

CHAPTER ONE

Consumer Warning

Advertising is the rattling of a stick inside a will bucket.

– George Orwell

Elise stared at the computer screen, her reflection a ghost in the black glass. The gray morning light slipped through the office blinds casting thin stripes across her desk. A Prison. That's what this place had become. Each day felt longer than the last, the minutes dragging like dead weight. The office felt claustrophobic.

James was dead. Three months gone and the weight of his absence pressed against her chest like a stone she couldn't push off. Three months, and she still caught herself reaching for her phone to text him. It was worse in these quiet moments, the sound of the office life fading into the background as her thoughts clawed their way to the surface.

The monitor covered her face in pale blue light, revealing the shadows etched beneath her eyes. Her inbox sat open, untouched, its subject lines like landmines waiting to explode. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard, but for some reason refused to type.

Somewhere in the back of her mind she heard James's voice. Steady and calming, reminding her not to let things pile up. She blinked hard, her vision blurring, not from tears, but from exhaustion. The kind that seeped into your bones and sat there.

A sound broke the silence, a mechanical noise followed by the soft hiss of silk rubbing against leather. Elise looked to her left. Amanda Singh, ever-perfect Amanda, sat upright at the next desk, adjusting her posture with a fluidity that was almost inhuman. Her Aether band pulsed at her neck. The glow calm and soothing, like the heartbeat of something alive.

Elise's fingers drifted to her own neck, bare and seemingly unremarkable. What it would feel like, she wondered, to wear one? To surrender to its gentle guidance. To let it carry the weight of every decision she'd been too tired to make. But the thought turned her stomach, and she let her hand drop, the rebellion against it instinctual, almost primal.

Her eyes moved back to the screen just as an email notification popped up, the subject line ruthless. *Final Notice: Tuition Payment Overdue*. Harper's school. Again. The words blurred together, but the meaning was clear. Sympathy only stretched so far, and Elise had already exhausted hers. Her finger trembled as it moved toward the mouse.

"Elise!" The knock of knuckles on her desk made her flinch. She looked up to see Ness standing there, perfectly dressed and manicured as always. Her Aether-free neck caught the office lights, a rare sight these days. Despite her upbeat tone, the way she shifted her weight gave her a restless energy. "You know Powell's calling an emergency all-hands, right? I heard it's something big from corporate."

Before Elise could respond, her phone buzzed. She glanced down, her pulse jumping at the message from an unknown number.

You may be in danger. We need to talk.

Her throat tightened as the office seemed to close in around her. Another soft chime from Amanda's Aether filled the air, followed by her perfectly synchronized posture adjustment. Elise's eyes moved to Ness, still hovering, her head tilted in concern.

"You coming?" Ness asks.

Elise nodded, standing on legs that felt like they might give out at any moment. She gripped her phone tighter, its edges digging into her palm. The world became unfocused as her fingers hovered over the screen.

Who is this? What do you mean? she typed, the message barely coherent as her pulse continued to hammer in her ears.

Three dots blinking, mocking her, as they disappeared then reappeared with maddening slowness. Finally, the response.

Your husband's death.

A chill ran down her spine. Her thumb trembled as she typed back, desperation seeping into every letter.

What are you talking about? Who are you?

Someone who can help. Meet me tonight. Don't tell anyone.

Her stomach twisted violently, her mind grasping at the absurdity of it all. It felt wrong, surreal, like a poorly scripted thriller. Yet, something about the specificity of the words clung to her, wrestling with her logic. She stared at the screen, her thoughts colliding as she began to type another frantic response.

"Elise!" Ness's voice interrupted, yanking her back to the office. The sound grated against her raw nerves like sandpaper. "Let's go."

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Clenching her jaw, Elise locked her phone and shoved it into her pocket, its weight far heavier than the plastic and metal should allow. She followed Ness out of the cubicle, her steps unsteady as she tried to shake the words from her mind, but they clung to her like a funky smell.

As they navigated the labyrinth of desks, Elise's attention hooked on the glowing Aether bands wrapped around her coworkers' necks. Each one pulsed in perfect harmony, their lights flickering in shades of blue, silver, and gold. They sparkled like jewelry, but the precision in their synchronization felt chilling. The bands weren't just adornments—they were declarations of allegiance to something much larger, more insidious.

"Gorgeous, aren't they?" Ness whispered, catching Elise's eyes. "I've been saving up. Well, trying to. Seems like we're the only ones without them." She laughed it off, but Elise recognized the hidden anxiety in her tone.

Elise forced a tight smile, though her jaw felt locked in place. She'd heard it all before, the endless comments about how much easier life could be if she just joined the tide, let the current carry her. Her eyes moved back to the bands, shimmering with crystalline curves that caught the light like prisms. For a brief moment, she wondered what it might feel like to wear one, to let it hum against her skin, to give herself over to its promise of guidance. The thought left her cold, her hand instinctively brushing her bare neck.

Ahead, the frosted glass walls of the conference room came into view, the distorted shapes of the gathering crowd inside giving the space an almost dreamlike quality. The buzz of voices grew louder, a mix of excitement and speculation that set Elise's nerves on edge.

Her phone seemed to grow heavier with each step, its presence against her thigh inescapable. She pulled it out, glancing down as if it might have more answers waiting. The thread of messages stared back at her, vague and ominous.

Elise's heart beat violently in her chest as Grayson Powell stepped forward, the glow of his Aether band casting subtle golden hues across the room. The two corporate reps next to him looked eerily similar, their identical gold bands blinking in a slow rhythm. They didn't look at the crowd, didn't fidget, didn't blink often enough. They stood there like extensions of the machine Powell so effortlessly represented.

"Good morning, everyone," Powell began, his voice smooth as silk. It carried just the right mix of warmth and authority to draw everyone in without giving them room to question. "I won't keep you long, but I'm excited to share some groundbreaking news about our partnership with Necessity Mart."

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He paused, letting the anticipation build, his eyes scanning the room with a calculated smile. “Actually, it’s more than a partnership. It’s a commitment... A commitment to embracing the future of optimal living.”

He waved to the screen behind him, where bold white text over a black background came into view: *TRANSCEND THE ORDINARY*.

The words seemed to vibrate slightly, though Elise wasn’t sure if it was the screen or her own straining eyes. The room got silent, the weight of collective attention pressing down like a physical force. She looked around, catching glimpses of her coworkers leaning forward in their chairs, eager, attentive. The buzz of excitement hung in the air.

She tried to focus on Powell’s words, tried to tune into the presentation that had everyone else hanging onto every syllable. But her mind tugged relentlessly toward her phone, still in her pocket, still warm against her leg. The messages sat there like burning coal, whispering with possibilities too dark to ignore.

Unable to resist any longer, she slid her phone out, keeping it low under the table. Her fingers moved before her mind could catch up. *Where do you want to meet?* she typed. The question felt heavier this time, as if she were carving it into stone instead of tapping it into glass.

Three dots appeared, vanished, reappeared. Each blink sent her heart racing faster.

The old rail station. 8:30 PM. Don’t let anyone see you.

Her breath caught in her throat. The old rail station—abandoned, decaying, forgotten. A place that no one had any business being, especially at night. Her stomach turned as she pocketed the phone again, her mind a storm of questions she couldn’t afford to answer, not now.

She swallowed, glancing up from her phone. Powell rambled on, talking about “proactive wellness monitoring” and “unprecedented benefits.” The screen shifted to show infographics: bars rising, scores climbing, smiling faces glowing with the subtle light of their Aether bands. Around her, those same bands glowed in quiet harmony, wearers unconsciously straightening their posture, deepening their breaths, adjusting their movements in unison. It was mesmerizing and sickening all at once.

Elise’s phone buzzed again—the vibration rattling against her thigh. She didn’t want to look down, but she did.

Don’t be late. And don’t tell anyone.

Her fingers tightened around the device, blood draining from them as she stuffed it back into her pocket. Whoever this was, they were pulling her deeper

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into something she wasn't sure she wanted to uncover. But the promise of answers, of finally understanding what happened to James, was a hook she couldn't ignore.

Powell's voice faded to background noise, the words blending together as her mind spiraled toward the rail station.

The lights flickered to life as Powell wrapped up, illuminating the room in harsh fluorescence. The sound of conversations started immediately. Elise stood quickly, eager to slip away, her chair scraping quietly against the floor. But just as she took her first step toward the door, Powell's voice cut through the crowd.

"Elise? A moment."

She froze, pulse hammering against her ribs. Slowly, she turned, locking eyes with him. His Aether band glowed... bright, steady, watching. As if it could sense her unease.

He drifted closer, tablet in hand, his movements unhurried. "Your numbers for Q3," he began. "I'm worried about you, Elise."

Her mouth opened, but he didn't wait for a reply. His eyes softened just enough to mimic concern. "I know these past months haven't been easy. James was..." He hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "... he was a good man, Elise. And I see how hard you're working to keep things together."

He swiped his tablet, turning it toward her. Cool blue graphs came to life, their dips and valleys like accusations. "But I can't help noticing a trend," Powell continued. "You're scattered. Distracted. This really isn't like you."

The glow of his Aether pulsed gently, its rhythm syncing unnervingly with his words. He leaned in slightly. "Have you thought that maybe you're carrying too much alone?"

He tapped the screen again, pulling up a new set of metrics. "Your natural ability is there... brilliant analysis, attention to detail... but it's fractured now."

"I'm managing," Elise replied.

Powell shook his head, his expression almost pitying. "You're surviving," he corrected. "But you could be thriving."

From his jacket, he pulled out a brochure, sliding it into her hands. The cover showed a serene woman bathed in soft light, her Aether glowing a tranquil blue. "The Aether isn't just about productivity," Powell said. "It's about finding balance. Something I think you could use right now."

He flipped the brochure open, pointing his finger at the financing options that were laid out in pristine columns. "The company has programs to help with the initial investment," he added. "I hate seeing one of my best analysts struggling when

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there's a solution right here." His tone was sincere, almost fatherly. "Just... think about it. For your sake."

Elise forced a smile. "I will."

Powell smiled back, a practiced warmth that never quite reached his eyes. "Good," he said, tucking the tablet under his arm. "Because we want you at your best, Elise. And if there's anything else you need... really, anything at all, you know where to find me."

As he walked away, his Aether glowed steadily, its golden light fading into the crowd. Elise gripped the brochure in her hands, its glossy surface covered in sweat. She shoved it into her bag and slipped out of the conference room, her thoughts already spiraling back toward the rail station and whatever answers might be waiting there in the dark.

Elise looked at her phone, her fingers flying across the screen as she typed a quick message to Maggie about being late for Harper. The send button clicked, and the message felt heavier than the text itself, an echo of their last fight hanging in her mind like smoke in a closed room.

She could still see Maggie's face that night, illuminated by the glow of the TV Harper had been half-watching. Maggie's voice had risen above the sound of the show. "You're smarter than this, Elise," she said, her tone somewhere between frustration and pleading. "Can't you see what's happening? They're not just selling convenience anymore... they're selling goddamn control."

Elise tried to brush it off, deflecting with something about priorities and survival. But the words stuck like a thorn. Maggie had a way of speaking truths that festered under the surface. Truths Elise didn't want to acknowledge.

She checked the time: *4:45 PM*. The numbers blurred for a moment before coming back into focus. Less than four hours until she's supposed to meet a stranger in the shadows of a forgotten rail station to discuss her dead husband. The kind of place where bad things happen. Where no one will hear you scream.

She locked her phone and stood, the world tilting slightly as she took a step forward. She exhaled, her breath shaky but determined. Whatever this meeting is, truth or trap, she'll be there. She has to be.

As she grabbed her bag, Maggie's words whispered in the back of her mind like a ghost she couldn't shake. *Can't you see what's happening?* She pushed the thought aside, but it clung to her, following her out of the office like a second shadow.