

## Prologue

When you are scared, several things happen simultaneously in your brain.

First, the production of the stress hormone cortisol is activated. Your body prepares itself either to fight or to flee. Adrenaline and noradrenaline flood your body's cells. They put you into a heightened state of readiness, your pulse begins to skyrocket, your heart beats faster, your blood pressure rises. Your bronchia expand. You breathe harder to provide more oxygen to your muscles; your pupils dilate and you are wide awake.

You break out in a cold sweat.

If you're lucky, this is when you wake up. If you're lucky, it was all just a dream that leaves you gasping and staring into the darkness. Your heart throbs painfully against your ribs while you wipe the dampness from your cheeks with a trembling hand. At some point you stand up, change out of your sweat-soaked t-shirt, and splash some cold water in your face.

If you're not lucky, you don't wake up.

If you're not lucky, you stare at him as he slowly swings back and forth. You note the stool on its side on the wooden floor, the one you bought together at Ashley Furniture a few weeks ago. You look at his pale toes and you know that it's too late, even if you don't yet understand how you know that.

You begin to scream.

You want to run away.

You want to wake up.

But you'll do none of that.

## Chapter One

Most people are afraid of all kinds of things. They're afraid of spiders, sky scrapers, clowns or their tax returns. Some are afraid of losing their partner, others are afraid they'll never find a better one. Add to that fear of loneliness, of boredom, of routine, or fear of making the wrong decisions. Lots of people are afraid of making presentations, of losing their jobs and livelihoods, of farting in an elevator or snorting when they laugh. Women are afraid that their appearance is too ordinary, they weigh too much, or their apartment is too messy. Men are afraid that their income is too low, their body is not sculpted enough or that baldness is inevitable.

Many are afraid of dogs, some of children and some even of the elderly. A few crazy people are afraid of beards, the color yellow, or the number thirteen. There is practically nothing on this Earth that you *cannot* be afraid of.

At that moment, I could understand this all too well. Anxious, I stepped off of the elevator on the top floor of the New York high rise and turned to the left. At the end of the short hallway stood the door to the trendy apartment where I would be living for the foreseeable future. My heart beat faster than usual, which was ridiculous. After all, the interaction with this Josh had been totally cool. It was an incredible stroke of luck that the advertisement for a room in this apartment happened to pop up on my

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by Rose Snow

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laptop right after I got my acceptance letter from Columbia College. Even more amazing, the rent was definitely affordable, which was a miracle, considering the photos and the short Skype-tour Josh had given me. Or perhaps it was just luck. Maybe life was trying to compensate somehow for the pain of the past few months.

With determination I pushed aside all thoughts of the past, combed my fingers through my hair, and took a deep breath. The number on the white door in front of me was an ornate 19, which could also be interpreted as a good omen – after all, I would be turning nineteen years old in a week. Still, I still hadn't managed to actually ring the doorbell.

*Damn it, Widney, get your act together.*

I leaned forward and rang the bell. In the same moment, the door was flung open and I stared into a pair of hazelnut brown eyes. They belonged to a young woman about my age. A little mascara clung to her lower lashes and her lips were swollen. A young man towered behind her in the hallway; he spontaneously reminded me of one of the actors in *Vikings*. He was well over six feet tall, with broad shoulders, dark blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. He was clearly an athlete, but despite his impressive muscles he didn't seem conceited.

The girl with the smeared mascara turned back to face him and placed a hand on his chest. "Do you want to get together again later? I can call you."

Without any change in his facial expression, he plucked her fingers off of his gray t-shirt. "No, thanks."  
"But..."

"Was I not clear? We had a lovely night. That's all I have to offer." His tone left no doubt that the conversation was over. "Get home safely."

Even as the young woman stared at him in astonishment, his gaze slid over to me. "And you are?"

"Widney," I said, as his rejected conquest pushed past me with a snort and stomped towards the elevator.

"Okay." The guy turned around and left the door open. I could see that he'd gathered his longer hair into a sloppy bun, just like my brother had liked to wear it. The sharp pain was unexpected and intense, but I managed to quickly push it aside. The young woman behind me punched the button for the elevator as I hesitantly stepped across the threshold of the apartment where I would be living. It was even bigger than I had imagined from my brief Skype tour. Across from the door was a huge expanse of glass with lattice windows; along with the visible pipes on the ceiling they gave the room a really cool factory vibe. The raw, gray stone walls fit the scheme perfectly, and in combination with the warm wooden floor somehow made the place inviting. To my left was a chic designer kitchen with an enormous stainless-steel refrigerator, and just a few steps in front of me I gazed at the centerpiece of the loft: a huge, U-shaped leather sofa with a gray carpet and a square coffee table. A fair-haired guy lounged on the sofa, reading some scholarly-looking tome. The two ends of the couch did not face in my direction, but to the left towards a free-standing wall with a huge plasma television.

Wow. I was impressed.

"Hi," said the guy on the sofa, lowering his book. Meanwhile, the *Vikings* castoff headed towards a U-shaped staircase in the back left corner of the loft that led to the first floor. A glass gallery ran around the room, with further doors leading off it.

"Hi," I answered with a smile and took a few steps towards the sofa dude. "I'm Widney."

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“Fuck you, you pathetic piece of shit,” said the *Vikings* guy, without looking at me. Annoyed, I watched him pass a lovely potted plant before climbing the stairs two at a time.

“He doesn’t mean you,” said sofa dude, snapping his book shut.

“Okay. Is he talking to himself?”

“No, self-loathing isn’t really Cooper’s thing.” My blonde future roommate smiled briefly before he narrowed his eyes and studied me intently. “But you seem to be familiar with it.”

Furrowing my forehead, I stared at the guy in front of me. I wasn’t sure if he was just trying to provoke me or if he actually believed I couldn’t stand myself.

“I’m Xander, by the way,” he said then and offered me a hand. “But most people here call me Freud.”

“Because of your unsettling psychoanalyses?”

Xander grinned. “Exactly. It will be a pleasure to analyze you in the future, Widney.”

I grinned. “Is that why the rent is so cheap? Because you like to play Dr. Freud and invite your roommates onto the couch all the time?”

Xander smirked. “Since I’m studying psychology and intend to be a respected therapist in a few years, it should actually be the other way around, and you should all be paying me for it.”

I let my backpack slip from my shoulders and raised my eyebrows. “Okay. Then why is my room so incredibly reasonable?”

“You get right to the point.” Xander tilted his head slightly and regarded me with interest. With his broad nose and the look in his eyes, he reminded me of a Rottweiler that had just caught sight of a cat. “Relationships,” he finally explained after a brief pause. “My uncle works in the real estate business and rents this loft to me at an absolute bargain rate.”

I looked around the large room. To the right of the sofa was another large area where a punching bag dangled from a steel beam running across the ceiling. The metal struts wound through the entire room and had been equipped with black spotlights. Behind the brown sandbag I could see a pool table in the corner beside the front door. It was partially hidden behind a freestanding pillar that had blocked my view when I came in. On the wall behind that were three closed doors, which apparently led to other rooms.

“And do you know why it was such a bargain in the first place? Was someone murdered here, or am I going to land in the hospital with a fungal infection in the next couple of weeks?”

Xander smiled. “No, my uncle is just good at his job. He has even worked for Kiera Knightley. You look like her, by the way. Are you related?”

I had to laugh at that thought. “Not that I know of.”

“But you could be sisters. The same brown hair, the same high cheekbones, the same vulnerable charisma...”

The same angular face... unconsciously I moved my jaw, which was a little too wide for my liking.

“Maybe she looks like me,” I countered half-jokingly, without addressing his comment about vulnerable charisma. Then I slipped out of my jacket.

Xander scratched thoughtfully behind his ear. He had rather thick blonde hair that got lighter towards the tips, held in a casual spiked hairdo by a hazardous quantity of hair gel.

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“Interesting. Egocentric personality traits with a dash of narcissism. It’ll be fun getting to know you,” his wide grin defused his insulting analysis.

“Oh definitely, you, too.” I replied in the same tone. “Is Josh actually here? He’s the only one I know so far because we Skyped last week.”

“Josh is still upstairs, but he’ll be down soon,” Xander said, sitting down on the sofa again. The gesture he made inviting me to join him seemed to indicate he was looking forward to the upcoming interrogation. “He does all the contracts and stuff for all of us because he knows the most about rental law.”

“Is he going to be a lawyer?”

“No.” Xander crossed his legs. “He’s studying computer science and anthropology. But that doesn’t stop him from knowing more. That’s why he skipped a few years in school and started college when he was seventeen. We like to call him Wikipedia on two legs.”

“So Josh is something like your own in-house genius?” I asked, also sitting on the black sofa. It was buttery soft and I felt like I was sinking into it, never to get up voluntarily again.

“Josh is our nerd. The genius is me, of course.”

I raised an eyebrow in amusement. “Now which one of us is the narcissist?”

Xander shrugged his shoulders with a grin. “We probably both have some narcissistic traits. Might be because I was an only child. And you?”

There it was again, the question that instantaneously stabbed my heart with all the pain, with such force that I flinched.

Xander looked at me expectantly.

“Uh, yeah,” I said a little late. “No siblings.” That at least was not a lie, even if it was a long way from the truth.

“Okay. And what else is there to know about you? Don’t be shy.”

Oh, wonderful. This was exactly what I didn’t want.

I shrugged my shoulders casually. “I grew up in Ohio. Dad is a musician and Mom works at a bank. Or I should say, she used to work there.”

Xander’s forehead was furrowed and he was so intently focused on me that I actually felt like I was in a therapy session. The expression on his face looked less like a Rottweiler now, and more like that of the therapist I had to go to after the thing with Aiden.

“Why doesn’t your mother work at the bank anymore?”

I hesitated. *Because the death of her son plunged her into a bottomless depression from which she is only now starting to recover.*

“Because my dad’s music career has taken off in the past few years. She didn’t have to work anymore.”

The next half-truth. I hadn’t even moved in yet and was already making up a bunch of nonsense. On the other hand, it was asking a little much to invite me onto the inquisition sofa and expect me to divulge my entire life story in the first ten minutes. That’s just not who I am.

Freud rubbed his eyebrow with a finger. “Is your father famous? Do I know him?”

“I don’t think so. He plays country music,” I said evasively.

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“And you? Do you play country music too? Or some other kind of music?”

I scratched at a light spot on my jeans with my thumbnail. “No. I don’t play music, just listen to it.”

“Your father’s music, too?”

“Yeah, sometimes on the radio.” When I saw the face he made in response to that, I leaned forward a little. “Are you now analyzing what it’s like for me to like my own father’s music?”

Freud smiled. “Do you want me to do that?”

“Do you want me to want you to analyze it?” I could play that game, too.

Laughing, he leaned back and crossed his arms above his head, bringing his upper arm muscles into view. Apparently Xander also kept in shape, although purely based on looks, he couldn’t compare with the cursing Cooper.

“I think I’d have to listen to your father’s music first to have an opinion about what listening to his songs might do for you. Music is often very intimate. What I’m asking myself is: Do we want to know that much about our parents’ private lives?”

“Do we want to know that much about anyone’s private life?” I replied thoughtfully. Sometimes it seemed to me that it would be easier if everyone just tended to their own business. That was more than hard enough, in most cases.

“I note depressive tendencies with a dash of cynicism.” Freud observed me like a child looking at a Christmas tree. He was obviously enjoying our time together on the inquisition sofa a lot more than I was.

“Okay. You’re clearly the kind who wants to know every detail of other people’s lives. But I don’t know if that’s not just a thirst for sensationalism.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Interesting. Your tone is getting defensive, but at the same time you deliver a respectable attack to distract me from your insecurities. What do you have to hide, Widney? There’s certainly something there. Just let it out. “

I let out a tightly controlled breath. I was slowly starting to feel really uncomfortable.

“Hey! Are you annoying our new roomie?” The voice came from the glass-lined gallery above our heads. Relieved, I looked upwards. An average-height guy with reddish-brown hair had appeared at the railing. It was my Skype contact, Josh, who looked relatively normal on the outside, but I had my suspicions that he was anything but once you got to know him.

“We’re just talking,” said Xander. “No reason to play the knight in shining armor. Or maybe there is a reason, Josh?” He raised his eyebrows and looked meaningfully back and forth between us.

I was slowly getting fed up with psychological analyses. “Hi, Josh. I’m glad to meet you in person, too,” I said and stood up.

He smiled at me and jogged down the U-shaped staircase. The stairs were made of wood, but they had a glass railing that made them look pretty cool.

“No one can stand you, you piece of shit,” he said towards the potted plant on the floor as he walked past it, then continued to me and shook my hand with a wide smile. “Good to have you here, Widney. I’m glad everything worked out so smoothly.”

It really had. After being constantly bombarded by mail from Colombia University for the past year, I had made of a spur of the moment decision to apply to the New York school, and then was actually accepted.

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Only a day later I stumbled across the ad for the shared apartment, which was even located near the university. The first email exchanges with Josh were as pleasant as our Skype call. Since I never got replies from the other two potential roommates I had written to, the decision to come here had not been particularly difficult.

“Thank you. I'm glad to be here.”

Josh looked at me attentively. “Did Freud explain the apartment rules?”

“No, so far we've only talked about me and my family and my dad's music,” I answered wryly, while my gaze kept being drawn to the waist high palm next to the stairs, which had been verbally abused twice already. “So, do you have something against that plant?”

“Yes, it's hideous!” Xander called out in the direction of the poor plant, which I was already feeling sorry for.

“It's an experiment,” explained Josh in response to the expression on my face. “Supposedly plants react to how they are treated. When they're raised in a friendly environment, they grow better, develop larger flowers, and generally flourish. But if you insult it...” He sighed deeply. “Well, then that should also have a visible impact.”

“And that's why you're harassing it? To prove that you can ruin it?”

“Originally we had two of these yucca palms,” Xander explained, standing up and sauntering over to the refrigerator. “We decided one of them would be treated kindly and be praised for its pretty leaves, while we only said mean things to the other one. In any case, *someone*,” — the way he looked at Josh just then made it clear who that someone was — “switched the plants around again and again, until in the end no one knew which was the good yucca palm and which was the evil one.”

“They needed light,” Josh defended himself as a touch of red appeared on his cheeks.

Xander helped himself to a can of soda from the fridge, which he opened with a hiss. “Josh, you have approximately three hundred plants in your room. Why don't you just fuss over those?”

“I do that already.”

“And then what happened?” I prodded.

“Then,” Xander moved around the big kitchen island and propped himself up on his elbows. “One of the two yuccas curled up and died.”

“The one that was insulted all the time?”

“No, it was the one we were nice to, at least most of the time. When it wasn't treated so nicely for a week because Josh switched the pots around, it gave up entirely and got plant lice.”

I frowned. “Okay. So the experiment worked. It did respond to being insulted.”

“Yes, it did,” said Josh, somewhat guiltily.

Xander flashed a crooked grin. “We had to throw it out, and he still hasn't gotten over it. By the way, would you like something to drink, Widney?”

“A glass of water would be great.” Xander filled a glass at the stainless-steel sink while I admired the kitchen. It was a typical designer kitchen made of wood, stone and steel that could have been featured in a cooking show. In front of the massive kitchen island topped by a granite counter stood five barstools with black leather seats and metal legs.

“And what’s with the palm by the stairs?” I asked after I had taken a sip of my water and thanked Xander.

“It seems to be a sadomasochist,” answered Josh with a shake of his head.

“Really?” I had to grin.

“No shit,” said Xander. “The more we curse it the greener the leaves grow. So we do our little piece of shit the favor, isn’t that right?”

“That’s completely crazy,” I said.

“And it’s one of the apartment rules,” Xander emphasized.

I almost choked on my water. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“He doesn’t joke when it comes to these things,” Josh said earnestly.

“If I live here, I have to denigrate your palm tree?”

“Our palm, Widney. But how about if Josh shows you your room first?” Xander glanced at his cell phone and tipped back the rest of his soda. “I have to leave.”

“Ah... sure.”

“Then come with me,” said Josh. “I’m sure you’re going to like it.”

## Chapter Two

“I wish you would just die, already.” Josh reached for the handrail on the stairs and looked at me expectantly. “Now you.”

“Uhm.” I cleared my throat. “The yucca plant my parents have is at least twice as big as you.”

Josh raised his eyebrows, amused.

“You should be ashamed of your puny leaves,” I added, sounding a little mad even to myself.

“You’ll get used to it.” He headed up the stairs in front of me and threw a bemused look over his shoulder. “At the beginning it was a little weird for all of us, but that goes away quickly.”

“And why are you doing this again?” We reached the first bend in the U-shaped stairs and for a moment I took in the beautiful loft that was spread out below me.

“Because we’re doing Xander a favor with it. He loves these kinds of experiments. For a while we did something similar with two glasses of cooked rice, too.”

“And what did that accomplish?”

“Opinions vary on that score.”

Josh had now reached the gallery, which also formed a massive U, starting against the giant wall of windows, which reached all the way up here. On each of the three sides were two rooms with light gray sliding doors, leading to a total of six rooms.

“And all our rooms are up here?”

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Josh shook his head. "Not entirely. Xander's is downstairs, the rest of us are up here."

I automatically glanced down at the three closed sliding doors on the lower floor. "Xander has three rooms?" Maybe he needed a place for his extensive ego.

Josh shook his head. "No, he only has the room on the far left. The one next to that," he hesitated for a moment, "is currently unoccupied, and to the right is the laundry room. Later I'll show you how the washer and dryer work, too."

"You actually have an extra room that's empty?" I asked in disbelief. "Aren't other students breaking down the door to get in?"

Josh rubbed his neck uncomfortably. "The room is really just a storage space and is locked most of the time. Besides, we try not to draw a lot of attention to our posh living situation."

I nodded. Who knew how Xander's uncle had managed to pull this incredible deal out of his sleeve.

"The two rooms you see in front of you belong to Cooper and me," Josh continued quickly. "Between them is a bathroom that we share." He marched past the sliding doors to the hallway that was directly across from the wall of windows and indicated the door to the right. "This room belongs to Ash. If you don't want any trouble, give her some space. Ash cannot stand it when people go near her things."

"Am I going to share a bathroom with her?" As far as I knew, Ash was my only female housemate, which led me to assume that I'd be moving into the room next to hers.

Josh shook his head. "Behind the door on the left are stairs leading up to the roof. Actually, the property management doesn't let us go up to the roof for safety reasons, but nobody really holds to that. We still keep it locked, just so that no party guests make their way upstairs. The key is in the pot of the yucca plant, in case you feel like going up there. On clear evenings the view is phenomenal."

"Wow."

He smiled modestly. "The next room belongs to Quentin. Quentin is..." Josh turned the corner to the last section of the gallery, which led back to the window front. "Quentin is busy right now," he finally finished his sentence.

Confused, I followed his gaze to a cactus in a bright red planter that stood on the floor in front of the gray sliding door.

"What does that mean?"

"It means that Quentin has a female visitor at the moment."

"Oh, okay." I hurried to move along so as not to give the impression that I had any particular interest in what might be going on behind the door.

"Since we've started using the cactus, the term 'prick' has taken on new meaning," sounded the deep voice of the *Vikings* castoff from the opposite side of the gallery. He had just come out of his room with a bulging gym bag slung over his shoulder. The bag was bursting at the seams and I had to wonder what he could be transporting.

Maybe a giant pumpkin. Or a medicine ball.

"Thank you, Cooper, for the excellent mnemonic. I am sure Widney will use it to memorize the function of the cactus," Josh gave a crooked grin while Cooper just casually tapped his forehead and then barreled down the stairs. Not five seconds later the front door of the apartment fell into its lock with an audible bang.

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“So you put a cactus in front of your door when you don’t want to be disturbed,” I summarized.

“Normally you hang a tie or a cloth on the doorknob,” Josh replied. “With sliding doors it’s not so simple. And the attempt to wedge a red cloth in the door in the heat of the moment has gone wrong a few times already – hence, the cactus.”

“I see.”

We had now come to the last gray sliding door. From here it was only a few steps to the end of the gallery, which reached all the way to the giant windows. Overwhelmed, I looked through the latticed glass panes, behind which New York lay at our feet. The morning sun glistened off the countless windows of the sky scrapers, and I could see a thin strip of ocean far in the distance.

“The view is unbelievable.”

Josh nodded. “You come from a less urban area, right?”

“Yep. I grew up in a typical American suburb.” The words brought a series of memories to the surface that made my smile falter and threatened to tear it apart.

“Yeah, I remember you mentioned that. Must be a pretty big adjustment for you. Have you ever lived in a big city?”

I shook my head. “This is my first time.”

Like so much else.

At that moment, a pigeon came out of nowhere, flying straight towards the wall of windows. The sight of its rapidly beating wings made me very uncomfortable.

“Careful!” I gasped, though I knew that warning the bird was utterly pointless. Nonetheless, the pigeon wheeled away from the window just before impact and disappeared, gliding between the other tall buildings.

“Hey. Everything okay?” Josh laid his hand on my shoulder. “You’ve gone all pale.”

“I just thought...” I tried to control my breathing and not look as crazy as I felt right then. “I was afraid the pigeon was going to commit suicide on your window.”

“On *our* window,” Josh corrected me in a friendly way. “And yes, it has happened before – a bird crashing into the windows in panic. But that was on New Year’s Eve, while fireworks were going off everywhere. That almost never happens during the year because of the lattice windows.” He paused briefly. “Are you ready to see your room?”

“Absolutely,” I said quickly, and tried not to think about the pigeon anymore. Or the sound of its strong wingbeats, which I imagined I could still hear.

Josh pushed the sliding door open with gusto. “Voila. Welcome to your kingdom, Widney.”

The room was the bomb. Although it fit with the style of the rest of the apartment, it still had a unique flair to it that made me emit a little squeal of delight. As in the enormous common living room below, there was an impressive bank of windows that boasted an astonishing view of another portion of the New York skyline. To the left of that, a wooden futon bed stood against the light, textured wall, which was exactly the same color as the rectangular, deep-pile carpet on the parquet floor. Thrilled, I soaked up all the impressions. Whoever it was that had put this room together was apparently well acquainted with interior design. Every piece of furniture was perfectly suited to the others, from the narrow desk on the left next to the bed or the modern, gray built-in closet on the right. The straight, sleek lines harmonized perfectly with each other, without making the room seem uncomfortable. In addition to the

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soft carpet, other cozy touches included an off-white upholstered chair by the window and lots of pillows on the bed.

“And? What do you say?”

“Wow. I’m not sure if you’re asking for enough rent.”

Josh laughed. “I hope you aren’t planning on being a lawyer or a manager. You’re clearly too honest for that.”

Grinning, I shook my head. “No, after my bachelor’s degree I want to study medicine.”

“Interesting.” He leaned against my desk with his arms folded while he studied me intensely. “Which direction do you want to go with that?”

“I want to study the brain.” Under Josh’s curious gaze I took a few steps into the room and let my backpack slide off my shoulders. Then I opened the closet and ran a hand over the well-made shelving in wonder. To the left was a narrow bookcase, while to the right of the closet was another closed sliding door.

“This one probably leads to the bathroom?”

Josh nodded. “Don’t be nervous about opening it. If Quentin were in the bathroom, he’d have locked the door from the inside.”

“What’s Quentin like?” I asked as I hesitantly pulled the door open. Effortlessly it glided to the side and revealed a bathroom that was in no way inferior to the rest of the space. Huge gray stone tiles covered the floor and the walls, contrasting nicely with an angular white sink on the left wall, which was set into a wide cabinet of dark wood. To my right was an enormous glass shower that was big enough for three people, as well as a white toilet. A fluffy, light bathroom mat loosened up the masculine style a bit, but I still perceived Quentin’s presence with all my senses. Not only because he had spread his toothbrush, toothpaste, mouthwash, comb, aftershave, shaving cream and shaving brush around the sink, but also because his intense men’s cologne filled the air intensely, as if he had just been in here.

A quiet, feminine voice from behind the door on the opposite side of the bathroom encouraged me to leave the bathroom quickly.

“Quentin isn’t easy to describe.” Josh was apparently still pondering my question. “He’s already got his bachelor’s degree and is in his second year at Columbia Medical School. At the moment he’s slightly pissed because the school is being rebuilt and he has to keep making the three-mile trip to Columbia’s campus where his classes are held in the meantime. What else?” Josh scratched his head. “Quentin is a very straightforward guy and always says what he thinks. He can also be aloof, but you can’t take that too seriously.”

“And why not?”

“Well, because...” Josh frowned. “It’s not that important.”

Intrigued, I narrowed my eyes. I really would’ve liked to know the story behind Quentin’s aloofness, even if it wasn’t to be taken too seriously.

“So, brain research,” Josh said just then. “Sounds exciting. Is there a particular reason you want to go in that direction?”

His sudden change of subject reminded me of the conversation with Xander on the inquisition couch.

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I shrugged my shoulders as casually as I could. "I find it interesting to figure out what goes on in the human mind."

For example, what all had to go wrong for him to just kill himself.

Josh grinned. "The human psyche is Freud's passion, too. You two will have plenty to talk about."

"I'm more interested in the chemical processes," I countered and walked over to the bed to try out the mattress. It was even more comfortable than I had expected and I started to question whether all of this was real, or if I would wake up soon in my own bedroom back at home.

Josh cleared his throat. "That means you want to do research later? Cure Alzheimer's and stuff like that?"

"It's possible. What about you?" I bobbed up and down on the edge of the bed a few times. "Xander said you're studying anthropology and computer science. That sounds pretty demanding."

Josh made an odd movement between a nod and a shrug. "I remember things pretty well."

"I heard that too."

"Speaking of remembering," he said as he pushed himself off the desk, "I wanted to explain the apartment rules to you. If you want, we can get the rest of your things at the same time."

"That would be great." My belongings were still downstairs with the doorman. I had only brought the most essential stuff with me, because I breathed easier when fewer things reminded me of the past.

"Rule number one: living here means contributing to our group projects."

"And these group projects include cursing at innocent potted plants and cooked rice?"

"Exactly." Josh winked at me as we took the wooden stairs down to the first floor. "There's also a shopping plan that says who's responsible for making sure the fridge is full each week. The list is hanging in the kitchen."

"Okay."

"There's also an Indian restaurant down the street that makes the best curry in the world. It's rescued several of us from starvation when we didn't have the time or energy to cook something."

I grinned. "Sounds good." By then we had reached the elevator that led downstairs to the doorman.

"What else?"

"No sex between people living in the apartment." Josh pressed the call button. "That didn't work out so well in the past."

"Oh." I bit my tongue to keep myself from asking which constellation had gone so badly awry that my new roommates felt compelled to make a rule about it.

"Ash and Freud," Josh said, who had apparently noted my curiosity. "Best not to bring it up with them. Especially with Ash. She can be pretty..." He ran a hand through his reddish curls with a sigh. "Let's put it this way. Ash can be kind of abrasive."

"Got it." When the elevator doors opened, I stepped into it behind Josh and lowered my gaze to my shoes. Maybe there was a good reason I could afford a room in this apartment after all. From what I'd heard, neither Ash nor Quentin seemed to be easy-going, and Xander, otherwise known as Dr. Freud, was also rather a special case. "Is there anything else I should keep in mind?" I asked on the ride down. "What about Cooper? Does he have some special quirks, too?"

## 19: The First Book of Magical Fear

by Rose Snow

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“Cooper? No, he just brings home a different woman every night.” Josh’s voice sounded so neutral, that I wasn’t sure if he was secretly jealous of him, or simply making a value-free statement. The elevator had reached the ground floor and we headed for the doorman’s room to collect my things. Josh groaned a little under the weight of my heavy box of books, but didn’t want to accept any help.

“I forgot one more thing,” he mentioned, breathing heavily after I had rolled my suitcases into the elevator and we were on our way back upstairs. “Once a month we do something together as a group. Freud started that, to make us feel more like we belong together. Tomorrow night, for example, we’re throwing a party. If you want, you can invite someone, too.”

The suggestion elicited a smile from me. “I’m afraid there’s no one I could invite on such short notice, other than my invisible friend from kindergarten. My social contacts in New York so far are limited to you and Xander.”

Josh shrugged his shoulders as well as he could with the heavy box in his arms. “Doesn’t matter. Maybe you’ll meet someone at Columbia. And if not, just come as you are. We’ll get started around nine.”

“Okay.” I smiled at him and headed for my room with the suitcases. After Josh had lugged my books upstairs, he said he still had some work to do and took his leave.

I closed the sliding door behind me and leaned my back against it for a moment. My heart was pounding with a mixture of nervousness and anticipation.

I had made it!

I was finally here. In a city where no one looked at me with pity or looked away with sadness, because they had heard about our loss. In a city where no one asked me how I was doing, and I answered with a lie so they would feel better and I could end the conversation.

I had escaped.

For a moment I tried to believe myself, while a voice in my head whispered that that was impossible. That I could never escape, because his death was a part of my history and belonged to my life from now on — just like the birthmark at the back of my knee and the scar on my collarbone.

“Don’t make yourself crazy,” I tried to calm myself down as the tightness in my chest intensified. It was clear to me what was happening. I had experienced a trauma, and my brain was reacting by producing stress hormones. All of my physical responses – the racing heartbeat, the rushing in my ears and the nausea – resulted from that. They were by-products of my loss that lingered in every cell of my body.

Take deep breaths, in and out.

My gaze traveled through the amazing room that had delighted me just a moment ago. Now I just had the impression that it was getting smaller by the moment.

I drew in air through my constricted throat and closed my eyes. Breathe, Widney, breathe.

A loud beating of wings outside the window made me flinch. I felt my heart make a leap and my eyes flew open again. A black raven had landed on the sill outside my window. Its head was cocked to the side and it studied me with an intelligence that made me take a step backwards.

Feeling uneasy, a tingle ran up the back of my neck. This isn’t possible. I stared at the raven. It had a slightly lighter patch on its chest and looked exactly like the one I had seen last night while packing up my room. It had sat in the branches of the willow tree outside my window and had looked at me with the same tilted head.

“Get lost,” I said loudly, and forced myself to take a step towards the bird. “Go away.”

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The raven cawed in protest before it took to the air and flew away. Its flapping rang in my ears. It felt like I could still hear it long after it had disappeared from sight.

This couldn't be. Birds didn't follow a person hundreds of miles across the country. They didn't observe someone. That was just my paranoia that was trying to convince me, an irrational, unfounded paranoia.

Breathing hard, I leaned against the closet to my right. I knew that there were different ways to deal with fear. You could run away from it. You could suppress it, ignore it, look it straight in the eye, or face it. But one thing you couldn't do: you couldn't prevent fear from following you like a shadow.

Or like a goddamn bird.