

## Chapter 1

# Out of Tune

*Some truths arrive in costume.*

Mine was a lion suit, courage stitched a size too big for my tiny frame. The hood sagged, one ear flopping forward—more teddy bear than lion. Fluorescent lights buzzed above. The air smelled like crayons and paste.

I stood in my sister's kindergarten classroom for Show and Tell. She held my hand, proud to share her world. When my turn came, I roared with the unfiltered enthusiasm only a three-year-old can muster.

The teacher beamed. The class clapped. For a moment, the room turned toward me. I felt seen.

My chest filled with certainty, not knowing how quickly it would fade. On the walk home, my sister cried. That day, she wasn't the one in the spotlight. Her tears fell onto my shoulder, and they felt like mine to carry.

Something in me folded. Not to comfort her. To disappear.

I didn't have words for it then, only the feeling that being fully myself could change the atmosphere around me without warning.

Still, I roared.

Until I didn't.

The shift happened quietly enough to be mistaken for maturity.

Years later, I could trace the shape of it—how the girl in the lion suit learned to become easier to love. A life that looked complete, yet never quite felt like mine.

But the real me was never entirely gone.

In spaces where I felt comfortable, I became animated and expressive. I loved a good debate. The guardedness eased there. For a little while, I stopped shrinking and let myself take up space.

I laughed loudly when I felt safe. I loved deep conversations that stretched late into the night, lying beneath the stars wondering what existed beyond what I could see.

I could lose hours making elaborate cakes no one had asked for, completely absorbed in the joy of creating something beautiful.

But those moments depended on safety. The rest of the time, the deeper pattern of disappearing still shaped most of my life.

I can see her in ordinary moments: saying I'm fine when I was hurting, smiling while my stomach tightened, hearing myself agree while another part of me pulled back.

I rarely stayed with myself long enough to know what I actually felt. I replayed simple conversations afterward, searching for places I might have disappointed someone.

My attention moved automatically toward everyone else. I could read people easily by a shift in tone or the way they walked through a room. I knew

how to tend to other people's emotions long before I knew how to stay present with my own.

I felt everything intensely, but I could never understand why I couldn't cry. I could feel emotion rising in me, but it always got caught before it reached the surface.

So I kept moving. Chairing fundraising events. Volunteering to help. Becoming whoever was needed. Hosting exhausted. Feeling immediate relief when plans were canceled, then guilt for feeling relieved at all.

Noise wore me down. Crowds tightened my chest. I wanted to relax around people, but my body stayed braced, even in rooms that weren't asking anything of me.

I became so practiced at tending to everyone else that I barely noticed how absent I felt from myself.

From the outside, I looked composed. Happy.

The life I had built was the kind I once believed would make me feel complete: marriage, children, responsibilities I carried well, a house full of people who felt like home.

I loved my life and the people in it, yet sometimes I could stand in the middle of a room, listening to laughter bounce off the walls, and still feel some part of me hovering just outside the moment.

This was what I believed capable women did: carried everything quietly, even when part of them was asking them not to. The strain crept in so gradually I stopped noticing it.

For a while, disappearing into competence looked a lot like success. But

eventually, the effort of holding it all together became heavier than the life beneath it. I was drained by trying to be who everyone thought I was.

What I wanted was a life I could live inside, one I could inhabit. Instead, living felt like pushing against tension. My body moved through the world as if impact were always imminent.

For years, I searched outside myself, trying to fill the hollowness I couldn't name. I kept moving, caretaking, reaching—hoping relief would finally find me.

Then, one morning, months of pushing past fatigue collapsed all at once.

Something in me gave way before I understood what was happening. My legs failed beneath me. My breath came in short pulls as the hum of the refrigerator turned strange and far away.

Before fear arrived, one thought moved through me:

Something is wrong.

It landed in my body before it reached my mind.

My body could no longer carry the life I was asking it to live.  
That moment wasn't an ending. It was the first refusal.

My body drew the boundary I had spent a lifetime erasing.

The costume had held.  
The body no longer would.

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*Once, I wore a lion suit  
and believed that being seen  
was the same as being brave.*

