

**IN
ANOTHER
LIFE**

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PROLOGUE

DEATH

There is a moment between lifetimes, where for a fraction of a second, I can forget who I am. But I've been here long enough to know that a moment is all it'll ever be.

I open my eyes, and it takes me a second to adjust to my new surroundings. The soft blue colour of the sky from a minute ago is gone and darkness stretches over me with nothing but the stars to keep me company. The same stars that mock me with their mortal existence.

I'm standing on the footpath of an empty suburban intersection dimly lit by the few streetlights that fold over the connecting streets. The air is thin and the only sound comes from the ticking of traffic lights towering over the junction, signalling to absent cars. But even with the mechanical ticking of the lights, it's quiet. Too quiet.

The tightness in my chest eases slightly against my will and I quickly remind myself that the silence isn't something to take comfort in. It's a warning.

In the distance, the steady rumbling of a small, silver sedan chuffs through the air. I swallow and turn my head slowly, preparing myself for what comes next.

The traffic light flicks above me, illuminating the dark asphalt with an orange undertone, then red, and the driver of the sedan slows cautiously to a stop at the edge of the intersection. I narrow my gaze at the driver—a seventeen-year-old girl with light hair and bright blue eyes—as she leans forward, reaching for the dashboard. Her friend fails to stifle back the urge to laugh in the passenger seat as she leans forward, reaching for the dashboard after her.

To my left, the revving of another car engine slices through the stillness as it accelerates down the street. I turn my head towards the jeep speeding at me. If the driver has any intention of slowing down, he doesn't show it. I squint my eyes at the harsh headlights burning through the darkness, trying to make out the features of the driver through the windscreen, but the tinted windows make it impossible to see through the glass.

Slow down, I think to myself. Please, slow down.

But he doesn't. And he won't. I know this because if he did, then everyone would be fine and I wouldn't still be here. But I am here and no one is safe.

The traffic light *flicks* above me, turning green and the silver sedan inches forward over the solid white line. My heartbeat pounds against my rib cage as my gaze shifts from the sedan to the jeep, then back to the sedan.

It's too late.



CHAPTER ONE

FLETCHER

I force myself awake from the edge of my sleep.

The abrupt motion jerks my body upright, pulling a gasp from my lungs and my eyes widen, scanning the familiar walls of my bedroom. In the fleeting moments before reality settles in, I try to remember the remnants of the dream, but any memory of its existence quickly slips from my mind.

I'm awake. My breathing comes in quick, shallow waves. *I'm awake.*

Sweat dampens my body and I throw back the bedcover, craving relief from the warmth. The sudden rush of cool air pinches at my skin, making my insides shiver. *I'm awake.*

I run a hand through my hair, brushing away the strands from my face and blindly reach for the lamp switch dangling over the edge of my nightstand. The bulb clicks to life, illuminating the room with a warm glow. I sit up, swinging my legs over the edge of my bed and when my feet find the steadiness of the floor, the tightness in my chest eases a fraction of an inch.

I look up and my eyes flicker to the outline of my phone pressed face down beside the base of the lamp.

I pause.

Bodhi is the only person I've ever mentioned these dreams to—back when I used to consider him to be my best friend. Somehow, he knew exactly what to say to make me feel like I wasn't going crazy. Still, not even he knows how bad they've gotten. There's a small part of me that wants to call and tell him.

Another part of me regrets ever telling him about them in the first place.

Ever since my father's incident, we've been slowly drifting apart—though neither one of us has the courage to say it. He doesn't want anything to do with my father or the accident, and I don't blame him. I don't want anything to do with it or him, either.

Quitting the basketball team felt like the right place to start.

My dad used to be captain of the team back when he was in high school. He led them to win their first championship game—and every game after that until he graduated. It was the only thing anyone in this town could talk about for years. I used to think that being his son was a privilege, but now, no matter what I do to get away from him, people always have a way of reminding me that I'm his son.

Like father, like son.



Mum is asleep on the couch in the living room.

A spread of folders and papers are splayed out across the coffee table next to a half empty mug of coffee. She never used to drink coffee.

She never used to spend her nights on the sofa, either. I wonder if it's because she can't stand sleeping in the bed without Dad next to her. Or maybe it's because everything reminds her of him and she can't handle the memories of who he used to be.

But people change. I just wish it didn't have to be the people closest to me. Then again, I guess the only way to know for sure they've changed is when you learn to know them better than you know yourself, until you don't know them at all.

It's cold tonight. Even with two layers on, I can still feel the chill. Mum must've been too tired to care because the blanket is folded and draped over the backrest of the sofa, untouched.

I unfold it gently, careful not to wake her, and slowly let it fall over her. She begins to move under the weight of the blanket and I freeze. For a moment, I think she's going to wake up, but then she exhales and settles again.

As I turn to walk away, my gaze drifts over the coffee table. I narrow my eyes, scanning the print. A trail of darkened papers to my right catches my attention and my gaze flickers to a number of large photographs taken at night. I narrow my eyes, trying to get a better look at the wreck and that's when I see it—the number plate of Dad's jeep. My body tenses against my will and it takes every ounce of me to keep my composure.

In the corner of my eye, the words, *In loving memory of...* piques my interest and I shift my gaze to where the words trail off beneath one of the photographs. I reach for the picture and slide it out of the way to reveal a thin A5 size booklet that reads, *In loving memory of Ava Jensen.*

Printed beneath it is an enlarged photograph of a girl with light coloured hair and calming blue eyes, smiling candidly at the camera. She looks around my age. Maybe a year younger.

I used to think that Dad could never do anything wrong. That he was incapable of ever hurting anyone. Until the accident happened, and Ava died.

A lump forms in the back of my throat, and I glance at my mother. I know a part of her will always love him. A part that will never

leave her. A part that still chooses to see him as the boy she fell in love with in high school and not the monster he has become. There are nights when I would lie awake in bed and let myself reminisce on the memories I wondered if we still shared. Like when he'd take me to the local park and teach me how to play basketball or when he took me and Bodhi fishing at the lake. But then reality catches up and I am reminded that it will never go back to the way it was.



CHAPTER TWO

LAUREN

It's the first thing I think of when I wake up in the morning and the last before I fall asleep. The sound of glass shattering and the screeching of metal against metal. The look on Ava's face as I watch her take her last breath. But it doesn't matter how many times it plays out in my head; it always ends the same.

The morning sun seeps in through my bedroom window brighter than a hundred light bulbs. It's only seven o'clock, but I can already feel its warmth on my skin. My bed is made and, for the most part, my room is tidy.

I stare blankly into the mirror, feeling slightly unhinged. My mouth turns dry as I study my reflection and I wonder if it's too soon for me to start school again. My sun-kissed skin looks a little washed out against my cropped beige sweater, but I make no effort to change.

When I can no longer stand to look at my reflection, I shift my gaze to the bare wall above my bed where pictures of Ava and me used to hang aesthetically.

There was a time when I would look at them and smile, but now even the thought of their existence tucked away in an abandoned box somewhere in the garage overwhelms me.



In the kitchen, Mum sits at the counter reading through a magazine and sipping on coffee from a mug I got her a few years ago for her birthday. Her eyes widen when she sees me, and she smiles. “Good morning. How did you sleep?”

“Never better,” I lie. Most nights I’m lucky if I can get a few hours of sleep. Last night was not one of those nights. For a fleeting minute, I worry she can see past my lie, but then her expression eases slightly and her smile widens.

“Did you want some breakfast before you go? I could make you bacon with eggs or pancakes...”

“I’m good, thank you,” I say, turning away.

I don’t skip breakfast because I’m not hungry.

I skip breakfast because of the swell of anxiety that sets up camp in the pit of my stomach, evicting my appetite.

“Have a good day at school,” Mum calls.

Her words trigger a memory in my brain, and I pause, remembering those same words spoken on a different day.

I used to say, “no chance of that ever happening,” but saying that now would only spark her worry for me.

I’m not sure I can handle her worrying about me again.

Instead, I say, “I will,” then turn and head for the front door.



The bell isn’t supposed to ring for another twenty minutes, which gives me enough time to find the administration office. As I wander the halls, the sound of a piano playing from a nearby classroom tickles my eardrum and I pause, listening to the elegant sound of the notes blending into each other smoothly.

I follow the sound willingly down the hall to a large classroom and peer in through the tall, narrow window in the door. Inside, a girl with pale skin, warm cheeks and chestnut brown hair sits at the piano in the corner of the room with a pen clenched between her teeth as her fingers dance gracefully against the keys.

Her expression winces as the momentum of notes slow. I half expect the piece to end with a sudden peak of intensity in the repetitive chord progression like the one I've already composed in my head, but then she stops mid-key. Her brows furrow with an intense concentration that tells me she's deliberating her next move.

After a moment, she plays a key that turns the piece sour and I cringe. She opens her eyes and grunts frustratingly, then takes the pen from between her teeth and scribbles on the open booklet resting on the seat beside her.

Then it dawns on me.

She's playing an original piece.

The girl leans over, reaching for her bag and slides her arms through the straps, sending the booklet tumbling to the ground. She turns, starting for the door, and I quickly step out of view, pressing my back up against the wall. Seconds later, the door swings open. My pulse quickens as the girl emerges from the room. For an instant, I think she sees me, but then she continues down the hall without a glance in my direction and I'm relieved.

Without thinking, I reach for the doorknob behind her and step inside, letting the door close behind me.

The quiet of the music room closes in around me as I walk over to the piano and reach for the booklet pressed open, face down, against the floor. I flick through the pages, each lined with staves printed using a faint blue ink that can barely be seen and I wonder if it's intentional or if the printer just ran out of ink.

My eyes hover over the musical notations written in black ink that fill the page. Without realising, I find myself humming along to the tune until I reach an abrupt abundance of scribbles and distraught lines. But where it ends on paper, it completes in my head so vividly that I can't resist the urge to reach for a pen buried within the depth of my bag to finish it.

When I'm done, I look over it, examining the outcome of my work. To my surprise, it isn't as abysmal as I expect it to be. Then again, I don't know what I was expecting.

I close the booklet and lower it to the bench when, from across the room, a familiar outline enters my view. Propped upright against the far wall leans a violin enclosed in its case.

I pause.

It's been a while since I've played the violin, but I can still feel the vibration of the strings travelling through my fingertips and into my soul as the bow brushes against each note.

I close my eyes, letting the warmth of the distant memory fill me.

Suddenly, time catches up to me and with a sharp pull of the bow, a deafening shriek cries from the violin and the sound of glass shattering fills my ears.

"Can I help you?" a voice speaks from behind me. I spin around, almost losing my balance.

For a bizarre moment, I think the voice belongs to Ava. But it doesn't. It belongs to the girl who had been in here mere seconds earlier—the same girl whose booklet rests on the bench in front of me.

I swallow, clearing my voice. "Sorry, wrong room."

The girl opens her mouth to speak, but I don't wait to hear what she has to say.



The administration office is an easy find from the music room.

I walk up to the front desk where a middle-aged lady sits typing at the computer. Her choice of lipstick does little to compliment her complexion, and I wonder if she chose it on purpose to distract people from the circles beneath her eyes.

“Name?” Her lips barely move when she speaks. For a moment, I think I imagined her saying anything at all, but then she stops typing and turns her gaze away from the computer screen long enough to glare at me down the bridge of her nose.

“Uh... Lauren,” I say, shifting the weight of my bag on my shoulders. Her nails tap against the keyboard as she types into the computer. “Lauren Walker. I just transferred here from River Valley High.”

“Of course.” Her voice brightens a decibel. “I was told that you’d be coming in today.” She nods her head over the counter at the row of chairs lined up against the back wall. “Take a seat. I’ll be with you shortly.”

“Thanks,” I say, turning away.

A few minutes later, a tall lady appears in front of me with grey eyes broken by soft flecks of blue, and dark wavy hair that falls just below her shoulders.

“You must be Lauren,” she says, gently. The suddenness of her presence throws me and I don’t know whether to stand or not. “My name is Miss Mortem. I was wondering if we could have a minute to talk.”

I pause. “Sure.”

Miss Mortem’s office is the last room to the right of the narrow hallway and according to the certificate that hangs on the wall behind her desk, she is the school counsellor. A knot tightens in

the back of my throat and I hesitate, lingering in the doorway. Miss Mortem walks ahead and takes her seat behind the desk. When she notices my distant presence, she glances over to where I stand and gestures an open hand to one of the vacant chairs on the other side.

“Please,” she says, giving me a small smile, “take a seat.”

I swallow and sit down, dropping my bag on the floor beside me.

A moment later, she asks, “How are you doing?”

“Fine,” I say.

Miss Mortem leans forward, lips pursed and narrows her gaze. “I had a look at your file,” she pauses. “It’s quite impressive. I mean, you are quite the violinist...”

“I don’t play anymore,” I say, cutting her off.

“Does your reason for not playing anymore have anything to do with where you and your friend Ava were heading the night of the accident?”

The showcase. I hesitate. The mention of Ava and the accident in the same sentence makes the back of my throat start to hurt.

Intrigue washes over her expression. “Do you blame yourself for what happened that night?”

Yes. But I don’t say that. “Can we talk about something else?”

Miss Mortem’s smile slips a fraction of an inch. “Of course.” She leans back in her chair. “Tell me, do you drive?”

I shake my head once. “No.”

Her brows drop slightly. “Have you been in a car since the accident?”

I blink, wiping my sweating palms against the side of my jeans. “No.”

“How are you feeling about starting school again?”

I shrug a little. “Normal, I guess.”

She pauses as though to give me a second to reflect on my answers, then leans forward in her seat. “Listen, Lauren, I want to be able to help you, but I can’t do that if you don’t cooperate.”

“I never asked for your help.” I collect my bag off the floor and stand. I’m halfway out the door when Miss Mortem calls my name and I stop, turning back to look at her.

“I understand that you need time to heal after what you’ve been through,” she pauses, taking in a short breath. “But I want you to know that if you ever need to talk to someone, I’ll be here.”

I pause. Then, without saying a word, I turn and walk out.