

# It's Complicated



AJ ADAIRE

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# *It's Complicated*

*by*

*AJ Adair*

  
*Desert Palm Press*

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By **AJ Adaire**

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## **Back of Book**

Victoria Branningham had a guilty pleasure. Every day she would take a detour, sit on the boardwalk, and wait for the runner to show up. That's where the guilt came in, knowing she should be elsewhere.

Beverly McMannis was lonely. She was happy to become friends with her neighbor who lived across the street from her. It felt like they might be the only two lesbians on the island.

Victoria was honest with Bev the first night they met, explaining that she wasn't free. Bev promised that she could handle that and welcomed Victoria's friendship.

Love isn't always easy...sometimes it's complicated. Especially when it involves an odd situation where only one of the people in the relationship is aware of the promise to remain loyal to their commitment.

## **Acknowledgments**

To those of you in the medical and counseling fields, please forgive the liberties I have taken in telling my story.

## **Dedication**

As always, to my partner, who puts up with me...thank you for the first thirty years.

To my readers, who continue to support my work by buying my books and writing reviews or letters to me to tell me how much they've enjoyed them.

To my cheerleaders and support team. Thank you for all the hours you've invested in encouraging me, as well as reading, improving, and publishing my work. I'm glad that you have (at least so far) enjoyed reading it. Thank you OQI, Sue H, CK, MEB, Lee, Pat, CJH, Bee, Sally T, MCH, MK, FDC, Susie, Theresa, and Betty.

## Excerpt:

### Chapter One

VICTORIA BRANNINGHAM HAD A guilty pleasure. Every day she would take a detour, sit on the boardwalk, and wait for the runner to show up. That's where the guilt came in, knowing she should be elsewhere. Despite Tori having no idea why she was drawn to the stranger, it just felt to her as though her day was incomplete if she didn't see the white-haired woman run by.

Tori sat on a bench opposite the curly fry stand and looked north toward Seventh Street where the stranger always stretched before she began her run. Behind Tori, the cadence of the ocean waves hitting the shore, marking the passing of time, made her even more aware of the closing of the narrow window she had remaining before she had to leave her position. She checked her watch for the third time, her disappointment mounting. The woman was behind schedule today. Tori couldn't delay much longer. She was at the limit of the time she allowed herself.

The wooden walkway, lined on one border by mostly closed stores, was sparsely populated now. Once the season opened, the whole town would blossom into a bustling community of vacationers and visitors. For now, it was still too early in the year for anyone, other than the stalwart locals, to be out braving the chilly weather. Willing the warmer weather to hurry, Tori preferred to optimistically think of the time as 'early spring' rather than 'late winter.' She pulled her collar higher around her neck and stuffed her hands deeper into her pockets as she hunched her shoulders against the penetrating wind.

*Finally!* From her vantage point Tori saw the runner start her stretching routine. She would wait till the woman started to move before she began walking north in her direction. By doing that she could watch as the runner approached her. If everything worked out perfectly, they would cross paths near Mooreline and Tori could exit the boards near the water slide on Eighth, where she'd parked her car earlier.

Tori started to walk, eyes focused on the compact body and easy stride of the runner coming toward her. Her body in motion was something to behold...beautiful, just beautiful. If not for the red sneakers that made her progress easy to follow, her dark glasses and navy form-fitting jogging outfit would have allowed her to blend in. Her luminous white hair was tucked under the pink breast cancer awareness cap, and on really cold days, she generally wore a fleece jacket and gloves of medium blue.

A wry thought crossed Tori's mind. *If I were directing a movie of my life, I would probably film this scene in slow motion as she runs toward me, the only soundtrack the ever-increasing tempo of my beating heart instead of "Bolero" like in that movie with Bo Derek.*

As was their habit, because they saw each other several times a week, as they passed each gave a nod to the other. Tori's timing was perfect today. She arrived at Eighth Street, veered left and turned to watch, unobserved, the fleeing form of the runner who left her crisp, fresh scent on the wind in her wake.

Tori sighed before she turned to make the short walk to her car. With the engine now running, she cranked the temperature knob onto full heat and switched on the fan to high before blowing warm air into her hands. *This is insane.* She dropped her head into her hands and allowed herself a quick cry before she blew her nose and checked her appearance in the rear view mirror. Tear-brightened green eyes rimmed with dark lashes stared back at her with reproach.

*All right, I know...I'm going. It's not like she'll know that I'm ten minutes late. Maybe I'll catch all the lights green.* Eight green-lighted minutes later, she exhaled a sigh of relief, allowed herself a quick smile, parked in her usual spot at the nursing home and rehab center, waved at Ernie, the guard at the door, and took the elevator to the third floor. She walked the familiar path to the nurses' desk, where she waved to MJ.



"How is she today?" She already knew the response.

"She's resting quietly." MJ came closer so she could talk more quietly. "I gave her a nice bath today, and a good massage with some moisturizer. I plan to file her nails tomorrow."

"I can do that while I'm here tonight."

"You're running late today."

"Just a little. I, uh, went to the boardwalk and just lost track of time."

"Really. That's not like you. Everything okay?"

Tori made brief eye contact, nodded, and looked away. "I'd better get in there. See you later." She made the short journey to Liz's room. The hallways were bright and freshly painted. Decorations hung everywhere, made by the rehab clients in occupational therapy classes housed in a different wing. Liz was in the wing dedicated to long-term care.

Tori paused in front of the door to gather her courage. At first she'd held out hope, watched Liz's every move, searched her face for any sign of recognition. Initially, she thought there were glimmers of recognition in Liz's eyes. Now, after nearly three long years, she'd given up on Liz's recovery, finally coming to a closer acceptance of the doctor's declaration. Liz was in a permanent vegetative state. She'd watched her once beautiful lover wither to someone she hardly even recognized.

After the accident, Liz's mother and father couldn't accept that their daughter was gone and insisted she receive life support. In her heart, Tori knew that Liz would have hated living that way. Unfortunately, the relationship Liz and Tori shared had no legal standing. Frank and Claudia had the final decision and they refused to have life support removed.

A deep breath fortified Tori enough to put a broad smile on her face and push the partially closed door open to enter Liz's room. "Hello, sweetheart. It's a gorgeous day today. It feels like spring is finally preparing to make an appearance."

Liz's eyes were closed. Machines surrounded her, monitoring her vital signs. Tubes ran from and to various parts of her body to supply nutrients and carry away waste. In the very beginning, it sometimes seemed that Liz actually was responsive to questions or comments. As time passed and Liz's brain continued to swell, she'd become unresponsive, slipped into a deeper coma, and eventually into a vegetative state. Tori grieved for the loss of her partner's laughter and the love they shared.

As Liz's condition deteriorated, her parents, Frank and Claudia still wouldn't let their daughter go naturally. Liz's mother was the most vehement in her belief. "Tori, we know that Liz will wake up one day. We won't let her go. The doctors are wrong. She'll get better." Efforts to explain reality gained no traction with Claudia. Despite Frank seeing the situation more realistically, it was his habit to acquiesce to his wife's wishes, so she got her way and Liz received life-sustaining treatment. As half of a lesbian couple in Pennsylvania, Tori's opinion carried no legal weight, so the decision was out of her hands.

Frank and Claudia announced their decision to bring their daughter back to their hometown at the Jersey shore and place her in a facility near their home. Tori's mother and father tried to convince them to wait, but they remained firm in their conviction.

Tori kissed Liz's forehead before settling into the chair she drew nearer to the side of the bed. Despite the fact that she got no response, Tori continued a dialogue with her partner. "I went to the boardwalk again today. I told you before how much I enjoy watching the ocean and the other scenery." She sighed. *I'm such a shit. How can I lie to her like that?*

"I promised MJ I'd do your nails today. No polish, just the way you like them." Liz's mother always applied bright pink polish to her daughter's nails. She didn't believe Tori that Liz wouldn't like them that way. Half an hour later, her task was completed. "There we go. All done." Tori tucked Liz's hand under the covers, folded the sheet over the top, and settled back in the chair.

"Guess what? I have a surprise." She leaned over and whispered conspiratorially. "I got us a new lesbian novel. It's by one of your favorite authors." Tori reached into her bag, took out the book, and

read the title. "I thought we'd both enjoy this one. It's a romance with a little mystery mixed in. The love story is for you and the mystery for me. Okay, here we go. Chapter One." Tori began to read.

## Chapter Two

IT WAS IN THE market, while standing in front of the melons trying to decide if they were ripe enough to purchase, that she noticed her. Something drew Tori's attention and when she looked up, there she was. The faded denim jeans that rode low on her hips looked inviting to the touch and incited a forbidden desire to run her hands over them, to feel their softness, and to appreciate the toned skin and muscles Tori suspected were hidden beneath. Even though casually dressed, the woman exuded style and sensuality. The term 'well put together' flashed through Tori's mind. Tucked into the jeans, a navy blue and white striped cotton shirt, starched and wrinkle free with the collar and cuffs turned up, completed the outfit. Her prematurely white hair was just collar length and stylishly feathered. The familiar aroma of a clean, light scent tickled Tori's senses, daring her to bury her nose in the soft hollow of the woman's neck and trace with her hand the blue lined pattern on her shirt downward over the swell of her breast.

The woman, perhaps subconsciously aware of Tori's scrutiny, reached up to run her fingers through her thick, shiny hair as she raised her eyes. Catching Tori's gaze as she glanced up, she flashed a quick smile, revealing even white teeth, a single dimple on the right side of her face, and the most gorgeous shade of blue eyes Tori had ever seen. Tori, hoping she hadn't been caught admiring, grabbed what seemed to be the ripest melon from the pile at the same time the fabulous woman plucked an apple from the precariously stacked array.

A shriek caused Tori to look up in time to witness the woman's attempt to keep the apples from tumbling from the case. She'd managed to prevent them from falling on the floor but was trapped in position, unable to move for fear of dropping all the fruit onto the floor.

"Hang on. Let me help you." Tori circled the counter and began rearranging the apples, neatly stacking and reorganizing them into a more secure display. One by one, she carefully removed the last few apples that were resting against the woman's breasts, enabling her to stand up. "Nice save."

"Thanks, quick reflexes. I appreciate you coming to my rescue. No telling how long I'd be stuck like that at this time of night." She looked around at the store that was nearly devoid of shoppers at a little after eleven o'clock on a Friday night.

"My pleasure."

"You look very familiar, do I know you?"

"Not technically. I think we may have seen each other on the boardwalk. You run, I walk."

"Oh right. I thought I recognized you."

Tori didn't say any more and the woman gave a quick wave, turned her cart and prepared to head up the vegetable aisle. "Well, I'd best get a move on, or I'll never get done, nor will you. Thanks again for saving me."

Before Tori could respond, the woman rounded the corner and disappeared from view. *Why didn't you take the opportunity to introduce yourself you idiot? 'My pleasure.' Brilliant repartee. Oh well. She's right, might as well get a move on.* With only one register open, Tori found herself in line behind the same woman just as she was finishing up with her order.

The cashier totaled the bill. "That'll be nineteen eighty-four, please," she said extending her hand to the attractive woman who was frantically searching her pockets for her money.

"Crap! I left my wallet in the car. Can I just leave the bag here while I run out to my vehicle to get my money?"

The cashier shrugged, her mouth occupied by chewing and cracking the wad of gum in her mouth. "I'm here all night, so I personally don't care..." She tilted her head in Tori's direction. "I can't ring her up until I close out your transaction, so it's up to her."

Fixing Tori with a warm, dimple-punctuated smile the woman asked, "If you can wait, I'll be quick, I promise. It might save you time in the end."

It was at that moment that Tori realized all eyes were focused on her. Quickly calculating the time it would take and considering the status of her melting ice cream, Tori offered an alternate solution. "Look, here's twenty bucks. Wait for me while she rings up my items. We can walk out to the parking lot together and you can pay me back. It'll be faster."

Tori paid for her own groceries when the cashier finished totaling her order and joined the waiting woman. As they carried their bags to the parking lot, she pointed. "That's mine." The car's lights blinked and the horn tooted as she directed the remote in the direction of her vehicle and depressed the button. "You've rescued me twice already, and I don't even know your name. I'm Bev...Beverly McMannis."

"Tori Branningham. Pleased to meet you."

"I'd like to thank you properly, Tori. I know it's too late for dinner. Umm...I could buy you a drink instead? Look, it's the least I can do."

Tori could feel her pulse pounding in her temple as she flashed a quick grin. "I'd love to get together with someone who shops at odd hours like I do. However, I don't expect you to treat. Anyway, I can't tonight, my ice cream is melting."

"How about lunch or dinner tomorrow? I'm relatively new here and I could use a friend." Bev produced a card from her wallet and handed it to Tori along with a crisp twenty-dollar bill.

A laugh bubbled out of Tori as she read the card. "This is too weird. You live right down the street from me."

"No. Really? Great! Call me in the morning and we'll make plans." Bev's smile lit up her face.

"Okay, it's a date." It was too late to call back her hasty response as Tori realized the implication of her words. "Uh, I mean, uh, I'll..."

"Really, it's okay." Bev reached out to clasp Tori's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. Her soft, full lips curved into a warm smile. "I'd like it if you would consider it a date. I've lived here for over two months and you're the first friend I've made. And dating...well, that's a long story." Her attempted smile came up short of sincere.

Tori wondered what caused the woman's sadness. She noted, with relief, the fine wrinkles that appeared at the corners of Bev's eyes when she smiled. *Maybe she's closer to my age than I thought, maybe mid-thirties at the most.* Reluctantly, she released her grip on the slightly shorter woman's hand. "Let's keep it a plan. I know it's cool out here, but I'd better get going before my ice cream melts."

"Right, sorry. Will you really call?"

Tori mustered her most sincere look. "Sure. I'm looking forward to it." They stood, each slow to turn away. Tori grinned. "Threshold paralysis."

"What's that?"

"You know when people start to say goodbye, then remain on the doorstep for another fifteen minutes like we're doing. I really do have to go...ice cream, remember?"

"Oh right. Okay, go! I'll wait for your call."

They followed each other from the store parking lot to their condo buildings where they parked on Dwayne Street in adjacent spots. They were the only sign of life on the deserted street. As they slammed their car doors, Tori pointed to her building. "I'm there."

"That's mine, there," Bev responded, adding a smile. "Talk to you tomorrow?" Tori nodded and Bev turned and gave a quick wave before heading into her building.

Tori's unit was in a raised condo building with parking underneath, a necessity in the beach town in-season. Her parking spot at the end of the row was farther from the door to her building than the spot on the street where she parked off-season when the entire town was nearly deserted. In-season, she'd be grateful for her assigned parking space under her building despite its distance from the door. Until the tourists arrived she enjoyed the luxury of hauling her groceries only a few steps to the entrance of her building.

## Chapter Three

EXACTLY TWELVE MINUTES LATER, at precisely one minute past twelve, Bev's phone rang. Puzzled, she picked up the phone and tentatively said, "Hello?"

"You said to call tomorrow, and I promised I would. Technically it's tomorrow." Tori smiled when she heard a laugh on the other end of the phone.

"No. Actually, it's today." Bev switched the phone to her other ear and settled into a chair.

"I guess. Regardless, I figured you'd still be up. I know you invited me to lunch but uh...I was wondering if you might be interested in some ice cream now? I'll understand if you are about to go to bed..."

"Stop right there! I'll be over in a few minutes. Do I get a cherry and whipped cream?" Bev's eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Have you been a good girl?"

"You have no idea how good I've been, Tori. I can be there in a couple of minutes if you'll give me your address."

"I'm in number twenty."

"Good, got it. I'll be right over. Start scooping."

Tori smiled as the phone went dead. She glanced around her orderly apartment. Her nearly compulsive neatness did have its benefits. At least she could spontaneously invite someone over and not have to race around and clean up. She headed for the kitchen to prepare the ice cream. Just as she began to scoop she heard a quiet rap on her door, so she reversed direction and tugged the door open. "Welcome. Come on in."

Bev entered, leaving a trail of her now familiar light scent behind. Her eyes swept the room registering details. "Nice place. Lived here long?"

Nodding, Tori answered, "Thanks. Um, a little over two years give or take." Tori could hardly take her eyes off her guest as she glided around the living room, stopping here and there to examine the room. The motion of her body was a thing of beauty to behold. *What is it about this woman? She completely undoes me.*

Bev leaned over to examine a photo of a bird in a frame resting on the coffee table, the only decoration in the stark room. She stood, casually brushing her fingers through her hair, pushing it away from her face. "You're very tidy."

"Thank you?" When Bev didn't comment further she added, "Is that a good thing?"

"Oh definitely. I'm not a slob by any stretch. If pressed, I'd have to admit I'm more relaxed in my housekeeping practices than you. I wouldn't object to living this way if someone kept it like this for me, I just can't invest this much time in doing it myself."

"It's really not that hard, you just have to keep after it, pick up after yourself, and put everything back in its proper place when you're finished with it. It's easier, too, if you don't have a lot of stuff."

"I don't have a lot of personal stuff." Bev allowed her eyes to travel the perimeters of the room before adding, "I certainly have more than you. You live like a monk. Don't get me wrong...your place is lovely. What I find interesting is that I can't get a read on you from your surroundings. Like that photo there, for example. It's a picture of a seagull on a streetlight. It could be anywhere. Is it significant?"

"Not to anyone but me. I like a particular bench on the boardwalk. The gull likes to sit there. Looking at the photo reminds me of the enjoyment I get from sitting there too. That's all." Tori glanced around and shrugged. "Come on, I promised you some ice cream. Come into the kitchen with me while I dish it up."

Bev followed behind Tori and took a seat at the kitchen counter while her host prepared the ice cream. Pointing to a beautifully framed photo resting on the counter, the only personal object in the immaculate kitchen, Bev asked, "Is this you when you were younger?"

"Yes."

"Cute. Your hair was darker here, almost black."

Tori self-consciously touched her hair. "I let it grow out. I got tired of dying it...didn't really have the time anyway. I kind of like the grey mixed in now."

"It suits you. I like it. My hair began to turn white twenty years ago, when I was eighteen. By the time I was twenty, I was completely white, like I am now."

"I like your hair, it's very attractive and suits you somehow. It's positively luminous...gorgeous."

"Thank you. Over the years, I've vacillated about how I feel about it."

"Did you ever dye it?"

"Oh, sure, although I've finally come to a peace with it and it's just part of who I am now." Bev turned her attention back to the photo. "You look happy in this picture. Who's the woman...girlfriend?"

Tori, unsure how much she wanted to reveal, quickly ran through her options. "Yes. Girlfriend, partner, love of my life."

Bev leaned forward to hear what Tori said. "And..."

"I'm sorry. I don't like to talk about it." After a brief pause she added, "However, if we're to be friends, you should know." Still, she held back. Tori added a swirl of whipped cream to each bowl, fished a cherry out of the jar, and held the spoon out, offering the sweet treat as a conciliatory gesture.

Bev accepted the offering and plucked the cherry from its resting place. The spoon dipped into the jar again emerging with two more cherries. Tori placed one on each serving of ice cream and pushed Bev's portion toward her.

Before Bev dug into her treat, she sought Tori's eyes. "I'll still be your friend, you know. You don't owe me any explanations."

"No, I want to tell you. You see I find you very attractive, not to mention sexy. I need to say it and you need to know, in advance, that despite those facts, I'm not available. My situation is...complicated."

"Okay, look. Let's eat our ice cream and talk about brighter things. You think about what, if anything, you want to tell me. If we're going to be friends, there's plenty of time for deep discussions. Tonight, let's just talk about lighter topics."

Tori, who had earlier appeared to shrink like a balloon in a freezer as she anguished over what and how much to reveal, seemed to regain her footing. A quick smile appeared as she sampled her ice cream. "Umm, good. Okay, let's start with you. Tell me about yourself. You said you're new here. What prompted your move to this area?"

"I was looking for something different, I guess. Last year, I sold a computer program I'd developed to a large company near Atlantic City. It was..." Bev hesitated, reflecting on how to phrase the rest of the thought. "It was, uh, shall we say...lucrative. After I sold them the program, I signed on with the company to provide training for their staff and to monitor functioning until they are comfortable using it. They seem to want me to stay on part time to assure it keeps functioning properly and to provide impartial oversight to its use."

Bev paused to eat some of her ice cream before continuing. "Umm, you're right, this is good. Thank you. Anyway, the job requires that I be available overnight. At first, I thought that I'd hate working at night. After doing it for a while, the work hours are growing on me, except for the fact that I find it's lonely. I only work days if I do training. Most of the time I just have to stop in for a couple of hours at night to problem solve their issues. I stay as long as I'm needed, after that I'm free to go on my way. There is a guy there, Victor, whom I'm starting to train in deeper aspects of the program. I usually call in about midnight to see if he needs me. If all is well, I don't even have to show up. I can actually log in from home to take care of most issues although I prefer to go in. It gives me a chance to talk with the

people using my program and allows me to see what adjustments I need to make as I rewrite and update it. I'm negotiating with two other companies in Chicago now to buy my updated program. They're waiting for the next version I tailored for each of them, which I should finish later this summer. If they buy it, they'll probably want me to do some additional customization for them."

"Well, today really is a lucky day. Guess who also works night shift. We've each found a playmate." Bev flashed her dimple.

"A computer geek, eh? I'm impressed. I hate the computer-based record keeping system we use for keeping track of the drug inventory at my job. It's so cumbersome. I'm sure I'm inept. Although it just seems that the database program we use seems more difficult than it needs to be. In order to make an entry, I have to access two, sometimes three different screens. Compared to using the program, I can keep the records easier on one sheet of paper. I know using the software makes it easier to sort and track things, I just wish the entry process were easier." Tori scraped the bottom of her bowl. "I enjoyed that. I enjoyed the company more."

"Yes, me too. I guess night work explains why we're both wide awake and eating ice cream at this hour." Bev handed her empty bowl over as Tori extended her hand for it. "So tell me what you do."

"I'm a hospital pharmacist. It's really more of a managerial position than what you probably think of as a pharmacist's typical duties...I do a little bit of everything. Most of the time I work nights unless I'm training or doing a workshop with the medical staff on a new medication. Technically I supervise the pharmacy department and the staff."

"So have you always been a night owl?"

Glancing over at the picture of her partner, Tori hesitated. "For a while now, since I moved here."

Bev waited for Tori to continue but when it seemed to be the end of that conversation she said, "I appreciate the treat and the company, as well as your rescuing me earlier at the food store." She flashed a sincere smile. "I'm going for a bike ride on the boardwalk in the morning. Want to join me?"

"That sounds like fun. How early?"

Bev checked her watch. "Well, it's a little after one o'clock. Being that it's off-season we can ride any time. How about nine? I'll meet you in the parking lot downstairs."

Tori smiled. "I'm looking forward to it." She walked her guest to the lobby door and stood watching as she made her way across the parking lot to her own building. Once there, Bev turned and waved before entering her apartment. Tori went inside and headed straight for the phone, dialing the number from memory. Upon hearing the familiar voice she asked, "How is she this evening?"



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