

*In Five  
Years*

REBECCA SERLE

Quercus

# Chapter One

Twenty-five. That's the number I count to every morning before I even open my eyes. It's a meditative calming technique that helps your brain with memory, focus, and attention, but the real reason I do it is because that's how long it takes my boyfriend, David, to get out of bed next to me and flip the coffee maker on, and for me to smell the beans.

Thirty-six. That's how many minutes it takes me to brush my teeth, shower, and put on face toner, serum, cream, makeup, and a suit for work. If I wash my hair, it's forty-three.

Eighteen. That's the walk to work in minutes from our Murray Hill apartment to East Forty-Seventh Street, where the law offices of Sutter, Boyt and Barn are located.

Twenty-four. That's how many months I believe you should be dating someone before you move in with them.

Twenty-eight. The right age to get engaged.

Thirty. The right age to get married.

My name is Dannie Kohan. And I believe in living by numbers.

"Happy Interview Day," David says when I walk into the kitchen. Today. December 15. I'm wearing a bathrobe, hair spun

up into a towel. He's still in his pajamas, and his brown hair has a significant amount of salt and pepper for someone who has not yet crossed thirty, but I like it. It makes him look dignified, particularly when he wears glasses, which he often does.

"Thank you," I say. I wrap my arms around him, kiss his neck and then his lips. I've already brushed my teeth, but David never has morning breath. Ever. When we first started dating, I thought he was getting up out of bed before me to swoosh some toothpaste in there, but when we moved in together, I realized it's just his natural state. He wakes up that way. The same cannot be said of me.

"Coffee is ready."

He squints at me, and my heart tugs at the look on his face, the way it scrunches all up when he's trying to pay attention but doesn't have his contacts in yet.

He takes a mug down and then pours. I go to the refrigerator, and when he hands me the cup, I add a dollop of creamer. Coffee mate, hazelnut. David thinks it's sacrilegious but he buys it, to indulge me. This is the kind of man he is. Judgmental, and generous.

I take the coffee cup and go sit in our kitchen nook that overlooks Third Avenue. Murray Hill isn't the most glamorous neighborhood in New York, and it gets a bad rap (every Jewish fraternity and sorority kid in the tristate area moves here after graduation. The average street style is a Penn sweatshirt), but there's nowhere else in the city where we'd be able to afford a two-bedroom with a full kitchen in a doorman building, and between the two of us, we make more money than a pair of twenty-eight-year-olds has any right to.

David works in finance as an investment banker at Tishman Speyer, a real estate conglomerate. I'm a corporate lawyer. And

today, I have an interview at the top law firm in the city. Wachtell. The mecca. The pinnacle. The mythological headquarters that sits in a black-and-gray fortress on West Fifty-Second Street. The top lawyers in the country all work there. The client list is unfathomable; they represent everyone: Boeing. ING. AT&T. All of the biggest corporate mergers, the deals that determine the vicissitudes of our global markets, happen within their walls.

I've wanted to work at Wachtell since I was ten years old and my father used to take me into the city for lunch at Serendipity and a matinee. We'd pass all the big buildings in Times Square, and then I'd insist we walk to 51 West Fifty-Second Street so I could gaze up at the CBS building, where Wachtell has historically had its offices since 1965.

"You're going to kill it today, babe," David says. He stretches his arms overhead, revealing a slice of stomach. David is tall and lanky. All of his T-shirts are too small when he stretches, which I welcome. "You ready?"

"Of course."

When this interview first came up, I thought it was a joke. A headhunter calling me from Wachtell, yeah right. Bella, my best friend—and the proverbial surprise-obsessed flighty blonde—must have paid someone off. But no, it was for real. Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz wanted to interview me. Today, December 15. I marked the date in my planner in Sharpie. Nothing was going to erase this.

"Don't forget we're going to dinner to celebrate tonight," David says.

"I won't know if I got the job today," I tell him. "That's not how interviews work."

"Really? Explain it to me, then." He's flirting with me. David is a great flirt. You wouldn't think it, he's so buttoned-up most of

the time, but he has a great, witty mind. It's one of the things I love most about him. It was one of the things that first attracted me to him.

I raise my eyebrows at him and he downshifts. "Of course you'll get the job. It's in your plan."

"I appreciate your confidence."

I don't push him, because I know what tonight is. David is terrible with secrets, and an even worse liar. Tonight, on this, the second month of my twenty-eighth year, David Andrew Rosen is going to propose to me.

"Two Raisin Bran scoops, half a banana?" he asks. He's holding out a bowl to me.

"Big days are bagel days," I say. "Whitefish. You know that."

Before we find out about a big case, I always stop at Sarge's on Third Avenue. Their whitefish salad rivals Katz's downtown, and the wait, even with a line, is never more than four and a half minutes. I revel in their efficiency.

"Make sure you bring gum," David says, sliding in next to me. I bat my eyes and take a sip of coffee. It goes down sweet and warm.

"You're here late," I tell him. I've just realized. He should have been gone hours ago. He works market hours. It occurs to me he might not be going to the office at all today. Maybe he still has to pick up the ring.

"I thought I'd see you off." He flips his watch over. It's an Apple. I got it for him for our two-year anniversary, four months ago. "But I should jet. I was going to work out."

David never works out. He has a monthly membership to Equinox I think he's used maybe twice in two and a half years. He's naturally lean, and runs sometimes on the weekends. The wasted expense is a point of contention between us, so I don't

bring it up this morning. I don't want anything to get in the way of today, and certainly not this early.

"Sure," I say. "I'm gonna get ready."

"But you have time." David pulls me toward him and threads a hand into the collar of my robe. I let it linger for one, two, three, four . . .

"I thought you were late. And I can't lose focus."

He nods. Kisses me. He gets it. "In that case, we're doubling up tonight," he says.

"Don't tease me." I pinch his biceps.

My cell phone is ringing where it sits plugged in on my nightstand in the bedroom, and I follow the noise. The screen fills with a photo of a blue-eyed, blond-haired shiksa goddess sticking her tongue sideways at the camera. Bella. I'm surprised. My best friend is only awake before noon if she's been up all night.

"Good morning," I tell her. "Where are you? Not New York."

She yawns. I imagine her stretching on some seaside terrace, a silk kimono pooling around her.

"Not New York. Paris," she says.

Well that explains her ability to speak at this hour. "I thought you were leaving this evening?" I have her flight on my phone: UA 57. Leaves Newark at 6:40 p.m.

"I went early," she says. "Dad wanted to do dinner tonight. Just to bitch about Mom, clearly." She pauses, and I hear her sneeze. "What are you doing today?"

Does she know about tonight? David would have told her, I think, but she's also bad at keeping secrets—especially from me.

"Big day for work and then we're going to dinner."

"Right. Dinner," she says. She definitely knows.

I put the phone on speaker and shake out my hair. It will take

me seven minutes to blow it dry. I check the clock: 8:57 a.m. Plenty of time. The interview isn't until eleven.

"I almost tried you three hours ago."

"Well, that would have been early."

"But you'd still pick up," she says. "Lunatic."

Bella knows I leave my phone on all night.

Bella and I have been best friends since we were seven years old. Me, Nice Jewish Girl from the Main Line of Philadelphia. Her, French-Italian Princess whose parents threw her a thirteenth birthday party big enough to stop any bat mitzvah in its tracks. Bella is spoiled, mercurial, and more than a little bit magical. It's not just me. Everywhere she goes people fall at her feet. She is the easiest to love, and gives love freely. But she's fragile, too. A membrane of skin stretches so thinly over her emotions it's always threatening to burst.

Her parents' bank account is large and easily accessible, but their time and attention are not. Growing up, she practically lived at my house. It was always the two of us.

"Bells, I gotta go. I have that interview today."

"That's right! Watchman!"

"Wachtell."

"What are you going to wear?"

"Probably a black suit. I always wear a black suit." I'm already mentally thumbing through my closet, even though I've had the suit chosen since they called me.

"How thrilling," she deadpans, and I imagine her scrunching up her small pin nose like she's just smelled something unsavory.

"When are you back?" I ask.

"Probably Tuesday," she says. "But I don't know. Renaldo might meet me, in which case we'd go to the Riviera for a few days. You wouldn't think it, but it's great this time of year. No one is around. You have the whole place to yourself."

Renaldo. I haven't heard his name in a beat. I think he was before Francesco, the pianist, and after Marcus, the filmmaker. Bella is always in love, always. But her romances, while intense and dramatic, never last for more than a few months. She rarely, if ever, calls someone her boyfriend. I think the last one might have been when we were in college. And what of Jacques?

"Have fun," I say. "Text me when you land and send me pictures, especially of Renaldo, for my files, you know."

"Yes, Mom."

"Love you," I say.

"Love you more."

I blow-dry my hair and keep it down, running a flat iron over the hairline and the ends so it doesn't frizz up. I put on small pearl stud earrings my parents gave me for my college graduation, and my favorite Movado watch David bought me for Hanukkah last year. My chosen black suit, fresh from the dry cleaners, hangs on the back of my closet door. When I put it on, I add a red-and-white ruffled shirt underneath, in Bella's honor. A little spark of detail, or life, as she would say.

I come back into the kitchen and give a little spin. David's made little to no progress on getting dressed or leaving. He's definitely taking the day off. "What do we think?" I ask him.

"You're hired," he says. He puts a hand on my hip and gives me a light kiss on the cheek.

I smile at him. "That's the plan," I say.



Sarge's is predictably empty at 10 a.m.—it's a morning-commute place—so it only takes two minutes and forty seconds for me to get my whitefish bagel. I eat it walking. Sometimes I stand at the



counter table at the window. There are no stools, but there's usually room to stash my bag.

The city is all dressed up for the holidays. The streetlamps lit, the windows frosted. It's thirty-one degrees out, practically balmy by New York winter standards. And it hasn't snowed yet, which makes walking in heels a breeze. So far, so good.

I arrive at Wachtell's headquarters at 10:45 a.m. My stomach starts working against me, and I toss the rest of the bagel. This is it. The thing I've worked the last six years for. Well, really, the thing I've worked the last eighteen years for. Every SAT prep test, every history class, every hour studying for the LSAT. The countless 2 a.m. nights. Every time I've been chewed out by a partner for something I didn't do, every time I've been chewed out by a partner for something I did do, every single piece of effort has been leading me to, and preparing me for, this one moment.

I pop a piece of gum. I take a deep breath, and enter the building.

Fifty-one West Fifty-Second Street is giant, but I know exactly what door I need to enter, and what security desk I need to check in at (the entrance on Fifty-Second, the desk right in front). I've rehearsed this chain of events so many times in my head, like a ballet. First the door, then the pivot, then a sashay to the left and a quick succession of steps. *One two three, one two three . . .*

The elevator doors open to the thirty-third floor, and I suck in my breath. I can feel the energy, like candy to the vein, as I look around at the people moving in and out of glass-doored conference rooms like extras on the show *Suits*, hired for today—for me, for my viewing pleasure alone. The place is in full bloom. I get the feeling that you could walk in here at any hour, any day of the week, and this is what you would see. Midnight on Saturday, Sunday at 8 a.m. It's a world out of time, functioning on its own schedule.

This is what I want. This is what I've always wanted. To be somewhere that stops at nothing. To be surrounded by the pace and rhythm of greatness.

"Ms. Kohan?" A young woman greets me where I stand. She wears a Banana Republic sheath dress, no blazer. She's a receptionist. I know, because all lawyers are required to wear suits at Wachtell. "Right this way."

"Thank you so much."

She leads me around the bullpen. I spot the corners, the offices on full display. Glass and wood and chrome. The *thump thump thump* of money. She leads me into a conference room with a long mahogany table. On it sits a glass tumbler of water and three glasses. I take in this subtle and revealing piece of information. There are going to be two partners in here for the interview, not one. It's good, of course, it's fine. I know my stuff forward and backward. I could practically draw a floor plan of their offices for them. I've got this.

Two minutes stretch to five minutes stretch to ten. The receptionist is long gone. I'm contemplating pouring myself a glass of water when the door opens and in walks Miles Aldridge. First in his class at Harvard. *Yale Law Journal*. And a senior partner at Wachtell. He's a legend, and now he's in the same room as me. I inhale.

"Ms. Kohan," he says. "So glad you could make this date work."

"Naturally, Mr. Aldridge," I say. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

He raises his eyebrows at me. He's impressed I know his name sight unseen. Three points.

"Shall we?" He gestures for me to sit, and I do. He pours us each a glass of water. The other one sits there, untouched. "So," he says. "Let's begin. Tell me a little bit about yourself."

I work through the answers I've practiced, honed, and sculpted over the last few days. From Philadelphia. My father owned a lighting business, and when I was not even ten years old, I helped him with contracts in the back office. In order to sort and file to my heart's content, I had to read into them a bit, and I fell in love with the organization, the way language—the pure truth in the words—was nonnegotiable. It was like poetry, but poetry with outcome, poetry with concrete meaning—with actionable power. I knew it was what I wanted to do. I went to Columbia Law and graduated second in my class. I clerked for the Southern District of New York before accepting the reality of what I'd always known, which is that I wanted to be a corporate lawyer. I wanted to practice a kind of law that is high stakes, dynamic, incredibly competitive, and yes, offers me the opportunity to make a lot of money.

*Why?*

Because it's what I was born to do, what I have trained for, and what has led me here today, to the place I always knew I'd be. The golden gates. Their headquarters.

We go through my resume, point by point. Aldridge is surprisingly thorough, which is to my benefit, as it gives me more time to express my accomplishments. He asks me why I think I'd be a good fit, what kind of work culture I gravitate toward. I tell him that when I stepped off the elevator and saw all the endless movement, all the frenzied bustle, I felt as if I were home. It's not hyperbole, he can tell. He chuckles.

"It's aggressive," he says. "And endless, as you say. Many spin out."

I cross my hands on the table. "I can assure you," I tell him. "That won't be a problem here."

And then he asks me the proverbial question. The one you always prepare for because they always ask:

*Where do you see yourself in five years?*

I inhale, and then give him my airtight answer. Not just because I've practiced, which I have. But because it's true. I know. I always have.

I'll be working here, at Wachtell, as a senior associate. I'll be the most requested in my year on M&A cases. I'm incredibly thorough and incredibly efficient; I'm like an X-ACTO knife. I'll be up for junior partner.

*And outside of work?*

I'll be married to David. We'll be living in Gramercy Park, on the park. We'll have a kitchen we love and enough table space for two computers. We'll go to the Hamptons every summer; the Berkshires, occasionally, on weekends. When I'm not in the office, of course.

Aldridge is satisfied. I've cinched it, I can tell. We shake hands, and the receptionist is back, ushering me through the offices and to the elevators that deliver me once again to the land of the mortals. The third glass was just to throw me off. Good shot.

After the interview I go downtown, to Reformation, one of my favorite clothing stores in SoHo. I took the day off from work and it's only lunchtime. Now that the interview is over, I can turn my attention to tonight, to what is coming.

When David told me he had made a reservation at the Rainbow Room, I immediately knew what it meant. We had talked about getting engaged. I knew it would be this year, but I had thought it would have happened this past summer. The holidays are crazy, and the winter is David's busy time at work. But he knows how much I love the city in lights, so it's happening tonight.

"Welcome to Reformation," the salesgirl says. She's wearing black wide-legged pants and a tight white turtleneck. "What can I help you with?"

“I’m getting engaged tonight,” I say. “And I need something to wear.”

She looks confused for half a second, and then her face brightens. “How exciting!” she says. “Let’s look around. What are you thinking?”

I take barrels into the dressing room. Skirts and low-backed dresses and a pair of red crepe pants with a matching loose cami-sole. I put the red outfit on first, and when I do, it’s perfect. Dramatic but still classy. Serious but with a little edge.

I look at myself in the mirror. I hold out my hand.

*Today, I think. Tonight.*

## *Chapter Two*

The Rainbow Room is located on the sixty-fifth floor of 30 Rockefeller Plaza. It boasts one of the highest restaurant views in Manhattan, and from its magnificent windows and terraces you can see the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building floating amongst the city skyline. David knows I'm a sucker for a view. On one of our first dates, he took me to an event at the top of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They were showing some Richard Serra pieces on the roof, and the sunlight made the giant bronze sculptures look like they were on fire. That was two and a half years ago now, and he never forgot how much I loved it.

The Rainbow Room is usually closed for private events only, but they open their dining room during the week to select clientele. Because Tishman Speyer, where David works, owns and manages the Rainbow Room and the underlying real estate, these reservations are first made available to employees. Usually they're impossible to get, but for a proposal . . .

David greets me at Bar SixtyFive, a cocktail lounge adjacent to the restaurant. The terraces are now covered, so even though it's

reaching frigid temperatures outside, people can still take advantage of the superb view.

Under the guise of David “coming from the office,” we decided to meet there. He wasn’t home when I came back to change, and I can only assume he was running last-minute errands, or taking a walk to ward off nerves.

David is wearing a suit, navy, with a white shirt and a pink-and-blue tie. The Rainbow Room is, of course, jacket required.

“You look very handsome,” I say.

I take off my coat and hand it to him, revealing my fire-engine red ensemble. Bold, for me, in color. He whistles.

“And you look very incredible,” he says. He hands my coat to a passing porter. “Would you like a drink?”

He fidgets with his tie, and I understand, of course, that he is nervous. It’s endearing. Additionally, he seems to be sweating at his hairline. He definitely walked here.

“Sure,” I say.

We sidle up to the bar. We order two glasses of champagne. We toast. David just stares at me, wide-eyed. “To the future,” I say.

David downs half a glass. “I can’t believe I didn’t ask!” he says. He brushes the back of his hand against his lips. “How did it go?”

“I nailed it.” I set my glass down, triumphantly. “It was honestly butter. It couldn’t have gone better. Aldridge was the one who interviewed me.”

“No shit. What’s their time frame?”

“He said they’d let me know by Tuesday. If I get the job, I’d start after the holidays.”

David takes another sip. He puts his hand on my waist and squeezes. “I’m so proud of you. One step closer.”

That five-year plan I expressed to Aldridge isn’t just mine, it’s *ours*. We came up with it six months into dating, when it was

obvious this thing between us was serious. David will transition out of investment banking and begin working at a hedge fund—more opportunity for big money, less corporate bureaucracy. We didn't even argue about where we want to live—it's always been Gramercy for both of us. The rest was a fluid negotiation. We never came to an impasse.

“Indeed.”

“Mr. Rosen, your table is ready.”

There is a man in white tails at our backs, ushering us out of the bar, down the hallway, and into the ballroom.

I've only ever seen the Rainbow Room in movies, but it's magnificent, truly the perfect place to get engaged. Round tables sit gracefully in tiers around a circular dance floor, where a dazzling chandelier hangs overhead. Rumors are the dance floor rotates, a spinning circle in the center of the room. Ornate floral arrangements, reminiscent of a wedding, pepper the dining room. There is a festive, old-world holiday air. Women in fur. Gloves. Diamonds. The smell of good leather.

“It's beautiful,” I breathe.

David squeezes me to his side and kisses my cheek. “We're celebrating,” he says.

A server holds a chair back for me. I sit. A white napkin is produced in a flourish and eased onto my lap.

The slow, smooth styles of Frank Sinatra float over the dining room. A singer croons in the corner.

“This is too much,” I say. What I mean is that it's perfect. It's exactly right. He knows this. That's why he's him.

I wouldn't say I'm a romantic, exactly. But I believe in romance, which is to say, I believe in calling to inquire about a date instead of texting, and flowers after sex, and Frank Sinatra at an engagement. And New York City in December.



We order champagne again, this time a bottle. Momentarily, my chest ticks at what tonight will cost.

“Don’t think about it,” David says, reading me. I love that about him. That he always knows what I’m thinking, because we’re always on the same page.

The bubbles arrive. Cool and sweet and crisp. Our second glasses go down easy.

“Should we dance?” David asks me.

On the floor, I see two couples swaying to “All the Way.”

*Through the good or lean years, and for all the in-between years . . .*

Suddenly, I think that David may grab the mic. He may make this public. He is not a showy person, by nature, but he is confident, and unafraid of public displays. I am unnerved at this possibility. Of the ring arriving in my chocolate soufflé and his getting down on one knee for all the world to see.

“*You* want to dance?” I ask him.

David hates dancing. I have to drag him at weddings. He thinks he has no rhythm, and he’s right, but so few guys have rhythm that it really doesn’t matter. There are no wrong moves to “P.Y.T.” except sitting down.

“Why not?” he says. “We’re here.”

He offers me his hand, and I take it. As we make our way down the steps to the rotunda, the song switches. “It Had to Be You.”

David takes me in his arms. The two other couples—older—smile in approval.

“You know,” David says, “I love you.”

“I do,” I say. “I mean, you’d better.”

Is this it? Is this when he drops?

But he keeps just moving me, slowly around the rotating rotunda. The song ends. A few people clap. We go back to our seats. I feel, suddenly, disappointed. Could I be wrong?

We order. A simple salad. The lobster. Wine. The ring is neither perched on the lobster's claw nor drowning in a glass of Bordeaux.

We both move our food around on our plates with lovely silver forks, barely eating. David, usually chatty, has a hard time focusing. More than once he knocks and rights his water glass. *Just do it*, I want to tell him. *I'll say yes*. Perhaps I should spell it out with cherry tomatoes.

Finally, dessert arrives. Chocolate soufflé, crème brûlée, pavlova. He's ordered one of everything, but there is no ring affixed to any of their powdered tops. When I look up, David is gone. Because he is holding the box in his hands, right by my seat, where he kneels.

"David."

He shakes his head. "For once don't talk, okay? Just let me get through this."

People around us murmur and quiet. Some of the surrounding tables have phones aimed at us. Even the music lowers.

"David, there are people watching." But I'm smiling. Finally.

"Dannie, I love you. I know neither one of us is a particularly sentimental person and I don't tell you this stuff a lot, but I want you to know that our relationship isn't just part of some plan for me. I think you're extraordinary, and I want to build this life with you. Not because we're the same but because we fit, and because the more time goes on the more I cannot imagine my life taking place without you."

"Yes," I say.

He smiles. "I think maybe you should let me ask the question." Someone close breaks out in laughter.

"I'm sorry," I say. "Please ask."

"Danielle Ashley Kohan, will you marry me?"

He opens the box and inside is a cushion-cut diamond flanked

by two triangular stones set in a simple platinum band. It's modern, clean, elegant. It's exactly me.

"You can answer now," he tells me.

"Yes," I say. "Absolutely. Yes."

He reaches up and kisses me, and the dining room breaks out in applause. I hear the snaps of lenses, the *oohs* and *aahs* of generous goodwill from surrounding patrons.

David takes the ring out of the box and slides it onto my finger. It takes a second to waddle over my knuckle—my hands are swollen from the champagne—but when it does, it sits there like it has always been there.

A waiter appears out of thin air with a bottle of something. "Compliments of the chef," he says. "Congratulations!"

David sits back down. He holds my hand across the table. I marvel at the ring, turning my palm back and forth in the candlelight.

"David," I say. "It's gorgeous."

He smiles. "It looks so good on you."

"Did you pick this out?"

"Bella helped," he says. "I was worried she was going to ruin the surprise. You know her, she's terrible at keeping anything from you."

I smile. I squeeze his hand. He's right about that, but I don't need to tell him. That is the thing about relationships: it's not necessary to say everything. "I had no idea," I say.

"I'm sorry it was so public," he says, gesturing around us. "I couldn't resist. This place is practically begging for it."

"David," I say. I look at him. My future husband. "I want you to know I'd suffer through ten more public proposals if it meant I got to marry you."

“No you wouldn’t,” he says. “But you can convince me of anything, and it’s one of the things I love about you.”



Two hours later we’re home. Hungry and buzzing off champagne and wine, we crouch around the computer, ordering Thai food from Spice online. This is us. Spend seven hundred dollars on dinner, come home to eat eight-dollar fried rice. I never want that to change.

I want to put on sweatpants, per usual, but something tells me not to—not tonight, not yet. If I were different, someone else—Bella, for example—I’d have lingerie to wear. I’d have bought some this week. I’d put on a matching bra and underwear and hover by the door. Fuck the pad thai. But then I probably wouldn’t be engaged to David right now.

We’re not big drinkers, and the champagne and wine have gotten to both of us. I edge myself farther onto the couch. I put my feet in David’s lap. He squeezes the arch of my foot, kneading the tender place my heels are unkind to. I feel the buzzing in my stomach move upward to my head, until my eyes are being pulled closed like blinds. I yawn. Within a minute, I’m asleep.

## *Chapter Three*

I wake up slowly. How long have I been asleep? I roll over and look at the clock on the nightstand: 10:59 p.m. I stretch my legs. Did David move me to bed? The sheets feel crisp and cool around me, and I weigh just closing my eyes again and drifting back to sleep—but then I'd miss this, our engagement night, and I force them open. We still have more champagne to drink, and we need to have sex. That's a thing you should do on the night you get engaged. I yawn, blinking, and then sit up, my breath exiting my body in a rush. Because I'm not in our bed. I'm not even in our apartment. I'm wearing a formal dress, red, beaded around the neckline. And I'm somewhere I've never been before.

I could tell you I think I'm dreaming, but I don't, not really. I can feel my legs and arms and the frenetic beating of my own uneasy heart. Was I kidnapped?

I take in my surroundings. On further glance, I realize I'm in a loft apartment. The bed I'm in is flush up against floor-to-ceiling windows that appear to orient me in . . . Long Island City? I look out, desperate for some anchoring image. And then I spot the Empire State Building, rising out of the water in the distance.

I'm in Brooklyn, but where? I can see the New York City skyline across the river, and to the right, the Manhattan Bridge. Which means I'm in Dumbo; I must be. Did David take me to a hotel? I see a redbrick building across the street with a brown barn door. There's a party happening inside. I can see camera flashes and lots of flowers. A wedding, maybe.

The apartment isn't giant, but it gives the illusion of space. Two blue velvet chairs sit necking in front of a glass-and-steel coffee table. An orange dresser perches at the foot of the bed, and colorful Persian rugs make the open space feel cozy, if not a little cluttered. There are exposed pipes and wood beams and a print on the wall. It's an eye chart that reads: *I WAS YOUNG I NEEDED THE MONEY.*

Where the hell am I?

I hear him before I see him. He calls: "Are you awake?"

I freeze. Should I hide? Make a run for it? I see a large steel door, across the apartment, in the direction of where the voice is coming from. If I bolt, I might be able to get it open before—

He rounds the corner from what must be the kitchen. He's dressed in black dress pants and a blue-and-black-striped shirt, unbuttoned at the top.

My eyes go wide. I want to scream; I might.

The well-dressed stranger comes over to me, and I leap onto the other side of the bed, by the windows.

"Hey," he says. "Are you okay?"

"No!" I say. "No, I'm not."

He sighs. He does not seem surprised by my response. "You fell asleep." He runs his hand back and forth across his forehead. I notice he has a scar, crooked, over his left eye.

"What are you doing here?" I've backed myself so far into a corner I'm practically pushed up against the windows.

“C’mon,” he says.

“Do you know me?”

He bends one knee onto the bed. “Dannie,” he says. “Are you really asking me that?”

He knows my name. And there’s something about the way he says it that makes me pause, take a breath. He says it like he’s said it before.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I don’t know where I am.”

“It was a good night,” he says. “Wasn’t it?”

I look down at my dress. I realize, for the first time, it’s one I already own. My mom and I bought it with Bella on a shopping trip three years ago. Bella has the same one in white.

“Yeah,” I say, without even thinking. As if I know. As if I were there. What is happening?

And that’s when I catch the TV. It has been on this whole time, the volume low. It’s hanging on the wall opposite the bed and it’s playing the news. On the screen is a small graphic with the date and time: December 15, 2025. A man in a blue suit is prattling on about the weather, a snow cloud swaying behind him. I try to breathe.

“What?” he says. “Do you want me to turn it off?”

I shake my head. The response is automatic, and I watch him as he walks to the coffee table and grabs the remote. As he goes, he untucks his shirt.

“Weather warning for the East Coast as a blizzard heads toward us. Possibility of six inches overnight, with continued accumulation into Tuesday.”

2025. It’s not possible; of course it’s not. Five years . . .

This must be some kind of prank. Bella. When we were younger, she used to pull shit like this all the time. Once, for

my eleventh birthday, she figured out how to get a pony into my backyard without my parents knowing. We woke up to it playing chicken with the swing set.

But even Bella couldn't get a fake date and time on national television. Could she? And who is this guy? Oh my god, David.

The man in the apartment turns around. "Hey," he says. "Are you hungry?"

At his question, my stomach rumbles. I barely ate at dinner and wherever I am, in whatever parallel universe with David, the pad thai has most certainly not yet arrived.

"No," I say.

He cocks his head to the side. "Kind of sounds like you are."

"I'm not," I insist. "I just . . . I need . . ."

"Some food," he says. He smiles. I wonder how wide the windows open.

I slowly come around the bed.

"Do you want to change first?" he asks me.

"I don't . . ." I start, but I don't know how to finish the sentence because I don't know where we are. Where I would even find clothes.

I follow him into a closet. It's a walk-in, right off the bedroom alcove. There are rows of bags and shoes and clothes hanging, organized by color. I know right away. This is my closet. Which means this is my apartment. I live here.

"I moved to Dumbo," I say, out loud.

The man laughs. And then he opens a drawer near the center of the closet and pulls out a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt and my heart stops. They're his. He lives here, too. We're . . . together.

*David.*

I reel back and run for the bathroom. I find it to the left of the



living room. I close the door and bolt it. I splash some cold water on my face. “Think, Dannie, think.”

Inside the bathroom are all the products I love. Abba body cream and tea tree oil shampoo. I dab some MyChelle serum on my face, comforted by the smell, the familiarity.

On the back of the door hangs a bathrobe with my initials, one I’ve had forever. Also, there are a pair of drawstring black pajama pants and an old Columbia sweatshirt. I take off the dress. I put them both on.

I run some rose hip oil over my lips and unlock the door.

“We have pasta or . . . pasta!” the man calls from the kitchen.

First things first, I need to find out this guy’s name.

His wallet.

David and I have a sixty-forty split when it comes to our finances, based on the income discrepancy between us. We decided this after we moved in together and haven’t changed it since. I have never once looked inside his wallet except for one unfortunate incident involving a new knife and his insurance card.

“Pasta sounds good,” I say.

I go back near the bed, to where his pants hang half off a chair, trailing to the floor. I glance toward the kitchen and check the pockets. I pull out his wallet. Old leather, indistinguishable brand. I riffle through it.

He doesn’t look up from filling a pot with water.

I pull out two business cards. One to a dry cleaner. The other a Stumptown punch card.

Then I find his license. Aaron Gregory, thirty-three years old. His license is New York State, and he’s six-foot and has green eyes.

I put everything back where I found it.

“Do you want red sauce or pesto?” he asks from the kitchen.

“Aaron?” I try.

He smiles. “Yes?”

“Pesto,” I say.

I walk toward the kitchen. It’s 2025, a man I’ve never met is my boyfriend, and I live in Brooklyn.

“Pesto is what I wanted, too.”

I sit down at the counter. There are cherrywood stools with wire-framed backs I don’t recognize and don’t particularly like.

I take him in. He’s blond, with green eyes and a jaw that makes him look like one of the superhero Chrises. He’s hot. Too hot for me, to be totally honest with you, and evidently, based on his looks and his name, not Jewish. I feel my stomach twist. This is what becomes of me in five years? I’m dating a golden Adonis in an artist’s loft? Oh god, does my mother know?

The water boils, and he pours the pasta into the pot. Steam rises up and he steps back, wiping his forehead.

“Am I still a lawyer?” I ask suddenly.

Aaron looks at me and laughs. “Of course,” he says. “Wine?”

I nod, exhaling a sigh of relief. So some things have gotten off track, but not all. I can work with this. I just have to find David, figure out what happened there, and we’ll be back in business. Still a lawyer. Hallelujah.

When the noodles are cooked, he drains them and tosses them back into the pot with the pesto and Parmesan, and all of a sudden I’m dizzy with hunger. All I can think about right now is the food.

Aaron takes two wineglasses down from a cabinet, moving expertly around the kitchen. My kitchen. Our kitchen.

He pours me a glass of red and hands it over the counter. It’s big and bold. A Brunello, maybe. Not something I’d usually buy.

“Dinner is served.”

Aaron hands me a giant steaming bowl of spaghetti and pesto, and before he even comes back around the counter, I’m shoveling a forkful into my mouth. It occurs to me, mid-bite, that this could all be some kind of government science play and he could be poisoning me, but I’m too hungry to stop or care.

The pasta is delicious—warm and salty—and I don’t look up for another five minutes. When I do, he’s staring at me.

I wipe my mouth with my napkin. “Sorry,” I say. “I feel like I haven’t eaten in years.”

He nods and pushes back his plate. “So now we have two choices. We can just get drunk, or we can get drunk and play Scattergories.”

I love board games, which, of course, he would know. David is more of a card guy. He taught me how to play Bridge and Rummy. He thinks board games are childish, and that if we’re playing something we should be strengthening our brain pathways, which both Bridge and Rummy do.

“Get drunk,” I say.

Aaron gives my arm an affectionate squeeze. I feel like his hand is still there when he lets go. There is something strange here. Some strange pull. Some emotion that begins to expand in the room, fill up the corners.

Aaron tops off our wineglasses. We leave our plates where they sit on the counter. Now what? And then I realize he’s going to want to get into bed. This boyfriend of mine, he’s going to want to touch me. I can just feel it.

I make a beeline for one of the blue velvet chairs and take a seat. He looks at me sideways. *Huh.*

All at once something occurs to me. I look down at my hand, panicked. There, on my finger, is an engagement ring. It’s a soli-

taire canary diamond with tiny stones around it. It's vintage and whimsical. Not the ring David gave me tonight. It's not anything I'd ever pick out. Yet here it is, on my finger.

*Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.*

I bolt up from the chair. I pace the apartment. Should I leave? Where would I go? To my old place? Maybe David is still there. But what are the odds? He's probably living in Gramercy with some non-insane wife. Maybe if I tell him what's going on he'll know how to fix it. He'll forgive me for whatever I did to get us here—me in this apartment with a stranger and him on the other side of the bridge. He's the best problem solver. He'll figure it out.

I get up and head toward the door. I need to get out of here. To escape whatever feeling is flooding this room. Where do I keep my coats?

"Hey," Aaron says. "Where are you going?"

Think fast. "Just the deli," I say.

"The deli?"

Aaron gets up and comes over to me. Then he puts his hands on my face. Right up against either cheek. His hands are cool, and for a moment the temperature change and motion shocks me and I make a move to reel back, but he holds me in place.

"Stay. Please don't leave right now."

He looks at me and his eyes are liquid, open. So this is what this guy has on me. This feeling. It's . . . it's new and familiar all at once. It's heavy, weighted. It sits all around us. And, despite myself, I want to . . . I want to stay.

"Okay," I whisper. Because his skin is still on mine and his eyes are still looking at me, and while I don't understand why I've committed to spend my life with this man, I do know that the bed we share gets a lot of action, because . . . this is big. I feel its

resonance in my body, the reverberations of some kind of seismic tidal wave. Outside, the sky turns.

He heads toward the bed, holding my hand, and I follow. The wine has started to make me feel languid. I want to stretch out.

I perch on the edge of the bed.

“Five years,” I mutter.

Aaron just looks at me. He sits back against the pillows. “Hey,” he says. “Can you come here?”

But it’s not a question, not really, not insofar as it only has one, rhetorical, answer.

He holds his arms open and out, and I ease onto the bed. I can feel it, this tug on my limbs, like I’m a marionette being pulled unevenly forward, toward him.

God help me, I let him hold me. He pulls me to him, and I feel his breath warm near my cheek.

His face hovers close. Here we go, he’s going to kiss me. Am I going to let him? I think about it, about David, and about this Aaron’s muscled arms. But before I can weigh the pros and cons and come to a solid conclusion, his lips are on mine.

They land gently and he holds them there, delicately—as if he knows, as if he’s letting me get used to him. And then he uses his tongue to open my mouth slowly.

Oh my god.

I’m melting. I’ve never felt anything like this. Not with David, not with Ben, the only other guy I dated seriously, not even with Anthony, the study abroad fling I had in Florence. This is something else entirely. He kisses and touches like he’s inside my brain. I mean, I’m in the future, maybe he is.

“You sure you’re okay?” he asks me, and I respond by pulling him closer.

He threads his hands under my sweatshirt and then it’s off

before I even realize it, the cool air hitting my bare skin. Am I not wearing a bra? I am not wearing a bra. He bends and takes one of my nipples into his mouth.

This is insane. I'm insane. I've lost my mind.

It feels so good.

The rest of the clothes come off. From somewhere—a different stratosphere—I hear a car horn honk, a train rumble, the city carry on.

He kisses me harder. We get horizontal quickly. Everything feels incredible. His hands tracing the curves of my stomach, his mouth on my neck. I've never had a one-night stand up until this point—but this has to count, right? We met barely an hour ago and now we're about to have sex.

I can't wait to tell Bella about this. She'll love it. She'll . . . But what if I never make it back? What if this guy is just my fiancé now and not a stranger and I can't even share the details of this wild and . . .

He presses his thumb down into the crease of my hip, and all thoughts of time and space escape through the slightly cracked window.

"Aaron," I say.

"Yes."

He rolls on top of me, and then my hands are finding the muscles in his back, the crevices of his bones, like terrain—knotted and wooden and peaceful. I arch against him, this man who is a stranger but somehow something else entirely. His hands cup my face, they run down my neck, they wrap around my rib cage. His mouth is urgent and seeking against mine. My fingers grip his shoulders. Slowly, and then all at once, I forget where I am. All I'm aware of are Aaron's arms wrapped tightly around me.