

Chapter 1



When Daphne Ballinger graduated top of her class with her degree in journalism, in the memorable year of 2000, she had promptly moved to the city to launch her illustrious career writing for *The New York Times*. And why not dream big? Because really, how many grads landed such an impressive job straight out of college?

Her plan had been to work hard and quickly scale the ladder to success. By thirty she would have a corner office with a window overlooking the river as well as an apartment on the west side. By her midthirties, she would have published her first book. But similar to the plans of mice and men, Daphne's best-laid schemes had gone awry.

She stuffed a worn pair of brown Prada pumps into her Hermès bag (splurges she'd indulged in back when she still believed you should dress for the job/life you wanted). Then she sat down to put on her comfy-yet-unfashionable white sneakers. After tying the first shoe, she sat up straight and looked around the messy apartment.

Daphne knew it was cliché but, on gloomy days like today, it truly did feel like the walls were closing in on her. Most of the time, she could overlook the crowded space. She could walk right past piles of papers and miscellaneous pieces of clothing and empty take-out boxes . . . and not even notice. But this morning, the apartment actually seemed to stink. When was the last time they'd really cleaned this place?

She shared this three-bedroom apartment with Greta and Shelby. And in previous years Greta, the lease owner, had always proclaimed April as spring-cleaning month. But it was already mid-May and no one had lifted a finger. And Greta, obsessed with a new job promotion, hadn't complained once. Daphne's gaze skimmed over gritty windows, dingy curtains, dust-covered surfaces, piles of clutter, sun-faded carpet. . . . How had she stayed here so long?

"I can't promise to be here more than a year," Daphne had informed Greta Phillips when she first moved to the city right after graduation.

A coworker at *The Times* had tipped off Daphne about a friend looking for a third roommate for an apartment in Brooklyn. And although the location was lackluster, it was near the subway and the rent was affordable. Besides, it would just be a temporary stop—the bottom rung on her ladder to success—or so she had naively believed.

"And *after* a year?" Greta had asked Daphne with a single arched brow.

Daphne simply smiled . . . perhaps a bit smugly upon reflection. "Oh, I plan to move into my *own* place by then."

"Your *own* place?" Greta seemed humored by this declaration. "Really?"

“Oh yes. This is just the first step for me.”

“Well, I still need you to sign a one-year lease. After that, we’ll see.”

Daphne had hesitantly signed that “confining” lease, wondering how Greta would react if she was forced to break the contract before the year was up. Although numerous other roommates had come and gone during the next thirteen years, climbing their own ladders to success, Daphne had stayed . . . and stayed . . . and stayed. Remembering the arrogant assumptions of her youth was embarrassing.

“Hey, Daphne,” Shelby called out cheerfully. Shelby was the most recent roommate, less than six months ago she’d moved here straight from her family’s Connecticut home. “I’m heading out early this morning. So you’ll have to put Oliver in the bathroom. Okay?”

Daphne looked over to see Shelby looking sparkly and stylish as she opened a golden shoe box. After tossing the lid, tissue paper, and red shoe bags aside, Shelby extracted a dark-colored shoe with a sole that flashed like a stoplight. Shelby slipped on the first high-heeled pump, pointing her toe to admire the sleek black patent leather. “Classy, huh?”

“Another pair of Louboutins?” Daphne frowned, knowing she probably sounded like somebody’s mother. But really, Shelby couldn’t afford such extravagances.

“Yes. Can you believe it?” Shelby giggled. “I think I’m going to need a twelve-step program before long.”

“Or a raise.”

Shelby waved a hand, hopping on one foot as she tugged on the other shoe. “I’d rather settle for a nice, big diamond.” Shelby was obsessed with Marilyn Monroe, and sometimes Daphne worried that the pretty young woman had seen *How to Marry a Millionaire* one time too many.

“So how is that working for you?” Daphne knew Shelby had been flirting with her boss’s son for the past several weeks. She also knew the boss’s son had recently divorced his second wife.

Shelby stood up straight, pushing her short, sassy blond hair back into place with a confident-looking grin. “As it turns out, John Junior is taking me to Club 21.”

“21?” Daphne was impressed. The whole time she’d been in New York, she’d only been there once. And here Shelby was going after just a few months. This girl worked fast.

“Yes. I told John Junior that I’d been dying to go there ever since I moved to the city. And we’re going there *tonight*. Can you believe it?”

“Can you believe it” was Shelby’s favorite expression and sometimes, after hearing it a few dozen times in the course of an evening, Daphne sometimes wanted to gag the girl. “That’s wonderful, Shelby.” She stood and smiled. “I hope you and John Junior have a lovely time.” Did Shelby really call him *John Junior*—to his face?

“Oh, we will.” Shelby reached for her hot pink umbrella, holding it in front of her like a scepter. “The weatherman predicted showers this morning. So don’t forget your umbrella.”

“I hope the rain doesn’t ruin your pretty new shoes.”

“No worries.” Shelby shrugged. “John Junior is picking me up in his car this morning.”

“He’s driving you into Manhattan at this time of day?”

“No, silly, that would be insane. He’s giving me a ride out to his parents’ home in the Hamptons. John Senior is working at home today, so I’ll be working there too.”

“Oh . . .” Daphne nodded. That explained the new shoes, stylish suit, perfect hair. Shelby was out to impress Mrs. John Senior. “Well, have a good day.”

“Oh, I’m sure I will.” Shelby opened the door to peek out. “There he is now—right on time. You should see his car, Daphne.” She stepped outside, then looked back in. “Don’t forget to put Oliver in the bathroom.”

Daphne went over to the front window, watching as Shelby skipped down the cement stairs in her new shoes, swinging her bright umbrella in time with each step. Sometimes it was as if Shelby were starring in her own movie. She paused midway down the steps, waving to the man who was just getting out of the silver Jaguar in front of their building. From her vantage point, Daphne could see the balding patch on the top of the man’s dark hair, and for some pathetic reason this comforted her.

Still, as she stepped away from her voyeurism, she didn’t wish ill for young Shelby. If John Junior was truly a nice guy, she hoped he would produce a diamond . . . in due time. Daphne hadn’t known Shelby long, but she knew the old-fashioned girl dreamed of a big white wedding and a houseful of kids. It was sweet, really.

“Oliver,” Daphne called out as she grabbed a yogurt carton from the fridge. “Here, kitty-kitty.” She reached into Greta’s bag of kitty treats, singing out enticingly. “Here’s a treat for you, Oliver. Here, kitty-kitty.”

She was not fond of Greta’s fat gray cat and, unfortunately, Oliver seemed to sense this. Still, she kept her voice sugary as she walked around calling for him, “Come on, Oliver, come get your yummy-yummy kitty treat.”

She eventually found him hunkered down in Greta’s bedroom with a guilty expression, but if he was doing something he shouldn’t, Daphne did not want to know. She had learned the hard way to keep her own bedroom door closed. For some twisted reason Oliver

sometimes preferred a nice soft bed to his smelly litter box in the bathroom.

“There you are, you darling little scoundrel,” she said in a saccharine tone. As he looked up, she curled her arm around his hefty midsection. “Got you.” Then she quickly packed him off to the bathroom, tossing in the treat with him behind it. “Have a good day, you spoiled fat cat.” Daphne closed the door firmly. It wasn’t that she disliked cats in general. She just didn’t care much for Oliver.

By the time Daphne locked up the apartment and was on her way to the subway, it was already starting to rain. And despite Shelby’s reminder, Daphne had set off without her umbrella and there wasn’t time to run back and get it now. Consequently, as the clouds opened up and let loose, she got thoroughly drenched in the short distance to the subway. Waiting with the other dampened commuters, she tried to shake off some of the moisture before the train arrived, then she hurried in with the crowd, finding a spot in the back of the car where the air was smelly and muggy and close.

Firmly planting her feet, Daphne held tightly to a pole and, shutting her eyes, attempted to imagine herself in a happier, cleaner, dryer place. Like the Grand Canyon where her dad had taken her as child one summer. She breathed deeply as she recalled the beautiful painted mountains changing hues of golds, reds, and russets at sunset.

This was a trick she’d taught herself years ago, her way to combat the claustrophobia that she sometimes suffered in the city. One would think she’d be over her dislike of tight spaces by now, but on days like today the anxiety seemed to lurk just below the surface. She remembered when she had been in love with New York. Some called it the Big Apple Honeymoon Phase, but it had lasted several years for her. However, like so many other things in her life, it had gotten

a little tarnished and dull over the years. And as she emerged from the subway, back into the drizzling rain and noisy traffic, she didn't much like the city.

By the time Daphne reached her cubicle at *The Times* and peeled off her soggy jacket and slushy sneakers and stashed them in a sodden pile in the corner, her long auburn hair, which she'd spent thirty minutes straightening this morning, now resembled Bozo the Clown. Not that anyone would particularly notice or care since most of her day was spent on her own.

Daphne was a wedding writer—one of several—and she had been doing the same thing for more than ten years. She could write one of these pieces in her sleep. In fact, sometimes she did. Oh, not for the paper, but she would lie in bed writing another piece. They ran about 250 words, five or six paragraphs, all meant to impress the bride and the groom and their family and friends.

She turned on her computer and perused her e-mail, sifting through junk and flagging some, and then on to read today's assignments. This time of year was usually fairly busy, but to her surprise there was only one happy couple waiting for the spotlight, and she managed to spend two whole hours on making them seem larger than life. Hopefully they would appreciate her efforts.

Then with still an hour until lunch, she imagined what she'd write for Shelby's wedding announcement, and because she was bored and didn't like to appear idle or get caught playing Spider Solitaire, she decided to hack a phony baloney announcement for her romantic roommate.

Miss Shelby M. Monroe and John Junior Millionaire were married on Friday night in May at Club 21 in downtown Manhattan. Family friend and celebrity entrepreneur Donald Trump, who became an ordained

minister for this monumental occasion, officiated the extravagant event where no expenses were spared.

The beautiful bride, twenty-three, and the prematurely balding bridegroom, of undetermined age, met at the bride's place of employment, which is also the bridegroom's father's multimillion-dollar investment corporation.

Miss Monroe, who will not be keeping her name since it's not really her name, will give up her career, which wasn't really a career, in order to raise a houseful of boisterous children. She is the daughter of a once-prestigious family who resided in Westport, Connecticut, until her father's investment corporation was dissolved in a scandal involving insider trading. Now, despite some diminished wealth, the bride's parents are enjoying an early retirement abroad.

Mr. Millionaire, who goes by John Junior, holds some mysterious position in his father's corporation, where not much actual work is required of him. John Junior graduated from some Ivy League school, where his family probably had some really good connections.

Following an over-the-top honeymoon, which probably involved a beach in an exotic locale, the happy newlyweds will reside in a penthouse apartment on the upper west side.

The bridegroom's first two marriages ended in divorce. Hopefully the third time will be the charm.

Feeling a bit juvenile, not to mention catty, Daphne hit the select all and delete buttons. Best not to leave something like that lying around for too long. She was about to shut down and go to lunch when her cell phone rang. She got up and grabbed her bag. After

digging for her elusive phone and expecting it to be Beverly since they were meeting for lunch today, she was surprised to discover it was actually her father. He rarely called her in the middle of the day. Not unless something was wrong.

“Dad?” she said with concern. “What’s up?”

“Hello, Daphne. I’m afraid it’s bad news.”

“What?” Her throat tightened. He’d had some health issues last winter. Hopefully it wasn’t worse. She’d lost her mother as a small child. Dad was all she had left of her immediate family.

“It’s Aunt Dee . . . she passed away this morning. Her lawyer just called to inform me, and I thought you’d want to know.”

“*Aunt Dee.*” Daphne sank back down in her chair. “Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that, Dad. I know how much you loved her. I loved her too. And I’d been hoping to get out there to visit you and her this summer. I can’t believe she’s gone.”

Tears filled her eyes as she suddenly recalled the summers she’d spent at Aunt Dee’s house as a child when Dad was busy with work. Aunt Dee had tried to make up for Daphne losing her mother. Daphne and Aunt Dee had always enjoyed a special connection and a shared name.

“If it’s any consolation, she died peacefully. In her sleep.”

“How old was she?” For some reason, Daphne couldn’t recall her aunt’s age. She knew she was older than Dad, but in a way Aunt Dee had seemed timeless. Maybe it was her youthful spirit.

“She would’ve been ninety-one in July.”

“*Ninety-one?* Wow, I had no idea she was that old.”

“Yes. She never really told anyone her real age. But she enjoyed a good, full life.” He sighed. “Even though she never married or had children, she seemed to have a good time in whatever she did. She

traveled. Had lots of friends. Dee lived life on her own terms. And she always seemed happy.”

“She did—didn’t she?” Daphne let out a choked sob as she reached for a Kleenex, wiping the tears now streaming down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry, honey. I hate to be the bearer of sad news. But I knew you’d want to know.”

“Yes. I appreciate that. I don’t know why I’m taking this so hard.” She blew her nose.

“Will you be able to make it out here for her memorial service?”

“Yes, of course, Dad.” She reached for another tissue.

“Oh, good. I’m in charge of everything. And I could really use your help with the arrangements. I mean, if you can come out here soon enough . . . I’ll understand if you can’t drop everything.” His voice sounded tired and weak, but maybe it was just sadness.

“How are you feeling? I mean, with your heart and cholesterol and everything. Are you okay?”

“Oh, sure, honey. I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.” He sighed. “When do you think you can get away?”

“I’ll find out as soon as we hang up. And I’ll get right back to you,” she promised.

“Thanks, Daph. I can’t wait to see you.”

They said good-bye, then she grabbed her purse and hurried up to her boss’s office, feeling she’d get better results if she asked in person. Hopefully Amelia wouldn’t have left for lunch yet. However, when she got up there, Daphne could tell by the darkened office that Amelia was already gone.

“Amelia left early for a lunch meeting,” her assistant told Daphne. “Want me to leave her a message for you?”

“No. I’ll come after lunch. When do you expect her back?”

Fiona shrugged. “Well, you know how those working lunches can drag on forever. I wouldn’t expect her until three or maybe even four.”

“Thanks. I’ll stop by later.” Daphne headed out to meet Beverly, calling her as she walked toward their favorite dining spot. She left a message saying she was running late. Then she called Dad and explained that her boss was out. “As soon as I know, I’ll call,” she assured him.

Fortunately, the rain had stopped and the clouds had cleared and the city, now scrubbed fresh and clean, should be shimmering in the sunshine. And yet, as Daphne hurried down the street, everything around her still felt dull and gray and dismal.