



*Anything
Your Heart
Desires*

AJ Adaire

Other Books by AJ Adaire

Friend Series

Sunset Island - Book 1

The Interim (a novelette)

Awaiting My Assignment - Book 2

Anything Your Heart Desires

by

AJ Adaire


Desert Palm Press

Anything Your Heart Desires

Friends Series Book 3

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Back of Book

"Whoa--lesbians!" That was straight author Stacy Alexander's first thought as she observed the group of women in the new shop across the street kiss each other in greeting. Stacy had been staring out her apartment window trying to think of a motive for the death of the character she'd killed off in her mystery novel. Ah ha--extortion! What could be a better reason for the murder of my heroine than being blackmailed because she's a lesbian? Now all I need is a lesbian to teach me about the 'lesbian lifestyle.'

That's where policewoman Jo Martin enters the picture. Jo has two rules by which she religiously lives her life: never get involved with someone already in a relationship and never, ever date a straight woman. As Jo and Stacy collaborate on the novel, will Stacy want to gain a more intimate knowledge of the topic, and will Jo hold steadfastly to her rules?

Catch up with old friends Amanda, Mallory, Nic and Dana and meet some new characters in this sequel to *Awaiting My Assignment* and *Sunset Island*.

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Special appreciation is extended to ICL and PAS who read and then read again each version of the story. I am very grateful.

Last, but never least, thanks to my readers. I especially appreciate those readers who take time to leave reviews or send me notes. Leaving reviews helps others decide which books to read and tells authors what you liked about their story and what you didn't. I love to hear from those of you who write notes to me to say how much you've enjoyed my stories. Knowing you've gotten pleasure from my tales makes it all worthwhile. Thank you.

Dedication

I tend to disappear into my books. When I'm writing, I hear—but don't always listen. I observe—and don't always see. Couple this absorption with time spent thinking about new stories, editing already written stories, responding to mail from readers, publicizing the books, remaining visible on Facebook, Twitter, and other venues. I give interviews as well as doing interviews of other authors, and it all adds up to too much time absent from the most important relationship in my life. For this reason I dedicate this book to my partner of thirty years. I'm still glad it's you.

Excerpt:

Chapter 1

MEG SLID AN ARM across Jo Martin's stomach and snuggled closer. Jo could tell by the woman's regular breathing that she was, thankfully, still asleep. *Oh God, what have I done now? Shit, shit, shit! I should have stopped this before we had sex. Why didn't I?* Jo groaned inwardly and exhaled a long sigh. *I could have just pushed her away, or simply said 'no.'* *What the hell have I done? How could I be so stupid?* The events of the afternoon raced through her mind. She wanted to put her fingers to her forehead and massage away the headache that was forming between her eyebrows but refrained, fearful of waking the sleeping woman next to her.

Earlier in the day, after returning from Christmas vacation with her family at their cabin in the mountains near Edinborough, New York, Jo had not even unpacked her suitcase when Meg stopped by unannounced. Jo had opened the door for her friend, expecting their usual brief greeting. A split second later, their normally casual hug and kiss hello took on a totally new dimension. Meg, definitely the aggressor, wouldn't release Jo after their brief hug. Instead, she pulled Jo firmly against her, pinned her against the wall, and kissed her thoroughly.

"I missed you more than you'll ever know." Meg pulled Jo against her to kiss her again.

As Jo's mind wandered through the earlier events, she realized that she'd responded more out of loneliness and surprise than out of desire for her friend. With the deed done, it was too late now to undo her error. Guilt and regret gnawed at her for what she'd allowed to happen. In her heart, she knew she didn't want a relationship with Meg. Until the kiss in the hall earlier, she hadn't even really thought of Meg as a potential sexual partner. They were friends, never more than that.

Jo was normally attracted to women who were smaller in stature and shorter than her own height of five-eight. Meg was an imposing figure of a woman, standing just a bit less than six feet tall with ice blue eyes and nearly white short-cropped hair. Her muscular, almost masculine build attested to her avid interest in weight lifting.

Meg had told Jo how much she'd missed her before kissing her. Unfortunately, Jo hadn't thought of Meg once during the time she vacationed with her family. She groaned mentally.

Why did I kiss her back? Hell, more to the point, why did I have sex with her? Well, the answer is obvious, really. When was the last time I had a date or sex with anyone other than my vibrator? Jo calculated the answer to the question. *Can it be true that I really haven't dated anyone in over two years? The last person I've even been attracted to was the Director of Nursing at the hospital, Mallory Barnes.* Jo and Mallory both worked shift work. Between their two crazy work schedules, they had rarely been able to get together with each other outside the hospital. Jo often brought prisoners in for medical treatment, and they had become friendly during a two-week period when Jo was guarding one of the prisoners. As time passed, their initial attraction turned into friendship, and Mallory and her new partner Amanda had both become Jo's friends. Mallory Barnes was much more her type than Meg. Short and petite, easy-going, dazzling smile, great giggle. Yes, definitely her type. Jo quickly shook away her regret because she would never interfere in an established relationship. Someone paired was definitely off limits. Besides, Jo liked Mallory's partner, too. Once Mallory and Amanda had established their relationship, Jo had quickly contented herself with a friendship with the couple. Jo had two rules she never broke—never get involved with anyone already in a relationship, and never, ever date a straight woman.

Come on. Stop digressing and get back to the issue at hand. How do I handle this? It's not that Meg is unattractive. She's certainly comely enough, even if she's not my type. Jo continued to mentally list Meg's good points. *She's intelligent, kind, interesting, and unattached. Unfortunately, there's just something missing in my feelings for this woman sleeping next to me, and I don't see the potential for my feelings to change.* Their lovemaking had been sweet, although Meg was definitely more into it than she was. *Why on earth didn't I stop Meg after the first kiss? I didn't want to hurt her feelings. Plain and simple, I'm an idiot. Now it'll be worse. She's going to wake up all huggy and kissy, and I'm going to want to do a disappearing act. Only I blew it this time. This is my house. She's here. That means I have to ask her to leave. No...too cold. I can spend the rest of the day with her and beg off early saying I'm too tired. She'll want to go back to bed with me and spend the night. Well, I can't treat her like she's some meaningless one-night stand. Surely I remember those days. Let me see, when was the last time? Oh yeah, three, no more like four years ago? Oh no, she's waking up.*

The tall woman stirred and turned toward Jo. "Hi," Meg said with a sleepy grin. "Are you okay?"

Jo smiled. "Yes, fine. You?"

"I'm good." Meg smiled weakly. Before Jo could extricate herself from the uncomfortable situation, Meg solved her dilemma. "Look, Jo, I think I'm more into you than you are into me."

Honesty is the best policy, but be kind. Jo nodded. "I'm sorry."

Meg shook her head. "No. I'm sorry if I made it hard for you to say no. It's okay, really. It's just that I've had the hots for you since we met, and I knew if I didn't make a move, you never would. I thought if we well, you know, did this, maybe you'd start to feel something for me."

"I do feel something for you, Meg. You are a lovely, kind, and loyal friend. I care for you very much, and I treasure your friendship. However, I think this may have been a mistake. I'm sorry."

Meg exhaled a long sigh. "Please don't think it was a mistake. I enjoyed myself, and I hope you did, too. I know you feel differently about it than I do. I'm glad we made love. Maybe it'll help me get you out of my system."

Concerned about the ramifications of what they'd done, Jo put her hand on Meg's arm. "I hope this won't ruin our friendship?"

"Why should it?"

"I don't know. Will you feel awkward?"

Meg shook her head. "Look, we're both single adults. We like each other. I'd hoped for more. Unfortunately, it's not going to happen. I'm still not sorry we did it, and I hope you won't be either. Now, before you give me the 'it's not you, it's me' speech, let's get up and go get something to eat."

Wow! She's a mind reader. I'm famished. Phew! Maybe this'll be okay after all. "Sounds good to me. I'm hungry. Are you on call tonight?"

Meg was a physician's assistant by day. She volunteered much of her spare time on the EMS squad. She rode in the ambulance with another paramedic when she was on call three nights a week and every other weekend. She truly was a good soul to donate so much of her time.

"No, I'm not on call. I left my glasses in the ambulance and I'd like to stop by and pick them up if I can. Want to go with me? We can stop by and get some pizza on the way home. I can drop you back here on my way to my house. I have an early shift tomorrow at the office."

"Yes, sounds good."

They rolled out of bed, turning their backs to each other as they quickly dressed.

Meg checked with Jo. "You want to eat first, or find out where the ambulance is?"

"Let's get your glasses first, before we eat. Even though I'm hungry, it's still a little early for dinner."

"I'll call and find out if they're at the EMS squad room or out on a call." Meg flipped open her phone and punched in the number of the regular driver. "They're at the hospital. They just picked up a gunshot victim and are taking him to the ER. We can catch up with them there."

Jo tucked in her T-shirt as she walked to the breadbox where she kept her off duty pistol and holster. She picked up her weapon, reached behind her back, and clipped the holster and Glock into the waistband of her jeans. Then she put on a shirt, which she left unbuttoned. It was her standard attire when not in uniform.

Meg and she made small talk on the way to the hospital. Maybe making love with Meg hadn't been such a terrible mistake after all. Meg actually did seem okay that sex would not be a regular component of their friendship. She'd also seemed to accept the fact that this experience definitely would not result in any kind of ongoing or committed relationship between them.

The two women entered the emergency room and spotted the EMS team across the room. The team members who had just delivered the patient were talking to one of the doctors on duty, explaining the emergency treatment they had provided to the patient en route. Meg gestured with her head to Jo that she would be heading in that direction to talk with her friends as soon as they were free. Jo looked around and saw Mallory standing behind the main desk.

"Hey, Mallory! Busy tonight?"

"No, it's been strangely quiet. That's our first serious case, a shooting. Some kind of domestic dispute between two friends over some woman, I think. Apparently she slept with both of them, and one took particular offense."

"I hate those domestic dispute calls. You never know what you'll run into. One time..."

Before Jo could finish her story, there was a crash at the door and in an instant, a flash of motion. A crazed man rushed in past the shocked EMTs. He grabbed the closest person, Meg, and held a gun to her head.

"Where is he? I want to know where that bastard Smitty is."

Jo could hear Meg's reply. "I'm a visitor here, I swear I don't know."

While his attention was focused elsewhere, sticking to the perimeter of the room, Jo started to slowly make her way across the ER, moving nearer to the upset man. As she edged closer, his attention started to shift in her direction. He stopped to focus on Mallory when she dropped the chart she was holding in an effort to distract his attention from Jo.

Worried for Mallory's safety, Jo quickly moved closer to the gunman. Jo's hand flashed behind her back and emerged from under the shirt with her pistol in hand. She shouted, "Police! I'm a police officer. Drop your weapon."

The scene unfolded in what seemed like frame-by-frame action. The gunman pushed Meg viciously aside. As she fell, she smacked her head on the edge of the stretcher. She dropped, unconscious before she hit the floor.

As Meg lay unmoving, the gunman's focus shifted to Mallory. The man raised his weapon to fire, apparently not sure who had called out, or where she was standing. Jo tried to distract the gunman and yelled at the top of her lungs. "Hey you! Over here! Drop your gun." As if in slow motion, he fired once wildly before he zeroed in on Jo, turned toward her and pulled the trigger at the exact same time she did. They both fell to the floor. He was dead. She was seriously injured and bleeding heavily.

The EMS team and the hospital staff sprang into action. The wild shot he'd squeezed off had hit Mallory. Fortunately it only skimmed her arm causing a slight flesh wound. The hospital staff and EMS team lifted both Meg and Jo onto stretchers and began a quick but thorough assessment of their condition.

The action was over in an instant. *Thank God Jo was here*, Mallory thought as she watched them wheel everyone away. Meg, who was still unconscious, was admitted for observation. Jo was rushed into surgery to repair the serious wound to her thigh. Mallory's arm treated and dressed.

Mallory normally would not be working this shift if she weren't trying to catch up. She'd soon be leaving her position as Director of Nursing. She and her partner, Amanda, and their two closest friends, Nic and Dana, would soon be starting their own business. Thanks to a large inheritance Amanda recently received when a former lover passed away unexpectedly, she was investing in a business for the four of them so they could be in charge of their own professional lives.

Amanda. I'd better give her a call before she hears this on the radio and worries. Mallory reached for the phone.

Eager awaiting Mallory's return home, Amanda answered her phone on the first ring. "Hi, Honey, coming home soon?"

"Hey, Babe. No, but I didn't want you to be concerned. There's been a shooting at the hospital. Don't worry. I'm okay, I only got a flesh wound."

"Flesh wound! What do you mean? You've been shot?"

"Yes, but I'm okay," Mallory emphasized. "Honest. I'm not sure about Meg and Jo, though. They were both injured. Jo killed the gunman. She was very brave and really impressive. If not for her, I might have been more seriously injured and no doubt more lives would have been lost. If she hadn't called out to him to get his attention, I might not be making this call to you."

"My God! Are you coming home now? Should I come get you?"

"No, the police are on their way here, and I'm sure I'll need to answer some questions. Also, I want to check on Meg and Jo's condition."

"Then I'll come there to you. I'm leaving right now."

"There's no need for you to come. Really, I'm okay."

When Amanda strongly protested, Mallory recognized a losing battle and quickly gave in. "All right. I'll be in the surgery waiting room, waiting to see how Jo's surgery went."

Chapter 2

AMANDA RUSHED IN AND checked Mallory out thoroughly before wrapping her in her arms. She whispered into her lover's neck as she held her tightly, "Are you really okay?"

"Yes," Mallory assured her, "I'm really fine. I will say that, if Jo hadn't distracted him by yelling at him, I'm sure it could have definitely been much worse. It could have been me on that operating table. This was close, Honey, and I'm still shaking."

Amanda grabbed Mallory's hands. "I'll be forever grateful to Jo for saving your life. We owe her. How are Meg and Jo doing?"

"Meg took a terrible hit to her head. She's still unconscious, last I heard."

"And Jo?" Amanda asked. "Have you heard anything about her condition?"

"Yes, she's still in surgery. She was shot in the thigh." Mallory arched her brow and shrugged. "If you have to be shot, the hospital is the best place for it to happen. If she'd been shot anywhere else, she might not have lived. I know she lost a lot of blood. Fortunately, because it happened here, she was in the operating room in a matter of minutes."

A tall, well-built man with neatly trimmed grey hair and a well-trained mustache rushed in.

"Hi, John," Mallory said. "Amanda, this is Captain John Strayer. He's Jo's boss."

Amanda and the police captain shook hands and exchanged greetings.

As they were chatting, the surgeon exited from the operating room. He recognized Mallory and the police chief and approached. "Has anyone contacted Jo's family yet?"

"No, not yet," the Chief replied. "I thought I'd wait until I had something definite to tell them."

"Well, you know, as her physician, I can't legally give you any information. I think you can safely tell them that she made it through surgery okay and I'm guardedly optimistic. Have them give me a call for the details. I'm transferring her to the ICU. Mallory, I assume I'll see you up there?"

"I'll take care of that right away. Thanks, Doc," the Chief promised.

"Take care, Mallory, Amanda," he said nodding in their direction.

"Come on, Amanda," Mallory said. We're going to the ICU. In so many words, he just gave me permission to read her chart. I'll find out what's going on."

The Chief pulled out his phone. "I'll catch up with you as soon as I can, Mallory. We'll need to ask you some questions about what happened."

Amanda waited in the ICU waiting room while Mallory entered the restricted area. Ten minutes later Mallory came out and sat down next to her lover. "She came through the surgery okay. Unfortunately, it may be a career ending injury. She lost a lot of blood and they suspect she'll have some numbness, at least initially. She had a lot of muscle and nerve damage. Some of the feeling will return but probably not all. They worry now about infection, and she'll need rehab to get functional use of her leg back."

"Mal, does she have any family here?"

Mallory shook her head. "I know she's close to her parents. I think they live in Pennsylvania. Why?"

"She saved your life. Maybe we should offer to take care of her while she recovers. I feel like we owe her something for that, don't you? Besides, she helped rescue me when I was hurt after my run-in with the deer."

"Well, we already have a chair," Mallory laughed, referring to the motorized reclining chair, with the seat that helped raise a person sitting in it to a standing position. They had bought it for Amanda after she'd injured her leg in her biking accident with the deer.

"Was she awake yet?"

"In and out. I expect that she'll have a lot of pain. They'll keep her pretty doped up for a couple of days."

"Can you sit with her or do you have to go back to your office?"

"I need to check in. I still haven't talked to the police, and I'm sure they're waiting to see me."

"Can you get me in there?" Amanda asked, referring to the ICU.

Mallory smiled, before she pulled Amanda to her for a quick hug. "Time will be limited, but I can get you in there. You're a fortunate woman, you know, to have a friend in high places."

Amanda raised her eyebrow. "And don't I know it."

A couple of hours later, Jo woke up. Amanda smiled at her. "How are you feeling?"

Jo gave a wan smile. "Kinda like I've been assaulted by a bullet."

"Well, we're all glad that guy wasn't a better shot."

"How are Mallory and Meg?"

"Mal only got nicked on the arm, thanks to you. I know Meg hadn't awakened yet, last I heard. That was a couple of hours ago. I can check on her for you, if you'd like."

"Yes, in a little while. Can you stay with me for a bit?"

"Sure. Can I get you anything?"

"How about some water?"

"I'll ask the nurse."

When the nurse finished checking on Jo, she again allowed Amanda in to visit with her.

"Has anyone called my parents?"

"I think your captain planned to call. Would you like me to follow up and call them?"

"Could you? I'd appreciate it. My mom will want to come, as will my dad. They just returned home from a trip to the cabin, so I know they'll be exhausted. I'm concerned about them turning around and making the trip here. Taking care of my dad is a full time job for mom. I know she'll want to take care of me. I really don't want her to. I think it's too much for her." Jo clicked the trigger to release a dose of pain meds.

"Well," Amanda said. "I have a solution. I'd like to invite your parents, and you when you're well enough, to stay with Mallory and me. Mallory and I can take care of you, and your mom and dad can visit until they feel comfortable that you're on the mend."

"Amanda. I couldn't possibly take advantage of you that way."

"When it's offered freely, how is it taking advantage? Please trust me when I say it's something we can do. Besides, Dana and Nic will help too, I'm sure."

"Well, I really appreciate it. Would you call my mom and tell her I'm going to be okay and tell her not to worry?"

"I'll take care of everything. Now, you rest. I'll call Dana and Nic first to update them before I call your mom. I'll be back later after I've talked to everyone. Try to get some rest."

"Thanks. My mom's number is on my phone." Jo relaxed, thankful and reassured by Amanda's promise that she would have the support of her friends for what she knew might be a difficult recovery.

Chapter 3

“MRS. MARTIN? THIS IS Amanda James. I am a friend of your daughter's. I just came from seeing Jo. I know her captain called you, and you're probably concerned. Jo wanted you to know that she's awake and worried about you and her father making the trip to see her.”

“Hello, Amanda, and please call me Josette. Thank you for calling. We've been so worried. I just talked to her supervisor a couple of hours ago. He hadn't seen her yet. How is Joanna?”

Amanda smiled at the formal name hardly anyone used to refer to their friend and was surprised to hear Mrs. Martin had a strong French accent. Jo had never mentioned that her mother was French.

“Your daughter is doing okay. I have good news. They just informed us that, now that they have her stable, they plan to move her to the step-down unit soon. They'll keep a careful watch on her there, and assuming she continues to improve, they'll probably move her to a private room tomorrow or the day after. Jo wanted me to assure you that although she still has some discomfort from the surgery, she's getting the best of care and she doesn't want you to worry.”

“Thank you for calling and giving me this information. I feel reassured. No doubt I'll feel better when I can see her. My husband, Ben, and I plan to drive there to be with her tomorrow. I have trouble seeing at night, so we have to wait until morning to leave.”

“I would like to invite you and your husband to stay with my partner, Mallory, and me. We've already offered to take care of Jo, so if you will stay with us, we can all pitch in and help.”

Mrs. Martin expressed her relief at hearing that her daughter was feeling well enough to make these arrangements. “My daughter has mentioned her friends before. I appreciate your offer, and I'm grateful. I feel better knowing that Jo has such good friends there to help watch over her. Thank you.” They agreed that she and her husband would come as soon as they could get there.

“Please tell her that we're coming as soon as we can and that I love her. And thank you so much for your call.”

Amanda returned to find Mallory next to Jo's bedside, talking softly with her. The nurse on duty said, “You can go in, but keep it quiet in there, please.”

“Not a problem.” Amanda slid her arm around Mallory's shoulder, and Mallory circled Amanda's waist with her arm. Amanda related the details of her conversation with Jo's mother.

“Now, don't worry about your parents. We'll take care of everything. You just worry about getting better.”

Mallory squeezed Jo's hand. “Thank you for saving me.”

Jo smiled. “Thank you both for being here for me.” Relieved, Jo closed her eyes and drifted.

“We can't stay too long. Technically, we shouldn't be here. I'll check in with you again before we leave.”

“Thanks.”

Jo's parents arrived at the hospital the next afternoon. Mallory met them when she went to visit Jo to check on her condition. Mr. and Mrs. Martin's day had been long and tiring. They'd left home early that morning, driven to the hospital to see their daughter, and spent several hours there in the uncomfortable chairs in the waiting room and visiting their daughter. With Jo's encouragement, her parents reluctantly agreed to leave before the end of visiting hours. “Really, Mom and Dad, I'm fine. Please go get something to eat and get some rest.”

Mallory drove them home at the end of her shift. Amanda had dinner ready shortly after they arrived. Nic and Dana, their neighbors and close friends, joined them for dinner.

“Ben, Josette, we'd like to offer you to stay next door with us in our second floor guest quarters. We've all talked and agree that it will be best to put Jo in the first floor guest bedroom at Mallory and Amanda's. The second floor in Nic's and my place will provide you with a private area of your own to stay in, and we think you'll be more comfortable there. We know you don't know any of us, but we are friends of Jo's and hope you'll feel comfortable staying with Nic and me.”

Josette smiled at Dana and nodded. “Well, we know we've never met you all before. Jo talks about you all enough that we feel like we know you.”

“Thank you for your kindness,” Ben said. “If you don't mind, we'd like to get settled now and make it an early night. We've had a long day.”

“Of course,” Dana said. “I'll show you to our house.”

Nic extended her hand palm up. “If you'll give me your car keys, I'll get your bags.”

A week later, Mallory picked Jo up from the hospital for her trip home. She was still on antibiotics and being monitored carefully for infection. She had progressed sufficiently that the doctor felt she was well enough to be released to the care of her family and friends. He was reassured knowing that Mallory would be directly involved in Jo's care. The physical therapy Jo received during her hospitalization helped her become comfortable with the crutches she required to support and stabilize her when she walked. Getting in and out of the wheelchair was still something she required assistance to do. The trip home was uncomfortable despite Mallory's attempt to avoid any bumps. Jo sighed as she sat in the living room chair surrounded by family and friends. "I'm glad that's over."

Mallory brought Jo a drink of water, a few crackers, and her pain pill, a kindness for which she received a huge smile in thanks.

"I've made arrangements with the PT department to send someone out. Your insurance will cover the visits until you're comfortable enough to make the trip into rehab for your therapy."

"That's a relief. I know you tried to be careful. Still, the ride home was no walk in the park."

"I know, Sweetie. It should be less problematic now that we have you settled."

The day after her return to Amanda and Mallory's place, Jo and her mother had an opportunity to speak privately. They lapsed into French, Jo's mother's native language. "I'm glad that you have such good friends, Honey. I feel happier with you living here alone knowing that you have all of your friends to help you and support you."

"So, you like my friends?"

"Your Dad and I like your friends very much. You are lucky to have so many caring people around you."

"How is Dad holding up being around so many lesbians?" Jo winked at her mother.

"You know, I think it's been good for him. He was very quiet at first. Now it seems he's really hit it off with Nic and Dana, and he's impressed with Mallory and Amanda taking such good care of you. I know he's feeling comfortable. He's been telling jokes."

After staying in Nic and Dana's house for nearly a week, with some encouragement Jo's mother and father felt comfortable leaving their daughter in the care of her friends. They agreed to return home once promised that Jo would call them with a daily progress report.

"We don't know how we can ever thank you," Ben said to the group of women.

"It's truly been our pleasure." Nic took the bags from Jo's father.

They all hugged each other goodbye. Nic, Dana, Amanda, and Mallory left Jo and her parents alone for their goodbyes and waited outside. They all waved as Jo's parents left for home. The group quickly settled into a new routine with two fewer guests and one semi-invalid to care for.

Jo did everything she could to be useful. She peeled vegetables and helped to the best of her ability in preparing meals. Her physical therapist came every other day until Jo could comfortably make the trip to the rehab center. Mallory had never seen anyone work as hard or as diligently to improve and to regain her strength as Jo did. Mallory did all she could by giving Jo daily massages to help stimulate the nerves and to relieve some of the stiffness and pain Jo felt in her injured leg.

As Jo recovered, Amanda, Mallory, Dana, and Nic were deeply involved in plans for their new translation business. Even though she wasn't actually involved in any of the planning for the business, Jo listened to their discussions as they each reported their progress.

"I've rented us a small space for our offices and classroom about a half hour from our homes, closer to the city," Amanda reported. "Mallory and I are splitting the responsibility of overseeing the painting and furnishing of our new office space. I've already put up a website and made all the necessary arrangements for advertising which is scheduled to begin in eight weeks' time."

Nic reached for Dana's hand. "We're lining up other translators who can moonlight for us once we get established."

With everyone involved in jobs, and Jo involved in her rehab, time passed rapidly. Before they knew it, Jo had been on leave from work nearly two months. Mallory went with her for her check up with the surgeon. He didn't sugarcoat his prognosis for her recovery. "Jo, I know you've worked extremely hard to make the amazing progress you've achieved in such a short time. I'm sorry Jo. No matter how hard you work, you'll never regain sufficient strength in your leg to return to your job on the police force. Don't get me wrong, you'll continue to improve, although I believe you may always have a slight limp and your leg will definitely help you predict the weather." He smiled kindly as he delivered the bad news. "I'll sign the necessary paperwork to allow you to retire on disability from the force."

"Thanks, Doctor, it's not the outcome I'd hoped for, although it's what I expected you'd say. I appreciate that you saved my life and my leg."

Jo and Mallory left the doctor's office with Mallory pushing Jo's wheelchair. Normally, she used crutches. However, they'd found that it was much less tiring if they used the chair when she had to cover larger distances or when the terrain made using her crutches too difficult. A short way down the hallway, Mallory quickly pushed Jo into a vacant office and closed the door, pulling up a chair next to her friend. "Are you okay?"

Jo sniffed once and wiped her eyes with her sleeves. "Yes. I've been expecting this news. I've worked as hard as I could to regain full use of my leg. Unfortunately, I just can't seem to beat the odds on this one. The physical therapist told me that my limp would diminish over time as I strengthen the leg. She'd already cautioned me to not hold out hope that I'd ever regain totally normal function. She said I'd always favor my bad leg. So I've been anticipating the bad news."

Returning home to Mallory and Amanda's, they found that Meg was there for a visit. She had recovered her health, although she'd lost her memory of events for most of the week before the accident. Jo thought it was a blessing in a way. Their friendship seemed to be back to where they were before the fateful night of the shooting. They passed the time chatting together until dinnertime when the four of them talked about lighter subjects.

Two weeks later, Jo's captain came to visit her at Mallory and Amanda's house and brought the necessary paperwork for her to apply for a disability retirement. She was due to turn forty-three on her next birthday.

"If you were closer to full retirement, I could keep you on. I don't think I can manage it for another two and a half years. I'm really sorry."

"I know, Chief. I appreciate your keeping me on this long."

The captain left, and Amanda came into the living room to sit with Jo. "Have you given any thought about what you want to do with the rest of your life?"

Jo shook her head. "I have no clue. I could probably be a part time dispatcher, I guess. I can't do that full time because they have the same pension plan I have. It may be possible that I could work up to twenty hours a week at that job without having to join the pension fund. Between that and my pension, I think I can earn enough money to keep me afloat with virtually no risk to my life and limb like I used to have. And my experience on the force should provide good background for dispatch work."

"Is that something you'd enjoy?"

"I guess it would be okay. At least I'd still be involved in helping people in a bad situation. At least I'd feel useful." Jo ran her fingers through her hair. "Well, I've taken up space here long enough. I need to start thinking about moving back home. First thing I need to do is trade my car. With my left leg injured, I can't use a stick shift any more. I'll need an automatic."

"I think Mallory would be better suited to help with that. Let's see if she'd like to go new car shopping. This is exciting."

Jo, Mallory, and Amanda took Jo's car and went shopping for a new vehicle that afternoon. Jo had obviously given some thought to her needs regarding a new vehicle. "I think I want a small pickup truck. I'd like to be able to throw my bike in the back and not have to bother with a bike rack. My intention is to ride as much as I can as soon as the weather breaks. I think it'll help me strengthen my leg."

"Okay, let's look around. They went to several dealerships looking for the perfect vehicle. "I don't want a huge truck. They're too high for me to get into," Jo declared. "I need something small."

They drove through the local car dealership without seeing any pickups out front. "Hey, look at that," Amanda said pointing to a small pickup at the back of the lot. There was no sign on it listing its price.

Mallory looked in the direction Amanda was pointing. "I wonder what the story is on that one." Jo looked interested. "Let's go check it out."

Mallory navigated the lot and parked next to the little silver truck. The three women got out of Jo's car and with cupped hands peered inside the vehicle.

"This is neat," Jo said. "It's just the right size, seats four people, and has a small bed. Look, it looks like this little rack flips back to extend the bed. I think my bike will fit in there. Let's talk to a salesman and get some information about it."

As if on cue, a tall, lanky salesman approached the group of women and, after a warm greeting, he asked, "How can I help you?"

"Yes." Jo drew the salesman's attention. "We saw the truck parked here and are curious about this vehicle. Can you give us any information about it?"

"Sure. That's a 2006. I sold it as a new vehicle to an older man four years ago. He recently died, and his family just sold it back to us. We're getting ready to clean it up and put it out front for sale. It has really low mileage, only has eighteen thousand some odd miles on it."

"Next best thing to it was driven by a little old school teacher," Mallory joked causing everyone to chuckle.

“Exactly.” replied the salesman adding a genuine smile. “I’m Dan.” He shook hands with each woman in turn. “Which of you is interested?”

Jo raised her hand. “That would be me.”

“Okay, let me show you some of the other features of the vehicle.” He opened the door and allowed Jo to get in. “This is the turbo model. It has an electric driver’s seat.” He pointed to another car on the lot. “It’s built on the same frame as that model over there, so it rides like a car, has all wheel drive and the added functionality of a truck.”

“That’s good, Jo,” Mallory commented. “It’ll be good in bad weather.”

“Yeah, and the power seat will be perfect for me. I can push it back to get out and in and adjust it easily to drive.” Turning to the salesman, she asked the price. It was within the ballpark of what she thought she could afford with her trade. “Can we take it for a ride?”

“Sure, let me get a tag. If you give me the keys to your car, I can have it appraised for you while you take this one for a spin.”

While he was gone, the trio looked over the neat little truck. Mallory lowered the tailgate and flipped the bed extender back. “Look,” she added, “the back seat folds forward, and that little door folds down making the back open to the bed so you can put longer items inside. That’s pretty neat.”

The salesman returned with a tag. Mallory and Amanda got in the back seat and Jo drove. She was barely out on the road when she decided she wanted the vehicle. It answered all her needs. Returning to the lot, they negotiated a price and Jo made the deal.

“I don’t think you stole it, although you probably got a fair price. Perhaps had you not been drooling on the hood when we started dickering about price, we could have done a little better,” Mallory teased.

Jo glanced at Mallory. “I would probably have paid full price if not for your intervention. It’s exactly what I need. It has low mileage, and he gave us the extended warranty at a reasonable cost and threw in that nice bed cover that’ll be good, especially for the bad weather. It’ll be nice to be able to lock things in the bed. I’m a happy camper.” A huge grin spread across her face.

On the way home, the women stopped so Jo could treat them to dinner. As they were eating, Jo announced, “I think it’s time for me to go home, Ladies. I can get around on my own now and should be able to care for myself. I might need help with shopping for a few more weeks. Other than that, I think I can manage.” Jo had graduated to using a cane for stability and for the past couple of weeks had been navigating fairly well.

“We’ll help you as long as you need us,” Amanda promised. When she got home, Amanda offered and Jo accepted that she call their cleaning service and arrange for Jo’s house to have a thorough cleaning so Jo wouldn’t have to worry about it. She could see if she could maintain it on her own and make her own decision about whether to keep them on or not.

“I hope I’ll be able to do it myself. Surely, I’ll have the time.” A wisp of sadness insinuated itself into her voice. She quickly forced herself to brighten her tone. “Just think, no more alarm clocks for me.”

Mallory and Amanda had talked with Dana and Nic about the job offer they were about to make Jo. In the time Jo had spent at Amanda and Mallory’s house, Jo had become a member of their extended family.

“Jo, we have an offer to make you. Initially, we won’t need you much. However, you know that we’re planning on opening the business in the next couple of weeks. Mallory is going to be office manager. She’s still working part time at the hospital for a while and won’t be available to be at the desk for all the hours we’ll be open. Even after she leaves the hospital, there’ll be too many hours for us to cover. Especially after business increases and Nic gets busier, we’ll need someone to help us out. We were wondering if you would be interested in working for us part time to start, with increasing hours as the business grows. From time to time, we’ll need someone who knows the business anyway. As it becomes successful, Mallory and I will want to be able to take time off to get away together as will Nic and Dana. We’ll need someone we can trust to help out.”

Jo, appreciative of all that her friends had done for her, jumped at the opportunity to be able to help them in return. “Sure, I’ll even do it for free. I owe you guys so much. How will I ever repay you?”

“We won’t hear of it. We feel we owe you more for saving Mallory’s life. We’re extremely glad you’ll be with us in our new venture.”

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