

Chapter 1

With his eyes still closed, Rain raised his arms above his head and stretched. He stopped short when his arm hit someone else's. His eyes flew open.

Oh crap, he thought. *One slipped through*. He had a rule against this sort of thing. Letting them sleep over tended to give them the wrong ideas. He sat up in bed and looked down at the blonde lying next to him. Sure, she was cute—round, perky breasts—but he could get another one just like her tonight if he went out looking. That was the fun part. The not-so-fun part was falling asleep before remembering to kick them out of bed.

She blinked and smiled sleepily at him. “Hi.” Running a hand through her curly blonde hair, she sat up next to him in bed.

How was he going to get out of this? “Uh, hey.” If you let them stay the night, it was tricky getting rid of them—so much more awkward. If you got rid of them the night of, it was kind of expected. They knew the deal.

“Last night was amazing.” She tickled his arm with her fingernails.

Of course it was. “Oh, um, thanks.” He slid out of bed and spotted his jeans halfway across the room. Walking over, he grabbed them and tugged them on. “Yeah, you, too.” What was he supposed to say? See, this was another good reason to get rid of them before any sleeping happened. He never knew what to say the morning after. He didn't want to encourage them, but he didn't want to be a total ass, either. It was all in good fun. Everyone got something they wanted out of the deal.

“I love this bed.” She fell backwards and burrowed deep in his sheets. Well, it was a high quality bed. Only the best for him.

Yeah. Don't get too attached. “Well, it’s—a bed.” *Yeah, dumbass. That’s exactly what it is,* he thought. He looked around the room for his phone as he spoke. He scratched the back of his head, having no clue where he left it.

This was why partying with Skylar was a bad idea. No matter what they were doing or where they were, Skylar managed to get him in trouble. From getting arrested in Montreal, to hitchhiking in Brazil, to blow-out parties Rain couldn’t remember later, Skylar was usually the common denominator in the bad situations Rain ended up in. The thing was, Skylar was usually involved in the most epic of Rain’s adventures, too.

“...Breakfast?” she was saying.

“Huh?” Rain looked up, startled. That was not a word he wanted to hear. Breakfast implied they would be in each other’s company longer. He couldn’t even remember her name. The name thing was another problem with allowing them to spend the night. He rarely bothered trying to retain such details. It wasn’t like he planned on seeing these women again.

A new voice made Rain jump. He’d forgotten there were two. A woman walked out of his bathroom wearing only one of his shirts. “Yeah,” she said. “I’m hungry.” This one was a redhead. Her bright red hair couldn’t be natural. Now he remembered. He suppressed a grin. Last night had definitely been a good time. No wonder he’d been so tired he passed out afterward. He still didn’t remember either one’s name, though.

“I think breakfast is a great idea,” he said. He finally spotted his phone on his desk. Walking over to it, he said, “You two can get to know each other better...” Or crap. Were they already friends? He couldn’t remember that, either.

“Wait, aren’t you coming with us?” the blonde asked with a frown. She got out of bed and stretched her gloriously naked body.

“I can’t,” Rain said. “I have this thing...I have to do...it starts in—” He stared down at his wrist before realizing he’d taken off his watch last night and left it in some location he couldn’t remember at the moment. He glanced at his phone and pretended to study its face. “Whoa. Starts really soon. I have to get going, ladies.” Hm. He had a new message from Carolina. He hadn’t heard from her in a while.

“Oh yeah?” Red’s expression told him she wasn’t buying his story. “And what exactly is this ‘thing?’”

“It’s for my grandma. She needs me to feed her cat.”

“Oh? That can’t take long. We can wait for you.” Her look went from incredulous to scrutinizing.

He coughed. “In New York. I have to...cat sit. I’m cat sitting for my grandma. Yep. That’s right. You know. I forgot. I gotta take this train. I’m already late. It leaves really soon. I have to get out of here like...now, ladies.”

The blonde and Red exchanged glances. Then the blonde asked, “Don’t you have to pack a bag?”

He was sweating over there even though he hadn’t put on his shirt yet. Couldn’t they give him a break? “I have clothes there,” he said, fully aware of how lame he sounded. “I visit Grandma a lot. And...her cat. Very hungry cat.” He nodded. They stared at him for a moment, and he interjected a “Yep,” into the uncomfortable silence.

“Don’t you get it?” Red said to the blonde. “He’s trying to get us out of here.” She yanked off the shirt of his she wore, popping a few buttons off in the process, and pulled on her jeans and top.

“Oh yeah,” the blonde said. “I get it.” She bent to grab her dress from the floor, and he couldn’t help but appreciate what he’d enjoyed last night. She pulled her mini-dress over her perfect bubble butt. “He’s doing a shitty job of it, though.”

Red snorted. “Asshole.”

“No, it’s not like that,” he said, but he was dancing a jig of relief on the inside. “I had fun last night.”

“Yeah,” they said. “We bet.”

“Let me walk you two out.”

The blonde pushed past him, followed by the redhead.

Red tossed him an ugly sneer. “Don’t bother,” she said.

The two of them walked out together, slamming the door after them. After they left, Rain looked down at his phone again. He smiled.

Carolina. They’d met in college and dated for a while, but Rain wasn’t the serious relationship type. They’d stayed friends for a long time and were sometimes more. Rain hadn’t heard from her a lot in the past few months or so, but life got busy. He assumed they were both tied up with things and hadn’t thought any more about it. Hopefully, this text meant she was in town and wanted to get together.

He opened the text and read it. It said that he needed to call her whenever he woke up because she had some huge news for him. He grinned. She knew him so well. She never called before noon on the weekends because she knew chances were he wouldn’t be conscious yet.

He pulled up her number and pressed the send button. A few moments later, he heard her sexy, throaty voice. He could hear music and loud voices in the background. It sounded like some sort of party was going on.

“Rain!” Carolina said. “Oh, it’s so good to hear from you. How’ve you been?”

“Good. I’m glad you called. I miss you,” he said.

“Let me walk outside. We’re having something at Tia Rosa’s house and these people are so loud. Hold on a minute,” she said, talking so quickly that her words ran over one another the way she usually did. He heard her moving around. When she stopped, it was quieter. “There. That better?”

“Yeah,” he grinned. His grin faded. If she was at her Aunt Rosa’s, that meant she was in Brooklyn. New York. Nowhere near D.C. But maybe she was coming down to visit soon and wanted to make sure he would be in town. He wouldn’t give up hope yet. “So what’s up?” He sat on the corner of his desk. He scanned the room, continuing a visual search for his watch, as he waited for her to answer. He couldn’t lose another Piaget. Those things were pricy to replace. Not that he couldn’t afford it, but he hated throwing money away.

“Gosh, it’s been so long since we talked,” Carolina said. “We have so much catching up to do. Are you seeing anybody? Or you still breaking hearts?”

He grinned. “You know me.”

She laughed. “Don’t I?” Her voice took on a faraway tone for a moment. Before he could put his finger on what was strange about it, she continued, “Anyway, how’s the job? How’s life? Come on, talk to me.”

“Everything is good.” Rain was a partner in a small venture capital firm. He’d started the business with a couple of people he knew from business school. He used to work with Skylar—he’d helped Skylar start his company—but they made much better friends than they did business partners. He’d left the business to save the friendship. Carolina had heard plenty of his griping

about that, though. “How are things with you?” He was ready—more than ready—to get to the good part of this conversation. “Coming to D.C. any time soon?”

“No, not really,” she said distantly. “So. Remember this guy I was telling you about? Manny?”

“Sounds familiar,” Rain lied. “He a boyfriend?” He didn’t care to learn anything her boyfriends. He saw them only as nameless, faceless guys standing between him and good times with Carolina. The only things he ever felt toward them were ambivalence or a vague sort of jealousy.

“He was. Now he’s a fiancé.”

“He’s a what?” Rain pulled the phone away from his ear, stared at it a moment, and held it back to his ear.

Carolina squealed, and he held the phone away again. He put it back to his ear again just in time to hear her say, “I’m getting married!”

“You are?” He couldn’t have been more shocked. “I’m so happy for you.” He was pretty sure that was the right thing to say in this situation.

“Yes! January first. We’re starting off our New Year with our new marriage. Isn’t that beautiful? It’s going to be in San Juan, Puerto Rico.” She chattered on with more details—destination wedding, family in Puerto Rico, blah, blah, blah. He didn’t catch most of it. He was still busy trying to comprehend the fact that Carolina was getting married.

She stopped talking, so he assumed he was supposed to say something.

“Oh. Great,” he said woodenly.

“Don’t you think it’ll be beautiful?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll love Manny.” Her tone of voice changed when she said the man’s name. He’d never heard her say anyone’s name like that.

“I’m sure I will.” He was still on auto-pilot.

“My family adores him. He’s here now because Tia Rosa insisted on throwing us an engagement party. I put it off for months, and I kept trying to tell her we didn’t need one, but you know how that woman is. I think she thought I would never get married. She is so excited. You would think she’s the bride.” Carolina went on about her aunt.

Rain laughed in all the right places, but he couldn’t really concentrate on her story about her aunt. He was trying to remember the last time he’d seen her. What had they done? What had they talked about? Suddenly, it seemed so important, but that last visit melted into all the others in his mind. He’d had no idea it would be the last time he’d see her while she was a single woman.

“I hope you don’t have plans for New Year’s already. I didn’t get around to sending you one of those save-the-date cards,” she said. “I, you know, things get busy.”

Hm. That sounded like the sort of lame excuse he might give her. “Nah, nothing yet.” Rain wasn’t the type to make plans that far in advance unless they were work-related plans. New Year’s was over two months away.

“I know it’s a lot to ask for you to fly all the way to Puerto Rico for my wedding, but it’d mean a lot to me if you were there,” she said, her voice sounding a lot more solemn than it had been when she was gushing about Manny a moment ago.

“Yeah, I mean, of course I want to be there. For you.” He still couldn’t believe he was having this conversation. He was talking about Carolina—his Carolina—getting married. How was that possible? She’d never even mentioned anything about wanting to get married. And

weren't they too young for this? They'd just graduated college. Wait. Had it really been five years ago that they graduated?

“Okay, thank you so much! Give me your address so I can make sure I have the right one. I need it for your invitation.

He rattled off his address while thinking that something felt out of place about this whole thing. Something seemed really wrong. He finished his conversation with her while still kind of zoning out and not able to focus on what was being said. All he knew was the next time he saw Carolina, it would be in Puerto Rico. And he would be there to see her getting married to some other man.

No more Carolina? No, that couldn't happen. Could it? All through college when they'd been off and on, he'd never imagined this. In all the times she'd visited him in D.C., he'd never imagined this. They'd driven each other crazy in good and bad ways, and they'd driven each other away, but they always somehow managed to come together again. She'd teased him about this very thing sometimes, and sometimes the words had taken on an angry tone: *some day, you're going to realize you missed your chance. That's going to be a bad day for you*, she'd said.

Carolina was a beautiful woman. There was no doubt about that. And spending time with her was mind altering incredible. She was the only one he'd found worthy of repeat sex since his only serious girlfriend in high school—not that high school really counted. He remembered the first time he'd seen her. Tight jeans over lovely hips, a tiny tank top, and a smile a mile wide on her beautiful golden face. He'd felt his lips tug into a matching smile almost of their own accord. Her smile had always demanded a matching one from him. Always. Right from the start.

He guessed he'd assumed they'd end up together. He should have had plenty of time to get to that end, though. He wasn't interested in settling down yet. Other things were priorities

right now—taking over the telecom industry, seeing the world, just enjoying the single life. Relationships and all that didn't go with his brand of ambition, and they didn't seem like enjoying life to him. That sort of thing seemed stifling. Like a trap. He'd seen it suck the life right out of friends of his that had fallen prey to the marriage trap. Friends he rarely if ever saw anymore. He wouldn't mind putting that whole thing off for a few more years. He needed more time.

But.

He didn't have more time. He was getting closer and closer to losing Carolina forever every moment. In fact, the date had been set for The Loss. New Year's Day.

He put his phone down on the desk and stared at it for a moment before it hit him. It bothered him not because of jealousy. Or not only because of it. It didn't even bother him that she was getting married. Not really. What bothered him the most was a combination of those things.

Carolina was getting married, and he wasn't going to be the groom.

“My God,” he said, shocked and horrified with the realization as it entered his brain. “I think I'm in love with her.”

Yeah, he'd go to that wedding, but not to smile and nod and throw rice at her and whoever this Manny jerk was.

He was going there to get his Carolina back.

Chapter 2

Daphne Moore walked out of the building at the end of her volunteer shift and squinted against the early afternoon sunshine. She spent most Saturday mornings volunteering with Dogs for Vets, a small non-profit organization that paired Iraq and Afghanistan Vets with service and therapy dogs. She helped the organization with everything from editing grant proposals to caring for the dogs to following up with the Vets who used their services. It was a small operation with just a few volunteers, and her volunteer time was spent wherever she was needed. They often needed lots of help in many different areas. Every shift was different, and she never had time to get bored. She loved putting in her hours there.

Daphne had walked that day because it wasn't a bad walk from her condo in Northeast D.C. to the location of the non-profit and because she didn't want to have to drop her car off later. Her cousin, Bettina, had insisted on picking her up after her shift so that they could go to lunch and then go shopping in Georgetown. It was their thing—especially when Bettina had a really hard week at the law firm where she worked as a secretary. In fact, Bettina was waiting in the parking lot for her now.

Daphne walked up to Bettina's car and got in.

“Hi, how's it going?” Daphne said.

Bettina quirked an eyebrow at her. Her cousin's stylish, short, dark brown hair was perfectly curled. Her green eyes stood out in a nice way against her caramel skin. “I was there all morning. That's all I have to say.”

As soon as Daphne had both feet in the car and the door closed, Bettina sped off. “What's the rush?”

“If I’m not surrounded by designer clothes and jewelry I can barely afford in the next few minutes, I might lose it.” Bettina blended right in with the crazy, pissed off, lane-switching drivers all around them. She zipped down the road much faster than Daphne would have. Bettina usually drove when they went somewhere because Bettina didn’t have the patience for Daphne’s driving. Daphne barely had the nerve for Bettina’s, but she managed.

Bettina glanced at her while they waited at a traffic light at Dupont Circle. “How was volunteering?” Bettina muttered under her breath as she cut someone off, having the nerve to complain about the other person’s driving.

“It was good. I got to play with the dogs today.”

“Good.” Bettina swerved to avoid a car that had pulled out of a side street. “Hey! Hey!” she shouted. She was too busy ranting at the driver for small talk after that.

When they got to Georgetown and finally found a parking space, Daphne was grateful they would get to be on foot for a while. Her cousin’s driving tended to make her a little queasy. Bettina and Daphne made their way to one of their favorite restaurants, a place on M Street. They sat outside because it was a warm day in late October, and they wouldn’t be able to enjoy lunch outdoors for much longer that year.

Daphne filled Bettina in on her plans—or lack thereof—for that night while they waited for the server to bring their drinks.

“You should come out with us,” Bettina said. “We’re going to this new place on U Street. You’d have a good time.”

Daphne raised her eyebrows. She and her cousin had different ideas of fun. “The last time you said that, I woke up in Cancun with a tattoo on my ass.”

Bettina laughed. "I thought you were going to have a stroke until I told you it was just Henna and would go away eventually." When she was able to stop laughing long enough to speak again, she said, "Really. You never come out anymore." Bettina dabbed tears of laughter away from her eyes with the corner of her napkin.

"I'm out now."

"You know what I meant."

"That's not true. I went out for your birthday."

"Almost a year ago," Bettina said. "You're never going to meet anyone all holed up in that condo. I know you love it, and you're so proud of yourself for buying it, as you should be, Ms. Homeowner. But. The fact remains. You have to get back out there eventually."

Daphne sighed. She didn't have the greatest luck with men. "I'm taking a break," she said. "Just a small one," she added when a look crossed Bettina's face that told Daphne she was about to get an earful. Daphne seemed to attract only the skeeziest, scuzziest of the no-good good-for-nothings for some reason.

"You know what happens when you go after the pretty ones," Bettina said. "You know my theory. It's best to always be the prettier one in the relationship."

"I don't only go for the pretty ones, and I know your theory very well," Daphne said. That wasn't hard in Bettina's case, though. She was stunning. Bettina resembled Nicole Arie Parker a little. Once, she and Bettina had been stopped on the street by a director who was filming a movie in D.C. He'd cast Bettina in a small, non-speaking role on the spot.

"You're a great catch," Bettina said. "You're beautiful. I wish you'd do more with all that long, pretty hair, though."

Daphne smirked. “So you’ve said.” She had her long, black hair up in a loose bun that day. Her makeup was minimalist as it usually was when she went to volunteer—just a little eye makeup, some powder, and lip-gloss. Warm, somewhat golden tones that went with her even, brown skin.

“And you have such pretty eyes. I hate you for those lashes. You know how much time and frustration and how many lash curlers and mascara coats go into these things?” Bettina gestured toward her pretty face. “Anyway, you need to come out with us. We’ll get you an outfit right now.” Bettina got excited all over again at the prospect of having a mission for her shopping trip.

“Maybe next time.”

“Daphne, I say this out of love. You keep this up? You’re going to die bitter and alone.”

“I have a profile up on dreamdate.com,” Daphne countered.

The server chose that moment to show up with their drinks. They thanked him, ordered salads—Cobb for Daphne and something with seasonal vegetables and a fancy house vinaigrette for Bettina—and the server went away.

“How’s that online dating thing working out for you?” Skepticism was written all over Bettina’s face. She gave Daphne a pointed look over the rim of her glass as she drank her water.

“This dating thing is hard work, okay?”

“Trust me. I know. That’s why I keep trying to get you to come out with us.”

“No thanks.” Daphne could see it now. Watching guys practically wait in line for a chance to talk to Bettina. Having some guy spill drinks all over her or offer to buy them in an attempt to lay a claim to her for the rest of the night. Then there was always the chance she would get roped into being D.D. and have to drive a bunch of very drunk women very raucous

home or worse—have to keep them from going off with mistakes they'd regret in the morning thanks to the Beer Goggle Effect. No thanks.

For the rest of lunch, Bettina kept trying to sell her on drunken good times, and she kept giving Bettina reasons why she wasn't interested. Afterward, they headed for the nearby shops.

Bettina was about to cross the street when Daphne put an arm out in front of her. "Just wait a minute." She nodded at the orange hand that was the "don't walk" signal. "It'll change in a minute.

"There's nothing coming."

"What about that car down there?"

Bettina shielded her eyes with her hand and pretended to have to squint to see the car.

"Oh, you mean that speck way down there? I think that car's in Virginia, Daph."

Daphne laughed. "Make all the fun you want. Car versus pedestrian is not a game I like to play. Pedestrians lose that one too often for my taste."

The light changed, and Bettina turned to Daphne expectantly. "Can I go now, Mommy?"

Daphne gave her cousin a playful shove into the crosswalk. "Shut up, you."

They crossed and went into a shoe shop. Bettina had been coveting an overpriced pair of boots in there for a few weeks, but hadn't worked up the nerve to buy them yet. Next, they hit up a few shops at which Bettina tried to get Daphne to buy some new club gear.

After they wandered in and out of a few boutiques, Daphne frowned down at her phone. She'd missed a call. She must not have felt her phone vibrate.

"What's wrong?" Bettina asked.

"I missed a call."

"From who? Is it a man? A cute one?"

“Yeah,” she said with a slight grin. “But he doesn’t really count.”

“Who is it?”

“Rain.”

“Oh. Him.” Bettina gave her a knowing glance. Bettina knew about Daphne’s long and painful crush on Rain Foster. She’d secretly had a thing for him since they’d met during freshman orientation in college. “Are you going to call him back?” Bettina asked.

“Yeah.” Daphne tried to make her tone come off nonchalant. “I might as well see what he’s up to.” She and Rain both lived in D.C., but rarely saw each other unless a group of their college friends who lived in D.C. were getting together. Her fingers trembled a little as she pulled up Rain’s number and pushed send. Why was she acting like this? So it’d been a while since she talked to him. Probably over a year. So what?

“Hey,” his easygoing, deep voice came through the phone. She knew why she was acting all unhinged as soon as she heard that voice.

“Hi,” she said. She knew Bettina was going to call her out for melting into a puddle in the middle of the street later, but she couldn’t help it. Everybody had one. At least one. That One that no matter what the circumstances, could make your knees weak and your heart knock. Even if you knew better. Unfortunately, she knew who Rain’s One was, and she wasn’t it. That didn’t matter, though.

She was still a goner for him.

Chapter Three

“How are you?” Rain asked. “It’s been so long since we talked.”

“I’m good,” Daphne said, sounding cautious. Almost suspicious.

“Glad to hear it,” he said. They talked for a few minutes. As soon as he felt like he could naturally drop it into the conversation, he said, “So I talked to Carolina recently.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” Rain forced a laugh. “She’s getting married. Can you believe it? How crazy is that?”

There was a pause. Then Daphne said, “I know.”

“Oh.” Rain took a fumbling step and then sat on the corner of his bed. “Okay.”

“Yeah. She asked me to be one of her bridesmaids. I’m in the wedding party.”

“Wow,” he said. “Makes sense. You two were close when we were all—” He stopped short. He’d almost said when they “were” all friends. They were still friends, weren’t they? He said, “When we went to school. In New York.” What had made him add that last part? Of course she knew where she’d gone to school. He couldn’t get it together today. No more partying for him for a while. Except...Skylar really wanted him to show up for a thing he was having for a new angel investor and his friend that night. And apparently, the guys liked to party hard.

“Yeah. We were all close,” Daphne said.

“We should catch up,” Rain said, an idea forming in his mind as he spoke. “I miss you.” He really did. He always had fun hanging out with Daphne. He didn’t know why he didn’t seek her out more. He only saw her when they happened to be out with the same group of people.

“That’d be nice,” she said.

“How about tomorrow? We could get together for brunch. There’s this great place near Logan Circle.”

“I’d love to. I mean, sounds good.”

He rattled off a name and an address. “Meet you there around noon?”

“Sure.”

“Looking forward to it,” he said.

“Me, too,” Daphne said.

When they got off the phone, Rain decided to venture out of his room and assess the damage.

“Ugh. Gross,” he muttered. Whatever had transpired here must have been epic. Too bad he couldn’t remember most of the night. His living room had been turned upside down as a result of whatever had gone down. There was no way he could deal with this. The cleaning lady would be there on Monday. She could deal with it. He’d have to tip her huge for this one. At least double-her-hourly-rate huge. And he’d get rid of the old food and anything else that might get funky over the next couple days. He’d get rid of the skanky stuff, too—like any used condoms that might still be floating around the apartment.

He bent over his couch and peered at a scrap of red material on the beige carpet behind it. Was that a thong? Had the blonde or Red left her underwear behind? Probably.

Sunday was going to be a big day. Not only did he have brunch plans, but he’d promised to have dinner with his parents Sunday evening. They lived in Virginia, out in Vienna. They would want to drill him about when he planned on settling down and otherwise harass him. He loved his parents and had a great relationship with them, though, so it was all good.

The first thing he had to do was recoup enough to destroy his body all over again tonight. And he still had to be ready for a full day Sunday. He didn't know why he did these things to himself. Well, that was a lie. Of course he did. They were fun at the time—just not so much the next morning or whenever he happened to wake up the following day.

He would probably go to the gym after drinking lots of water, then drink some more water. Take a nap. Drink some more water. Do the little bit of cleaning he planned on doing. And did he mention he needed some water? He needed to call Skylar, too, to double-check the plan for that night.

First things first. He hunted down a bottle of water. It wasn't hard to do because there was little in his fridge besides beer and water. That was the way it would be until his housekeeper did groceries on Monday and until the meat truck as he liked to call it dropped off his steaks. They brought other stuff, too, but his main interest was in the steaks. The truck came once a month—his favorite day of the month.

After he got home from the gym and finished cleaning, he called Skylar.

“Dude,” he said. “What is the plan for tonight?”

“I'm just waking up,” Skylar said with a yawn. At least he had Skylar beat. It was almost four in the afternoon. “Hard to think right now. I guess we'll meet at that sushi place near the office—the one we used to always go to—and take it from there. I told them that's where we'd start.”

“I don't know if I can drink tonight.”

“Oh please,” Skylar said. “Not this ‘I'm never going to drink again' thing. You do this every other week. I swear.”

“No really. I woke up with not one, but two girls here.”

“Oh no,” Skylar said. “You broke one of the few rules you have in life.”

“Yeah. Luckily, it didn’t go too badly.” Rain gave him a quick recap. Skylar couldn’t stop laughing at his lame story about the cat sitting. Rain had the feeling he was going to catch grief about that one for a while.

After a few minutes, they got off the phone. Rain went to get ready. Not sure how formal that night was supposed to be, but knowing Skylar never got too dressed up for anybody—even for business meetings—Rain pulled on dark jeans and grabbed a blazer to wear over his pale blue button-down. Thank goodness for his housekeeper or everything we wore would’ve been wrinkled.

He went to the sushi bar that was somewhere between Dupont and the office, which was at Sixteenth and K. As he suspected, Skylar hadn’t gone out of his way for the dinner meeting. He wore jeans, flip-flops, and a dark shirt. His blond hair was cut close. It was a good thing he was a tech genius. If Skylar weren’t absolutely brilliant, he wouldn’t get away with half the stuff he managed to pull off. Skylar introduced Rain to the man who was the newest investor in Skylar’s business, the Bevyx Corporation, and his friend.

“This is the man who made it all possible,” Skylar said, pointing to Rain. Rain had been the ideas person and the people person. He’d made all the connections and helped Skylar come up with the ideas that really set Bevyx apart in the software engineering business. Rain liked to think those skills translated well to his work now at his venture capital firm and in the consulting work he did on the side.

Rain shook hands with the men and asked them how their flights from New York had been. New York. That made him think of Carolina. Ignoring the sudden pang of loss he felt, he

forced himself to keep his feelings from showing on his face. Skylar was right. There was no way he could give up drinking that night. He was ready to order a bottle of sake.

Later that night, they went to a club on U-Street. Skylar and Rain sat in a plush booth alone while the two men went to the bar to see what was up with their bottle service. Skylar had offered to go, but the men had insisted. Rain thought they were more interested in the bartenders than in asking about the bottle service. One of them had been eyeing a thin blond guy and the other had been eyeing a curvy brunette woman behind the bar for half the night.

“Carolina’s getting married, man.” Rain toyed with an empty shot glass. Oh man, it hurt to say it out loud. Made it seem more real.

“Psht. Don’t tell me you still got it bad for her.” Skylar slurred his words. He was feeling the effects of a night of drinking already. He’d been going hard, trying to keep up with the angel investor and his friend, even though they easily outweighed him by at least fifty pounds each.

“I’m going to the wedding.” Rain stared across the room. “It’s going to be in Puerto Rico.”

“Don’t, man. Bad, bad idea.”

“I have to.” He didn’t say it out loud because he didn’t want to hear Skylar’s response, but he thought, *It’s my last chance to tell her how I feel. That I can’t lose her.* That was the kind of thing he had to do in person. And he couldn’t just take a random trip to New York to do it. He needed time. The trip to Puerto Rico would last longer than just one day. Besides, she might not call off the engagement. The wedding was more final. It would be easier to get her to see what a huge mistake she was making if he showed up there. Or maybe...maybe he’d just go and wish her well and bow out gracefully. He didn’t know. All he knew for sure was that he had to be there.

“Well,” Skylar said. “At least you’ll get to go to the beach. He nodded as if this was good enough for him. He suddenly sat forward in his chair and squinted. Then he got up, stumbled forward a few steps, and leaned over the nearby balcony.

Rain jumped up and put a hand on his shoulder to steady him. “Hey. Hold on. What are you doing?”

Skylar was still leaning over the balcony in a precarious way. “I think that’s Bettina.” He pointed down. “There. In the lime green.”

Rain followed his pointing finger to an attractive light-skinned black woman with short dark hair. She wore a lime green halter-top and a short skirt. Nice rack. “Who’s Bettina?” Besides the obvious—a very sexy woman in very high heels.

“She works for my lawyers,” he said, his gaze still stuck on Bettina.

“Come away from there,” Rain said, tugging at his shoulder. It really wouldn’t take much for Skylar to tip the wrong way with the angle at which he leaned over the railing.

“Man. She is looking good tonight.”

Rain couldn’t dispute that. “You should go say something to her.”

“Nah,” Skylar said. “I think she thinks I’m an ass.”

Rain laughed. “No. What could’ve possibly given her that impression?”

“Well, you know, sometimes I have that effect on people.” Skylar pulled away from the railing, stumbled back to the table, and dropped into the booth.

They laughed. Skylar was forceful and used to getting his way. That didn’t go over well with people sometimes. It was one of the reasons Rain had decided to start his own business and leave Bevyx. He still owned stock in Bevyx, but that was his only remaining tie to the company.

It was either get out while things looked good career-prospect wise and save the friendship as well or let things get ugly.

The angel investors came back to the table. They told Rain and Skylar how they'd gotten the bartenders' numbers, but Rain was distracted from the story. He tried to show interest, but he couldn't stop his mind from drifting to Carolina.

He could tell that Skylar was distracted as well. Skylar was a man of few words—that was one of the reasons he tried to bring Rain along to schmoozing events like this—but that night he was quiet even by Skylar standards. And he kept glancing in the direction of the dance floor below. The place where he'd pointed out the woman in the green top with the incredible legs and breasts.

San Juan, huh? Who got married on New Year's Day? It seemed kind of tacky to him. Not that he was bitter or anything. He'd never been a relationship man, but maybe he could be ready to change that for the right woman. And if there was a right woman, it had to be Carolina.

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When Rain woke up the next morning, he reached out tentatively, afraid to open his eyes. His hand touched nothing but air and sheets, and he breathed a sigh of relief. He sat up in bed and pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes. What a rough weekend. At least today would be easier. Nothing but brunch with an old friend and the obligatory Sunday evening with his parents.

Thinking of brunch led to thoughts of Carolina. He'd been shocked by the news was all. He'd missed out, and someone else had snapped her up. He would go to brunch with Daphne. It would be nice to see her. After all, he hadn't seen her in a while. He couldn't just stand her up after he'd been the one to invite her out to brunch in any case. But that was it. He probably

wouldn't even bring up the wedding. No, he couldn't just go busting up an engagement and stopping a wedding that had probably already been all planned out. Right?

First things first. He needed a shower. He would worry about the rest when he didn't reek so badly.

Stumbling out of bed, he headed for his bathroom. Yeah, he had to let this thing go. Carolina would be better off with someone who was ready to settle down. This Manny guy obviously was. Rain was nowhere near that. Right? He shuddered at the thought of slipping enough to let women sleep over last night.

But those women weren't Carolina. It could've been different with her. Did he want it to be? Was he missing his big chance at happiness? Would he ruin hers if he called her right now and told her how he felt?

All he knew for sure was he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her since she'd called and delivered what she'd thought was good news.