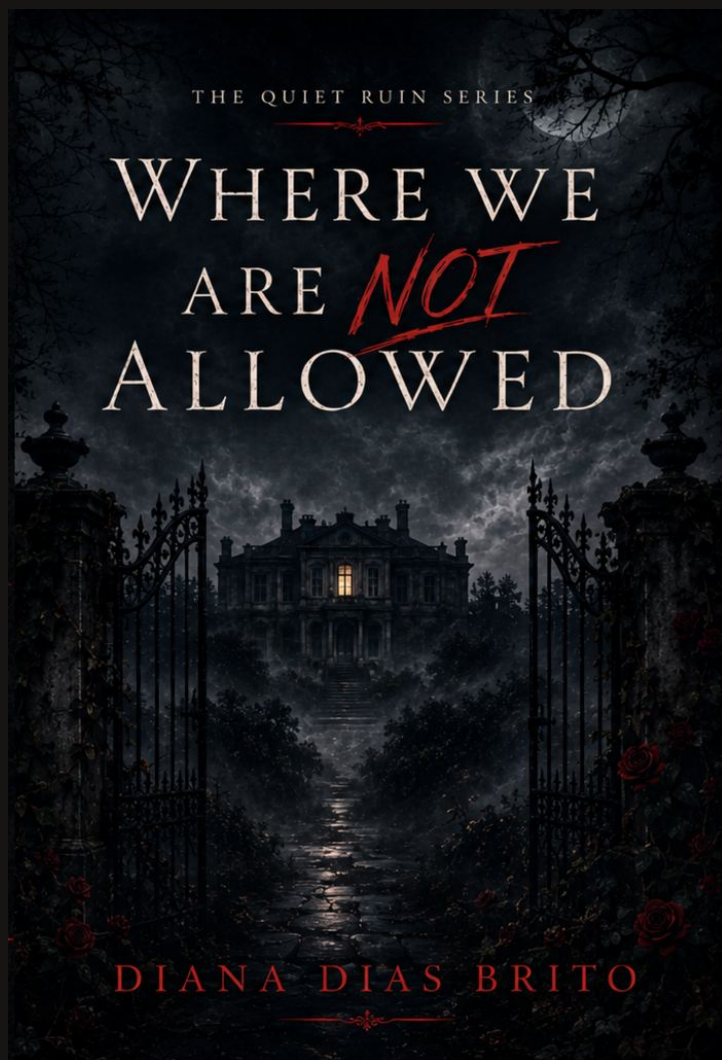


STEP INSIDE THE STORY



A FIRST-CHAPTER GIFT

DIANA DIAS BRITO

Chapter One

The gate is colder than I remember.

My fingers hesitate before touching it, as if the metal might reject me.
As if it knows I shouldn't be here.

It hasn't changed. The iron curves still twist into the same deliberate shapes. The stone pillars still stand taller than they need to, heavy with the kind of permanence that outlasts regret.

The house waits beyond it.

Not abandoned.

Not broken.

Waiting.

I tell myself I came back because I needed closure.

That word feels thin now.

Closure suggests something finished. Something clean. Something that can be folded away and placed on a shelf.

Nothing about this place was ever clean.

The gravel shifts under my shoes as I step closer. The sound is too loud in the stillness. Even the air feels restrained, as though it has been holding its breath for years.

I shouldn't have come alone.

But there are returns that cannot be witnessed.

Confrontations that demand solitude.

My reflection trembles faintly in the iron. Pale.

Composed. Controlled.

I practiced that expression in the car.

The last time I stood here, everything was louder. Voices raised.
Doors slamming. A decision made too quickly and defended too
fiercely.

I swallow the memory before it can fully form.

The house does not move.

It does not accuse.

It does not forgive.

It simply exists.

And for a moment, I wonder if that is worse.

A breeze slips through the trees behind me, brushing against the back
of my neck. I resist the instinct to turn around.

Because turning around would mean expecting someone to be there.

And I don't want to expect him.

My hand closes around the iron at last.

The cold bites into my skin.

I push.

The gate opens without resistance.

That unsettles me more than if it had resisted.

I step through.

The path curves toward the house in a line I once knew by heart.

I don't rush it.

The front door stands closed.

Not locked.

Closed.

That distinction settles quietly in my mind.

I climb the steps slowly, aware of the hollow sound beneath each
footfall. The wood does not creak. It holds.

Someone has taken care of this place.

The brass handle is cool beneath my palm.

No dust.

No neglect.

No abandonment.

I hesitate, listening.

Nothing.

No footsteps.

No voices.

No distant movement.

Only the low hum of air passing through trees behind me.

I turn the handle.

It yields.

The interior air meets me first, cool, still, faintly scented with old wood and something sharper beneath it. Polish, perhaps. Or memory, preserved too carefully.

I step inside.

The door closes behind me with a muted click.

Soft. Final.

The hallway stretches ahead, unchanged. The narrow table against the wall remains in its place. The mirror above it reflects a thinner version of me than I remember leaving.

I don't look at myself for long.

The floorboards feel solid beneath my shoes.

The house has been maintained.

Maintained by whom?

A draft moves through the corridor, brushing past my shoulder. I follow it instinctively, deeper inside.

The living room opens to my right.

The curtains are drawn halfway, filtering the light into long pale stripes across the floor. Dust drifts lazily through the beams.

The furniture is exactly as it was.

The armchair near the window.

The low table beside it.

The faint mark in the wood where a glass once stood too long.

Nothing rearranged.

Nothing erased.

A strange relief moves through me at that.

If it had changed, I wouldn't know where to place the memories.

I step further in.

The silence tightens.

Not empty.

Occupied.

I feel it before I hear it, that subtle shift in the air when someone else breathes in the same space.

I freeze.

It's slight. Almost imagined.

But not imagined.

A presence.

Behind me.

Not close enough to touch.

Close enough to matter.

I don't turn immediately.

Because turning would confirm it.

And I'm not sure I'm ready to confirm anything yet.

Then, quiet and level, from somewhere just behind my left shoulder:
"You always paused there."

No anger.

No warmth.

Just recognition.

My pulse does not race.

It steadies.

I close my eyes for a fraction of a second before turning.

The first thing I register isn't his face.

It's the shift inside my chest.

Not panic.

Not relief.

Recognition.

It moves through me slowly, like something settling back into a place it never truly left.

He stands a few feet away, far enough to avoid intrusion, close enough to remind me that distance is a decision.

The room feels smaller with him in it.

Denser.

The air no longer drifts. It holds.

My body reacts before my mind catches up, shoulders straightening, breath evening out, chin lifting just slightly.

Control.

I promised myself I would keep it.

He hasn't moved.

That unsettles me most.

No step forward.

No defensive shift.

No attempt to close the space.

He simply watches.

Not hungrily.

Not cautiously.

Carefully.

As if I am something fragile that might fracture under the wrong pressure.

The silence stretches between us, not awkward, not uncertain.

Measured.

His presence presses against my awareness without touching me. I am suddenly conscious of everything, the weight of my coat, the sound of my own breathing, the slight tremor in my fingers that I force into stillness.

Three years.

And the first thing I feel is not resentment.

It's alignment.

Like two pieces sliding back into place without asking whether they should.

"You kept it the same," I say.

I don't specify what.

The house.

The furniture.

Us.

His gaze doesn't waver.

“I don’t change things unless I have to.”

There is something beneath the words.

Not explanation.

Not apology.

Conviction.

The quiet kind.

“You knew I would come back,” I say.

It isn’t accusation.

It’s recognition.

He considers that for a second.

“I assumed you would.”

“You sound certain.”

“I usually am.”

Silence settles again.

Heavy. Intentional.

He tilts his head slightly, studying me, not what I’m wearing, not how I’ve changed, but what I’m hiding.

“You don’t look surprised,” I say quietly.

“I’m not.”

“Why?”

A fraction of a second passes before he answers.

“Because nothing about you was ever temporary.”

The words aren’t flirtation.

They aren’t softness.

They are stated like fact.

And facts are harder to argue with.

“People change,” I say.

“They adapt,” he corrects quietly.

The distinction lands harder than it should.

“You assume too much.”

“Do I?”

Our eyes meet properly for the first time.

Not accidentally.

Not in passing.

Intentionally.

The contact is not electric.

It is heavier than that.

Measured.

Familiar.

Dangerously steady.

And in that moment, I understand something I didn’t want to admit on the drive here.

He isn’t surprised I returned.

He was waiting.

“For what?” I ask.

“For you to decide.”

“Decide what?”

His gaze doesn’t break.

“What to remember.”

The words don’t make sense immediately.

“I remember everything,” I say.

A flicker passes through his expression.

“No,” he says quietly. “You remember what you could live with.”

The air shifts.

The room feels smaller.

“I didn’t invent anything.”

“I know.”

“Then what are you implying?”

He studies me for a long moment.

“I’m not implying anything.”

A pause.

“I’m reminding you that it didn’t end the way you tell it.”

The words settle into my chest, heavy and slow.

I open my mouth to argue.

Nothing comes out.

Because somewhere beneath the version I’ve carried for three years,
there is a fracture.

A detail I avoid.

A moment I never replay.

“You think I forgot something,” I say.

“I think,” he replies carefully, “that you chose not to see it.”

Silence.

Not loud.

Not explosive.

Just full.

“I didn’t need protecting,” I say.

His expression changes then. Not visibly. Not dramatically. But
something closes behind his eyes.

“I know,” he says.

And for the first time since I stepped inside, I feel it clearly.

He isn’t afraid of what happened.

He’s afraid of what I’ll remember.

And for the first time, I’m not sure the version I’ve been living with is the truth.



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