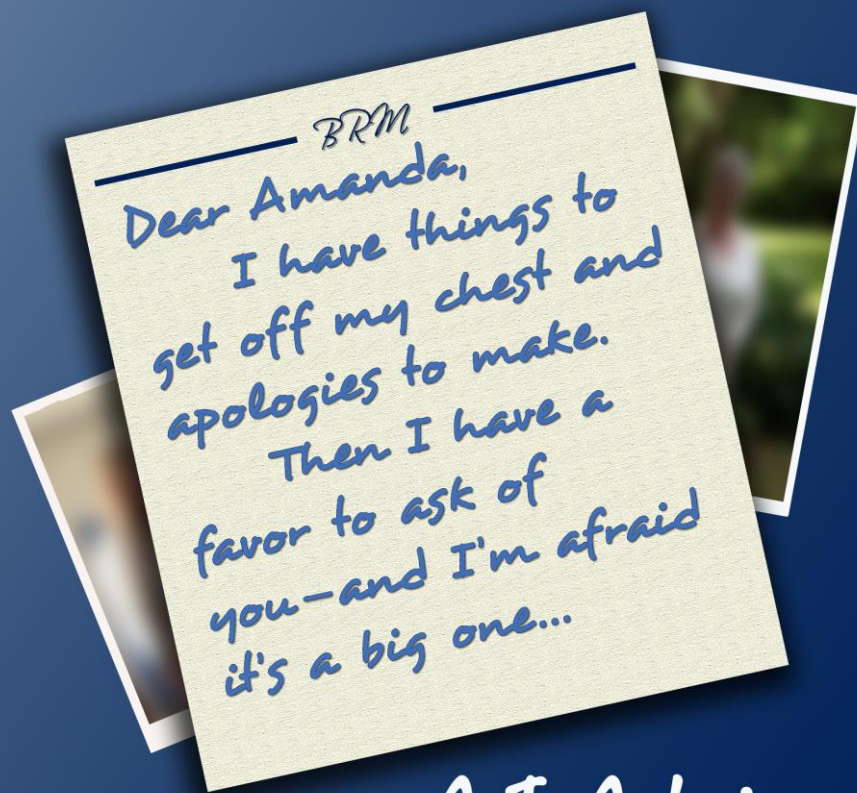


Awaiting My Assignment



AJ Adaire

By AJ Adaire

The Friends Series

Sunset Island
The Interim (a novelette)

Awaiting My Assignment

Friends Series - Book 2

by

AJ Adaire


Desert Palm Press

Awaiting My Assignment

Friends Series Book 2

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Back of the Book

Bernie was a liar. Amanda learned that much when she caught her lover cheating the first time. Upon discovering a second indiscretion, Amanda vows there will never be another. She leaves the relationship, fleeing to her friend Dana in New York State. While staying at Dana's home, Amanda meets and falls in love with a wonderful woman named Mallory.

Amanda is ready to move on. However, the consistently surprising Bernie isn't finished yet. Amanda learns of Bernie's rudest betrayal yet when she receives a package from her recently deceased ex-lover. A very surprising revelation and one final request is contained therein. The favor comes with a gift that delivers dramatic and life-altering changes, not only to Amanda's life, but to the lives of her closest friends and new partner as well.

Authors Note

In my travels, I have taken several different cruise lines and traveled to Canada seven times. I have combined details of Amanda and Mallory's cruise from a mixture of my trips. Cruise details are not meant to advertise, publicize, or criticize any specific cruise line. I'd like to acknowledge that I confirmed dates and details about the Halifax Explosion, recalled from my visits, from various online sources.

AJ

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my readers. Publishing *Sunset Island*, my first book, and the first in the Friends Series, has been an exciting, roller coaster-like experience. I think the most amazing part of the whole endeavor has been receiving letters from readers. They wrote to tell me how I kept them up at night, reading my story, or caused them to set the alarm to get up early so they could finish the book before they went to work. Others wrote telling me how my book encouraged them to keep searching for the right partner, or how it helped them analyze their feelings over their own loss of someone special. I've read every note I received and responded to those who reached out. Those letters have been wonderful, and I'm very appreciative to those who wrote to me. I also want to thank those readers who took the time to put up thoughtful reviews of *Sunset Island*. Writers and readers alike, benefit from those who take the time to put their thoughts in writing on Amazon and other places.

Awaiting My Assignment allowed me to not have to say good-bye to my characters, Ren, Lindy, and Mallory, from *Sunset Island*. Many who wrote said they had fallen in love with those characters, just as I did when I wrote their story. I hope you will enjoy this new group of friends just as much and will enjoy revisiting Ren and Lindy. The third and, for now, final book in the series will be along in a few months. *Anything Your Heart Desires* is Jo's story and will continue the tale of this wonderful group of friends.

Thanks to all my buddies who beta read, helped find my mistakes, and told me how much they loved the story. Special appreciation to my last minute proofers: Pat, Kay, Christy, and Christie. To my editors, Sue and Lee, and to Desert Palm Press, who took a chance on me last time and now again, thank you.

Last, but never least, thanks to ICL who is my partner in life, my best friend, and biggest cheerleader. I'm so glad it's you.

Excerpt:

Chapter 1

Amanda raised both hands to her head and although tempted to use them to cover her ears, she ran her fingers through her dark auburn hair instead. Exhaling a long sigh, she drew herself up to her full height of just over five feet then crossed her arms in front of her chest, her hazel eyes unsympathetic. Bernie was still pleading her case. However, this time, Amanda ignored the excuses and explanations, all of which were aching familiar.

“Look,” Amanda said, her tone measured, her voice more calm than her wrath would indicate, “I told you the last time that if I caught you cheating there would never be a next time or I’d leave you. As you can see, I meant it. There will be no more chances.”

“But honey...”

“Don’t ‘but honey’ me.” Amanda could feel her anger creeping into her voice. It was time to end this debate.

“Okay sweetie, you’re right,” Bernie said, trying a new tactic. “It was just a one night stand. You know she doesn’t mean anything to me. I love you. With her it was just sex. With you, I make love.”

“You’re pathetic. Love? You don’t even know the meaning of the word. I’m done here.” Amanda shook her head in disgust.

It was clear that this pronouncement had no impact because when she turned to head for the bedroom Bernie followed, close on her heels. She strode from the room hoping that would be the end of their discussion. She felt her shoulders slump when she heard Bernie following her down the hallway. Amanda grabbed her matched set of luggage from the hall closet before she entered the bedroom to begin packing. Without making an effort to sort things properly, she grabbed stacks of items she thought she might need for the next few days and jammed them into her suitcase with little care for how wrinkled they would be.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Away from you. I told you, I’m done here.” Amanda repeated her intent as much to convince herself as to convince Bernie she was serious.

Amanda packed her belongings. Recognition of how little there was in the house that reflected her taste compounded her sadness. Their custom built home, not a size or style she particularly liked, was paid for mostly with Bernie’s money. Amanda, so enamored with the magnetic woman at the time they built it, would have done anything to make Bernie happy. When Amanda couldn’t afford the lavish home Bernie desired, they agreed she’d contribute what she could afford and Bernie would provide the rest. For that reason, Amanda had acquiesced on nearly every decorating decision in their three bedroom home from, in her opinion, the tacky, ornate, and overdone bedroom furniture to the sleek white modern, extremely uncomfortable living room set. None of the artwork was her taste, nor had she picked any of the paint colors, which ranged in shades from eggshell to pale almond. It distressed her to admit how much of herself she had surrendered to be Bernie’s partner. She always felt that living in their house was akin to living in a snowstorm.

Amanda’s haven was her office. She decorated it with dark green walls, crisp white trim, comfortable leather chairs, a roll top desk, shutter covered windows, and ceiling to floor bookshelves. Books had surrounded her all her adult life. *How was it ever possible for me to establish a relationship with someone who doesn’t value the printed word? I’m an author, for God’s sake, involved with a woman who hates to read.*

The house was uncharacteristically quiet. Left to her own devices, Bernie would have the television on twenty-four seven. Not in the beginning of their relationship, but for the past few months, Bernie even hated to turn it off when they had sex. *What possessed me? What was I thinking? How could I have been so stupid to have not seen what she was up to?*

“Okay, I’m sorry. Is that what you need to hear?”

Amanda recognized Bernie’s statement for what it was, another attempt to deter her, and responded in a voice tight with emotion. “No. You remain completely clueless about what I need to hear.”

“Well, then that makes us even, since you’re clueless about what I need, too. I need a little excitement in the bedroom, not that bland huggy-kissy, touchy-feely pabulum-like, lukewarm sex you prefer. You bore me to death sexually. If you’d spiced things up a little, maybe I wouldn’t have strayed.”

The education in various sexual techniques and positions that Bernie had provided over their years together gave Amanda confidence and left her with no doubts about her sexual prowess. Amanda knew that Bernie was

simply being hurtful. Amanda wanted to say, 'Yeah, *maybe* being the operative word in that sentence,' or perhaps 'So now it's my fault that you cheat?' Amanda's resolve to maintain control steeled her. She managed to clamp her mouth closed and refrain from spitting out either retort. It was important to her that she not allow herself to be pulled into exchanging hurtful barbs with the woman she at one time thought she loved and who, she thought, loved her in return. Unfortunately, their definition of love turned out to be too disparate. Although she had to bite her tongue to keep from tossing a final insult that burned to be released, she managed to remain silent. Instead, Amanda picked up the overnight bag, slipped the strap over her head, and adjusted its weight on her shoulder.

Bernie grasped Amanda's upper arm with enough pressure to cause Amanda to wince. Pulling Amanda around to face her, while gesturing expansively with her free hand, Bernie assaulted Amanda with her words. "Are you just going to throw all this away? Aren't you even going to fight for our relationship?"

"What for? So you can cheat again? How truly stupid do you think I am?" Amanda shrugged her arm free from Bernie's painful grasp, slid the large suitcase from the bed, and extended the handle. "I'll come back to get the rest of my stuff after you leave on your trip."

"Coward," Bernie uttered. The word was just barely audible as she changed strategy again.

Amanda glanced back at her, noting Bernie's sad expression she didn't for a minute think was genuine. "I can't believe you. You have the balls of life!" In a momentary lapse of control, Amanda allowed herself to be hooked in. "Cheater!" She snapped the word back, her voice strident.

Bernie's eyes flashed. "If you walk out that door, don't think I'll let you come crawling back. I can have that empty spot you'll leave in the bed filled three times over before it's even cold."

Despite the angry and bitter feelings she had yet to express, Amanda replied in a calm and measured tone, "I don't doubt for a minute the veracity of that statement." She was too exhausted to argue.

Although slamming the door might have been more dramatic, Amanda opted to close it quietly behind her, refusing to allow her tears to come until she was alone in the car nearly a block away from the house. She pulled to the side of the road when she no longer could see well enough to drive. *Okay, that was certainly a dramatic exit, but what the hell are you going to do now?* Mentally ticking through her list of friends, she concluded that she had no friends on the west coast that were exclusively her own and didn't want to put their mutual friends in the uncomfortable position of having to take sides. *May as well get a motel room until I figure all this out...*

Her emotions in control and with a destination in mind, Amanda drove as thoughts swirled in her head. She realized she was thankful that, except for the house, they had maintained separate financial accounts, opting not to co-mingle their money. At least she wouldn't have that hassle to deal with on top of everything else.

Amanda settled into her motel room, after a cursory look around the simple but functional room decorated in a combination of green and orange stripes and flowers. Idly, she wondered when designers had begun believing that the different contrasting patterns like stripes, plaids, and floral prints coordinated with each other. "Well, at least it's clean." Spotting the coffee pot on the dresser, "and it has coffee."

Other than the friendships she and Bernie had established as a couple, Amanda had made no new friends of her own since she relocated from her apartment about fifty minutes south of their current home in San Francisco twelve years ago. She moved in with Bernie and pursued her profession as a writer, a solitary endeavor. It wasn't as if she didn't like people or was unlikeable herself, she had simply gotten out of the habit of doing things and placing herself in environments where she might meet people. Bernie's job in hotel management required frequent travel. When Bernie came home for a week off before her next trip to Brazil or across the country somewhere, they would rarely socialize. Sometimes, they might get together with another couple, but more often, they would simply fall into bed or work. Bernie always brought work home with her to do, even on what was considered her down time.

When had their relationship really ended? Certainly it had changed at least a couple of years ago when she'd called Bernie's hotel room early one morning and another woman sleepily answered the phone. She thought back to the confrontation they had upon Bernie's return home. Bernie swore that would be the last time but, of course, it wasn't. Amanda had her suspicions before, but this time there had been proof Bernie couldn't explain away.

Alone, thinking over her earlier dialogue with Bernie, self-doubts began to clamor in her brain. *Were all those cruel things Bernie had said about me true? Am I boring in life and in bed?* It was true that Bernie did most of the talking when she came home. *From my perspective it seemed that Bernie enjoyed the sound of her own voice, so I just let her talk. She was never interested in any project I was working on and had shown absolutely no interest at all in the novel I've been writing.*

Their sex life had changed too, from loving and exciting to something darker and more edgy. Although Bernie had never hurt her, she had become sexually more aggressive, dominating her physically and verbally. At the outset of their relationship, Amanda would miss Bernie when she was gone. Lately she dreaded Bernie's return home from a trip.

This is a good decision. Although I'm sad, I'm not sorry I ended it. Amanda exhaled a long sigh and felt some of her tension release. *In all honesty, the primary emotion I'm feeling is relief.* Desiring support and needing to unburden herself, Amanda called her oldest friend Dana in New York.

Dana had obviously checked her caller ID. "Hey girlfriend! What's happening?"

Amanda grinned at her always-upbeat best friend's greeting. Her petite frame, rusty-hair, blue-eyes, and freckle-faced appearance combined with her unflaggingly cheerful and good-natured personality made Dana someone that everyone liked. Born two days later in the month than her own January fifteenth birthday, she was Amanda's closest friend.

Amanda had come out to Dana years ago. Fearing rejection, she'd delayed telling Dana that she was gay. The day she finally worked up the courage her palms were sweaty and her stomach queasy from nerves. However, her concerns were unfounded. Dana's response had been to simply pull Amanda into her arms to give her a hug. "So what," she said. "I still love you."

They became even closer than they were before she'd revealed her secret. Maybe it was because Amanda felt freer to share her thoughts and feelings more openly. Smiling at the pleasant memory, she returned her mind to the phone conversation. "You mean what's new other than the fact that I left Bernie."

"I know this will sound unfeeling, but I'm glad."

"I know. I've pretty much come to the same conclusion."

"So, when did you leave?"

Amanda adjusted her pillow under her head and made herself comfortable on the bed. "About two hours ago."

"Where are you now?"

"Motel."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"So what's your next move? Do you plan to stay in California and get an apartment?"

"I don't know. I haven't really had the chance to process the whole thing yet."

"Are you open to a suggestion?"

"From you, always."

"Okay. Well, less than two weeks from now, I'm leaving for a two and a half to three month assignment in Italy. Why don't you come stay at my place till you figure out what you want to do? Honestly, you'd be doing me a favor." Knowing her diligent and hard working friend all too well, Dana added, "You can work anywhere as long as you have a computer with Internet access and a phone, can't you?"

Amanda smiled as she pictured her friend in her cozy little home. The lovely cape style cabin she owned sat nestled in a small town bordering a large New York State park, a little over an hour from New York City. A mid-sized international pharmaceutical company employed Dana as a certified translator. She was often required to travel with her boss for her assignments. "Yes, I can work anywhere, but let me think about it. I'll call you in the morning and let you know. It's an extremely attractive offer and I appreciate it very much. The best part is that I'd get to spend a few days with you before you leave."

"Okay, let me know. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Call me if you need me. Good night, sweetie."

Amanda gave about five minutes of serious consideration to her friend's suggestion. There was really no down side to it. She checked flight information, booked her flight, and texted Dana her travel plans along with a thank you for the offer.

Amanda knew her partner's schedule as well as Bernie did. In two days, Bernie was set to fly out on her next trip. Amanda organized her plans then waited patiently for time to pass. Two days later, when she returned to the house she shared with her lover, Bernie had already left for the airport. It took Amanda less than a day to pack up her office, files, a few personal items, and to have her remaining belongings that she wanted or cared about, moved into a storage unit or shipped to Dana's place. The rest, mostly clothes, she decided could be collected once she determined where she would settle.

Amanda only took things she had brought to the relationship, leaving everything they'd bought or accumulated while they were together. She left a note on the kitchen counter for Bernie saying that, after careful consideration, leaving was for the best and that she would be in touch in a week or two to let her know where she decided to settle. After a final look around, she left for the airport.

Dana was waiting for Amanda at the arrival gate in Newark. In the car on the way to Dana's cabin, Amanda recalled the wonderful times she'd shared with her friend as they grew up. Dana's grandparents had raised her after her parents died when she was a teenager. Another painful loss struck when her grandfather died just after Dana turned twenty. Dana inherited the cabin when her grandmother passed a few years later and had lived there full-time since graduating from college. Amanda loved the small town's ambiance and its proximity to the park in Harriman, NY.

Amanda smiled as they pulled up in front of the house. "I'd almost forgotten how lovely this place is."

While she and Dana grabbed her bags from the trunk, Amanda noticed Dana's neighbor wave in greeting to Dana.

"Mallory, stop over after dinner. I want you to meet my friend," Dana called to the attractive woman with a megawatt smile.

Once inside her house, Dana helped Amanda get settled in the guest bedroom in the loft. "Need anything else?" Dana asked as she turned to leave.

"Do I have time for a quick nap before dinner?" Amanda flopped on the bed.

"Sure. I'm just going to defrost a casserole. We can eat in an hour and a half or so."

"Need any help?"

"No, get some rest. I'll call you when dinner is ready." From the doorway, Dana gave a quick wave before she closed the door and headed downstairs to prepare dinner.

Chapter 2

Amanda awoke when Dana called up the stairs that dinner was just about ready. Even though she felt more refreshed after her nap, Amanda knew she'd still be able to sleep soundly when she turned in for the night. The emotional strain of the past few days had left her mentally and physically exhausted. Dinner was delicious and the two long time friends chatted easily throughout the meal. Just as they were finishing up, there was a knock at the door and Mallory let herself in.

Dana wrapped her arm around Mallory's shoulder, leading her to where Amanda sat. "Fantastic! I'm glad you're here. You're just in time for coffee and dessert. Mallory, this is my oldest and dearest friend Amanda. She'll be staying here at the house while I'm away."

Mallory flashed her dazzling smile in greeting. "That's great. I'm glad to have someone that I'll know next door."

Dana's friend is an attractive woman, but when she smiles, she's beautiful. Her hair was an unusual shade of ash blonde, lightened by the sun on top, with a darker layer underneath. Amanda forced herself to drag her eyes away from the woman's sexy mouth so she could meet her eyes.

"Amanda, this is Mallory Barnes. She's the Director of Nursing at the hospital. Her job there requires her to work some strange hours, but she always lets me know her schedule. That way I don't worry when I hear her come home at some odd hour. Also, when I'm traveling, it's useful to have someone I can text or call at all hours of the day and night, just so someone knows I'm alive and well." Dana gave Mallory's shoulder an affectionate squeeze and a quick wink, for which she received another brilliant smile.

Amanda liked Mallory's warm smile and welcoming demeanor. Mallory was maybe an inch or two taller than Amanda and they had a lean, muscular body type in common. A hint of eyeliner and a light application of mascara emphasized her beautiful sparkly greenish blue eyes. Her hair was streaked with naturally sun-bleached ashy colored highlights that indicated she spent time outdoors. Amanda guessed Mallory's age to be a few years older than her own age of thirty-eight. Her own birthday would occur in four months, leaving her only one year until she turned the dreaded forty.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mallory. I hope we'll be good friends. So, a Director of Nursing huh? Do you still do direct care or is your job totally administrative at that level?" Amanda asked.

"For the most part it's administrative, but I'm still able to orient the new nurses, so I get to set standards for my staff. It's true that I still have my fair amount of pure paper pushing as well. There are advantages and disadvantages to any supervisory role, but most days I enjoy my job. What do you do?"

"I'm a writer."

"Have I possibly read any of your work?"

Amanda laughed. "Possibly, I write copy for a direct mail company. So, if you read any of the direct mail fliers, chances are good I've written some of them." She thought for a moment. "I did ghost write a novel that was published last year that you may have heard of."

"Really. Which one?"

"Doctor Jonathan Grandly's book on diet and exercise, *Get Fitter Faster*."

"No kidding. I've more than heard of it. Would you believe that I own it? You did a great job of making an extremely boring man sound interesting." Mallory's engaging grin appeared again and she produced an endearing giggle.

"Oh, you're being too hard on him. He's a genuinely nice man."

Mallory's smirk and raised eyebrow made Amanda laugh in return. "Okay, I'll agree to nice, if you'll give me boring. Plus I'll admit that he really knows his subject. I attended a lecture he gave at my college a few years back."

Amanda liked Mallory's conciliatory efforts. *I'll bet she's good at her job. Her warmth is conveyed through her quick smile and obvious willingness to compromise.* "It's a deal."

"You know Amanda, like you, Mallory loves to bike ride. You're welcome to use my bike if you want to ride with her sometime," Dana offered.

Both Amanda and Mallory were enthusiastic at the prospect of having someone to ride with them. During the animated conversations over the remainder of the evening, Amanda and Mallory discovered that they had a lot in common. Besides biking, they both enjoyed reading, hiking, photography, and watching old movies. When the evening ended and Mallory hugged Dana before leaving, it seemed perfectly natural for Amanda and Mallory to hug each other good night as well.

"I really like her," Amanda confided after Mallory closed the door. "Being able to have someone to do things with will make my stay here much more enjoyable while you're away. What's her story?"

"Story?"

"Yeah, you know. Who does she date, is she involved? The dirt."

"The dirt, huh?" Dana shook her head and rolled her eyes causing them both to laugh. "Honestly, I don't know who or even if she dates. I've never seen her go out with anybody and she's never mentioned anyone she's been serious about since she moved here about a year ago. She seems to work a lot and her hours are extremely irregular. I'd think it would be difficult for her to have a relationship with anyone who follows a regular work schedule. Maybe she just doesn't have time to date."

"Oh, I was just curious."

"Oh, duh," Dana uttered, just getting it. "If you're asking me about her sexual preference, I honestly don't know. Are you interested?"

"No. Not really. Geez, give me a break here. It's been less than a week since my relationship ended. It's too soon. It's just that she's so darned cute and likable." Amanda refrained from mentioning that Mallory had one of the most kissable mouths she'd ever seen, classifying it as too much information.

"Think about it, Amanda. Your relationship with Bernie has been over since you found out she'd cheated on you the first time, a couple of years ago. You've been pulling back your feelings from her for a long time. Seriously, be honest. How much have you missed your relationship since you ended it?"

"Yes, I guess you're right. I think I've had more of a sense of relief than anything else. Still, I don't know what I'm going to do, where I'm going to end up, or even where I'm headed." Feeling suddenly fatigued and not wanting to talk about Bernie any more, Amanda stood up and hugged her friend. "I'm bushed. I'm heading up to bed. Thanks again, Dana. You're a lifesaver. I'll see you in the morning."

Over the next several days, Dana and Amanda spent their time talking and relaxing together as only old friends can. Dana had several things to do to prepare for her trip, so they focused on getting together what she needed. Too soon, the time came for Dana's departure and Amanda drove her to the airport. Each reluctant to say goodbye, they lingered over small talk for a few minutes before she gathered her belongings.

"I'm glad you'll be here to run my car."

"Thanks for letting me use it. I love you, you know. You're the best friend I could ever ask for."

"I know that...and don't you forget it." Dana grinned and winked at her friend before she pulled her close for a final hug. "I'll be in touch when I get settled in. If you need me, text me and I'll call you back as soon as I can. Don't forget, I'm about six hours ahead of you in time." After a final good-bye, she gave a jaunty wave and disappeared into the terminal.

The day after Dana left for Italy, Amanda spent time reacquainting herself with the area and buying miscellaneous items that didn't get packed when she'd hastily left home. She shopped for food for the rest of the week, stocking up on staples and buying some snacks in case Mallory dropped by. A brief stop at the video store yielded two of her favorite old movies to rent.

Amanda pulled into Dana's driveway and glanced over towards Mallory's house. The car in the driveway indicated that her neighbor was home. Once inside Dana's house Amanda unpacked her purchases, tidied up the kitchen, and gave some thought to dinner. Suddenly feeling very lonely and a bit panicky with nothing to do, she decided that the safest and most productive thing would be to get back to work. Amanda had set up her computer the previous day and knew some extra hours of work would be required to assure she would get caught up, just not today—she couldn't do it today. Instead, she sat down at her computer and pulled up her novel.

The previous year she'd invested in dictation software that allowed her to speak into a microphone and control the computer with her voice. She'd conquered the training period and, once she'd mastered the program, she found it worked very well. Being able to dictate certainly helped alleviate the typing induced pain in her neck that radiated downward between her shoulder blades. When she had to sit at the keyboard to type her work, she suffered constantly. Now, instead of perching over her keyboard at a desk, she could just sit on the recliner with the computer on her lap and dictate. Amanda hadn't written anything for over a week, making it necessary to go back and reread the last few pages to orient herself to where she was in the story. She checked her notes and was just about to begin dictating when the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“It’s Mallory, you know, from next door.” The hesitancy in her voice conveyed her nervousness.

“Hey! I almost gave you a call when I got back from dropping off Dana. I didn’t because I was afraid I’d wake you up.”

“No, I worked midnight to eight a.m. this week. I slept a few hours when I got home. I have some time off before I swap to the four p.m. to midnight shift. It’ll take me a day or two to get acclimated. This is the last rotation change I’ll have to do for a while. Working midnight to eight a.m., I have fewer interruptions. I use the late night, quieter hours to work on reports and budgeting, and to meet with the night supervisors. Once that’s done, I’ll go back to covering day and evening shifts. In a couple of weeks, I have new staff coming on board. These two I just hired should be easy, since they’re very experienced nurses. I was lucky to get them. I usually stay on schedule with the new folks as much as I can for the first few weeks, just to make sure they get all the training they need. Often those in my position don’t have to work shifts. Because I work in a small hospital, I have the flexibility to set up my own schedule to suit my own needs, as long as I’m available for staff and planning meetings. I prefer a hands-on approach to training and supervision. Sometimes, I cover part of one shift then part of another. I find it keeps channels of communication open and makes me more accessible to my staff.”

“Our jobs have one thing in common, we both have that unrelenting element. Even though I finish an article or project, there’s always another to deal with right away. No breaks from that sense of deadline,” said Amanda.

“That’s an astute observation. Yes, I do feel that way and, sometimes, I wish I could clone myself so that I could be in more than one place at a time. I know the paperwork is an unavoidable evil of the job, but I’d much rather be working with the staff and the patients. The supervisory position pays better. However lately, I’ve been feeling like there’s more to life than just money.” Mallory shrugged, a natural gesture indicating some frustration, even though no one was there to see it. After a brief pause, she revealed, “My work schedule leaves very little time for socialization.” She chuckled. “Wow! Where did that come from? I hope that wasn’t too much information. You’re very easy to talk to, you know...and a good listener.”

“Thanks. I feel very comfortable with you also.” She hoped that Mallory could feel her smiling through the phone.

“Maybe I’d better hang up now, before I disclose where I’ve hidden my family jewels.”

Several quick comments ran through Amanda’s head in response to that straight line, but she settled for the most benign. “Well, in keeping with that sentiment, could I interest you in dinner, another opportunity to discover your secrets, and maybe a video? I was thinking of having grilled hotdogs and a salad.”

“That sounds delicious...even if it’s not healthy, it’s a great suggestion. Think there might be enough time before dinner for us to take a walk?”

“Sure, that sounds wonderful. It’ll help me wake up. Shall I come collect you, or do you want to come here?”

“I’ll come to you. See you in a few minutes.”

Amanda realized that her heart was beating a bit faster than usual, and she recognized that she was excited by the prospect of spending time alone with Mallory. A few moments later as they left the house, Amanda gestured for Mallory to lead the way. “I’m not sure where to go from here. I’m sure you have a trail you like.”

“How much time do we have?” Mallory glanced at her watch.

“Until about a half hour before you reach famished. We just have to grill up the hotdogs. I have potato salad, coleslaw, and some tomatoes to slice. Easy as can be.”

“There’s about a two mile walk I like a little ways up the road here.” Mallory indicated a path a short distance away. “Will that be okay with you?”

“Perfect.”

The first few minutes were quiet as they adjusted their strides to one that was comfortable for each of them. They were well matched in height, so it wasn’t much of an issue. They fell into an easy, ground-consuming pace and before they knew it, they were deep into the shaded woods. They walked for about thirty-five minutes before pausing to rest on a fieldstone wall overlooking a small creek.

“What a beautiful spot,” said Amanda glancing around. “Just gorgeous.”

They sat in companionable silence for a while until Mallory nudged Amanda and gestured with her head upstream. A deer emerged from the brush and lowered her head to drink from the water.

“Wish I had my camera with me,” Amanda whispered.

The deer looked up, noticed them, and melted back into the undergrowth.

“Isn’t it amazing that a large animal like a deer can disappear into the brush like that with hardly a sound?”

“Absolutely,” agreed Amanda.

“So, tell me a little about yourself.” Amanda propped her chin on her hand and waited for Mallory’s response.

"I finished my degree by attending college in New York City, after which I returned home to Philly. I moved back to New York State a little more than a year ago to take the supervisory position at the hospital. I fell in love with this area while I was in school because of its rural nature. I wanted to advance in my profession, which was something this supervisory role at the hospital offered me. It didn't take long for me to discover that the grass is not always greener on the other side of the fence."

"What do you mean?"

Mallory shrugged. "Don't get me wrong. Although there are numerous aspects of the job that I like, there are just as many that I don't. Once I began working in the supervisory role, I discovered that I missed providing direct care to the patients, and I hate the report writing and the politics of the budgetary process. In the plus column, I do enjoy helping to decide hospital policy and training the new employees. So there are tradeoffs in everything and since I don't hate the job, I've made myself contented."

"Does the shift work bother you?"

"Not any more. I've adjusted to it I think. It makes socialization difficult. It's sometimes hard for me to find people to do things with. It's nice that you're able to join me today." Mallory smiled and turned toward her right. Pointing she said, "See that path there? That's a loop I usually add onto the shorter trail if I take this route with my bike."

"I can't wait to do that. If we walk or bike again tomorrow, I want to bring my camera." We should be getting back. I'm starting to get hungry. How about you?"

They retraced their path back to the house. Amanda opened the fridge and gathered the ingredients for a salad. "I'll start the grill if you'll make the salad,"

"Deal. You want onions in yours?"

"Sure, why not. Throw whatever you have in there, I'll eat anything."

They ate at the counter in the kitchen. Mallory pushed her plate back then wiped her mouth with her napkin.

"That was great. I'm stuffed."

"In my one concession to good nutrition, I have fruit for dessert."

Mallory laughed. "You might need more than that to make amends for those hotdogs."

"Would you like to stay and watch a movie with me? I picked up a couple of movies earlier." Amanda retrieved the DVDs and slid them across the table.

Mallory assessed her choices. "*You've Got Mail* is one of my favorites. However, since I've never seen *Overboard*, let's watch that one,"

They cleaned up the dishes and finished dessert. Amanda set up the DVD. The light and funny movie had them sharing laughter as they watched.

"That was wonderful. Any movie that makes me laugh out loud gets five stars in my book." Mallory stood and stretched. "Thank you so much for dinner and the video."

Amanda walked her guest to the door to bid her good night. "I mentioned to you that I finally have a couple of days off. Would you be interested in taking a bike ride tomorrow? We could go a bit farther since we'll have more time, see some new scenery, and maybe take a ride around the lake. I'll pack us a lunch and we can make a day of it."

Amanda didn't hesitate at all. She could write at night, or in the morning before they left for their ride. "That sounds great. Would it be okay to leave around ten? If I get up early, I can get some writing done before we take off. What do you think?"

"Sounds like a plan to me. Okay, it's a date then." Mallory gave Amanda a quick hug and left without looking back.

Hmm, date. Did she mean 'date' as in a friendly get together or date as in 'date date'? Which do I want it to be? She wasn't even sure if Mallory was gay or straight. Since she'd recognized and accepted her own attraction to women, Amanda had made it a policy to only date other lesbians because she didn't want to bring a straight woman out. She'd seen too many of those relationships end in heartbreak when reality faced them. The pressures of coming out to parents, family, and friends too often sent them running back into the folds of heterosexuality, leaving a wake of pain behind. Amanda's own coming out had been painful enough. She told three of her closest friends about her 'secret' only to have two of them cut her from their lives. Only Dana had stood by her. Telling her family had brought additional heartbreak.

Amanda locked up the house before she went upstairs. There was ample time to get in a couple of good hours of work before she went to bed. She logged into her email to see if the new assignment from her boss had arrived. In addition to the standard batch of spam she didn't need to bother with, there was an email from Bernie. She ignored it not wanting to ruin the good mood she was in after her evening with Mallory, by reading what she expected would be a poison pen note from Bernie. She had closed that door and was happy leaving things as they were.

Before snapping the lid closed on her laptop, Amanda noticed that it was just after one o'clock. She was pleased with her accomplishment of finishing another chapter in her book plus a short article that she'd been putting off writing since arriving at Dana's. It was a relief to finish it and email her submission. After setting the alarm for nine, she slid into bed between the soft sheets and fell asleep almost immediately.

Refreshed after a solid night's sleep, Amanda lingered in the shower then ate a breakfast of cereal and fruit. She was just finishing a cup of tea when Mallory knocked at the door.

"Good morning." Mallory's greeting was as cheerful as she looked. Dressed in a bright red jersey and black body conforming biking shorts, she entered the kitchen and took a seat next to Amanda at the breakfast bar, but not before Amanda got to check out Mallory's tight body in the outfit that fit her like a second skin.

"Want some breakfast or some tea? The water is still hot," Amanda pointed to the kettle on the stove.

"No, thanks, I ate already, but I'm out of juice. Do you have any?"

"There's some OJ in the fridge. Help yourself." Amanda allowed herself to appreciate the view as Mallory leaned over to get the juice from the fridge. *There's no doubt about it—I find Mallory's sporty good looks and tight body very attractive.* Her eyes, an interesting blue-green, appeared greener in the morning sunlight streaming through the kitchen window. Her lashes were darker than her paler hair color, almost black in fact, giving the appearance that she was wearing mascara although she was not. *Mallory is cute, for sure, but her smile transforms her face from cute into lovely. She has a very kissable mouth, especially the way her lips turn up at the corners giving the impression that she is always just about to smile.*

After finishing their beverages, Amanda rolled Dana's mountain bike out of the garage and they set off following the path they had taken the previous day. They took a trail that headed north at the first intersection and rode for about an hour before stopping for a break. Mallory produced some nuts and raisins from her seat bag. She shared them with Amanda who, in her pack, was carrying bottles of water, one of which she shared with Mallory.

Amanda wiped her brow. "This is a great ride. Not too steep, but it still presents enough of a challenge for someone like me who's out of practice. You're definitely a much better rider than I am."

"You have to be patient with yourself. When was the last time you rode?"

"At least a year or more ago. I got focused on working and really didn't pay attention to my health as much as I should have. I'm glad you're here to encourage me to not just sit around and veg out."

Mallory let her eyes travel the length of Amanda's body, boldly assessing without appearing the least bit self-conscious. "You look to be in good shape. You must have done something, because you're still fit."

"I used to jog or walk, but not often enough. We had a gym in the basement of the house, so I could go there and work out occasionally." *What was that look that flashed across Mallory's face? What did I say?*

"Maybe we should get on with it. Think you can manage another twenty-five minutes or so? There's a wonderful place to stop up the trail a bit further. We can eat lunch and have a rest before we head back."

They rode to the spot Mallory had described and stopped for lunch. Amanda was tired. She hoped she'd be able to make it back and that she wouldn't embarrass herself by having to ask Mallory to stop too frequently. "So, do you ride often, then?"

"As often as I can. When I work the day shift, I try to ride to work if my schedule allows and the weather permits it. Other than that, I do try to ride at least five miles two or three times a week. Time is always an issue though, isn't it? Do you find that you generally seem to find time for everyone but yourself?"

Amanda nodded her agreement.

"My mom always told me, 'Pay yourself first.' Of course, she was talking about saving money. She tutored me to think of myself as a bill that I owed and to be sure that I paid myself every pay period just like the telephone, electric and gas bills. I maintain that habit to this day. In the past, I've always been reasonably well disciplined financially, but not always personally, especially as it relates to exercise. When I moved up here I decided to generalize my mom's rule to include health. So, now I follow my mom's advice and pay myself first by taking time to exercise. Now I'm doing better about putting my health and fitness at the top of my daily list of things to do."

“Sounds like a good policy. Maybe I’ll try to emulate your good example. I mean, I always enjoy myself when I’m getting exercise, but left to my own devices, I often just can’t muster up the initiative,” Amanda finished up her sandwich and took a long swig from her water bottle.

“Well, then, I’m glad you’re here. We can motivate each other. Besides its more fun doing it with someone, isn’t it?”

“So you’re close to your mom?” Amanda asked.

“Yes. I’m especially close to my mother. My dad and I don’t always see eye to eye about all things, but we still get along. I think they gave me a good start in life and I love them both. I wish we lived closer sometimes, but I haven’t helped that by moving too far away for them to pop over. I was thinking of inviting them up for either Thanksgiving or Christmas. I haven’t made a final decision yet. My family usually tries to get together for at least one of the holidays, but it’s getting to be a bit labor intensive for them the older they get.”

They sat quietly together enjoying the scenery. Mallory nodded toward the clearing. “Look, a chipmunk.”

Amanda followed the progress of the cute little creature as it scurried furtively from the sanctuary of one form of vegetation or shrub to another, darting quickly from beneath a leaf of some plant to another place of safety. Suddenly, he slipped into a hole that would have been virtually invisible had they not been watching so intently.

Amanda furrowed her brow. “Wonder if he has a family in his little burrow.”

“Don’t know,” Mallory replied. “Maybe we’ll see if we watch a little longer. What about you, Amanda? Tell me about your family. You have sisters, brothers?”

“My parents are both deceased. They were smokers and ended up going long before they should have. Dad had lung cancer and mom had breast cancer. I have one brother.”

“You must be close, since it’s just the two of you now.”

Amanda shrugged. “We used to be.” She paused. Amanda assumed that Dana would have told Mallory that she was a lesbian. “Um...when I came out, not only did I lose some of my friends, but my parents also disowned me and my older brother stopped speaking to me. The worst part is that he refused to allow me to visit with my nieces and nephew, a punishment that I still can’t forgive him for to this day. Despite his refusal to allow me to see the kids, I continued to send the kids cards and gifts on their birthdays and other holidays, but never receive any indication from my brother or the kids that they arrived at their proper destination. On the QT, my sister-in-law sends me a picture of the kids each year along with a note and an update on the highlights of their lives. When she sent the first photo, she begged me not to let him know.”

“Thank God for your sister-in-law. At least she has sense, in addition to being kind. But never hearing from your brother must be a heartbreaking dismissal, especially since you said you were close before you revealed your sexual orientation.

“Yes. Initially it was devastating. Now, it’s just painful.” Amanda looked away.

The play of emotions across Amanda’s face hinted that, obviously, there was more to the story, but Amanda wasn’t ready to share the depth of hurt her brother’s dismissal had inflicted. After such a wonderful day, she didn’t want to bring down her spirits by digging up how deeply his rejection hurt her. Amanda was grateful that Mallory was willing to allow her to reveal things at her own pace and to not push by asking questions. The silence between them was comfortable.

Referring to the chipmunk, Mallory said, “Well, I suppose the little guy is tucked in for now. You feel rested enough to start back?”

“Ready when you are, I guess.” Amanda wanted to ask Mallory more about her family, but Mallory was already packing up the remnants of their lunch and seemed eager to get under way. *There’s plenty of time, I guess, maybe tonight when we have dinner.*

Before she swung her leg over the seat of her bike Mallory said, “You’ll probably be glad to hear that the path home is much less strenuous and the ride goes much more quickly than the ride up...I know I sure am.”

Standing together next to their bikes, they took a few minutes to appreciate and comment on the beauty around them. It won’t be too many weeks before the leaves begin to change,”

“I know. The fall colors of the forest will only add to the beauty of the mountains in the background.”

The comfortable, sunny weather contributed to a wonderful day that the new friends were sharing. The path that Mallory selected for the ride home was exactly as promised, easier than the earlier ride out, because it varied between being flat or, in places, slightly downhill.

“There’s only one steep part that can be difficult. When I signal you to be careful, either get off and walk your bike or take it very carefully. That one curve up ahead can be tricky.”

They had ridden a short distance down the trail when Mallory signaled with a downward motion of her hand and they dismounted to survey the difficult part of trail ahead. With Mallory’s guidance, they both navigated the

trickiest bit of trail. Things were easier after that for both riders. They stopped to rest twice before taking on the final leg of their ride that brought them back home.

“I don’t know about you, but I need a shower,” Amanda said as she toed the kickstand into place.

“I know what you mean.” Mallory stretched out her legs before she turned toward Amanda. “That was a great workout, though. I think I might add a soak in my hot tub to my agenda as well. Want to join me? I bet it would make you less sore tomorrow.”

“I definitely can’t decline that offer. Let me wash up, get my suit, and I’ll meet you at your place as quickly as I can.”

Mallory gave a wave as she pedaled towards her garage.

Chapter 3

Amanda washed off, before going in search of her suit. Unable to find it quickly and knowing that Mallory was waiting for her, she gave up searching and settled for a pair of lightweight jogging shorts and an old sleeveless T-shirt that she threw on.

“Well, at least they’re clean. Can’t wear what I don’t have with me. Hopefully, she’ll understand,” she mumbled.

After gathering a towel and a comb, Amanda cut across the back yard to Mallory’s house. The hot tub was recessed into the deck and Mallory was already in it, submerged to her chin in the furiously bubbling water. The air had already grown cooler since they returned from their ride causing steam to rise from the water.

“I’m sorry I took so long. I couldn’t find my suit. Hope what I have on will be okay.” Amanda tugged at the shoulder of her T-shirt.

“You don’t need anything but your skin. Get out of those clothes and climb in. You’ll feel one hundred per cent better.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, come on. We’re not getting any younger.” Mallory softened the words with a smile and a wink.

Since high school, Amanda couldn’t remember a time when she didn’t feel shy about being naked in front of anyone who was not her lover. The little voice inside the left side of her head said, “*Grow up, she’s a nurse, for God’s sake. It’s not anything she hasn’t seen before.*” To which the voice on the other side of her head replied, “*Yeah, but she hasn’t seen mine before.*” Amanda looked around for a sheltered spot where she could remove her clothes and found none. She also noted the neighbors wouldn’t have a view of the deck area.

A devilish grin accompanied Mallory’s giggle and amused, twinkling eyes. “Come on, nobody can see you but me.”

Amanda slipped out of the shorts and took off her T-shirt, leaving the final bastion of modesty for last. Finally, in one quick motion, she bent and stripped off her underwear. As she stepped down into the hot tub, Mallory appreciatively swept her eyes over Amanda’s body from head to toe. It was obvious that she didn’t miss anything in her quick perusal. “So what’s the significance of the tattoo?”

Amanda had a bar code tattoo just below her navel done in rainbow colors. Ignoring the rainbow coloration, she replied, “Just my date of birth. The tattoo seemed like a good idea at the time. I’ve never had any doubts about my sexuality and have always described myself as ‘gay from the day I was born.’ So in my drunken state one night, I thought the tattoo expressed that sentiment perfectly. It wasn’t anything I’ve ever regretted doing exactly. Given a second chance to make the decision, I might have considered locating it in a less public place.” Amanda hadn’t noticed any change in Mallory’s attitude when she mentioned coming out before, but she still waited to see if Mallory’s attitude toward her would change.

“What a neat idea. I like it a lot and there’s nothing wrong with the location you chose. I don’t have any tattoos...I’m too cowardly.”

“Ha! You can dish those needles out, but can’t take them, eh?”

“Busted!” Mallory chuckled at the reference.

Amanda felt herself respond to Mallory’s endearing laugh and warm smile. Once Amanda settled into the water, the two women enjoyed the relaxing heat of the water in shared silence. They soaked in the hot tub together for about ten minutes until the timer chimed.

“I’m cooked. I think I need to get out, but you can probably do another ten minutes or so. I was in for a while before you arrived. How about I go start some dinner? You’ll join me, won’t you?”

Amanda nodded her agreement and Mallory reset the timer for an additional ten minutes, stood up and walked to the steps providing Amanda an opportunity to appreciate the woman’s well-toned body. She felt herself warm in response and was amazed that she could be so attracted to someone so soon after she had ended her relationship with Bernie. After Mallory’s departure, as she soaked alone in the tub, she realized that Dana was right about the fact that she’d emotionally left her relationship with Bernie long ago when she’d learned that Bernie had been unfaithful the first time, or at least the first time she had caught her. She suspected there might have been many others she didn’t know about.

The timer turned off the jets in the hot tub. Amanda stepped out and dried off. She still felt awkward standing outside completely nude, even though she was alone and knew no one was able to see her. From the corner, where the hot tub was tucked, to the sliding door was nearly the whole length of the house. She didn’t feature making the

dash naked, so she got out of the tub, hid in the shadows as best she could before drying off. Quickly throwing on her clothes, she scooted across the length of the deck. Her soft tap at the window drew an invitation to come in from Mallory. Amanda entered the living room of the cozy cottage and appreciatively absorbed the welcoming room. Decorations were in warm earthy colors with splashes of red as the accent color. Two rich reddish brown leather recliners, facing each other, were placed strategically on either side of the fireplace. A leather sofa in the same shade appeared soft and inviting. It sat opposite the fire, providing a straight on view of the flames through the glass doors that covered the hearth.

"I'm in here, around the corner," Mallory called.

Amanda, moving in the general direction of Mallory's voice, made her way into the modern kitchen. The cherry cabinets and granite countertops with swirls of deep burgundy accents complimented each other and made for a pleasing combination. "Do you want to eat in here at the counter or in the dining room?" Mallory held two plates, napkins, and silverware in her hands.

"Let's eat in here. We don't have to be fancy. What's for dinner?"

Mallory smiled. "Hungry?"

"You bet. It's probably a good idea that we're not going to the dining room. I might gnaw at the table leg and ruin the good table."

Mallory chuckled. "Well, then it's good we're staying here. I defrosted some sauce I made a couple of weeks ago. We're having pasta, my special recipe meatballs, and a huge salad. Oh yeah, and some garlic bread." She gestured between the sink and the wine rack. "Water or wine?"

"Wine. Want me to open it?"

Mallory handed the dishes and silverware to Amanda. "How about you set the table and I'll finish up everything else in here." When the meal was ready, the two women sat down to their dinner. Mallory held up her glass and offered a toast. "To a wonderful new friendship."

"Absolutely," replied Amanda. "Cheers!"

"I've really enjoyed the time we've spent together the last two days. I love having company for dinner and having someone to enjoy hiking and biking with has been a gift. There have been many times that I've been lonely since I moved here," Mallory admitted with characteristic candor.

"I can understand that. It must be difficult meeting people when you work such irregular hours. How do you even begin to establish friendships, let alone find anyone to date?"

Mallory shrugged. "Yes, it's tough. Even tougher now that I'm in a supervisory role, which eliminates most of the people I know at the hospital from the friendship pool. It would be too awkward to be friends outside of work with people I supervise and impossible to date anyone from there. I just wouldn't be comfortable. A few months ago, I met a police officer named Jo, who is someone I like a lot. She was on duty at the hospital guarding a prisoner. Because we both work shift work, we've only managed to get together sporadically. I played cards with her and a couple of her friends a few times. So, honestly, the closest friend I have here is Dana and unfortunately, between her schedule and mine, we don't see each other all that often."

"So how do you go about meeting people?"

Mallory paused before she responded, giving thought to her answer. "It seems that I just wait patiently for my neighbor to invite a lovely woman friend of hers to stay at her house—someone with whom I immensely enjoy spending time.. Problem solved." Mallory winked at Amanda and flashed a wide grin, displaying perfect teeth. "We really have to thank Dana when we talk to her. She's done well by both of us."

The two women cleaned up the remnants of dinner, storing the leftovers, before they carried their wine into the living room. "Think we need a fire?" Mallory asked.

"Not unless you want one. I'm going to have to be going soon, anyway. I have to check my email to make sure everything was okay with the article I just submitted, and I wanted to write a quick email to Dana."

"If you'd like, you can log into your email account from here. You could check your mail and we could write a note to Dana together."

"Great idea. That would be fun, wouldn't it?"

The email to Dana was great fodder for laughter for both women. They commented on Dana's great choice in friends and wrote a breezy, lighthearted account of their day together. Without discussion, neither seemed to feel that it was necessary to describe their soak in the hot tub to their friend, but they mentioned the delicious dinners and how much they both enjoyed sharing meals the past two days.

Amanda reread the letter aloud one final time to allow for edits and corrections. "Okay?"

"It sounds good to me. Hit the send button." Mallory stood and stretched. "I think, after our workout today, we both may be a bit too sore tomorrow for another ride. If that turns out to be true, I wouldn't mind going into town for a leisurely lunch and a movie. I'd love to have some company. Are you up for it?"

“Sure, that sounds great, but I have to do a few hours of work sometime tomorrow. Could we do lunch after 12:30? Maybe we should check what time the movies start, decide what we want to see first, and then let the movie time dictate when we eat.”

Mallory nodded her agreement. “Works for me. I’m going to use the facilities. Do you mind looking up the movies for us?”

“Sure. Not a problem.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Amanda reached for the laptop and turned the screen to face her. The screensaver was rotating through several pictures. Each picture showed Mallory with a very attractive blonde woman. They were touching in each picture, either clowning for the camera or standing with their arms linked or one behind the other with their hands on the other’s shoulders. The next photo was a picture of the two women close, face-to-face, looking into each other’s eyes. Mallory was kissing the other woman on the nose. The lovely, fun photo revealed a deep intimacy between the pair. The meaning left little, if any, doubt in Amanda’s mind that Mallory and this woman had a romantic relationship with each other.

When she heard the toilet flush she quickly looked up the local movie theater. By the time Mallory returned, she had the current show times up on the screen. She didn’t know if she should address the information that she’d just learned about Mallory or wait for her to disclose the relationship on her own. She decided not to mention anything right away, but before she allowed herself to become too attached to Mallory, she needed to know something about the status of her relationship with the attractive blonde. Perhaps they still had a long distance involvement.

“So, did you pick out a movie?” Mallory asked as she returned to the living room.

“No,” Amanda smiled. “Thought I’d wait for you so we can pick it together. I have the list here.”

They selected a movie that began at two-fifteen and agreed to hold lunch until one o’clock.

“Do you have a favorite place for lunch?” Amanda asked.

“Yes, I do, and I think you’ll like it too.” Mallory quickly pulled up the restaurant’s website and clicked on their lunch menu.

“Umm, I’m sure I can find about ten things I’d love to eat on this menu,” Amanda exclaimed. “Okay, I’d better get back home so I can get up and do what I have to do tomorrow before we meet. Thank you, Mallory, for a very enjoyable day and an amazing dinner. Shall I pick you up tomorrow at what...twelve-thirty or so?”

“That would be perfect.” Mallory walked Amanda to the door. “I had a great time today and am really looking forward to another day with you tomorrow.” She gave Amanda’s hand a quick squeeze as Amanda slipped out the door and headed home.

Before stepping off the deck, Amanda glanced back to find Mallory watching her departure, a sad expression on her face. Amanda gave a quick wave, which Mallory rewarded with a sweet smile.



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