

The background of the cover is a photograph of a sunset over a large body of water. The sky is filled with vibrant orange, red, and purple clouds. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright glow. In the distance, there are silhouettes of landmasses or islands. In the foreground, there are dark, silhouetted plants and bushes.

THE
INTERIM

AJ ADAIRE

The Interim

(Friends Series Novelette)

by

AJ Adaire


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Back of the Book

Devastated that her partner cheated, Melanie flees to a new job in Maine, where she meets Ren Madison. Ren is dealing with issues of her own after losing her partner Brooke in a plane crash

What happens in the interim after one relationship ends and you're really ready to love again? For Ren Madison, Melanie was what happened.

The Interim fills in the details of Ren Madison's life on Sunset Island after Brooke but before Lindy.

Excerpt:

Chapter 1 - Can I Take You Home With Me?

Having not dated since she'd lost Brooke three years earlier, the true nature of her lunch with Melanie was a bit of a mystery to Ren Madison. Had Melanie asked her to lunch as a friend, or as a date? At first she felt stupid. Upon reflection, the realization that it had been eighteen years since she'd last been on a date made her feel better. *I have to admit that I'm a little rusty in the dating department.* She felt surprised that she'd just made herself smile, a rare occurrence since the death of her partner Brooke.

She called Mallory, her best and closest friend, to share the news and assuage her discomfort. "I have a date, or at least I think I do."

"What do you mean?"

Ren could picture her trim friend with the megawatt smile settling into her recliner for their conversation. "Well, I met this woman, Melanie, at one of Penny's luncheons. You know, Penny has been a good friend. She's never given up trying to get me to rejoin the human race. At the party where we met, I only had a brief opportunity to chat with Melanie."

"What did the two of you talk about?" Mallory switched the phone to her other ear and settled deeper into her chair.

"You know, about general stuff. I told her I'm an artist and own the Inn on Sunset Island. She told me she's a chiropractor and new to town. We made small talk for a while and just before the party broke up, she asked me to meet her for lunch. She never used the word 'date.' She just asked me to join her for lunch next Sunday."

"Everything will become clear in time, grasshopper." After a pause, when Ren didn't add more, Mallory asked, "So you're feeling nervous?"

"Nervous? I guess. Why wouldn't I be? I just turned thirty-six two weeks ago, and I'm preparing to go out with the second woman I've ever dated...if it is a date. I'm not sure if it's just a casual friend thing or a real date."

"Well, my friend, it doesn't really matter if it's a lunch date or, as you call it, a date-date. Just go and have fun."

Soon after they hung up, Ren headed down the hallway to her bedroom. With the Inn she and her brother owned closed for the season, she was alone in a massive structure set atop Sunset Island. Being alone didn't bother her. She was used to it, having grown up on the island. Soon the Inn would reopen for the new season and it wouldn't be long before she'd be wishing for some peace and quiet.

That night Ren again dreamed of Brooke. In her dream, Brooke was smiling. She looked happy as they walked together on the beach until Brooke stooped down and wrote a message in the sand with her finger. Ren watched as Brooke spelled out the letters, I LOVE YOU. When Ren looked up, Brooke smiled. "It's time to let me go." Brooke stood, waved farewell and disappeared.

Ren awoke sobbing. "I love you, too. Brooke, don't leave me." In her heart, she knew her dream's message was valid and she knew it was time to move on, if only she could figure out how.

Sunday morning, the sun burst through Ren's window waking her. She stretched and got up, made her bed, and ate breakfast before heading to her studio to work. From the stack of active projects, she pulled the sketch for the brochure she'd promised to deliver to her client by the end of the week. After a little over two hours, the drawing finished and placed in the brochure, Ren admired the completed project. *Not bad if I do say so myself.* She printed a proof and after placing it carefully into the client's folder she glanced at the clock. *Eleven o'clock...I've got time for a shower and a quick stop at the marina before I meet Melanie if I don't expire from a severe case of nerves first.*

Standing naked in front of her closet she pondered what to wear after discarding several outfits. *Nope, too dressy...too severe, too rugged.* Settling on a casual outfit of tan pants, a white turtleneck, and a navy cotton pullover sweater, she wiped her sweaty palms on her pants and gave a final check in the mirror nodding her

approval., Ren took the speedboat from the island to her brother's marina on the mainland. She made a quick stop to collect her mail before getting into her SUV and driving to the luncheonette where she'd agreed to meet Melanie.

"I'm sorry, I'm a bit early," she said to the hostess. "I'm meeting someone at twelve. She's not here yet."

"No problem. I'm Sara. Would you like a table now or would you rather wait here?"

"A table please."

Sara escorted her to the table. Ren's pulse was pounding in her temple as her heart did a double-time dance in her chest. She fidgeted with the silverware to pass the time as she sat awaiting Melanie's arrival.

Melanie rushed in, spied Ren, made her way to the table, and took her seat. "Am I late?" A warm smile on her face, she glanced at her wrist to check her watch.

"No. I'm habitually early. It's nice to see you again."

After the server took their order, they sat chatting over their beverages. Once Ren relaxed, the lunch proved to be an enjoyable experience. "So, how did you end up here, since you're not local to the area?"

"It's a long story. Short version is that I've always loved it here, I'd just finished school, and when the opportunity presented itself I jumped at the chance."

"I've never felt the need to see a chiropractor because I've never really had a problem with my back. At least not until I started spending hours at a time in front of the computer doing my illustration work."

Melanie opened her personal calendar. "Why don't you come by my house tomorrow night for dinner. I have a portable table there. I can give you a massage and an adjustment. After that, I'll show you several exercises to help relieve some of that pain. Will six work for you?"

Ren hesitated, her mind racing. Knowing for sure that this time Melanie was asking her on a date, she tried to analyze her feelings about going to Melanie's house. Melanie was waiting for an answer so Ren couldn't delay any longer. She smiled. "I'll look forward to it."

Despite stopping to buy a bottle of wine, Ren arrived at Melanie's a few minutes early. Responding to the doorbell as soon as the chime sounded, Melanie greeted Ren with a welcoming smile. A thought flashed through Ren's head. *She's really cute and so very different in appearance from Brooke.* Brooke had been tall and blonde, while Melanie was shorter than Ren's own height of five feet three inches. Melanie had a tan, slender, well-muscled body, and short brown hair. Her expressive brown eyes, the color of liquid chocolate, were a contrast to Ren's own nearly black hair and blue eyes.

"Hello, come in. You're here right on time." Melanie welcomed Ren into her tastefully decorated, contemporary styled home.

Ren removed her jacket and placed it into Melanie's extended hand. Making quick work of hanging it in the closet, Melanie smiled at her guest. "Come on, I'll show you around." The tour ended in the kitchen where Melanie opened then offered Ren some wine. "Was the trip over from the island cold?"

"Not too bad, just a little chilly. It'll be colder going home tonight for sure. Anyway, I'm used to it. Having been raised in the Inn on Sunset Island, I've made the trip to the mainland and back in all kinds of weather. Ren smelled something good baking in the oven. "Whatever you're making smells delicious."

"Thanks. If it's okay with you, I thought we could do the massage and adjustment first before we eat. Getting adjusted on a full stomach isn't the most comfortable."

"Okay, whatever you think best. Where do you want me?"

Melanie led Ren to the basement where she had the table set up in one of the two rooms. Ren glanced around at the unfamiliar surroundings. "I've never had an adjustment before, so I don't know what to expect."

Melanie stood across the adjustment table from Ren and gave an overview of what she'd do. "Because this is not the result of an accident or injury and we know the reason you're having difficulty, we won't need an x-ray. I started out as a massage therapist, but soon realized that there were times when I couldn't do everything with just soft tissue work. So, I went back to school to get my degree as a chiropractor. Before the adjustment, I like to warm up and relax the muscles first. I've found that my patients adjust easier that way. Most clients don't find the adjustment painful so you can relax. I won't hurt you. Got any other questions?"

"I don't think so." Ren stepped closer to the table waiting for instructions.

"Would you mind taking your sweater off? The fabric is thick and I'll be more able to feel your spine through just your shirt."

"Sure." Ren slipped her sweater off over her head. She was glad she had ironed her entire blouse instead of just the collar and cuffs like she sometimes did when she was in a hurry.

“Lie face down on the table, please.”

Ren complied with the instructions. She placed her face in the hollow at the head of the table, settled her body, and exhaled a long breath to calm her nerves.

“We’re going to start with a little massage, okay?”

Ren nodded as best she could while face down on the table. Melanie wheeled the stool around to the head end of the table and began to massage Ren’s back. After only a couple of minutes she felt some of her muscles begin to unknot and as she exhaled another lungful of air, she felt herself relax. “Umm. That feels great.” To Ren’s relief, the massage was not sensual like one a lover might give. This was a more vigorous, professional massage of the muscles of her upper back and shoulders.

Melanie worked on Ren’s neck and shoulders with her hands for about five minutes before asking, “Will it be okay to use a massage machine on your lower back?”

Ren nodded her agreement. She heard the device start then felt the thumping of what seemed to be a group of balls bouncing on her back.

Melanie used the machine for a couple of minutes then asked, “How does that feel? Okay so far?”

Again, Ren nodded. “Good.” Her voice shook in time with the vibration of the machine and it made her smile. She likened it to a kid talking while thumping his or her chest.

Melanie bent Ren’s legs at the knee to check alignment before asking Ren to turn over and remain seated with her legs out in front of her. She wrapped her left arm around Ren’s back and her right arm around Ren’s left shoulder. As she supported Ren’s weight, she leaned Ren backward onto the table, leaving her arm underneath. Using her full body pressed against Ren’s torso, she pushed. Being embraced in such a way, by a stranger, felt odd to Ren. It was intimate but not sexual in any way. She felt her spine release then Melanie moved her left arm higher and pushed again. Her effort resulted in another release.

“That was good. You’re adjusting well.” Melanie again moved to the head of the table and sat on her stool. “Please slide up towards me.” Melanie began to massage Ren’s neck to warm and loosen the muscles. “This will feel strange but won’t be painful,” she warned, as she sharply moved Ren’s head causing the vertebrae to adjust and emit a loud crack. The noise the adjustment made was alarming to hear but was not painful. “Okay, I found your pelvis to be in good alignment and the adjustment in your back and neck should have released that tension you have between your shoulder blades and shoulders.” She took Ren’s right hand with hers, slipped her left arm under Ren’s shoulders to assist her in sitting up. “Stand up slowly and be sure you don’t feel dizzy.”

Ren stood up and was amazed at how good her body felt. “Wow! I really do feel much better. Can I take you home with me?” Suddenly she realized what she’d said which caused her face to turn bright red. “I mean, no I didn’t mean...”

“That’s okay. I know what you meant...for professional purposes only. Don’t worry, Ren. I understand that you lost someone you loved very much. I won’t pressure you for more than you’re ready to give me, so just relax and let’s enjoy dinner.”

“Melanie, you’re the first woman I’ve had any potentially romantic interaction with since Brooke died three years ago. I’m not even sure what I’m doing here. I know I definitely want to be your friend. In all honesty, I don’t know if there will be more than that for me. I can promise you that I’m a good friend. If you’re patient with me, it’s possible that there may be more. I’m sorry, that’s all I’m sure of right now. Can you accept me on those terms?”

“I can.” Melanie extended her arms, “Come here, give your friend a hug in appreciation and let’s have dinner. I’m starved.”

Ren hesitated, just for a moment, before she returned the hug. Hugging Melanie felt so different. She was used to being dwarfed by her partner. With Melanie, she felt physically taller and bigger in stature. The feeling was different—not that it was unpleasant, just different. She evaluated her response...*nope, no sexual tingle at all.* She wondered if she would be unresponsive forever, or if she just was simply not sexually attracted to Melanie. *She’s cute and has a great personality. I enjoy being with her, but don’t know if I can offer her, or anyone for that matter, more than friendship.*

Deciding there was no upside to trying to analyze her feelings yet, Ren opted to take Melanie at her word, to just relax and enjoy their time together, to see how things progressed. Dinner concluded and coffee consumed, they’d enjoyed animated conversation throughout the evening. Melanie stood to clear the table.

Ren said, “Let me wash.”

“No, I like playing in the water. I’ll clean up after you leave.”

“Well, I hope you’ll forgive me then. We have some early guests this week, long time customers so I have to get back to the Inn to make sure that everything is set up for breakfast. Maggie, our Innkeeper, will probably already have done that, but I won’t feel comfortable if I don’t check it myself before I go to bed. It’s the only thing I really

micromanage. “Ren smiled. “My biggest fear about running the Inn is that some morning, I’ll find fifty hungry people sitting at the breakfast tables, knives and forks in their fists, pounding out the mantra, ‘Feed me, feed me!’”

Melanie patted Ren’s arm. “I completely understand.” She handed Ren her jacket and walked her to the door. Ren stood there, obviously struggling with what to do. Melanie opened her arms, but didn’t move forward. “Another hug...or is that too much?”

“Are you reading my mind?”

Melanie laughed. “No. Just your body language.”

Ren stepped into Melanie’s open arms and accepted the embrace. She inhaled a deep breath and let out a long sigh.

“Want to talk about it?” Melanie released Ren and slid her hands down Ren’s arms to take each of Ren’s hands into her own.

“I’m not sure I can. Not just yet, anyway.” Ren exhaled another long breath and shrugged her shoulders. Her tense muscles indicated she was ready to pull away at the slightest provocation.

“That’s okay. If you change your mind, I’m willing to listen whenever you feel ready to talk. I’m sure you have very conflicted thoughts running through your head right now. Maybe someday it’ll feel right to tell me about it. Maybe you won’t ever feel a need to tell me anything. That’s okay too. I want you to feel better. It’s part of who I am—in my job and in my personal life.”

Ren nodded. “I really appreciate the adjustment, the dinner, and the friendship you’ve given me tonight. Mostly, I appreciate your patience. If you’ll give me a chance again, next time I’ll try to be more ready to...well, let’s just leave it at just more ready. I’ll give you a call tomorrow. Thanks again for everything.”

Ren opened the door and strode down the walk.

Chapter 2 – I Don't Know How Much Of Her I Can Let Go Of

At work the next day, Melanie had just said goodbye to her patient when the phone rang.

“Oh, Ren. Thank you for the flowers. That was nice of you.”

“Thank you for the adjustment and massage. So you used to do massage for a living?”

“Yes. Now, if I massage as part of my adjustment, I mostly do therapeutic massage. I focus on individual muscles or areas of the body that are hurting. It's similar to what I did to you last night but more focused on areas that are particularly sore. The massage last night was just to loosen your muscles up a bit and make the adjustment easier. I also did spa massages, just a general total body massage that feels good, works out a few kinks, but is less intensely focused than the therapeutic massage.”

“I wanted to call and say thank you for last night. I really enjoyed the evening with you, and I have to say that I slept like a baby when I got home.”

“I'm so glad. I had a nice time with you last night, Ren.”

Prior to phoning Melanie, Ren had devoted considerable thought to their evening together the night before concluding that she wanted to spend more time with the warm and caring woman. Ren was unsure how much she would be able to offer emotionally. “Yes, I also enjoyed your company.” Ren had promised herself that she would try spending time with Melanie to see how it felt. “I appreciate the fact that you were very patient with me last night.” The fact that Melanie hadn't pushed her to talk or to be physical in any way gave Ren the sense that she might eventually be able to feel comfortable enough to share what she was thinking and feeling. “I, um...uh well, I was wondering if you would you like to take a sail with me on Sunday, assuming the weather is cooperative?” Ren held her breath awaiting Melanie's reply.

“I'd love it.”

“Great! You'll need to dress warmly, in layers. It can be cool on the water this time of year. Although it's only late April, the temperatures feel warm on land. However, with the wind blowing across the water, it can get real chilly.”

“I understand.”

“Do you want me to pick you up, or do you want to meet me at the boat?”

“You'll probably have to get the boat ready for our sail. I'll meet you at the marina. Where and when?”

“We don't want to go out too early, it'll be too cold. Let's say eleven-thirty at my brother's marina, Seawind, on the south side of town. Do you know it?”

“Yes. Is there parking near the boat, or should I park in the street?”

“Come straight in. I'll meet you in front of the office and show you where to park.”

“Great. See you then...I'm looking forward to it.”

“Good. See you Sunday.”

Sunday's weather proved to be a bright sunny day perfect for sailing and they were running with the breeze as they left the marina. Ren studied the water and knew it would be much cooler on the return sail as they tacked into the wind. If it was too cold she could always drop the sails and motor straight in, but the sailor in her hated to do that. At lunchtime, they stopped and anchored. Ren retrieved the cooler she brought along filled with sandwiches and drinks for their lunch. At anchor in a protected cove, with the sun shining brightly, they were very comfortable as they ate lunch.

Conversation on the sail out was light and fun. Melanie told tales of her training to be a massage therapist that elicited Ren's laughter. Melanie had a laugh that made Ren smile. She realized how much she'd missed laughter in her life since Brooke died—especially her own laughter.

Ren related a couple of stories about how embarrassing it had been initially to paint nudes in her art classes. She chuckled. “Now, I'd rather paint someone without clothing than with clothes on. I love to draw the light and shadows over their skin as it conceals the structure of the muscles and bones. I loved to paint Brooke nude. She was beautiful—fair, tall, and sexy as hell.” Surprised that the revelation came out so easily, Ren looked into Melanie's eyes. “I started to date her when I was a freshman in college. She was the only woman I ever dated, but I knew almost from the minute I met her that we'd have something special.”

Once Ren started talking, the story poured from her. It surprised her that she didn't feel sad summarizing her life with Brooke for Melanie. "We had an amazing relationship. I was an orphan, my parents died when I was two. My grandparents raised me at the Inn on Sunset Island. Just as I finished college my grandfather had a stroke, and I had to return here to help care for him. As I approached the end of my senior year in college Brooke and I had been struggling with the decision about where to live. She wanted to live in the city, and I felt I needed to return to Sunset Island to help my grandfather. When Grandpop had his stroke, Brooke gave up her goal to be a chef in the city and moved here with me to help out. She ended up opening the Inn's restaurant to the mainlanders and making it a very successful business. So she realized her dream, albeit in a way neither of us expected. Anyway, we were deliriously happy until..." Melanie reached for her hand and held it tightly in her own.

A few tears slowly made their way down Ren's cheeks. "She got an invitation to a wedding of an old friend. She didn't want to go, but I convinced her. If not for me..." Ren shook her head trying to deny her guilt. "Her plane crashed, on the way to the wedding, killing all onboard. For a long time after she died, I thought I wouldn't be able to go on alone. I just felt dead inside. I went to counseling and the miracle of what counseling can do for the human soul sits here before you today." Her wan smile revealed Ren's sarcasm. She scanned the horizon, organizing her thoughts before seeking Melanie's eyes. "I've given this considerable thought. I enjoy your company and appreciate your patience and willingness to put up with me." Not needing, or really expecting a reply from Melanie, Ren chuckled. "Okay, now I've thoroughly depressed both of us. I guess we should head back in. Better bundle up, it'll be much cooler going back." Ren packed up the remains of lunch and then busied herself with raising the anchor and hoisting the sails.

Melanie was pleased Ren felt comfortable enough to share her story, the good parts as well as the pain she'd endured after her partner's death. She noticed that Ren was open while telling the story, even up to and through the part where Brooke died. She encountered more difficulty when it came to revealing her own suffering after Brooke's death. Now her demeanor wasn't unpleasant. Instead, she was detached, remote.

Melanie wondered if Ren was feeling regret for being so open, or if talking had reopened the old wounds. Melanie wanted to say something to her, but wasn't sure what might be the best thing to say. She resolved to be honest with her in all ways and just tell her how she felt.

"Can you concentrate on what you're doing and listen to me at the same time?"

Ren nodded.

"Thank you."

Ren glanced over and made brief eye contact before turning back to handling the boat in the tricky wind.

"I don't know what to say to you to make it easier. I'm glad you told me your story even though it was painful for you. I'm honored that you trusted me enough to show me some of your pain. As much as I would like to, we both know I can't fix it for you or make it go away. If it helps, I'll always listen." Ren didn't respond. "I'm sorry I never had a chance to meet her. I know I'd have liked her. I hope you'll understand if I tell you that I envy you the chance you had to experience a love like that. I've never had a relationship near as long or intense as the one you described. It's something I think we all wish for ourselves. You were so lucky to have had it for as long as you did. I completely understand your anger, disappointment, and pain from your loss of that kind of love."

"I think talking about it will help, but I'm not sure. I'll have to get back to you on that." Ren's expression reflected her sadness. "Regardless, I'm glad I told you some of it. It's fair that you know this... I don't know how much of her I can let go of just yet. Sometimes I worry that I may never be ready to let go of enough to move on, you know, uh... to give another hundred percent to someone else."

The conversation ended as Ren concentrated on entering the marina. Because the wind had kicked up as the temperature dropped, Ren lowered the sails and motored the last leg, navigating neatly into the slip and securing the boat. When all the gear was stowed and the boat secured, Ren led Melanie up the stairs to the apartment above the marina office. She made hot chocolate for them and they sat in front of the small fireplace drinking it. There was little dialogue. Once they began to thaw out, the conversation between the two women increased but remained on safer, non-personal topics. At the door, Ren helped Melanie put on her coat as her guest prepared to leave for home. They made plans to catch a movie together later in the week.

"I'll check times and will give you a call tomorrow," Melanie said as she zipped her jacket. There was no parting hug. Ren's reserve, that had been present ever since she'd related the story of her relationship with Brooke, didn't project that she'd welcome physical contact.



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