



Valentina Fast

The Elite of Ashriver – Hidden Secrets

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Ages 16+

Sample translation by Romy Fursland

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Chapter 1

Jade

There are only a few roads that lead to Phoenix, and I'm driving down one of them. I fidget nervously with the torn edge of my thumbnail and gaze out through the front windscreen, past the driver, who I found a little intimidating at first in his black suit and matching cap.

The road ahead of us is full of twists and turns, and lined with pine trees. The side roads lead off into the wilderness, and the horizon is all mountains, green and white, with grey clouds hanging low in the sky above them. Even with the threat of rain in the air, this place is more beautiful than any postcard could ever do justice to.

I can't believe it. I'm really here. In Canada.

There are no signs or any other indication that we're on a direct route to a city. Just this long, lonely road through the trees. But every Supernatural in North America knows that the Black River Highway leads to Phoenix.

My thumbnail tears a bit more, right into the nailbed, and I press my lips together as I tuck my thumb inside my fist. For a moment I wish I'd had that manicure last week after all. But I'd known I wouldn't be able to afford fake nails any more from now on, and they look stupid if you just let them grow out. So I lied and said I had an upset stomach, and we postponed the appointment to this week. To tomorrow.

My chest feels tight as I picture my mother's reaction when she finds out I'm gone. That the money is gone. That some of her clothes are missing.

She's going to flip.

You're a liar. You're worthless, if you can't even pay your way. Absolutely worthless.

I break out in a cold sweat. It's as if my guilty conscience has all of my internal organs in a vice. Slowly I breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth. Quietly, hoping the driver won't notice I'm starting to have a panic attack. I lean back against the pale leather seat and close my eyes for a moment.

I deserve freedom. I'm allowed to choose my own life. I don't owe anyone anything.

I repeat the words that have been going round and round in my head ever since I met a psychology student in a bar and, after one too many cocktails, told her my whole life story. She seized the opportunity to test out some of the theory she'd learned, and gave me some advice. I soaked up every word like a sponge.

I am my own boss. I don't owe anyone anything.

It's a while before the tightness in my chest starts to subside, and longer still before I feel like I can breathe normally again.

When I open my eyes, my gaze meets the driver's.

He looks at me impassively, probably checking I'm not about to throw up all over his expensive leather seats, before turning his eyes back to the road. The trees on either side seem to be closing in – after a few more bends in the road they're so tall that they swallow up every little bit of sunlight.

My stomach becomes one giant knot as an iron gate suddenly looms ahead of us. It's as wide as the whole road, and on either side of it there are high fences leading off into the trees.

'Your ID card, please.' The driver slows down, reaching back over his shoulder and holding out his hand.

He did tell me earlier that we'd need to display my ID card on the approach to Phoenix. But still my fingers tremble as I take my wallet out of my bag and fish out the nondescript little card. My fake smile falters as I watch the driver place my card next to his own in the middle of the dashboard.

Every muscle in my body is tensed as we come to a stop right in front of the gate, and I watch as red lights start to blink on the two cameras mounted on the gateposts.

A few seconds pass. My heart is pounding in my chest. My hands are shaking. I hold my breath.

And then the gate gives a little jolt and swings open, slowly, mechanically. As if by magic. Remotely controlled by strangers who've decided the details my ID card has brought up on their system are true.

The driver pulls forward.

And then we're inside.

Oh. My. God.

I'm in Phoenix.

I'm in Phoenix?

I'm in Phoenix!

I'm still trying to gather my thoughts a few moments later when the driver indicates right. Ahead of us I can see a sign with two intertwined A's. The driver takes the turning, and we leave the highway. Now we're on the direct road to Ashriver Academy. It's the last building between me and the city that calls to me like no other – and from which I have more to fear than any other.

This is where I will study, graduate, and build a life. The Academy has its own system, a cross between a school and a university, with different departments and courses

tailored to a student's own abilities. A few weeks ago, when I asked my uncle if he could get me a place here, he wasted no time in sending me over a whole load of information. The Academy has specialist departments for all eight houses of the Supernatural world.

And now that I've got my documents, and my primary residence is listed as Phoenix, I'm officially a member of the House of Sirens. Because that's what I am: a Siren. It's something I've had to hide my whole life. My mother, on the other hand, is an Animorphus – but she doesn't really feel she belongs anywhere, and prefers to live incognito among human beings.

The other Houses are based in Phoenix too. There are the Whisperers and the Shapeshifters, the Elementals, the Readers, the Seers and the Magicians.

Just the thought that I'm finally about to find out all about the mysterious city and the other Supernaturals makes me nervous.

It takes longer than I'd expected to reach the towering old building, surrounded by seemingly endless forest and snow-capped mountains. My cousin Riley has told me about the Academy's neo-Gothic architecture: with its many towers, high windows, gables and pointed cupolas, the imposing dark-grey stone building is like a cross between a castle and a palace. There are alternating stained-glass and clear glass windows – lots of them – and carved stone figures jutting out over the decorative gables, as if peering curiously down at every new arrival. Riley has also told me the Academy is built right next to the Ashriver River, down which the ashes of the dead were washed after the great war. They came from Phoenix, a city which rose again after years of death and finally found peace. I don't know much about the Supernatural world, but these words have burned themselves into my memory.

And it is this Academy where I am now to study and get a degree. A real one, not one I have to squeeze in between performances and training sessions. A degree that's really worth something.

I hug the Prada bag on my lap (also stolen) more tightly, and hear the rustle of paper. I let go at once, not wanting to crease my valuable documents. I fight the urge to take them out and look over them once more, just to make sure they really do look genuine.

Again I glance at the driver, but he's busy turning into a parking lot in a clearing in the trees. It's so well hidden I wouldn't even have noticed it. Parked on the gravel is a whole army of expensive cars, littered with fallen leaves from the gnarled branches above. Everything from Bentleys to Ferraris to Mercedes.

I gulp at this sudden reminder of the difference between me and my fellow students. The divide between us is painfully clear. In this world, I'm a nobody. My many prizes are worth sweet FA here – because here I'm just a poor Siren who's only made it to North America's most prestigious academy with the help of her uncle.

A nobody.

I smile.

Just the way I planned it.

This is my fresh start, and I don't care if I have less money than everyone else here. Nothing could be worse than where I've come from.

As the driver stops the car and I climb out to go and retrieve my suitcase, another car comes roaring into the parking lot. It's going so fast that it churns up a cloud of dust and sprays gravel everywhere. It's Sunday afternoon – this is probably when all the students

who've been away for the weekend start returning to campus. I'd better not stand around in this parking lot any longer than necessary.

'Thank you.' The driver has already taken my suitcase and holdall out of the car. They're both Chanel, taken from my mother's wardrobe. Yesterday at dawn, as I was throwing my stuff into the bag, I thought: what's one more crime on top of all the rest? My knee-length beige coat is the only thing that's actually mine.

The driver nods without speaking, and turns back to the car. My uncle Derek paid him to bring me here; when I alighted at a bus station on the Canadian border after a twenty-four-hour bus ride, I could have hugged him. He was going to take me out of the country, and I would be safe at last. My mother can't hurt me now. Never again.

I step backwards, pull my new phone out of my handbag and message my uncle to tell him I've arrived at the Academy. The phone only has three saved contacts: Uncle Derek, Auntie Betty and my cousin Riley. I bought it yesterday, and then destroyed my old phone so nobody could use it to find me.

Uncle Derek doesn't reply straightaway – which is no surprise, he's a busy man – so I slip the phone back into my bag. I turn towards the Academy building as my driver pulls out of the parking lot. Then I hear another car door slam behind me. It's high time I was going.

I tie the holdall onto the telescopic handle of the suitcase and start walking. But the wheels get stuck in a rut in the uneven ground, and the case won't budge. I let out an irritated noise, dig my heels into the gravel and tug.

Then I hear footsteps, and suddenly a young man appears in front of me.

I turn and find myself looking into the most gorgeous green eyes I've ever seen. His hair is blond and wavy, his face perfect in every possible way, and his smile is so dazzling that I have to look away again. *Dangerous*. The word flashes red in my head: I've come across too many guys like this in my time. Physically perfect in every way, and almost certainly incredibly entitled. 'Hi.'

'Hi,' he replies, and his smile takes my breath away. It's a smile that could make whole legions of girls sigh, a smile that makes you feel special just for having it bestowed upon you. 'Can I help?'

I put a hand on my hip and raise an eyebrow. My magic is tingling on my skin, and I try to push it down – it's the last thing I need right now. 'My mother told me never to talk to strangers.' It almost makes her sound like a caring parent, rather than one who used her child as a cash cow.

The corners of his mouth curve upwards in a casual, familiar way. It's a look you only ever see on the faces of men who know they've got the world at their feet. Then he offers me his hand. 'Asher,' he says. 'There, you see, now we're not strangers any more.'

I only hesitate for a second before shaking his hand. His grip is firm, and he lets go promptly instead of seizing the opportunity to hold on for longer than necessary.

I glance down at his clothes.

A dark red blazer with gold stitching and the initials of the Academy embroidered in gold on the chest; a red-and-gold striped tie, beige trousers and brown patent-leather shoes. So this is the school uniform. 'Jade,' I reply.

'So, Jade.' He rolls my name on his tongue, taking hold of my suitcase and starting to pull it along behind him as if it were the most natural thing in the world. 'You must be

new. At least I've never noticed you before – if that's due to my own ignorance, I apologise wholeheartedly.'

Disarming. Charming. Dangerous. And far too attractive.

I walk along beside him, past all the expensive cars. I'm glad I went for one of my mother's outfits instead of my own. She's always had a weakness for luxury brands. I knew I'd attract less attention arriving in her clothes than in my own favourite high-waisted jeans and a crop top. My foot is really hurting, but I try not to let it show on my face. I should definitely have left these stupid shoes at home. 'Yes, I'm new. It's my first day tomorrow.'

'Interesting. It's rare for people to move schools so close to the start of the year.'

'But luckily not impossible.'

He points at my foot. 'Injury, or unfortunate choice of shoe?'

So much for not attracting attention. 'It's a sports injury, and it's the reason I've decided to concentrate on my education for a while.' No-one is getting me on a fricking stage ever again.

'Competitive sport?'

I flick my dark hair and grin in Asher's direction. 'Someone's curious.'

'Guilty.' He flashes me another dazzling smile as we exit the gravel parking lot onto a grey paved footpath. Perfectly trimmed grass, technicolour green, stretches away on either side of us as we approach the building. His magic brushes against mine, and for a moment I'm so overwhelmed by it that I nearly stumble. Apart from my close relatives and a handful of others, I've never met any other Supernaturals. And definitely none whose magic has felt so powerful that it's almost like a separate being.

Again I feel his magic – it's so targeted, like a soft stroking on my skin, that it must be intentional.

I raise an eyebrow again, to signal how completely unimpressed I am. But secretly I'm in awe. How on earth does he do that? I'd love to know. No, I *have* to know!

But I can't ask. Because my documents are forged, and if anyone finds out and reports me, I'll be straight off to jail.

Even though I don't know many people in the Supernatural world, I know its most important rules off by heart:

Keep the secrets.

Conceal your powers.

Pass the exam.

The first two rules have become second nature to me. But I've had to break the third one.

Asher withdraws his magic, and his grin grows broader. Which House does he belong to, I wonder? I know about the eight different types of magic in our world, but I've never been taught how to distinguish between them. It's much easier to tell when someone's controlling fire than when they're trying to read the memories of an object, for example, or whether a dog is an Animorphus or not. The idea that someone might be able to tell I'm a liar just by looking at my pencil case makes me incredibly nervous. And there are so many other types of powers as well. Hopefully now I'm here I'll be able to (discreetly) learn to tell the difference between them.

‘How would you describe the Academy?’ I ask him, keen to change the subject.

Asher looks at me as if he knows exactly what I’m trying to do, but he humours me. ‘Fanatical. Elitist. Rigorous. And... like a family.’ He says this with a straight face.

I struggle to suppress a smile, and for a moment my unshakeably cool mask slips. I can see in his eyes that he notices this, and likes it.

‘Fanatical? Elitist, sure. And I’ve heard the standards are rigorous, and that people describe it as being like a family – but fanatical?’

He grins, and it lights up his whole face. He really is one of the best-looking guys I’ve ever met. Under my skin there’s a tingling sensation, and it’s giving me the urge to use my magic. *Damn it!* I scratch the back of my hand discreetly with my torn nail to try and get a hold of myself.

‘Yes, it’s all a bit like a sect.’ He lowers his voice confidentially, still with that invincible smile on his lips. ‘Some people here are worshipped like gods. Plenty of people want to be part of a club – any club. There are a lot of cliques. And everyone is obsessed with this crest.’ He taps the embroidered emblem on his jacket. ‘The merch for this place sells like hot cakes.’

I laugh out loud, sincerely, and I can’t stop a little of my magic spilling over my carefully constructed wall.

I tense up immediately, ready to fight if necessary. Because if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that my magic can sometimes cause people to pounce on me.

For a fraction of a second the light-hearted expression vanishes from Asher’s face, but he soon gets himself under control again. Relief floods through me.

I turn my eyes back to the huge building – we’re nearly at the door now. ‘And do you belong to any of these clubs?’

He gives a wry smile. ‘The most elite one.’

Why does that not surprise me? ‘Of course you do.’

We stop in front of the Academy, and suddenly he seems to hesitate, as if he wants to prolong our time together. I like the way he’s looking at me, even though I know this is all just a game to him. Of course it is – I’m the new girl. Guys like him are always on the lookout for their next challenge.

You’re a slut, you live for male attention.

My throat tightens, and my hand darts to my chest as I feel a sudden pressure there. I try to disguise the movement by flicking my hair back, hoping I don’t look too awkward. And I try to shake off the memory of my mother’s voice.

I’m not a slut. I didn’t ask for any of this, for god’s sake. Not my appearance, nor my powers. I was born a Siren. And it’s my fate to live with the consequences.

Asher points to my suitcase, which he’s still holding. ‘So, Miss New Girl, may I be the one to give you the guided tour of the Academy?’

‘You’re too kind.’ As I say this, I’m so distracted by the cheeky twinkle in his green eyes that I miss the first step leading up to the front door, and go over on my bad foot. Embarrassingly, I let out a ridiculously squeaky ‘Oh!’, and it’s only by grabbing his arm that I manage not to fall flat on my face.

I feel the warmth of his body beneath the fabric of his blazer and smell the fragrance he’s wearing, and for a moment my wall crumbles again. My magic spills over to him, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. I see the red sparks settle on him, I see something flicker in his face and the sudden hunger in his eyes.

He definitely felt that. My cheeks burn with shame: I don't understand why I can't seem to control myself. I've practised this. Over and over again. My whole life.

You're a slut.

'Sorry.' I step back hurriedly and attempt a casual smile. 'Do you say that to all the new students, or just the ones you find attractive?'

He smiles. 'Definitely the latter.'

At least he's honest.

From somewhere in the distance I suddenly hear the sound of more car doors slamming, and it brings me back to reality.

This is crazy. I've been in the grounds of the Academy for five minutes and already I'm on my own with a guy.

My mother is right.

The thought pops into my head so suddenly that I almost flinch.

No. She's *not* right.

I didn't ask to be a Siren, and I always do my best to control myself. And maybe, at the Academy, I can learn to do just that. It's my only hope.

I take another step backwards and clasp my hands behind my back. 'Okay. Good to know. But I should probably go in and get registered first. How about you show me where the school office is for starters?'

'My pleasure.' He puts his head on one side as he pushes open the massive wooden door, and one of his blond locks falls into his eyes. 'This is the administrative building. Here you'll find the school office, the teachers' offices, and more administrative departments than you can shake a stick at. The only office that's not in here is the caretaker's.'

We step into an entrance hall that's longer than it is wide, with a pale marble floor, walls full of artworks, and corridors branching off on either side. At the far end of the hall there's a wide glass door, through which I can see more buildings dotted around the grounds. From some of the corridors the sound of voices drifts towards us, but I can't see anyone. My high heels click loudly on the beige marble, and the noise echoes off the white walls. I look around. An enormous, ornate light fitting hangs in the centre of the hall; the lights are on even though it's broad daylight.

But the thing my eyes keep returning to is the high window, and the students now emerging from one of the buildings in the distance. They're all wearing the same uniform, and even though I'm actually standing here, I can hardly believe I'm about to become one of them.

My bag of forged documents suddenly feels incredibly heavy, and I straighten the strap on my shoulder.

Because for a brief moment I'm overcome with doubt.

Because I'm going to stick out like a sore thumb, no matter what I do.

Because I never sat the obligatory exam, and I've never attended the relevant camp, even though my documents say differently.

Part of me wants to turn and run. But then I think about my mother. About Riley. About my life. About this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

I can do this.

Asher leads me off to the right, past a large noticeboard listing all the different offices and their room numbers. You can't miss it. But still he insists on leading me to the relevant glass door.

'And here's our school office, where I advise you to get registered as quickly as possible so I can show you the way to your room.'

I raise an eyebrow. 'Is this a cunning plan to find out which room I'm in?'

He holds open the door for me, grinning. 'Absolutely. I'll wait here till you're done.'

Sweet. Charming. Good-looking. And incredibly attentive. He looks like someone who's far too good for me. Like someone who eats girls like me for breakfast. Like someone with a bright future ahead of him, whereas I just have to do my best not to stand out.

But still, I smile at him gratefully before stepping into the office, where there are two desks standing opposite each other behind a raised counter. Only one of the desks is occupied, and the woman sitting at it stands up with a smile when she sees me. She could be anywhere between thirty and fifty.

'Hello! You must be Jade. I'm Emma, the school secretary.'

'I'm guessing I'm the only new starter today?'

Emma gives a little laugh and nods, setting her dyed orange hair bouncing. 'You are indeed. Just a second, I've put together a starter pack for you.' She picks up a black folder off her desk and opens it. 'So – in this pack you'll find a map of the campus, a copy of the school rules, and the login details for your laptop. You'll need to reset all your passwords – the instructions are in here. And since you're a Siren, you've been assigned compulsory subjects alongside your main electives of French, Spanish and Mandarin. Your timetable is in here too.' She points to a stapled sheaf of papers, before pulling a laptop case out from under her desk. Shining brightly against the dark brown of the artificial leather are the two large intertwined A's of the school crest. 'You'll find notepads and pens in here. Laptops are not to be brought to lessons, but all homework should be submitted via email.'

I nod. Riley has already told me this. I feel a little nervous to think we might actually see each other today. But Emma's instructions keep me from getting too lost in my thoughts. 'I see you already have someone looking after you.'

I follow her gaze to the glass door, behind which Asher is leaning nonchalantly against the opposite wall. 'Yes, he seems to have attached himself to me.'

Emma gives a tinkly laugh and closes the folder. 'Good. He can take you to your room, but from ten p.m. there are no visitors allowed in rooms: I refer you to the school rules in your pack.' She reaches for an old, heavy-looking key and pushes it across the counter, followed by a credit-card sized ID card featuring the photo I emailed to the school in advance.

'There you go. Your room number is...' – she pauses for a moment, opens the folder and checks the sheet of paper at the front – '472B, in Bones Manor. You'll need your student ID card to get into the building. Your uniform is laid out ready for you in your room. And you can have a wash at the salon, which is marked on your campus map. As soon as you've moved into your room you'll need to wear the Academy uniform at all times during teaching hours. You're allowed to wear your own clothes when you go out at weekends.'

I pick up the key. The metal feels cool against my skin, and a wave of excitement floods through me. 'Okay. Thanks.'

‘Perfect. We’re nearly there.’ She hands me the rest of my documents and the laptop, before going over to her computer. ‘I’m just going to print you off a confirmation of payment of your fees. I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone pay the whole amount up front before.’

I shrug, but she doesn’t even look at me as she fiddles with the printer. After a while she comes back over. ‘Do you happen to have your exam certificate with you? I’m afraid our computers had trouble with the file you sent over.’

My throat goes dry, and I open my handbag to take out the envelope. ‘Here you go. I ordered a new certificate. I don’t think the old one scanned properly.’

Emma nods trustingly and takes the documents out of the envelope before skim-reading them and placing them on the table. ‘I’ll scan them in, then we’ll have them on our system. It’ll just take two minutes, okay?’

I nod, not even daring to breathe. My eyes follow every movement she makes, my heart racing. One by one, she places the sheets of paper on the scanner in the corner of the room. The hum of the machine sounds incredibly loud in my ears.

Beads of sweat form on my skin, and my throat feels parched.

It’s all going to come out. She’s going to realise. She’ll have me arrested.

I feel slightly dizzy. I lean against the counter trying to look supremely relaxed, whilst inside I’m losing my mind.

Suddenly she turns and slides the documents back into the envelope. ‘Perfect. All done. Welcome to Ashriver Academy, Jade.’

My knees give way a fraction, and my hands tremble a little as I slip the envelope and the payment receipt into my handbag. ‘Thanks. It’s so kind of you.’

‘Oh yes, just one more thing – since you missed the welcome event at the start of the school year, I’ve made you an appointment with Ms Rosehall, the headteacher, so she can go through the welcome talk with you. It’s at eight o’ clock tomorrow. Just come and find me here and I’ll take you up.’

I feel sick. But I smile. ‘Okay. Thanks. See you tomorrow, then.’

We smile at each other, and my body feels strangely detached from the world as I turn and walk towards the glass door, and Asher waiting on the other side of it.

You’re a liar and you’ll never be anything else.

I guess there, for once, my mother was right.

Still.

I’m here.

I’m really here.