



Love on the Line

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Description: AJ finds it hard to trust another man's intentions after being duped and dumped, so the last thing she wants is another in her life. But her friend has other ideas and sets her up with the perfect guy—through a chat-only service. Hesitant at first, AJ is lured in by the deep, sexy voice and fun banter that easily becomes a nightly habit. As their bond grows and she begins to fall hard for him, they make plans to meet face-to-face. With love on the line, will AJ decide to forgive him when he confesses to being part of the set-up?

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While AJ's friends sat around her livingroom trying to convince her to join them for a Saturday night out, she silently mulled over excuses to make, knowing she was running out of them.

She had pretty much wasted her entire summer—her favorite time of year—doing nothing but sulking, and now with Labor Day only a week away, the rest of the year would surely fly by.

“Come on, AJ, it's been six months for goodness' sake. That man shouldn't still be dragging you down.” Jen, AJ's best friend, made no bones about her dislike for that man—AJ's ex, Brad. Jen rarely said his name, preferring to call him a host of other colorful ones, her latest favorite being “fucktard.”

“I knew you were always too good for that slimeball and you're finally rid of him. So, time to start a new chapter.” She took a healthy drink of her wine while winking at AJ over the rim of the glass.

AJ scoffed at the idea that she was rid of him, when he'd been the one to dump her after two years together. She wrinkled her nose in thought, poised to protest, but before she could say a word, Jen started again as if she'd read AJ's mind.

“And so what if he's the one who gave you the send-off, he's gone. He was a fucktard of the highest order, and so not worthy of you. I'm just sorry you didn't see his duplicity behind the fake façade, and wasted all that time with him.”

“Well, I learned the hard way that looks aren't everything,” AJ responded. She set aside her glass of the wine, preferring beer over the sweet drink Jen insisted she try.

“It’s definitely a start,” Kayli said. “I mean, who wants to be with an unattractive person?” Although Kayli wasn’t drinking, one would think she was already half tipsy as she giggled constantly through the conversation. She was also a bit of a klutz, seeming to trip over lint as she made her way to the bathroom twice in the span of an hour.

“True that.” Jen laughed.

“Yeah, well, I’ll be sure to look beyond a pretty face before I let the next guy move in and start making wedding plans.” AJ’s sarcasm wasn’t lost on her friends. Jen seemed to go through guys faster than a newborn went through diapers, whereas Kayli hadn’t had a boyfriend in what seemed like years. AJ was more cautious, practically putting them through a screening process tougher than the FBI. Evidently, Brad had been a master at hiding his selfish, manipulative side.

He had been a new coworker at the advertising agency where AJ worked, and an instant attraction occurred when they were assigned to the same team to work on a major project.

“To your defense,” Jen started, “you did put him through the paces before you got really serious. I think the jackwad actually thrived on the challenge. He only cared about the conquest, proving he could get whatever he went after.”

“Gee, thanks,” AJ mumbled.

“And then the jerk had to go and take credit for all your hard work,” Kayli added. “What a douche move.”

Jen spewed her wine, obviously not expecting sweet, reserved Kayli to use that word. Her two friends couldn’t be more different from each other, with AJ falling somewhere in between, but the three of them meshed perfectly. Jen, loyal to a fault,

was brash and brutally honest, never intending to be mean even if many of her comments came out that way. Kayli, although intellectually smart in a freaky way, was more naively innocent in an endearing way when it came to matters of the heart. Each had one another's back no matter what the crisis may be.

While AJ handed Jen a napkin to wipe up her mess, Kayli continued on. "And to accuse you of being the unsupportive bitch who wouldn't stand by her man! Uh, hello, 1950 called and they want their chauvinistic pig back!"

Jen howled with laughter causing Kayli to giggle, and AJ couldn't help but join them, thankful for their support. They'd been friends since college, and even now in their early thirties still managed to act like schoolgirls at times. Lighthearted occasions like this had been sunshine in an otherwise bleak period for AJ over the past few months.

She had been steadfastly focused on her career, having only a few casual relationships, so Brad's intense interest in her had thrown her off-kilter. When he had relentlessly wooed and pursued her, she'd been flattered. After all, who could resist a charming, handsome, and seemingly like-minded man who said they could be the next dynamic duo of advertising? And while she would've liked to have said she'd been smart about how she eased into their relationship, truth was, she fell head over high heels faster than a cat could go from loving you one minute to scratching your eyes out the next.

AJ was not a cat person.

Then, finding out she had just been a pawn he wanted to use in his attempt to rise higher in the agency had been quite a blow. It shook her confidence, both personally and professionally.

"If you ask me, he got off too easy simply being fired." Jen threw aside the napkin and finished off the little remaining wine in her glass. "He should be blacklisted from any

agency and forced to drive a garbage truck for the rest of his life.”

“Yeah, he’d fit right in with the rest of the stinky trash, huh?” Kayli giggled.

AJ could only chuckle as she shook her head, actually thinking about Brad behind the wheel of a garbage truck. Her chuckles turned into full-on laughter, causing tears to stream down her face, which in turn became muted sobs as she began to feel sorry for herself. Again. Something she never did. And it pissed her off that it was happening too frequently.

Wasn’t she stronger than this?

Jen was quick to pull AJ off the couch. “Oh, no you don’t. He doesn’t deserve your tears.” Jen practically dragged AJ up the stairs, leading her to her own bathroom as Kayli followed. “Kayli, pick out something awesome for AJ to wear, and while you’re at it, please find me another blouse. Can’t be seen with wine-splotted clothes, now can I?”

“But—” AJ started to protest, only Jen was quick to interrupt.

“But, nothing. You’re going to splash water on your beautiful face, you’re going to put on some makeup and clothes, and you’re coming with us. No protests, no excuses. You need this.” While Kayli made her way to AJ’s closet, Jen lifted AJ’s chin, making eye contact. “You are stronger than this, you will get through this, and we need our friend back. So let’s go.” Jen turned AJ around and gave her a swat on the rear before turning to join Kayli in front of the closet.

AJ stared at herself in the mirror, hating the puffy red eyes staring back at her. She took a deep breath and a longer exhale. “Okay, let’s do this,” she mumbled.

“Louder, and with more conviction,” Jen called to her. And when AJ didn’t sound off

soon enough, Kayli followed that up with, “We can’t hear you,” in a sing-song voice.

AJ smiled, loving her friends more than ever at this very moment.

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“Okay, let’s do this!”

“That’s our girl!” Jen said while Kaylilaughed.

AJ took care of matters in the bathroom and joined the others in her bedroom. Jen had slipped on a mauve blouse that looked better on her than it ever did on AJ, so she told her to keep it. “It was always too tight, I just never bothered to get rid of it.”

“Glad you didn’t,” Jen remarked. “You are just a wee bit bustier than me.” She winked at AJ.

“Ya think?” AJ snorted. The three were close to the same height around five eight, with AJ being lean and having bigger boobs than she wanted, while small-busted Kayli wished she could relieve AJ of some of her double-Ds to supplement her padded B cups. Jen’s figure was more robust in the hips with what she considered the perfect size Cs on her chest.

While Jen freshened her makeup, AJ slipped into the outfit Kayli had set out which consisted of a loose-fitting, sleeveless cream blouse over wide-legged slacks in a rich nutmeg.

“Those slacks distract from your boobs,” Kayli said, handing AJ a pair of studded sandals. “And these will go perfectly.”

AJ chuckled as she slipped on the shoes and joined Jen in the bathroom to put on her makeup. “Guess there’s a reason you’re a fashion designer, huh, Kayli?”

“Yep!” The woman practically bounced with joy before she stumbled over her own feet, thankfully falling against the soft bed. She quickly stood, righted her glasses, and smoothed down her tunic dress before running a hand through her kinky raven hair.

“And not a runway model,” Jen quipped. “Although you’re much more beautiful, you’d never make it three feet without falling on your lovely rump.”

Kayli was a darling with rich mocha skin and deep brown eyes. Jen enjoyed a year-long brown tone thanks to the Latin running through her genes. And AJ spent as much time outside as she could to tan her pale skin due to her Icelandic heritage.

“That’s why you’ll never see me dancing,” Kayli said. “I’d wipe out the entire dance floor. Mom never could understand me not having any rhythm.”

After makeup was complete, AJ whipped her blonde hair into a messy bun that shouldn’t look good on her but thankfully did. Jen applied more hairspray to her mahogany-dyed locks bouncing just below her shoulders.

They joined Kayli, and the three made their way downstairs. “Aw, you may surprise yourself, chicka. That’s why tonight we’re going to give it a try.”

“What?” AJ and Kayli said at the same time. AJ had to catch Kayli’s arm to keep her from tumbling on the last two steps.

“Yeah. We’re heading over to the Grove Hotel for drinks and dancing. And we just might run into some delicious hockey hunks.” Jen wiggled her brows. “The Steelheads have been practicing, getting ready for their season, and word is they like to hang out at the Grove.”

AJ and Kayli began a simultaneous complaint.

“Seriously, Jen? You know I’m not ready for any kind of hookup,” AJ said.

“Oh, no, no, no, no, I can’t do this,” Kayli said, frantically shaking her head back and forth.

“One, it’s not all about you,” Jen said with sass, pointing at AJ. “Although I do want you to come out and have fun. And two,” she turned to Kayli, “you can do this, and you will. Now, time to woman-up and go.” She looped her arms around each of theirs and steered them toward the front door. “Grab your purses, Kayli’s driving, ‘cuz I’m drinking.”

“I may need a drink after all if I’m going to attempt to dance,” Kayli mumbled.

“Or three,” AJ added.

Jen just chuckled as they all gathered their items and left AJ’s house, locking up behind them. Piling into Kayli’s car with her driving—at least for now—they made their way into downtown Boise.

Two hours later, AJ could admit she wasn’t sorry she was forced into going out. While enjoying her second local IPA—Indie Pale Ale—she was also enjoying feasting her eyes on some very handsome men. Not that she planned to do more than look. Nope, not going there, she thought. No harm in looking. Jen on the other hand was doing more than her share of looking by dancing and flirting with a handful of them. AJ had been introduced to six members of the local hockey team along with some of their non-hockey friends who were just as sexy.

Earlier Kayli had decided she needed a shot of courage and ended up indulging in a few too many mixed drinks, thereby causing her to become embarrassingly sick. AJ

had just returned from taking her home, and was now wondering if she'd also have to rescue Jen from any precarious situations. It was doubtful, as Jen always knew her limits and remained in control.

As AJ sat comfortably at a booth in the bar, she snacked on appetizers as the lights dimmed and the area began filling up. Although the space didn't really lend itself toward dancing, the bar's piano player started in on a jazzy number that had Jen and two guys taking up floor space to move seductively around one another. AJ watched, almost envious of her friend's ability to be so loose and carefree.

AJ had become so wary of a guy's intentions, she wondered if she'd ever be able to hold a simple conversation without thinking there were ulterior motives involved. She sighed to herself, lifting the bottle of brew when her eyes caught sight of a man across the room. Even in the lower light, she could see he was utterly gorgeous, with his tall frame, perfect build, and stylish glasses on his face making him even more attractive. Her body responded before she could make sense of what was happening.

Sheesh, one minute I'm thinking a guy would only talk to me in order to get in my pants, and here I am about to cream my panties just by looking at a hottie. Hypocrite.

Even after her self-admonishment, AJ couldn't help but stare and wonder about him. Was he an athlete? Was he even available? There weren't any women hanging on his arm, but that didn't mean he wasn't involved with someone.

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Suddenly, his gaze connected with hers and she forgot to breathe. The intensity in his look had her suddenly turning away, seeking an escape. She set her drink down and searched the area for Jen, seeing she was still tangled up with two guys, not the least bit concerned it looked as if they should get a room. As she quickly scanned the bar, trying to discretely locate the hunk, she saw him still staring and making his way through the crowd in her direction.

AJ felt her eyes widen in panic, thinking there was no way she was going to engage in conversation with this man. She was not prepared and didn't want to look like a fool. Small talk and flirting was not her forte. Luckily the guy was having difficulty moving around the many occupants in the bar, giving AJ a chance to maneuver out of the booth and hurry across the room. She barely made eye contact with Jen before she slipped out of the bar and hurried down the corridor into the furthest bathroom she could find.

Leaning against the counter, AJ tried to get her breathing under control while also hoping Jen would understand her look and seek her out. She couldn't just leave without at least letting Jen know. Although AJ knew her friend could take care of herself, Jen would be worried first and then pissed to know AJ had bailed.

After a few moments, the door burst open with Jen coming through, flushed with a look of confusion marring her face.

“What’s going on?”

“I, uh, I just needed to use the bathroom. I think I’m ready to go,” she lied. Well, it wasn’t a total lie. She was ready because she didn’t want to have a run-in with the

gorgeous stranger. She quickly rattled on. “I just didn’t want to abandon you without letting you know, even though it looked like you were doing just fine and couldn’t care less about being left alone with those hunks you were dancing with.”

Jen cocked her brow as a smile lifted the corner of her mouth. “What the hell, AJ? A hot guy wants to talk with you and you hightail it out there?” She made a move to take AJ’s elbow as she said, “Come on, let’s go back and have some fun. Well, I’ll resume my fun while you start to have some.”

AJ whipped her arm away from Jen. “No, no, um, I really am ready to go. Listen, you’ll be fine taking a cab, right? Or are you, you know, gonna—”

“Am I gonna hook up with one of those boys, you ask?” She placed her hands on her cocked hips. “I most certainly am, and if you had stayed put, you might have had the same luck.”

AJ sputtered. “I don’t want any such luck! Listen, I’m just going to go. It really has been a great evening, but I’m ready to head home. So, um, are you sure you’ll be fine? You sure you don’t want me to take you home?”

“Hell, no. I’m about to go home with not one, but two gorgeous guys who I’m sure will show me more than just their hockey sticks.” She winked.

Although not a prude, AJ still gasped, causing Jen to laugh.

“All right, listen, hun, you go home then. But I sure wish you’d stay and at least talk to a guy. It doesn’t have to be any more than that, you know.”

“Yeah, I know, but I guess I’m just not ready. I can’t handle all that gorgeousness in my face.” A strangled laugh escaped her.

“Okay.” Jen hugged her. “Drive safe, and don’t worry about me. You know I can take care of myself.”

“Oh, don’t I know it.”

The two walked out of the bathroom, giving each other one more hug before Jen made her way back to the bar and AJ made her escape before anything else happened. She took the first exit and had to circle around the building before finding Kayli’s car. Once inside, she breathed a sigh of relief, followed by a groan at how stupidly childish she had acted.

She banged her head against the steering wheel and mumbled. “Thirty-two years old and acting like I’m twelve.”

With a deep breath, she buckled up and headed home, promising herself she’d try to act more mature next time. If there was a next time.

“I can’t believe you fled like that!” Kayli exclaimed when she saw AJ the next afternoon. “Think of the fun you could have had!”

“Really? I can’t believe you felt the need to bolster your courage with alcohol, only to get sick and not have one minute of fun.” AJ instantly regretted her words when she saw Kayli’s face crumple. “Shit, I’m sorry, Kayli, that was uncalled for.”

“Seems we both need to work on our confidence, huh?”

“Yeah,” AJ simply said. She rubbed her friend’s arm as they sat side by side on AJ’s couch.

Kayli had taken a cab over to AJ's to visit and retrieve her car, and Jen had arrived only moments ago looking fresh as a daisy stretching toward the sun.

"Well, if you had both just listened to Momma Jen, you'd have had a fabulous night with a fabulous guy or two, and wouldn't be ripping each other with comments like that."

"After all these years, you know we're not built like that," AJ said.

"And after all these years, you'd think some of my influence would've rubbed off on you two," Jen replied.

"At least I talked with a guy," Kayli said weakly.

"That you did," Jen confirmed. She then turned to AJ. "Now, you. You want to tell me what's really bothering you? Why you couldn't stay to even talk to a cute guy whose seemed interested in you?"

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“Cute? The man was more than cute, he was gorgeous! Probably another smooth-talking player who took one look at me and said, ‘my next target.’”

“Oh my God, AJ, really? Is that how you see yourself?” Jen sat forward on the edge of the lounge chair where she was sitting. “If so, then you really don’t think much of yourself at all. And to judge another person based on looks alone?”

“Seriously?” AJ stood from the couch and began pacing her own living room. “It’s a natural reaction! You see a person and instantly make a judgement based on their appearance, their demeanor. You can’t tell me that isn’t true, because I’ve never seen you with an ugly person. All your conquests are physically attractive men.”

“My conquests?” Jen sputtered and stood while Kayli sat passively, eyes wide, head toggling between the two women.

AJ faced off with her friend. “Yes, conquests, because you go through men like shit through a goose. But hey, as long as you’re enjoying life and nobody’s getting hurt, right?” She waved her hand around in front of her. “Well that’s not me. I can’t go from guy to guy to guy.”

“I’ll have you know, which you really should already know—I don’t go from guy to guy to guy. Sure, I have fun, but I’m not some tramp who sleeps with anything having a pulse and a dick!”

“Re—”

Kayli jumped up between the two women. “Hey, hey, stop! This is not like either of

you at all! Now sit!”

AJ and Jen snapped back, clearly surprised at Kayli’s authoritative attitude. When both women sat in a huff, Kayli continued. “Now, Jen, we know you aren’t a tramp, and we know you care about AJ, but sometimes a gal has to find her own way back at her own pace.” She faced AJ next. “And AJ, you need to stop with the self-pity and pick up that pace. Yes, you were used and hurt, but that’s over and it’s time for you to be you again. You can’t live in solitude forever.”

“Pot, kettle, black,” Jen muttered, earning her a glare from both AJ and Kayli.

“Yes, well, that may be,” Kayli started, “but I’m no good with men because I like women.”

The room grew so quiet one could hear a church mouse fart.

“Uh, come again?” AJ asked softly.

“I knew it!” Jen exclaimed, causing AJ and Kayli to wince.

“Oh, you did not,” Kayli said.

“Okay, I suspected, but that’s neither here nor there. Why on earth did you keep this from us? We’re supposed to be the best of friends!”

“Yeah, well, I guess I’m a slow learner myself, only truly realizing within the past year. But this isn’t about me, this is about AJ.” Kayli turned to AJ. “Honestly, AJ, by not letting go of the shit show that was Brad, you’re letting him hold power over you still, and that’s not you. It’s time you moved on, met a great guy, and became happy.”

“Why does my happiness have to revolve around finding a guy?”

“Again, you can’t live in solitude,” Kayli said. “Isn’t it more fun when you can share experiences with someone else? And I’m certainly not gonna be your girlfriend.” She smiled and winked at AJ, causing her and Jen to snort with laughter.

“Yeah, finding someone is so much easier said than done.” AJ slid back against the couch nearly pouting. “And Kayli, I love you no matter who you want to love. Just know that.”

“Ditto, sweetheart. We love you and want you happy, too.” Jen stepped to Kayli and gave her a quick squeeze.

“Thanks,” Kayli said. She sat next to AJ again when released by Jen, who then walked toward the kitchen.

Jen reappeared holding AJ’s phone. “Okay, so, maybe finding a guy can be easier said than done, and I’ll tell you how.”

AJ eyed her friend skeptically and asked how.

“So, there’s this online site called Flirt Chat, where people register to just talk to others based on similarities. You know, you program in all this information about yourself and then you seek out others who have the same qualities, interests, whatever.”

“Okay,” AJ said hesitantly. “And you’re telling me this, because...?”

“Well, because I registered you there, and I picked out a guy for you to talk to, and I’ve just alerted him you’re going to give him a call.” Jen began hitting the screen on AJ’s phone, obviously punching in numbers to contact this guy.

AJ sprang to her feet. “Oh, you did not! Noway, Jen. What the hell?”

Before she knew what was happening, Jen handed her the phone, kissed her cheek, grabbed Kayli's hand, and hauled her out the door, laughter ringing out.

“Shit!”

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“Hello,” said the husky voice. “This is Mathias.” His few words were clear, succinct, and surprisingly soothing.

Still, AJ remained quiet, locked up, unsure if she could even do this. She was on the verge of disconnecting the call when Mathias broke the silence.

“Would you like to tell me your name?”

Oh yes, definitely a voice made for phone sex. Okay, she hadn’t called for phone sex. She wasn’t even the one who called. But did people even do that anymore? Call for phone sex? Mathias’s sexy timbre certainly made her think of that, giving her goose bumps and making her short hairs stand on end.

Thanks a lot, Jen, AJ thought, remembering her laughter as she quickly explained her scheme. Real mature for thirty-something.

Oh God, and here she sat with her phone to her ear, listening to this undeniably alluring voice, wishing she had just hung up the damn phone the minute the first word had been uttered.

“...and apparently you do, too.”

I do too, what?

“Hello?”

Crickets.

“If you’ve changed your mind, that’s understandable. No harm. I’ll just say good-bye, and—”

“AJ,” she blurted. He sounded so down. Disappointed. She felt bad.

Oh my God, what is wrong with me? I don’t even know him, and here I am feeling sorry for him because I’m the one who won’t speak to a stranger?

She slapped her forehead as she closed her eyes and grimaced.

“Hi, AJ.”

She swore she could hear the smile in his voice when he said her name. She was so weak.

“So do you really like hiking and kayaking?”

“Yes,” came her simple reply.

“And you enjoy beer more than wine. And you prefer college football over NFL?”

“Yes, and of course.” So her friend really had listed true facts.

“And even though you love to indulge in pizza, burgers, and ice cream, you still manage to keep your figure in tip-top shape as an ice girl for the Idaho Steelheads.”

“W-what!” AJ sputtered.

Mathias’s light laughter echoed in her ear. “Gotcha. Just seeing if you were

payingattention.”

“The Steelheads don’t even have icegirls.”

“You are correct. Think they have puckbunnies though? Amelia Jane.”

AJ sucked in a quick breath. “You knew myname all along.”

Mathis cleared his throat. “Yes. I got analert you were going to call. I just wanted to break the ice, so to speak. Makeyou comfortable.”

Jenput my full name in the profile? What else did she put in there? Should I knowwhat’s in his?Gah!

“So, I take it you like hiking andkayaking, too?” AJ asked.

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“No. I like indulging in pizza and burgers and ice cream while also keeping my figure in shape as an ice girl.” AJ couldn’t help the burst of laughter that escaped her.

Mathias followed suit, laughing as well. “I like your laugh, Amelia Jane. And your name. Do you always go by AJ?”

“Thank you, and yes, AJ’s always been easy.”

“Okay, but I hope you won’t mind if I tend to say your full name. It’s a beautiful name.”

“Thank you.”

“And to answer your question honestly, yes, I do enjoy hiking and kayaking. I also mountain bike, no street cycling. I’ve done some rock climbing and BASE jumping.”

“Wow. Really adventurous.”

A chuckle preceded his words of “I suppose.”

“I really enjoy being outside, losing myself in nature. And our area provides a lot of opportunity for that.”

“Do you live in Boise?”

There was silence for a moment before he spoke again. “You did read my profile, right?”

“Um, no. I know nothing about you.”

“But you called me, based on our matching profiles and similar interests. Right?”

“No again,” she stated. “I had no idea what was going on when one of my friends just handed me the phone as she suddenly decided she needed to be elsewhere. She told me about this Flirt Chat, and how it worked, but I didn’t know she’d actually registered me until it all came spilling out in a rush.”

“Right before rushing out the door.”

“Precisely.” She hesitated before continuing. “Um, I’m sorry?”

“Why are you sorry? It wasn’t your doing. Your friend must really be desperate for you to find someone.”

“You have no idea.” AJ sighed. As much as she loved Jen, this act was pushing the envelope between caring about her and being intrusive.

“Are you upset with her?”

“I don’t know yet. I know she cares, but this ... this was...”

“Pushing it?”

AJ laughed. “Exactly. Very uncanny how you say just the right things.”

“Well, I try.”

His attitude came across as relaxed, nice, and truth be told, AJ didn’t mind talking to him at all. He was witty, and she could truly listen to his voice all day long. Possibly

into the night.

Her face heated at the thought. Thank goodness they weren't video-chatting, because how awkward would that be? Anonymity was safer.

"So, AJ, would you like to keep talking? Because truthfully, I'm enjoying this."

She hesitated a moment before confessing. "I was thinking the same thing."

"Excellent! So, what would you like to know? Since you know nothing about me and I know everything about you."

"Oh, is that so? And what exactly is everything you know about me?"

"Well, besides what I already said... And I'm still fantasizing about you being an ice girl." He chuckled. "I know you're thirty-two and passionate about your career in advertising. You want to visit all twenty-three World Heritage Sites in the United States, five of which you already have. And that's just for starters."

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“Again, wow! I guess my friend was pretty thorough. Tell me, are there any pictures on the profile?”

“No. It’s an informational site only. They want to promote relationships based on commonalities, rather than superficial trappings like appearances.”

Wow. Okay.

“But people could lie about their likes and dislikes, just like they could post false photos on any other site, right?” She could feel her brow wrinkling.

“True. I think some people may detail what they think they’d like, trying to switch it up or attract someone they might want to get to know.”

“But then how do you know you’re getting the real person? How can you start off any sort of relationship with lies?” She knew her past with Brad was making her skeptical, but that kind of mistrust you just couldn’t put aside. His actions had really taken a toll on her.

“With some, they certainly could be lies. With others, they may be the opportunity to explore new possibilities.”

“But they’re being deceitful. How can you trust that?” Her voice rose and she knew she was getting defensive, but she couldn’t help it. “What does a person have to gain by lying?”

Oh, she knew all right. She knew selfish behavior was just that—all about the self-

serving asshole who liked to feel superior, who liked control, who didn't want anyone else to appear better than them! Who...

"Well, I know we really don't know one another yet, but you'll hear only the truth from me. So, if you still want to give this a try, I'm game."

"This took an awkward turn, huh? Bet you didn't bargain for this seriousness." A strangled laugh escaped her.

"I'm not sure what I bargained for, honestly, but I can certainly understand your caution. I took a chance on something new and different, and here we are."

"And here we are. So why did you think you needed this? What's wrong with you that you can't meet people another way?" As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she cringed and wanted to immediately take them back. "I am so, so sorry! That's not exactly what I meant to say. I—"

"It's okay." He chuckled. "You're wondering if I'm some creeper, trolling for women. Or maybe someone who's not six three, two-ten, with six-pack abs and a killer smile, but pretending to be."

AJ noisily gulped, imagining the man he just described. That vision, combined with his hypnotic voice was enough to cause her belly to flutter and moisture to gather in certain unmentionable places on her body.

"Um, okay." She was at a loss to say anything intelligible.

"So, would you like to know about me?"

"You tell me what you'd like me to know. Is that okay?"

“Absolutely. I’m thirty-five, Boise bornand raised, and a die-hard Broncos fan. That’d be Boise State as well asDenver. I’ve visited ten of the World Heritage Sites here in the States, two inIndia, and would love to visit many, many more.”

“So far, so good. What else?”

“Okay.” He chuckled.

There was certainly plenty of laughter andgaiety between them, and she wanted that to continue. It sure beat the patheticsob-fests she was prone to lately.

“Well, I’m a software engineer who spendsa considerable amount of time alone. Not that I’m antisocial, I just prefersolo adventures more often than not. And besides, when all your friends arealready hooked up and trying like crazy to get you hooked up, there’s only somuch one can take. As you can attest to.”

“Amen to that!”

“So what do you think so far?”

“About you, or this experience?”

“Yes.”

AJ was hesitant, not wanting to jinx thefun they were having, yet not knowing how far she wanted to encourage this. “Ithink, so far, it’s been pleasant?”

“Well don’t hold back, by all means,regale me with your praises.”

Again, AJ couldn’t hold back the laughter,and it felt liberating. “Well, as far as talking on the phone to a totalstranger goes, it’s been enlightening. And

fun.Aaannd,I'd like to continue.”

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“All right. So would I. Your profile says you’re a Boise native as well. Did you attend Boise State for your degree?”

“Yes, I got my B.F.A. in graphic design then went on to do advertising.”

“And you’ve never been out of the country but have your passport ready to go.”

“Yes again. I want to hike Machu Picchu and swim the Great Barrier Reef. And see the great Pyramids and tour a castle. Or twelve.” She tried but failed to stifle a giggle. When she’d talk about her dreams of travel and adventure with Brad, he’d scoff and ask why. Everything she’d ever need was in the United States, he’d say. That should have been a clue to their incompatibility.

“Um, how about you? Besides India, what other out-of-country adventures have you been on? Oh, and do you prefer Mathias or Matt?”

“Mathias. I had the opportunity to go to Dubai on business, and while there, I BASE jumped off the Princess Tower. And since I was in the vicinity, I ventured over to see the Taj Mahal and the Chitwan National Park in Nepal.”

“That’s so amazing! Wow, that’s really something to brag about.”

“I’m pretty fortunate with my job and lifestyle. So why haven’t you fulfilled any of your out-of-country dream trips?”

“Oh, well, I ... you know, I’ve been busy building my career.” And letting a manipulator basically run my life for two years while I was oblivious to his true

nature. Let it go, AJ! What's done is done!

"And are you where you want to be?"

My God, his voice is something, she thought. The kind you read about, if you're one to read romance novels, which she totally was, and how a voice like his was described as a panty-dropper. She had to fan herself from the heat suddenly overtaking her entire body. Sheesh!

"AJ, you there?"

"Oh, yep, still here." What was the question? Oh, yes, am I where I want to be? "My career's been going great. Hit a bit of a road bump recently, but you know, that happens."

"Anything you care to elaborate on? Anything I can do to help?"

"Unlikely. I'm sorry, I guess I'm not ready to discuss that right now." Because it's much more than just my career that's hit a road bump.

"Please stop apologizing. I understand. I mean, how much do you really know someone after only ten minutes of chatting?"

"Precisely." Although I feel like I could say things to you I never could to Brad. How interesting. AJ cleared her throat. "So, any plans for your Labor Day weekend coming up?"

"Yeah, I thought I'd go check out the hot air balloons at the Spirit of Boise Balloon Classic, then head down to the 10 Barrel Brewing Company for the beer wars."

"Really?" She, too, had thought of checking out the balloon classic, and since she

loved beer...

“What about you? Any plans?”

Howmuch do I tell him? What if he wants to meet up? Could I?

“AJ? Do you always have a habit of goingoff into your own little world from time to time?”

She knew he was teasing by the laughterthat followed. “Is that your way of asking if I’m an airhead?”

“I would never!” he feigned outrage,causing her to giggle.

Giggles,really? Get a grip!

“Well, if you must know—”

“And I must,” he smoothly interjected.

“I was also thinking of going to theballoon classic.”

“And since you prefer beer to wine...”

“Oh my God, are you a mind reader?”

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Mathias chuckled. “No. Just following logical thinking. The engineer in me.” He paused, and before she could say anything more, he asked, “Amelia Jane, I’m going to take a leap and ask if you think it’s too soon to plan to meet one another on Saturday?”

She remained silent as she let the whisper of her name from him float through the air. She couldn’t even stammer a response. Her mind suddenly flooded with yeses and nos, with pros and cons, with a host of scenarios playing out in her head.

“We could continue to talk with one another, get to know more about each other little by little every day leading up to Saturday. Because what I’ve heard so far has me wanting to know more.”

“Really?” she squeaked out, surprised he seemed to feel the same way she did. And surprised at herself for feeling this way so quickly. “You want to spend your Sunday evening talking to a stranger?”

“Yes. Really.”

AJ grinned from ear to ear, ridiculously pleased and nervously hopeful. “Okay.”

“Okay.”

“So, now what?”

“Now, we get to know more about each other. So how long before you get over this road bump?”

“Wow, right to it. Um, I’m not sure. My agency has been great, but I seem to be lacking my drive.”

“And you need a confidence booster. Or you’re reevaluating whether to stay in the profession. Or you’re recovering from a pulled hammy while doing the splits during practice out on the ice.”

More laughter. “What is it with you and this ice girl fantasy?”

“Well, they’re terrific dancers in tremendous shape. They’re usually gorgeous and wear those sexy little outfits. What’s not to like?”

“So it’s all about appearances, is it?” she asked teasingly.

“Absolutely,” he returned, his sarcasm evident. “Isn’t that what we’ve learned from social media these days?”

“So you’ll be thrilled when I tell you I look just like Miley Cyrus. Because that’s the look I’ve been going for these days. She’s all the rage, don’t you know, what with being such a marvelous judge on TV and all. Not to mention her eye-catching attire and sassy attitude.”

“Then you’ll be happy to hear I like sassy. And I look exactly like Chris Hemsworth. And even though Miley preferred Liam, let’s just say maturity has its advantages.”

“And let me just say I actually prefer older guys, and due to my diligence at staying in shape, twerking on the ice is a sight to behold.”

Matthew’s deep laughter washed over AJ, infusing her with joy and comfort. It’d been much too long since she felt this at ease, and with a complete stranger no less.

“Oh, AJ, you are a joy.”

“I know, right?” She couldn’t help the giggles that escaped her. Followed by a snort. But only a little one. “Oh my gosh, I’m sorry.” But she proceeded to continue her laughter, followed by more snorting.

“You’re on a roll. I’m glad I could be so entertaining.”

“I haven’t had this much fun in, well, in some time.” As she began to calm down, she extracted herself from the couch and made her way into the kitchen for something to drink.

He must have heard her noises as he asked, “Is it time for cocktails?”

“No, just needed some water.” After taking her drink, she said, “So, Mathias, you obviously don’t think much of social media, yet here you are using this chat service. Care to explain?”

“It’s not that I don’t think much of social media. I think it’s all in how it’s used. The saying is true that it’s a curse and a blessing. While it may bring people closer together, making the world seem smaller, there are definite dangers. Too many have become dependent on the different platforms, their lives are immersed in it. There’s not enough human interaction these days. And not everything is portrayed truthfully, so people need to do their research. They need to distinguish between truth and false truths. People just need to be smarter about it, and children and teens definitely need guidance and monitoring.”

“That’s quite the soapbox.” AJ teased.

Mathias chuckled. “Yeah, I can really get going on a subject.”

“Well, I happen to agree with everything you just said. And I admit, when social media came along, I was a junkie. I was able to reconnect with faraway relatives as well as school friends no longer in the area. Now there’s a plethora of sites that can make it all overwhelming, but I love being able to not only follow celebrities and authors, also news channels and charity sites. I can be entertained by dancing dogs one minute and motivated by a yoga practitioner the next. In the past I was checking my phone every thirty minutes it seemed. Now I’ve learned to control my obsession by limiting the sites I engage in while dedicating no more than an hour of my day to them. Otherwise, I could easily spend hours upon hours at it.” She ended with a chuckle.

“I know what you mean. I was the same for a while also. But setting limits, even for adults, is a good thing. It’s crazy how it’s taken over many lives. I was waiting in my physician’s reception area just a few weeks ago, and out of a dozen people there, I was the only one whose nose was not glued to their phone. They even had a sign posted on their desk, giving the office’s Wi-Fi guest passcode. That alone tells you something.”

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“Yeah, it’s so they don’t feel bad making you wait so long because they know you’re going to be entertained.”

“There is that.” He laughed. “So, enough of the soapbox. And you never did answer me about meeting next Saturday.”

“Um, yeah, well, you never did answer me about why you think you need to talk to strangers,” she replied quietly, unsure if she really wanted to know the answer to her question.

I mean, is he just socially awkward? He speaks with confidence and seems fun. Does she think he’s unattractive, hoping someone will like him without judging first on looks? That is the premise for this type of service.

“Fair enough. I, uh,” he hesitated before blowing out an audible breath. “I was challenged by some friends to sign up for this. Much like your friends, mine won’t stop trying to fix me up with someone. After enough grumbling, this grown man finally gave in to peer pressure, telling them I’d do this, but on my own terms, and that seemed to appease them. I guess I had to feel like I still had some control. You know?”

“Actually, I don’t,” AJ laughed. “Or at least not at first. I mean, when my friend signed me up for this, barely blurting out the details right before handing me the phone, I just froze. But then...”

“Yes?” Mathias prompted.

“I could’ve just hung up, but your voice...”She trailed off again.

“My voice?”

“This might sound ridiculous, but your voice is captivating, and, uh, I guess I wanted to keep talking to you. And now that I have, I like talking to you.”

“And I like talking to you, too. Amelia Jane.”

She sighed, causing him to chuckle. “So, about Saturday?”

“How about...” She started hesitantly, unsure if she could really do this. Deciding, what the heck, she continued with, “We talk a little each night and then decide on Friday? I mean, I could totally piss you off about some random topic, like how Microsoft trumps Apple, and then you’d lose all interest.”

“Doubtful, even if I believe the conglomerate Google tops them all.”

“Google,” AJ scoffed. “How cliché.”

They both erupted with laughter.

Monday morning arrived with AJ waking early and feeling refreshed after having had the best night of sleep in months. Years, maybe, if she really thought back on her time with Brad. But she didn’t want to think back on that time and spoil her fantastic mood, so she quickly pushed those thoughts aside.

What she did want to think back on was her conversation with Mathias last night. They had talked for nearly two hours, the discussion revolving mostly around their traveling

adventures. Well, her adventures were limited compared to what he had experienced, but that was something she was determined to change. While most of the Heritage sites they had visited were located in the western part of the US, he had been to the Statue of Liberty and she had been to the Florida Everglades.

“So did you swim with the crocodiles and alligators?” Mathias had teased.

“Heck, no! I remained safely aboard the airboat, thank you very much. I did see plenty, though. And I even saw a Florida Panther!” she said excitedly. “Well, from afar with the aid of binoculars, but still, it was pretty awesome.”

“I bet. So what prompted you to go to the Everglades? Besides wanting to eventually see it because it’s a Heritage site.”

“I have a cousin who works there for the National Parks Service, and she invited me down about four years ago. It’s an amazing ecosystem, really cool to visit. I couldn’t imagine people once making it their home. Some still live on the outskirts.”

“People deal with what they know and adapt to their surroundings. It’s like that anywhere, I suppose. But nowadays, if you can’t adapt, I guess you could move.”

“If one had the means,” AJ quickly interjected. “Some people are stuck, or at least they think they are. They don’t know anything else, and the idea of change seems impossible.”

The line remained quiet a beat before Mathias softly spoke again. “You aren’t speaking personally, are you, AJ?”

Once again she hesitated before continuing. “Not really. I mean, I’ve done well with my career and I’m financially sound.”

“But you feel as if you’re stuck?”

“Not really stuck ... maybe hovering, unsure which direction to take. I loved my career—still love my career—but, I, uh, I’ve been unsettled lately.”

“Trying to recharge?”

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“Yeah, you could say that. I’m trying to find me again, and figure out what’s going to make me happy. Sounds pathetic, huh?”

“Not at all. Everyone goes through periods where they need to reevaluate their life, their goals. Life is anything but static, AJ.”

“I’m learning that the hard way,” she mumbled quietly.

But not quietly enough when Mathias asked, “Does this have to do with a relationship gone bad?”

AJ sighed, not really wanting to get into that just yet, if ever. So once again she tried to cheerfully glaze over the subject. “Yep, but we aren’t going to get into that right now because you’re going to tell me all about your next planned adventure.”

Mathias chuckled. “I am, am I?”

“Yes, you are.”

“Well, okay-dokey.”

He went on to tell AJ besides Glacier Bay near Juneau, Alaska, and Waterton Glacier, at the Montana-Canada border, the only other western site he had not visited yet were the Hawaiian Volcanoes. His trip was booked in November.

“You’re going to Hawaii in November? How lucky!”

“Yeah, I usually take a trip about every three months. Breaks up the monotony of life.” He chuckled.

“Hashtag first-world-problems,” AJ joked, causing Mathias to laugh. “So before or after Thanksgiving?”

“Um, well, during.”

“During? You don’t spend the holiday with family?”

Mathias remained quiet and AJ thought she’d have to coerce more out of him. But he resumed, his words making her sad.

“If I had family, I’d spend it with them.” And just as AJ was poised to say something to express her sorrow, Mathias quickly continued. “And don’t feel sorry for me, AJ. I’ve spent some holidays with friends in the past, but I’ve come to realize I like spending them on my own, usually traveling.”

“Okay,” she replied softly.

“Just okay? You aren’t going to grill me for more?”

“Nope. Guess we both have some issues we’d rather not talk about right now. If you want to say more, I’m here to listen. And if not, I understand.”

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly call it having an issue, but thank you. It’s just a fact of my life and I’ve come to terms with that. I really am a happy guy.”

“Okay.”

Mathias chuckled. “You really aren’t like a lot of women I know. Most would be

trying hard to console me, or prying me to tell them my woes.”

AJ snorted. “Well, I guess I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You should. I’m going to enjoy getting to know more about you, Amelia Jane.”

After a few more stories were exchanged, they had called it a night, rather reluctantly it seemed. They made plans for Mathias to call AJ Monday evening when he was free, considering AJ’s schedule was a bit loose lately.

Thinking about that made her realize she had to get her crap together, or risk losing a promising future with the company. She wouldn’t sacrifice all the hard work she’d put in because of the actions of a no-good selfish prick.

Yeah, she could look back now and see what a lazy bottom-feeder Brad had been. Too bad it took such an awful incident for her to see the real him.

On the other hand, AJ could admit she was glad it happened before their relationship progressed any further, like into marriage.

Sheesh, what a nightmare that would’ve been.

Sure, she still hurt, although the sting lessened as each day went by, and her ego bruised, but it was past time to stop letting the jerk’s actions continue to influence her. This was her life and she’d take charge of it.

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“Okay, pep talk complete, now let’s makesomething great happen today.”

AJ decided to go for a run, knowing thefresh air and activity would do her good.Other than going back and forth to work, she’dbeen cooped up at home for weeks, barely getting out to grab what meagergroceries she had on hand. After splashing cold water on her face, she changedinto running gear and swept her hair up into a hasty knot. She then tucked herphone and key into a pocket and set out.

The end of August had been beautifullypleasant with clear mornings turning into the best days. Plenty of sunshine andtemps in the eighties. Perfect. Trying not to berate herself for wasting time,she focused on moving forward, which included enjoying the last remnants ofsummer. Heck, even much of autumn in Boise was perfect in her opinion, withcrisp, cool mornings and plenty of blue skies. There definitely was no shortageof activities to take advantage of in the area, and AJ planned to get out ofher funk and do just that.

Living a short distance from Camel’s BackPark, she decided to head there and run the trails. With light traffic at 7:00AM, she didn’t have much to contend with, and once she made it to the park, shewasn’t surprised to see others out as well. An older couple walked hand-in-handwhile a well-mannered dog kept pace at their side. AJ also saw a group of youngmen and women running in a pack, headed in the same direction she’d thought totake. From the looks of their blue and orange outfits, she’d have to guess theywere athletes from the University.

As they got about half a mile ahead ofher, AJ followed, and although her pace was

slower, the movement felt wonderful. She settled into a nice rhythm with easy breathing and a welcomed burn in her muscles. It had been nearly a year since she last engaged in this type of physical activity, and even though it felt liberating, she knew not to push herself and end up paying for it later. After about thirty minutes, she drew closer to a rise and decided to slow it down to a walk once she crested the hill. With plenty of ground still to cover, walking would provide the needed exercise without the regret of overdoing it. And, with nothing but time on her hands for the day, she didn't need to rush. She planned to work on a project from home today and head into work tomorrow.

AJ carried on with a brisk pace, analyzing her situation and automatically cataloguing her plans. Whether the spark came from her own common sense about moving on, or the fact that her spontaneous yet delightful conversation with Mathias last night lifted her spirits, she knew it was time. Time to put Brad and the awful experience behind her. Time to regain confidence in her judgement and abilities. Time to take charge of her happiness.

Her career had always brought her happiness, and her relationship with her girlfriends was her lifeline, even if they were going a bit overboard lately with this whole "get back in the game" business.

But the more AJ thought about it, the more she could say she wasn't upset at them anymore. Her talk with Mathias had been an unexpected surprise that even now put a smile on her face. She had something to look forward to this evening, and that feeling hadn't been a part of her life in a long time. Their conversation had been easy and never lagged with awkward pauses while either one of them thought of something to say. It just seemed to flow naturally and comfortably.

Now, had they been face-to-face, would it have been as easy? Hard to say.

AJ had already half made up her mind she would meet with him at the Balloon

Festival Saturday. It was a public event with plenty of people around, so what could go wrong? Well, she wasn't fooling herself into believing something crazy couldn't occur, but her gut instinct told her this could be something good. At the very least, she'd gain a new friend. And at the most, a new boyfriend.

That sounds so juvenile! And am I ready for that?

She shoved those thoughts aside as her body began to warm nicely from her exertion. The sun had risen over the hills and she decided to peel off the top layer of her clothing. Continuing with her stride up the open path, she began to whip the lightweight fleece over her head, only to have the material put up a fight as it snagged her hair. Thinking she was sure of her steps and would untangle herself with the next pull, AJ struggled for a moment before finally working it free. And practically tumbled over another person on the trail.

"Son of a bi—"

"I am so sorry," a masculine voice rang out, cutting off AJ's words. With her lower arms still encased in the sleeves of her fleece, warm hands held her upper arms to steady her. "Are you okay? Damn, I'm sorry. I bent over to remove a rock from my shoe and ... and didn't notice anyone else..."

His words faltered and grew softer as AJ looked up. And then up some more as she stared into the most gorgeous set of deep blue eyes she'd ever seen on a man. His brow crinkled as his full lips remained parted a few millimeters. Flawless sun-kissed skin covered a handsome face with prominent cheekbones and the cutest cleft chin. Short, light brown hair fell across his forehead and teased his ears. AJ felt the heat from his touch all the way to her toes. Her mouth suddenly became dry, making her regret she hadn't thought to bring a water bottle.

She stood nearly spellbound, unable to conjure a word of reply as the stranger's eyes

held hers. Finally finding her voice, she said, "I was losing a fight with my fleece." She grinned before looking down at his hands still securing her arms. When he quickly released her and took a step back, she began to pull her arms out of the garment and resumed talking. "Got caught on my hair, but I got it."

"Again, I'm sorry. I'll, uh, I'll let you get back to your walk," the man rushed to say.

Just as AJ freed her arms, she didn't have a chance to reply as he darted past her and took off sprinting down the trail leading back to the park area. She spun around and watched his very shapely backside shift as his powerfully muscular legs carried him further and further away.

"Well, okay then," she mumbled before deciding she'd had enough as well. Tying the fleece around her waist, she started off in the same direction as the cute jogger. She slipped her hair out of its band to finger-comb it and twist it back up into a knot. Glancing at her watch, she noticed she'd already been out an hour and figured by the time she got back home at this pace, another hour would pass. Even with time on her hands, she decided to kick it in gear by jogging down the trails, through the park, and along the sidewalks that would take her back to her place.

AJ replayed the encounter with the handsome stranger over in her mind. His beauty had mesmerized her, leaving her speechless. She thought there had been something vaguely familiar about him, but couldn't recall ever having seen him on the trails before. And someone as good-looking as that, she'd definitely remember. His voice replayed in her mind and she immediately thought of Mathias. Although they were similar, both with a deep, sexy tone, there was no way they were one and the same.

Right? What were the odds that I'd talk with a stranger, only to run into him the very next day? Literally!

AJ reached home, shaking her head at herself as she unlocked her door and stepped

inside. She must be going batty if she was ready to project Mathias into the first man to catch her eye since ...well, in a while. So she'd enjoyed her conversation with him, and felt as if she'd known him for much longer than a few hours, and felt comfortable to tell him things she never even told Brad, a man she'd lived with, thought she loved, and was ready to make a future with...

Gah!

"Stop it, AJ," she chastised herself. "You said you were moving on, so move on."

After depositing her keys and phone on the counter, she chugged two glasses of water before making her way upstairs. She wouldn't mind a soak in her claw-foot tub, but opted for a shower instead. She wanted to get a start on her plans for a productive day. After removing her clothes and throwing them in the basket, she entered her bathroom and started the shower. Stepping into the warm spray, she let the soothing water cascade over her, easing the soreness she had already begun to feel from her run.

Once again, Mathias's voice echoed in her mind. What was it about him that resonated with her? His seemingly laid-back nature? The ease with which they exchanged stories and laughed with one another? She could just imagine his rich voice with its low tone whispering in her ear, sending shivers across her skin like a caress. Was he really as he jokingly described, at six three, washboard abs, and looking like Chris Hemsworth?

AJ shivered as goose bumps dotted her skin in spite of the warm water. She imagined his muscular form pressing into her backside, warmth surrounding her as his arms circled her torso. Large hands easily palmed her breasts, his fingers teasing her nipples while his growing erection pressed into her lower back.

A whimper involuntarily escaped her mouth as her breasts were suddenly tender, her sex clenching at the mere thought of the man she envisioned performing deliciously

dirty deeds. AJ caressed one breast then the other as her hand roamed her own body. She moved down her toned abdomen to the neatly trimmed curls between her thighs, pressing into her fold to finger her clit. Moisture easily coated her digits and tentative flicks soon gave way to furious rubbing as her movements became faster and harder. She moaned at the euphoric feeling starting to sweep through her—something she had rarely ever felt with Brad.

AJ quickly shut down those thoughts and instead concentrated on bringing herself to orgasm. It'd been too long since her body felt this way. She trembled as her fingers swirled across her flesh, her pussy becoming engorged. What she wouldn't give for a hot, thick cock filling her, pounding into her. She couldn't even mimic that action due to the fact she didn't own a vibrator.

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“What woman in this day and age doesn’t own a vibrator?” Jen had asked.

AJ began to rethink that decision immediately.

As her legs weakened, she braced a hand against the shower wall while she continued to stroke herself. So close. She could feel her insides tightening, and her hips began to thrust back and forth as she raced to the finish line.

She couldn’t help the cry that shattered the silence as her climax barreled through her. Her rubbing didn’t stop as she pressed even harder against her clit, enjoying every pulse exploding from that tiny, sensitive bundle of nerves.

As the waves of pleasure began to recede, AJ leaned against the shower wall, panting. She couldn’t believe the fierceness of her orgasm, brought on by her own hand and the explicit thoughts involving a faceless stranger.

“Oh my,” she said and sighed. Wanting nothing more than to remain right where she was and let the high run through her, she forced herself to move. Her movements were sluggish as she shampooed her hair and washed, tingles still present as she moved over parts of her body.

“Sheesh, one orgasm and I’m ready to melt into a puddle of goo.”

After a final rinse, AJ shut off the water and stepped out to wrap herself in a towel. She stared at her reflection, noticing even in her post-climax haze, her light blue eyes appearing brighter, clearer. She was more focused as her short-term objectives lined up in her mind. Realizing she had literally turned a corner toward happier days,

she smiled at herself, pleased to see the old AJ reemerging.

She giggled at herself, also realizing she'd just had the best orgasm in years.

AJ dropped the towel and applied her favorite lotion to her body, loving the tangerine scent. As she stood in her bathroom naked, she took the time to dry her waist-length hair, the blonde tresses shining. Since she had plans to work from home and not leave the house, makeup wasn't necessary, so she padded to the bedroom and dressed. She pulled out simple cotton underwear and bra, then chose a well-worn vintage t-shirt and Capri leggings.

AJ made her way back downstairs to the kitchen to get some nourishment. She pulled up her Pandora station on her phone before setting out to make a monster bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich with avocado. Humming along to the latest country tune, she made quick work of her task, adding a glass of chocolate milk to her meal. Once finished and the kitchen cleaned, she realized the miniscule amount of food and drink she had on hand. So before she dove into her project, she figured a quick trip to the store was in order. Deciding her attire was presentable—not pajamas like too many wore these days to the supermarket—she donned some socks and shoes. Still not bothering with any makeup, she placed her phone in her bag, grabbed her keys, and set out.

Nearly two hours later, AJ was back at home with plenty of groceries which included her favorite cocoa-roasted almonds she began snacking on immediately. As she settled at her computer, she pulled up the latest project she was asked to consult on, given the client had requested her. Said client was meticulously selective, as AJ had learned early on when they demanded re-dos because the initial proposals weren't good enough. So, she was sure to always mock up at least four to five alternatives, knowing one would inevitably be selected.

AJ loved the challenge of bringing something to life that would be viewed by many,

something that could ultimately influence whether a person purchased a particular item or called a particular company for their services. It never got old to see her work unleashed in the wild, so to speak.

She had been engrossed in her work and not paying attention to the time, so when her stomach growled, she saw it was mid-afternoon and she had missed lunch. AJ glanced at her phone she had placed on “silent” and also saw she had missed several texts. Three were from Jen, asking about getting together again tonight for drinks. Two were from an unknown number. Her curiosity had her looking at the unknown number first, and quickly realized they were from Mathias. AJ hadn’t thought to set him up as a contact after their talk last night.

She read his texts that were thirty minutes apart:

Just on my lunch break and couldn’t wait until tonight to contact you. How’s your Monday so far?

Guess you’re busy. Or else already tired of me. ;) still hoping we’ll talk this evening. Enjoy the rest of your day.

AJ snickered. “Aww, what a sweetie, and so polite even in texts.”

She rapidly fired off texts, unsure if he’d check his phone during work hours, or if he’d get them later.

Sorry I missed your texts. Engrossed in project. Still looking forward to talking this evening.

Before AJ could even begin to answer Jen’s texts, her phone showed a message from Mathias.

Hadme worried that I scared you off. Glad you're still willing to give me a chance. Hope project is going well.

AJ responded back: I don't scare easily ;) Project coming along nicely.

Another message from him quickly came through, but AJ answered Jen first. She let her know that she couldn't meet up for drinks due to another commitment. She omitted the fact that it involved more conversation with the stranger from the previous night. She couldn't say why, but she wasn't quite ready to divulge that bit of information. Of course, Jen could be excited about the prospect, given she's the one who practically forced last night's call on her in the first place, with the idea of AJ meeting someone new.

Jen wanted to know why AJ couldn't meet, and began a long tirade AJ now ignored in favor of texting with Mathias.

So then, you'd be up for an excursion to a haunted house come Halloween? Mathias had asked.

"Mmm," AJ murmured before answering back. Halloween was two months away, so he obviously thought they'd be together or still in contact.

AJ: Wishful thinking or self-assured? ;)

Mathias: A bit of both...?

AJ chuckled aloud.

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AJ:I like a man with confidence. And shouldn't you be working?

Mathias:I am indeed working, from home today. And don't change the subject so quickly. Let's get back to the fact that you like a confident man ... a quality I happen to possess in spades.

AJ:There's a fine line between confidence and cockiness.

Mathias:A line I never cross.

AJ:Good to know. So, do you lounge in your PJs or actually dress for work?

Mathias:Since it's casual Monday, I'm in lounge pants and a polo. Does this meet your approval?

AJ:I suppose, although I was envisioning you in black tights, gold breastplate, and a flowing red cape, Thor. ;)

Mathias:And I'm envisioning you in a nude onesie with silver sparkly boots, Miley ... or is that too dressy for your day off?

AJ snorted with laughter, having so much fun bantering with the man like this. And while she would've liked for the fun to continue, she really wanted to answer Jen and get back to her project.

AJ:I, too, am taking advantage of casual Monday in t-shirt and leggings. I don't mean to snub you, but must get back to work. Call me later?

Mathias:Of course, work beckons. Will definitely call later. Until then, beproductive, Amelia Jane.

AJ smiled at the text, feelingridiculously and inexplicably giddy. She then started texting Jen, only to findthe task cumbersome, so opted to call instead. The two spent thirty minutes onthe phone, during which Jen had gotten AJ to spill the beans on her conversationwith Mathias. Jen had been thrilled, insisted on updates, and stronglyencouraged her to make plans to meet the man this coming weekend. She evensuggested she and other friends, along with their men, arrange to be in thevicinity of their meet, should AJ feel even the slightest bit of unease aboutthe situation.

AJ acknowledged the smarts in that planand agreed. It hadn't taken much to convince her, given she was ninety-ninepercent sure she already planned to meet him.

After disconnecting with her friend, AJmade use of her groceries and whipped up a delicious meal that would fuel herthrough a few more hours of work. Then, she would look forward to moreentertaining conversation with the stranger who captivated her.

“So, what are you wearing?”

AJ snickered at Mathias's segue into theirconversation. It was seven in the evening, and after completing the project andresubmitting to her boss, AJ was relaxing with a glass of wine, along with a plateof smoked salmon and cheese. She still wore her t-shirt and leggings whilecurled up on her couch, answering the phone immediately when she recognized itwas Mathias calling.

“We really must get past this wholewardrobe fascination, don'tyathink?”

“Not at all. I’m a visual kind of guy, and while I’ve seen ... um, would love for you to describe yourself to me, I realize we’re trying to build our relationship on conversation only.”

AJ thought nothing of his words as she finished her wine. “Relationship, eh?”

“Well, sure. Isn’t that what we’re doing? Developing a relationship? Even if it only results in friendship, I’d be honored.”

“As would I.” AJ hesitated to say more, not wanting to sound eager and desperate. She continued with, “So, you weren’t tempted to look me up on the various social media sites? I mean, you could search for me on Facebook and Twitter, and look at my profile picture. Then you wouldn’t have to fantasize about my appearance.”

“No, Amelia Jane, I didn’t stalk you on social media. Not knowing your last name, it would be nearly impossible to weed through all the AJs. And besides...”

“You don’t know my last name? Isn’t it part of the profile on Flirt Chat?”

“You really haven’t even looked at the website, or your own profile page, have you?”

“Well, no. I mean, I wasn’t the one who started it, and I certainly have no intention of chatting with anyone else. Why? What’s on there?”

“For starters, no last names. It’s a first-name-basis only, along with the number to be contacted.”

“Oh, well, yeah, I guess that makes sense. I mean, why put your true full name if a person could easily seek you out on social media. Guess that would defeat the purpose of promoting relationships based on commonalities, rather than superficial trappings like appearances.” She used the same words Mathias had used just last night.

His boisterous laugh lit her up and caused her to laugh along with him.

“You’re something else, AJ.”

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“So I’m told. Now, back to building our relationship. What are you wearing?”

His laughter continued as he stated he was still in his casual Monday attire.

“Me, too. My t-shirt and leggings make for a real fashion statement.”

“I’m sure you could make a fashion statement in anything you wore.”

“Mm, hmm. Suck up,” she teased as she popped a cheese cube in her mouth.

“Just being a gentleman like my mom taught me,” he drawled.

“I take it your parents are no longer with you, from what you mentioned last night about no family?” she asked gently, really wanting to know something more personal about him.

Without hesitation or deflection, as she thought he’d do, Mathias answered, “No, unfortunately, my parents passed a few years ago. I have no siblings, and surprisingly enough, neither did my parents. So I’m the last of my line.”

“Until you have children,” AJ quickly interjected. “I mean, do you want children?”

“Are you offering?”

AJ practically choked on the tiny bite of salmon in her mouth and tried to clear her throat by washing it down with the wine. Although it sounded as if he tried for lighthearted, something in his tone sent shivers through her. With her delay in

answering, Mathias quickly spoke again.

“That was inappropriate, I apologize, AJ.”

“Oh, so now it’s AJ? Tired of saying Amelia Jane already?” She tried for levity.

“Never,” he answered, his voice like gravel. He cleared his throat and resumed. “Are you okay?”

“Oh sure, just choking on my dinner.” She gave a quick cough before starting again. “No, really, I’m fine.”

“Well, to answer your question about children, I honestly don’t know. I’m set in my career, I enjoy the luxury of travelling whenever I want, and I’m no spring chicken anymore.” He chuckled.

“Yeah, right. Like thirty-five is past your prime or something,” AJ scoffed. “The fact that you’re set in your career means stability. And as far as travelling, it’s still possible with kids. Just takes more patience and planning, I would imagine.”

“Along with the right woman in my life,” he said softly.

The tone of the conversation seemed to be getting more somber and serious, and AJ wasn’t sure what to say next. Luckily, Mathias spared her from saying anything awkward or regretful.

“Sorry again, I really didn’t mean to get all serious and reflective. Our talks are meant to be fun and informative, right?”

“Well, the topic is informative, but if you want to steer more toward fun, I can do that.”

“So what’s on your dinner menu? Hopefully I won’t make you choke anymore and you can enjoy whatever you’re having.”

“I’m having cold smoked salmon with smoked Gouda, and a refreshing Riesling. How about you? Did you already eat?”

“I did, although yours sounds much better than what I settled for, which was leftover pizza.”

“Nothing wrong with that. Leftover pizza hits the spot, including cold pizza for breakfast with an ice cold glass of chocolate milk. Well, I just enjoy chocolate milk regardless.” AJ chuckled.

“Duly noted. Wine instead of beer this evening?”

“Yes, I do enjoy an occasional glass of the vino. You know, break up the monotony.”

“Of course. And was your afternoon productive with your project?”

“Indeed it was. I turned in my summary for the project and felt it was some of my best work recently.”

“You sound confident and happy. That’s great.”

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“Thanks. I realized I’ve had enough moping around. No more letting the past dictate my future. Time for better days.”

“Very inspirational.” Mathias chuckled. “But seriously, AJ, that sounds great.”

“Thanks.” AJ beamed at his compliment, smiling broadly despite the fact he couldn’t see her face. She drained the rest of her wine, and deciding she wanted another glass, lifted herself off the couch to head to the kitchen. Putting her phone on speaker, she continued talking while bustling around the kitchen. “I’m not one to sit idle or feel sorry for myself, and I realized that’s just what I was doing. It was beginning to sicken me and I hated that. I was ready to move on.”

“Good for you. No need to dwell on the past. Concentrate only on the future.”

“Exactly. And my immediate future consists of me enjoying another glass of wine and delightful conversation.”

“Delightful, huh? Well then, you won’t mind if I have a beer, and I’ll try not to disappoint.” He chuckled.

“Better not, because I can one-click on my Kindle like nobody’s business.” AJ laughed.

“Sounds serious. Do I need to develop a twelve-step program for this addiction?”

“Absolutely not. I do have some self-control.”

“Uh huh, and how many reads do you have in your TBR queue?”

“About thirty,” she mumbled into her glass as she made her way back to the couch. She propped herself against the armrest and kicked her feet up onto pillows.

“Excuse me, I didn’t quite hear you?” he teased.

“Thirty, okay.” AJ giggled. “That’s about average, right?”

“Actually, I wouldn’t know. I don’t own a Kindle, or a Nook, or—”

“Wait. Are you telling me you don’t read anything electronically? How is that possible in today’s world?”

“I do have a tablet, and I read some things on it, but I actually like to frequent bookstores. I like holding a book in my hand. And at the rate I read, I’m lucky to get through one leisurely read in a month.”

“Wow! You’re an anomaly, aren’t you? So how many books on your TBR shelf? I’m assuming you have a physical bookshelf, right?”

“Yes, I do, and I have about ten books awaiting my attention.”

“Only ten? Well, you better pick up the pace there, mister.”

“Are we in a competition?”

“No, I’m teasing. Everyone reads at their own pace. So what genre do you like?” AJ took another sip of her wine, the liquid infusing her with a comforting warmth she felt spreading across her skin and through her body. Usually one drink a night was her limit, but tonight she felt like celebrating, so why not an extra glass?

“Thrillers and suspense, some nonfiction about history. What about you? No, wait, let me guess. Romance.”

“Stereotype much?” AJ laughed and Mathias joined her. “But to be honest, yes, I like all sorts of romance stories. Some involve suspense, some humor and emotion, even ero-, er, paranormal.”

“Amelia Jane, you were about to confess your like of erotic romance, weren’t you?”

Oh God, she didn’t need to hear him say those words in that sultry voice of his and have wild images take shape in her mind. So, she tried for deflection. “So what are you currently reading? Do you like Lee Child? My friend Jen loves him, but I haven’t read any yet. I did see the Jack Reacher movie and really enjoyed it, but most say that isn’t the same. And too many thought Tom Cruise wasn’t even a good representation of the character, so—”

“AJ, you’re rambling, and definitely avoiding my question.”

“Um, yeah, we don’t need to talk about that. Let’s just move on to another subject.” She took a fortifying drink of her wine, noticing her second glass was now empty.

Huh.

“But I’d really like to know the answer,” he playfully whined.

AJ laughed. “Nope, not going there, because then I’ll forever be embarrassed.”

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“Well, that alone gives me my answer. And there’s nothing wrong with you enjoying erotic romance. In fact, I just may have to research the genre and select a read. Any recommendations?” His teasing tone made AJ laugh even more.

“You’re really not going to let this go, are you?”

“I’m really not.”

“Fine. But I’m only going to give you a name, and then it’s up to you to do the research and decide from there.”

Mathias chuckled. “Okay. I’m ready.”

“Sam Crescent.”

When there was no response, the silence made AJ curious, and nervous. “Um, Mathias, you still there?”

“Mm hmm,” was his only reply.

She chuckled. “Okay, so what are you doing? Why are you suddenly quiet? What happened to our conversation?”

“Shhh, I’m researching so I can make an informed decision.” AJ snorted into the silence, causing Mathias to chuckle. “It’s really cute when you do that.”

“Snort? Pfft, it’s not very ladylike.”

“Who says you always need to act like a lady?”

“Well, my mother, for one.”

“Which reminds me, we never got around to talking about your family. Parents? Siblings?”

“Oh, sure, change the subject again.”

“Fills the silence.”

“All right. I have an older brother who joined the Army and is currently an instructor in Georgia. My parents are happily retired and split time between here and New Mexico. I had planned to spend New Year’s with them down south this year.”

“New Mexico is wonderful. Besides the Heritage sites, there are plenty of other amazing sites to see and activities to enjoy.”

“I had a brief visit this past spring after my parents settled into their home, but it wasn’t near enough time to scope out wish-list destinations—”

“Got it!” Mathias suddenly exclaimed.

“Okay,” AJ chuckled. “What’s the deal?”

“My next read. A couple, in fact. Such a variety.”

“Care to share?”

“Nope, I’m going to leave it to your imagination and we’ll discuss when I’m finished.”

“Sheesh,” she mumbled.

“Maybe a better idea would be to read to one another. What do you think, Amelia Jane?”

AJ involuntarily moaned. His voice, those words, the thought of reading erotic to one another suddenly made her panties wet.

“That’s a sexy little moan. Care to tell me your thoughts?”

“Not so much,” she strained to say.

“Maybe another glass of wine to loosen your inhibitions?”

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“I don’t think so. One beer a night is usually my limit, and I’ve already downed two glasses of wine.”

“You’re safely at home, so you don’t have to worry about drinking and driving. And I assume you’re settled in nicely for the night.”

“I am indeed. Mathias, how long has it been since you were involved with someone?”

“Talk about changing the subject,” he said lightly.

“Too soon to get that personal? Never mind, I’m sorry.”

“AJ, please stop apologizing. I don’t mind talking about it.”

“Very gracious of you, considering I was so tight-lipped about it myself.”

“But that was yesterday, and today we know so much more about one another. We’re more comfortable with each other. At least I am.”

“Oh, I am too,” AJ quickly added. “Do you think that’s weird? I mean, we’ve spoken two nights and I feel as if I could tell you almost anything.”

“Almost anything, huh?” he teased.

“Well, yeah, I mean, let’s not get too crazy. I may need another day or two to really get to know you more before I start spilling certain secrets. Or another five drinks.” She softly added that last bit with a giggle.

“Feel free to have all the drinks you’d like. And what could be a bigger secret than you enjoying erotic romance? Unless of course you like to engage in—”

“Hey, hey, hey, okay, moving on. What say we talk about something else?” AJ was beginning to rethink having another glass of wine, but decided against it. Once again she went to the kitchen, this time getting a glass of water. She had to maintain some semblance of control, right? Part of her couldn’t believe how much she and Mathias had already shared, and another part wanted to share oh, so much more. Like how she missed cuddling up with a warm, male body, not that Brad actually liked to cuddle all that much. Or how it was nice to have someone to laugh with during comedy movies, even if Brad always preferred the action flicks. Or how nice it was to have a running partner, someone who would motivate you and make the exercise seem less grueling. And that’s why it’d been a year since she last ran because Brad hated the activity.

“God damn it,” AJ muttered as she sniffled, her eyes now misty.

“Well, hey, you asked.”

Once again, Mathias had been talking and she had completely tuned him out. Instead, she’d been thinking about things she wished had been true about her past relationship, only now realizing what she had put up with. Settled for. Sacrificed. Her two years with Brad had been a joke, and she never saw that more clearly than she did now.

“Such a fool,” she continued to mumble, forgetting all about answering Mathias.

“AJ, what’s wrong?”

She sniffled again and reached for a nearby tissue. After wiping her nose, she released a heavy sigh. “I was such a fool. How did I lose myself so completely? Why couldn’t I see what he was doing to me?”

“Who, AJ?” Mathias asked gently.

“My ex, Brad,” she said with contempt. “Two years, Mathias, two years I wasted on him. Two years of making myself believe what we had had been worth planning a future for. Two years with blinders on and settling for what I thought was good enough. Two years I’ll never get back, thanks to that asshole!”

The air became silent, yet charged. AJ’s temper flared and she didn’t know how to rein it in. But she didn’t want to take it out on Mathias. Before he had a chance to say a thing, AJ continued. “God, I’m so sorry! That was completely uncalled for and I should probably hang up and let you—”

“No, AJ, it’s fine...”

“It’s not fine. I sound like a complete lunatic, and I’m sure you’d rather—”

“There’s nothing I’d rather do than keep talking with you.”

“Yeah, right,” she said skeptically. “Look, Mathias, I should—”

“What you should do is let me talk now while you relax and listen. Can you do that for a bit, AJ?”

She gulped. Although his tone wasn’t harsh by any means, it was definitely laced with authority. “Yes.”

“Okay. Good.” He cleared his throat before starting again. “It’s been three years since I was in a relationship. And yes, that means three years since I’ve been with a woman.” AJ’s quick intake didn’t deter him as he continued. “I don’t do casual sex, much to the disappointment of my so-called buddies. I’m just not wired that way. Maybe I’m old-fashioned or a freak, but for me, being intimate is meant to be more

than just a physical release.

“Christina and I were together for two years and began planning our wedding. We were the complete opposite of one another, but thought we balanced each other perfectly. My adventurous streak brought her out of her shell, and her calm demeanor grounded me and kept me focused. While I was rash and spontaneous, she was the voice of reason.”

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When he was quiet for a moment, AJ broke the silence. “What happened, Mathias?” she asked gently.

“She fell in love with someone else, married him, and moved to Central Washington.”

“Wait, what? Who? How?” AJ was flabbergasted, especially at his matter-of-fact tone. As if the entire incident had been no more upsetting than ordering curly fries, only to receive the crinkle cut.

“AJ, the particulars don’t really matter. What matters is I devoted years to a woman I thought I loved, whom I thought loved me, only to see her affections given to another—a coworker she had barely known a month but said was her soul mate. Do I believe in something like that? Not personally. Was I angry? Yes. Was I hurt? Absolutely. But I couldn’t fault her for feeling she had found her true love.”

“Wow. You were much more understanding than I would’ve been. Unbelievable,” she muttered.

“What’s unbelievable is spending the past three years fearful of getting close to someone again because I couldn’t stand the thought of going through the heartache again. Of course my friends’ cure to that situation was to love ‘em and leave ‘em. Enjoy women without any attachment. But I’m not that guy.”

“I’m glad you’re not. I’m glad you exist, and I hope there’s a lot more like you out there.”

Mathias scoffed. “Yeah, because I’m so honorable.”

“Hey, you are. You aren’t a user, a cheat, or an imposter. You don’t hide a monster behind a false façade.”

“And that’s what you dealt with.”

AJ sighed, realizing at some point she’d have to confess. And honestly, it didn’t upset her as much as it might have a week ago. Hell, even a few days ago. The past was right where it belonged, and AJ was ready to move forward.

“Yes. Brad was an imposter. A wolf in sheep’s clothing. He was a coworker, someone I was immediately attracted to because of his intelligence and aggressive work ethic. And okay, sure, he was physically striking. But good looks mean nothing when there’s a cheating, pompous asshole lurking behind that fake exterior. He rode the backs of others, stealing their ideas and passing them off as his own. He was resentful that I held a position over him, and when his duplicity became known, he was fired. And before I had a chance to break it off with him, he turned the tables by dumping me and accusing me of not supporting him.”

“So for years while I was reluctant to put myself out there, you were giving it your all, only to have it thrown back in your face.”

“Yeah,” AJ scoffed. “Funny how life works, huh?”

“Sure, if that’s how you choose to look at it.”

“Shit, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to sound so—”

“AJ, I said to stop apologizing, so stop apologizing. We all deal with shit in our own way, and whatever brings us out on the better side is fine by me.”

AJ chuckled. “You’re right.”

“Of course I am,” he said quickly.

“Member what I said about confidence and cockiness?”

Mathias laughed. “Yes, indeed—a fineline.”

“So, now that we know so much more about one another, whatever shall we discuss next?”

“Music.” Mathias’s suggestion came out of left field, which was most likely the intention, and AJ was definitely ready for a topic switch. The two spent the next thirty minutes playfully arguing over true country versus much of today’s popcountry, as well as the days of good rock and roll being long gone.

And when AJ couldn’t stifle her yawns, Mathias kindly suggested they call it a night.

“Mathias?”

“Yes, Amelia Jane?”

“Thank you.” She said nothing else, hoping he’d understand there was a wealth of emotion behind those two words. She smiled broadly to herself when he whispered “You’re welcome.”

Once again, they agreed to talk the next evening at the same time.

“Good night, Mathias.”

“Good night, Amelia Jane. Sleep well.”

She yawned as she said, “You, too.”

He chuckled when he said, “I most certainly will now.”

Before she could process his words and comment, he disconnected. AJ shook her head and extracted herself from the couch, taking her phone to the counter to charge. She dragged herself upstairs with just enough energy to brush her teeth and strip down before flopping into her bed, where she was asleep within seconds.

AJ spent the following three mornings at Camel’s Back Park getting back into her exercise routine, and also wishing she’d run into the gorgeous stranger. Alas, she saw no glimpse of the man, but that didn’t prevent her imagination from conjuring sinfully wicked scenes in her mind. Especially when she and Mathias spent those three nights talking for hours about nothing and everything, from their work, friends, and pet peeves, to movies and holidays.

The subtle sexual undertones of their conversation progressed as each day passed, and it was a challenge to keep certain things left unsaid. AJ thought she could detect the same restraint in Mathias’s voice as well. And oh, what a voice. She couldn’t get enough of his sexy timbre as it washed over her like a reverent touch. It drifted into her dreams, causing her to wake with such need, she had no choice but to satisfy herself. Her fingers were a poor substitute to hot, male body parts, but they’d have to do until circumstances changed.

That thought brought her around to her pending meeting with Mathias tomorrow. It

was Friday morning, and tonight was the night she'd let him know she did indeed want to meet up at the balloon festival.

The anticipation had been building little by little every night, and she felt simultaneously thrilled and petrified. His discussions were intelligent and humorous, and she never thought they'd run out of topics to talk about. But what if he was only five feet tall, bald, and buck-toothed? What if he was nothing like the perfect specimen she had conjured in her mind? Would she be that shallow to cut bait and run?

What if she fell short of his expectations, preferring someone with more meat on her bones? Or with green eyes instead of blue, or auburn hair instead of blonde? What if it came down to appearances after all and they were both left disappointed and shattered?

"Gah!" Her preoccupation caused her to stumble along the path as she was nearing the end of her run along the trails. "Focus, AJ," she admonished herself. As she made her way through the park, ready to hit the sidewalks and return home, she slowed her jog into a walk and took a drink of her water. Glancing behind her at the beautiful sunrise peeking over the hills, she caught sight of a figure nearing the crest, ready to head out onto the trails. He was only a silhouette dancing in the brilliant light of the sun, but AJ knew without a doubt he was her gorgeous stranger.

She was transfixed by his form, his movement, and sorely wanted to call out to him, just to get a glimpse of his handsome face. And then what? Stare like an idiot? Run after him like a crazed fan at a Kenny Chesney concert? "You're for sure not gonna run again," she mumbled to herself.

AJ sighed and turned, eager to get home, and missed seeing the stranger turn as he stood atop the rise, watching her walk away.

Several hours later, after showering, eating, and trying to get work completed, AJ was hopelessly distracted. And after a call from Jen in the afternoon, while it had been wildly entertaining, it only served to heighten her anticipation. Jen did her best to ease AJ's anxiety by telling her any man would be damn lucky to have a woman like her, and if this Mathias couldn't accept her for who she was, well then he wasn't worth a spit. She also told AJ she could afford to be picky, and if Mathias wasn't all she wanted, then make a break and move on.

Yeah, as if it would be that simple. AJ felt as if she and Mathias were somehow invested in one another, as crazy as that seemed after only five nights. Their talks were something she had come to really look forward to, and if they were to end, well ... she knew she'd be sad. There was safety in their conversations, without any concern for how she looked or what she wore.

Suddenly, inspiration hit. Although she didn't want to make it all about appearances, she couldn't believe the idea that ran through her mind hadn't come sooner. AJ chuckled to herself as she searched the internet for pictures and sought out shops to visit. With her game plan in place, she set out for an afternoon of fun. And by the time evening rolled around, her outfit was complete and she couldn't suppress her triumphant glee.

She knew for certain she was going to knock Mathias's socks off. Laughing at the old cliché, she ate a hasty dinner before getting comfy on the couch with her Kindle as she waited for the man's call.

When her phone chimed, she eagerly reached for it, thinking it was him, but Kayli's information came up. Trying not to be too disappointed, she answered.

"Hey, girl, what's up?"

"Hey, AJ, just thought I'd call and chat, solidify our plans for tomorrow. I haven't

heard from you all week. How have things been?"

AJ went on to have a quick chat with her friend. As much as she loved Kayli, she knew it was getting close to the time Mathias would call. Well, long-story-short, AJ ended up giving Kayli a rapid rundown of her week, and her conversations with Mathias. Kayli was thrilled for her and said she couldn't wait to meet him tomorrow.

"You sound wonderful, AJ. I really hope this works out."

"Me, too. It's been crazy, but good, you know."

"Yeah. Okay, good luck. I'll let you go and see you tomorrow. Love you, girl."

"Love you too, Kayli. Good night."

Just as she disconnected, her phone chimed again. She smiled at her screen as Mathias's number popped up, along with the sketch AJ couldn't stop herself from drawing a few days ago. One she assigned as his profile picture. It was a simple pencil sketch of a face that resembled Chris Hemsworth, only with darker hair, deep blue eyes, and cleft chin. Okay, so it looked more like the handsome jogger from the park, AJ conceded in her mind. So what?

Well, hopefully I'm not setting myself up for disappointment.

"Well, hey there, handsome," AJ greeted.

Mathias's chuckle echoed through the air, causing AJ's skin to tingle and a bigger smile to form on her face. "And how would you know I'm handsome? I could look like a toad."

AJ laughed. "Well, then I'd kiss you and turn you into my prince."

“Is that so?”

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“It is.”

“Well, in order for you to kiss me, we’d have to meet.”

“And we shall.”

The joy in her voice was evident, yet Mathias didn’t comment right away. When he finally did, his voice was husky.

“AJ, does that mean...?”

“Yes, Mathias,” she began softly, “it means I want to meet you tomorrow. In the morning, as the sun begins to rise over the hills and the hot air balloons are coloring the sky. How does that sound?”

“Like a scene right out of a romance novel.” He chuckled. “Sounds perfect.”

Both remained silent for a moment.

Mathias cleared his throat and said, “So, how was your day?”

AJ laughed as she launched into discussion. She left out her preoccupation with him as well as her preparation for their meeting. Even when he asked where he should meet her and how would he know who she was, she didn’t reveal all the details.

“Let’s meet at the small parking lot on the western edge of Ann Morrison Park, off of West Royal Boulevard. Say, around 7:00 AM? Does that sound okay to you?”

“You are an early bird, aren’t you?”

Originally, after talking with Jen, she had planned to ask Mathias to meet late in the afternoon when her friends could plan to be nearby. But she wanted this instead—just Mathias in the morning.

AJ chuckled. “I have been. I’m finally getting back into a routine, and every morning this week I’ve been out at Camel’s Back to jog and walk the trails.”

“Y-you have?” he sputtered.

“Why does it sound as if you’re surprised by that? Do I not sound like someone who’d enjoy the activity?” she said lightly.

“No, no, not at all. I mean, yes, yes, you’d probably enjoy the activity, given your adventurous spirit. Maybe I just figured you’d take advantage of sleeping in, given your reduced time at the office.”

“Well, I plan on returning to my regular work schedule next week, so I figured I’d better start getting used to an early rise. Besides, the mornings have been beautiful, and I love the trails out there when there’s not too many out and about yet.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” He sounded almost wistful.

“You do? Are you an early riser? Do you get out to the parks for your exercise?”

“Uh, yeah, I take my bike out, especially up to Bogus Basin when the trails are dry. Then, when the snow comes, I head up for skiing.”

“It’s been so long since I’ve been skiing. I miss it.”

“Perhaps this season we could go together?” he asked hopefully.

“Perhaps.”

“So, back to our meeting. How will we know one another?”

“You mean you haven’t already planned this out from night one? Had scenarios running around in your head? Where’s your creativity?”

“Oh, believe me, I’ve had creative scenarios running around in my head, Amelia Jane.”

“Y-you have?” It was now her turn to sputter. Dare I ask?

“Would you like me to share? I’ve had plenty of ammunition since reading Sam. Of course I don’t want to scare you off.”

Damn, that sexy, deep voice of his was driving AJ crazy. “Oh, boy,” she squeaked out.

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He chuckled, sending a zing right through her that pulsed at her sex. AJ squirmed and felt moisture flood her panties. She couldn't help the moan that drifted from her mouth.

“God, AJ, those noises you make drive me crazy.”

She snickered. “Well, then we're even.”

“Is that so?”

“Do you want to know the first thing that went through my mind when you first spoke?”

“I'm not sure. Do I?”

“I thought, that's definitely a voice made for phone sex, and then wondered if people even do that anymore. I mean, not that that was the purpose of our call. Considering I wasn't even the one who called. Jeez.”

“You sound a little flustered,” he teased.

“You have no idea,” she mumbled.

“Oh, I think I do. Every night I've imagined your voice whispering to me as your lips journey over my skin. It's been nearly impossible not to imagine your eyes staring into mine. Or your hair feeling like silk in my hands.” AJ groaned as Mathias continued. “Or how your body would be more welcoming than my hand as I orgasm.”

“Oh God, Mathias.”

“I bet you’re wet and swollen, aren’t you, Amelia Jane?”

“Yes,” she managed, imagining his perfectly muscled body atop her, slowly torturing her with his movements.

“You’ve thought about me too, haven’t you?”

“How could I not?” AJ was done holding back. Of course, maybe the boldness came from the security of anonymity, knowing she could do or say whatever she wanted because there were no preconceived notions between them. “Your voice is so sexy, and confidence oozes from you. I’ve imagined your large hands roaming my body, easily palming my breasts. I’ve imagined your warm mouth on my skin. I’ve imagined—”

“Jesus, AJ, I’m ready to explode just listening to you.”

“And I’m on the verge of climaxing, one flick across my clit and I’m sure I’d shatter.”

“Fuck,” he groaned, his voice a rumble as he drew out the word.

“Are you hard, Mathias? Is your hand wrapped around your cock, wishing it was my pussy swallowing you up?”

“Fuck, I love those words coming out of your sweet mouth. Hell, I wish that mouth was wrapped around my hard cock, but tonight my hand will have to do. There’s no way this hard-on I’m about to fist will subside otherwise.”

AJ whimpered and couldn’t stop her hand from slipping into her panties, feeling the slickness between her folds.

“Tell me your hand is on your pussy. Tell me how wet and swollen you are,” he ground out.

“So wet, so swollen,” she said breathlessly. “Stroke yourself and imagine being buried deep inside me. My juices bathe your cock and my pussy squeezes you tight. Fuck, I wish I had a vibrator. My fingers aren’t nearly enough to fill me.” Mathias nearly choked in her ear as AJ pulled her hand from her panties and hastily rid her lower body of her clothes. She had to spread her legs and open herself as wide as she could while she imagined Mathias’s body wedging itself in place.

“Don’t stop talking, AJ, tell me what you’re doing.” His raspy voice spurred her on, eliciting delightfully naughty visions.

“I had to take off my shorts and panties. I needed my legs spread wide. My fingers are in my pussy and I’m pumping my hips, imagining youth-thrusting inside me.” More whimpers and gasps escaped as her thumb scraped over her clit.

“Yeah, I can feel your wet pussy bathe me, scorch me, squeeze the orgasm out of me. So close, AJ. Rub your clit, make yourself come. Fuck, I’m so close, I want to hear you scream when I come.”

AJ removed her fingers from her pussy and furiously rubbed her clit. Gasps alternated with moans as she felt herself getting tighter and tighter, closer to falling apart.

“Oh fuck, Mathias, fuck.”

“That’s it, give it to me. Let me hear you. Tell me you wish I was there fucking you right now.”

“Yes,” she gasped. “Yes, I wish your cock was fucking my pussy so hard right now.”

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Mathias grunted and groaned, low and steady, and there was no mistaking he was coming. “God, Amelia Jane, how I want you,” he ground out.

“I ... want you ... too,” she panted. Then screamed as her orgasm ripped through her. She didn’t relent as she continued to press on her clit, extending her pleasure. Mathias’s plea of encouragement faded as the hand that held her phone fell away. Lethargy set in as her high sadly and all too quickly began to dissipate. AJ barely registered the tinny voice somewhere in the distance. She then realized Mathias was talking, asking repeatedly if she was okay.

She quickly snapped the phone back to her ear. “Sorry, sorry.”

He chuckled. “S’okay, post-climax haze,” he returned, his voice sounding sleepy.

AJ couldn’t help her giggles that quickly turned into snorting laughter.

“That funny, eh?”

“I just can’t believe we did that. I ... I’ve never done anything like that in my life.”

“Neither have I, but I’m damn sure not gonna complain. It was the best orgasm I’ve had in years. Thank you.”

“I wouldn’t dare compare you to my ex, but that was the best I’ve had in years as well.”

“I’ll take that as the highest compliment.”

After a moment of quiet, AJ timidly asked, “Mathias? Um, you don’t think I’m a freak, right? I mean, doing what I just did with a stranger?”

“That’s a loaded question. I mean, I could be a creep and say no just to hear you do it again. And as much as I’d like to think we aren’t strangers, given all we’ve shared with one another, I realize we haven’t even met in person, so…”

“I almost don’t want to meet you. I mean, this way, our relationship remains perfect, right?” She tried for laughter, but it came out choked. “I hope I don’t disappoint you,” she whispered. AJ hated that she couldn’t stop those words as old insecurities emerged.

“Don’t, AJ. Don’t do that to yourself. I could easily say the same thing, because I think you deserve so much goodness in your life. And I’ll hope to be worthy of you.”

AJ sniffled as she wiped the stray tears from her cheeks. “Me, too.”

“Do you still want to talk, or would you rather we say good night?”

“Neither?” When Mathias chuckled, she said, “I wish we could just cuddle.”

“I think that can be arranged. Go to bed and get comfy while I, um, take care of a few things. I’ll be right back with you.”

“Okay.” AJ grabbed her discarded clothes and padded up to her bedroom. After using the bathroom, she got naked and crawled beneath her covers. Didn’t matter that it was still early in the evening, she suddenly felt exhausted. Once settled, she put her phone back to her ear. “Mathias?”

“Yes, AJ, I’m still here. Now, are you comfy?”

“Comfy enough,” she said as she sighed. She put the phone on speaker and set it on the nightstand.

“Close your eyes. Imagine you’ve just come off the slopes after a day of skiing. Your body feels alive and exhausted all at once. There’s a roaring fire and its warmth surrounds you as you burrow into your soft bed.” Mathias began to sing Charlie Puth’s “One Call Away.” His voice was soft, comforting, and perfect.

AJ smiled into her pillow as the words continued. Contentment washed over her as the words became softer, dimmer. She had already fallen asleep by the time he finished, missing him wishing her goodnight.

Darkness surrounded AJ as she startled awake. Sitting up in bed, the covers pooled at her waist as her eyes adjusted, and she caught sight of her phone on the stand. Looking at the time, she saw it was 5:00 AM and realized she had slept soundly through the night. Never had she slept straight through like that. She then blushed as the events from earlier flashed through her mind. Her skin grew warm in spite of the coolness in her room. AJ couldn’t help the smile that formed as she crawled out of bed. Looking once again at her phone, she noticed the low battery and plugged it in before making her way to the bathroom.

AJ took her time in the shower, slowly washing her hair and body, and shaving herself smooth everywhere. She was excitedly nervous about meeting with Mathias this morning, and the anticipation made her aware of every detail in her preparation. After drying, she applied lotion to her body, dried her hair, and added curl. She then went to her room and carefully selected lacy lingerie that made her feel fabulous. She donned the outfit she had carefully pieced together yesterday, which consisted of a black fitted top with rhinestones spelling out Idaho Steelheads. It had their mountain and tree logo off to the side. She slipped on black booty shorts that barely covered her

rear. They had a blue stripe on the sides that matched the team's colors. Next came black socks and leg warmers, followed by black boots.

Going to the bathroom, she began her makeup routine by adding light foundation, smoky gray eye shadow, and a touch of mascara. She pinned most of her hair up, allowing a few curls to frame her face. Pleased with her look, she grabbed her phone and went downstairs for a quick bite to eat. Once finished, she put a few items into a small shoulder bag, along with her phone, and added the final piece to her outfit—a white faux-fur coat that nearly reached her ankles.

AJ couldn't wait to see Mathias's expression when she flung open the coat, revealing the outfit that resembled what she imagined an ice girl would wear—if the Steelhead had ice girls. She couldn't help the little-girl giggle that escaped as she locked up the house, got in her car, and drove to the park where they planned to meet.

During the drive, she began to wonder why she hadn't asked him to wear something distinguishing. Did she imagine their meeting to be like a fairy tale—one look and they'd just know? AJ snorted at the thought. Maybe he'd take her hint and dress like Thor.

“Wouldn't that be something?” she said to herself.

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Thankful for light traffic, and the fact that not many others decided to head to the park at 6:30, she easily found a parking spot in the small lot. A handful of cars were present, but she didn't see any occupants, and looking around, others nearby were heading to the heart of the park where the balloons were getting ready to launch.

Before she exited her car, AJ decided to send a text to Jen, letting her know the change of plans, and if she didn't hear from her by ten, to send the police. She added several winking emojis and assured her friend she was confident in what she was doing. She also stated she'd still like her and Kayli to plan to meet later at the 10 Barrel Brewing Company, as originally discussed. Satisfied with her decision, she got out of her car, locked it, and wandered toward the greenbelt running adjacent to the Boise River.

AJ passed a couple who gave her a curious stare as both their glances took in her attire, but she didn't care. She just smiled and continued on, actually glad for the coat due to the brisk early September morning. Somehow, within just a few days, it's as if they turned that corner toward autumn as the mornings grew cooler and it took longer for the sun to rise.

As AJ reached the greenbelt and looked out over the river, she admired the pristine water flowing over rocks and a few downed trees. She loved living here, with fresh air, clean conditions, and a plethora of activities to enjoy. And she very much hoped that after meeting Mathias, they'd hit it off beautifully and could enjoy many activities together.

Checking her phone, she had two minutes until she was supposed to meet him, so she headed back toward the lot. As she approached, she was surprised to see it had filled

up, and more people were making their way across the grass toward the balloons.

AJ quickly scanned the vehicles, not seeing anyone standing about, but as she neared a silver SUV, a figure emerged from between it and another. Her eyes widened, as did her mouth, as she took in his attire of black tights, gold breastplate, and flowing red cape. He even held a replica of Thor's hammer in his hand.

But more surprising than that were the glasses on his face, and the deep blue eyes behind them. And the cute cleft in his chin.

The stranger from the park! The same man from the bar at the Grove!

"Mathias?" AJ asked hesitantly, not taking another step.

His eyes softened and a smile started to form on his lips. "It's me, Amelia Jane." He stopped within a few feet of her.

"Wh... how?" She shook her head to clear her confusion. What are the odds this would be Mathias? And before she knew it, she was voicing her concerns. "From the park. From the bar," she said softly. "What are the odds it's you?" As AJ studied his face, she saw a change in his eyes, a furrow in his brow. He actually began to look uncomfortable. "What is it?" she asked.

Mathias expelled a breath and said words that stole hers. "I, uh, I have a confession. I knew who you were all along."

AJ instinctively took a step back. "What?"

"That night in the bar, when I first saw you, you looked so beautiful. You sat alone for some time, and I finally worked up the courage to go talk to you. But then you looked, panicked, and you couldn't get out of there fast enough."

“I—”

Mathias rushed on, taking a step toward her. “Something about you struck me right in the chest, Amelia Jane. I just had to find you. I had to get to know you.”

“This is unbelievable. So, how ... when ... I don’t understand.” AJ shook her head. “How did you know I was on Flirt Chat and that we’d connect?” She looked up at him, wanting answers, wanting to believe this wasn’t some elaborate setup.

“I didn’t. Until Jen.”

“Jen? What does she have to do with this?”

“After you and she left the bar, later when she came back, she spoke to me. She said she’d seen me trying to make my way to you.” Mathias chuckled. “She took me off to the side and actually grilled me for thirty minutes. She thought I might have done something untoward to you, something to scare you.”

“You did,” AJ couldn’t help but blurt out.

“What? No. All I wanted to do was talk to you.”

“I wasn’t ready to talk to someone like you.”

“Someone like me?”

AJ waved her hands about. “Someone with all this gorgeousness! I didn’t trust anyone, not after what Brad did to me. You take one look at me and decide I’m a pretty face so you start to move—”

“It wasn’t like that at all,” Mathias said, his voice raising. “I saw a beautiful woman

who helped her friend out of an embarrassing situation. I saw a beautiful woman who looked sad yet yearned for the uninhibited fun her other friend was having. Do you know how hard it was for me to get up the nerve to try to talk to you?"

"Right," AJ said, her sarcasm evident. "Because someone like you couldn't get any woman he wanted."

"Appearances are deceiving, AJ. If anyone should know that, you should."

She reared back as if slapped. "I sure as hell should. So, what, you tell Jen you've just got to get to know me and you two concoct this plan for us to hook up through Flirt Chat?"

"Basically, yes."

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“What? You admit to this setup?” She took another step back, uncaring that they were receiving curious stares from others.

Mathias took another step and closed the gap she had widened. “Yes, AJ, I do. After talking with Jen, quite extensively, mind you, and our mutual friends vouching for my character, she told me of your situation and your reluctance at meeting someone. We really do have a lot in common, you and me. So, we thought—Jen mostly—that instead of me simply asking you out or her arranging another meeting, this would be the best approach.”

“Oh, you did, did you? How very kind of you. Both of you.” AJ spun away, wanting an escape, wanting to get away from this bizarre scenario.

Mathias gently touched her arm. “AJ, please, let me explain more.”

She shook off his touch and glared at him. “Why? So you can tell me more lies?”

“No, I told you you’d only hear the truth from me.”

“Really? You never thought to mention in all our conversations, or hey, when I practically bowled you over in the park, that, gee, this is all an elaborate arrangement among friends?”

“That incident in the park was purely coincidental, I promise. And never in our conversations was there a situation which prompted me to confess.”

“Hence, you never lied. Isn’t omission basically a lie?”

“I felt justified. I loved our talks, the connection we were making, and I know you did, too.”

When he took another step toward her, she backed away. She spoke through clenched teeth. “Don’t you tell me what I did or did not enjoy. Don’t tell me your friends vouched for your character when you do something like this. Don’t—”

“AJ, please.” He closed the distance and took hold of her arms. When she tried to shake him off, he held on. “Please, AJ,” he pleaded. “Despite how this came about, you can’t deny there’s something between us. The things we’ve shared, talked about, experienced.” His heated stare told her he was talking about last night, their orgasms while talking to one another.

AJ felt her face flush and started to look away, but Mathias gave her arms a squeeze and started again.

“Please believe me, at first I didn’t want to go along with Jen’s plan, because I knew how it would look. Deceitful.”

“Yathink?” AJ snorted. She hung her head as tears gathered, and she felt more the fool for that.

“AJ, please...”

She managed to shake off his hold and take a step back, wiping at her eyes. “No, Mathias. The truth is, you did. You went along with this plan. You’re damn right it was deceitful. How do you expect to build a relationship when it starts out like that?” When he tried to talk, she cut him off. “No. Nothing you can say will change it. Nothing you say will make this right.”

She took another step away and began to dig through her bag for her key fob. When

she found it, she clicked her locks and quickly made her way to her vehicle. Mathias was fast on her heels, still trying to plead his case. AJ whirled on him.

“Stop. How would you feel if the tables were turned? If you were in my situation? You can’t tell me you wouldn’t be upset! Lose my number, Mathias, because I never want to hear from you again.”

AJ ran the last few steps to her car and jumped inside, locking the doors and starting it up. She barely had the presence of mind to look around to make sure she wasn’t going to run someone over or back into another vehicle. Speeding out of the lot, she didn’t give Mathias another glance. Tears came faster as she sped toward home.

Then the anger came.

When she parked in her garage, she pounded on the steering wheel and screamed her frustration to the world. After a few moments, when her sobs quieted, she pulled herself out of the car and entered her house. She threw her bag and keys on the counter and shrugged out of the coat. Fresh tears began anew at the wasted effort on her outfit.

“And I didn’t even get to enjoy the balloons,” she choked out in the silence of her living room. “How could you, Jen?”

AJ sank to her couch and curled up into a ball, letting her emotions pour out.

Good God, that pounding needs to stop, AJ thought. She pried open her eyes, realizing she was still on her couch and wasn’t sure how much time had passed. What she thought to be a pounding in her head was actually a pounding on her door.

“Go away,” she croaked, wincing at her dry, sore throat. Carefully, she sat up, instantly feeling dizzy and wanting to lie back down. Only whoever the hell was at her door wasn’t relenting.

“Amelia Jane, open this goddamned door!” Jen’s voice easily carried through the thick wood.

AJ could only groan, nowhere near ready to face her “friend.” Slowly standing, she ignored Jen’s protests and made her way into the kitchen for a drink. After guzzling some water, she shouldn’t have been surprised to hear her front door being unlocked and opened. Both Jen and Kayli had keys to her place, as she did for theirs, in case of emergencies. Obviously, Jen thought this was one of those times.

“AJ!” Jen yelled.

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“Stop your hollering, I’m fine,” AJ called out.

“See, I told you she’d be fine,” Kayli said.

AJ snorted at Kayli’s comment, knowing she was anything but fine.

“She’s anything but fine,” Jen said right before entering the kitchen and coming to a halt in front of AJ. “What the hell happened? Are you all right? And why the hell are you dressed like that?”

AJ could only imagine what she looked like after her crying jag and sleeping in a ball on the couch. Her makeup was probably all over her face, hair a mess, and clothes rumpled. She straightened and gathered some semblance of strength.

“I’m dressed like this because I was meeting Mathias this morning, as you are well aware. And no, I’m not fine. How could I be fine when one of my best friends and a stranger at a bar scheme to get me to meet said stranger under false pretenses? How could I be fine when I have the most amazing conversations with a stranger, think I’m falling for him, and learn that it’s all a charade?” Her strength was quickly waning. “How could you, Jen? And did you know about this, Kayli?”

“No, no, I promise,” Kayli said emphatically. “Only on the way over here just now did Jen tell me what was going on after she received a call from Mathias. He was really worried about you. He’s really sorry,” she added with her own special kind of tenderness.

AJ looked to Jen and thought she actually saw regret and remorse. Too bad. She

wasn't getting any sympathy from her.

"I don't give a damn if he's sorry, which he should be, but it doesn't excuse what happened. And you, my friend," she pointed at Jen, "are no kind of friend at all to pull some shit like that. How could you, Jen? How could you?" AJ closed her eyes against the fucking tears that just wouldn't stop. When she felt arms circle her, she instinctively reached out in return, holding on tight to Jen.

"I'm so, so sorry it went down like this," Jen started. "I really am. Damn his honor for coming clean."

AJ choked on a sob. "Really? So we could start off a relationship on a lie, never to be revealed? What kind of trust does that inspire?"

Jen pulled back and stared at AJ. "Admittedly, none. But we really did have the best of intentions." When AJ snorted and started to pull away, Jen held tight to her arms and carried on. "Really, we did. And if it's any consolation, Mathias was really, really reluctant to go along with my plan."

"Yet he did anyway."

"Only because I can be very persuasive, and I convinced him it'd all work out. That you'd see the humor in this and still give him a chance."

"Humor? Nothing about this is humorous."

"But he really is perfect for you. Your reluctance to meet anyone was holding you back."

"Don't you think I should have had some decisions in this? Maybe you could've convinced me to go to the bar again, meet him, have the courage to engage in

conversation myself.”

“Maybe,” Jen said softly. “I was just giving you a nudge, speeding up the process.”

“It was wrong, Jen. And again, why the push to have me meet someone? Why should my happiness revolve around having a guy in my life?”

Kayli chose that moment to speak up after watching the exchange up to this point. Jen released AJ, taking a small step to the side. “Didn’t we go over this just last weekend? What, are you going to turn into some lonely spinster with no joy in your life? I know you won’t turn into a cat lady, because you hate cats.”

“Well, hate is a bit strong,” AJ said defensively.

“Pssh, whatever, you hate cats, and that’s fine.” Kayli crossed her arms, looking from AJ to Jen and back to AJ. “What Jen did, she went about it the wrong way, even if her heart was in the right place.” When Jen started to protest, Kayli held up a hand to halt any comments she wanted to make. “Uh, uh, don’t. You know it was the wrong approach, given what AJ went through with Brad, yet you did it anyway.”

“Thank you,” AJ said.

“However,” Kayli started again, “maybe this wasn’t a total fuck-up after all.”

Both AJ and Jen just gaped at Kayli, never having heard her talk like this in all their years of friendship.

Kayli just waved a hand at them both. “So, yeah, this is the new Kayli. I’m going to speak my mind more often. Get used to it.”

“I like it,” Jen stated, giving her a wide smile.

“Me, too,” AJ added.

“Okay, can we all go have a seat and talk through this?” Jen asked.

“I need to pee and wash my face first, but fine, we’ll talk,” AJ said, making her way out of the kitchen and toward the stairs. Once she took care of herself and returned to the living room, Jen and Kayli were seated, each holding mugs of tea. AJ noticed a third mug on the table waiting for her.

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“Thanks,” she said as she sat and picked up the cup of warm comfort.

“Okay, so I’m really sorry,” Jen said. “When I cornered Mathias at the bar and had a long chat with him, I just knew he’d be perfect for you, AJ. And I only want to see you happy. You have so much spirit and joy to share, and, well, he went through some crap as well, and I knew you two could be so good for each other.”

“Jeez, you’re like a broken record,” AJ mumbled.

“Yeah, well, sometimes you need to hear things over and over before they finally start to sink in. So, are they sinking in?” Jen asked with a sassy smile on her face.

“Maybe,” AJ mumbled again with the mug pressed to her lips.

“AJ,” Kayli spoke up. “I didn’t get a chance to meet Mathias, but from what Jen told me about him, and from the change I heard in you just last night, can’t you admit there’s something between you two? You haven’t sounded that happy in years.”

AJ set her mug down and sighed. “Yes, okay? Yes, there’s something between us. Our talks have been the best thing for me. Besides being friends with you two. He’s smart and funny, and he’s got his life on track. I was already falling hard just from our conversations alone. And then to find out he really is the cute guy from the bar who also happened to be the stranger I ran into at the park. And he’s the most attractive man I’ve ever seen.”

“Stranger from the park?” Kayli asked. “You ran into him at the park?”

“Yes, but he swears it was purely coincidental. And thinking back on the way he acted, he was genuinely surprised to see me, kind of taken aback, flustered, you know? Then he rushed off like his pants were on fire. Which at the time was really disappointing. But, whatever.”

“Did he tell you about Christina?” Jen asked. “His fiancé?”

“He has a fiancé?” Kayli squealed.

“Had, he had a fiancé. After years together, she suddenly fell in love with someone else and left him.”

“Yes, he told me,” AJ admitted.

“He’s had a rough time, too, hun. Women would judge him on his looks and come on to him with certain expectations. He’s not a playboy, but was viewed as one. Even men can have self-esteem issues. They can be just as reluctant as women, you know? Not to mention his pushy friends always trying to hook him up with someone.”

“Gee, I wouldn’t know what that’s like, now would I?” AJ smirked. She was beginning to see the loving motive behind Jen’s actions. And trying to see the situation from Mathias’s point of view, although still not totally excusable, was beginning to sink in.

“I see the wheels turning,” Jen said. “Are you ready to give him another try?”

“What if he doesn’t want one after all? He practically pleaded for me to give us a chance, coming clean right when we met. Then I go off on him, but rightfully so at the time. I mean, it was a shocking discovery.”

“Doesn’t that tell you something about his character when he felt the need to expose that little fact?” Kayli said.

“That little fact,” AJ scoffed. “Yes, I suppose.”

“You suppose,” Jen mocked. “That was a huge risk for him, you know.”

“Really?” AJ said. “This whole situation is crazy. You’re just trying to find justification for yourself while defending him and—”

“I am,” Jen admitted. “Look, I know this all came about in a convoluted way, but I had the best of intentions for you. Do you honestly think I’d encourage setting you up with some guy who’s loco? No. And, okay, so it wasn’t the greatest approach, but it worked. Sort of, right? I mean, you got to know him and like him and you were ready to meet him and make a go of it.”

“Yes, yes, yes, all right? God, yes, I really like him. Like I said, he’s smart and funny and charming and sexy. And yes, I want to give him another try.”

Jen and Kayli jumped up with excitement. “Hot damn!” Jen shouted. “Okay, well then, I suppose we better get you fixed up, because I don’t know what all that is.” She waved her hand at AJ’s attire.

“I’ll have you know, he was fantasizing about me being an ice girl, so I wanted to give him an ice girl. And Lord, you should have seen him, dressed up like Thor.” AJ moaned, not the least bit concerned about embarrassing herself, because these were her friends.

“Really?” Kayli said. “Thor? Mmm, does he look like Chris Hemsworth then?”

“Sort of, only better.” AJ grinned.

“Well then, let’s freshen you up while I give Mathias a call.”

“No, Jen, let me contact him. We’ll planto meet at the park still. I’m not getting robbed out of seeing the balloons. Whattime is it anyway?” AJ began to search for her phone, realizing it was stilltucked away in her bag.

“It’s noon, and there will still be plentyto see,” Jen answered.

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“Come on, beautiful, let’s get you fixed up.” Kayli took AJ’s hand and led her back upstairs. After redoing her hair and makeup, AJ figured her outfit still looked decent and she really wanted to wear it. “You really do look great, AJ. Think Mathias will still be in his Thor outfit?” She giggled.

“I have no idea, but I wouldn’t hate it if he was.” She winked at her friend.

“You’re really okay with this, right?” Kayli gently stroked AJ’s arm. “I mean, like Jen said, it wasn’t the smartest way to go about this, but there’s potential, right?”

AJ held Kayli’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “Yes, there’s definitely potential. I won’t make him beg too badly.”

Kayli laughed as the two made their way back downstairs to join Jen, who was holding AJ’s phone out to her with a big smile on her face.

AJ just smiled in return as she took the phone, deciding to text: So have I missed the balloons? Because I’ll be really mad if I have, and you’ll have some serious making up to do.

Within seconds, Mathias answered: Balloons are still here, and I’ll beg, plead, grovel ... whatever it takes.

Find me at the park and we’ll see what I decide. 15 minutes.

Yes ma’am.

AJ grinned, and when she looked up at her friends, they were grinning, too. "All right, let's go." AJ didn't bother with the coat, as the day had warmed up nicely. Once again they piled into Kayli's car and headed for the park.

Ten minutes later the ladies walked into the heart of the park. Only a few balloons remained on the ground, or they had completed their flight and landed already. AJ looked up to see so much color as the balloons dotted the sky, it was spectacular. There was still quite a crowd, although she suspected many of the spectators had moved on to other activities.

"How is he going to find you?" Kayli asked.

"Determination," AJ answered. She, Kayli, and Jen strolled leisurely around the park, admiring the balloons and glancing at the vendors. AJ's stomach growled, realizing she hadn't had anything to eat for six hours, and the smell from the food carts was utterly enticing. "Let's grab a bite, I'm starving."

"Shall it be pizza, burgers, or ice cream?" Mathias's husky voice in her ear sent shivers through her. She felt his warmth at her backside as he moved in closer and continued to whisper. "Or are you watching your gorgeous figure?"

AJ closed her eyes and sighed. Oh, that voice. She opened her eyes and turned to face him, a shot of adrenaline flowing through her at his impressive sight. He was still dressed as Thor, earning appreciative glances from not only Jen and Kayli, but many passersby. They stared at each other, somehow silently communicating as smiles began to grace both their faces.

Mathias's eyes roamed her body from head to toe, and when he looked into her eyes again, AJ could've sworn they were brighter. He groaned and brought his hand to his

heart while going down on one knee. “By the Gods of Valhalla, your beauty and your spirit will be my undoing. I humbly ask for your forgiveness, milady, and by granting that, I will forever be under your command.”

AJ couldn't help but melt just a little and smile even bigger as she framed his face and spoke softly. “All is forgiven, Mighty Thor. Rise and join me for a day of adventure, the likes of which you may never see again.”

Mathias rose slowly, never taking his eyes from hers. And when AJ began to withdraw her hands, he caught one and kissed her knuckles. “I pray that won't be the case, as I look forward to many adventures with you.”

AJ bowed her head in a regal fashion, and keeping their hands joined, introduced Mathias to Jen and Kayli. “I know you know Jen, our matchmaker, and this is Kayli.”

“Jen,” Mathias nodded his head before turning to Kayli. “And nice to meet you, Kayli.”

“S-so nice to meet you,” she replied, a bit breathlessly.

AJ couldn't help but grin at the way Kayli was fawning over Mathias, considering the gal had recently figured out she was into women.

Smile still plastered to his face, Mathias turned to AJ. “I believe you said you were starving?”

“Indeed I did. I'm in the mood for BBQ. What about you? Jen? Kayli?” She glanced at each person, awaiting their answer.

“Why don't we go find some burgers and fried elephant ears, Kayli?” Jen responded. “We'll catch up with you two later.” She winked at AJ before looping her arm with

Kayli's and walking away.

Mathias chuckled. "Guess they wanted me to have some privacy while I beg your forgiveness."

AJ stopped and faced him. "There's no need, Mathias, I forgive you."

"Just like that? So easily?"

"Yes. It's useless to deny what I feel for you."

“Which is?”

“A connection. Our talks were wonderful, funny, uplifting, and so easy. They felt comfortable from the very first night. I can understand why Jen did what she did, and you, unable to resist her persuasiveness.” AJ chuckled.

Mathias laughed. “Yes, she is tenacious.” He returned to her and held both hands in his. “I’m glad you’re giving me this chance, and I promise I’ll do everything in my power to prove it’ll be worth it.”

“Oh, I know you will, and I’m looking forward to it.” She stood on her tippy-toes and gave him a light kiss before pulling back.

Mathias rested his forehead against hers. “You know you’re wrecking me with that outfit.”

“Am I?” AJ answered seductively.

“You look so damned sexy. I want to cover you up with my cape so no other man can look at your ass that’s barely covered by those shorts.”

AJ turned her body and looked over her shoulder at her rear, shaking it. “You mean this ass?” When she looked back at Mathias, she had to giggle at his sexy moan. She whispered up to him. “Others can look all they want, but you’re the only one that’ll be touching this ass.”

“AJ,” he groaned.

She laughed again as she pulled him toward the food cart. "Come on, let's eat. I have a feeling we're gonna need our strength for later."

Mathias chuckled as he followed, and they spent the better part of an hour devouring BBQ, followed by ice cream as they watched many of the balloons returning from their flights. Once finished, they walked the park.

"Do you come to the event every year?" Mathias asked.

"Almost, and it never fails to astound me. What about you?" She looked up at him, happy to have him by her side.

"I've never missed a year. Something always draws me. Amazing we've never run into each other before."

AJ laughed. "Well, it is a huge event, and Boise's a big city."

"Biggest little city in the west."

"I thought Reno had that distinction?" AJ quipped.

"Maybe." Mathias shrugged as he grinned.

"Have you ever been up in a balloon?"

"I have, several times, in fact. Would you like to go up today?"

"I would love it! But wait, aren't there rides only on opening day?"

Mathias winked as he squeezed her hand, leading her deeper into the crowd. "I have my powers, and I would never dare disappoint the lady."

AJ's spirit couldn't get any better as she let Mathias lead her through the thinning mass of people, closer to a few grounded balloons. The colorful variety was spectacular, and their sheer size never ceased to amaze her.

They approached a balloon with a southwest zigzag pattern, with white, peach, and turquoise coloring. One man noticed them and a beaming smile broke out across his face. Two strides had him in front of Mathias as they shook hands.

"Mathias, I see you found your lady."

"Yes," he answered, raising AJ's hand to kiss her knuckles. He then introduced her to his friend, Jeremy Dietrich, and pointed out his wife, Megan. They met while Mathias had been to Albuquerque's balloon festival a few years ago, theirs taking place about a month after Boise's.

"Are we still set?" Mathias asked.

"Yeah, be ready to go in a few. I signal when we're good to go." Jeremy slapped a hand against Mathias's shoulder and walked back toward the balloon.

AJ turned to him. "We're going up?" she asked with excitement.

"We are. While I was waiting, hoping, and praying that you'd return, I asked him about taking us up."

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AJ launched herself into his arms, squealing in his ear. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! This is going to be awesome!”

“I certainly hope so,” Mathias returned, kissing her temple.

It didn’t take long for Jeremy to signal and within twenty minutes, the two couples were staring out across the city from almost a thousand feet in the air.

“This is amazing!” AJ exclaimed. She looked to Mathias and saw a sexy grin on his face. Seeing him dressed as he was, she was extremely turned-on by the man. A knowing look passed between them, as if they both knew the night would end with them in one or the other’s bed.

Too soon? AJ thought. Hell, no! I’m going to grab onto whatever pleasure I can with him.

Mathias raised a brow as his grin grew bigger; as if he knew her thoughts. AJ felt herself blush in spite of the coolness surrounding them, given their altitude. She started to place her hands into the jacket Megan loaned her, but Mathias intercepted her movement, pulling them to his chest as he covered her hands with his. He leaned down to whisper.

“I’d love to know your thoughts, Amelia Jane.” He kissed the shell of her ear, causing her body to shiver.

“I just bet you would, but I’ll save them for later.”

He pulled back to look into her eyes. "Promise?"

"Promise." She pressed her lips to his and was rewarded with a low growl as he took over the kiss, savoring her mouth. Had they not been interrupted by Jeremy clearing his throat, who knows where the kiss would have led?

"How long have you two been together?" he asked.

Mathias reluctantly broke away from AJ and faced his friend. "This is our first date."

"You're kiddin' me? You two look like you've been an item for some time."

"Feels like it, too," Mathias said as he looked to AJ, wrapping his arm around her waist. Her heart swelled as she gave him a smile, leaning into his side.

"Ah, there's a story there," Jeremy said.

"There's always a story," Megan added. "But let's let them enjoy the ride."

AJ and Mathias remained huddled together for the duration of the trip, and although it had been wonderful, AJ was ready to get her feet back on land. Once they disembarked, she and Mathias said good-bye to the couple, promising to see them in New Mexico if they made it down to the festival.

As they continued to walk the park, Mathias held her close. "I may not be able to control myself, AJ, with how sexy you look. And if you receive any more leering glances from another man, I just may clobber them with my hammer." He held up the item between them.

AJ laughed, given the hammer was plastic and weighed no more than a pound, if she had to guess.

“Well, we can’t have that. I guess this means our outing has concluded and you’ll have to safely ensconce me at a location of your choosing. For my own protection, of course, and those of the commoners around me. We can’t have a public uprising, now can we?”

When his mouth quirked and he started to lean in for a kiss, AJ stopped him with a hand on his chest. “Mathias,” she began to whisper, “please tell me this isn’t too bold or too soon, or whatever, because I can’t help wanting you.”

His mouth came within millimeters of hers and said, “I like you wanting me, because I damn sure want you.” He captured her lips, suckling before tracing her seam with his tongue. And as soon as AJ opened for him, he devoured her.

She clutched his arms as he had his way with her in broad daylight, palming her rear and pulling her into his body. AJ felt like stripping him bare and having her way with him, public indecency be damned.

Mathias was first to pull away, resting his forehead against hers. “Would it be completely improper for me to proposition you, milady?”

“Please do.”

“Your place or mine?”

A burst of laughter escaped AJ as she grabbed his hand and began running for the parking lot.

Mathias led AJ to his vehicle, unlocking the door and ushering her inside. He sprinted to the other side, slid in, and started it up.

“I’m going to text Jen and let her know we’re leaving. I’m sure she won’t be surprised.” Once done, AJ looked to Mathias, both grinning like fools. “So,” she said.

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“So,” he returned. “Are you sure about this, AJ? Because believe me, I want this, but I want to be sure you do, too.”

“I do.” She gave him her address and Mathias took off.

She didn’t second-guess her decision or question what in the hell she was doing. She just went with her gut. And it was telling her that Mathias was worth the risk.

Never in her life would she have thought she’d bring a man home after meeting him mere hours ago. But they knew each other beyond a few hours. Their nightly talks had revealed a lot about one another, and AJ truly couldn’t feel safer with anyone else.

As they pulled into her drive, they silently exited then AJ was leading him into her home. Closing the door and locking it, she turned to face him. A myriad of emotions seemed to cross his face, and for a split second, she did begin to question her actions. But before she could say a word, Mathias was in front of her, framing her face and kissing her sweetly.

AJ gave herself up to his kiss, to the feeling of being cherished. She moaned and opened for him as his tongue swept inside, dueling with hers. With her hands on his hips, she pulled herself into his body, wanting to feel more, see more.

When his mouth trailed along her jaw, to her ear, Mathias’s hot breath tickled as he whispered, “I want you naked. I need you, Amelia Jane.”

“My thoughts exactly,” she managed to say. When they parted, she took his hand and led him up the stairs to her room. Once inside, she wasted no time in kicking off her

boots and ridding her body of her clothing. Meanwhile, Mathias stood frozen as his eyes raked her body from head to toe. When he looked up again into her eyes, she watched them soften.

“You are so gorgeous, AJ. You humble me with your willingness.”

“I feel as if I could trust you with anything, Mathias. Please don’t make me regret it.”

“Never.”

AJ could only nod as her eyes grew misty and her heart swelled.

Without further words, Mathias made quick work of getting out of his clothing as well, standing gloriously naked, his arousal clearly evident.

“Damn, you’re magnificent,” AJ said.

Mathias approached but didn’t touch. “You are.”

“Please touch me,” she said.

He surprised her by unpinning her hair and combing his fingers through the silky strands. “So soft and beautiful.” He then scooped her up into his arms and placed her on the bed. Her peals of laughter quickly turned to gasps as he wasted no time in spreading her legs and burying his face against her pussy. She nearly orgasmed immediately as his tongue swept up her folds and latched onto her clit, sucking mercilessly. His big, warm hands pressed against her inner thighs, keeping her open, otherwise she may have clenched his head like a vise.

AJ squirmed and writhed while she alternately moaned and whimpered. She felt herself rising, tightening as she ground her pelvis into Mathias’s face, needing to

come.

“That’s it, AJ,” he breathed against her flesh. “Come for me. Only me.”

His attention returned to feasting on her, and within seconds she shattered. Her scream echoed throughout the room, startling even AJ in its intensity. She continued to buck as Mathias wrung every little bit of pleasure from her. And when he moved away, gently massaging her thighs where he held her, she whimpered once again.

“Don’t worry, I’m nowhere near through with you,” he said, his voice strained.

“Oh, good,” she said and sighed. She lifted her head to look at him, still marveling at his beautiful form. Not to mention his very impressive cock standing at attention. She propped herself onto her elbows to watch him crawl over her, his gaze never leaving hers.

As he braced his hands by her waist, he gave her a wink and leaned forward, pulling a nipple into his hot mouth. The attention he gave it was exquisite, and he did the same to the other. AJ’s body melted back into the bed and Mathias followed, never letting go. And when he finally did, she looked up at him as he studied her. He then fisted his erection and began to stroke himself.

“I can’t wait to feel your warm pussy surround my cock. Do I need a condom, AJ? Because I’m clean, and I’d love to hear you tell me you’re on the pill.”

“I am. On the pill, that is. No condom, Mathias.”

“Good. I want to feel your flesh on mine.” He continued to tug on his length, his strokes working from the base to the tip. “I want to feel your tight muscles ripple around this.” He squeezed his cock until pre-cum coated the tip, and AJ desperately wanted to lick it off before taking him into her mouth. When she whimpered, Mathias

smiled as if he knew her thoughts.

“Is that what you want, AJ? You want this in your pussy?” Another tug. “Or do you want it in your mouth first?” More fluid seeped from his tip and he smeared his thumb across it, bringing the digit to her lips.

Greedily, she sucked his wet thumb into her mouth and swallowed his cream.

“You are so sexy,” he rasped. “Tell me what you want, AJ.”

“Lie down and let me suck your cock.”

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“As the lady wishes.”

As Mathias helped her rise, ready to trade places, she fused her lips to his for a surprising kiss that had him moaning. AJ rejoiced in giving him such pleasure, and couldn't wait to give more. She broke the kiss, allowing him to lie on the bed, and within seconds, her mouth swallowed his erection. He sucked in a quick breath as she wasted no time in attacking, fisting his base as her mouth worked him up until he was panting, begging for relief.

Shudders ran through his body into hers. But before he could come, she released him from her mouth and straddled him, guiding his cock to her pussy. Their combined groans competed with one another as AJ slowly lowered herself onto him, making his entire length disappear inside her body.

Mathias's hands gripped her hips, holding her tight to him. With no other movement allowed, she pulsed around him, squeezing with her internal muscles.

“It feels so good to be deep inside you.”

“Yes, it does,” AJ agreed. She reached for his hands and pried them from her hips, guiding them up to her breasts. “I've dreamt about your hands easily surrounding my breasts. As you can see, I have plenty to hold onto.”

He must've sensed her own admonishment as his eyes hardened for a second before softening. “AJ, you're perfectly you, and you're gorgeous.”

She started to shake her head and say, “I don't—”

“Stop,” he commanded. When she complied, he continued. “Trust in what I say.” He gently squeezed her breasts before releasing them to seek her hands. He laced his fingers with hers and held on. “Ride me. Move that beautiful body and make us both come.”

AJ used their linked hands as leverage and began to pump her hips. She rose up, pulling away so that half his cock appeared before slamming back into him, swallowing him again. She set a rhythm that soon quickened and had both of them coated in a sheen of sweat.

“Faster. Yes, I feel it, AJ. I’m gonna explode inside you.” He ground his teeth, the tension on his face undeniable as pleasure swept over him.

She felt his pulse inside her as he flexed his hips, adding to their rhythm. Faster and harder, their flesh slammed together, hitting her clit just right until they exploded together. She cried out his name as he pulled her down onto his chest, tiny thrusts continuing to pulse through them. Their skin seemed to fuse together as neither wanted to move.

Mathias trailed his fingers delicately across her back causing her to squirm as it tickled. She giggled in his ear as his mouth latched onto her shoulder, suckling hard enough to probably leave a hickey. When she tried to pull away, he held her tight but released his mouth to lick his way to her neck. AJ’s mouth now found its way to his neck and suckled, delighting in his moans. She then squealed when he expertly rolled them, bracing his body above hers.

“You’re quick and agile,” she chuckled. All the while, they remained joined, and she could feel him getting hard again as he pulsed inside her. “And possess plenty of stamina, I take it.”

“Absolutely. Get ready for round two.” He then proceeded to withdraw and sink into

her slowly, teasing her clit with his thumb until her spasms broke him, and he unleashed with his own orgasm.

When their bodies calmed, Mathias withdrew from her and collapsed at her side. AJ cradled his head next to her breast while she sifted her fingers through his thick hair.

“Rest,” she murmured. “We have nothing but time.”

A few hours later, AJ woke to the sound of light snoring. She and Mathias were wrapped around one another while he still slept, her fingers still buried in his hair. She massaged his scalp with one hand while the other traced patterns across his impressive shoulder. As he stirred, he lifted his head, his sleepy blue eyes connecting with hers.

“Hello, beautiful.”

AJ smiled at his adorable face before kissing the top of his head. “Hello, handsome.”

“Did you sleep?”

“I did. Just woke only a moment ago myself.”

Just then both their stomachs growled, causing laughter to bubble between them.

“You must be starved,” he said, making to move off the bed.

“Well, you satisfied one appetite. For now.” When he smiled at her, she said, “But I could use some food.”

“Of course.” He offered his hands and helped her from the bed. She took the lead, pulling him toward the bathroom where they made quick work of cleansing.

As they reentered her bedroom, she looked at his discarded clothes and laughed. “I, uh, don’t suppose you have a change of clothes in your vehicle? Unless you want to continue to be Thor for the remainder of the evening.”

Mathias grinned and said he did indeed have a bag. “I don’t suppose you’d mind retrieving it? Unless it’s okay to parade down your driveway in only a towel.”

“Might impress the neighbors,” AJ quipped. “But I’ll grab it.” She quickly dressed, putting on jeans and one of her favorite vintage t-shirts.

“Aw, no more ice girl?”

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“Uh, no. But I’ll parade around for you later in private.” When she made a move around him to head downstairs, he lassoed her waist and hauled her close.

“I like you parading around in nothing at all,” he whispered against her neck.

AJ’s hands found his rear, caressing him through the towel. “And I’ll happily oblige while you reciprocate.”

Mathias chuckled and kissed her quickly before releasing her. “Anything for you, Amelia Jane.”

“Just remember those words, mister.” She blew him a kiss and headed downstairs. After finding his keys and getting his bag, she watched him quickly dress similar to her in jeans and t-shirt.

“So, still up to going to 10 Barrel Brewing?” Mathias asked.

“Sure am. Okay if I text the girls and have them join us?”

“Of course.”

Once they finished getting ready, AJ texted Jen that they were heading out. Mathias offered to drive. “No need to take both vehicles. I can drop you back home later.”

“No,” she stated.

Mathias stopped in his tracks and turned to her, confusion marring his face. “No? You

don't need me to bring you home?"

"Oh, I definitely will, but you won't be dropping me off, as if you'd then be leaving." She walked to him and loved that his arms immediately engulfed her. "You'll be returning me to my home and staying the night, because I'm nowhere near through with you."

AJ also loved seeing his amazing smile take shape on his gorgeous face.

"I love how you throw my words back at me." He kissed her slow and deep, almost making her wish they decided to stay in for the evening. When they finally came up for air, they grinned like lovesick fools at one another. And when AJ made to move out of his arms to grab a jacket, Mathias held on.

"I'm glad you didn't hang up on me, Amelia Jane."

"And I'm glad you didn't actually lose my number, Mathias. I'm trusting you with my heart. Can you handle that?"

"Absolutely, because you have mine. Handle with care."

With one more kiss, they separated and headed for the door. Once settled in his SUV, they made their way downtown.

During the short drive, Mathias took hold of AJ's hand and said, "Now, how do you feel about Thanksgiving in Hawaii?"

AJ's smile rivaled his, and she knew her future was most definitely looking brighter.

The End