

Chapter 1

Of course, I can't sleep—it's too much. My eyes have been closed for what seems like an eternity now, just waiting for him. How is he still moving? Is he still awake? I have to get up. The day keeps replaying in my head like a broken movie. I have to get up *now*.

I take a deep breath and decide it's time. It's worth the risk; the bed is suffocating.

I make sure to lock the door behind me after grabbing a drink. The bathroom—the only place in this house where I can get some privacy. I can't believe I'll be calling it home. I hate this place. It's like living in an office—no personality, no warmth. I guess I could change things. After all, *I'm going to be living here*.

I step into the scalding hot water and instantly feel better. This giant bathtub isn't so bad. What am I going to do if Aaron knocks on the door right now? I reassure myself that after that many drinks, I could be holding a baby unicorn, and he wouldn't notice or care.

I take another deep breath. Breathing— isn't that what I'm supposed to excel at after a decade of yoga? Why is it so challenging to control the most basic human function? I smile at the only thing that could calm my nerves right now: *whiskey*. Another perk of this place—always a stocked bar. With everyone getting drunk at the party, I'm happy I saved enough space for this. There's a difference between drinking with people and drinking alone. Like everything else, I prefer doing it alone.

As I let the liquid gold work its magic, my mind dives into my past, searching for answers—some insight to explain why my dad decided to show up after all these years. *Seventeen fucking years*. Of course, there's nothing. My fingers toy with the necklace he gave me, turning it over and over. I've never seen anything like it. Obviously, I know it can't be the real thing—there's no way. A diamond this size, almost an inch long, on a delicate gold chain? My parents struggled to make ends meet for as long as I can remember. My mind goes back to all the hand-me-down clothes and toys. Mom stayed home with me while Dad worked in sales. He had good and bad seasons; unfortunately, the bad ones always seemed to last a lot longer. At least we always made rent. I shrug at the memories.

Tears spill down my face, disappearing into the bathwater. Crying on my birthday—classic me. *Then again, it's probably past midnight by now, no longer my birthday at all*.

I reach for my phone to check the time, and my glass slips from my hand and shatters on the floor.

“Shit.”

Blood stains the water, and I suck on my finger, sighing heavily. *I want this day to end*. I dunk my head underwater, letting the silence wrap around me. When I resurface, my new necklace catches my eye. It's glowing. Not shining exactly, but there's a light trapped inside the diamond—a soft, pulsing purple. Or violet, as Akira would correct me. I lift it closer, turning it in my hands, searching for an explanation. Nothing. My mouth hangs open as I stare. The spilled drink on the floor is the only proof I'm not drunk.

What kind of diamond does this? What did Akira call it when I sent her the picture earlier? *A prism?* I'm not even sure I know what that is. Math has never been my thing. I count the edges. Five edges—but seven sides? Is there even a name for that shape? Probably something I would know if my parents had been around to help with my homework. I roll my eyes. Anger churns beneath the surface, anger I thought I'd worked through in therapy. Apparently not. Not enough therapy in a lifetime to fix all my bullshit.

My dad's voice slices through me. "You look...beautiful," he said, walking toward me just hours ago. How did he know to be there? Where did he even come from? Did someone invite him to my party? Amid all the questions swirling in my head, all I managed to say was, "Dad?"

To say I was shocked is an understatement. I barely remember the man. My idea of a father is split between hazy memories of a great dad playing with his little girl and the bitter truth that he walked out on his teenage daughter.

"Get out," I said.

And that was it. He nodded, murmuring, "I'm so sorry." He handed me his gift—or rather, my mother's gift—and left. Again.

It took me a while to process that my dad was actually standing in front of me, just like I used to dream about for years. But now, it's too late. *Way too late.* The music from the party pulled me out of my spiraling thoughts, along with the hollow wishes for happiness from people who barely knew me. Most of them were Aaron's friends. We were never going to be friends. It took one look at them to know that. Aside from Akira, Lara, and Ted, you wouldn't even know it was my birthday.

By the time I get out of the water, it's cold. I carefully dry myself, avoiding the broken glass on the floor. The prism's light vanished minutes after it appeared. I stayed in the bath, hoping to see it again. I didn't.

Now, staring at my reflection in the mirror, at my perfectly matching pajamas, one thought claws at my mind: *I'm so tired of being a good girl.*

The sunlight filters through the trees, bringing the colors to life. Yellow leaves are starting to pile up at my feet, and the brick buildings on campus feel perfectly in tune with the season. October always has a way of lifting my mood—my birthday is simply another perk of the month. Honestly, I've yet to meet anyone who doesn't love autumn. Soon enough, this place will be full of tourists who'll agree with me: Harvard in the fall is as good as it gets.

"Hey! How did it go last night? I mean, after the party," Akira asks, falling into step beside me.

I smile, noticing the coffee cart line is unusually short today. "Oh, you know, nothing too crazy," I reply, eyeing her outfit. "What are you wearing?" Between her tattoos, colorful hair, and chaotic style, I'm surprised she's even allowed on campus.

"Because I'm the best at my shit," she replies, like she read my mind. And she's right. Akira is some kind of astrophysics genius. We met during my first week here and bonded over coffee—always running into each other in this very line. Eventually, we said hello. Now, our friendship revolves around a shared love of Friday-night drinking, dancing at Spiral, and, occasionally, fantasizing about murdering our students.

"Don't change the subject!" she snaps, waving a hand at me. "Nothing crazy, huh? Not even in bed?" She tries to wink, and I can't help but laugh.

"Yeah, I got my birthday dessert," I shoot back with a playful wink, even though I told Aaron I had a massive headache and needed to sleep. He bought it after I blamed it on my father.

"I mean, who wouldn't, with that delicious boyfriend of yours? Shit! Fiancé!" she teases.

I stare at the new ring on my finger, opulent yet so simple compared to the other gift I received yesterday. I swear I can almost feel the prism warming up as I think about it. I lift my

gaze in Akira's direction, but she's already walking away, calling over her shoulder, "Gotta get to class!"

Nothing like the first sip of coffee. I ran out the door this morning, barely exchanging words with Aaron, even though I don't have to be in the classroom until eleven today. I can still see his face when he proposed last night. I knew it would happen eventually. It was the obvious next step. We've been together since we were teens. *The boy next door*, as my grandma used to call him. I wonder if she really thought he lived that close. Aaron lived on the West Side, where all the homes had been remodeled, and I lived on the East Side, where all the homes had been forgotten. Even though we lived on opposite sides of the park, it was an easy cross if you knew the shortcuts. He was there for me when no one else was.

After my mom died, Dad had a rough few years. Then, we had some good months before he left me for good. My grandparents moved in right away, trying to keep some semblance of normalcy in my life by keeping us local. Nothing has been normal since.

Aaron would sneak in after school on most days. We'd watch TV, do our homework, and, of course, make out until it was dinner time and we both had to show our faces to our families. My grandparents were too old to go upstairs; they mostly stayed on the first floor until bedtime, giving me almost full rein of the upper level of the house during the day. That, along with the constant sound of their loud TV, allowed me to grow up faster than most kids my age. Mostly, though, Aaron was there for me—when the anxiety attacks would creep in, when my breathing would get stuck. He was there to rub my back, guiding each inhale and exhale for as long as I needed. He was there when I cried on my birthdays, on Christmas, even at prom. He was the first one I showed my college admission letter to, and even though we went to different schools, we stayed tight.

Turns out, it's very easy to date your best friend. And then keep dating him, *because he loves you*.

I plan to do my research right away since I don't have any papers to grade this morning. After such busy weeks, I welcome the break. If any place has abundant information on prisms, it has to be Harvard's library. I understood nothing from the descriptions I found online. Words like "polyhedron," "base," "second base," and "faces" kept popping up. Although I got the gist—a glass geometric object used to spread out light—what I need to know is: *what the heck was that violet light I saw yesterday in the tub?* I haven't seen it again since. I stared at it in the mirror this morning, hoping it would happen again, like somehow I could turn it on. Now it's merely a beautiful piece of jewelry. I'm starting to wonder if I made the whole thing up.

The library is framed by beautiful large windows on both sides, with a dome ceiling that mimics classical temples. I'm used to getting lost in the maze, but I don't think I've ever made it to this section before—rows and rows of books I have no idea how anyone understands.

I don't ask for help; I don't want to draw attention to myself. I want to avoid the noisy students and the faculty who love to gossip. Does anyone have hobbies anymore? Like, the only reason to be researching anything should be because you're writing a damn paper. What happened to learning for enjoyment?

I fell in love with art history when I was a little girl. Mom, Dad, and I would spend our Sunday mornings at the art museum, like a religious appointment. Dad came because we loved it; I knew it wasn't his passion that brought him there. I remember how my mom could simply stare at something for hours, not realizing that Dad and I were waiting for her to keep moving along. She had an apologetic smile when she'd break the trance and find us looking at her.

After she got sick, Dad kept bringing me. I told him he didn't have to, but he reassured me that he liked it. I knew he did it for her. And after he left me—I was thirteen—I kept the habit. I would find myself there, even when I lied and pretended I was only going to the park. It was my home away from home, a place where I could still feel my parents nearby, happy. Dad and I would make up stories about who the people in the paintings were; sometimes, I imagined I was part of their life too. Especially when everything fell apart. I wanted to escape to those meadows, talk to those people, ask them to take me away.

When senior year came around, I knew the only thing I could imagine myself doing was studying those paintings. Aaron had asked me a few times if I wanted to paint, but I never had the desire. I wanted to understand the hand that created those paintings. I wanted to know what made someone take their time—often a long time—to create such things. What drove them, what pushed them, what fed them. I wanted to know the story behind each artwork, the real story. I became obsessed in college. I didn't have the ambition to become a professor; it was pure passion that led me to rise to the top of my classes.

“Professor De Loughery?” A voice breaks my blank stare.

“Hey, Darion, remember, Iris is just fine.”

He's staring at his foot, a little uncomfortable with my directness. Darion is a little taller than me, with dark eyes that hide behind his glasses.

“What are you doing on this side of the building? I hope you're not thinking about changing majors,” I ask.

“Just helping a friend.”

If I didn't know better, I would say he was probably getting paid to do someone else's work.

“How nice of you,” I say.

“What about you?” he asks, giving me an odd look.

“Personal project.” Before he can say anything else, I start to walk away. “See you in class.”

I gather more books about math than anyone could read in a lifetime. I scan the pages, but nothing explains what I saw in the bathtub last night. I do end up learning an interesting fact: apparently, prisms have been used as early as the thirteenth century to *generate rainbows*. Sunlight looks white to our eyes, although it's actually a mixture of many colors. A prism can be used to refract or disperse a beam of light, separating those colors. Still, you are supposed to see all seven of them, not just one. I'm startled by my phone buzzing—the alarm reminding me that I'm needed in the classroom.

“Is she pregnant?” Stella asks, a young blonde with a huge canvas bag who always sits in the corner. An artist herself, judging by the spilling contents.

I glance back at Jan van Eyck's iconic portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife, one of my favorite pieces of art.

“That's a common question, Stella,” I say. “Most historians agree she isn't. She's simply holding her large skirts. Young Renaissance women were also encouraged to clasp their hands like that. It was a sign of modesty. The subject of pregnancy is still debatable. Take a look here, at the bed's headboard... This is a wooden statue of Saint Margaret, the patron saint of childbirth. And let's look over here as well, at the window: another symbol, ripened fruit.

Everything signals that, if she isn't pregnant—which artists typically avoided depicting, as it was considered improper—she is expected to be soon. What else is her gown telling us?"

"That she is wealthy," Ava says, typing quickly on her laptop.

"Correct. Her ermine-lined gown is proof of her husband's wealth. What else indicates that?"

"The brass chandelier and the oriental carpet," Darion says, still giving me a weird look.

"And the mirror," Stella adds, writing something down.

"Let's take a closer look at the mirror," I say, zooming in on the painting. "We see someone else there, wearing red—that is the artist himself. This mirror has enough details to warrant an entire lecture. I'll be brief now, but we'll discuss it in more depth next week. Around the mirror's wooden frame, we see scenes from the Passion of Christ—it might represent the premise of salvation, or God observing the vows of the wedding. Some believe this painting represents that: matrimony."

"What's with the dog?" Isaac asks.

"The little terrier could symbolize either fidelity or lust, or perhaps a desire for children. It might also be a gift from the husband to his wife. It also reflects the couple's wealth and their position in court. We'll revisit this painting next week. Now, let's hear how the assignment went," I say, closing the image.

"I thought I was going to lose my mind. The time did not pass," Stella says.

"I thought it was relaxing," says Paul, trying a little too hard to be agreeable. I see most of the students roll their eyes.

"I thought it was torture," says Mila, her voice dripping with sarcasm. She's the confident one who doesn't think she needs to be here.

After a few more similar comments, I explain, "The experiment wasn't meant to torture your souls, waste your time, or even put you into a trance—though I'm glad it did some of those things too. The idea was solely to teach you that you do have the time. The time to take your time. I can see the stress in your faces, the fidgeting in your seats. This goes beyond your addiction to screens; it's about the constant pressure to impress others by the sheer volume of things you do. You are now more than ever pressured to take more classes, write more papers, all while opening your own business and becoming millionaires by the age of twenty-five. The artists who created the works you sat in front of for two hours last week took their time, and that's how they achieved mastery. If you learn anything from this assignment, I hope it's the skill to slow down. Appreciate things. *The simple things*. Make room to truly wonder, to sit by a painting for as long as you want. The concept that we all have twenty-four hours is often debatable, yet time disappears when you are truly enjoying yourself." I pause, letting my words settle. Perhaps I needed to hear them more than they did.

I finished the lesson and lingered on campus for a while. There was one thing I was dreading more than facing Aaron when I got home at night: the *letter* that came with the prism.

Chapter 2

I waited until I was home from the party to open my dad's gift. I wanted to throw the box against the wall, I wanted to yell at it, to tell it to go to hell. Instead, I tugged on the gold ribbon that enclosed the box, and it slid off like silk. My hands shook as I lifted the lid. The note inside read: *For Iris on her thirtieth birthday, not a day earlier, from Mom.* Relief flooded me knowing I didn't just throw it away. *This wasn't from him.* I would treasure whatever it was inside, just like I did with everything I kept from her. We didn't have much, so there wasn't much to keep. I have her favorite coffee mug, a pair of earrings she got from Grandma on her wedding day, and a handful of her favorite novels.

I found the necklace inside a black velvet bag, but it was what lay underneath that took my breath away: *a letter.* If the letter was also from Mom, I couldn't open it. I could barely remember her voice. My childhood videotapes would soon have to be packed up—where were they? It had been a while since I watched them. Only a letter... that was something else. New words from her—my skin tingled at the thought. I had never been more curious in my life. The expectation matched the intensity. Did I want to know what she had to say? What if the letter was actually from Dad? I didn't want to give him the chance to explain himself. For all I knew, it could be a damn receipt inside. Whatever it was, it was best unread.

A couple of weeks went by, and I let myself forget about the letter, only to be reminded as soon as my head hit the pillow. Dreams and nightmares about all the things the envelope could contain filled my nights.

Aaron cannot stop talking about the wedding. Every day, he adds something new or someone else to the guest list. If it were up to me, we'd simply elope. Only he's always had this need to prove himself to everyone. I cringe at the thought of what's becoming a massive event.

"You should invite George and the department chair lady," he suggests as we order food.

"I don't know them that well," I reply from the couch.

"What about your aunt?"

"Maybe. I'll call her."

Despite the wedding plans, we were having a nice time. Aaron had picked up sushi, and we laughed as we reminisced about our childhoods.

One of my favorite memories was when Aaron bought me a dog for Christmas. I named him Benny; he was a mutt, and I loved him the moment I saw him. He was a little shabby, a little dirty. Turns out, Aaron had just brought a stray dog into my house. I didn't care. Benny was mine. All he wanted was to cuddle in bed, which made it very easy to persuade my grandparents to let me keep him. "As long as nobody claims him, he can stay," Grandpa said that day. And so, Benny did.

Sometimes, like any untrained dog, Benny would get into trouble—chewing on furniture or a shoe. My grandma would blame Aaron and even demanded he pay for the damage once or twice. We never took him to the vet. He never seemed sick. He didn't look like a young dog, but my grandparents assured me he was fine. We couldn't afford a vet anyway. He lived with us for three years and died months before I left for college. I was determined to bring him along, even if I had to hide him in my dorm. Benny took care of me, not the other way around. I grieved him the most. I think my heart was still numb from the loss.

Those are my favorite moments with Aaron—casual nights, just the two of us, talking about the past. *They're rare.* He's turned into a full-blown businessman, constantly attending social events. He followed in his dad's footsteps, taking over the firm, and making it much bigger than his dad ever thought possible. He's always busy, angry, and tired from all the parties. Yet, he says yes to even more events the following week. He's addicted to the lifestyle. He has more friends than I can count, and I can't stomach them for long. I'm always coming up with excuses to avoid the dinners. If Aaron knows they're lies, he doesn't say.

I tell myself there are nice times between us. There could be more. Still, nice doesn't scream marriage, I know that. Even the sex with him has always been...nice. He was my first, but not the only guy I've slept with. We split during our first couple of years in college, only to reconnect after coming home for the holidays. My grandparents moved to a home for the elderly that year. I couldn't believe it when they told me my father had sent a check for that. *What kind of person leaves their family and still pays for things?* I almost asked Aaron to help me track the money, but then again, what could my father say that would matter? He hadn't even shown up for their funeral. Aaron and I have been together since. And the sex has always been that, nice. Much better than with the guys I dated in college. Even so, sometimes I wonder if 'nice' is all that's in the cards for me.

"I love knowing you'll be living here. We can do this every night," he says, pulling out the duvet.

"Tonight, it was nice, staying in," I say, knowing well this won't happen again anytime soon.

"Do you need help packing?" he asks again.

"I don't think so. I like taking my time, going through my stuff. A lot needs to be donated," I say, lying through my teeth.

"Okay. Let me know if you do."

"I will."

"I have to show my face at Arnold's tomorrow. You can join me if you want, but don't feel obligated; the plus-ones weren't exactly invited."

"Okay. I think Akira wanted to do something anyway." Another lie. They roll off my tongue easily these days.

I struggle to get out of bed—at least it's Friday. I bribe myself with coffee twice just to get going. I never sleep well; my anxiety always finds a way to creep in at night. But I can feel myself extra tense lately. I'm not sure if it's due to the wedding or the prism; both things are constantly on my mind. It's especially during moments like this that I wish I had my mom around to talk to.

I put on the simplest outfit and head to work.

"Remember, you're not being graded today. This is an exercise. I'll pull a different art piece for each of you randomly, and I want you to try to describe it. Let's talk about the time period, the material used. You can talk about the artist if you know it. You can mention the style, describe the subject matter, the symbols you recognize. If time allows, you can bring up meaning; however, let's leave that for last, as it tends to get complicated."

I have to work extra hard to pay attention to what the students are saying; my mind is scattered by the time they're done. I'm in desperate need of a break.

No sign of Akira at the coffee cart.

Coffee? I text her.

Can't right now, Spiral tonight? she replies.

Aaron has plans. Anything to avoid his stupid dinner. Still, there's a hint of guilt as I text her back, *Sure*. I know it would make him look better if I went to those events, especially now that we're engaged. I won't be able to avoid them forever, and a part of me thinks he deserves better.

It's a crisp night, and I wish I had waited a little longer before getting out of the cab. I'm meeting Akira at the corner of Melrose and Fayette. As I wait, I eye the long line of people waiting to get in. Spiral isn't a large club, yet somehow, all of those people will fit inside. We know the guys at the door by now, so we don't have to wait. Still, I always feel weird skipping the lines. I can hear the usual words shouted from strangers watching us enter: "slut," "whore," and "bitch" among them.

Akira is wearing leather pants and a shirt that leaves her stomach exposed. With her body, I would too. From behind, you can see a couple of her tattoos. Her hair is loose, strands of different colors catching the light. She's hot. And all the guys around notice. I envy her confidence—she doesn't hide behind any masks—not the professor one, not even the genius one. She owns herself with such ease, it's hard not to compare.

I opted for my usual combo of jeans and a tank top. My inherited red hair is in a top bun, mostly for lack of time. It took me an hour to do my makeup with the new eyeliner I decided to try out. I broke a sweat getting both eyes even.

"Can you believe that guy?" she asks, gesturing to a young man blowing her a kiss.

"Just ignore it," I say, as we wait to make eye contact with the bartender.

"Thanks for dragging me out here tonight. I think I really needed this," I tell her.

"Yeah, it usually takes another round of begging," she replies, still bothered by the guy across the bar. She raises her glass. "To us," she says, as we click our champagne glasses. Our habitual toast.

The first time I came here, Aaron was with me. Turns out, dancing wasn't his thing. He just stayed in the corner, on his phone, drinking. I managed to drag him onto the dance floor a couple of times, but he was ready to go soon after. It was also an important night for my career—my first praise in the papers—and we were out to celebrate. I puked on the way home. Aaron said something about us being too old to be clubbing, and I never insisted he come again. So now, whenever I find myself either free of plans or hating the ones he has for us, I come here. Akira started coming soon after we met, and it's been our thing for the past three years. We both agree it's the music, the lights, the letting loose we crave. Some nights, I don't even drink. My body moving with the beat is enough to set me free. Other nights, I drink more than I should. I made a point to stop doing the latter.

We have a great time dancing, and after a couple of drinks, I start to finally feel at ease. The music's doing it for me... *Who's the DJ in the house tonight?* I glance up at the top of the iconic spiraling steps. I find him with his eyes closed, his body moving perfectly synced to his own beat. DJ Jaxx is always a treat.

I'm on my way to the bathroom when I overhear bits and pieces of a conversation that make me feel relieved I'm not single. With everything that's happened lately, I really need this night to help me release some stress. I hear someone snorting something in the next stall. Drugs are not my thing, but who the hell am I to judge?

Back on the dance floor, the song changes and I recognize it. One of my favorites. I'm not sure where Akira is, but I know she's around. We have one rule: If either of us wants to leave, the other has to go too—unless we have other friends here. Not that I've kept in touch with many. I was the kind of teen who liked being left alone. *Not much has changed.* Our number-one rule is: never stay by yourself in the club. We both know that's a recipe for disaster.

I close my eyes, letting the music move me. I let go of everything—the wedding, my family issues, my job... all of it.

Minutes later, Akira's hands are on my shoulder, shaking me. "Iris!" she yells.

I open my eyes and realize that a lot of people have moved out of the way and are staring at me. I see the violet light reflected in her eyes, and I look down. My prism is floating in the air, like an invisible hand is holding it up. As I reach for it, it falls back down.

"What the fuck!" Akira says, her voice sharp with disbelief. She's looking at me for answers, but I don't have any to give.

People start to move closer again, quickly forgetting what they just witnessed. That's the allure of the club: The harder you try to stand out, the more invisible you become. I don't need to impress anyone here; I can just be myself.

"You should take that off!" Akira almost yanks it off me as we head for the door.

I can't. Not only because it was a gift from my mother, but because there's this strange, instinctive urge to protect it. "It was my mother's," I plead.

"Iris, this thing is possessed. I saw it. Everyone saw it."

How many people had seen it? From now on, I have to keep it concealed.

"You're telling me that you, Ms. Science Girl, believe in that stuff?" I ask her, surprised.

"Hell yeah," she says, her voice shaky. She looks genuinely freaked out.

"Akira, relax. It's just a necklace. I'm not sure what you think you saw—maybe they put something in your drink."

She shakes her head, unconvinced. I finally manage to get her into a cab, reassuring her that everything is fine.

I think about going to sleep at Aaron's, but the guilt of having bailed on him again weighs on me. I text him, saying I need clothes—I'm sleeping at my own place tonight.

But sleep is the last thing I get. I toss and turn, restless and hungover. At least now I know—wicked or not—*something* is going on with my necklace.

Chapter 3

I should be packing, I think, as I look around my apartment. Aaron has been asking me to move in for years, but I've always loved having my own space. Of course, things will have to change now with the wedding.

I run my fingers through the floral bedding on my bed, knowing it won't match his apartment. I survey the room—nothing here will fit there. Not the paintings, not my green antique lamp, and definitely not that wooden statue. My love for art goes beyond just paintings; the objects in my home have stories. I consider keeping this place. I honestly don't want to hurt Aaron's feelings, but he would never understand. He buys his home décor from a catalog; I buy mine from antique stores. Everything here, I've slowly curated, like my own personal collection. Many things were purchased needing repair, and I paid to fix them. I've brought them back to life. It's not so much the attachment to each piece, but the feeling that I'm about to move into somewhere without a soul. His furniture is modern, sleek, cold. I like my things a little broken, a little odd, a little complicated—like me.

As I'm clicking to purchase the boxes I need, I get a message from Akira. Another one. She's been texting me all weekend since our... incident at the club. *I know someone we can talk to, someone who can clean it*. She was going on and on about the prism needing to be...baptized, for lack of a better word. Not only do I not believe in whatever she's trying to convince me of, but I also like my prism the way it is. It's not like it's hurting me. I can't help but wonder... What if it's Mom who is still... around? Not that I believe in those things. Whatever it is, it's not evil—that I can feel for sure.

I text the only thing I know will calm her down: *I'll think about it*.

I put my phone away and start searching for one of my childhood tapes. "*They have to be here somewhere*," I say to myself as I pull another photo album from the closet. Good thing I'm moving soon; this place needs some serious organization.

I get distracted twice during my search. First when I find an old sketch of me, lecturing; a student from last year gave it to me. He was a much better artist than historian, if his grades were any indication, and I haven't seen him since. The second distraction is almost laughable: my attempt at writing a novel. The manuscript is covered in dust. A few years ago, I tried to write my life's story on the recommendation of my therapist. I never finished it, though—I didn't want to add an end to my story. Somehow, I always felt like my life hadn't really even begun.

I almost fall off the step stool when I pull down the cardboard box that holds the four tapes. I just need to hook up the old VCR. If only I could find the cables. *How did I let this place get so messy?*

I sit on the couch, replaying the scene over and over, of my mom dancing. She was beautiful, her hair very much like mine. I have my father's hazel eyes; the rest—it's all her. The footage is shaky, but I love seeing her smile. I always want to picture her like this... joyful. She was spinning around, and when I got closer, she took me by the hands and twirled me. I looked just as happy.

I watch until I finally fall asleep on the couch.

I've had a constant headache for weeks now. I'm more than ready for the holiday break. November flies by in the blink of an eye—between packing my old apartment, grading the final papers, enduring wedding plans, and dodging Akira's questions. I'm craving solitude, and a visit to my favorite museum is long overdue.

The MFA museum is home to more than five hundred thousand works, and no matter how many times I've been here, I'm always surprised. There are prints by Dürer, Degas, and Rembrandt, drawings by Goya and Gauguin, Peruvian and Roman textiles, paintings and more paintings. A few of my favorites are by Van Gogh and Monet... enough to keep someone like me in a dreamlike state. I remember the words I gave to my students this season: *Take your time.*

I find myself standing in front of an artwork by Eugène Cicéri, from 1852. It's a painting of a forest, where its uneven terrain and massive trees surround a man with a walking stick. The heavy bag on his back is filled with sketching supplies, as I learn from my phone. It's a depiction of an artist's journey, I imagine. The painting shows a beautiful golden light filtering through the trees. I can almost hear the silence of the woods; only the man's heavy breathing breaks it. I crave that kind of peace.

I'm moving toward the next painting when a little girl's voice draws my eyes across the room. The sign above her directs to the jewelry collection. That's probably the section of the museum that I visit the least. I'm less drawn to the riches of the aristocracy, though they're as beautiful as one could imagine.

I follow the sign, my eyes blinking as they adjust to the dimmed lights. I pass a Roman cameo, worn to advertise the wearer's taste and profess devotion to gods or political forces. I'm amazed by all the details as I stop to look at an Italian medallion set into a silver-gilt case.

The next row holds a French beaded ring, along with brooches and a gold wreath of oak leaves and acorns. I let myself daydream about what it would have been like to live in a time when such accessories were worn.

I'm looking around when my eye catches the next object—a British tiara. The hair ornament, created by Cartier in the early twentieth century, is lit by focused light, setting the crystals to dance. It's not the tiara itself that delights me, but the idea that it sparks. *I should be looking into jewelry making, not math books.* It's not the shape itself that matters, but perhaps who created my necklace, or if other jewelry pieces were made with prisms. My specialization is in Renaissance paintings; I don't know much about the history of accessories. Though, I do know someone who does.

I pull out my phone right there to check if I still have Elena's email. She's a costume historian whom I helped with a research project a year ago. She had come to Harvard to finish a paper, and my colleague George introduced us. She was writing about certain costumes and accessories worn by Henry VIII and wanted help with viewing books in the private section of the school's library. George knew I had access, so he introduced us at lunch. Elena was quiet, kept mostly to herself during our visits, and was an expert in the subject. It won't startle her if I ask about this.

I can't even wait to get home. I stop at a coffee shop, order my usual latte, and sit down to write the email. It turns out to be harder than I thought. I have to be detailed enough to get the information I need, while also vague enough to avoid hinting that I'm in possession of such a thing.

Hi Elena,

I hope you're doing well. I've found myself a bit lost in my research for a project and was wondering if you could point me in the right direction. Have you ever encountered any jewelry myths in your past research? Perhaps folklore mentioning magical jewelry? Something involving diamonds? I figured if anyone would have insight, it would be you.

Thanks in advance! Let me know if I can return the favor.

Iris De Loughery

Harvard is bustling with a conference—too many egos per square foot. The students are beyond distracted today.

“What is the difference between balance and symmetry?” I ask, only to receive blank stares.

“Symmetry is a way to achieve balance,” I continue. “It’s when a portion of an image is mirrored. Many cultures have associated it with beauty. Let’s take a look at this Greek temple—both sides are completely symmetrical. And here’s another example in architecture.”

“What about in a painting? You don’t mean when artists just copy and paste half of a painting, right?” Isaac asks, his attention more on what’s happening outside the window.

Influential names are supposed to be here today; everyone wants to shake hands with everyone.

“There are different types of symmetry. Let’s take a look at this plate. What we have here is called radial symmetry. It’s when an image is created around a central point. All around the plate, we see rows and rows of flowers.”

“Can you show us an example... in a painting?” asks Paul.

“Sure.” I pull up an image of Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter by Perugino. “Here, this is a fresco from the Sistine Chapel. There is a building in the center, and two more on each side. The symmetry in this case not only gives us a sense of balance but also a sense of formality. Now, we don’t always need symmetry to achieve balance.”

“Symmetry looks boring,” says Mila.

“Perhaps. Asymmetrical balance can feel more natural or more interesting. In this case, we are talking about balancing with the same visual attention—maybe the same colors or amount of detail, keeping the eye at rest.”

I’m about to bring up the concept of eye direction when someone mentions that Robert Fletcher is outside. Everyone stands up to look; even I, who don’t care about technology, make my way to the window. I dismiss them. Whatever I say next won’t be able to compete with this.

The positive side of all the commotion: the library is empty. I sit down to read about jewelry design when something grips my curiosity.

Diamonds are better at dispersing light than glass due to their higher reflective index.

I make sure I’m completely alone before pulling my prism out from underneath my shirt. Could this actually be a diamond, or is it a crystal? I recently learned the difference between the two—diamonds are harder and have more facets and cuts. I put it away quickly as I hear someone walking by. I glance at my phone. I have to be dolled up in two hours.

“So, you’re the future Mrs. Dawson?” an elegant, middle-aged woman named Carmen asks me.

“Yes, lucky me,” I say with a faint smile.

“Lucky indeed. The deal with FundsForge Aaron closed today... Well, let’s just say blood could be spilled for it,” she adds, eyeing Aaron.

He looks handsome in his suit, his dirty blond hair perfectly styled. Yet he’s different from the boy I used to hang out with in my bedroom. He’s obviously taller, stronger... but even the way he stands, he holds himself differently now. The only reminder of that boy is the grayish-blue of his eyes. Every time he looks at me, I try to catch a glimpse of our past; I hold on to that as tightly as I can.

I know very little about his business these days; I stopped being interested long ago. There was a time when we told each other everything, but it started to weigh us down. I’d hear him complain all day about his deals, and he’d listen to my stories from the classroom all night. We’d argue, and our relationship would suffer. We eventually decided to keep work out of the bedroom, then out of the dining room, and before I knew it, work was out of all our conversations. And with work being the main thing in our lives, once we stopped sharing it, we grew apart, too.

Carmen is still standing next to me, now talking to another executive, when a familiar voice catches my attention.

“How are you holding up?” Lara asks. She’s wearing a gray suit like most of the men, except her heels and jewelry make her stand out. She could easily pass for a model.

I shake my head, a little confused.

“These events can be a little... toxic,” she explains.

I laugh. I like Lara; she’s not like the others. I remember Aaron’s words: “Lara can be different; she doesn’t have to work to be rich. She doesn’t take anything seriously because she can afford to.” Whatever her reasons are, I don’t care. She’s the only one I can talk to at events like this. She orders me another drink, even though the one in my hand is still full. I know better than to drink in a place like this, but Lara’s husband, Ted, on the other hand, didn’t get the memo.

“You seem very comfortable among them,” I tell her.

“Well... I am,” she says with a smile before someone comes to pull her away.

I’m looking for the balcony when Aaron comes to find me.

“Already in need of fresh air?” He knows I breathe better outdoors. I’m about to apologize when he says, “I hate how they all look at you, like you’re a piece of meat to be devoured.” He gestures toward a group of men.

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re telling me you haven’t noticed them looking at you?” His face can’t hide his feelings.

I roll my eyes. “You must be out of your mind... If they’re looking, it’s because they know I’m your fiancée, and I heard the deal you made today is worth a bit of gossip.”

I can feel his anger—not at me, never at me, but at any other man near me. The jealousy has always been a problem, even if I didn’t want to admit it.

“Thanks for coming,” he says on our way home.

“Of course. I guess I have to get used to these things now,” I say more to myself than to him.

“I will never force you to go, Iris.” Is it love I see in his eyes? Or pity?

“I know, I mean... I’m going to be your wife; it will be my... duty?” I try to smile, hoping my words don’t sound as bitter as they feel.

He grabs my hand and caresses the ring. “No duty. But I can’t wait to call you my wife.” I know he means it. And that hurts even more.

I want to stop Aaron but I hold the urge. I have been avoiding him for a while now. I decide to embrace the distraction. I move closer and kiss him back. I let him feel my body, his light fingers brushing my arm, drawing circles on my back. He touches me with muscle memory. I feel him ready against me and I kiss him harder. We move like a pair of dancers in bed, knowing exactly when to turn, with which pace to proceed. That’s how long we have been together. There is nothing rough about the way he loves me; he’s always the perfect gentleman. Always making sure I climax before releasing himself, never knowing the difference when I actually do or when I fake it.

Chapter 4

My headache is now insufferable; no pill seem to ease it. It's woken me up again. It isn't even six o'clock, and Aaron is already gone. I check my phone and see his text about an early meeting. I find myself with nowhere to be for hours and in need of fresh air.

Days have passed since I emailed Elena, still no reply. I'm starting to get restless with the wait. I have no plan B. Nothing else to research. The more I search the internet, the more I realize it's pointless. Wherever I go, whatever I do, I always find myself wondering: *What is this necklace my mother gave me? Did she know something? Why did she give it to me?* The answers are probably at my fingertips... if only I could bring myself to open it.

I scan the calm water of the Charles River during the chilly morning. The sun has only recently risen, and a few runners jog by, completely lost in their exhaustion. I've always admired the discipline of those who run in December. If the cold isn't enough to fight against, they've got the holidays to deal with, too. They breeze past me and soon vanish from view.

So much to do, yet I want nothing to do with any of it. Aaron wants to decorate his place—our place—for Christmas. Akira is still acting weird. My old apartment is a hot mess with boxes scattered everywhere. I still haven't come up with a plan for the final assignment I'm supposed to be giving. Despite the long list of things to do, all I want is to curl up with a cup of hot chocolate under the covers and let a good book help me forget it all.

As I shift my gaze to the water, I feel a pull to bring out the prism. Since the club, I've kept it hidden underneath my clothes—easy enough with all the winter layers. Even when it's dormant, I swear I can feel its presence. I debated telling Aaron about it. Although after seeing Akira's reaction, I knew this wasn't something I could share with anyone. I could almost hear Aaron's words if I did: *"There's no such thing as the supernatural. Everything has an explanation. Maybe you created this to satisfy a certain subconscious need."* He'd say anything except the word *pathetic*, and that's exactly how he would make me feel. Consequently, I have been keeping it all to myself.

I'm lost in thought, twisting the prism in my palm, when something cold hits my nose. I look up to see the first snowflakes of the season. I close my eyes, letting myself simply feel for a moment. A surprise welcomes me when I reopen them—the violet hue is exactly as I remember it. Alluring and trapped. The sight of it makes my heart race. I get closer and whisper, *"What are you?"* Only it begins to fade. I let out a soft laugh at the absurdity of talking to it. I keep staring, silently begging for it to stay longer, but it doesn't. When I look around again, I find that I'm no longer alone.

Staring at me from only a few feet away is Darion. Did he see...?

"What are you doing here?" I ask, a little too defensively. He startled me with his proximity. I quickly let the prism fall back to my chest, swinging gently, caught by the chain. I don't wait for him to respond. "I was... It's snowing," I add, gesturing to the air.

Darion looks at me strangely, his black-framed glasses perched on his nose and his hair—just a shade darker than mine—greasy and unkempt.

Before I can say anything else, he asks, "What is that?"

Of course, he saw it.

"What?" I'm not sure how to answer. "The necklace?" I realize he's staring at it. "Oh, it's... a family heirloom. I think it's broken though. The light goes on and off..." There is something about him that freaks me out. "I'm late for a meeting, but nice seeing you."

I'm almost out of breath by the time I catch a cab. The encounter was weird—he was so close, *too close*. My heart is pounding at a speed I can only associate with the runners going by. I feel dizzy. I loosen my scarf and practice my breaths in the car, completely aware that I probably look and sound disturbed. In and out, in and out. By the time I get home, I've managed to calm myself down.

I decide grocery shopping can wait. Laundry can wait. I grab my novel and head to bed, pressing the buttons of Aaron's automatic shades. I'm done with the world for the day.

I have another nightmare. This time, it's Darion hunting me. I really don't want to see him today. Still, I know it will be impossible to avoid him since he's my student.

The campus is covered in snow, and walking requires concentration. I'm focusing on my footing when I hear a ping from my phone. All notifications are silenced except one. Elena has sent a reply. If I could run without risking breaking my neck, I would. By the time I'm inside and no longer freezing my ass off, I read:

Hi Iris,

*Sorry for the delay. I'm still on maternity leave and have been slowly catching up with my inbox. My guess is that you've already explored the classic tales like *The Great Ring*. If you need to go deeper, I recommend the book *Accessories & Their Lost Fables* by Phaedrus. (It's out of print, but the library should have a copy.) If you could give me more details, perhaps I might be more helpful.*

Best, Elena

I'm on my way to my office when I hear a student calling my name.

"Professor De Loughery?"

I turn toward her. "Hi, Mila." I don't know her friend.

"I was wondering if you could tell me what the final paper will be on. I wanted to get a head start."

"You'll be asked to write about what made art valuable in the Renaissance and what makes it valuable now." I'm not sure I should've answered her. I didn't mean to give Mila an advantage on the assignment; I just needed her to move along. When Mila wants something, she can be persistent.

"Oh, shouldn't we be focusing on critiques by now?" she says, her voice laced with attitude.

"You guys haven't proven you're ready for them yet." I try to stay calm. She doesn't like my answer. I'm already sorry for whoever Mila ends up critiquing.

With the girls gone, I look up *The Great Ring* tale. I remember it vaguely—every historian has come across it at some point. It's nothing more than a children's bedtime story. According to the Russian legend, there was once a diamond ring capable of making its owner live longer; however, there was a price for the longevity. When death finally came to claim the body, the wearer had to give his soul in return. It was the previous owner's soul that powered the ring and extended the new user's life. Classic myth.

Now I have to think about how to reply to Elena. I'm not sure if I should mention a prism. With Darion and Akira already knowing about it, I need to be more careful. My stomach turns at the thought of seeing Darion again, and I wish I had skipped breakfast. To my relief, he's nowhere to be seen.

"We're covering a Baroque painting today, *Las Meninas* by Velázquez. Remember what we talked about last week? About the highly ornate and dramatic style of the Baroque? This is a great example. Does anyone know who the main little girl in the center is?"

"The king's daughter," Becky answers proudly.

"Correct. Why is this artwork greatly known and discussed?"

"Because it's a painting about a painting," says Stella.

"That's right. Velázquez was able to create different illusions, playing with the perspective. We are left unsure if the portrait subject is Margaret, her parents, or the painter himself. He uses light and dark to define the focal points. It's often said that Velázquez meant this work to suggest that art, and life, are an illusion."

I heat up my leftovers and carry them back to bed. My eyes feel like they might bleed after staring at the thick volume for hours. The only copy I could find of the book Elena mentioned was in Italian. With enough drawings and charts to fuss over, I brought it home anyway. Depictions of *incantate—enchanted*—necklaces, rings, and crowns fill the pages. There are also grotesque sketches of body parts, including organs. Nothing looks like my prism. I'm back to square one.

With Aaron gone on a business trip, I'm relieved to have the place to myself. I know I need to go back to my apartment soon; I'm running out of clothes again. *I need to get my life together.* I think to myself before deciding to actually do something about it.

It's been ages since I've done a proper meditation session. They kept me steady in college, and later in grad school; I pretty much owe those practices my degrees. There isn't a yoga mat here; I simply push the coffee table aside and sit on the rug. I place a lit candle in front of me and begin the process.

A combination of inhales and exhales, and a focused stare at the flame. I was to acknowledge my body and the sounds around me and let them go.

I scan my feet, then an itch on my back lifts my attention, which I tell myself to let it go. I continue going through my entire body, from the bottom up, noticing the headache at bay.

I turn my focus to the sounds around me. There's nothing besides my breathing and the hum of the apartment's heat.

Before I can focus entirely on the flame, my tears start to fall. It requires no effort on my part. They wash away my makeup; I know my mirrored reflection would likely resemble a scary clown. But there's no one here. No one I need to look pretty for. It's a great feeling—being oneself, truly free.

And so I let myself cry. I cry for Dad, for my mom, for Aaron, for the wedding, for the prism... and then I cry for myself.

And then, once again, the prism lights up for me. This time, I understand. *Water.* The prism requires moisture to light up. First, the water from the bathtub, then the snow, now my tears, and the time at the club? My sweat. *At last, some answers.* However, something is still missing,

something I don't understand. The prism didn't do anything when I showered. There's more to it than just getting it wet.

I bring the candle closer to the violet light. The reflection of the flame enhances the prism's inner glow, and the more I decrease the distance, the weirder I feel. But I'm done waiting. I need to know more. I push it closer and closer to the flame, defying what feels like nature's law. The prism begins to spin uncontrollably, suddenly alive and agitated. I blink—and everything goes black.

I can't see anything. Panic starts creeping in. I can't control my eyes. I open and shut them—still nothing. I reach for my phone, but the darkness doesn't relent.

Then, suddenly, the blackness gives way.

Somehow, I'm in another place. I can almost feel the ground beneath my feet. My brain fights the concept, knowing I'm still sitting in my living room. *I'm not actually here*, I tell myself. I scan the room, afraid that I'm losing my mind. *I'm not dreaming*. I'm stuck, imprisoned in my own eyes. I have no choice but to look around.

A fireplace casts a warm glow over the rustic room. Animal heads are mounted on the walls—far larger than I imagined they'd be in real life. My eyes dart around, frantically searching for a way out. Through the windows, I see mountains. It's snowing here too. I'm still looking for a door when I see... *him*.

A handsome, dark-haired man sits on a leather chair by the fire. By the look on his face, he sees me too. I step back, though something inside me tells me I have nothing to fear. I try to open my mouth, but no sound comes out. His green eyes are wide with shock as they scan me.

Am I shaking? I look down at my hands and realize... I have none. I'm... invisible—at least to myself. Before I can glance back at him, it all goes dark again.