

Before You Begin

Some stories ask whether love can survive.

This one asks what survives after love changes you.

If you've ever mistaken being wanted for being chosen...

If you've ever stayed because leaving felt lonelier than losing yourself...

If you've ever looked in the mirror and wondered where you disappeared to...

Welcome.

This story is for you.

"Sometimes the greatest seduction isn't another person. It's the version of yourself you're willing to become just to be loved."

- *Love*

Chapter 1

Unchosen

"The hardest goodbyes aren't spoken. They're discovered in the moment someone looks at you... and chooses another direction."

I've never been the kind of woman who questioned where I stood with someone.

Not when I gave them everything.

Not when I showed up the way I did.

Not after spending the last eight and a half years answering late-night calls, memorizing the cadence of his voice, learning to hear everything he never said out loud.

I knew him.

Or at least... I thought I did.

So when he tells me he's coming home, I don't ask what that means.

I don't have to.

Some things don't need words when you've already lived them.

I simply assume I'll be part of what comes next.

The room is already too full by the time I get there.

I came early — too early — hoping I'd catch him before everyone else did.

Before the hugs.

Before the condolences.

Before grief claimed him for the rest of the day.

He hadn't seen his brother in years.

Now he's gone.

The final goodbye.

He's finally free... and his little brother isn't here to see it.

Time has a cruel way of reminding us it waits for no one.

Too many bodies.

Too many voices.

Too much grief hanging in the air for anyone to notice the way something inside me shifts before my eyes ever find him.

But I feel it.

That pull.

Like my body knows he's here before my mind catches up.

When I finally look up, I smile.

It's instinct.

Automatic.

He's exactly where my eyes expect him to be.

Just... not the way I imagined finding him.

My smile doesn't drop right away.

It stays there — too long.

Suspended.

Confused.

Like my body hasn't caught up to what my eyes are seeing.

His arm is wrapped around another woman.

Not loosely.

Not casually.

Familiar.

Intimate.

Certain.

Is that her?

His baby mama?

For a second, I don't panic.

I don't assume the worst.

Not yet.

He hasn't given me a reason to.

Then he looks at me.

And everything inside me goes still.

There it is — that moment.

The one where the world narrows and two people who know each other find each other in a crowded room.

This is the part where something is supposed to happen.

A smile.

A nod.

A shift.

Something.

But instead...

he looks away.

Just like that.

Like I was never there to begin with.

Like eight and a half years had never happened.

Like I wasn't the one who answered every collect call.

Who put money on his books.

Who wrote letters just so he'd have something to hold onto when the nights got long.

As if I'd never spent eight and a half years loving a man through concrete, steel, and glass.

...

I start rationalizing immediately.

He didn't recognize me.

It's been years.

That has to be it.

It has to be.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I'm weaving through the crowd toward him.

My hand lifts.

Ready to tap his shoulder.

Ready to hear him say my name.

...

And then I stop.

Something about the way he's holding her tells me not to.

My hand falls back to my side.

Like it was never supposed to touch him in the first place.

There he is.

Still tall.

Still solid.

Still...

him.

And that smile...

God.

That smile.

It still melts me exactly where I stand.

But something about this picture refuses to make sense.

Why is he with her?

He's standing there with Morgan Anderson —

her hand wrapped tightly around his arm like she belongs there.

Like she's always belonged there.

And worse...

he's letting her.

...

"Hey, Bear!"

Star, Dominick's cousin, slices straight through my thoughts.

Fuck.

She wasn't supposed to see me.

Double fuck.

Now I have to pretend I'm okay.

"Hhhheeeeyyy boo," I greet, forcing a smile that doesn't quite reach my eyes.

And now...

she sees me.

Breathe.

Just breathe.

You got this.

"Hey Morgan," I say, hoping my face is controlled. "You look cute."

She smirks before finally mustering a small hi.

I know this bitch didn't!

She tightens her grip around his arm.

He doesn't pull away.

She gives me a small, satisfied smile.

Dumb bitch!

Meanwhile, he still doesn't acknowledge me.

My stomach drops so hard it feels like my heart goes with it.

It feels like the air inside my body is being squeezed out.

Air refuses to reach my lungs.

I glance away, swiping the tear that defiantly rolls down my cheek.

"It was nice seeing y'all."

I walk away before anyone can say anything –

if they were even going to.

I make it to my car before everything falls apart.

I don't remember unlocking it.

I don't remember climbing inside.

I just know the door slams shut harder than I meant for it to.

The silence out here is different.

Not peaceful.

Suffocating.

My hands find the steering wheel automatically.

I grip it so hard my knuckles ache.

Like if I hold on tight enough...

maybe I won't be the thing that comes apart.

My chest feels wrong.

Too tight.

Too full.

Like something is trapped inside me, clawing its way out.

Then it happens.

Not soft.

Not graceful.

Not something I can control.

A sound tears out of me.

Loud.

Sharp.

Ugly.

I don't even recognize it at first.

It doesn't sound like me.

I scream.

Once.

Then again.

And again.

Until I'm not even sure where the sound is coming from anymore.

Until my throat burns raw.

Until my vision blurs.

Because what the fuck was that?

What the fuck just happened?

My whole body folds forward, forehead hitting the steering wheel...

I can't even hold myself together long enough to cry pretty.

Eight and a half years.

Eight and a half years of showing up.

Of answering every collect call.

Of putting money on his books.

Of writing letters just so he wouldn't forget there was still life waiting for him outside those walls.

And this...

This is how my story ends?

The fucking audacity.

I drag my hands down my face, trying to pull myself together.

One breath.

Then another.

It doesn't help.

Nothing helps.

I feel stupid.

Replaceable.

Disposable.

Like I spent eight and a half years believing I already had a place that was never mine.

Like I was never really...

HER.

...

The part that makes me feel even more fucked up?

I still want him.

Even after that.

Even after he looked right through me...

like I wasn't even there.

I let out another broken sound, quieter this time.

More like something collapsing than releasing.

Because how do you turn that off?

How do you stop loving someone...

just because they finally showed you a truth you never wanted to see?

How do you convince your heart...

when it's years behind your eyes?

He wouldn't do this to me.

He loves me.

Right?

Because if he doesn't...

then everything I thought I knew —

about him...

about us...

about myself...

was never what I thought it was.

And if that's true...

who have I been loving all this time?

I've never felt this lost before.

For the first time in my life...

I don't know where I stand