

A. C. MEYER

love at a
distance



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«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Meyer A.

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A tale of second chances and hope, taking place during the Coronavirus pandemic. While the world is devastated by a pandemic, Babi finds herself trapped in her own personal nightmare. Alone at home, depressed by the direction her life is taking and terrified by the disease that plagues the world, she decides to hide in the family home in the countryside of Minas. Going through a serious creative crisis, Eric turned away from everything and everyone just over a year ago, believing that far from the spotlight and pressure from fans, he would be able to rediscover his passion for music. When nothing else works, he decides to return to the place where he discovered his love for the guitar and composing. His best friend's old house was empty, and he would have all the loneliness he needed to find his way back. When Babi and Eric are reunited, all those painful feelings from the past surface... as well as the passion. Will it be possible to make peace with the past or is it too late to start over? With her ability to approach difficult topics in a lighthearted way, A.C. Meyer, author of *Falling for Her* and the *After Dark* series, presents in *Isolated in love* a sweet story about second chances and new beginnings during one of the most difficult moments that humanity ever had to face.

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This book is dedicated to all professionals who are at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19. Doctors, nurses, technicians, receptionists, security guards, couriers, supermarket and pharmacy employees, and all those who, in some way, are exposing themselves so that we can remain at home. You are our superheroes...

I hope time *flies*.
So, *you return*
So, *I can hold you*
And kiss *you*.
Again.
Nando Reis

Chapter One

After looking at herself for the fifth time in the mirror to make sure that her hair was still naturally straight, with no strands out of place and that her makeup was just as discreet, as if she wasn't wearing anything, Babi took a deep breath, took out her cell phone, opened her Instagram and turned on the camera.

– Good morning, my *da'lins!* How are you, guys? Excited for the Backstreet Boys show later? – She smiled and winked with her usual charm. – I can't wait to see our boys up close! I promise to show you guys everything when I get to the arena, okay? I'll come back later to show my preparative and the look I'll be wearing. Kisses, Kisses! —She waved at the camera and turned it off, sighing.

Ever since she posted a video on the internet of herself having fun with her friends, sharing a day when she was particularly excited about a party she was going to, Babi saw her social media grow wildly. Overnight, she was elevated to the status of digital influencer and now had her daily life closely monitored by millions of followers. She was sponsored by eighteen brands – ranging from cosmetics to food brands – and occasionally appeared on major celebrity portals.

All this had come as a big surprise to her and her family. The shy teenager, born in a small town in the countryside of the state of Minas Gerais, who had grown up as a reserved adult focused on studies and who dreamed of having her own business – the reason why she went to study business management – has been a *web celebrity* for two years now. She lived in Barra da Tijuca, in Rio de Janeiro, was responsible for the employment of 25 people and had a revenue she could never have imagined. How had that happened? She had no idea. When she thought about having her own company, she never imagined that *she* would be the product. But life followed that path and she took the opportunity.

Gradually, with the aid of image and style professionals, she began to mold herself into the character that people wanted to see: the beautiful, well-groomed, cheerful and fun girl who was always present at the hottest events. The scriptwriter hired by Renata, her manager, created some of the catchphrases she used, like *da'lins* – the loving way to call her followers – and the *kisses, kisses* at the end of each video. Everything was carefully studied and planned to reach the final goal: increase the number of followers, engagement and views that turned into more contracts and growth in the revenue of the company that she needed to open to handle all of this.

Babi placed the cell phone on the living room counter and rested both hands on the furniture. With her head down, she took a deep breath in and out, counting from one to five. She had the perfect life for her *sweetscribers*, except for the problems she needed to deal with behind the camera.

– Are you alright, Babi? – Renata asked upon entering the room and seeing her in that position.

– Did you read the newspaper? – she asked, feeling her heart racing. She lifted her head and looked at the manager. – More people are getting sick. I think I'd better not to go to the show.

Renata rolled her eyes. That conversation again.

– Dear, it's just a little flu. It's nothing. And it didn't even really get to Brazil. Besides, we have contracts to honor. It's not just a show, you know. It's a professional appointment that will cost us millions if you don't go. – The short-haired brunette picked her cell phone, opened on social media, touched the screen and showed it to her. – Lana Gouveia has done five stories today talking about the show. You know that...

– Each *view* counts... I know it. – Babi sighed, tucking a strand of platinum hair behind her ear. – But I read in Folha that...

– *Stop. Reading. That. Fucking. Newspaper. Please.* And also, Uol, Yahoo and any other fucking online news portal. – Renata raised her hands, out of patience. She was tired of having to deal with Babi's insane fears. With every news she read, especially those related to health, she snapped a little, which she needed to keep secret from the public. After all, no one wanted to follow the life of a

hypochondriac with anxiety crises whenever they discovered a new virus on the other side of the world. – The government has already said we don't need to worry about that.

Babi closed her eyes and took a deep breath again. *The government...*, she thought to herself and decided not to say anything. She didn't want to have that kind of argument again. Especially when her head was so full. She spent much of the night awake, reading the news about the new virus that had caused an outbreak of some type of flu in China and that had quickly killed thousands in the country. The virus appeared to be spreading all over the world and that week it had finally been reported in Brazil.

What had lit a warning light in her brain was the fact that she read that the wedding of a *fitness* influencer's sister, to which she was supposed to have gone, but didn't due to already having a professional appointment scheduled long before the invitation arrived, had been the focus of infections of the virus in the state of Bahia. During the night, she chatted via messages with some friends who went to the party and discovered that five of them had symptoms and were waiting for exam results.

– Luma is waiting for her exam's results..." she said, referring to another digital influencer whom she was very close to.

– And she went to the Juiz de Fora concert. She's fine. Well-disposed and working. And she'll be going to Lucas Aguiar's birthday party later – Renata replied, smiling as she mentioned the party of the six o'clock soap operas lead. – Everyone is leading a normal life, Babi. And so, will you. – The tall, thin girl walked across the room and approached Babi, who continued breathing hard. She held the young woman's cold, sweaty hands and opened a comforting smile. – Calm down. No one young dies of a flu. Nothing will happen to you. Dr. Luiz has already said that your health is perfect.

Mentioning Babi's trusted doctor seemed to work. She nodded, closing her eyes and counting to five as she tried to control her breathing.

– It's going to be all right, – Renata assured her. Shaking her hands on her own. – Now let's decide what outfit you're going to wear. That brand you love sent five perfect looks. It's gonna be hard picking one.

Led by the manager, Babi went to the room-turned-closet to choose the clothes she would wear at the show. Even though she continually repeated that she was exaggerating and told herself to stay calm, it was very difficult to convince her heart.

* * *

Renata finally managed to divert Babi's attention from the news portals. They were in the arena where the show would take place, and she was talking to two other influencers she was friends with.

– How is she doing? – Sandro, her assistant, asked, worried about Babi. Everyone on the team knew about her anxiety crises and her fear of diseases and were apprehensive. During the afternoon, the news had not been encouraging. Health authorities started to warn that the risk was becoming ever greater.

– She's fine now. I had the Information systems team configure one of those parent control apps in her phone to block access to news portals – Renata explained, and Sandro raised an eyebrow. – I had to do it, Sandro. If she learns that the governor ordered all cultural events in the city suspended, she'll snap.

Sandro shook his head.

– That's really wrong, Re. She has to know what's going on. Soon, there'll be talk about that subject.

The brunette closed her eyes and placed her hand on her forehead.

– I gotta hold her here at any cost... the contract she signed has a fine of millions if she doesn't honor it. It's the biggest fine we ever agreed on. I don't know if we can afford that...

– Renata! – he rebuked her. – How could you...

- Who would have thought something like this would happen?
 - It's *your* job to be ahead of it.
 - An epidemic?
 - Any problem. What if she got sick? Had an accident? You can't play with danger.
- Renata shrugged.
- Now it's done, and you need to help me keep her here.

* * *

Babi turned the camera to the arena to show how crowded it was... well, *almost*. She frowned. Strange. It was less than an hour away from the concert and the place was not as crowded as expected. It was an international concert, the tickets sold out quickly... where were the people?

– *Da'lings*, We're very excited here at Drink's VIP area, I'd like to thank them for inviting us to this magic moment – she said to the camera, forcing an excitement she didn't feel. Her friends, also influencers, who were present, gathered behind her and started to scream, excitedly.

– Woo-Hoo!!! Backstreet Boysss!!

She lifted her drink into a toast to the camera, leaving the sponsor's logo clearly visible, smiled and took a sip of the drink. Then stopped recording and posted it. She was about to open the browser to see the news when she was called by the beverage company's marketing director to take pictures. She greeted a number of people who were there until the lights of the arena went out and the concert began.

When the song started playing and the band came on stage, Babi relaxed and put her worries aside. She was anticipating that show for a long time and when she heard the familiar songs, she let herself be swayed and danced all night long. She recorded several videos from her vantage point, in addition to taking many photos of the presentation.

At the end of the show, she and the other girls were very excited. Generally, the executives of the companies that hired them took them to meet the artists in the dressing room and the whole thing was properly recorded and posted on social media. But when she looked at Renata, Babi realized something was wrong. The manager seemed annoyed and a wrinkle of concern was visible on her forehead. She excused herself with her friends and went to her.

– Everything all right? – she asked, worried. Renata was one of the most restrained people she knew and dealt with any problem with the coldness needed to solve it. Seeing her seemingly shaken by something was unusual.

– Everything... – the woman began to speak but was interrupted by the older man.

– We're sorry, Babi, but we won't be able to take you to the dressing room because of the epidemic. – The man ran his hand down his thin brown hair and continued talking without noticing her widened eyes. – The band's crew warned that they won't receive anyone because of this and...

– Wait. What are you talking about? – she asked, trembling from the inside.

– The concert shouldn't even have happened. The governor has ordered all cultural events suspended starting today. The production team ignored the order – he continued to explain.

– Things are... Are they that bad? – she asked.

– Babi... – Renata called, but she raised her hand to stop her and continued looking at the man.

– We don't know yet. – It's all too recent, but everyone's very worried.

She nodded.

– Don't worry. I won't be upset. I appreciate the invitation to come today. – The executive smiled, seeming relieved that she did not complain. He was used to dealing with celebrities and many of them weren't easy to please.

When the man walked away, Babi took her cell phone and typed the address of a news portal.

Page not found.

That was her luck, the website was offline. She tried another one.

Page not found.

What's going on?

– You won't be able to open it. – She raised her head upon hearing Renata's words. – I had the network team block these pages using an access control program so you wouldn't see the news.

– You did what?

– I knew you would freak out, just like you are now and...

– Renata, have it unlocked *now*. And I want to leave. Immediately – she spoke, serious. The manager was worried with the expression she saw on her face. – I can't believe it... – she murmured to herself and walked away, without answering when Renata called her.

I need to keep cool, she told herself, I'm still in public. I can't collapse.

She managed to conceal the shaking of her hands and the cold sweat. She smiled, talked a little more, and a few minutes later, Sandro called her to leave.

In the car, he picked her cell phone again and typed the address of the news portal once more. When the page loaded, she was surprised by the news that were not there the last time she had accessed:

Brazil has more than 77 confirmed cases of coronavirus

Rio confirms 1st local transmission.

Government creates crisis office to fight the virus.

Governor suspends public events in the city.

As the car sped up, heading to the condo where she lived, she accessed every link on the subject and read the articles, feeling fear taking over. She stopped reading and took a deep breath, closing her eyes.

– We arrived – Sandro whispered, waking her from her thoughts. She looked at him, nodded and was about to get out of the car when she saw their motion to follow her and stopped them.

– No. I want to be alone. – She saw Renata open her mouth to speak but shook her head. – Please, go home. It's late. We'll talk tomorrow...

She turned around and entered the building. She said good evening to the janitor, who was cleaning his hands with gel alcohol. She frowned. The building employees were never that careful. She got in the elevator and pressed the button for the 11th floor, thinking about the strangeness of it all. She couldn't fully understand what was going on... how that could be happening. Everything seemed surreal.

She entered the apartment and the first thing she did was take off the clothes and shoes she was wearing. Still in her underwear, she turned on the TV on the news channel and headed for the shower. She rubbed herself thoroughly and washed her hair. She knew what she had to do. She watched more series and documentaries about doctors and diseases than anyone should, but she couldn't stop herself. Since childhood, when she heard her mother mention to a neighbor that her father had died after contracting a terrible bacterium, she developed an uncontrollable fear of diseases. This led her to do things that an ordinary person didn't normally do, such as washing her hands countless times during a day.

When her mother realized that she was easily alarmed into feeling something out of the ordinary in her body, she took her to a doctor who diagnosed her with illness anxiety disorder, also known as hypochondria. Therapy and medication helped her get better, but from time to time, she felt that anxiety caused by the fear of getting sick extending its claws.

After the bath, she sat on her bed with a towel wrapped around her hair and dressing a bathrobe in front of the TV and was zapping between news channels that incessantly repeated the same information about the virus that was taking over the world. *What if she contracts that? What if she was already sick?*

– My God, there were thousands of people in that arena today, – she murmured, distressed.

On TV, a doctor was being interviewed.

– The infected patient may experience shortness of breath, coughing, fever... – She placed her hand on her forehead. It didn't seem to be hot. She wasn't coughing, but... definitely was short of breath. She saw her chest go up and down with difficulty and became even more nervous. Her hands sweated and she started shaking. Until a little speck of clarity whispered inside her head: *calm down, that's just anxiety trying to control you. You are not sick. You will not die. Calm down.*

She turned the TV off. Listening to so many experts and journalists talking about that wouldn't do her any good. In other circumstances, that would be the time for her to open her social media and make videos, talking about the concert and the people she met, post photos on her *feed* and watch the repercussion. But now, all she wanted to do was to curl up like a ball and go to sleep.

* * *

The following days, all the talk in the country was about the terrible pandemic. The number of the infected increased, as did deaths. She was isolated indoors as the health agencies recommended, but she felt more and more alone. Contrary to what she imagined; she had signed more advertisement contracts. She had decided to fire Renata for what she had done, but Sandro convinced her to reconsider. She was a person of trust and, at that moment, she was trying to protect her. Even if it was by wrong means.

And that fear she felt that people said was unfounded, seemed to have taken everyone judging by what she saw on TV and on the internet. On social media, the hashtag #stayhome went viral. Everyone asked for those who didn't need to go out to avoid crowds.

Obviously, Babi wouldn't come out for anything. The fridge was full and, for now, she didn't need anything. Alone in the flat, she spent her days watching TV programs about the coronavirus. She couldn't stop consuming everything that was said about it. The only posts she made on her social media were those related to work. Renata had made her a schedule of videos to record and she reserved an entire afternoon just to do that. She left everything ready and the posts programmed so she wouldn't have to do it every day.

Until she began to feel back pains and an intense headache. Then, the shortness of breath began. The difficulty to breath became such that she had to call Dr. Luiz and ask for help.

They had a video conference appointment and he recommended that she tested to know if she was infected. She didn't tell anyone. She knew if she talked about it with someone on the team, the information would be leaked to the press and she wasn't ready to see the news that she was sick on the papers. She scheduled a home visit with the lab recommended by the doctor and got examined.

Those were the two worst days of her life. When she received the result and saw it was negative, that she was not sick, it was as if someone had lifted a gigantic weight off her back. But the symptoms were still there. Increasingly intense.

Anxiety crisis, the doctor diagnosed. Again.

She couldn't handle everything. The disease. People suffering. Deaths. The loss of freedom. Loneliness. She knew how privileged she was in many ways, but that pain she felt in her soul was too much to bear.

That night, she talked to her mother and brother before going to bed. They were well and healthy. Her mother was temporarily living with her eldest son in Belo Horizonte so she wouldn't be alone. After hanging up, Babi let out the tears she'd been holding back since it all started. She was trying to be strong, keep up a schedule and deal with isolation, but all at the expense of her broken heart. She couldn't understand how that could be happening. It was 2020, after all. Something like that was unimaginable.

Sitting in the living room, she looked around at the well-decorated room. It was as if everything was as it always was. As if her world – and probably that of millions of people – hadn't changed. As if it continued exactly as it should be.

But *everything* had changed.

Looking around the room again, she felt as if the walls were closing in little by little. It was then that the memory of one of the recurring dreams of her almost sleepless nights came to her mind. Closing her eyes, she remembered clearly, the small house in the outskirts of the city where she was born, in the countryside of Minas Gerais. Where she, her mother and older brother used to spend New Year evenings.

An idea started to take form. *Should I...?*

With her eyes closed, she could almost smell the flowers in the house's backyard, which were cared by Mr. Antonio, the caretaker who would go there once a week. She loved that place. Every time she went there, it was like recharging her batteries and renewing himself.

– That's it – she told herself. She got off the couch and went straight to the closet to pack her bags. She was alone in that flat, at least she'd be alone in her favorite place in the world. She needed some time for herself, away from everything. From that world she was living in.

She picked her cell phone and pressed the speed dial. When her call was picked up, she went straight to the point.

– Suspend all activities. Except for what is already scheduled to be posted on social media, I don't want to make any more posts for now.

–But Babi... – Renata protested, but the girl did not let her finish.

– Tell the accountant to keep paying the team normally and let him know that we're going to keep everyone's job, but we're taking a break.

She had invested much of what she earned and was able to keep the team employed.

Thank God for the little miracles. She didn't even want to think about the possibility of having to fire someone in the middle of a pandemic.

– But this is a great time for you to make money. There are sponsors interested in promoting *live streams* with you.

– That's enough, Renata. I don't care about *live streams*. I'm tired of *hearing* about *live streams*. I'm not a singer, actress or someone like that who has entertainment to offer. This is a serious moment. We're living a pandemic. People need to feed their souls with good things, not frivolities. And so, do I. I'm going to Minas. I need some time.

She could almost see Renata placing her middle finger in her forehead, searching for self-control and arguments to dissuade her from the idea. But she was determined to retake control of her life.

– Very well – the manager said grudgingly. – I'll pull the brakes here. Maybe it will be good for you to be away for a while. Back in that end of world where you like to go, things must be a little calmer with regard to the pandemic.

For the first time in many days, Babi opened a true smile. She was still afraid of the disease, anguished, with feelings of uncertainty, and lonely. But she was going *home*. Finally, something seemed to be getting into place.

Chapter Two

After spending hours on the road, Babi finally took the country road that would take her home. She was tired and hungry but didn't want to stop on the way. She didn't think it was safe. During the three-and-a-half hour's trip, she listened to her favorite songs, arranged in a *playlist* created especially for when she went home and ate almost an entire package of Oreos she had brought on impulse.

Slowing down, she glanced at the almost empty package on the passenger seat, feeling guilty. She didn't have the habit of eating unhealthy food, her diet was well balanced, but in the last weeks she'd been abusing sweets. Mostly the Oreo packages she had hidden in her storeroom and that were her weak point.

Besides the cookie package, she had brought, also on impulse – despite having promised herself she wouldn't post anything while she was away —, the tripod and the LED ring she used to record videos. They were tools that were part of her daily life and she was afraid of not bringing them and ending up needing them for whatever reason.

Finally, she saw the wall of the condominium and smiled. That was her *home*. The place that had left her heart and kept the best memories of her life. Just being a few feet from her real home, she could already feel her heart beating a little less fast.

She looked at the clock on the car's dashboard. Almost ten P.M. She preferred to drive at night, because the roads were clearer, and now, during the pandemic, they were painfully silent. She passed the condominium's security cabin and after the guard checked her car, she drove to the street where her house was.

She parked in front of it, turned off the engine and looked up to the sky. Everything here was different from the place where she lived in Rio. The sky was bluer and without the pollution, it was possible to see thousands of stars sparkling. Breathing in, still inside the car, she was able to feel the scent of nature, provided by the infinity of trees around. She picked a surgical mask from the small box that was on the seat and placed it carefully on her face. On TV, they always said it wasn't necessary to use it. The doormen even laughed when they saw her using the mask on her way to the garage, but she didn't care. Fear was bigger than embarrassment. And if they thought she was overdoing it, so be it. That wouldn't be the first or the last time.

She took a deep breath and let out the air slowly. *Easy, it's all good. You're safe here.* From paranoia. From fear. from loneliness. From the virus... *am I?*

– Social isolation is the best form of prevention – she spoke aloud while disconnecting her phone from the charger, as if she wanted to convince herself.

She picked the black leather bag and put it on her lap. She searched it until she found her Charlie Brown Funko keychain. It was old, the paint was already fading, worn out by the time of use, but it kept thousands of memories of a life that was left behind. One that wouldn't return.

Don't go that way, she warned herself. Shaking her head, she pushed away the thoughts and memories that threatened to return. This wasn't the time to open that Pandora's box.

She opened the door, hung her purse on her shoulder and got out of the car. Facing the garden, she looked at the house. It was modest for her current living standards. She lived in a large flat, decorated by a professional so that every room was carefully planned to look good in videos. But not here. The house was white, colonial style and had a small balcony in the front. The tilted roof gave it a special charm and the welcoming atmosphere she loved so much. It had been decorated by the family and each furniture, each object, had an emotional connection with them. As expected, it was dark and... *wait. Why was one of the rooms lit?*

She frowned and approached. She saw a man's outline, hidden by the curtains, pass in front of her brother's bedroom window. She knew it wasn't Leandro. He was in Belo Horizonte with their mother. She was so surprised by the unexpected presence that she didn't even think of the danger.

She decided to go around the house. She'd go in from the back and confront the intruder. Deep down she knew that she should've gone back to the condo's entrance and talked to a security guard or called the police, but impulsiveness got the best of her. She was just like that. Impulsive. As always, her blood boiled, and she decided to kick out whoever was there. She went stealthily around the side of the house to the backyard, being careful to avoid rustling the plants. She crossed the yard and finally reached the porch in the back. She placed the key in the lock carefully and opened it slowly. She pushed the dark wooden door and went in, stepping firmly. The light was off. She blinked a couple times so her eyes would get used to the darkness. After barely passing through the door, she was thrown to the ground, knocked down by the impact of a strong, muscular, heavy and warm body.

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