



## Chapter One

Today

New York City -- Winter

HIS HANDS WERE trembling. The stall held the sour stench of vomit and the residual tang of urine, caked in the grit and rusting the bolts that held the toilet to the floor. It was worse where he sat, he was sure — crouched in the largest, farthest stall, his back to the wall. His shoulders were wedged between a trashcan and the porcelain bowl holding the scant contents of his stomach. It was the farthest thing from comfort, logic, or sanitation, and it was sure to ruin his suit jacket and matching pants, yet he felt not the slightest inclination to move.

The pills were rattling in his fingers. Steel grey eyes panned down, almost silver, both iris and eye rimed in black. Pale white fingers, too cold in appearance to seem quite right, pressed flush against the yellow bottle. It was an odd contrast. Through the plastic, his skin looked almost... normal. He smirked, only to wipe the vomit from his lips on the cloth of his shoulder.

He raised his free hand, flexing his fingers in the light. People had always told him he looked like a porcelain doll. At least, those who realized that this was his skin, his own flesh, not some sort of backwards attention- seeking circus routine. Most assumed it was. Just this last week, he'd been called a freak, a fag, a fairy princess. Not that he cared terribly much what anyone else thought.

He tilted his hand, watching the way his skin seemed to swallow the light. Most skin was so... shiny. Not his. Maybe he was a void? A vacuum? A porcelain vacuum- void. The toilet he was leaning against was porcelain. Maybe that was it. 'Porcelain'—a subtle way to tell him he was full of shit. Back when he had a family, his grandpa used to tell him that. Always with a smile, though.

His hand fell back to his lap. He held the pill bottle up, instead, shaking it just to watch the contents jingle. His stomach hurt. So did his head, for that matter, along with his throat. These always made him nauseous. And gave him a headache. Or maybe it was the headache that made him nauseous. He wasn't sure, nor was he sure he cared. His doctor did. Without a definitive source, he was told, there was no definitive treatment.

Had he been alone, he might have laughed. Actually, he was fairly certain he'd just laughed anyway, but he couldn't tell. He was hearing them again. Not 'the voices', not like on television. They were people, he was convinced, but not in the sense of flesh and bone and flapping lips. They were something deeper. Something trapped. But he could never figure out from where, or how, they spoke to him, or why they always came when he saw *them*.

He shook the pills again. He could take them. Probably should take them, or at least that's what his doctor, therapist, pharmacist, boss, and psychiatrist would tell him to do. Swallow them down, yum yum yum, and all the scary shit would flutter flutter away. But was that honest? Was that really him? And surely he was on to *something*, surely there was some truth to his visions, to *them*, to the monstrosities waltzing through the three stories of mall below him and pretending to be just like everyone else.

The bottle hit the stall wall. He was stomping on it, gritting his teeth, cursing under his breath as the bottle shattered and the pills became powder. He didn't remember throwing it, or getting up, or even getting angry, but he was angry goddamnit and these piece of shit pills were to blame. Not real? How the hell should they know? How presumptuous did a person, any person, have to be to tell another human being that what they could see and hear and touch and smell and hold wasn't real? Truth? This was truth: they could fuck themselves.

He felt a quiver in his shoulders. It took a moment, a long moment, for him to realize he was still trembling, but for a different reason. Moisture blurred his vision. He'd just crushed his freedom, his normalcy. His relief, his escape, was glued to the bottom of his dress shoe, powder and piss and water forming his hope into a sickly yellow paste.

He spit in the pile of dust, or what was left of it, throwing open the stall door and kicking out a chunk of plastic. Stumbling to the nearest sink, he gave his most aggressive finger to the portly, concerned- looking bearded old man drying his hands. He could go to hell, just like everyone else. Not like he'd understand. He'd call the cops if he knew.

Splashing water in his face, over his washed- out black hair, and against his neck, he began to scrub. He scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed, adding soap and nails and raking the skin of his face, as if he might peel away the world's filth. But he could still hear them, still feel them in his head and gut and skin. They were a stain, a taint he could never be rid of. There were times he thought to soak himself in bleach. It wouldn't do a goddamned bit of good.

Thirsty. His mouth had been dry for hours and now the acid burned. He thrust his face under the running water, cramming his head into the sink. By the time he was done drinking his head was soaked, but he felt so much better. He took a deep breath. He could think — really. He was okay. Really. He was. His head was cold, though, so he stepped towards the paper towels, only to notice he was sticking to the floor.

Hopping on one foot, he peeled the medication label off the other, stumbling and slamming into the towel dispenser with a laugh. He glanced at the label, for a moment. It was so dry, so careful not to offend. As if his pharmacist didn't know exactly what haloperidol was and why one

sixteen- year- old Raiku Hirubasa would need to take it. Of course, those dear folk were trained not to think about these things, not to ruffle any feathers. He might snap, after all. He might do something irrational, because he was crazy, clearly, or why else would he take this.

He smirked to himself as he grabbed handfuls of paper towels, thinking about how absurd it would be to jump his pharmacist. He scrubbed his hair dry almost violently, for no real reason other than to make it look ridiculous. Tilting his head and putting on his best crazy face, he took a peek at the mirror and cracked up laughing. He was sure he was laughing, this time, though in the back of his head he was busy grieving over the raggedy state of his hair.

He made a note to buy more dye. Surely the Manhattan Mall had hair dye, somewhere. Going to a salon would have been easier, really, but he didn't like strangers with sharp objects around his face. Not now.

With a wobbly step towards the doorway, he nearly fell. Evidently he'd wrenched his knee. Oh, well. Now he could be a crippled porcelain vacuum- void. The thought made him smile, until a new stranger entered the restroom.

Pain bloomed in his skull, a horrible shrieking cacophony rattling between his ears. No one else heard; no one else knew. But he could feel it, physical, tangible, a definitive some *one* or *something* pleading, begging, calling to him for help or mercy in words that weren't even real — syllables that amounted to little more than nonsense, but made so much sense to him. And it hurt so much, every time.