

## Chapter 2

Ava tried to suppress the dread filling her as she sat in the back of the taxi, but she knew she was failing miserably. The taxi driver was some sort of supernatural, so he could probably sense everything. She knew that not because she had suddenly developed any enhanced senses overnight but because they were the only ones allowed to ferry the new students from the airport.

Phoenix Academy was in some super-secret location that humans were not allowed to enter. She almost snorted at that. If that was true, they should never have insisted on her attendance. She should have been allowed to go to a regular college like any other nineteen-year-old human who'd survive the torture of high school. But no, she had to attend this place with all sorts of supernatural species who could kill her without a second thought if it wasn't for the fact that it was forbidden.

There were several branches of this academy all over the world to accommodate all of them, and she still didn't know which one she had come to. A private plane had picked her and a few others from a small airport in Arizona, and then they had made several stops along the way to refuel and pick up more students. She had been travelling for a whole day and felt tired to the bone. Not knowing where she was made the entire situation worse.

They seemed to have been driving for hours but every time she looked at the time on her phone, it had barely moved. They had driven through the mountains, and then the taxi entered a dark forest that brought her nightmares back to the forefront. She could hardly see anything through her window even though it was still daylight, and even from the safety of the taxi, she could feel that this was somewhere she wouldn't want to find herself alone. There was such a heavy feeling in the air as if the darkness could consume her the moment she exposed herself.

She looked away and found her gaze on the driver's eyes in the mirror. He had a frown on his face as if he disapproved of her emotions—or her, in general. It was probably the latter, as everyone else. There was nothing she could do about anyone else's opinion of her. She was who she was, and no amount of crying or hoping would change that.

She looked at her phone again and typed quick messages to her family just in case they would be the last ones. Her dad had already warned her that no matter which campus she ended up on, there would be no outside networks, and she would only be allowed to call from the school phones on weekends. This was a deprivation of liberty, no doubt about it. How anyone felt they had the right to do that to adults was beyond her.

But then again, she had been in their world for thirteen years. None of it surprised her anymore.

She almost teared up when she read her dad's message.

“Remember your name. Stand tall.”

She squared her shoulders and repeated what he had taught her from the moment they had realized she was not one of them. She was Ava Morgan, daughter of Alpha Roland Morgan, and she didn't take shit from anybody. If only that were true.

Her shoulders sagged again as her mind tried to pull her back to the torturous years she had endured living among the wolves. Even the Alpha and his four sons had failed to keep her safe from that.

Her phone signal disappeared; her only link to her safe haven was gone. She blinked back tears as she switched her phone off and put it in her handbag.

As the Alpha of their small pack, no one had ever dared question her dad about his decision to take her in. But that hadn't stopped the abuse when he or her brothers had not been around. School had always been the worst time for her, but at least she had always gone home at the end of the day and found comfort in her family. Now, she was out here all alone.

She could only hope that, as college students, everyone was too mature to do what they used to do to her in her isolated pack. Supernatural beings from all over the world attended this school she had to hope that they weren't all ignorant turds like the ones she had left behind in New Mexico.

They came out of the forest and into the sunlight again, and it felt like she had entered another world. Even the majestic beauty of the vast forest she had called home most of her life didn't compare to this. The grass seemed greener here, and tall trees lined up perfectly on either side

of the road, with their branches forming an arch. Even the atmosphere felt different. If she had felt uneasy in the forest, it was worse here. She felt like a little lamb being driven into a den of predators.

She tried to put it down to nerves because of leaving her pack territory for the first time in her life, but she couldn't lie to herself for too long. She felt danger everywhere, and they hadn't even arrived yet.

Tall, imposing gates loomed in the distance, and giant birds, which she assumed were phoenixes, were on the posts on either side. Her anxiety notched up again. Once this taxi drove back, there would be no way to leave this place. She would be stuck here for months before they would allow parents and guardians to visit on Parents' Day. She wished she could turn back, but defying an order from the Council would bring the greatest shame to her dad. That was something she never wanted to do.

The gates slid open, and her jaw dropped when she saw the vast grounds. There was so much space she wondered if she'd ever have to go from one end to another for her lessons. If that were the case, she would never get there, not with her human speed. The buildings came closer, and she noticed they were all four storey and looked like fancy mansions, complete with driveways that had expensive cars parked at the front.

She had never gone hungry a day in her life. She and her dad and brothers were not filthy rich; they were comfortable. But with the types of cars she saw here, she realized this was a whole different ball game. The taxi eventually slowed as it drove around a huge fountain and then stopped at the entrance of a big, imposing building. It looked like it had been built in a different time with its stone walls and spires as if it was

the original building that had served the many generations of supernatural beings that came through here. Its rich history was something that would have fascinated Ava any other day, but today, she had too many knots in her stomach. She had received specific instructions to stop at the reception first, so she assumed this was the main building where it was.

“We’re here, Miss.”

She was startled when she heard the driver’s voice and realized she had just been sitting and staring like an idiot.

“Sorry. Thank you,” she mumbled, grabbing her handbag as she got out.

There were students everywhere in the same uniform that she wore: black pleated skirts for the ladies and black trousers for the guys, white shirts, and they all had maroon blazers. She noticed, though, that the others had different-colored trimmings around the lower sleeves of the blazers.

The trunk slammed behind her, and she was startled again until she realized the driver had just taken her bags out of his trunk.

And her little gasp seemed to bring everyone’s attention to her. If she hadn’t known about this world already, she would have known they were all other-worldly just by looking at them. These were some damn good-looking people. And to top it all off, they were all perfectly made up. They could have stepped off a runway. They didn’t look like they had spent hours on a plane and tried to freshen up in its cramped bathroom.

She pushed her hair behind her ear and felt self-conscious as she picked up the handle of her luggage and started walking towards the entrance. She had dull red hair, ordinary blue eyes, freckles and skin that burnt easily in the sun. There was nothing sparkly, shiny or airbrushed about her—just ordinary. She had felt that in high school, but even those people wouldn't hold a candle to anyone here.

As she walked past them, she saw several of them sniff the air. She kept her heart calm, as she had learned to do over the years, but this was when they would know what she was. And they would know that she didn't belong here.

“Is she human?” someone asked.

She ignored the rest of the whispers as she finally stepped inside

It was worse there. More people were standing around with their bags, and it looked like she had to stand in a queue to get further instructions. The others looked like they already knew each other, judging by how they talked in groups. Their conversations were lively, but they all stopped talking the moment she stopped in one of the lines. She kept her eyes down knowing she could control her emotions better if she didn't make eye contact with anyone. She didn't even try to look around the interior of the building that had fascinated her from the outside.

“You're in in the wrong queue. The donors don't come through this building”

She looked at the boy who had said that and refrained from making a snarky comment. This was not the place to let her mouth get her into

trouble. The boy had to be her age if he was in this queue. Like the rest, his silky blond hair and blue eyes could have made him a movie star.

“I’m not a doner. But thanks,” she answered with a tight smile.

“Wait. You’re actually enrolled here?” the man said incredulously. “Did someone prank you?”

“How?” she asked with a frown.

The invitations were always delivered to the intended person using magic; only they could read the details. The instructions had been very clear.

“I’m sorry. I just thought they couldn’t have humans enrolled here,” the boy said, and then he turned back around.

She had as well. She kept her fingers and toes crossed that they would tell her this had been a huge misunderstanding and send her back home. This was not the place for her.