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# Bridges

A Daphne White Novel

# Chapter One

Daphne juggled two sacks of groceries against a hip as she fumbled with her keys, hoping that if she dropped a bag it wouldn't be the one holding the eggs. Once safely inside the house, she rushed into the kitchen, put the eggs, milk, and orange juice into the fridge, then left the nonperishables on the counter before hurrying into her office. She took a seat at the desk and powered on the computer, then checked the time on the screen to see how late she was. Ten minutes. Not that bad for her—but probably ten minutes later than Skylar, whose schedule tended to run like clockwork. She logged into her e-mail account and clicked to open the link Skylar had sent, hoping she wouldn't flub her first-ever attempt at video chatting.

In a flash, her friend appeared on Daphne's computer. "Hi Skylar!"

"Hey hot stuff! It's great to see you, even if it's just on a screen. Can you believe it's been over a year since we were last together in the flesh? Scary how fast time is flying."

"Tell me about it. Emma's junior prom is tomorrow."

“Junior prom? How is that possible? In my head, she’s still in diapers. Then again, in my head I still have no wrinkles. Or cellulite.”

“I wouldn’t mind looking like you,” Daphne said.

Seated at her desk in her spacious Manhattan office, Skylar had her auburn locks pulled back into a low ponytail, her lovely face framed by expensive tortoiseshell reading glasses that complemented the tiniest of freckles on her fair cheeks. As always, Daphne thought, her college friend managed to look both appropriately corporate *and* impossibly stylish. She glanced down at her faded jeans and wondered what it would be like to be able to afford nice clothes. She’d been scrimping for so long now that she’d forgotten what it felt like *not* to worry about money.

“Stop it. You look beautiful, as always. So Emma’s off to junior prom, eh? Good God, that is horrifying. How old is she now?”

“Sixteen. She’s driving. Can you believe it? My little girl behind the wheel?”

“No. I can’t believe it. I refuse to believe it, actually.”

“Seems like just yesterday she was selling Girl Scout cookies, and at this time next year she’ll be getting ready to go off to college.” Daphne glanced at a framed photo of her smiling, metal-mouthed daughter on the desk, from back when she wore braces instead of lip gloss. Back before Daphne and Brian split up and Daphne found herself a single mom working part-time at a flower store.

“Does she still want to go to Ohio State?”

“That’s the plan, although truth be told it’s kind of *my* plan. I don’t think I could handle it if she moved

far away, so I haven’t exactly encouraged her to look at other schools.”

“If you want her to come back to Ohio for the long haul, you should encourage her to go to school somewhere she’d never want to live *after* graduation. That’s what I’d do if I were in your shoes. A bit of reverse psychology, if you will.”

Daphne smiled. “Well, she has really good grades and test scores, so it shouldn’t be a problem for her to get into OSU and stay right here in Columbus.”

“Sounds like you’re not exactly looking forward to the empty nest?”

“Dreading it, to be honest.”

Although having the house to herself would give Daphne more time to focus on her writing, which she was thoroughly enjoying. Having put a once-promising career on the back burner to focus on raising her daughter, she’d finally revived a long-abandoned dream harbored by many a young journalism student: to pen a novel. Hers was a work of contemporary fiction loosely based on her own experience as a newly single mother trying to find herself again. After toiling away at her computer for more than a year, she’d recently completed the manuscript, thrilled to have rekindled a passion for storytelling that for years had been buried under the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood.

“What about Northwestern?” Skylar asked.

Daphne blinked, having been lost in thought.

“What about Northwestern what?”

“Is Emma at least going to apply there? I always thought that if I had a daughter it would be cool if she went to Northwestern.”

“I don’t think so.” As she thought of their alma mater, Daphne suddenly remembered the third member of the video call. “Hey, where’s KC? Is she on here too and I messed it up? I don’t see her.”

Her eyes darted around the computer screen. In the backdrop she saw the windows of Skylar’s office. Or rather, of Skylar’s office when she was working in New York City. Skylar was rarely in one place for long. For years she’d traveled practically nonstop for her job running global sales for a large software company. Daphne didn’t know how she found the energy. Then again, Skylar didn’t have kids.

“She hasn’t logged on yet. I bet she’s working out. So what’s new on the romance front? Are you still seeing that guy, Derek?”

“Yep, so far so good. We’re both really busy though, and of course there’s the distance thing.” Daphne had met Derek on the joint fortieth birthday trip to Saint Mirika that she and Skylar and KC had taken the year before, but it wasn’t until he’d begun coming to Columbus from Chicago for work a few months ago that they’d begun dating.

“Glad to hear it. And your novel? What’s going on with that? Has a publisher snatched it up yet?” Skylar had read the first draft and, much to Daphne’s delight, had enjoyed it. A lot. Skylar wasn’t easy to please, so her stamp of approval meant more to Daphne than she wanted to let on.

“Not yet. I sent it to a bunch of agents a few weeks ago, so I should start hearing back from them soon.”

The true number was thirty-six. *Was that too many?* She’d been so excited by the thought of getting published that she’d gone a little overboard with the submissions.

“I bet it’s only a matter of time before you’ll be swatting the offers away.”

“I hope so.” Despite the financial stress it had caused, Daphne had loved exercising her storytelling muscles again and was proud of her accomplishment. Getting compensated for it would sure be nice, however. She was definitely looking forward to living less frugally.

“Hey, girls!” KC’s tan, smiling face popped up on Daphne’s screen. “Sorry I’m so late. I was running a boot camp on the beach and lost track of time.”

“Skylar called that,” Daphne said with a laugh. KC was in perpetual motion, like a hummingbird. As always, she was dressed in workout clothes, her blonde hair pulled into a ponytail. Her forehead glistened with tiny beads of sweat.

KC touched a finger to her computer monitor. “I’ve never done a video chat before. This is so cool! It’s like you’re both right here in my kitchen.”

Daphne saw a spice rack and a glass cabinet filled with brightly colored mugs in the background.

“I feel the same way about this thing—like we’re in the future,” Daphne said.

“Totally! It’s so fun to see you both again, even through a computer. Isn’t modern technology the best? Hard to believe we didn’t have the Internet in college. Can you imagine?” KC said.

“I wouldn’t go around broadcasting that fact,” Skylar said.

“Why not?” KC asked.

“Because you might as well hang a sign around your neck that says, ‘I’m in my forties.’”

“But we *are* in our forties.” KC looked confused.

Skylar chuckled. “I’m not disputing that, I’m just saying there’s no need to shout it from the rooftop. How’s the weather out there in SoCal?”

KC gave a thumbs-up sign. “The usual. Sunny and gorgeous. Max went surfing this morning before work.”

“Does he do that every morning?” Daphne asked.

“Not *every* morning. Sometimes he swims, or goes running with me.”

Skylar took a sip of coffee. “Athletic people. I will never understand your species.”

“You should come out and visit us sometime! Max can give you a surfing lesson.”

Skylar coughed. “That will never happen. The surfing lesson, I mean. A trip to visit you and your little beach town is definitely an idea worth discussing, though. So hey, how goes it being the youngest grandma around, or should I say step-grandma?”

“Yeah, how’s that going? Are you getting used to it?” Daphne asked.

“It’s going pretty great, actually. She’s crawling a little, or trying to crawl, I should say. She doesn’t get very far before rolling over onto her squishy little back. Max and I can’t get enough of her. Hang on a second, I’ll show you a photo.”

KC stood up and disappeared from the screen, then reappeared with a framed picture of a smiling baby in a light-green onesie that said “I’d rather be at Grandma and Grandpa’s.”

“Isn’t she the cutest?”

“Adorable,” Daphne said. “Nice onesie.”

“Sounds like someone’s gone soft out there,” Skylar said.

KC held up a hand. “Guilty as charged. I have to admit, I didn’t expect to get such a kick out of being a grandmother, or step-grandmother, or whatever I am.”

“You’re a superstar, that’s what you are,” Skylar said. “That little girl could do a lot worse than having a kick-ass grandma like you as a role model. No wonder she looks so happy in that photo.”

KC grinned. “Thanks.”

Daphne agreed with Skylar.

*How could I not?*

Skylar adjusted her glasses and leaned toward the monitor, her face turning a bit serious. “Anyhow, ladies, thanks for taking the time out of your busy schedules to talk. I hate to cut the chitchat short, but I have a meeting in a few minutes so I don’t have much time.”

“Is everything okay?” Daphne asked.

Skylar smiled. “Yes, hon, everything’s okay. Everything’s great, actually. It’s just that ... well, I have some news.”

“Good news, I hope?” Daphne said.

“Yes.”

“I love good news!” KC said.

“Are you both sitting down?” Skylar asked. “Because this good news is big news.”

“Spill it, already! I’m on the edge of my seat here,” Daphne said.

Skylar glanced away from the screen. “Hang on a second.” She stood up and disappeared for a moment. It sounded like she closed her office door, then she returned to her desk. “Ladies, I know in a million years you never thought you’d hear me utter the following statement, but ...”

KC leaned forward. “But *what?* The suspense is killing me!”

Skylar paused, then held up her left hand to the screen and yell-whispered, “I’m getting married!”

An enormous diamond ring was perched on her third finger.

KC covered her mouth. “Oh my God!”

Skylar touched a finger to her lips and pointed at her office door. “Careful there, Shouty McShouterson. I think my entire department just heard you. They’ve probably noticed the ring, but I don’t want to make a big deal of it around here.”

Daphne was stunned. Skylar had never even been in a serious relationship. And now she was getting married? Daphne didn’t even know that Skylar had been seeing anyone.

“That’s wonderful news, Skylar. Completely unexpected, but wonderful nonetheless. Who’s the lucky guy?”

“His name is James Attingly. He’s the CFO of one of my longtime accounts here in Manhattan, but we only met for the first time six months ago. I didn’t mention

him until now because I wanted to make sure it was the real deal. I hope you understand.”

“Of course we understand,” KC said. “Don’t worry for one second about a silly little thing like that.”

*Six months?* Daphne squinted at the screen to get a better look at Skylar.

“Are you pregnant?”

In addition to suggesting many times over the years that she’d probably never choose to get married, Skylar had also pledged not to have children. Those things had just never been in her plan. But her plan had clearly changed. If she was engaged, it wasn’t outside the realm of possibility that she was also pregnant.

Skylar laughed. “Definitely not. Can you imagine? I’d be pushing fifty at the kindergarten orientation. No, thank you. I have no desire to be mistaken for a grandmother. Oops, no offense, KC.”

“No offense taken! Your kid *would* be almost the same age as little Julia. Wouldn’t that be funny? We could all go on playdates together.”

“What a horrifying thought. Trust me ladies, I do not have a bun in the oven. There will be no firearms at my wedding, thank you very much.”

“So why get engaged so fast, then? What’s the rush?” Daphne asked. “Please don’t take that the wrong way. I’m happy for you, just curious.”

Skylar shrugged. “I don’t know, I guess it just ... feels right. I know it’s kind of unlike me.”

“Coming from someone who patented the rotation system of dating, that’s *kind of* an understatement,” Daphne said.

“Ha ha, true. It’s incredibly unlike me. But I don’t know, there’s just something different about this one. It’s like he and I knew each other in a previous life or something. It’s hard to explain, but for once I’m all in. So yes, ladies, the rotation system is officially retired.”

“I never could figure out how you managed to juggle all those men anyway,” KC said.

“It was never more than one at a time, so it wasn’t *that* hard. It just was never the same one for long,” Skylar said.

“James must really be something special to get you to settle down,” Daphne said.

A smile spread across Skylar’s face. “He is. He’s amazing. He’s kind, and smart, and thoughtful, and funny as hell. Sometimes he makes me laugh so hard I can’t breathe. You should hear some of his celebrity impressions. *Spot on.*”

“I love him already!” KC yelled.

Skylar pointed in the direction of her office door again. “Jeez Louise! For such a small person, you have a freakishly powerful voice. Can you please keep it down? There are a lot of people who work for me sitting right outside, and I kind of need them to take me seriously.”

“How many people?” KC asked.

Skylar furrowed her brow. “In this office? Probably a hundred. Maybe a hundred and fifty.”

“Wow.” Daphne looked around her tiny home office. “That’s a lot more than I have working for me here. Like a hundred and fifty more.”

“So you see why I need you to stop yelling, KC? During business hours I like to maintain the facade of

professionalism I’ve worked for two decades to create,” Skylar said.

“Sorry, sorry. I’m just so *excited!*” KC managed to whisper a shout this time. “It’s just that what you said about James making you laugh reminded me of something. Remember that nice older couple we met on Saint Mirika? They were there to celebrate their fortieth wedding anniversary? Remember what they told us the key to a successful marriage was? *Laughter.*”

Skylar smiled. “I’d forgotten about that until right now.”

Daphne hadn’t forgotten it. She was still hoping to laugh her way into old age with someone.

KC pressed a finger to her lips, and then against her monitor for a kiss. “I didn’t forget it. I don’t think I’ll *ever* forget it, because it’s true. So true! And *that’s* why I’m so happy for you, Skylar. Over the moon!”

“Thanks, Muppet,” Skylar said. “I’m kind of over the moon too.”

“I’m happy for you too,” Daphne said. “Surprised, but happy.”

She couldn’t help but reflect on her own romantic situation by contrast. She liked Derek, but there was no way she felt ready to marry him.

“Thanks, hon. I guess it’s true when they say ‘never say never,’ because if anyone thought they’d never get married, it was me. I know that was terrible grammar, by the way,” Skylar said.

Daphne smiled. “I think you get a pass on grammar today.”

“Have you set a date?” KC asked.

“No date yet, but that brings me to the reason for this call.”

“Are you saying you have *more* news?” KC asked.

“I don’t think I can take any more news. I’m still trying to process the original news,” Daphne said.

“No news, just an invitation. I’d like to invite my two oldest and dearest friends to New York for a girls’ weekend to celebrate. And to help me find a dress. And to drink a lot of wine. What do you think?”

“You mean a bachelorette party?” KC said.

Skylar waved a hand in front of her face. “Please. I’m in my fifth decade. I refuse to call it a *bachelorette party*. Let’s call it a girls’ weekend.”

“So no white sash and tiara for you, then?” Daphne asked with a fake frown.

Skylar cringed. “Oh God, can you imagine? I’m so glad cell phone cameras weren’t around to capture the days when we used to do that sort of thing. I don’t want any evidence floating around that I ever took part in such drunken debauchery. Not that I’m *against* drunken debauchery—now I just prefer a more dignified version of it.”

KC raised her hand. “Well, whatever you want to call it, I’m in. I love drunken debauchery, dignified or otherwise.”

“That’s because you’re so healthy it takes you like one cocktail to get drunk,” Skylar said.

“That is a good point,” KC said.

“When did you have in mind for this little nonbachelorette weekend?” Daphne asked.

“Would Fourth of July weekend work?” Skylar said.

KC raised her hand again. “In!”

“You don’t want to check with your husband first?” Skylar asked.

KC shook her head. “Not necessary. Max knows that when it comes to getting the Three Musketeers together, I have a *never say no* policy. It’s written in pen on the back of our marriage license.”

Skylar whistled. “Oooh, I like that. I might have to do that with my own marriage license. What about you, Daphne?”

“Hang on, I have my calendar right here. Daphne flipped ahead several weeks to the date in question, then nodded. “Looks good to me. Emma’s with Brian that weekend.”

Skylar snapped her fingers. “Perfect! Then let’s book it. I’m paying for your flights, by the way.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Daphne said. Managing the cost of a ticket on her tight budget had already crossed her mind, however. Flying to New York on a holiday weekend had to be expensive, especially on relatively short notice.

“I insist, so don’t even try to argue with me about it. I’ll book the flights and e-mail you both the details. You can stay with me, unless you’d rather stay in a hotel? No, scratch that. I *insist* you stay with me. It will be so much more fun that way, like an extended slumber party. James has a golf trip planned that weekend, so I can focus entirely on you two.”

KC stood up from her kitchen stool and did a little celebratory dance. “This will be so fun! I’ve never been to New York. Can we go for a run in Central Park?”



“You can go for a run in Central Park. Be careful throwing around those pronouns.” Skylar looked at Daphne. “Did I get that right? *We* is a pronoun, yes?”

“*We* is indeed a pronoun. Well done. I’ll go running with you, KC. Being around you always motivates me to get in better shape.”

“That’s the spirit! I love motivating people!” KC pumped a fist.

“You can try motivating me all you want, but while you two go off and sweat to death in the heat, I will happily remain inside with my air-conditioning, thank you very much. I’ll be traveling practically nonstop until then and will probably just want to park my rear end on the couch for a few days and chill,” Skylar said.

“I’m not good at lying on the couch,” KC said. “I get antsy.”

“I guess we all have our own ways of relieving stress,” Daphne said.

“My thoughts exactly,” Skylar said. “Your workout is my blowout.”

Daphne laughed. “I’m not sure what that means, but you do have really nice hair.”

“Do you have room for both of us at your place?” KC asked. “I’ve always heard New York apartments are like shoe boxes.”

Skylar held up a palm. “We’ve got room, no worries.”

“We?” Daphne said.

“James and I, hon.”

“You’re *living* together?” Daphne asked.

“Officially shacking up as of a month ago,” Skylar said. Then she glanced at her watch. “Okay, lovelies, I’ve

got to skedaddle to a meeting. Can’t wait to see you both and catch up on all the happenings.” She blew them a kiss and disappeared from the screen.

“Bye Daphne!” KC waved, and then she too evaporated.

Daphne logged off as well, then reached for a pad of sticky notes and jotted down a reminder to request time off from the flower store over Fourth of July weekend. She hoped to have some good news of her own to celebrate by then. She looked across the room at a bookcase. It was lined with her favorite stories, the ones she’d read over and over throughout the years. She pictured her own name among the spines in the not-too-distant future. A tiny smile crept across her lips as she thought about how incredible that would feel.

She taped the sticky note to her monitor and decided to go for a run after putting away the rest of the groceries. As she laced up her shoes and headed out the door into the crisp afternoon, she felt a happy flutter of anticipation at the thought of spending a weekend with her best friends—and in New York City! Back in college, she’d considered moving there after graduation, visualizing herself as an intrepid young reporter riding the subway each day en route to a job at the *New York Times*. But that was a lifetime ago, and things had turned out differently than she’d once imagined. Jogging past the picture-perfect houses and tidy lawns of suburbia, she wondered what her life would be like now had she chosen that path. She’d never know, but at least she was writing again—and delighted about it.