



miles apart



A.L. BROOKS



Chapter 1

JUSTINE SMILED WIDELY AS THE woman—she'd forgotten her name already—draped over her from behind. The music was pumping and her latest conquest was thrusting her hips against Justine's in time to the beat. Her body responded in all the right ways and Justine glanced at her watch.

Yeah, this was a good time to leave.

Justine turned to face her. Anna! That was her name. *Thank God.*

"Anna," she said, bending to speak directly in her ear. "Shall we get out of here?"

Anna beamed and nodded, her dark hair bouncing.

Justine smiled and grabbed her hand.

Anna lived only a ten minutes' drive away. Justine didn't let on that her place was closer—tonight she was happier going elsewhere for whatever was about to follow.

Anna fumbled with her door keys when Justine snaked up behind her on the step and nuzzled her neck.

"Oh," Anna murmured when Justine's hands slipped under Anna's thick coat and squeezed her ass.

Justine laughed and let go. "Go on, get that door unlocked."

Anna did as she was told and Justine followed her into the apartment. She barely gave it a glance; she wasn't here for a tour of Anna's home. Just her bedroom.

Justine grabbed Anna and pulled her roughly to her, kissing her fiercely. Her last assignation was a couple of weeks ago, and she was hungry for the release she knew was on its way. Anna moaned and held on tight as Justine plundered her mouth.

Their hands scrabbled at each other's coats and scarves and pulled them away, dropping them on the floor at their feet.

As Justine moved her mouth to the softness of Anna's neck, she let her hands roam. She pulled Anna's T-shirt out from her pants, and there it was—warm, soft skin. Just what she wanted.

"Oh," Anna whispered. "I love your hands on me."

Justine smiled against her neck and continued her explorations, running her hands up Anna's ribs to the underside of her bra.

Anna pushed against her, her own hands digging into Justine's back. "I knew you would feel like this," she said, offering yet more of her neck to Justine's lips. "That connection we had on the dance floor was just too special to ignore."

Justine hesitated ever so slightly. What was she talking about?

Anna pulled back as Justine's lips stopped moving. "You felt it too, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Sure," Justine said, nudging Anna with her hips. "Bedroom?"

"This way."

Anna grinned. Grabbing Justine's hand, she tugged her down the hallway and into a large bedroom. Turning to face Justine, she pulled her T-shirt off, then her bra.

Justine's mouth watered. "Beautiful," she murmured, taking her time to admire the full breasts, their nipples hardening as she gazed at them.

"All for you, baby," Anna murmured.

Justine lunged forwards, briefly kissing Anna again as her hands cupped those bountiful breasts, then dipping her head so she could lick one of Anna's firm nipples. Anna ran her fingers through Justine's curly hair, tightening their grip against her scalp the more Justine's lips nibbled and sucked.

"You and I are going to be amazing. I can just feel it." Anna's words made their way through the desire-induced fog in Justine's brain, and she raised her head.

Anna looked down at her. "Don't stop," she said, pushing herself towards Justine's mouth. "We've got so much to share, and it all starts here."

Anna's words were like ice-cold water being thrown in her face. Justine stood and stared at Anna, who tilted her head, her eyes narrowing.

"What are you talking about?" Justine took a small step backwards.

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Anna smiled. “Us,” she said, reaching for Justine and pouting when Justine pulled back. “Come on, you feel it too. You know you do.”

Oh, holy shit.

Justine took another step back. Her arousal had disappeared entirely. Now all she could think about was getting out of this as fast as possible.

“Look, I think we’ve got a little problem here,” she began, and flinched as Anna’s face crumpled. She exhaled. Oh crap, this was going to be... difficult. “I think you want more from this than I do. So I think I should just go.”

Anna stared at her, and her expression moved to one of hurt anger. “You mean, you just wanted me for one night?”

Scratching idly at the back of her neck, Justine tried not to laugh. She wasn’t normally a callous person, but maybe that was the only way she’d get Anna to understand.

“Well, yeah. That’s always all I’m after.”

She watched the words hit home and hated herself, more than a little, for causing pain to another person. She’d never had this kind of thing happen before. Normally whomever she picked up wanted exactly the same thing: no strings, one night of fun, thanks and goodbye in the morning.

Anna started to cry.

“I’m going to go,” Justine said, backing away.

“Yes, I think you should.” Anna’s tone was icy and Justine didn’t waste any more time. She left the bedroom, retrieved her coat from the floor, and yanked open the front door.

“You bitch!” Anna screamed as Justine stepped back out into the cold air.

She wanted to retort, to defend herself. *No, actually, I’m a nice person who just read the signals wrong. Much like you.* But she knew there was no point.

As she pulled the door closed behind her, she heard a loud thump against it. If she had to guess, she’d say Anna had just thrown a boot at it. She shook her head as she walked down the steps to street level.

How had she got that one so wrong? She was normally so good at this.

She huffed out a breath as she set off for the main road. She’d give herself five minutes to find a cab before calling Lyft. Montreal’s winter was already creeping in and she really didn’t want to walk home if she could avoid it.

What a disaster the night had turned out to be. This life—one-night stands and going home alone—was the only life she'd been able to stomach since Nadia had taken her world away eighteen months ago. God, was it that long? Sometimes, like now, it seemed it was only yesterday. At least she got out and about these days, and two or three times a month found a warm body to enjoy. But lately it had seemed...empty. Meaningless.

Maybe her heart was finally starting to heal and make room for something that *did* have meaning.



Justine's phone rang just as she stepped out of the shower. She knew who was calling, and she laughed as she strode across the bedroom to answer the call before it went to voice mail.

"*Bonsoir*, Christina. I know, I'm very late."

Justine was notorious for running late to everything. It always surprised her, as she usually thought she'd timed everything right. But, invariably, she was the last one into the room at meetings, always a few minutes late for appointments, and never on time to meet up with Christina and Sylvie.

Christina snorted with laughter. "Of course you are! But how close are you?"

"Um," Justine said, looking down at her still-damp body and running her fingers through her wet hair. "If I tell you about twenty minutes, will you believe me?"

"Pah, we'll see you in forty, then. We're going to order some starters. We can't wait that long." Christina sounded grumpy, as she always did when kept from her food too long. She was one of those annoying women who was stick-thin but could eat like a horse.

"Go ahead. I'll be as fast as I can, promise." Justine chuckled as Christina snorted again, then abruptly ended the call.

Towelling herself off, she pondered what to wear. It was cold out, the temperature having dropped further since the start of the week. They'd even forecast a light snow. So that meant layers, at least. As long as the base layer was something tight, and sexy, and—

She stopped herself. Tonight was supposed to be just about seeing Christina and Sylvie—no extracurricular activities.

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She finished drying her hair, pushing her blonde curls around until they fell into the messy just-out-of-bed look she liked to sport outside of work, and looked back at the closet again. Tonight she was just meeting friends for food and wine. No picking up a woman and going home with her. She needed a break from that, needed to regroup. Especially after what had happened on Monday. She shuddered.

She smiled to herself—Christina would be delighted to hear that Justine might be on her road to reform. Christina was her closest friend and had watched Justine’s descent into a series of lacklustre one-night stands with open disdain. She would be very happy to hear that Justine felt a need to put a stop to that, even if only temporarily.

So tonight called for jeans and a T-shirt, nothing fancy. Having decided, she dressed, adding a warm sweater, a little jewellery, and pulling on her favourite soft brown leather boots. Grabbing her scarf and jacket along with her wallet, she headed out of the apartment and strode down the street. She only had a ten-minute walk to the bar where she was meeting them.

The one good thing that came out of Nadia ending their relationship was that it forced Justine into moving home. She’d listened to Christina’s advice and put herself in the heart of the Gay Village, surrounding herself with a community where she could feel completely herself. Not stuck out on the outskirts of the city in the executive home the status-hungry Nadia had insisted they live in when they got serious about their relationship. As Justine walked down Rue Sainte-Catherine Est, she shook her head, wondering, with hindsight, how she had managed to live in that soulless place for over four years. She’d hated it. She smiled ruefully to herself. *The things you do for love.*

She trotted up the steps of Gabrielle’s and pushed open the door. Spotting Christina and Sylvie straight away, she strolled over, laughing at Christina’s glare as her friend tapped the watch on her wrist.

“Sorry,” she said, leaning down to kiss each of them on both cheeks, then shedding her jacket and pulling out the third chair to sit down. She reached for the wine bottle and poured herself a glass, taking a long swallow before sitting back and smiling at them. Christina was dressed in her trademark all black—T-shirt and dressy pants. Her long dark hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail with a few strands hanging down either side of her face, framing her bright red glasses, her only nod to the colour

palette. Some might have called her look severe, but Justine always thought it exuded a sexy classiness. Sylvie, in contrast, was dressed in one of her multicoloured short dresses, her chestnut-brown hair piled up in a loose bun with multiple wild strands falling in all directions around her head. She was a petite woman, with an elfin face. She was a few years older than Justine and Christina's thirty-eight, and most definitely wiser than the pair of them put together. Despite appearing to be so very different from their outward appearances, she and Christina worked brilliantly as a partnership and had been together for over eight years.

"You look...different," Christina said, tipping her head to one side and staring at Justine as if examining a painting in a gallery.

"Different how?"

"Not physically. Something in your demeanour. Something intangible. You seem more relaxed somehow."

Frighteningly perceptive was a phrase Justine had often used to describe Christina, and she wasn't letting Justine down now.

"Very good," she murmured, nodding. "One of the reasons I was late was because I was having a little think about my...lifestyle over the last couple of years."

"Oh, please tell me this is good news," Christina cried, grabbing Justine's arm dramatically, making Sylvie roll her eyes and Justine laugh.

"You will be happy, I think. Given what a disaster my last conquest was, I've decided to cool things off for a while."

"How long is 'a while'?" Sylvie asked, smirking, her eyes expressing her disbelief in Justine's commitment to her declaration.

"I can't put a number on it. And, before you get all excited, I don't know if that means I want to start looking for something more meaningful, or if I just want a break. I'm just going to see how I go, and make sure my nights out are not only focused on getting laid."

"Well, it's a start," Christina drawled, and Justine smiled at her.

"What brought this on?" Sylvie asked, reaching across the table to steal a piece of calamari from the plate in front of Christina, who growled jokingly at the thievery.

Justine shrugged. "I guess I've not been happy for a while but just couldn't break out of the routine of it. It's just too easy to do, you know that."

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Christina and Sylvie would know there was no arrogance in her statement; it was just a simple truth. Justine was an attractive, sexy woman. Her blonde curls and pale blue eyes coupled with her lithe body ensured that women were drawn to her on an alarmingly regular basis. She had used this to her advantage for some time now, but she knew both her friends had known for all that time that it never really fulfilled her, no matter what she said. And while she laughed about each conquest afterwards, it was hollow laughter.

“Well,” Sylvie said, patting Justine’s hand where it rested on the table, “I am glad you are here with us tonight, so let’s eat and catch up on everything else.”

Justine smiled, grateful for Sylvie’s tact in changing the direction of their conversation.

“So,” Christina said, leaning in close, “did you hear about Lucile and that butch she picked up last week?”

Justine laughed and relaxed into the evening as Christina launched into a gossip fest.

They parted company a couple of hours—and a couple of bottles of wine—later. Justine didn’t linger in her walk home in the cold November air, passing the short journey thinking about the evening. She acknowledged it was the most relaxed she’d felt in a while. She also recalled she hadn’t once scoped the room, and she couldn’t remember the last time she’d spent a whole evening out without at least one eye on potential bedmates.

Maybe there was hope for her yet.

Chapter 2

THE TEXT FROM TERRI MADE Alex's blood boil—heat of a most unpleasant kind rippled through her skin, her heart rate accelerating along with it.

*Sorry. Deal taking longer than we thought. Won't make counselling.
Don't wait up.*

Before she could filter it, her anger had her swiping open the message and pressing the Call Back icon. She didn't actually know what she'd do if Terri answered or not, but she didn't have to wait long to find out.

"Hey," Terri said, her voice way cheerier than Alex wanted to hear. She wanted remorse and discomfort, and the lack of both in her partner's tone had her free hand clutching painfully at the edge of her desk.

"Seriously, Terri? This is the third time you've cancelled counselling. What am I supposed to do now?" She managed to keep the volume of her voice low, but her words were clipped and spat from between her lips.

"Oh, come on, give me a break! You know what my job's like. You know how quickly things can change in a day." Terri's voice had risen and it sounded incredibly loud in Alex's ear, making her tremble as her anger transformed into agitation.

Confrontation was not Alex's natural style, and she was suddenly struggling with the bad energy between them. Her usual need to smooth things over was overcoming her anger. Yes, she did know how fast-paced Terri's job was, and how her days often careened off-track. It was a big part of what had got them into this mess in the first place. Exhaling slowly,

and rolling her head to try to ease the sudden tightness in her neck and shoulders, she paused before speaking again.

“You just don’t make this any easier, you know.”

There was silence. Then, “I could say the same to you.”

The words hit Alex like a verbal slap. She inhaled sharply, but before she could retort, Terri jumped in.

“I don’t want to argue. Quite frankly, I don’t have time.” Her tone held a finality that brooked no argument. “I’m sorry about the counselling. I’ll get home as soon as I can, but like I said, don’t wait up.”

“Fine.” Alex hung up before she said something she’d really regret and carefully placed her phone back on her desk. Leaning back in her chair, she closed her eyes.

So Terri was bailing on their counselling again. Alex couldn’t stop the acid churning in her stomach at how...coldly Terri had written off their session.

Her teeth ground as she bit back the string of expletives queuing up to escape her mouth. While anger was still her overriding emotion, she opened her eyes as she acknowledged the other strong feeling coursing through her.

Relief.



A few hours later Alex slotted her key in the lock with an overwhelming sense of trepidation. Surprisingly, Terri was home already, and Alex had no idea what to expect when she walked into the flat.

She had found the solo counselling session useful, but that didn’t really surprise her. Gloria had helped Alex tap into some of her own long-standing issues around relationships. It left her with more questions than answers, but it had purged a little of the anger that still resided deep within her over what Terri had done three months ago. Just not enough. There just didn’t seem to be a way to remove that nausea, that twist of anger every time she thought about it. The sessions with Gloria had helped, but it seemed no amount of talking or sharing could quite bring her to be comfortable with where they were.

Breathing in deeply, steeling her bruised heart, she shut the door behind her and locked it.

She shrugged off her coat in the hallway and hung it up, heeling off her shoes in blissful relief as she dropped her bag on the floor.

“I’m home!” she called out.

“In the kitchen,” came the muffled response.

Poking her head round the kitchen door, she watched as Terri deftly stirred something in a pan. Terri was in her dark blue track pants, a cotton hoodie over the top with the sleeves rolled up. Her short dark hair was ruffled. Her wire-rimmed glasses were perched on the end of her nose, something she did when cooking to keep them from steaming up too much. She looked adorable, but Alex almost couldn’t allow herself to think it. She was still angry with Terri, and thinking nice things about her diminished that anger. Wanting her, desiring her—none of that was good right now.

“You’re home earlier than I thought you’d be,” Alex said.

“Yep, didn’t take as long as I thought in the end.” Terri looked up. “Want some soup? I didn’t eat earlier and I’m starving.”

Terri’s casualness irked Alex, but she tried to play nice. “No, I’m good.”

Terri blinked a couple of times. Then, “How was the session?”

Alex shrugged and worked hard at keeping her tone neutral. “Okay.” She paused. “Get your work done?”

“Yeah.” Terri stopped stirring the soup and put the spoon down. “Sorry about earlier,” she said quietly. She walked the few steps across the kitchen towards Alex and leaned in for a quick kiss, which Alex returned on autopilot. Alex was aware that she was working very hard not to respond to Terri’s kisses, to pretend they didn’t move her like they used to. Her mind resented them. Her body—more and more often lately, much to her mind’s chagrin—ached for them. But she didn’t trust the kisses, didn’t trust that Terri truly wanted to kiss *her*. And she wasn’t sure she would ever trust that again.

Terri stepped back. “Just so you know, I’m going in early tomorrow. We’re having a celebratory breakfast for finally pulling it off.”

“We?” Alex asked, before she could stop herself. Terri started and frowned, but before she could speak Alex held up a hand. “Don’t. Forget I asked. Sorry.” She had promised not to open up old wounds, as part of their path to reconciliation. It was just too hard not to, sometimes.

Terri nodded slowly and breathed deeply, the frown slowly easing itself out.

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“So,” Terri said eventually, “it looks like I’ll be free this weekend. Want to do something?”

Alex took a deep breath. On the way home she’d wondered when would be the best time to tell Terri her news, but now her hand had been forced. She could guess how well—or more likely, not—it would be received.

“Sorry, but I can’t. Richard ambushed me at the end of the day—I’ve got to go back to Montreal.”

Terri’s emotions played out across her face in stark clarity. Surprise, quickly turning to anger, followed by another attempt to get that anger under control.

“When?” Terri asked, her voice laced with tension.

“This Saturday, back next Friday.”

Terri pursed her lips, then turned her back on Alex and walked back to the stove where she picked up the wooden spoon again and aggressively stirred the soup that now bore the brunt of her anger.

Alex took a deep breath and walked over to Terri, slipping her arms round her waist from behind, pulling Terri’s resistant body into her own. She rested her chin on Terri’s shoulder, knowing her arms weren’t fully relaxed around her partner, that she was holding a piece of herself back. Terri leaned back into her.

“I’m sorry, I know you don’t like how much travelling I’ve done this year.” Alex’s stomach churned. She was apologising again—for being successful, for being good at what she did. It caused a tiny ball of molten heat to ignite in her gut.

Terri shrugged in her arms. “We knew it would be a big part of your new job. I just have to get used to it. Doesn’t mean I’ll like it, though.”

“I know.” Alex cringed at her automatic need to make things better for Terri, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself. Years of always making everyone else feel better had ingrained this behaviour into her bones—something she’d only just come to realise in her session with Gloria, and something she didn’t know how to change. A little voice, far off in the back of her mind, said Terri was being unreasonable, given how many hours Terri put into her own job, the cancelled counselling session being a prime example. But Alex wasn’t ready to deal with that voice yet. “I’m hoping this will be the last transatlantic one this year, if that’s any consolation?”

“I hope so,” Terri said, then eased herself out of Alex’s arms. “Okay, I’m ready to eat, so if you want to go get changed, we could meet in the living room?”

Alex could see the effort Terri needed to make that sound as relaxed as it did. Gloria had managed to instil in both of them the need to make an effort at key moments. To take a minute to consider, and breathe, and allow for each other’s feelings. Some days it worked. Some it didn’t. Terri was trying, and Alex had to be thankful for that. Even if all it did was cause that emptiness to gnaw away at her again.

“Okay.” Alex kissed her on the cheek and left the room to head to their bedroom.



They sat together on the sofa, not close, watching a detective drama on TV. They each had a glass of wine, something else they were learning to moderate between them. Alcohol had played a significant part in the events that had brought them to this point, and they’d both agreed that Terri, in particular, needed to be aware of how much she now drank. As part of the “deal” they’d done in couples’ counselling, Alex never drank more than Terri when at home. Even when, sometimes, all she wanted was to sink into the oblivion that she knew three or four glasses would lend her.

After thirty minutes of silently watching a program she couldn’t focus on, she was relieved when her phone rang.

Seeing Danielle’s name come up in the caller ID, she hurried to answer.

“I’ll go into the bedroom so you can carry on watching,” she said to Terri and stood without waiting for a response.

“Hey, you,” she said into the phone as she left the room.

“So,” Danielle said without preamble, “you *are* alive, then? I have been texting you all day.” While Danielle’s smoothly upper-class tone sounded pouty, Alex knew that her friend of over twenty years was only teasing. They went back too far, and had shared too much, for Danielle to be that annoyed at Alex not returning a few text messages.

Alex giggled and thrilled at the sound. She hadn’t realised she had that left in her today. She walked across the hall to the bedroom and flopped herself on top of the bed. The duvet gave way beneath her with a puff of air.

“I had a very long day, thank you. And found out I have to go back to Montreal this weekend.”

“Oh dear, I can’t imagine that went down too well at home? Or have you not told her yet?” This time Danielle’s tone was acerbic, and Alex knew she meant every bit of that emotion. Danielle, despite thinking what Terri had done was unforgivable, had agreed to support Alex in staying with Terri, when Alex insisted that was what she wanted. But it didn’t mean Danielle liked it.

“Yes, I told her. And no, she wasn’t happy.” The unspoken “of course” hung in the silence after she spoke.

“How have things been?” Danielle asked quietly.

Alex shrugged, even though she knew Danielle couldn’t see the gesture. “Okay. Hard. Just...”

Danielle’s exhaled breath sounded loud against Alex’s ear. “What?” Danielle asked.

Alex’s eyes welled up, and she flushed with anger at this weakening of her defences. “Don’t,” she said. “Don’t be nice to me. Not tonight.”

There was a pause. “When is your next counselling session?”

“Actually, I had one this evening. But on my own. Terri had to work.”

Danielle tutted. “Why am I not surprised,” she said. “Do...do they really help?”

Alex couldn’t stop the snort that escaped her. “I have no idea,” she said. She closed her eyes. She didn’t need to get into this with Danielle. Not tonight. She was so tired. “Look, forget it. It’s a process. It takes time.”

“I understand. But...”

“What?”

“Is this still what you want?” The question came in a rush of words that tumbled over each other, so out of character for Danielle, who usually spoke with a calmness and grace Alex could only envy. “Only I am not so sure it is, quite frankly, and if it isn’t, would it not be better to—”

“Don’t, Danielle. Please.” Alex’s voice ached with emotions she couldn’t release; the consequences were just too enormous.

Silence fell between them for a moment.

“What about lunch on Friday? Can you manage it?” Danielle’s voice had transformed into measured and falsely cheery, but Alex was grateful

for the change in direction. Even if it was only a stay of execution until Friday lunchtime.

“I’m sure I could squeeze you in,” Alex said, forcing herself to smile as she spoke, to crowbar her own false cheeriness into her tone. “One o’clock, the usual spot?”

“Lovely. See you then. And Alex...”

“Yes?”

“You know where I am. Whenever. All right?”

Alex’s throat closed up, and all she managed to squeeze out was a strangled “Uh-huh.”

She lay on the bed for some minutes, the phone clutched to her chest. Her emotions were all over the place, but the warmth she felt after talking to Danielle comforted her, even as her friend’s question ricocheted around her brain.

“Is this still what you want?”

No, she wasn’t sure this was what she wanted anymore. How could she be? She knew plenty of couples managed to survive one partner’s infidelity, but right here and now, she had no idea how they did. She’d been trying for over three months and was coming to realise that she wasn’t sure she *wanted* them to survive it. They weren’t the same people they’d been before that night. And no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t look at Terri and not have an image, however brief, flash up in her mind’s eye of Terri with Liz, Terri’s boss. Terri had slept with her one night three months ago. A night that had changed everything Alex and Terri had shared for the last five years.

When Terri had guiltily confessed all, a week later, she’d blamed the copious champagne they’d drunk that night as they’d celebrated landing a new client at the bank where she and Liz worked. But Alex had wondered if blaming the alcohol was just the easy way out. She remembered all the references to Liz in the previous few months. That extra little zing in Terri’s voice when she spoke about what she and Liz had done during the day. All the niggly little arguments that had started to play a bigger part in her and Terri’s daily life, and all the times they simply crossed paths as both their jobs took up more of their time.

The distance that crept between them like a slow-moving fog.

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And she remembered all the other late nights, all the other excuses for why Terri wouldn't be home until Alex had gone to bed. Had she and Liz been sleeping together all that time? Terri said it was just one night, but Alex didn't know how to believe her. Or had Liz just been planning it all that time, and the deal, and the champagne that had followed, gave her the perfect opportunity to strike?

As easy as it was for Terri to blame the champagne, it was even easier for Alex to blame Liz. To pretend that Terri was somehow a relatively innocent party in this. But she wasn't. Terri could have said no. She could have resisted.

But she didn't.

Sure, Terri had begged for Alex's forgiveness, sworn it would never happen again, and in her shock, Alex had believed her, for a while. Terri had been consumed with remorse and falling over herself to repent. But it had changed them, as individuals, and it had changed them as an "us".

The couples' counselling had started two weeks later. Alex had insisted on it. She had still been in shock, and although she'd been bitterly angry and upset at what Terri had done, she'd thought what they'd had before that night was enough to be worth rescuing. If they both wanted it enough.

Now, three months down the track, she really wasn't sure if either of them wanted it at all. But that was a can of worms she didn't want to open.

Not yet.

Alex heaved herself upright and walked back to the lounge. She found Terri sleeping in front of the TV.

So much for worrying that Terri would wonder where she'd got to.

She switched off the TV, roused Terri, and they went to bed. After a perfunctory kiss goodnight, Terri rolled over and was asleep in minutes. Intimacy was something they had only just reintroduced into their relationship. For weeks after Terri's affair, Alex had not been able to relax, to believe it was she who Terri saw in front of her and not Liz. From the snippets of information Alex had gleaned over the months, Liz was younger and taller than Alex, bigger-breasted and longer in the legs. Alex had looked at her own body in a new light—breasts still in reasonably good shape, hips maybe a little wider than she'd had before. Her auburn hair was a little dry on the ends and never quite held its style, and her green eyes were constantly circled with dark marks as she threw herself into striving

for her promotion. She looked tired, all the time, and lacked energy most weekends for anything other than watching football or heading out to a pub or café for late lunches. Was that why Terri had fallen so easily into Liz's arms?

Still, over this past month, intimacy of a kind had been resurrected between Alex and Terri. Hugs and tender kisses had morphed into deeply passionate kisses and the occasional fumble up each other's T-shirts. Until one evening a fortnight ago, suddenly burning with a desire she'd thought may have disappeared for good, Alex hadn't stopped Terri when her hands slid down inside Alex's jeans. Terri's weight had pressed her into the sofa, and the sex had been hard, and fast, and shockingly delicious. And for those few minutes, Alex had been able to lose herself in the sensations and forget the emotions.

Since then they'd tried a couple more times, but not with the same level of success. She didn't know why, but she couldn't conjure up that same intensity again, that same letting go of emotions. Each time Terri made advances, something shut down inside Alex and she couldn't find a way to turn it back on.

So they were back to where they'd been for the previous three months. Strangers sharing a bed, not even spooning anymore.

She turned her head slightly to look at Terri's silhouette in the darkened room. She was breathing deeply, fast asleep.

Alex tried to fathom why she was still trying to keep this going. Her reasons were a complex mix, and she wasn't sure she had the energy to unravel them, despite the glimmer of insight Gloria had given her. Her age was definitely playing a role, along with the fact she had a series of failed relationships behind her. Her lifelong tendency to loyalty, even if it was to the detriment of her own happiness, was also biting her in the ass. All of these things she should probably face up to and talk to someone about at length. Gloria had offered each of them individual sessions anytime they wanted—they'd had one individual session each in the early days, which was apparently standard practice. Alex had spent the entirety of that first one-hour session in tears. The betrayal had felt overwhelming, and she'd struggled to verbalise what it had done to her. The subsequent sessions she'd had on her own with Gloria had only emphasised how much she needed to deal with, and not just about her failing relationship with Terri.

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The fact it was called couples' counselling seemed ironic when she was attending more of the sessions on her own than with her partner.

Partner.

A dictionary definition of the word would suggest sharing or intimacy. Or being together.

She and Terri weren't any of those things right now. Not really.

She wondered if they ever would be again. The distance between them grew ever wider day by day. At the wave of sadness that swept over her, she swallowed back a sudden lump in her throat and rolled over, pressing her face into her pillow and curling into a childlike ball.



"Hey, you're home before me." Terri leaned in to kiss the back of Alex's neck as she chopped salad ingredients.

Alex forced a smile and turned to face her. "Yep. Managed to get out of that meeting I normally have late on Tuesdays and made a run for it. I thought I'd get started on supper as you said you'd be a little late."

Terri beamed, and it cut through Alex. How could she act so...normal? As if nothing was wrong? Was Terri forcing herself to appear happy? Did she really give a shit who cooked each night and why? So much for their counselling helping to improve their communication. Somehow, despite how many sessions they'd had, they seemed worse off than before in that regard. And Alex knew, deep down, that was mostly coming from her. The longer this went on, the more unsure she was. And yet, conversely, the more daunting it seemed to really talk about the mess they were in. To get the truth out.

"So what delights are you serving me?" Terri waggled her eyebrows playfully, and Alex searched her brown eyes for some inkling that it was genuine amusement, not contrived. Nothing in Terri's expression suggested it was anything but real. It tugged at Alex's heart and gut. Was she really the only one who thought this was all turning to crap? Did Terri still think they were going to be okay? Terri's cavalier attitude grated on her nerves.

She glanced away to the food beside her. "Um, well, it's just some grilled salmon, boiled new potatoes, and a salad. And I picked up some of that lime dressing you like so much." She had tried. Really tried. She'd hit the deli next to the station on her way home, determined to make an effort.

She just couldn't help thinking it shouldn't be this hard. Given how long it had been since Terri had slept with Liz, surely she should be past it now, if she truly was committed to Terri. Surely she wouldn't be so exhausted from trying?

"Nice! I love that dressing." Terri leaned forwards and kissed her tenderly again, lingering. This one stirred something, undeniably so. A tightening low in her belly, the barest hint of desire and need and, yes, affection. Surprising herself, she ran with it, clutched at it like a life raft. Then, suddenly, craved it. Deepening the kiss, she let her tongue play over Terri's bottom lip and was rewarded with a long, soft groan from her partner. Kissing Terri had always been her undoing. Her hot mouth, her gently probing tongue, the sound of her ragged breathing. All of it always conspired to weaken Alex, to tear down the resistance she sometimes wasn't even conscious of placing between them.

When they broke for air, Terri's eyes were shining.

"That was..."

"Yeah, it was," Alex whispered. And it was. But just like that, the walls came down again. She didn't want to take it further. Well, her clit, which was now quietly throbbing, wanted to. Badly. But her brain wouldn't let her body go there. Not yet.

She stepped away, exhaling slowly. She smiled as warmly as she could and gestured towards the salad. "Dinner in about ten, okay?"

Terri's eyes dimmed, just a little, but she smiled back. "Sure. I'll just go and get changed."



Terri slid into bed beside Alex, letting in a small whoosh of cool air as she did. It tickled at the bare skin on Alex's arms where they rested by her head. She was on her left side, facing Terri's pillow. She'd mentally gone back and forth with herself the entire time Terri was in the bathroom.

If I lie on my right side, that puts my back to her, which will only be seen as an insult. But if I lie on my left, that means I'm facing her when she gets in, and will that make her think I want us to take up where we left off in the kitchen? Does she think we'll have sex again? Do I want to if she does? How do I say no if I don't want to?

Eventually, driven to distraction by her own ridiculous roundabout of thoughts, she'd lain on her left, deciding that turning her back was just too harsh. Terri hadn't done anything wrong tonight. She'd been lovely, actually. Almost irresistible. It was what she'd done wrong in August that was still generating the aftershocks Alex couldn't deal with.

"Hey," Terri whispered as she wriggled down into the duvet and gazed at Alex. Six months ago this would have been romantic. Their bedside lights cast a soft glow around the room. The cold evening outside had them both hunkering down into the warmth of the duvet. They'd had a pleasant evening, chatting fairly comfortably over dinner about their days, then watching a movie. Terri had kept a respectful distance between them to begin with, then, as if winning her own mental battle over which path to follow, suddenly she'd snuggled closer and wrapped one arm around Alex's shoulders. Alex hadn't flinched, which had surprised her. And probably surprised Terri as well.

Now, here they were, in bed after that pleasant evening, and clearly Terri wanted to carry on what had started in the kitchen when she'd come home. Her eyes carried a look of desire so intense it almost made Alex wince. Terri reached out a hand. Tentatively, slowly. When Alex didn't move, Terri placed her fingertips on Alex's forehead, just above her eyebrow, and stroked a tantalisingly gentle pathway down around her eye, over her cheekbone, brushing past her top lip, then caressing both lips slowly, from one side of her mouth to the other. Something flared in Alex, but she wasn't entirely sure she was comfortable with it.

"You are so beautiful," Terri said, her voice still a whisper.

Alex closed her eyes. Words like that, words that should make her feel loved, and cherished, and wanted—words like that now just made her disbelieve. How could any of that be possible when Terri had so willingly slept with Liz? Who was she looking at now as she continued to stroke Alex's face? Who did she desire?

The bile rose in Alex's throat and she wrenched her head away. Terri's hand was left hanging in midair, and she dropped it slowly back to the bed, as if she couldn't quite fathom that Alex had pulled back. She frowned, and made to speak, but Alex interrupted her.

"I-I can't. Not tonight."

Terri exhaled and her eyes closed briefly before she opened them again to stare at Alex. “But I thought... Tonight was nice, wasn’t it? And that kiss, earlier?” She looked completely bemused, her forehead creased in a deep frown, her gaze darting all over Alex’s face, seeking answers.

“It was,” Alex admitted quietly. She rolled onto her back, unable to take the intensity of Terri’s gaze any longer. “It’s just...” God, how could she explain this? At least, how could she do it without causing an almighty row? She’d tried to talk to Terri about this very thing in a couple of the counselling sessions, but Terri just couldn’t get it. For Terri, that one night with Liz was all in the past. Done with. Forgotten. Terri had always been good at putting things in little mental boxes. Once she’d felt and dealt with something, she put it away.

Terri reached out a hand under the duvet and laid it carefully on Alex’s belly. “Please, baby. Please tell me what it is. I love you, and I want us to fix this. I do,” she said earnestly as Alex twitched beneath her hand. “But you have to help me. I need to know how to fix it. What you want me to do.”

Alex exhaled, taking her time. All right, she would try this.

She turned her head slightly, her view of Terri oblique. Too face-on and she might not manage it.

“You’ve said before that you don’t understand this. But it’s the same problem. A lot of the time, when you kiss me, or touch me, I don’t know how to trust that it’s really me you’re kissing and touching.” She didn’t understand why Terri couldn’t grasp this—Terri who knew exactly what games Jade, Alex’s ex, had played on her...

Terri’s hand tensed on her belly, then she snatched it back.

“Really?” Terri snapped. “This again? Yeah, you’re right, I *don’t* understand. I’ve told you until I’m blue in the face that she’s forgotten. That it’s all about you.”

“It’s just not that easy for me!” Alex’s voice was more vociferous than she’d intended. “*I’m* the one who was cheated on. *I’m* the one who has to forgive, and find a way to move on. To find a way to trust you again!” She slapped a hand over her mouth. All her pent-up frustration and hurt was threatening to explode and she couldn’t do that. Not now. Not this week.

Terri flopped back down beside Alex on the bed.

“Sometimes,” Terri said after a few moments, in a voice like acid, “I don’t think you ever will.”

Miles Apart

Nor do I, Alex thought.

“Maybe,” Terri said, aggressively pulling the duvet back up to her chin, “it’s not such a bad thing you’re off to Montreal on Saturday. Maybe a little time apart might be good for us.”

Alex exhaled. “Yeah. Maybe.”

Something was crawling inside her, something that was gathering force as it churned and swirled, deep down in her belly. Somehow the phrase *time apart* had loosened something, chipped away at more of her internal barriers. Because, suddenly, the idea of being on her own, of having the time and space to really sift through all her feelings without Terri there to distract her, created a yearning that shocked her in its intensity. A week would help, definitely. But it was achingly tempting to think that a much longer period apart might help even more. Scared at the implications of where her thoughts were leading her, she shimmied down under the duvet again.

“Goodnight,” she whispered.

Terri rolled over away from her and turned out the light.

Chapter 3

ALEX SMILED. DANIELLE WAS PERFECTLY on time for their lunch date on Friday, as always. The restaurant, tucked behind Holborn Station, was their usual haunt for a lunchtime catch-up, with impeccably swift service and located almost exactly halfway between each of their offices.

Danielle air-kissed Alex and smiled warmly at Alex before sliding gracefully into the chair opposite. Slim and impossibly beautiful, with a rich mane of long golden hair, Danielle turned heads, both male and female, wherever she went. That she was oblivious to every stare was a testament to the strength of her relationship with Beth, her wife of ten years. Danielle looked stunning—the dress, in swirling shades of grey, clung to every inch of her, and Alex could only be grateful she'd never crushed on her best friend, because if she had, she'd be struggling to breathe right now.

“You look amazing, as always,” Alex said, reaching across the table to pour some water into Danielle’s empty glass.

“Thank you,” Danielle murmured, as usual looking a little taken aback at the compliment. She frowned. “You look tired. How are you? How has the week been?”

Straight to the point, as usual.

Alex straightened in her chair, suddenly on guard. This was her best friend, the woman she should be able to talk to about anything, especially after all this time. But somehow, the magnitude of what she wanted to blurt out made her stomach tighten into complex knots and her natural instinct to avoid the truth rise to the fore. She'd been protecting herself like this for so long it was now second nature. But underneath it all, a part of her knew

how much damage it was doing. How much unhappiness it was causing, for herself and indirectly for Terri. She huffed out an extended breath.

Danielle sipped from her water and waited.

Alex met her eyes. "I think... It's been hard. She's trying, I know she is. But..."

"What?"

Alex looked away from Danielle's intense gaze. She knew her friend could see right through her, past the words to the truth behind. Why did she insist on trying to hide? But she knew why. Saying a thing out loud made it real. And she wasn't ready for real. Real would lead to mess and complications and heartache, all things she just didn't have the energy for. Not right now.

"We're struggling with...intimacy," she volunteered. She met Danielle's gaze again. "I still have trouble believing it's me she's seeing when she...touches me."

Danielle nodded, pursing her lips slightly. "I can imagine."

The waitress appeared to take their order. As long-time customers, neither of them had opened the menu, knowing beforehand what they'd want to eat.

"Seared tuna," Alex said, smiling wanly at the waitress if only to be polite, when she felt like doing anything but smiling.

"Caesar salad," Danielle requested. She waited until the waitress had moved on before turning back to Alex. "Is that the only issue between you now?"

Alex shrugged. "Not really. But all the other stuff is being dominated by the lack of...sex." Why she was so hesitant to use the word in front of her friend was beyond her. They'd talked about sex before. Although they'd never talked about it in the context of their partners at the time, so maybe that was colouring her hesitancy. "I mean, if you can't have sex, how can you really communicate and address all the other issues?" Too late, she realised that last statement gave Danielle an opening Alex would rather she didn't take.

Danielle, of course, grabbed it with both hands. "So there are other issues? You are being deliberately vague about this, Alex." She sighed. "You know I won't judge you, yes? You know I will support you in whatever you choose to do?"

Alex nodded and had to swallow hard before she could speak. Danielle's unwavering support all these years had always been Alex's one steadying influence. She'd helped pull Alex through the awful aftermath of two years with Jade, and here she was unflinchingly putting herself forwards as a rock for Alex to anchor to once again.

"I know you will. You always do. And I really appreciate it." Alex reached across the table to briefly clasp Danielle's hand. "I'm...very confused, right now. I really don't know what I want to do." Which was essentially true. She was beginning to accept that she knew what she wanted, but she definitely didn't know what to do about it.

"Perhaps your sudden trip to Montreal is a blessing in disguise," Danielle said quietly. "Perhaps some time apart would help?"

Alex nodded slowly. "Yes, we agreed about that, a couple of days ago. We...argued. She was the one who said this break might do us good."

Danielle tilted her head. "Were you okay with that?"

Alex stared at her. "I was...relieved."

Danielle nodded and her fingers played with her water glass as she seemed to take a moment to work out what she wanted to say next.

"I wonder if a week is long enough." Her voice was quiet, but her words hit Alex square in the chest. When Alex made to respond, Danielle held up one slender hand. "I have always said I will support you, and I have always tried to steer clear of direct interference. I listen, and let you tell me what you need to tell me, but I have strived not to try and lead you one way or another. But on this one, I am sorry, I have to make an exception."

Alex had never heard her friend so serious. "Okay," she said, "tell me what you want to say. I won't hold it against you." She braced herself for whatever Danielle would come up with.

Danielle wrapped her fingers around Alex's wrist, her thumb stroking the soft skin on the inside. "I have never seen you so unhappy as you have been these past few months. Even the bitch—" Danielle refused to call Jade by her name "—did not leave you this...empty. I fear you are clinging on to a relationship that has turned too sour to be rescued. Why you are clinging on only you can probably say, but I can hazard a guess. Terri was your safety net, after that bitch. And I think you are scared to leave that, even though it is no longer actually a place of safety. The trust is gone, Alex, and when that is gone, a relationship is doomed."

Alex's cheeks were wet with tears, and she grabbed her napkin with her free hand, mortified to be crying so openly in public.

"Gosh, I am sorry." Danielle's eyes widened. She squeezed Alex's wrist before letting it go. "I completely forgot where we were. This was not appropriate. Sorry, Alex." Her heartfelt words only increased Alex's pain.

"Excuse me," Alex muttered through a tight throat. She pushed back her chair. "I'll be back soon." She turned and fled to the bathrooms before Danielle could respond.

Once locked in a cubicle, she let it out. Sobbing into the napkin she had inadvertently brought with her to the bathroom, she muffled the sound as best she could with the rich cotton fabric. Danielle, as perceptive as ever, had cut right to the heart of the matter, and her simple words had flayed Alex open. The trust between her and Terri *had* gone. Blown apart the minute Terri had told her of her tryst with Liz. Nausea turned her stomach as memories of that confession flooded her mind.

She and Terri had been so...solid in their first three or so years together. Cracks had started to appear in the year after that. Just little things. Small differences in how they wanted to spend their time and where. More time spent with others in a group, rather than on their own. More silences in the evenings they did spend together, TV providing a welcome excuse not to really talk to each other.

They'd started to have bigger arguments in the few weeks prior to that fateful night; Alex's job had been demanding following her promotion, and she'd been coming home late more often than not. Terri was resentful all of a sudden. But Alex had truly believed the bedrock of their partnership was still firm, even if it was changing. Discovering that Terri had fallen into the arms of another woman, out of the blue, had literally pulled the ground out from underneath Alex. Everything she thought they were built on had crumbled to dust in just two minutes. The two minutes it took for Terri to say haltingly, through her sobs, "I'm sorry, babe, so sorry, but...that night I didn't come home last week, when I said we were out celebrating that deal? I... Oh God, I slept with Liz. I'm so, so sorry. I don't know how it happened..."

Shock was an extraordinary thing, causing a person to do irrational things that afterwards they either couldn't remember or couldn't understand. She'd been reading a book on her Kindle before Terri had asked to speak to her,

and she remembered calmly picking it up after Terri's blurted confession, switching it off and slipping it back into its case before she realised some kind of response was required. It was a delayed reaction, she knew now, brought on by hearing something so unbelievable, so awful, that her brain couldn't quite catch up with the words it had been given to work with. But when it did, when it finally sunk in that her partner of five years had just told her that she'd slept with someone else, the pain that had swept through her entire body was like nothing she'd ever felt before.

Shadows of that pain racked her now as she perched on the edge of the toilet, her arms wrapped round herself in a vain attempt to cocoon herself from more agony. It wouldn't go away, she knew that now. She would never be able to look at Terri and not feel some measure of this, on some level. And, for the first time since she'd naively promised Terri she would try to forgive her and work for them to stay together, Alex knew that Danielle's words were probably true. Their relationship was more than likely doomed, because how could it not be when this ache wouldn't leave her?

When she returned to the table, Danielle looked relieved, although concern was etched across her features.

"Alex, are you all right? I am so sorry—"

"No, it's okay. Please don't apologise," Alex said, her voice raspy from crying. "You just hit a nerve, that's all. But...nothing of what you said is untrue." Danielle's frown deepened. "It's up to me now to decide what to do about it."

She was interrupted by their meals arriving, and she glanced down at her plate with no appetite for the beautifully presented food in front of her. She looked back up at Danielle, who was also ignoring her food for the moment.

"I'm going to take the week away to try and be honest with myself about how I'm feeling. Deep down, I think I know we are doomed, as you say. But doing something about that isn't easy. Nor is walking away. Not after five years together."

"I know, Alex. But you have to do what is right for you. No matter what promises you have made each other since then, yes?"

Alex sighed. "I know."

They stared at each other for a few moments.

"Eat here or takeaway?" Danielle gestured at their plates.

Alex smiled. “Rather fancy for a doggy bag, isn’t it?”

Danielle smiled.

“No, I should eat here,” Alex continued. “I know if I take it back to the office, I’ll probably end up throwing it away.” She exhaled and looked back at the meal before her. “Come on, let’s eat.”

They ate in silence, for the most part, commenting only on the high quality of the food—something they’d come to expect from every visit here anyway. Danielle insisted on paying, and Alex couldn’t muster the energy to argue with her. She’d get the next one.

“Now,” Danielle said, “it has occurred to me that Sonia is in Montreal again at the moment. Do you remember her?”

Alex cocked her head, racking her memory banks. Sonia... “Oh, hang on, yes. Your cousin, the one who lives in New York? I met her at your fortieth, didn’t I?”

Danielle beamed. “Yes! You and she got on well, I think?”

Alex nodded. “Yeah, she was a lot of fun.”

“Excellent,” Danielle said, slipping her credit card back in her purse and dropping some coins onto the table to tip the waitress. “Well, she splits her time between various cities these days—far too much money for her own good, really. Anyway, I am fairly certain she is in Montreal this month, for some charity event she is helping to put together for an AIDS foundation. How about I contact her and see if she would meet up with you, maybe treat you to lunch one day? It might be nice for you to meet a friendly face while you are over there.”

“Danielle, I don’t know. I’m not exactly the best company right now.” Thinking about being sociable with someone, especially someone as bubbly as Sonia, started a tangle of nerves buzzing in her stomach.

Danielle waved a hand lackadaisically in the air in front of her. “Rubbish,” she said. “Look, I will simply put you in contact with each other. Whether you meet up with her is entirely up to you, but at least you will have the details of someone you *could* meet with if you were inclined. All right?”

Knowing when she was beaten, Alex shrugged. “Okay, deal.”

They said their goodbyes outside the restaurant. Danielle wrapped her long arms around Alex and held her slightly tighter than usual.

“Please take care of yourself,” she whispered. “I am very worried about you.”

“I know you are,” Alex said, squeezing her friend tightly against her. “But like I said, I plan on making the most of this week away from Terri to really sort through my feelings. I promise I’ll look after myself in the process.”

They pulled apart, and Danielle placed a soft kiss on Alex’s cheek.

“Call or e-mail anytime, and we will do dinner as soon as you are back.”

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MILES APART

BY A.L. BROOKS

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