



“A SUPER SWEET PARANORMAL ROMANCE
PACKED WITH ACTION THAT REMINDS ME OF
WHY I LOVE PARANORMAL SO MUCH.”

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beckon me

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Chapter One

My fingers itched to trace the lines in the black and white photograph hanging on the gallery's wall. The two arms in the image were outstretched, reaching for one another, but never quite touching. One set of fingers was curved inwardly, calling to the other. It was just an image, a simple photograph, but the story it whispered to me was wretchedly beautiful.

My hand rose and was within inches of the thin black frame when Rainey's swatted mine away. "Do I need to hold those behind your back?" she asked.

Heat flooded my cheeks. This was the fourth time she'd stopped me from marring one of the exhibits with my fingerprints. "Isn't it amazing? It's just so...sad. Are they coming together or being pulled apart?" I mused. "I can't tell."

I watched Rainey as she stared at the photo with an amused glint in her eyes. Her teal summer dress stood out against the muted colors of the gallery. I knew my own pink dress was equally as distracting compared to all the other patrons. The fact that we'd spent weeks looking for the perfect dresses for the grand opening of Winchester Gallery's *Silhouettes* was almost laughable. We couldn't have chosen anything more out of place if we'd tried. It turned out that the elegant updos and manicures we'd been so convinced made us look years older did nothing to camouflage our youth. Instead, we looked like two kids playing dress up, surrounded by Boston's sophisticated artsy types in their black cocktail dresses and stiff suits.

Rainey tipped her head to one side, still examining the photograph that had nearly moved me to tears. “They’re *hands*, Karina.” Her lips pulled up slightly at the corners and I could tell she was trying not to laugh. When a tiny little chuckle escaped, I snorted, and the next thing I knew we were both giggling. It didn’t even matter that everyone was probably staring at us. It was still the best night of my life. I wanted it to last forever. I reached for my camera, but remembered then that it wasn’t in its usual spot on my shoulder, but in the coat check. It felt awkward not having it.

I slapped Rainey’s shoulder. “Stop it. You’re going to get us thrown out of here.”

At this, Rainey turned, directing my attention around the gallery. “Umm...have you noticed that we’re the last people here? I think they’re going to throw us out, anyway. The owner looks like he’s considering tossing us to the curb right now.”

“Curator,” I said.

“What?” Rainey replied, confused.

“He’s the curator, not the owner.”

Rainey shrugged. “You say tomato...” She winked at me and I giggled again.

I turned, seeing that she was right. The gallery that was once so crowded that we could barely squeeze through was suddenly empty. The curator watched us from the bar, lips pursed, a set of keys jangling ever so quietly in his palm.

I glanced up at the clock on the wall, surprised to see the time. It was over? Already? I hadn't even had time to see everything—there were several little alcoves we'd missed entirely, walls filled with photographs I'd never see. For months I'd been excited for this event, and now that it was coming to an end, an unfathomable sadness settled inside my chest. After all, photography was everything to me. *Everything*. I wanted to live it, breathe it, consume it. It was all I thought about, and I never, ever went anywhere without my camera. It was like an extra limb, as much a part of me as my own skin.

I took one last look at the photograph of the hands before Rainey and I took the hint. We collected our things at the coat check and filed out the exit. The gallery door swung shut behind us and the lights dimmed as soon as our feet hit the bottom step. I turned to wave my thanks once more to the curator, still soaring from the evening, the images, the pure brilliance of the photographs I had seen.

“Look at you! You're glowing!” Rainey bumped shoulders with me, smiling.

I brought my hand to my cheek, rubbing it and feeling the heat radiating there. She was right; I *was* glowing. “Can you blame me? That was just so...” I stopped, not sure how to describe the way I was feeling in that moment.

“Yeah.” She bumped me with her hip this time. “Can't wait to see your photos in there one day.”

I couldn't help but grin, knowing she meant it or she wouldn't have bothered coming with me this evening. Rainey didn't exactly understand my obsession with photography. But when it came to supporting my obsession, she was the best. She was

wrong, of course. The images we'd seen in the gallery were a million times better than anything I could ever capture.

I hooked my arm through hers, resting my head on her shoulder. "Thank you again for coming with me tonight."

"It's what best friends do," she said matter-of-factly, but I could hear the smile in her voice. After ten years of friendship, I could read her tone. I squeezed her arm one last time before straightening up.

The gallery was in an upscale part of the city, but it was surprisingly dark with only a few streetlights illuminating our six-block trek to the parking garage. Loose gravel crunched beneath our heels as we passed the closed businesses and shops.

Hushed voices caught my attention and I turned to see a couple in the dimly lit alley. The girl's blond hair faintly glowed as she pushed up against her lover. Their bodies moved fluidly, rocking against one another intimately. Pale light shone down on them from a streetlamp, making ghostly shadows on the brick wall behind them. Mesmerized by the contrasts of their movements and the dancing shadows that their bodies created, I pulled my camera from my shoulder bag and snapped a shot.

Rainey gripped my arm. "What are you doing?"

"Taking pictures. You know, capturing the moment." I smiled at her, my camera clicking as I pressed the shutter once more.

"Karina! Give them some privacy."

“It’s too dark to see their faces,” I said, ignoring my rising sense of guilt for stealing this moment from the couple.

Just then, the girl groaned, almost too quietly for me to hear, but then a second one followed, sounding more guttural. Startled by the intensity of it and the way the girl’s body arced in what looked more like pain than pleasure, I took a step back and knocked into Rainey.

“Um...I don’t think they’re—”

My camera tipped from my hands, clattering to the ground. A bright flash illuminated the narrow alley when the camera connected with the pavement, and within an instant I knew I’d made a terrible mistake. This wasn’t a couple stealing a quick kiss, but something far, far more dangerous.

Something popped and the girl screamed, a bloodcurdling sound that sent shivers down my spine. She attempted to push away from the man, whose attention was no longer focused on her, but on me. His face alone, mottled in anger, would have been terrifying enough if it weren’t for what I saw in his hands.

The gun’s short silver barrel sparked and an earsplitting *bang* ricocheted throughout the alley.

My blood ran cold. My heart pumped sluggishly in my chest as I turned in what felt like slow motion to run. Somehow my fingers found Rainey’s and for a brief

moment, the sensation of her hand in mine was all I felt. Her firm grip, the assurance that she was with me.

Then another *bang* ripped through the air and searing hot pain flooded my senses, ripping me in two. I closed my eyes, willing the pain to end and suddenly...it did. A calm warmth rolled through me like a wave and I opened my eyes to find Rainey still with me, her hand still in mine. She pulled me gently, as if something was pulling *her*. Helplessly, I watched our entwined fingers begin to slip.

Beneath us, the world seemed to float away, leaving the tangled mess of our bodies behind. The only sound was the steady, low beating of my heart—*thump, thump, thump*—growing softer each second. *Thump...thump...thump*. A brilliant white light washed over me, so intense, so powerful that there was no doubt I was dying. It was then that I saw him. He stood before us, one arm outstretched, beckoning us to him. For a single moment, the urge to go to him, to follow him, was overpowering. In his deep blue eyes I could see my life as it was, and as it would never be again.

But just as quickly, the urge was gone. Something stronger and much, much more painful had me in its grasp, taking everything I knew and everything I was...away.

Chapter Two

I dropped the last of my boxes onto the hardwood floor and plopped down on the couch. Dust particles flew through the air surrounding me, a reminder that the apartment had been empty for months.

Rainey's parents owned the duplex near the university and had been renting the apartments out for years. It was one of those ancient-looking brick monstrosities that was split down the middle, creating two homes. Each side had four bedrooms—three on the second floor, and a fourth, smaller loft bedroom, on the third floor. It was much too large for just Rainey and me, and we had planned on having a couple roommates, but after the shooting Rainey's parents decided to keep it empty for the semester.

Coming back had been a last minute decision, so I was grateful for the place to live. And after staying in the noisy dorms our freshman year, we were excited to finally live in off-campus housing. Now, though, I would have done anything for that noise. The loud voices of the dozens of other girls on our floor last year would have been a welcome distraction from what I currently faced.

I tried to pretend I didn't see my best friend glaring at me from the other side of the room, her eyes sunken and dark. Like all the other times I'd seen her in these past weeks, tears stained her once beautiful face. My stomach churned as I squirmed on the dusty couch. Shivering, I closed my eyes, willing Rainey to disappear. I wanted nothing more than to pull her into my arms, to wipe the tears and pain away. I wanted to help her, but I couldn't. No one could.

Rainey was dead.

My cell rang, and without even looking I knew it was my mother. I had promised I would call her as soon as I got to the apartment, but seeing as I had only just arrived, I figured I could wait a few minutes before subjecting myself to her worried voice again. Since my only other option was to sit around with my dead best friend, I answered the call.

“I’m here, Mom.”

“Oh, thank God.” She sighed in relief. “Are you okay? You know your father and I can come get you if you’re not okay. Do you want us to come get you? There’s nothing wrong with changing your mind, honey.”

I gripped the phone harder, tempted to hang up on her. “Mom, I am not changing my mind. My classes start tomorrow. I’m fine.” She started to talk again, but I cut her off. “Seriously, Mom. Stop it.”

She huffed, but actually quieted, which was a major improvement from the incessant nagging she’d been delving out since the shooting. Let’s just say my parents were not fans of my decision to go back to college this semester.

“I still have to unpack, so I should go.” I didn’t really have any plans to unpack anything, but I didn’t need to tell her that. Also, I wasn’t telling her that my deceased best friend was currently standing in the corner of the room, hate oozing out of her eyes. I was sure that would go over really well.

Laying my head back on the couch cushion, I closed my eyes and tried to pretend Rainey wasn't there. I knew why my parents were worried. It had only been a couple of months since the shooting--since the night my best friend was murdered, and I had almost died, too. But I couldn't stay home and skip or postpone my sophomore year of college like they wanted me to.

The truth was, I had hoped that leaving home would have driven my hallucinations of post-mortem Rainey out. Now, though, I knew that wasn't going to happen. Minutes, maybe hours passed before I moved again. The light coming in through the window behind me was not as bright as it was before, and I was aware that, after I finally opened my eyes, Rainey was no longer in the room with me.

My bags were still on the floor by my feet, so I figured now was a good a time as any to put everything away. But as soon as my fingers wrapped around the handle of my suitcase, my stomach released a growl that was almost painful. Change in plans, then. I dropped the suitcase and snatched my purse, and after finding the right key on my chain, locked the front door to the duplex.

The coffee house two blocks away had a steady stream of students coming and going, so after ordering my mocha and a sandwich, I found a seat fairly easily. Even though the croissant had probably been baked hours before, the hot sandwich practically melted in my mouth. I took alternating bites of the deliciousness and sips of my coffee, and pulled a notepad out of my purse to make a list of what food I would need for the apartment.

I stopped when an odd sensation washed over me, and I felt degrees warmer than just seconds before. A light sheen of sweat broke across my skin. I searched my surroundings and spotted a guy—a very hot guy—sitting three tables away. His hands thrummed a rhythm on the tabletop and his eyes were fixed on me. Broad cheekbones, a straight nose and a strong jaw line accompanied stormy blue eyes. Dark curls framed his tan face and a slight grin emerged across his full lips. He seemed to shimmer, parts of him coming in and out of focus.

My desire to take his picture was strong--so strong I regretted not having my camera on me. I didn't move, unsure of what to do or why I felt the need to do anything at all. Part of me wanted to approach him, to hear his voice, to get a closer look into those eyes. They looked oddly familiar and I couldn't help wondering if they were as transfixing up close as they were from this distance. Another part of me was strangely terrified of him. The way he watched me felt intimate, like he knew me. Like he knew my secret.

We continued on like this—him staring at me, me staring at him—for several long moments before my attention was broken by someone standing next to me.

“Karina? Is that you?” Elyse, the overly friendly and talkative girl Rainey and I befriended in last year's general psych class stood before me, a mix of concern and hope etched into her tiny, mouse-like features. “I tried to call you.”

I nodded because I knew she had. A lot of my friends had. “I'm sorry—” I began, but my face was abruptly blanketed in a wall of platinum blond hair as she wrapped her arms around my neck.

“No, I’m sorry! I am so sorry about what happened. About Rainey.”

My stomach felt like a volcano about to erupt. I needed to get the hell out of there. “Yeah, me too.” I picked up my coffee. “Look, I need to run. Still have a lot of unpacking. Can we catch up later?”

“Oh, uh, yeah. Sure. Do you want to meet up before the UT meeting tomorrow afternoon? They’re at the same time this year. Mondays at four. We’d be lost without your photos.” There it was again—the hope I’d seen on her face earlier. I cringed.

Aside from Rainey, Elyse had been one of my closest friends before the shooting. She’d visited several times at the hospital and had called more times than I could count once I was discharged, but after never hearing back from me, I thought she had finally given up. I was obviously mistaken.

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to be friends with her, because I really did like her. But the thought of spending time with Elyse without Rainey felt wrong. There was no way I could show up at University Times meeting pretending that Rainey never existed. Her face, her memory would still be everywhere I looked, etched into everything I touched, reminding me of what happened. She wrote like I took pictures. Journalism was her passion, and I’d taken that away from her. How could I go back there? I couldn’t.

“Um...I don’t know,” I lied. “I really need to go, though. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“I could walk with you!” she yelled after me.

“That’s okay.” I waved her off, grateful she didn’t follow. “Thanks! We’ll talk later. Bye!”

Elyse’s eyes began to water and I knew, just freaking knew she was about to lose it. And I was responsible for that. Without waiting for another response from her, I backed away, right into an overly warm body. My coffee sloshed down the front of my shirt, but I didn’t care. Looking up, I realized I was now back-to-chest with the guy I had been staring down earlier, and I was momentarily rewarded with the knowledge that his deep blue eyes were indeed as beautiful up close as they were from a distance.

But then I remembered why I was running, and immediately the panic I had felt before began rising once again in my chest. I vaguely remember hands resting on my shoulders and gently guiding me out of the coffee shop, but my brain just wasn’t functioning correctly.

I heard the word, “Breathe,” but I wasn’t sure if it was my own voice, or his. I closed my eyes and did as the voice said. Deep breath in, deep breath out. Repeat. A calming sensation washed over my body and my insides finally began to feel normal again. I opened my eyes, expecting to find the mysterious guy from earlier still next to me, or at least somewhere nearby. I wanted to thank him for helping me, but there was no trace of him.

He was gone, just like that.

Chapter Three

I only had two classes on that first day back, though that was plenty enough for me. The great thing about college is that there are more strangers than friends. It made it so much easier to avoid running into those that knew the story of what had happened to Rainey and me. When I did see people I knew, I carefully avoided their sympathetic gazes, keeping my eyes trained on the professors and my textbooks. Occasionally someone would give me an “I’m sorry,” and a few asked how I was feeling, but most seemed to be as much at a loss for words as I was.

The only hiccup came when I went grocery shopping after my last class. I was trying to decide between golden grahams and cinnamon toast crunch when I heard his voice behind me.

“Rina?”

I froze. Only one person besides my family called me that, and as far as I knew he was in North Carolina, presumably starting his sophomore year at Duke.

I turned slowly, giving myself time to fix my face into something other than complete and utter shock. “Callen? Uh...hi?”

Callen’s lips lifted into a smile I was all too familiar with. He’d been my boyfriend since our junior year of high school. It was great for a while, but then we graduated and he went off to Duke and I was here in Boston and, well, it just stopped feeling right. It was more like checking in and less like a romance, and even though I

knew it would be harder long distance, I knew that wasn't entirely it. With him there and me here, it had felt...good.

It wasn't like I was going out and partying all the time, though I did enjoy my fair share, but I was never unfaithful. Never even really found anyone I wanted to be unfaithful for. I just realized that maybe us being apart was better than us together. The freedom was nice.

But then, there he was, standing in front of me like he'd never went away, and somehow that felt nice, too. He looked exactly the same, yet so different. His light brown eyes reflected the dim supermarket lighting and were every bit as kind-looking as I remembered them being, but his shoulders seemed broader now. His dirty blond hair was still cropped short, but in a pair of relaxed jeans and a band tee shirt, he looked more relaxed than I recalled him looking before. This Callen seemed comfortable. He reached for my shoulder, his fingers brushing my skin there. Even though we had been broken up for almost nine months, I was still accustomed to his touch. That touch, much like his gentle smile, brought me comfort. "What are you doing here?" I finally asked.

He took his hand off my shoulder and ran both hands over his cropped hair. I knew that move. That comfort I'd seen in his body just moments before was gone now. Callen didn't look at me. "I transferred in."

He what? For a few heartbeats we both simply stood there. I kept waiting for an explanation and maybe he was trying to avoid giving one, but my mind was officially

blown. He was at Duke, for Christ's sake. Duke. Why on earth would he have transferred to Backbay University? I gaped at him.

“Why?”

Callen's eyes met mine, pinning them in place. “I just realized Backbay has everything I want. It was stupid to think I needed to move seven hundred miles away to get it.”

I bit my tongue, scared to ask the questions forming in my mind. What did he mean by that? Our breakup seemed like so long ago, but having him here in front of me made me feel like no time had passed. Like we hadn't really broken up at all. After the shooting, Callen had called a few times. I never answered, but his voicemails had been nice, concerned about me. I didn't want to believe his transfer had anything to do with me. He wouldn't have been that stupid, right?

I needed to change the subject. “So where are you staying?”

Callen looked just as relieved as I was to be talking about something else. “I got an apartment with Devon and Max over in the Bayview complex.”

Bayview was a cluster of old brownstones that had been converted into apartments years ago. The buildings all faced each other and had a small courtyard in the middle, complete with small patches of grass and benches. It was just a couple of blocks away from my apartment, and only one block off campus. “That's a great spot.”

He smiled at me. “Yeah, it’s great being back with the guys. How about you? Did you find an apartment nearby?”

“I’m staying at Rainey’s parent’s place. It was pretty much the only thing I could find on such short notice.”

Surprise flickered in his eyes. “But that’s such a big house. Do you have any roommates?”

I shook my head. “No, but it’s fine. There are students next door.” Or at least there would be. Rainey’s parents told me the other half of the duplex was rented out, so I assumed I would run into the residents who lived there at some point. My lips parted in what I hoped looked like a smile.

“Hey, well, I’m sure it’ll be great. And if you ever need some company, you’re more than welcome to come over to our place. I know Devon and Max would love to see you, too.”

This time the smile came easier. Devon and Max had been Callen’s best friends in high school, and as a result, they sort of felt like my best friends, too. “That sounds nice, actually.”

As soon as I got back to the apartment, I made room on the desk in my room by pushing aside the unopened box that held my brand new camera and opened my art history textbook. I tried not to linger on the details of the day. Though unexpected, the highlight had definitely been seeing Callen.

After I finished my philosophy reading, I dug into my women's history text. I tapped my pen on the side of the desk as I worked my way through the pages. A sharp pain radiated from my ribs--or, more accurately, my exit wound--and I dropped the pen. Rubbing the still tender scar, I bent over to pick up the pen. It was then that a tingle shot down the inside of my right arm and the tiny hairs there stood on end. My stomach twisted in knots as I realized it was the same feeling I'd had the day before.

Walking over to my window, I nervously pulled the pale green curtains aside. Slight disappointment rolled through me when I saw no one. I knew it wasn't normal behavior to *want* someone to be watching you through your bedroom window. I'm still not sure that was what I was thinking. Mostly I just wanted to believe I wasn't imagining the feeling or the guy I'd seen at the coffee shop. If I could believe I hadn't imagined him, then maybe I'd be able to believe the same about Rainey. I needed to know if Rainey really was trying to reach me from the grave or I was just certifiable. I'd settle for either at this point.

A door slammed and I jumped back from the window. Once I heard the sound of a television through the wall I knew it was my new neighbors. I considered going over to introduce myself, but then remembered I was in my ugliest pair of lounge pants and a sweatshirt I should have thrown out years ago and decided against it.

Abandoning my work, I went down to the kitchen. I spooned way too much Nutella onto two slices of bread and poured myself a glass of milk before heading back up to my room. I sank down onto the bed and took a bite of my sandwich, making a

mental note to remember to eat dinner earlier the next night. The entire meal, such as it was, was gone in less than a minute.

The hum of the television next door, which was even louder now that I was in my bed that was pressed against the adjoining paper-thin wall, became somehow relaxing. Closing my textbook, I slid further down in bed and let the background noise lull me into almost-sleep. But then my skin chilled and I didn't have to open my eyes to know Rainey was with me. I couldn't make myself open my eyes. It hurt too much to look at her. I was caught between wanting to touch her, wanting her to leave, and needing her to stay. Her wails caused my chest to tighten painfully. Wrapping my arms around my knees, I cried for what I'd done to her. I cried because I couldn't help her. But mostly, I cried because I missed my best friend.

In the darkness of my room, the shooting crept into my nightmares, just like it had every night since I'd woken up in the hospital. The gunman's angry face taunted me as he pointed the gun at us again and again. Each night my heart stopped in my chest when I saw the silver barrel and the wicked glare in his eyes, only to stutter painfully back to life, reminding me that I was still here. And she was gone.

The doctors had told me it was normal to have blank spots in my memory since I'd lost consciousness due to blood loss. They said the mind had a way of protecting itself from traumas by blocking things out. That it was a good thing that I'd not been mentally present for everything that had happened following the shooting.

What they don't know is I remember dying. I'd died with Rainey, but something went wrong. One second I was with her, standing by her side, reveling in the peaceful feeling of no pain. As one we approached the light, but before we reached it, something pulled me back. Some unknown force pulled me away from the light and my best friend. The last thing I heard was Rainey screaming my name as her grasp on my hand was wrenched away.

Chapter Four

It was still dark outside when a loud screech woke me. It took me several moments and even more deep breaths to figure out that it was the tree outside my bedroom scraping the windowpanes. Unnerved and unable to fall back asleep, I went downstairs and poured myself a glass of water.

I stood alone in the narrow kitchen watching the wind whip at the trees outside, feeling oddly akin to those trees. The wind battered and tore at their limbs but the trees never fell. They looked flimsy with their thin branches and papery leaves fluttering loose in the wild wind, but their bases were strong. Could the same be said for me?

When I finally fell back asleep it was my like my nightmare had been waiting for me. There were the now familiar sounds of the gun's blast and the screams of the other girl who'd died in the alley. The feel of Rainey's hand in mine and the pounding of our feet as we tried to escape. The relentless pain. Then, there was Rainey crying, asking what happened. Asking me to help her. It was the same thing over and over. Punishment for what I had done. It was my fault she died and I knew I'd never forgive myself for not listening to her that night.

Except this time it was different. This time Rainey became more upset, almost frantic. She ran her fingers through her hair and paced rapidly in front of me. The gory scene of the shooting was a washed out image behind her.

“You have to help me, Karina.” Her brown eyes met mine and the tears began to fall once more. “I can’t be here. You have to help me.” An ice-cold shiver slid down my spine and across my limbs, turning my insides into a frozen tundra.

She reached for me, but then backed away just as quickly, as if she was scared to touch me. Her eyes glassed over as the tears fell faster. “Please, Karina. Help me,” she begged. Rainey slumped down onto the ground and sobbed. I squeezed my eyes shut, wishing this wasn’t happening, wishing I could do something. I wanted to help her. I really did, but this wasn’t real. It couldn’t be. This was just a nightmare. She had needed my help, but now it was far too late. Rainey was gone. She’d passed into the light. I’d seen it.

The storm outside my window was raging when I woke again. I peered out to find large clumps of hail bouncing off my car parked on the street, breaking into tiny pieces before hitting the pavement. The sky was an angry dark gray for miles in every direction. It felt like my nightmare had come to life in the form of a brutal thunderstorm.

By the time I was out of the shower I was trembling from the cool air. My teeth chattered as I got dressed. It was only late September, not nearly cold enough for one of my thick winter sweaters so I threw on a long-sleeved t-shirt and opted for sneakers instead of sandals.

When I plopped down on my bed to tie the laces, my wrist suddenly felt like it was on fire. A groan escaped me as I massaged it and inspected my skin. There was nothing visibly wrong with it, but the pain didn’t fade. The heat was coming from the

inside. Had I somehow strained it in my sleep? I swung my arms a few times and flexed my fingers. It didn't help, but I continued the exercise as I made my way downstairs to my kitchen in search of breakfast.

My first class didn't start for another hour, but I wanted to get there early. Or, more accurately, I wanted to get out of the too-quiet apartment, even if that meant I had to walk a few blocks in a raging storm.

I snagged an English muffin from the kitchen and smeared some butter on it. Holding it in my mouth, I slid my raincoat on, packed my laptop and notebook into my bag, and pulled the door shut behind me. A warm breeze tickled the back of my neck and just as I turned to insert my key into the lock, movement caught my eye at the window next door. The blind gently swayed as if someone had been peering out if it, but I saw no one behind it.

Deciding now was as good a time as any, I climbed over the short railing that separated the neighboring porch from mine and knocked on the front door. Several seconds passed by in silence while I waited for someone to answer. I took a bite of my muffin while I waited, and flipped my wrist over trying to figure out why it was suddenly flaring up again like I'd burned it on the stove.

"Hello?" After another minute passed with no one answering, I felt more than a little stupid. Maybe there wasn't anyone there at all. Maybe a pet cat had hit the blind and caused it to sway. Maybe there was someone home, but they were in the shower. Shrugging, I walked down the steps, and resumed rubbing my tender wrist, wincing at the

discomfort it caused. Maybe it was a weird side effect from the gunshot wound to my spleen.

There had been a momentary break in the falling rain and hail, but the three-block walk to campus had still splashed the entire back of my calves wet. I hurried to get indoors and into the heat but even in the auditorium I couldn't shake the chill running through me. Most of the other students had on shorts and tank tops. There were a few in jeans but no one had on long sleeves—no one except me. Aside from my still blazing wrist, I didn't feel sick, but maybe I was coming down with something. It occurred to me that the chills started when Rainey began to appear. It couldn't be related to her presence, could it? Scoffing at myself, I pushed the thought aside.

In British lit, I found a seat near the back of the auditorium and pulled out my textbook. I read through the syllabus the professor had given us as we walked in and waited for class to start, but became distracted by a commotion at the door.

The guy from the cafe, the one I had been beginning to think I'd imagined, sauntered into the room. His eyes met mine briefly before flickering to a girl in the front row. He winked at her before flashing a smile so beautiful I was sure that my heart stopped.

The professor handed him the same stapled stack of papers that he had given the rest of us, and pointed absently toward the rows of seats. I watched frozen as the guy made his way up the steps and onto my row. He slid into the empty seat next to mine, and ran a hand down his arm to his wrist and turned his focus on me, his hand extended.

“Hi, I’m Eli.”

“Karina.” He took my hand in his. My wrist flared again so sharply, I gasped.

Eli nodded and faced the front of the class.

I spent most of the lecture fighting the urge to stare at the gorgeous boy beside me. I lost the fight quickly when he stretched his long legs casually out into the aisle. For a while I was able to keep my focus trained on his dark boots, but eventually my gaze traveled up the length of his body.

His right hand rested on his thigh, the left gently tapping a pen on his desk. As my eyes took in the lean muscles of his forearms, biceps and chest, my cheeks burned with sudden heat almost as intense as my wrist. Yet, I couldn’t stop myself from continuing my blatant ogling. When I finally rested my gaze on his remarkable face, the professor shouted out reminders of our reading assignment. It startled me enough to cause me to jump in my seat, knocking my notebook to the floor in the process.

I quickly turned my attention back to my desk but not before I noticed the smug smile on Eli’s lips. *Oh, my God.* He’d seen me. I covered my face in embarrassment and avoided eye contact with him as he reached for my notebook and placed it on my desk. When I was sure he was gone I opened my eyes to find I was alone in the suddenly frigid auditorium.

Except for Rainey, who now sat in the corner watching me through bloodshot eyes.



I was asleep on the couch when the doorbell rang. Looking at the clock, I groaned. It was only seven thirty and I'd been asleep for God knows how long. I was going to be in for a long night. Even though I was freezing, I tossed the blanket from my body, and didn't even think about what I was wearing before I answered the door.

But, really, I should have. Because on the other side of my door stood *him*. Eli. The guy from the café, who then turned out to be in my English class, was now standing on my front porch. And I'll be damned if he didn't look even better with the last rays of the evening sun highlighting the curls on his head, turning them a gorgeous auburn. I licked my lips as the aroma of sweet potatoes and butter wrapped itself around me. He was holding a bag with an emblem I recognized immediately as coming from my mother's restaurant.

As his eyes locked with mine, heat replaced the coldness that had been coursing through me all day. Eli smiled at me, and I suddenly felt like licking *his* lips. His smile grew wider. "Karina?"

"Hmm?" I tried to think of a way to get him to say my name again. It sounded amazing coming from his mouth.

"This was left at my door, but I think it's for you. It has your name on it." He pushed the bag in my direction and I realized he was no longer smiling. And I was still staring. *Shit*.

I took the bag, practically shoving my face inside of it to inhale the scent of my mother's cooking. It cleared my head enough for me to look at him again without staring like an idiot. It hit me then that he said the food was left at his door. I cradled the bag to my chest. I was super hungry all of a sudden, but I was more interested in finding out something about this guy. "Where do you live?"

Eli slid his hands into his jeans pockets. My eyes followed the movement, admiring the slim line of his waist. Apparently I was hungry for more than food. I wasn't usually so transparent when it came to guys, but I mentally did the math in my head, and it *had* been a while. "I'm your neighbor."

My eyes snapped up, then across the porch to where he was pointing. Eli was my neighbor. My pulse thrummed through my veins. He lifted a hand to the back of his head and ran it through his dark hair revealing a small patch of skin just between the top of his jeans and the bottom of his shirt. *Oh*. Well, this could be interesting.

Somehow I found the strength to look away from that strip of skin and focused on the warm food still in my hands. "That's great. Thank you for bringing the food over."

"No problem." I could hear the smile in his voice and because I was weak, I stared at his mouth for several seconds past what was appropriate.

He climbed over the railing as I had done earlier and, just when I was sure our little exchange was over, Eli stopped and looked back at me over his shoulder. "Oh, could you do me a favor?"

Yes, yes I can. “Sure. What do you need?”

“Will you promise to always wear those pajamas when I come to your door? I kind of have a thing for girls in superhero gear.”

My mouth fell open as remembered the hot pink and black tank top and shorts I was wearing with tiny Batman symbols all over them. Eli’s laughter caused my heart rate to skyrocket and sent a shiver down my bare skin. He was inside his apartment before I was able to compose myself enough to respond. All I knew was I had a sudden urge to do some serious online shopping for some superman pajamas. Totally normal, right?

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