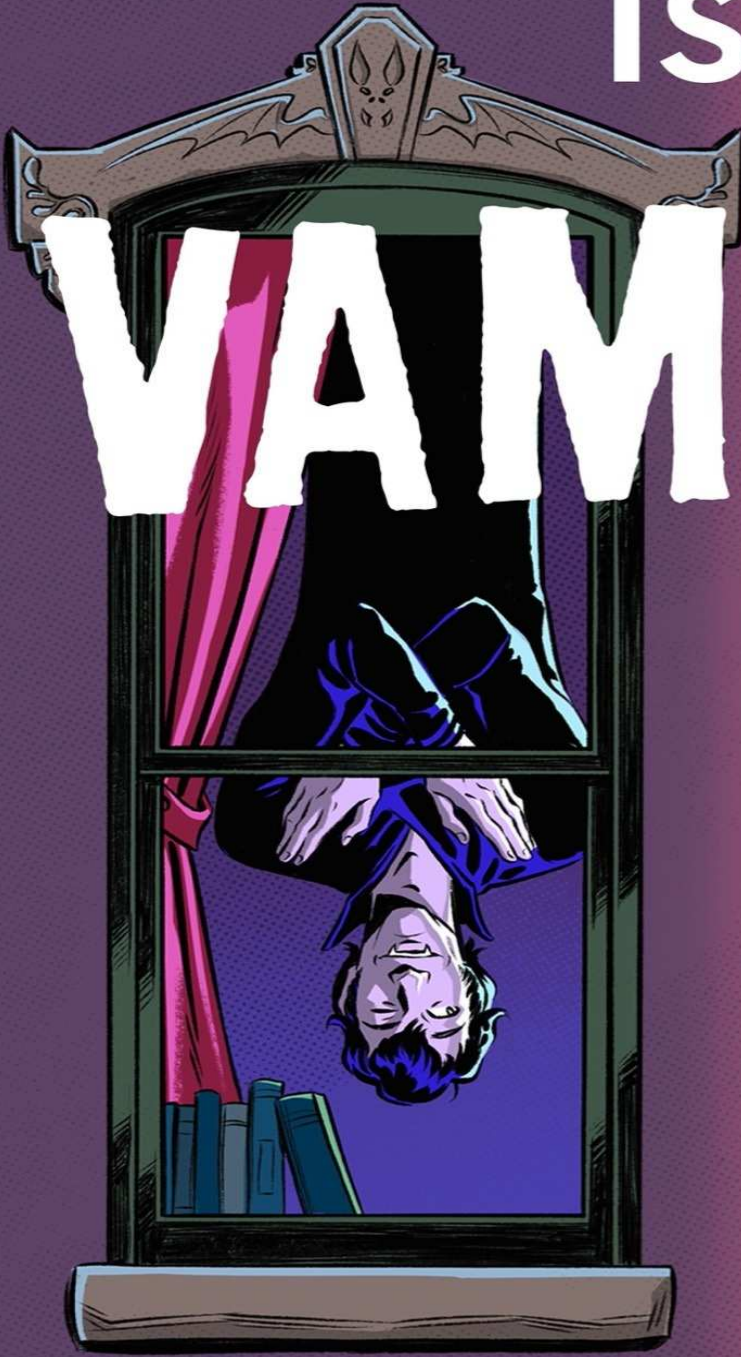


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bestselling author of *The Dead Romantics*

MY ROOMMATE

IS A

VAMPIRE



Who says you can't teach an old vampire new tricks?



JENNA LEVINE

MY ROOMMATE  
IS A

VAMPIRE



JENNA LEVINE

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*For Brian, who always makes me laugh, and who is always up for adopting just one more cat.*

# ONE



## ***Roommate Wanted to Share Spacious Third-Floor Brownstone Apartment in Lincoln Park***

*Hello. I seek a roommate with whom to share my apartment. It is a spacious unit by modern standards with two large bedrooms, an open sitting area, and a semiprofessional eat-in kitchen. Large windows flank the eastern side of the apartment and provide a striking view of the lake. The unit is fully furnished in a tasteful, classical style. I am seldom home after sundown, so if you work a traditional schedule, you will usually have the apartment to yourself.*

*Rent: \$200 per month. No pets, please. Kindly direct all serious inquiries to [fffitzwilliam@gmail.com](mailto:fffitzwilliam@gmail.com).*

“THERE HAS TO BE SOMETHING WRONG WITH THIS PLACE.”

“Cassie, listen, this is a really good deal—”

“Forget it, Sam.” That last part came out more forcefully than I’d intended—though not by much. Even though I needed his help, my embarrassment over being in this situation in the first place made accepting that help difficult. Sam meant well, but his insistence on involving himself in every part of my current situation was getting on my very last nerve.

To his credit, Sam—my oldest friend, who’d long ago acclimated to how snippy I sometimes got when I was stressed—said nothing. He simply folded his arms across his chest, waiting for me to be ready to say more.

I only needed a few moments to pull myself together and start feeling badly for snapping at him. “Sorry,” I muttered under my breath. “I know you’re only trying to help.”

“It’s all right,” he said, sympathetic. “You have a lot going on. But it’s okay to believe that things can get better.”

I had no reason to believe that things could get better, but now wasn’t the time to get into it. I simply sighed and turned my attention back to the Craigslist ad on my laptop.

“Anything that sounds too good to be true usually is.”

Sam peered over my shoulder at my screen. “Not always. And you have to admit this apartment sounds great.”

It did sound great. He was right about that. But . . .

“It’s only two hundred a month, Sam.”

“So? That’s a great price.”

I stared at him. “Yeah, if this were 1978. If someone’s only asking for two hundred a month today there are probably dead bodies in the basement.”

“You don’t know that.” Sam dragged a hand through his shaggy, dirty-blond hair. Messing with his hair was Sam’s most obvious *I’m-bullshitting-you* tell. He’d had it since at least sixth grade, when he’d tried convincing our teacher I hadn’t been the one who’d drawn bright pink flowers all over the wall of the girl’s bathroom. He hadn’t fooled Mrs. Baker then—I *had* drawn that aggressively neon meadow landscape—and he wasn’t fooling me now.

How would he ever make it as a lawyer with such a terrible poker face?

“Maybe this person’s just not home a lot and only wants a roommate for safety reasons, not income,” Sam suggested. “Maybe they’re an idiot and don’t know what they *could* be charging.”

I was still skeptical. I’d been scouring Craigslist and Facebook since my landlord taped an eviction notice to my front door two weeks ago for nonpayment of rent. There’d been nothing available this close to the Loop for less than a thousand a month. In Lincoln Park, the going rate was closer to fifteen hundred.

Two hundred wasn’t just a little below market rate. It wasn’t even in the same universe as market rate.

“There are also no pictures with this ad,” I pointed out. “That’s another red flag. I should ignore this one and keep looking.” Because yes, my landlord was taking me to court next week if I didn’t move out first, and yes, living in an apartment this cheap would really help me get on top of my shit, and maybe even keep me from ending up in this exact situation again in a few months. But I’d lived in the Chicago area for more than ten years. No deal in Lincoln Park *this* good came without a huge catch.

“Cassie.” Sam’s tone was quiet, patient—and more than a little patronizing. I reminded myself he was only trying to help in his very *Sam* way and bit my tongue. “This apartment is in a great location. You can easily afford it. It’s close enough to the El that you’ll be able to get to your jobs quickly. And if the windows are as big as this ad says they are, I bet there’s tons of natural light.”

My eyes widened. I hadn’t thought of the lighting in the apartment when I’d read the ad. But if it did have huge, lake-facing windows, Sam was probably right.

“Maybe I’d be able to create from home again,” I mused. I hadn’t lived somewhere with good enough lighting to work on my projects in almost two years. I missed it more than I liked to admit.

Sam smiled, looking relieved. “Exactly.”

“Okay,” I conceded. “I’m at least willing to ask for more information.”

Sam reached up and put his hand on my shoulder. His warm, steady touch calmed me, just as it had every time I’d needed it to since we were kids. The knot of anxiety that had taken up what

felt like permanent residence in the pit of my stomach these past two weeks began to loosen.

For the first time in ages, it felt like I could breathe again.

“We’ll see the apartment and meet the roommate first, of course,” he said very quickly. “I can even help you negotiate a month-to-month lease if you want. That way, if it’s really awful, you can leave without breaking another lease.”

Which would mean I wouldn’t have to worry about getting hauled back into court by yet another angry landlord. Honestly, that would be a decent compromise. If this person turned out to be an axe murderer or a libertarian or some other awful thing, a month-to-month lease would let me leave quickly with no strings attached.

“You’d do that for me?” I asked. Not for the first time, I felt badly about how short I’d been with him lately.

“What else am I gonna do with my law degree?”

“For starters, you could use it to make tons of money at your firm instead of using it to help perennial fuckups like me.”

“I’m making tons of money at my firm either way,” he said, grinning. “But since you won’t let me loan you any of that money—”

“I won’t,” I agreed. It had been my choice to get an impractical graduate degree and end up hopelessly in student loan debt with few job prospects for my troubles. I wasn’t about to make that anyone else’s problem.

Sam sighed. “You won’t. Right. We’ve been over that. Repeatedly.” He shook his head and added, in a more wistful tone, “I wish you could just move in with us, Cassie. Or with Amelia. That would solve everything.”

I bit my lip and pretended to study the Craigslist ad intensely to avoid having to look at him.

In truth, a large part of me was relieved that Sam and his new husband Scott had just bought a tiny lakefront condo that barely accommodated them and their two cats. While living with them would save me the stress and the hassle of what I was going through now, Sam and Scott had just gotten married two months ago. Not only would my living with them hinder their ability to have sex wherever and whenever they felt like it, the way I understood newlyweds tended to, it would also be an awkward reminder of just how long it had been since I’d last been in a relationship.

As well as a constant reminder of what a colossal failure every *other* aspect of my life was.

And, of course, living with Amelia was out of the question. Sam didn’t understand that his straitlaced, perfect sister had always looked down on me and thought I was a total loser. But it was the truth.

Honestly, my finding a place to live that was neither Sam and Scott’s new sofa nor Amelia’s loft in Lakeview was best for all of us.

“I’ll be fine,” I said, trying to sound like I believed it. My stomach clenched a little at the look of concern that crossed Sam’s face. “No, really—I’ll be okay. I always am, aren’t I?”

Sam smiled and tousled my too-short hair, which was his way of teasing me. Normally I didn’t mind, but I’d cut my hair pretty dramatically on a whim a couple weeks ago because I was frustrated and needed an outlet that didn’t require an internet connection. It was yet another of my not-great recent decisions. My thick, curly blond hair tended to stick up in odd places if not



cut by a professional. In that moment, as Sam continued to mess with my hair, I probably looked like a Muppet who'd recently stuck her finger in a light socket.

"Stop that," I said, laughing as I shrugged away from him. But my mood was better now—which was probably exactly why Sam had done it.

He put his hand on my shoulder. "If you ever change your mind about the loan . . ."

He trailed off without finishing his sentence.

"If I change my mind about a loan, you'll be the first to know," I said. But we both knew I never would.

.....

I WAITED UNTIL I WAS AT MY AFTERNOON GIG AT THE PUBLIC LIBRARY TO REACH OUT TO the person with the two-hundred-dollar room for rent.

Of all the part-time, not-art-related gigs I'd managed to string together since getting my MFA, this one was my favorite. Not because I loved all aspects of the work, because I didn't. While it was great being around books, I worked exclusively in the children's section. I alternated between sitting behind the check-out counter, shelving books about dinosaurs and warrior cats and dragons, and answering questions from frantic parents with tantruming preschoolers in tow.

I'd always gotten along well with older kids. And I liked tiny humans as an abstract concept, understanding—in theory, at least—why a person might intentionally add one to their life. But while Sam and I definitely thought of his spoiled kitties as his children, nobody in my life had an actual *human* child yet. Dealing with little kids twenty hours a week in a public-facing service position was a rough introduction.

Working at the library was still my favorite part-time job, though, because of all the downtime that came with it. I didn't have nearly as much free time during my shifts at Gossamer's, the coffee shop near my soon-to-be-former apartment—which was the *worst* aspect of that particular job.

"Slow afternoon today," my manager Marcie quipped from her chair beside me. Marcie was a pleasant woman in her late fifties and effectively ran the children's section. It was our little inside joke to comment on how slow it was when we worked together in the afternoon, because *every* afternoon was slow here. Between the hours of one and four, most of our patrons were either napping or still in school.

It was two o'clock. Only one kid had wandered through in the past ninety minutes. Not only was that nothing noteworthy, it was par for the course.

"It is slow today," I agreed, grinning at her. With that, I turned to face the circulation desk computer.

Normally, library downtime was for researching potential new employers and applying for jobs. I wasn't picky. I'd apply for just about anything—even if it had nothing to do with art—if it promised better pay and more regular hours than my current cobbled-together situation.

Sometimes, I used the time to think through future art projects. I didn't have good lighting in my current apartment, which made drawing and painting the images that formed the base of my works difficult. And while I couldn't finish my projects at the library, as my paints were too messy and the final steps involved incorporating discarded objects into my work, the circulation desk was big and well-lit enough for me to at least make preliminary sketches with a pencil.

Today, though, I needed to use my downtime to reply to that red flag of a Craigslist ad. I could have replied earlier, but I didn't—partly because I was still skeptical, but mostly because a few weeks ago I'd gotten rid of Wi-Fi to save money.

I pulled up the listing on the computer. It hadn't changed in the time since I last saw it. The oddly formal style was the same. The absurd rent amount was also the same and set off as many alarm bells now as it did when I first saw it.

But my financial situation also hadn't changed. Jobs in my field were still as hard to come by. And asking Sam for help—or my accountant parents, who loved me too much to admit to my face what a disappointment I was—was just as unthinkable as ever.

And my landlord was still planning to evict me next week. Which, to be fair, I couldn't even blame him for. He'd put up with a lot of late rent payments and art-related welding mishaps these past ten months. If I were him I'd probably evict me, too.

Before I could talk myself out of doing it, and with Sam's worried voice ringing in my ears, I opened my email. I scrolled through my inbox—an ad for a two-for-one sale at Shoe Pavilion; a headline from the *Chicago Tribune* about a bizarre string of local blood bank break-ins—and then started typing.

From: Cassie Greenberg [csgreenberg@gmail.com]  
To: fjfitzwilliam@gmail.com  
Subject: Your apartment listing

Hi,

I saw your ad on Craigslist looking for a roommate. My lease is up soon and your place sounds perfect. I'm a 32-year-old art teacher and have lived in Chicago for ten years. I'm a nonsmoker, no pets. You said in your ad that you aren't home much at night. As for me, I'm almost never home during the day, so this arrangement would work out well for both of us, I think.

I'm guessing you've gotten a lot of inquiries about your apartment given the location, price, and everything else. But just in case the room is still available, I've included a list of references. I hope to hear from you soon.

Cassie Greenberg

A pang of guilt shot through me over how much I'd fudged some of the important details.

For one thing, I'd just told this complete stranger that I was an art teacher. *Technically*, that was the truth. It's what I'd studied to be in college, and it isn't that I didn't *want* to teach. But in my junior year of college I fell in love with applied arts and design beyond all hope of reason, and then in my senior year I took a course where we studied Robert Rauschenberg and his method of combining paintings with sculpture work. And that was it for me. Immediately after graduation I threw myself into an MFA in applied arts and design.

I loved every second of it.

Until, of course, I graduated. That's when I learned, in a hurry, that my artistic vision and my skill set were too niche to appeal to most school districts hiring art teachers. University art departments were more open-minded, but getting anything more stable than a temporary adjunct position at a university was like winning the lottery. I sometimes made extra cash at art shows when someone who, like me, saw a kind of ironic beauty in rusted-out Coke cans worked into seaside landscapes and bought one of my pieces. But that didn't happen often. So yes: while technically I was an art teacher, most of my income since getting my MFA had come from low-paying, part-time jobs like this one.

None of this made me sound like an appealing potential tenant. Neither did the fact that my *references* weren't former landlords—none of whom would have good things to say about me—but just Sam, Scott, and my mom. Even if I was a disappointment to my parents, they wouldn't want their only child to become homeless.

After a few moments of angsting about it, I decided it didn't matter if I'd told a few white lies. I closed my eyes and hit *send*. What was the worst that could happen? This person—a perfect stranger—would find out I'd stretched the truth and wouldn't let me move in?

I wasn't sure I wanted the apartment anyway.

I had less than ten minutes to worry about it before I got a reply.

From: Frederick J. Fitzwilliam [ffitzwilliam@gmail.com]  
To: Cassie Greenberg [csgreenberg@gmail.com]  
Subject: Your apartment listing

Dear Miss Greenberg,

Thank you for your kind message expressing interest in my extra room. As mentioned in the advertisement the room is appointed in a modern but tasteful style. I believe, and have been told by others, that it is also quite spacious insofar as spare rooms are concerned. To answer your unasked question: the room remains entirely available, should you remain interested in it. Do let me know at your earliest convenience whether you would like to move in and I will have the necessary paperwork drawn up for your signature.

Yours in good health,  
Frederick J. Fitzwilliam

I stared at that name at the end of the email.

*Frederick J. Fitzwilliam?*

What kind of name was that?

I read the email again, trying to make sense of it as Marcie pulled out her phone for her daily Facebook scrolling.

So, the person listing the apartment was a guy. Or, at least, someone with a traditionally male name. That didn't faze me. If I moved in with him, Frederick wouldn't be the first guy I'd lived with since moving out of my parents' house.

What did faze me, though, was . . . everything else. The email was so strangely worded and so formal, I had to wonder exactly how old this person was. And then there was the weird assumption that I might be willing to move in sight unseen.

I tried to ignore these misgivings, reminding myself that all I really cared about was that the apartment was in decent shape and that he wasn't an axe murderer.

I needed to see the place, and meet Frederick J. Fitzwilliam in person, before making up my mind.

From: Cassie Greenberg [csgreenberg@gmail.com]  
To: Frederick J. Fitzwilliam [ffitzwilliam@gmail.com]  
Subject: Your apartment listing

Hi Frederick,

I'm super glad it's still available. The description sounds great and I'd like to come see it. I'm free tomorrow around noon if that works for you. Also, could you send me a few pictures? There weren't any with the Craigslist ad, and I'd like to see some before stopping by. Thanks!—Cassie

Once again, I had to wait only a few minutes before receiving a reply.

From: Frederick J. Fitzwilliam [ffitzwilliam@gmail.com]  
To: Cassie Greenberg [csgreenberg@gmail.com]  
Subject: Your apartment listing

Hello again, Miss Greenberg,

You are welcome to visit the apartment. It makes perfect sense that you would wish to see it before making your decision. I am afraid I will be indisposed tomorrow during the noon hour. Might you be free sometime after sundown? I am typically at my best during the evening hours.

Per your request, I have attached photographs of two rooms that you would likely use with frequency should you move in. The first is of my spare bedroom as it is currently decorated. (You may, of course, change the decor however you wish should you decide to live here.) The second photograph is of the kitchen. (I thought I had included both photographs when I placed the advertisement on Craigslist. Perhaps I did it incorrectly?)

Yours in good health,  
Frederick J. Fitzwilliam

After reading through Frederick's email I clicked on the pictures he sent me, and . . .

Whoa.

*Whoa.*

Okay.

I didn't know what this dude's deal was, but he *clearly* did not live in the same socioeconomic sphere as me. It was also possible we didn't live in the same century.

This kitchen wasn't just different from every other kitchen in every other place I'd ever lived. It looked like it belonged to an entirely different era.

Nothing in it looked like it had been made within the last fifty years. The fridge was oddly shaped, sort of oval at the top and much smaller than most fridges I'd ever seen. It wasn't silver, or black, or cream—the only colors I'd ever associated with fridges—but rather a very unusual shade of powder blue.

It perfectly matched the oven beside it.

I vaguely remembered seeing appliances like these in an old colorized episode of *I Love Lucy* I saw when I was a kid. I got an odd, disoriented feeling when I tried to reconcile the idea that an ancient kitchen like this existed in a modern apartment.

So, I decided to stop trying and moved on to the picture of the bedroom. It was big, just like the Craigslist ad said. Somehow, it looked even more old-fashioned than the kitchen. The dresser

was gorgeous, made of a dark wood I couldn't identify, with ornate curlicue carvings along the top and on the handles. It looked like something you might find at an antique show. The large, floral, probably homemade quilt covering the bed did, too.

As for the bed itself, it was an honest-to-god four-poster bed complete with a lacy white canopy hanging above it. The mattress was thick and looked sumptuous and comfortable.

I thought of all the shitty, secondhand furniture in my soon-to-be-former apartment. If I moved in here I could dump it all at a consignment shop.

These pictures, and the emails, suggested that while Frederick might be a lot older than me, he probably wouldn't steal all my stuff the day after I moved in.

I could handle an awkward roommate who was maybe in his seventies as long as he wasn't going to rob or kill me.

Then again, you could only tell so much from tone in an email.

From: Cassie Greenberg [csgreenberg@gmail.com]  
To: Frederick J. Fitzwilliam [ffitzwilliam@gmail.com]  
Subject: Your apartment listing

Frederick,

Okay, those pictures are amazing. Your place looks great! I definitely want to see it, but I can't come by in the evening tomorrow until around 8. Is that too late? Let me know, and thanks.—Cassie

His next reply came in less than a minute.

From: Frederick J. Fitzwilliam [ffitzwilliam@gmail.com]  
To: Cassie Greenberg [csgreenberg@gmail.com]  
Subject: Your apartment listing

Dear Miss Greenberg,

Eight o'clock tomorrow evening works perfectly with my schedule. I will make sure to tidy up so that all looks as it should when you arrive.

Yours in good health,  
Frederick J. Fitzwilliam

---

SAM CAME BY MY APARTMENT THAT EVENING WITH A BUNCH OF MOVING BOXES AND two venti Starbucks coffees.

"Pull up a chair," I deadpanned, gesturing to where my old secondhand La-Z-Boy used to be. I'd sold it on Facebook for thirty dollars the day before, which was about what it had been worth.

Sam smirked and gingerly spread a flattened moving box on the ground before sitting down on it cross-legged.

"Don't mind if I do," he said.

"Thanks for bringing those over," I said, nodding at the boxes. Even if I didn't end up moving into Frederick's fully furnished room, all I planned to bring with me from this place

were my clothes, my art supplies, and my laptop. Just the essentials—but I still needed boxes to pack it up.

“It was no problem,” Sam said. He handed me the coffee I’d asked him for. He’d said he’d get me whatever I wanted, but I’d felt guilty about asking for the pricey rainbow-colored sugar bomb I *actually* wanted and just asked for a plain black coffee.

“I can’t wait to live someplace with Wi-Fi again,” I mused, taking a sip. I winced at the bitter taste. How could anyone actually enjoy drinking coffee black? It was something I asked myself every time I worked at Gossamer’s. “I miss *Drag Race*.”

Sam looked affronted. “I’ve been keeping you posted on the winners, haven’t I?”

I waved a dismissive hand. “It’s not the same.” Reality television had long been a guilty pleasure of mine, and Sam’s dry summaries just didn’t cut it. “Anyway, you’re coming with me tomorrow night, right?”

“Of course,” he said. “This was my idea in the first place, right?”

“It *really* was.”

“If you’re meeting him at eight, I should pick you up around seven forty-five. Will that work?”

“Yeah. I’ll be just getting off my shift at the library.” The library hosted special activities for kids on Tuesday evenings, meaning it would be all hands on deck until seven-thirty. In all honesty, I loved Tuesday nights at the library. There was usually some kind of arts and crafts–related activity, and I could pretend for a little while that creating was still a significant part of my life.

I’d made a mental note to leave out my *Sesame Street*–themed *Reading Is for Winners!* T-shirt when I started packing. The library liked us to dress up for the kids on Tuesdays.

“Great,” Sam said. “If I pick you up then, we’ll have plenty of time to get to the apartment. Although . . .”

He trailed off and looked down at his coffee.

I recognized that worried look. “What is it?”

He hesitated. “It’s . . . probably nothing. But you should know I couldn’t find a *Frederick J. Fitzwilliam* earlier today when I Googled him.”

I stared at him. “What?”

“Yeah.” Sam sipped his coffee, looking contemplative. “If my criminal justice clinic taught me anything it’s that you should never move in with someone without looking them up first. So I tried searching for him online, figuring that with a name like *Frederick J. Fitzwilliam* I’d find him in two seconds, but . . .”

He shook his head.

That ever-present knot of anxiety in the pit of my stomach cinched itself a little tighter. “Nothing?”

“Nothing,” Sam confirmed. “I even checked the Cook County criminal docket. There is nothing anywhere about a *Frederick J. Fitzwilliam*.” He paused. “It’s like he doesn’t exist.”

I sat there, stunned. In an age where everything about everyone was knowable with a simple two-minute internet search, how was it possible that Sam hadn’t found *anything*?

“Maybe it’s a fake name he’s giving to people asking about the apartment,” Sam suggested. “Craigslist can be creepy. Maybe he wants to stay anonymous.”

That made me feel a little better. Because that sounded plausible. I thought back to a time in college when I *wish* I’d thought to give a fake name to someone on Craigslist. I graduated ten years ago, and the Younker College Literary Society still wouldn’t leave me alone.

“Yeah,” I said. “Though if he wanted to stay anonymous, why’d he bother including an email address in the post? He could have just used the anonymous email account Craigslist automatically generates for people placing ads.”

Silence stretched between us as we both pondered what all this could mean, interrupted only by the muffled sound of traffic from the street outside my window.

Eventually, I leaned towards Sam and asked, “If this guy turns out to be the next Jeffrey Dahmer, promise me you’ll avenge my death?”

Sam snorted. “I thought you wanted me to go with you. If he’s the next Dahmer, we’ll both be screwed. Also possibly dead.”

I hadn’t considered that. “Good point.” I thought a moment. “Maybe wait in the car. I’ll text you once I’m inside. If I’m not out in thirty minutes, call the police.”

“Of course,” Sam said, smiling again. Only this time, his smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. He was always terrible at hiding his concern from me. “You know, if Scott and I consolidated some of our wedding stuff, I’m sure we could make room for you until you found something more permanent.”

I swallowed around the lump in my throat at his renewed offer. “Thanks,” I said, meaning it. I had to avert my eyes before adding, “I’ll . . . give it some thought.”

## TWO



### *FJF's To-Do List: October 15*

1. *Dust sitting room furniture.*
2. *Vacuum spare bedroom.*
3. *Purchase decoy foodstuffs for both fridge & pantry in advance of Miss Cassie Greenberg's visit.*
4. *Should Miss Greenberg not wish to let the spare room, ask Reginald how to include photographs in the advertisement to avoid unnecessary future interactions with applicants.*
5. *Renew library books.*
6. *Write mother.*

FREDERICK'S APARTMENT WAS IN A PART OF LINCOLN PARK I RARELY VISITED. IT WAS just a few blocks west of the lake, at one end of a row of fancy brownstones that, if I had to guess, would probably sell for several million dollars each.

I refused to think about that. It was intimidating enough just breathing the same air as the people who lived here. No need to make things worse by dwelling on how I'd never be able to afford living here without winning the lottery or turning to a life of organized crime.

"I'll find parking," Sam said as I exited his car. I looked back over my shoulder at him; he had his worried face on again. "Text me once you get in, okay?"

"Okay," I promised, shivering a little. We'd both calmed down a bit once we realized *Frederick J. Fitzwilliam* might just be a Craigslist alias. But this whole situation was still weird.

I pulled my scarf around my neck a little tighter. October in Chicago was always colder than strictly necessary. The wind really kicked in this close to the lake, too. It cut through my thin T-shirt like scissors through paper.

I probably should have worn my winter coat, even if it would have ended up splattered in paint from tonight's library event.

Tonight's *ridiculously fun* library event, to be precise, which Marcie and I had planned entirely ourselves. If the sheer number of crying children who had to be carried out of the library



after it ended was anything to go by, “Paint Your Favorite Disney Princess Night” had been a smashing success. I couldn’t help grinning when I thought about it—even though I was underdressed for the weather and shivering, and even though I knew that between my library-issued *Sesame Street* T-shirt, my jeans that were distressed due to age rather than fashion, and my orange Chucks with a hole in one of the toes, I probably looked like I’d gotten dressed inside a dark art-supply closet.

I wished every night at the library was art night, though I knew why that wasn’t possible. Art night invariably ended with the children’s section in total chaos, with splatters of paint on every surface and various mystery substances ground into the carpet. The janitors—and Marcie, and me—would have to scrub the place down for days.

Somehow, though, none of that mattered. It was impossible to be in a bad mood when I’d just held a paintbrush in my hands for two hours, helped a grinning little boy paint an Ariel the Mermaid with bright red hair, and got paid to do it. Even though I was now off to meet a potential new roommate who may or may not be a serial killer.

I was glad Sam would be waiting out here just in case.

I glanced at my phone to confirm the address and buzzer code Frederick had emailed me. I hurried to the building and quickly punched in the code to get inside, then trudged up the three flights of stairs to the top floor. I rubbed my chilled hands together, relishing the relative warmth of the heated stairwell after spending less than two minutes outside in what passed for autumn in Chicago.

When I got to the top floor—and Frederick’s apartment—a bright pink *Welcome!* mat in front of the door greeted me. It featured a golden retriever puppy and a kitten snuggling together in a field of tall grass and was maybe the tackiest thing I’d ever seen outside of a Hobby Lobby.

It was so out of place in this fancy, multizillion-dollar building that I half wondered if the cold weather had done something to my brain and I’d just imagined it.

Then the door to the apartment opened before I even had a chance to knock—and suddenly I wasn’t thinking about the cheesy *Welcome!* mat anymore.

“You must be Miss Cassie Greenberg.” The man’s voice was deep and sonorous. I could *feel* it, somehow, in the pit of my stomach. “I am Mr. Frederick J. Fitzwilliam.”

It occurred to me, as I stood blinking stupidly up at the person who might be my new roommate, that I hadn’t really considered what the person behind the *Roommate Wanted* ad looked like. It hadn’t mattered. I needed a cheap place to stay, and Frederick’s apartment was cheap—even if the circumstances surrounding all of it felt a bit odd.

I’d spent a good part of the day wondering whether emailing him had been a good idea, or if he might be a psychopath. But what he looked like? That hadn’t really crossed my mind.

But now that I was here, standing less than two feet away from the most gorgeous man I had ever seen . . .

Frederick J. Fitzwilliam’s appearance was *all* I could think about.

He looked like he was maybe in his mid-thirties, though he had the sort of long, pale, slightly angular face where it was hard to tell. And his voice wasn’t the only thing with high production values. No, he also had this ridiculously thick, dark hair that fell rakishly across his forehead like

he'd sprung fully formed out of a period drama where people with English accents kissed in the rain. Or like he was the hero from the last historical romance novel I'd read.

When he gave me a small, expectant smile, a dimple popped in his right cheek.

"I—" I said. Because I still had just enough of my wits about me to remember that when someone introduced themselves, social custom dictated you say *something* in return. "You're . . . huh."

By this point, I was screaming internally at myself to snap out of it. I wasn't someone who usually gawked at people or went automatically into lust mode immediately after meeting someone attractive. Not like this, anyway. I still wasn't certain I even wanted to move into this apartment—but I also didn't want this guy to reject me right off the bat just because I was acting weird and inappropriate.

It didn't matter that Frederick J. Fitzwilliam had the sort of broad, muscular build that suggested he led football teams to victory when he was younger and still worked out regularly now.

It didn't *matter* that he wore a perfectly tailored three-piece suit, the charcoal-gray jacket and starched white shirt clinging to those broad shoulders like they were made specifically for his body, or that his matching gray slacks fit him just as well.

None of this mattered, because this was someone with a room I maybe hoped to rent. Nothing more.

I had to get a grip on myself.

I tried to focus on the more eccentric aspects of his outfit—the frilly blue cravat he wore at his neck; the shiny wing-tipped shoes on his feet—but it didn't help. Even with those unusual accessories he was still the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen.

As I stood there, yelling at myself to stop gaping at him while being helpless to do anything but, Frederick just stared at me with a puzzled expression. I wasn't sure what there was to be puzzled about. He *had* to know how hot he was, right? He must have been used to getting this reaction from people. He probably had to fend horny people off with a stick every time he left his home.

"Miss Greenberg?"

Frederick cocked his head to the side, probably waiting for me to form a complete sentence. When I didn't, he stepped out into the hallway—most likely to get a closer look at the weirdo who'd just shown up at his door.

But his eyes weren't on me anymore. They were on the floor, riveted to the cheesy doormat at my feet.

He scowled at the stupid thing like it had personally wronged him.

"Reginald," he muttered under his breath. He knelt down and grabbed the welcome mat in both hands. I absolutely did *not* stare at his perfect butt as he did it. "Thinks he's so funny, does he?"

Before I could ask who Reginald was or what he was talking about, Frederick turned his attention back to me. I must have looked pretty out of it because his expression softened at once.

“Are you quite all right, Miss Greenberg?” His deep voice conveyed what sounded like genuine concern.

I managed, with difficulty, to tear my eyes away from his perfect face, and stared pointedly down at my shoes. I cringed at the sight of my paint-splattered, beat-up old Chucks. I’d been so flustered I’d forgotten all about the fact that I’d showed up covered in paint and wearing the worst clothes I owned.

“I’m fine,” I lied. I stood a little taller. “I’m just . . . yeah. I’m just a little tired.”

“Ah.” He nodded, understanding. “I see. Well, Miss Greenberg . . . are you still interested in touring the apartment tonight to determine whether it suits your needs? Or would you perhaps prefer to reschedule given your current fatigue and your . . .” He trailed off, his eyes roaming over me slowly, taking in every part of my outfit.

I flushed hot with embarrassment. Okay, yes—clearly I had underdressed for coming here. But he didn’t need to make a thing about it, did he?

In a way, though, I was grateful. He might be the most attractive man I had ever seen in my life, but people who were snobby about appearances were seriously one of my biggest pet peeves. His reaction to my clothes helped prod me from my ridiculous lusty fugue state and back to reality.

I shook my head. “No, it’s fine.” I still needed a place to live, after all. “Let’s do the tour. I’m feeling okay.”

He looked relieved at that—though I couldn’t understand why, given how unimpressed with me he seemed so far.

“Well, then.” He gave me a small smile. “Do come in, Miss Greenberg.”

I’d seen the pictures he’d sent, so I thought I’d been prepared for what waited for me inside. I saw immediately that the pictures hadn’t done the place justice.

I’d expected it to be fancy. And it was.

What I hadn’t expected was that it was also . . . *strange*.

The living room—like the pictures of the kitchen and the spare bedroom Frederick had sent me—seemed frozen in time, but not in a way I could put into words and not frozen in any specific period I could name. Most of the furniture and the fixtures on the walls looked expensive, but they were thrown together in such a multi-style, multi-era jumble it made my head ache.

Dozens of shiny brass wall sconces created the sort of dim and atmospheric lighting I’d only ever seen in old movies and haunted houses. And the room wasn’t just darkly lit. It was also just . . . dark. The walls were painted a dark chocolate brown that I vaguely remembered from art history classes had been fashionable in the Victorian era. A pair of tall, dark wooden bookshelves that must have weighed a thousand pounds each stood like silent sentinels on either end of the room. Atop each of them sat an ornate brass, malachite candelabra that would have seemed right at home in a sixteenth-century European cathedral. They clashed in style and in every other imaginable way with the two very modern-looking black leather sofas facing each other in the center of the room and the austere, glass-topped coffee table in the living room’s

center. The latter had a stack of what looked like Regency romance novels piled high at one end, further adding to the incongruity of the scene.

Besides the pale green of the candelabras, the only other color to be found in the living room was in the large, garish, floral Oriental rug covering most of the floor; the bright red, glowing eyes of a deeply creepy stuffed wolf's head hanging over the mantel; and the deep-red velvet drapes hanging on either side of the floor-to-ceiling windows.

I shivered, and not just because the room was freezing.

In short, the living room was confirmation of something I'd known for years: people with money often had terrible taste.

"So. You like dark rooms, huh?" I asked. It was maybe the most ridiculously obvious thing I could possibly have said—but was also the least offensive thing I could think of. I stared at the carpet as I waited for him to reply, trying to decide if the flowers I stood on were supposed to be peonies.

A long pause. "I . . . prefer dimly lit places, yes."

"I bet you get a lot of light in here during the day, though." I pointed to the windows lining the room's eastern wall. "You must get a fabulous view of the lake."

He shrugged. "Probably."

I looked at him, surprised. "You don't know?"

"Given our proximity to the lake and the size of these windows, I can infer that one can see the lake quite well from here should one wish to do so." He fidgeted with a large golden ring on his pinky finger; it had a blood-red stone as big as my thumbnail in its center. "I keep the curtains drawn, however, while the sun is up."

Before I could ask why he'd waste a view like that by never looking at it, he added, "Should you decide to move in, you may open the curtains whenever you wish to see the lake."

I was just about to tell him that that was exactly what I would do if I moved in when my phone vibrated from inside the front pocket of my jeans.

"Um," I said awkwardly, fishing it out. "Hold on a second."

Crap. It was Sam.

In the shock of realizing that Frederick was hot, I'd forgotten to let him know I wasn't being murdered.

**Cassie? You okay?**

**I'm trying not to freak out.**

**Please text me right away so I don't start worrying that you've been chopped up and put into freezer bags.**

**I'm fine**

**Just got caught up in the apartment tour**

**Sorry**

**Everything's fine**

**Frederick's not a murderer, then?**