

Caution to the Wind
Book One of the Elementals Series
By F. R. Southerland

Please enjoy the following excerpt from this paranormal
romance/ urban fantasy novel:

Chapter One

What was the use of having superpowers if she couldn't use her ability to start a dead car battery?

It was a piece of junk, a worthless two-door sedan she'd bought used. She should have known there'd be something wrong with it. Now, a month later, she wished she'd saved the money. She could've used it for bus fare.

It didn't matter now. Her car was dead, the last bus of the schedule had already left, and her tips earned that night weren't enough for a cab. It would be a long walk. Her aching feet were already in heavy protest. She'd spent ten hours on them today. Why not an hour more?

Sighing, Loren pulled her bag higher on her shoulder and set off.

There wasn't a lot of traffic on the streets. She took that as a good sign she might make it home without incident. It made her consider using her speed to get home faster. No traffic meant no prying eyes to see her use her powers, but it was still risky enough that Loren opted instead for the slower route.

And flight was *always* out of the question. She was terrible at flying.

Loren put those thoughts out of her head and quickened her steps.

She didn't see the man move nor did she hear him until he'd forced her against the wall. She gasped when her back collided with the hard brick.

Wild, intense eyes stared at her. "Empty your bag. Now!" His voice was low and his breath smelled of sour whiskey.

"Let go of me!" She tried to jerk her arm from his grasp.

His hand tightened on her arm and she saw the glint of metal when he brought the pistol up. It pressed into her sternum.

She sucked in a sharp breath. Her heart kicked against her ribs, against the yellow stone that hung from the cord around her neck, against the gun barrel. "Okay, okay!" She ceased her struggles. "You can have my bag. Whatever's in it, you can have it."

If there was ever a time to use her superpowers, it was now, but Loren couldn't do it. She froze in fear. Panicked.

The mugger narrowed his eyes at her and lowered his gun. He wrenched the bag from her arm and dumped the contents. Loose change clattered onto the pavement. A lipstick tube rolled down the alley. Her wallet splashed into a small puddle.

The crook snatched it up and wiped the water away on his filthy shirt. "Good. That's good. Turn around!"

Trembling, Loren didn't think she had the strength to move, but the threat of the gun was a good motivator. She pushed off from the wall and faced it.

"Hands on the back of your head!"

Loren closed her eyes and put her hands on her head. She forced herself not to cry.

"It ain't just the money I'm after." He snapped open her wallet. There was a long pause. "Loren Bramley. Well, lookie here. It's the princess. I'll be damned. I ought to bow or something. It's my damn lucky night."

His words made no sense. Coins crunched as the man took a few steps. She fought to control her panic by breathing in deeper gulps of air. It would be over soon.

His hand touched her arm and she tightened her eyelids.

"Stop."

The new voice made her breath hitch. Her eyes opened and she jerked her arm instinctively back. She exhaled shakily against the brick, but she didn't turn.

"Step away from the lady." The voice was male but modulated to a lower pitch. A fake voice.

Her assailant laughed. "This got nothing to do with you. Just between me and the princess here." Boots shuffled on the pavement.

"I said step away." A blow landed with a terrible thud, followed by a grunt. She didn't move. There came another blow and a sudden, ringing gunshot. Loren gasped. Her hand covered her mouth to stifle the sound and her eyes squeezed shut again.

Over the sound of another broken sob, the gun clattered to the ground. There was another blow, another groan. The gunshot echoed in her ears.

Loren remained motionless. The only sound now was her quick breaths. She turned slowly, her eyes shut. Her entire body trembled and her heart thudded. She didn't know what to expect, but she forced her eyes open.

Her mugger lay face down on the ground, unconscious and bloodied. Her wallet lay next to him. Loren exhaled another breath and glanced around. Her rescuer appeared long gone.

She moved with tentative steps. She picked up her wallet and held it to her chest, where the jagged edge of the stone she wore pressed between her breasts.

Someone had saved her and she couldn't even thank him.

Who would do that?

She looked around again and stepped back. She retrieved her fallen bag, stopped to scoop up as much of the loose change, and dumped items before she made a hasty retreat. Home was her only goal. Forget stealth.

Her footsteps were quick, but the wind currents she generated behind her were much quicker. It ruffled the skirt of her uniform and fluttered open her coat. It pushed against her and gave her the speed she needed to move fast.

She floated on the air, feet barely hitting the pavement. Her apartment building appeared before her and she slowed down to take the steps into her building at a normal speed. She caught a glimpse of her reflection when she approached the door. Her dull gray eyes were wide, her face even more pinched and pale than usual and her mousy brown hair was windswept. She attempted to smooth it down as she opened the door and headed up the stairs to her apartment.

She entered her small, sparse living room. Adrenaline. Once it wore off, Loren would be even more exhausted. It had been a long day, an even longer night, and all she wanted was to sleep and forget everything that happened.

Except for the stranger who'd saved her. She'd never caught even a glimpse of him, but she'd heard his modified voice. A hero. She wouldn't forget that.

She did want to thank him and maybe ask him why he'd saved her. Why was she important? Muggings happened every night. Maybe that's all it had been for the hero. Work. That had to be the answer.

Sighing, Loren stripped off her coat and detached her nametag from her shirt, tossing both onto an end table. She kicked her shoes across the floor to thud against a chair. If this hero was anything like her, he hated work. Maybe right now, he was complaining about how he had to save people all the time and how no one could save themselves.

"Sorry," Loren muttered to herself. Of course, it was only duty and justice. She wasn't important for anything more.

A frown pulled at the corner of Loren's mouth as she headed for her bathroom. What she needed now was to put everything out of her mind and relax. A hot bubble bath was just the thing.

Tomorrow, things would be brighter. They had to be.

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“What do you mean? How can I be fired?”

Louise wasn't a harsh woman. She was always pleasant to her customers and Loren. Seeing her with narrowed eyes and her thin lips pressed into a tight line was a surprise. Loren grew cold. What had she done that was so terrible?

“Your register came up short.”

“What?” Loren furrowed her brow. “I don't understand. I counted my drawer last night. I wasn't a penny over or under.”

“It was fifty dollars short.” Louise's lips tightened even more.

“That's impossible. I-I d-did everything right. I counted it twice.” She glanced at the register. It didn't make any sense.

“I'm sorry.” Her manager didn't sound it.

This was an injustice but Loren didn't have the strength or confidence to dispute it. Instead, she accepted it. She blinked back the tears that blurred her vision. “Okay.” She unpinned the nametag on her uniform and held it out with a shaky hand. “Okay.”

Loren glimpsed a small hint of sympathy in Louise's stare, but her lips pursed and it was gone. “You can pick up your last paycheck Friday.”

All Loren could manage was a nod. She might cry if she opened her mouth. With as much dignity as she could muster, she walked out of the diner.

Outside, Loren paused to take a few deep breaths.

So much for a brighter tomorrow.

Resolving to put it behind her as much as possible, Loren began to walk. She passed her car and barely gave it notice. She'd have to get someone to tow it and that would cost money—money she no longer had. And the ticket she'd gotten for it parked illegally overnight didn't help. The tears started to fall and she quickly brushed them away with the back of her hand.

She wanted to go home and stay there, locked away to wallow in her self-pity. At least she was good at that.

She rounded the corner and stepped into the alley where her mugger had attacked her. Her heart rate spiked at the memory and her pace quickened. There was no sign anything had happened the night before. Even the items she'd managed to leave behind during the mugging were gone.

Loren wasn't surprised. The fact her attack hadn't even made the papers made perfect sense. No mention of it and no mention of the hero either.

Did he think he was unimportant too? The thought dismissed itself as she neared her apartment and fished her keys out of her bag. She entered the building and climbed the many steps to her floor. The

moment she was inside, she would fix herself a drink—the she remembered there wasn't any alcohol in her apartment. Loren sighed heavily.

She peeled off her jacket and tossed it to fall wherever it landed. She didn't care anymore. All she wanted was to curl up and fall asleep—forever if she could. Stepping into her room, she stripped off the uniform she would never wear again and curled up in her bed. She surrounded herself with the blankets, hoping the soft warmth of them would give her some comfort.

It did, for a little while, and she drifted off to sleep.

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Loren awoke hours later to silence. She stayed in her blanket cocoon, reluctant to move. Something unsettled her. Her brow furrowed, she peeked out from her sheets to see dusk had arrived at some point. Her room was dark, a small sliver of remaining sun shifted through the crack in her curtains.

Something was off.

Loren sat up, keeping the blankets bunched around her. She leaned over, fumbled around the side of the bed for clothing, and slipped an oversized t-shirt over her head. She got out of bed and tried to remain quiet as she tiptoed toward her bedroom door. Her hand closed around the knob and she opened it as slowly as possible.

She peered through the crack into the living room. At first glance, everything appeared fine. But something wasn't right.

She wasn't alone.

She went cold at the realization. Her first thought was of the mugger. He'd found out where she lived. He'd read her address off her driver's license. He'd come back to finish her off.

She saw movement from the corner of the room and hid behind the door. Loren's eyes squeezed shut. She took a shaky breath. The cops. She had to call them.

That would've been the best option, but her cell phone was in the pocket of her jacket and her jacket was in the living room.

She bit down hard enough on her bottom lip to taste blood. She had to do something. Escape? Her apartment was three floors up and the exit to the fire escape was nowhere near her bedroom. She could attempt flying and end up falling instead.

Running out of viable options, Loren became aware she might have to wait it out or face the intruder. She opened her eyes and took a large breath. Her gaze fell on an umbrella. As she reached for it, she made a mental note to invest in a baseball bat.

She grasped the handle tight enough to whiten her knuckles and slipped out the door. She held it aloft. If she put enough heft behind it, maybe it could be effective as a weapon.

She edged through her living room. No sign of anything yet, but she kept a lookout for sudden movements. Loren made her way into the small, cramped space that served as kitchen and dining room.

A hooded figure stood next to her kitchen counter, a hand wrapped around one of the pink plastic cups she kept in her cabinet.

“Loren Bramley.”

Just the sound of her savior’s voice made her lower her umbrella-bat a few inches in surprise. It trembled in her grasp. “How do you know my name? Who are you?”

Maybe not a hero but a stalker.

The figure turned. A hooded black leather jacket hid most of his face. She caught a glimpse of his profile—a strong jaw, sharp nose.

“A friend.” He brought the cup to his lips and took a drink from it. “And I saw your name on your mail.”

“Oh.” It didn’t make her any less suspicious. “Why are you here? How did you get in?” Her voice grew stronger. “What do you want with me? Why did you *help* me?”

He faced her, eyes obscured by the shadow of his hood. He didn’t answer right away. Instead, he took another drink and put the cup aside. His arms crossed over his broad chest.

“I need your help.” He moved forward but stopped after a single step. “*We* need your help.”

Her fingers tightened around the umbrella handle. She eyed him. “Help with what?”

A small smirk touched his lips. “We’re going to save the world.”

Chapter Two

“Huh?” Loren gaped at the hooded man.

“The world,” he repeated. “You’re going to help us save it.”

In her confusion, Loren lowered the umbrella and shook her head. This was too weird to be real. This had to be a dream.

The figure remained where he was, watching her. “I’ll give you a few minutes.”

Loren tried to regain her senses. She was aware the floor beneath her feet was cold. It made her realize her legs were cold and bare. It started to sink in. This wasn’t a dream. She really was standing in her kitchen, dressed only in a long t-shirt. She really was holding an umbrella in a defensive stance as she had a conversation with a hooded man about saving the world.

“Okay.” She blew out a small breath. “Okay.” She grabbed a chair with her free hand. As she lowered herself into it, the hooded man stepped toward her.

The movement startled her and she righted herself quickly. She bumped the chair with the back of her legs and it fell over. She ignored it as she held the umbrella pointed straight at him. “Don’t come any closer!”

She exhaled. A small breath shouldn’t have been a problem, but her emotions and powers were both out of control. The umbrella flew open.

The hooded man put his hands up and took a step back. “Whoa! Don’t shoot.”

Bullied as a child, Loren recognized mocking when she heard it in his chuckle. Even with his real voice disguised, it was obvious. She flexed her fingers around the umbrella’s handle. It shook in her grasp, but she didn’t let go. “You’re insane.”

“*I’m* insane? You’re the one holding an umbrella in self-defense when you could easily conjure a tornado to blow me away.”

Loren blinked a few times. Confusion returned full force. This time, the only sound that escaped her was a quiet one-syllable word. “How?”

“How do I know?” The hooded figure didn’t move, save for to lift his shoulder in a shrug.

Stunned, Loren lowered the open umbrella. This time it stayed down. Words failed her. She edged back toward the fallen chair.

She let go of the umbrella to grasp the chair and right it. She sat down and hunched over. Silence hung between them for a long while before she heard the creak of leather and looked up.

The hooded man picked up the cup from the counter. He took a long drink from it. His lips smacked when he lowered it. “I know because I saw you use your powers. Last night.”

Loren sat up straighter. She had always been careful, always using her abilities when she was alone. She'd only wanted to get home. She hadn't meant for anyone to see.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" The hooded man sounded confused. "Why are you sorry?"

Loren bit down on her bottom lip. She didn't want to explain to him how she wasn't good with her powers, especially when she was younger. There had been accidents. It quickly became standard for her to follow-up any noticed use of her abilities with an apology. She didn't have an answer for him otherwise. She stayed quiet and avoided looking at him.

He sighed. "You have powers, Loren. I know because I saw. And I saw because I was making sure you got home all right after what happened."

Loren nodded as she worried her lip with her teeth. That answered some of the questions. What made him care enough to save her in the first place? What was this business about her saving the world? And who was this *we* he mentioned? Who was *he*?

Her hand trembled when she ran her fingers through her hair. "I'm just..." she trailed off, unable to finish her thought, much less the sentence. Her gaze went elsewhere, but she kept him in her peripheral vision.

His weight shifted from one foot to another. "It's confusing. I know."

Loren sighed and looked back to him. His arms folded across his chest again.

"Confusing doesn't even begin to cover it. What—how am I supposed to help save the world?" That was the big question.

"I can't explain it. Not right now. It..." His robotic voice fell briefly silent before he sighed. "It's more than complicated. All you need to know right now is we need you. I can't explain it more than that."

"Helpful." Loren drew her lips together, wetting them. She debated her next words. "Who are you?"

The question met with another small shift of his feet. When he didn't reply after a few moments, Loren nodded. "Okay. I get it. Secret identity. Secret mission." She tightened her shaking hands into fists, released them, and flexed her fingers.

Only one of her dozens of questions escaped her. "Why me?"

"Because of your powers."

She'd been afraid of that. Loren wasn't important. It was her powers. That made sense. It was painful, but it made sense. It was never about her.

"Everything will be explained," he assured her. Loren detected a softer tone, but with the modulator altering his voice, it was difficult to tell. Most likely she imagined it. "It will take time." He let his arms hang down at his sides again. "We need to leave as soon as possible."

“Leave?” He expected her to go with him. “I can’t. You show up at my apartment, knowing about my powers, claiming—” Loren cut herself off. “I don’t know *who* you are. I don’t know *what’s* going on. I don’t *trust* you.”

The silence was thick between them, finally broken with his sigh. “You don’t have a choice. You need to come with me.”

Loren wasn’t convinced. Everything was happening so fast. She couldn’t think clearly on the spot with all this new information.

The hooded figure looked down at her before he moved. He reached into his coat and Loren automatically tensed. His hand withdrew empty a moment later. Both hands lowered the hood.

His hair was a dark shade of brown, slicked back and drawn into a ponytail. His eyebrows knit together in a sympathetic look, and bright blue eyes lifted to her. Loren stared, taking in the appearance of a man she’d seen in the media dozens of times.

“We *need* you, Loren.” Without the modulator, his voice was smooth and even. “Your powers. Your presence.”

Loren’s breath caught when he crouched down to her level, looking at her eye to eye.

“I know this is difficult to understand and I promise everything will be explained as soon as possible. I have powers too. You’re not the only one.” As he said it, he lifted a hand. He did so slowly, holding it out level with his palm up. A small flame ignited against his flesh and began to burn. The heat from it was real. Loren could feel its warmth.

Her throat tightened as she stared at the tiny, flickering flame. Her eyes watered, but she didn’t dare blink. Avery Morgan, brother of billionaire and industry mogul Callum Morgan, was just like her. She wasn’t alone. Slowly, she looked away from the flame to his face.

“There are others like us, with powers. We’ve been looking for you. For years.”

Loren took a deep breath and held it. She kept her eyes on him, searching for insincerity. She found none. Everything swam in her head and all she could do was stare at him.

“You’re important, Loren,” he said softly. “We need you.”

It was a lot of information to take in and it all happened fast. Her mind sought to wrap around it all. She believed she was important, once, and it had filled her with elation and purpose. That had been short-lived, but she remembered it well.

This feeling was the closest to that she’d had in years. Things were often too good to be true. She couldn’t hold onto much hope.

Avery’s gaze remained steady on her face, but he drew back to give her some room. Loren was thankful for that. It gave her a minute to attempt to collect herself. She wiped at her eyes. Why was she crying anyway?

“It's too much,” she managed to get out, casting her gaze to the side.

Avery shifted to stand and Loren took the opportunity to move her chair back. “I know,” he said. “These aren't the ideal circumstances. You shouldn't have to find out this way and it's sudden, but I didn't have another choice.”

“There were options?” She lifted her head and looked at him.

Avery's jaw set. “It's complicated.” He lifted his arm in a helpless gesture. “And I'm sorry I keep repeating that. There's a very long-winded explanation and I'm not the guy who can give it to you. You'll have to trust me. I can take you somewhere safe, to the people who can explain it.”

Trust was difficult. Loren found herself chewing on her lip again and she released it to speak. “Who?”

“My brother.”

Callum Morgan. He was a smart man, running a multi-billion dollar company. He'd been doing that for the last seven years, since the death of his father. Loren had learned about all of it from the media. The Morgan family was heavily in the spotlight, under public scrutiny on a daily basis. The idea he knew about superpowers and saving the world seemed completely ridiculous. “He knows?”

“Of course he knows.”

Loren's brow knitted together more. “I'm really struggling with this.”

“You'll have to struggle with it on the way.” He faced her and his gaze dropped, looking her over. “You should go get ready.”

She became aware she was only half dressed. Loren grabbed at the hem of her t-shirt, tugging it down to cover up an expanse of bare thigh. Her cheeks burned.

“I uh I'll go grab something.”

She stood and moved quickly from the kitchen. It was ridiculous for her to agree so readily. She thought about it while she changed out of her frumpy old t-shirt into a nice bra and a faded but clean black sweater with jeans. She did want to know more about her so-called purpose. She needed an explanation.

It was relief enough to know she wasn't alone. There were others with abilities. Curiosity got the best of her. She marveled at how that always seemed to win out over her suspicions and anxieties every time.

It didn't mean she trusted him. It didn't matter that he was famous, or rich, or had superpowers too. There was something dangerous about all of this. Loren wanted to be cautious.

Damn curiosity. She was throwing caution to the wind and she knew it.

Loren tucked the yellow stone into her shirt and adjusted the cord it hung from before she grabbed her shoes and went back to her living room. She sat on her couch as she put them on.

Avery had left the kitchen and currently stood next to her poorly constructed bookshelf. He had a novel in his hand, flipping through the pages, occasionally pausing long enough to read. He seemed distracted and it gave Loren the perfect opportunity to get a good look at him.

The Morgan family had been born into wealth generation after generation. Well-groomed and sophisticated, they were akin to a royal family. And Avery, if one believed the tabloids and media, was the black sheep of the family. Prone to partying, boozing, and a laundry list of offenses, he was one of the media's favorite targets. Each week there was a new article about his dalliances. Loren read the headlines at the supermarket checkout.

He must be very careful about his powers if he'd never been caught using them in public. The secret identity made a lot of sense to her. Word couldn't get out that the Morgan family had a skeleton in their closet, especially not this skeleton.

“Are you a crime fighter?” she asked as she finished tying her shoe.

Avery closed the book. A dark eyebrow lifted. “Excuse me?”

She made a gesture toward him. “The hood. The voice thing. Stopping that mugger. Are you a vigilante?”

His mouth twisted into a smile. “No, not strictly speaking. I help people when they need help.”

“A hero, then?” Loren stood.

“A friend to the city and the people in it, I prefer.” He put the book back on the shelf. “I’m no hero.”

“Oh.” Her voice only sounded a little disappointed. Maybe he wouldn't notice.

He didn't. “You should pack a bag. I can’t guarantee how long it will be until you come back here.” He looked away from her, scrutinizing the apartment with lifted eyebrows. “Or if you’ll come back at all.”

She looked around, taking in her residence. It wasn't one of the best places to live. It was in a terrible neighborhood and her landlord was a pig, but it was hers. She'd been here for long enough for it to feel like a home.

The idea she might not come back weighed heavily, but she shook it off. After all, Avery was used to big, fancy houses so leaving a small, shitty apartment probably didn't give him a second thought. She didn't need to think about it either—or let the judgment of her living conditions get to her.

“Okay. Sure. Just give me a minute to do that, okay?”

“Try to hurry.”

Loren nodded and headed into her room again. What should she take? She focused on the basics—clean clothes, lotion, shampoo, deodorant, and hairbrush. It didn't take her long to emerge with an old duffel bag in hand. “I uh guess I'm ready.”

“Good.” Avery stepped over and took the bag from her. He was close enough for Loren to smell his aftershave. It was nice, manly. She gave him a shy smile.

He didn’t notice. His free hand reached into his jacket again before he pulled the hood over his head once more. “Let’s go,” he said in his modified voice.

Loren grabbed her jacket and made sure her keys were in the pocket, as well as her cell phone. She took it out to check the battery. It was full.

“Leave it.”

Her eyes widened and she looked up at him. “What?”

“Leave the cell phone. You won’t need it.”

“But what if someone texts me?”

He gave her a pointed look. “Then they can wait.”

No one would text her. It was as if he knew. She shut off the phone and put it on the table.

Avery gave a satisfied nod and held the door open for her. After she shut and locked the door behind them, he began to walk and she fell into step beside him.

Loren gave one last look back to her apartment. “I’m leaving my world behind,” she said quietly.

Silence fell, but Avery’s hand touched her arm. She flushed and remained quiet.

“Think of it as a new start instead,” Avery suggested. “Leaving an old world behind, starting a new one?”

What did this new world have in store? Loren’s stomach knotted in anticipation and anxiety.

There was only one way to find out.

Chapter Three

Fairhaven Manor.

Loren couldn't believe she was actually here. In the broad spectrum, she should've focused on her recent discoveries.

But *Fairhaven Manor*.

The mansion completely blew her away. Having only seen the Morgan family home in photographs, it was surreal. Only the most prestigious of the prestige ever came here.

And here she was.

Avery chuckled at her awe of the place. "You've seen nothing," he told her. Maybe that was true. After all, she'd barely glimpsed the garage and the huge backyard. She'd seen a terrace and part of a swimming pool before he ushered her inside.

It didn't surprise her much when Avery explained he had a secret route for getting back and forth from the city and Fairhaven. It consisted of some back alleys, an old dirt road outside of city limits, and an honest-to-God underground passageway.

The ultimate secret lair wasn't so secret. It was only the Morgan manor, passed down through generations, as expansive and elegant as she'd ever seen it shown.

They entered the manor through a side entrance. Once inside, Avery stripped off his coat and put it in a closet. He looked normal now, dressed in a simple t-shirt and black jeans.

"Come on," he told her. "I'll get you settled." He hefted her worn duffel bag strap onto his shoulder and pushed open a door into another room.

She stayed quiet, her wide eyes taking in the surroundings. Everything was lavish. The dining room was incredible. There was a long table, with many chairs. The lighting came from electric sconces on the walls. There were landscape paintings decorating the room instead of photographs. It made for a sophisticated, cozy atmosphere.

As she followed Avery through the room, her attention finally returned to him. He had a smartphone in his hand.

"I'm home." Avery looked over his shoulder at her before he spoke again. "She's with me. Yes." A brief pause. "Right now? All right. Meet you there."

"What? Meet who? What's going on?" A wave of anxiety hit her and she bit down on her lip as she looked up at him.

"I didn't think they'd want to meet you right away. I figured they'd let you settle in first. Guess I was wrong." He pushed open the door and entered a large foyer.

Loren stayed close behind him as they neared the staircase. The chandelier hanging from the ceiling caught her attention. Loren stared up at it, slowing her steps as she gazed in amazement.

“Loren.”

She flushed in embarrassment when she noticed Avery had begun to climb the stairs without her. She hurried to catch up.

“I’m sorry; this is all so... fancy. You grew up here. With all this. I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s like—” she cut herself off when she noticed Avery’s stare. More heat flooded into her cheeks.

He didn’t ridicule her. He just smiled and continued up the steps. Loren followed and focused her eyes on his boots to keep from further distraction and embarrassment. While her gaze trailed Avery’s footfalls, her mind drifted to what was about to happen. She would soon meet other super-powered people. Nervousness formed a ball in her stomach. She worried her lip with her teeth again, further aggravating the raw wound.

Avery stopped and Loren nearly collided with him. He sharply glanced back at her and she gave an apologetic smile.

He opened the door. The first thing he did was toss her duffel bag into an empty chair nearby. Loren remained in the doorway.

She had never seen so many books in anyone’s home before. It was as if she’d become lost in the aisles of a public library. It put her pitiful bookshelf with its dozens of cheesy and dog-eared romance novels to shame.

She let her gaze trail along the walls, on the many rows of books. Her attention finally shifted. She noticed the desk and the man who leaned back casually against its lacquered surface.

Loren had only ever seen Callum Morgan in photographs and on television, and always in a three-piece suit. His dark hair was always combed back and his face was stoic and stern—every bit a serious executive. Seeing him now in jeans and a soft blue sweater with his arms crossed and a gentle smile made Loren rethink her preconceived notions. Maybe he wasn’t the hard-ass the media made him out to be.

Next to him was the sister. Eva Morgan, the middle child and the only girl of the family, looked as relaxed as her oldest brother did. Her hair was the same dark color as Avery’s, but her eyes were more hazel than blue. She was a gorgeous woman, perfectly made-up even now. A slender brow arched at Loren.

There was a young man seated in one of the large armchairs, a laptop open on his legs. She didn’t recognize him at all. His hair was short and spiked with blue at the tips. He glanced up and a wide grin spread over his face, pulling at the ring below his bottom lip.

“I wasn’t expecting the entire gang.” Avery ran a hand through his hair, brushing back one or two errant strands off his forehead.

“We became anxious when you disappeared earlier today,” Callum answered. His smile dropped.

Avery lifted his head. “Yeah, I figured as much.” His voice was tense, but he gestured for Loren to step forward. “This is Loren Bramley.”

Callum pushed off from the desk and closed the distance between them, offering his hand to her. “A pleasure, Loren. I assume my introduction is not necessary.” His hand was cool and strong when he shook hers. She hoped he didn’t notice how shaky and sweaty her hand was.

“Everyone knows who you are,” she answered. A small nervous laugh bubbled out of her. “Callum Morgan. One of the most powerful men in the world.”

He smiled. “I wouldn’t go as far as that.”

His sister strode forward and took Loren’s hand next. Her grip was much tighter than Callum’s, stronger. Loren hoped she hid the surprise from her face.

“Eva.” Her red lips spread into a tight smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Loren.”

“It’s uh nice to meet you too.” Her attention drew away from Eva’s face when the blue-haired man lifted his arm in greeting.

“Levi. I’d shake your hand, but I’m occupied.” He gestured at the laptop. “How’s it going?”

“Uh, good, I guess? I can’t believe I’m here. Meeting famous people.” Loren’s cheeks reddened when Callum chuckled.

“Famous, yes, but don’t let that deter you. We’re just as down to earth as the next family.”

“We’re really quite normal, outside the spotlight,” Eva continued. “You don’t need to be intimidated by us.”

“Oh, I’m not. I’m just... incredibly nervous.” Loren wiped her hands on her jeans.

“Would you like some tea?” Callum suggested, “Or perhaps another refreshment? I’m sure both of you would like something.”

“I’ll take hot chocolate,” Levi piped up, his attention glued to the computer screen. Long fingers scrolled along the mouse pad. Callum paid no attention to him.

“I’m fine, thank you.” Avery chose to sit in another of the armchairs, but he didn’t relax. His back was rigid, his shoulders tense. Loren remained where she stood.

“I’d like some tea,” she said.

Callum offered her another soft smile. “Please make yourself comfortable.” He stepped behind the desk, pressing a button on an intercom. “Please have tea and refreshments brought to my study. And one hot chocolate. Thank you.”

Eva chose a seat. Callum sat in the chair behind the desk. Hesitant for a brief minute, Loren finally sat in a nearby chair, but she couldn’t relax.

Was this actually happening? Was she about to have tea with the Morgan family in Fairhaven Manor?

Before her mind could thoroughly process it, Callum spoke again. He folded his hands on the surface of the desk, looking directly at her.

“There is much we need to discuss. It’s late. An in-depth discussion can wait until tomorrow, after breakfast. For now, I’ll hit the bullet points.” He paused. “Eva, Avery, and I were all granted abilities when we were young. We were told there was another.” He stopped there and once more focused on Loren. “Unfortunately, circumstances prevented us from discovering that person.”

Loren followed so far, but she had more questions. She met Callum's eyes. His were blue and intense, shining.

“How long have you had your powers, Loren?”

“Since I was seven.” She was quiet.

“Powers related to air?”

“Yeah.”

Callum leaned forward. “Do you remember how you got them, or the first moment you realized you could do incredible things?”

She nodded.

“And all your life you’ve wondered why, how?”

She nodded again.

Callum sat back. Loren risked a glance at Avery. He stared at her with the same intense gaze as his brother.

It was a long moment before Callum spoke again. “We have been searching for you for close to twenty years. You’re the one.”

All she could get out was a single, shaky word. “Oh.”

The silence gave her time to think but her mind was blank. She was the one. What did *that* mean?

“She’s freaking out,” Levi said.

Maybe he wasn’t wrong. Her breath came out in quick little gasps.

“Levi, behave.” Eva's voice was stern.

“Do you need a paper bag to breathe in? Put your head between your knees.”

“Levi, you’re not helping.” When Avery snapped, Loren finally broke out of her trance. He looked more than annoyed. Levi fell silent.

“I’m—I’m okay,” Loren said. “Really. It’s a lot of information and everyone keeps coming at me at once. It’s... too much.” She wasn’t okay. She was far from okay.

Callum looked at each person in turn. His gaze settled on Avery for a few moments longer before he returned to Loren. “It *is* a lot of information,” he agreed, “and precisely why I suggested we discuss the details tomorrow. To give us all some time to adjust.”

Loren liked that idea and nodded in agreement. She rubbed her hands on her jeans once more.

“We’ve had years to adjust.” Eva tossed some of her long hair away from her face with a graceful shrug of her shoulder. “But one more night won’t make much of a difference to me.” She looked at Loren. “Callum’s right. Discussing this won’t be so daunting after we’ve had a good night’s rest.”

The door to the study opened and a maid stepped in, carrying a tray laden with tea and goodies. Callum gave the woman a kind smile and a thank you. She departed quickly and Callum poured the tea.

Levi untangled himself from his laptop to snag the cup of hot chocolate. He took a couple sips from it. Loren gave him a shy smile, which he returned.

She accepted her cup of tea. “I don’t know what to say,” she admitted.

“You don’t need to say anything. We’re all thankful to have found you.” Callum blew on his tea.

Avery let out a small scoff and Callum fixed his younger brother with a sharp stare. Loren found that a good time to pick up her tea. Her gaze darted between them.

“And you wanted me to stay home.” Avery’s mouth twitched.

“I won’t deny it ended in our favor.”

Loren took note of how Avery’s jaw clenched at his brother’s words. She sipped her tea.

“It was still risky.”

“I was careful, Cal. I’m *always* careful. I know what I’m doing.”

“That’s debatable.”

Loren suspected this sort of exchange happened often. The brothers looked tired, jaded. Had she ever read anything in the papers about their less than amicable relationship? She couldn’t remember.

Witnessing the tension between them made her stomach cramp.

Avery rose from his seat.

“No arguing.” Eva was quiet, but firm. “No fighting. Not tonight.”

Avery resumed his seat, eyes narrowed as he stared across the table. Callum held his gaze but said nothing.

“Awkward,” Levi said under his breath.

Loren fixed her gaze on the desk and sipped her tea, hoping for the tension to ease soon.

After more edgy silence, Callum continued. “The point remains. You’re here now. That’s what’s important.” He lifted his cup to his lips, wetting them.

Loren refrained from asking questions though she’d already compiled a list in her head. She needed more answers.

“Where do you live, Loren?” Callum suddenly asked her.

“Oh, uh, Westacre. Downtown.” She omitted the bad neighborhood and the terrible apartment, but her cheeks burned all the same.

“So close and we never knew.” Eva’s tone was thoughtful. Loren glanced over at her, seeing a furrowed brow.

When Callum shifted to lower his mug, she looked back at him. He appeared pensive but didn’t share his thoughts. “It’s late,” he said instead, “and we have a busy day tomorrow. Best to turn in now and attempt a few hours rest.”

He pushed back his seat and stood. “We’ll meet in the dining room at ten-thirty, after my meeting.” His attention fixed on Loren, smiling at her. “I’m sorry this was brief.” He turned to Avery and his smile vanished. “Please see that she gets settled in.”

Avery nodded stiffly once and stood while Loren took a final drink of her tea and placed her cup on the desk. She quickly joined him.

“I think you’ll like it here.” Levi grinned at Loren on his way past her, giving her a thumbs-up. Loren attempted a smile and hoped it didn’t reflect her lack of certainty. It was too soon to tell if she would like it here, but she hoped so.

The others left the room and Avery and Loren remained. Wordlessly, he glanced at her. For a brief moment, Loren saw embarrassment and discomfort on his face, but it vanished seconds later. Maybe she imagined it. He stepped by her and grabbed the strap of the duffel bag. “Come on.”

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The room was exactly how she expected it—as extravagant as the rest of the house. Loren figured she could fit her entire apartment in here with ease. The bed was queen-sized and looked comfortable. She was bone-weary. Sinking into it would be heaven after the day she’d had.

“Thanks.” She took the bag from Avery and placed it on a dresser. “I can handle it from here.”

“If you need anything, there’s a buzzer here.” He showed her the intercom system on the wall near the bed. “It’s wired through the house. This button has a direct line to security. If there’s an emergency, press that. Otherwise, press this one.” He pointed to a smaller button. “This one will buzz and anyone near an intercom can answer it. After ten o’clock, it redirects to the household staff and they direct the calls where they need to go.”

“Okay. Thanks.” She made a note not to press any of the buttons unless she absolutely needed to.

“My room is down the hall. Turn to the right, five doors down, on the left.”

Loren nodded and chewed her lip again.

Avery still looked tense. It wasn't any of her business in how Callum had addressed him earlier. They were siblings, after all. She had to assume a lot of the tension came from having grown up together, standard sibling rivalry stuff. She wouldn't know much about it. She'd never had any brothers or sisters. It still unsettled her.

"I guess I'll see you in the morning," he said.

Loren nodded as she unzipped her bag. "Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed," she muttered as she grabbed a handful of fabric.

Avery chuckled. "That's cute."

"What? Cute? What's cute?" She faced him.

Avery's gaze dropped to her hands. Loren realized she held a pair of her lacy panties. Her face burned as she tried to conceal them.

"Everything." He shrugged, grinning. "Cute." There was a touch of laughter in his words. "Try to get some sleep, all right?"

"Oh, um, okay. Yeah. Sleep. Right." She laughed nervously. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Loren." The door closed with a soft click.

Once he was gone, she let out a groan. "I am *not* prepared for this."