past couple of weeks, she'd been busy plotting while waiting for my creations. Eventually, she started seeing her vision come together before her eyes.

"Creating characters is like staging an apartment for rent — you have to be creative enough so your reader falls in love," I said one day while we were discussing the personalities of each character. "You have to craft unique personalities, characteristics, and stories that will capture the reader's attention and make them relate with your characters. It's important to think about how a character would react in different situations and interact with the other characters to make them come alive on the page."

And now here I am again in her gorgeous office, waiting for her to finish her call. I studied the decor, which was far different from mine. Jenna had worked hard to create this luxurious atmosphere, which showed in every detail. In addition to the quintessential British mementos adorning her walls, she also showcased a curated collection of modern artworks, each piece thoughtfully selected to convey a distinct message. Positioned in a corner with a stunning cityscape vista, another circular glass table showcased a diverse assortment of accoutrements, reflecting her notable accomplishments and celebrating her success.

Unlike my humble writing nook, Jenna's office was meticulously designed and adorned with an impressive collection of trinkets from her world travels. An intricately carved wooden mask from Bali rested on one shelf, while a delicate Moroccan lantern cast a warm glow from a nearby windowsill. A small stack of colorful, handwoven textiles from her trip to Peru lay artfully arranged on a side table, each piece telling its own story.

The opulent displays were undeniable, and I couldn't help but feel her



power radiating from every corner of the room. Jenna even confessed that she wished she could bottle up the sensation and sell it.

Just as I was getting lost in my thoughts, Jenna's voice snapped me back to reality, "Hey there! I'm writing your check now. It's Esperanza Williams, correct?" she asked, having just wrapped up her phone conversation.

"Yep!" I confirmed with a nod.

Jenna's eyes lit up, and she offered a warm smile. "You know, I love your name. Esperanza means hope. It's one of those things that stuck with me from my high school Spanish class." She paused for a moment as if savoring a distant memory. Her appreciation for the meaning behind my name added a personal touch to our interaction, making the atmosphere in the room feel even more welcoming.

"My dad came up with it," I said with a hint of bitterness. "I never get to use it except in banks and my passport."

"Were you able to see your dad after he left when you were a child? Where is he now?"

"I honestly don't remember his face at all," I confessed, "whenever I asked my mother about him, she would always bail out and change the subject."

My father abandoned me when I was just two years old. I had never seen him again. I didn't have any letters, pictures, or memories with him. He had entirely vanished from my life.

"Anyway, I've added a little extra, so treat yourself to some new clothes," Jenna said with a hint of motherly concern. "Don't waste that beauty and youth sitting in front of your computer writing. When you get to my age, you'll regret it."

I chuckled politely, "Thanks, Jenna. But as you know by now, clothes and I don't get along well." Before Jenna could reply, I pondered aloud, "Is there more to life than just paying the bills? Maybe I should consider moving to London and finding my own Prince Harry?"

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Jenna laughed heartily, "Well, Esperanza, I haven't quite found my Prince Charming yet so I wouldn't hold my breath. But in all seriousness, life is what you make of it. You have the talent and the drive to succeed in anything you set your mind to. Just remember to enjoy the journey along the way."

I playfully pouted and quipped, "But, Jenna, where is my happily ever after?"

Jenna rolled her eyes. "Well, you'll need to be successful and a millionaire like Meghan Markle to hook up with a prince, too, my dear."

I let out a laugh, knowing that Jenna was right. But then she added something that genuinely shocked me. "But you know what, Esperanza? You are just as stunning as Meghan, with a huge heart to match. Who knows what opportunities may come knocking on your door?"

Jenna had always pushed me out of my comfort zone, and this time was no different. I glanced at her with a shy smile, and she seemed to understand what I felt —the uneasiness of being told you're attractive when you don't see yourself that way. Despite my reservations, Jenna kept pushing and encouraging me to try dating.

"I know it may feel uncomfortable at first, Esperanza, but trust me, there are plenty of eligible bachelors in town who would be lucky to have someone like you in their lives," she insisted with an arm around my shoulder.

I couldn't help but feel a pang of self-doubt. I've always considered myself quite ordinary, and I rarely wear makeup or put effort into dressing up. Nevertheless, Jenna's words lifted my spirits and gave me the confidence to try something new.

Despite my reluctance to date, deep inside I'm hoping to find my very own Prince Harry — someone who appreciated my unique looks and treated me like a queen every day. However, as of today, my fairy tale ending has yet to appear. Sometimes I wonder maybe my Prince

Charming hasn't even been born yet!

With a satisfied grin, Jenna sets down her pen and hands me the check. "Come on, let's celebrate our win today with some macarons at Ladurée!" she exclaimed, grabbing her coat and bag.

I couldn't help but feel grateful for Jenna's unwavering support and enthusiasm. Together, we strutted out of her impressive office, ready to indulge in sweet treats and continue chasing our dreams.



Jenna stopped at a clothing store window display as we strolled the chilly post afternoon. "Those will look good on you," she said. "At some point, you need to treat yourself to some nice clothes. Don't hide that slim figure with oversized coats or hoodies." She looked at me from my head to toe and shook her head sadly.

I smiled shyly at her before looking back at the beautiful dresses in the window. Could I ever afford something like that? With a deep breath, I replied, "Thanks, Jenna, but Salem and I will starve in the winter if I spend my check on those clothes!"

Jenna chuckled, hooked her arm through mine, and said, "Come on, let's just find you a young and attractive startup tech in Silicon Valley instead of those English royalties with their strict 'too-goody-you-can't-do-something-like-that' rules. I doubt there's still money in their hidden dungeons." We both laughed until our stomachs and lungs hurt.

We found the perfect spot at a cozy corner table in Ladurée, gazing across the bustling street. I caught my reflection in the window, still unsure of what could make me stand out from the crowd. Jenna always reminds me I am beautiful, but I couldn't shake the feeling that she was just being kind. Looking at my reflection, I took note of my long brown hair and the bangs that I consistently trimmed to prevent them from obscuring my brown eyes. I just knew I wasn't gorgeous.

Jenna's gentle voice interrupted my thoughts, "Esperanza, you remind

me of myself when I was a struggling writer, full of ideals but lacking direction." I didn't respond. Jenna and I had a unique understanding; sometimes, silence said more than words ever could.

We sipped our coffee as we watched people hurry by, many carrying bags full of secrets and stories waiting to unfold. It seemed like everyone here had something that made them unique — except me. In this city of struggle and ambition, I was content to simply go along with whatever life sent my way.

Jenna broke the quiet with a serious question, "Don't you feel like there's more to life than this?" she gestured towards the bustling street outside before taking another sip from her cup. "I mean, don't get me wrong," she continued, "it's great that you're comfortable and happy, but wouldn't you like to do something more? Something bigger?"

I looked away quietly, still unsure of how to respond. "Maybe I'm just scared," I admitted slowly, "scared that if I try to reach too high, I'll fall even further down."

Jenna smiled as if she understood what it felt like to have big dreams only to have them shattered by fear or reality. "No matter what happens," she whispered, "keep moving forward because life has so much more in store for you than you can imagine." I felt a happiness warm me better than the coffee did. Jenna never failed to remind me that I shouldn't give up on my goals and that I deserved more than the rat race we were in.

Jenna finished the last sip of her coffee, her eyes sparkling excitedly. "Come on," she chirped, extending an arm towards me. "Let's go make some magic!"

As we stepped out into the bustling street, I felt a new sense of energy surging through me, fueled by our conversation, the moments of comfortable silence that spoke volumes.

It became clear that there were endless possibilities; all I had to do was take a step forward and embrace the unknown with open arms. Life could still hold so many surprises waiting for me just around the corner, and I was ready to discover every one of them.

# 3

Saturday.

The day I always spend at the park, running and feeding the ducks. It became a beloved ritual that helped me unwind and de-stress after a long week at work. But little did I know, today was more than just another routine day at the park.

This morning, I was determined to go running in Central Park, and it was already shaping up to be a great day. After slipping on my shoes and grabbing my water bottle, I set off with the crisp autumn air engulfing me.

Crossing the threshold into the park, I was fascinated by an array of golden-green leaves that had just begun to turn red and orange, an incredible hue against a blue sky. Now and then, a gust of wind swept through, carrying sweet aromas from nearby bakeries — the scent of warm croissants and freshly baked pies lingering in the air.

I spotted one shop with a sign that proudly proclaimed, Purple Apron.

This quaint little bakery on the corner of my street had been there for years. But recently, it had gotten an upgrade — a fresh coat of paint in white and purple! Passersby couldn't help but be drawn in by its colors and the smell of freshly-baked goodies. Inside, the bakery was just as wonderful. The wooden tables and chairs painted white matched the purple and white wallpaper stripes. There were delicious treats everywhere — cupcakes, cookies, muffins — you name it! Every single

item was made from scratch by the baker herself, my friend Erin. Her signature cupcake, the classic vanilla topped with fluffy buttercream frosting and drizzled with chocolate ganache for good measure, is my favorite.

Every morning, the same excited customers queued up at the store's main entrance, eager to get their hands on the delicious treats. Little did they know I had my secret way in — a side door. What made it even more enjoyable was being greeted by Erin every time! She always appeared vibrant, cheerful, and perky, with her signature purple apron and hat creating a stunning contrast against the pristine whiteness of the kitchen. Today was no exception.

"Fresh coffee in the pot," Erin told me with a gentle smile. "And look here — there are even cupcakes!" I couldn't believe what my eyes were seeing! These heavenly treats smelled so irresistible that I had to take one, ready for my post-morning run snack. I quickly took a photo and shared it on my Instagram, basking in the delicious aroma that filled the room.

"Are you up for Mavi's yoga lesson next week?" Erin asked. "She met this new guru and insists we join this 'ten-days, no-talking meditation.'"

"Absolutely not! A full ten days of absolute silence?! We can barely manage a few minutes without speaking! I don't understand why she's so captivated by this extreme yoga masterclass. It's not like you'll acquire any supernatural powers by attending!" I stopped when I saw Erin's eyebrows raise higher than usual. I burst into laughter, and soon she joined in.

In spite of our playful teasing, both Erin and I recognized Mavi's unwavering determination this time around. My personal opinion took a backseat to offering support for our friend. However, I remained convinced that this silent meditation concept was absurd, and I had absolutely no intention of joining her! "Anyhoo, gotta go. Catch you later!" I said as I grabbed a chunk of bread, secretly hoping Erin wouldn't try to convince me to take up the challenge of Mavi's yoga master class.

\* \* \*

As I began my jog down the winding trails that wore dappled sunlight, something caught my eye — ducks! I ran up to a pond full of adorable ducks playing with each other, quacking happily, and swimming in circles. They looked like they were having so much fun that I wanted to join in, too! After completing my run, I walked over to where the ducks gathered around some grassy patches and fed them small bits of breadcrumbs. They gobbled it all up!

"It is such an amazing day surrounded by nature's beauty, isn't it?"

I looked up to see a charming, sun-kissed blond-haired man. His British accent only added to his undeniable charm and appeal.

"Yeah, it's a gorgeous day!" I responded, tossing a handful of breadcrumbs. "And these adorable ducks just make it even better! You're absolutely right. It truly is an incredible day. Mother Nature has outdone herself today."

"How fortunate of them to meet a beautiful human being who shares food with them. My name is Henry," he said, extending his hand to me.

As I rubbed my right hand through my yoga pants and accepted his grasp, I was at a loss for words. His warm handshake was like an invitation to be friends forever. I nervously nodded before finally being able to say, "I'm Hope."

I couldn't help but chuckle nervously at his uncharacteristic flat tone, "You aren't from here. Your accent, you're not from the same side of the Atlantic as me." Without thinking, I blurted out, "Ah, Henry. Like Prince Harry..." My thoughts immediately darted back to the controversial memoir, and a mischievous twinkle sparkled in my eyes. "Is it true that he applied Elizabeth Arden lotion on his, you know, todger? When his south pole is on the fritz ..." I hesitated, feeling a twinge of embarrassment for posing such a bold question to a handsome stranger. Thankfully, I had managed to use the now-famous slang term for the private area instead of the more explicit word 'penis' that had almost slipped past my lips.

Henry laughed, "I don't know. I haven't read *The Spare*. Have you?" His

eyes were laughing, too. He was adorable!

"Part of the occupational hazards," I replied, grinning.

"You get paid to read?" His tone was reminiscent of a young boy asking an innocent question.

"Mostly to read and write," I explained. "Sometimes, I'm asked to review books, develop characters in novels, or even ghostwrite for someone."

"So, you're like a writer for hire. Instead of an assassin for hire — who takes lives, you breathe new life into books," he quipped.

"You know, hearing you describe it that way — better than many of us who write for a living — makes me appreciate my job even more!" I exclaimed.

We both laughed at the playful banter that had unfolded between us.

Then I gazed at Henry. He had the perfect face — a chiseled jaw, blue eyes with specks of grey, and his long blond hair, which just grazed his shoulders, was tied in a perfect ponytail and glowed in the sunlight. His lean and toned body suggested he got in regular cardio, which explained his expensive athletic gear.

He looked back at me and smiled almost shyly before surprising me by asking, "Do you mind if I sit down with you?"

"Of course not! Please do!" I shifted sideways on the stone pavement to make room for him. "So, what's your story? Are you the new 007 assigned to spy on the CIA here?"

He chuckled. "I'm on a school break. I'll be off to med school in a few weeks."

"You seem quite young for medical school," I commented.

"I just turned 24 a couple of weeks ago. Not exactly young for someone who's about to go to a medical internship next year, but certainly too



young for whatever British super spy stereotype you have in mind right now," he chuckled.

"How did you know what I was thinking? For the record, James Bond's age when he first started as 007 isn't explicitly mentioned in the original Ian Fleming novels," I challenged him.

"Ha! It's generally believed that Bond was in his early 30s when he began his career as a secret agent with the double-0 status," Henry insisted.

"His age has varied in different adaptations and iterations of the story over the years!" I wasn't about to back down from the conversation.

"Just look at the actors who've played Bond: Sean Connery, George Lazenby, Roger Moore, Timothy Dalton, Pierce Brosnan, and Daniel Craig. They weren't exactly twenty-somethings," he elaborated.

"Hmm... I see your point. Connery is my favorite Bond," I admitted.

"Mine too. He's not at the top of my list, though. Joseph Wiseman as *Dr. No* and Gert Frobe as *Goldfinger* are up there. I always root for the bad guys," he laughed.

"I second that! Loki ranks higher than Thor for me." I was amused by how similar Henry's and my preferences were. "Speaking of Loki, Tom Hiddleston is another Brit in Hollywood. Why do they always cast Brits to play American superheroes — Andrew Garfield and Tom Holland for Spider-Man, Christian Bale for Batman, and Henry Cavill as Superman?"

"Don't forget Daniel Day-Lewis as American President Abraham Lincoln in Steven Spielberg's film *Lincoln*," Henry added.

"Are we running out of hero material in Hollywood?" I asked. Henry laughed as if he was the only one who understood his private joke. When I probed further, he laughed more and shook his head as if telling me, *you'll find out soon*.

It turned out we had more than just duck-feeding and rooting for

villains in common. I looked at Henry, his gaze was distant, seemingly lost in the tranquil ripples of the water, and his furrowed brow reflected the deep thoughts occupying his mind. Now and then, he would pause, absently watching a duck snatch a crumb before returning to his introspective state. The serene surroundings seemed to provide the perfect backdrop for Henry's quiet reflections as he sought solace in feeding the ducks.

"So, what brought you here?" I inquired.

"My dad has to work in the US from time to time, so he bought an apartment here," Henry said. "He was supposed to meet the real estate agent himself, but a pressing matter needs his immediate attention, so he sent me instead."

"Your dad sounds cool, Henry. Not all parents trust their children to handle significant financial transactions. My mom sometimes gets involved even in minor details like furniture purchases," I shared.

Henry smiled warmly, "He's the best father a son could ask for." I could sense the admiration in his voice as he spoke about his dad. "His work demands a lot of travel, and he was often absent, but he always made up for it during his breaks." His eyes sparkled, and he chuckled as if recalling a fond memory from the past. "One summer, when I was 12, my dad unexpectedly showed up at my summer camp. It turned into a bit of a disaster, as he unintentionally disrupted the entire afternoon's activities! Women and kids my age flocked to his side for attention."

"Your dad must be quite good-looking!" I blurted out.

"He truly is! If only I had inherited even a fraction of his striking features, I'd likely be faring much better," Henry remarked, casting a playful sideways glance my way, accompanied by a charming grin.

"Oh, please! That face of yours?" I gestured dramatically from his head to his feet, appraising him. "If you didn't inherit a substantial portion of your father's good looks, then he must be some sort of divine being!" I teased lightheartedly.

"If there is a god, my dad might just resemble one," he replied with a

smile.

I found myself drawn to Henry; like me, he wasn't afraid to show vulnerability or conceal any flaws. Furthermore, it felt like we'd known each other for a lifetime as we spent the afternoon feeding ducks.

Henry smiled and tapped the edge of the stone pavement where we sat. He looked like he was carefully choosing his words before finally asking: "So, what's the story behind that gorgeous look of yours?" I grinned, raising one eyebrow. He was about to receive the long answer if he only knew it!

"You mean this 'mixed-race' look?" I asked with verve. Henry shifted in his position, suddenly agitated as he quickly replied, an edge crept into his voice. "No, no – I didn't mean it like that! That sounds a bit racist." He ended with a nervous chuckle.

"No worries," I giggled. "I'm used to it anyway." It was so easy to talk about everything with Henry, from his childhood and our career choices to where I'm from. He seemed genuinely interested in my culture.

I picked up a slice of bread, crumbled it into small pieces, and tossed them into the pond as the ducks eagerly wiggled their way to the crumbs. Turning to Henry, I shared that my mother had been a free spirit from New York. "One day, she embarked on a backpacking adventure with some strangers and met my dad in Manila, where he was attending an art exhibit. They fell in love and had me, even though my dad's family threatened to disinherit him if he married my mom."

Henry smiled and remarked, "Wow, that's a classic love story of choosing love over money."

"In the beginning, yes. My dad chose love over his inheritance. Unfortunately, he couldn't handle the hardships he faced in New York. So, one day, he packed his bags and returned to his family in Manila. That was the last time we ever saw him. After that, it was just Mom and me left together," I replied.

\* \* \*

"I'm sorry to hear that, Hope," he said, patting my hand. I liked the warmth of his hand. "So, are you still living with your mom?"

"Oh, not anymore," I replied. "Mom married a tax lawyer and lives in California."

We swapped stories about our lives until we fed all the ducks, then he stood up and offered me his hand. I hastily swatted away the crumbs on my yoga pants and straightened up. Then, almost inaudibly, I asked, "So will I see you again?"

He shrugged. "I hope so. I'll be flying out for DC first thing tomorrow and then back to London soon after that." In a lighthearted yet dramatic tone, I smirked and said jokingly: "Same old me, though — Saturdays at duck ponds!"

As we said our goodbyes, Henry promised to keep in touch and that we'd meet again soon and I started the walk back home. However, it dawned on me that neither of us had exchanged mobile numbers or social media handles. I can't believe I had just spent an afternoon sharing my life with a handsome stranger I met in the park and then he vanished into thin air. I walked home feeling low and tried to put Henry out of my mind.

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The constant buzzing from my iPhone was all too familiar when I arrived home. Jenna was bursting with excitement when I answered the call. "You'll never guess what just happened!" she exclaimed.

My curiosity was piqued. "What is it? Did you get a book deal? Are you going to be on *Oprah*?" I could barely contain my excitement, too, as I pressed my phone between my ear and shoulder while sorting through the mail.

"I received an email from my book agent in Los Angeles. A new producer wants to turn my novel *Back In Time* into a television series!"

\* \* \*

"Wow!" I shrieked. Her hard work had paid off. This was a dream we both had and now it's coming true!

*Back In Time* had been gaining popularity, and I knew all too well just how powerful the story was. It was about an American soldier from the 1920s traveling through time to 2018 and falling in love with a woman he met in Seattle. Jenna's novel was about emotion — love and loss, heartache and joy. It tugged at your heartstrings and made you question how fate works.

My heart skipped a beat when Jenna told me the thrilling news. The novel she had worked so hard on will finally be made into a television series. I listened in rapt attention as she continued her non-stop chatter.

"This is a TV series and usually runs around fifteen episodes. I want you on my screenplay team, Esperanza," she said.

I couldn't help but feel a little overwhelmed as I absorbed the news. I knew the arduous task that lay ahead of me, but the thought of being involved in adapting a book for television was too thrilling to ignore.

While the prospect of collaborating with other writers excited me, I was nervous. Screenplay writing was unfamiliar territory for me, and I've always been more at ease working independently.

But then again, this was a lifetime opportunity that could take my writing career to the next level. Jenna quickly put my doubts to rest as she reassured me that we would work closely together to create something unique that people will remember for years.

"Don't worry, Esperanza. You're a very talented writer, and this will be your chance to showcase your talents on a much larger scale. And don't think for a second you're just a ghostwriter — your name will get out there too! *Back In Time* could be your big break."

Her words filled me with renewed excitement and confidence. She was right — this could be the stepping stone I needed to advance my career. I knew I would have to step out of my comfort zone and work with others, but the potential payoff was more than worth it.

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"What if the producers don't go for me, though? I've never done anything for television or film or screenwriting."

"Of course, they'll go for you! That part's already taken care of," she said confidently. "I know you can bring something unique to the table. Plus, I made sure to ask that any work done by my writing team is credited and recognized — that should help preserve the story." Jenna coaxed me out of my anxiety. "You can do this, Esperanza —trust me. All your hard work and dedication are going to pay off!"

Jenna's unwavering confidence in me was genuinely heartening. As she spoke, I felt the weight of my anxiety slowly lifting. The prospect of having my name on a television series was beyond thrilling, and the fact that Jenna had made sure my contributions would be credited and recognized gave me a sense of reassurance that my work wouldn't go unnoticed.

"All right," I said, wholeheartedly embracing the opportunity. "I'm in. Let's do this!"

Jenna let out a chuckle, clearly pleased with my response. "That's the spirit," she said.

"Just give me two weeks to complete my other projects," I said. "That way, I can focus solely on working with you and writing the scripts for the entire season for the next six months."

"Two weeks sounds reasonable to me. Of course, I understand you still have other projects to take care of, so take your time with them. Our writing team must be focused and committed to carefully tackling each episode."

I let out a small sigh of relief. I knew the next six months would be challenging, but I was ready to put in the time and effort required to complete the job.

"I appreciate the opportunity, Jenna," I said gratefully. "I'm excited to see where this goes, and I'll do my best to give this project my all."

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## Four Seasons

With that settled, I hung up the phone, excited and motivated. It would be difficult, but I was determined to make the most of this remarkable opportunity. There was no turning back now — my journey as a television screenwriter had officially begun. I couldn't wait to delve into the world of television and unleash my creativity on a new platform. Things were looking up for me!