

# Chapter 1

## Before the Storm – Life before anxiety and depression

I used to think I understood what depression and anxiety. Not in a deep way, not in a way that lived in my bones, but in the way you understand things that happen to other people. I never judged it. I never thought it was weakness. I listened when people talked about it. I nodded. I felt sympathy. I believed them when they said it was heavy, when they said it was exhausting, when they said it changed the way the world looked. I just didn't know it would change my world. Back then, my mind felt like a place I could trust. It wasn't always quiet, but it was familiar.

If I was sad, there was a reason. If I was nervous, there was a cause. Feelings came and went like the weather, and I never once questioned whether the sky might stay dark for weeks, months, or years at a time. I didn't analyze my own breathing. I didn't wonder why my chest felt tight for no clear reason. I didn't wake up already tired of existing. Life felt... linear. One day led to the next. Problems had edges. Solutions felt possible. I thought resilience meant getting back up after something knocked you down, not learning how to stand while something invisible pressed against your ribs all day long. I remember hearing the words “anxiety” and “depression” and picturing them as storms that passed through other people's lives. Loud, destructive, real — but temporary.

## DJ LAMPEREZ

I never imagined what it would feel like to live inside the storm instead of watching it from a distance. I never imagined the way it would blur time, distort memory, shrink the future into something that felt too heavy to look at directly. There was a version of me who woke up and didn't immediately take inventory of my own mind. A version of me who made plans without calculating emotional cost. A version of me who didn't rehearse conversations in my head or brace myself for feelings that hadn't even arrived yet. I didn't know how fragile that normalcy was, or how quietly it could slip away. At the time, I thought I was just living, not surviving, not managing, just being.

There's a strange grief in realizing that you never say goodbye to that version of yourself. You don't get a warning. You don't get a final, clear moment where you understand that this is the last day your thoughts will feel this light, this uncomplicated, or this safe. It only makes sense later, while you are looking back at how everything once was. When you're already standing in the aftermath, trying to remember what the air felt like before it became hard to breathe.

There were signs, I think. Or maybe I only call them signs now because I know how the story continues. At the time, everything felt ordinary enough to ignore. I was a little more tired than usual. I was a little less patient. There were now moments where my thoughts lingered too long on things that used to roll off me, but nothing that raised alarms. Nothing that felt like the beginning of anything permanent. I still trusted my mind. That's the part that feels the strangest to remember. I trusted it to tell me the truth. I trusted it to make sense of the world.

I didn't question every emotion or wonder if my reactions were too much or not enough. I didn't scan my own body for warning signs. I didn't live on edge, waiting for something to go wrong inside me. I moved through life without translating everything into feeling. I could be present without analyzing my presence. I could be quiet without assuming something was wrong. I could be alone without feeling like loneliness was swallowing me whole. Silence was just silence back then,