

CHAPTER ONE

MY FIRST day at school was pretty normal. Met my teachers, introduced myself to my classmates, fell for a cute guy who was totally out of my league, and learned that I have an archenemy for life who wants to kill me because my dad killed his dad before I was born.

Maybe I should back up a bit. My name is Ashley Carrie Jason, I am sixteen-years-old, and I am the daughter of the superhero Bolt.

I say that like it's some kind of accomplishment, but it's really not. Everyone tells me I am really lucky to be the daughter of such a famous and well-respected superhero. Bolt—or Dad, as I always like to think of him—has saved the world so many times it's practically a running joke in the family. Mom—who you might know better as Blizzard, who was a superhero in her own right when she was my age—is almost as accomplished and famous as he is.

Don't get me wrong. I'm grateful for both of my parents, who aren't just famous superheroes, but also great parents in general. I'm not even intimidated by the thought of living up to their legacy of success and fame.

Mostly because I don't expect to live long enough to become the next Bolt or Blizzard.

Wait. That sounds bad. Like I'm suicidal or something. If my best friend, Cora, was reading this, she'd probably tell me to be clearer about what I meant and stop being so depressing.

Besides, I didn't start this journal to make myself feel worse. I started it to get my thoughts onto the page and make sense of my life, which can be a little confusing at times, to put it mildly.

So let me back up one more time, to the morning of my first day at the Theodore Jason Academy for Young Superhumans. Hopefully, that will make me look less suicidal, although I doubt it will make me look very smart ...

Monday, September 17th, 2035, 7:55 AM ...

“We're here!”

I started, accidentally knocking my head against the handle overhead. Groaning, I rubbed my forehead and said, “We're what?”

My dad, sitting in the driver's seat of the car, turned around and smiled at me. “The Academy, of course. Look out the window. The facilities are amazing.”

I blinked and looked out the car window. Although not the first time I'd visited the campus of the Theodore Jason Academy for Young Superhumans, this was my first time looking at it as a student.

The Theodore Jason Academy for Young Superhumans was spread out before us. We were parked on the hill overlooking the school, allowing me to see the sprawling, five-mile wide campus. The Auditorium in the heart of the campus rose above all of the other buildings, looking kind of like an oversized chicken egg. Even from a distance, I could see the statue of a superhero who looked familiar to me standing in front of it, gleaming even under the dark clouds overhead.

A huge track field stood off to the west, next to an old abandoned building that I recognized as the Academy's Old Library from my research. Over on the east side of campus, the classroom buildings were scattered in a neat and orderly fashion, with the current Library—the second largest building on campus—and the Gymnasium standing not far away from them. They reminded me of bodyguards, as if those two buildings were responsible for protecting the students. To the north, the shiny new dorm buildings could be seen next to the cafeteria, while the south end of the campus had the teachers' dorms on the east side of the road leading to the Auditorium. A tall metal fence protected the entire campus, although from what Dad told me, the Academy had far more defenses than a simple chain link fence. There were quite a few other buildings as well, but I didn't recognize most of them.

My younger brother, who sat next to me, leaned across my lap to look out of my window. “Finally! I thought we'd never get here.”

Annoyed, I pushed my younger brother back onto his seat and snapped, “We’ve already seen the campus, Jake. No need to crawl all over me to see it. It’s not that exciting.”

My thirteen-year-old brother, Jake, sat back down in his seat. He was the spitting image of Dad, with the same brown hair, blue eyes, and face. He was just shorter and thinner than Dad, but I’d seen pictures of Dad at Jake’s age and you’d be forgiven for mistaking them for twins. Then again, Mom and I looked an awful lot alike, too, though I think I take more after Dad than Mom physically. I did have my grandmother’s green eyes, though, so I got that from my dad’s side of the family, at least.

“I’m just excited we’re here,” said Jake. He looked at Dad and frowned. “Why did we have to drive here like a bunch of normals? Why couldn’t we fly? Or even better, run? That would have been a lot more fun than driving in a freaking *car*.”

Mom, who sat in the passenger’s seat up front next to Dad, gave Jake a warning look. “Jake, don’t talk about ‘normals’ like that. Remember, your grandparents are normals and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

Jake shrugged. “Whatever, Mom. I just think cars are boring and slow. Running is faster.”

“Says the speedster,” I said with a roll of my eyes. “Not all of us can run at the speed of light, bro.”

“It’s the speed of *sound*,” Jake corrected, “although I am getting faster and I would like to run at the speed of light someday.”

“Your sister has a point, Jake,” said Dad without looking over his shoulder at us. “You and I may have super speed, but your mom and sister don’t. Plus, it really wouldn’t be good on your mom’s body to carry her while running at the speed of sound.”

Dad said that while glancing at Mom’s bulging belly. He reached over and patted her belly with one hand, a smile on his face. “Don’t want to risk harming your new sibling, after all.”

Jake and I nodded. Mom was about five months pregnant with our new baby sibling (who I was hoping was going to be a baby sister, but we still didn’t know its gender yet). That was the main reason why we had flown in an airplane from Texas to Washington, D.C., where the Academy is located, and then rented a car to go the rest of the way. The plan was for Mom and Dad to drop us off at the Academy, where Jake and I would spend the next year until we went home for the summer. That didn’t include visiting during the holidays and such, of course.

“Mom could have stayed home,” Jake said, folding his arms across his chest. “It’s not like she *needed* to come.”

“Yes, but I *wanted* to come,” Mom said. “I’m your mother. Of course I want to see you two off on your first day at the Academy. This might be the last time I see y’all in a year. Plus, I’m not so pregnant that I can’t make a quick trip to D.C., even if I can’t do any superhero work at the moment.”

That was true. Mom and Dad were both members of the Neohero Alliance, the largest superhero organization in the country, which was also their employer. Due to Mom’s pregnancy, however, she had decided to take time off from her superhero work to get ready for the arrival of the new baby. As you might imagine, superhero work isn’t exactly the safest line of work for a five-month-pregnant woman, super or otherwise.

“Also, this is good family time together,” said Dad. “Can’t have family fun and conversations when you’re running at a hundred miles an hour, right?”

Jake slumped in his seat. “I guess, but I’m still bored.”

“You’re in luck,” said Dad, “because we’re almost at the gates.”

Dad was right. The front gates of the Academy loomed up ahead. We got in line behind three other cars. I didn’t recognize any of the other vehicles, but I saw other teenagers and their parents in the cars. That meant that at least some of those cars held kids who were either returning for another year of school or were about to start their first year at the Academy just like Jake and me.

Jake leaned forward excitedly. “The gates? I heard they’re made of Indestructonium, the only metal in the world that can’t be broken. Is that true?”

“Yes,” said Dad with a nod. He raised a fist and mocked punching the gates. “Even I couldn’t break the gates, that’s how tough they are. The fence is also made of the same material, so it should keep both of you safe while you’re at school.”

I gulped and ran my hand through my hair. Despite knowing for over a year now that Jake and I were going to the Academy, it just hit me that Jake and I were going to spend the next four years of our life with over a thousand other super students. And no, I wasn’t nervous because most of my friends were normals and my experiences with other supers my age was limited.

Mostly, I was nervous about what would happen if the other students found out my secret. If they knew what I was, or rather, what I was born with, would they even let me into the school at all?

I shook my head. Dad had already extensively discussed my unique situation with the Academy’s Headmaster and the Academy Board. The faculty were already aware of my condition, especially Professor Hernandez. If my condition was going to be a problem for the Academy, the faculty would have let me know ahead of time.

But really, it wasn’t the faculty or staff I was worried about. It was my fellow students. Over a thousand students from all across the United States, plus a handful of foreign exchange students, attended the Academy. Each and every student was a super, meaning they had been born with some kind of superpower. They weren’t like the normals I had gone to high school with. I didn’t have much experience with other supers my age aside from my younger brother and my cousin, plus the kids of some of our parents’ superhero friends.

“It will be all right, Ashley,” Dad had told me before we left the house. “So long as you are your usual friendly self, you should have no trouble making friends.”

I snorted at the memory of Dad’s words as our car inched closer and closer to the gates. Me, friendly. I knew Dad was just trying to be supportive and encouraging, but he didn’t seem to understand that I didn’t want or need very many friends. Even back in John Smith High School, I only really had one normal friend. And unfortunately, normals were not allowed to attend the Academy, so I wouldn’t be able to see her, either.

Being the new kid was always stressful. But if the other kids knew about my condition ... I shuddered at the thought.

“Cold?” said Jake, looking at me in confusion. He waved a hand in his face fast enough to create a small gust of wind. “I’m hot.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m not cold. Just thinking about school.”

“I’m sure you’ll do fine, honey,” said Mom, looking over her shoulder at me. She reached over and patted my knee. “I’m sure you and your brother will fit in and find friends in no time.”

I smiled at Mom, but it was a weak smile. Again, like Dad, I knew Mom was just trying to be encouraging and make me feel less anxious. But, just like Dad, I felt like she didn’t really understand why I didn’t want any friends, even though she and Dad were both painfully aware of my condition.

“Friends are nice, but I want to become a superhero,” said Jake. He smiled. “Just like you and Dad. I want to wear a costume and get a cool name and go fight bad guys and stuff. Maybe even join the Young Neos.”

Dad laughed. “That’s nice, Jake, but before you can do that, you should focus on completing your homework and graduating from the Academy. You need to put one foot in front of the other to run and the same for becoming a superhero.”

Jake pouted. “Okay, Dad. But four years is, like, forever. I wish I could just skip over the next four years. Would be a lot more efficient than having to sit in a classroom all day listening to some old dude ramble about the First and Second Pokacu Invasion and stuff.”

“I think you’ll find the classes at the Academy *much* more interesting than the classes at your old school,” said Dad, “at least, if what the teachers told me is true.”

I tilted my head to the side. Mom and Dad had established their superhero careers before the Academy was founded, so they had never been students there. That made me wonder how Dad could know

if the classes were interesting or not. Then again, I remember Dad mentioning that he audited some of the classes over the summer, so that's probably where he got his info from.

Not that I cared. Unlike Jake, I wasn't going to the Academy because I wanted to be a superhero.

I was going to the Academy because I wanted to be *normal*. Not 'normal' as in losing my powers, but normal as in no longer having to live with my condition. Truthfully, if I could have gotten treated without having to go to superhero school, I absolutely would have, but circumstances just didn't make that practical.

I had nothing against superheroes. Really. It was just that the idea of putting on a costume and risking your life fighting bad guys on the streets was not my idea of a good life. My parents and Jake loved it, but I was hoping for something a bit more normal, I suppose you could say.

Of course, if I couldn't get my condition treated, then I wouldn't live long enough to deal with my future as an adult. I still liked to think about it, though, if only because it was preferable to the alternative.

We pulled up to the front gates. Through the windows, I saw one of the guards—a fat African-American man in a blue-and-black security uniform—step away from the tollbooth up to the driver's side. Dad rolled down the windows and began chatting with the guard, showing him our identification papers and engaging in small talk with him. I didn't pay much attention to their conversation, though, mostly because I was twirling one of my brown hairs nervously and just wishing we could go through the gates already. Jake, sitting next to me, was playing a game on his phone, his legs wagging up and down like they always did whenever he was bored sitting down.

"... *You're* Kevin Jason?" said the guard loud enough that I could hear him clearly. "As in, Kevin 'Bolt' Jason? The famous superhero?"

"Yep," said Dad, who sounded a bit embarrassed. "I take it you've heard of me."

"Course I have," said the guard with a chuckle. "This place was named after your dad, right? And you're so famous, too. Your kids going to be attending here?"

"Yep," said Dad. "Both of 'em. Ashley and Jake."

The guard glanced behind Dad. He smiled when he saw Jake playing on his phone, but when his eyes fell on me, a strange look of pity and worry crossed his features. That made me wonder if I had something on my face.

"Ashley?" said the guard slowly, looking at Dad again. "She's your daughter, right?"

"Of course," said Dad proudly. "I'm surprised you've heard of her."

The guard pursed his lips, his eyes darting back and forth. "I've definitely heard a lot about her. Her name's been thrown around the campus for a few days now."

Now I was listening more closely. Who was talking about me and why? I hoped it was nothing bad, but the guard's expression and tone made me think otherwise.

Dad seemed to sense that, too, because he said, in a slightly more tense voice than before, "Oh? What are they saying about her?"

"Just ..." the guard looked at Dad. "It's nothing. Just rumors. You don't want to—"

"I do, actually," Dad interrupted. "Tell me again: What are they saying about my daughter?"

The guard gulped. Couldn't blame him. Despite looking like a normal dad, Dad could look *really* scary when he got angry. It didn't help that red electricity sparked off his fingers, which was never a good sign. It made me worried that Dad might lose control of his powers if he got too upset.

The guard seemed to realize that, too. Sweat appeared on his forehead, which he dabbed away with a handkerchief from his uniform's breast pocket.

"They're saying a lot of things about your daughter," said the guard, "but the most persistent rumor I keep hearing is that she's got an infectious disease that only affects—and kills—supers. Any truth to—"

The guard was cut off when Dad rolled up the windows and slammed his foot on the acceleration, causing our car to zoom through the open gates just as they finished opening fully. The guard on the other side of the gates even jumped out of the way to avoid getting hit by Dad's car.

But I didn't pay attention to what was happening outside. My mind was fixed solely on the rumor that the guard had shared with us. My nerves, anxiety, worries, and fears swirled around in my head like a maelstrom, making it almost impossible to think straight.

One question did echo clearly in my mind, though, rising above my emotions and forming into words: How did anyone know my secret?

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