

Gifted: Here Today Gone Tomorrow  
First Chapter Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

Sometimes Emily wasn't sure if she was dreaming or having one of her visions. Usually it happened in the early morning, just before her alarm went off.

On this particular Monday morning, she was pretty sure she was awake. She knew her eyes were open because she could see her chest of drawers, her desk, and her bookcase, with her old collection of dolls from many lands lining the top shelf. Dim sunlight was coming through the muslin curtains at her window, and she could even see the sweater she'd left hanging on the bedpost the day before.

But at the same time, she saw something else, something that didn't belong in her bedroom—an image, sort of translucent, that floated before her eyes. Even though it wasn't very distinct, she recognized the image immediately—it was one of her classes at school, her so-called gifted class.

There was the teacher, Madame, sitting at her desk. In their usual seats sat her classmates: Ken, Amanda, Tracey, Martin, and the others. She could even see herself . . . but wait, there were only eight students—someone wasn't there.

It was funny, in a way: they all complained about the class—some of the students even hated it—but they rarely missed it. And with only nine students in the class, no one could skip it without being noticed. But who was missing in her vision? Jenna was there; she could see Sarah; and there was Charles in his wheelchair . . .

Carter was missing. It made sense that she hadn't realized this immediately. Since Carter didn't speak, he didn't call attention to himself, and it was easy to forget he was even in the room. But normally, he *was* there, physically at least, so this was odd.

Then her alarm clock sounded, and the classroom disappeared. She sat up, reached out to her bedside table and turned it off. The image was gone, and she still wasn't absolutely sure if it had been a dream or a vision. She'd dreamed about her class before, but the dreams had been like most of the dreams she had, full of silly things, like Ken swinging from a light fixture or Charles dancing on Madame's desk. The image she'd just experienced had seemed so real . . . yes, it must have been a vision.

It probably wasn't a big deal though. Carter might act like a zombie, but he was a human being and just as susceptible to getting the flu or an upset stomach as anyone else.

"Emily! Are you up?"

Her mother's voice sounded testy, as if this was the second or third time she'd called to Emily—which was entirely possible. Emily's visions, even the trivial ones, always seemed to require all her senses, so she might not have heard her mother's earlier calls. Or maybe she'd really been sleeping. It was so hard to tell . . .

"I'm up," she called back. Dragging herself out of bed, she left her room and went across the hall to the bathroom. While brushing her teeth, she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror and almost choked on the toothpaste. Why was her face so blurry? Was this the beginning of another vision?

No, it was just that she hadn't put her contacts in yet. Having done that, she went back to her bedroom where she spent about twenty seconds selecting her clothes. This activity never took very long since she essentially wore the same thing every day, with some minor variations in her choice of T-shirt or sweater. She didn't bother with makeup. Until very recently, she'd worn glasses, and what was the point of makeup when your glasses covered half your face? And even though she had contacts now and her face was more visible, she hadn't yet bought any cosmetics. Makeup required concentration, and the way Emily daydreamed, she knew she'd end up putting lipstick on her eyelids.

So when she checked herself out in the mirror, she didn't encounter anything surprising. In fact, having examined photos of herself as a small child, she knew she'd looked pretty much the same all her life. In her class picture from first grade, she could see the same oval face, long straight nose, and full lips she saw now. She was still wearing her long straight brown hair in the same style, which was actually no style at all.

She wondered if she would still look like this when she was an adult. But as usual, when she really wanted to see the future, she couldn't.

"Emily! You're going to be late!"

"I'm coming!" She snatched up her backpack and ran down the hall to the kitchen. Her mother had set out a choice of cereals on the small kitchen table, and Emily helped herself.

"Did you sleep well?" her mother asked. She asked Emily the same question every day, and usually Emily responded with an automatic "yes." But this time, thinking about her confusion that morning, she looked at her mother thoughtfully.

"Mom . . . do you ever think you're awake but you're really sleeping? Or the other way around?"

Her mother looked at her sharply. "Are you having those visions again?"

*I never stopped*, Emily wanted to reply, but she knew this would only upset her mother. She never liked talking about Emily's gift, but every now and then, Emily took a chance and brought up the subject. She couldn't help hoping that there would come a time when her mother would want to listen to her. But the expression on her mother's face told her that now was not the time, so she didn't even bother to respond to her mother's question.

"Is there any orange juice?" she asked instead.

Her mother was clearly relieved to have the change in subject. "Of course, it's in the refrigerator. There's grape juice, too—it was on sale at the grocery store."

Her mother was always on the lookout for items on sale. She had a good job as the office manager for a company, but since the death of Emily's father, she was the only one in the house who earned money.

A couple of other kids at Emily's school had also lost a parent, and although she'd never talked to them about it, she assumed they suffered the same kind of sadness she did. But she couldn't imagine that either of them felt as guilty about it.

"By the way, I'll be late getting home today," her mother told her. "I've got an appointment with Tony."

There was nothing unusual about that. Her mother wore her hair in a short, layered style, and every six weeks she went to see Tony at Budget Scissors for a cut. But out of nowhere, Emily had a sudden vision, and she was alarmed.

“I don’t think you should do that, Mom. Not today.”

“Why not?”

The vision was shockingly clear. Her mother’s normally soft curls were a frizzy, snarled mess. “I can see you. After your appointment. Maybe Tony’s in a bad mood or something—I don’t know—but he’s not going to give you a nice haircut today.”

Emily watched the bewilderment on her mother’s face turn to irritation, and she didn’t have to be a fortuneteller to know the annoyance wasn’t directed at Tony the hairdresser.

“Emily, stop it, right this minute! You’re talking utter nonsense.”

There was no point in arguing with her, but Emily had to make one point. “Mom, if my visions are nonsense, why do you think they put me in the class for people with special gifts?”

Her mother’s lips tightened. “I don’t want to discuss this now, Emily. We’re leaving in two minutes.”

She left the kitchen. Emily finished her cereal and went to search for her school stuff. She wasn’t angry at her mother for not understanding her gift. How could she be angry when Emily didn’t understand it herself? Passing through the living room, she paused to look at the framed photograph on the wall. It was something she did whenever she thought about her so-called gift, but it never provided any answers. Only more questions.

The photo was only eight years old, but her mother looked a lot younger in it. Maybe it was because she was smiling, not just with her lips but with her eyes—an expression Emily didn’t see on her face very often. She had one hand on the shoulder of five-year-old Emily. And on Emily’s other side was her father.

From the angle of the photo, it seemed that no matter where Emily stood when she looked at it, his eyes were on her. And sometimes she felt that he was looking at her with disappointment, like he was reminding her that she could have saved his life.

There were times when she wished she couldn’t recall the memory so easily. Was it her very first vision? She couldn’t be sure, but it was the first one that had a real effect on her life. And it had happened at such an ordinary moment.

It was as detailed a memory as if it had occurred the day before. Her mother was brushing Emily’s hair, getting her ready for a day at kindergarten. Her father was putting some papers in his briefcase.

The image had come to her out of nowhere, just like the vision she’d had of her class that morning. She could see her father walking out the front door, heading to the car he’d parked across the street. She could see him stepping off the curb without looking both ways. Another car, moving very fast, came screaming around the corner. And hit him.

She wanted to tell him about this frightening vision, but he was already heading to the door. She knew all she had to say was something like, “Wait, Daddy, I have

something to tell you,” but she didn’t. Even today, she still didn’t know why she hadn’t spoken up. Was she afraid he’d laugh at her?

The “why” didn’t really matter now. Her father was killed by a speeding car and it happened just the way she’d seen it in her vision. And maybe, just maybe, if she *had* told him about her vision, he would have been more careful crossing the street. If he had stopped to listen to her, maybe the speeding car would have gone down her street before he even went outside. At least her mother couldn’t blame her for her father’s death, since she didn’t really believe Emily could see into the future. But Emily could blame herself.

Now, whenever she had serious visions that could affect someone’s life, she told that person. But they didn’t always appreciate it, and usually they didn’t believe her. Which was understandable . . . because sometimes the visions were wrong. Well, maybe not completely wrong, but not exactly . . . clear. Like the time she told Terri Boyd in her English class that she was going to fall off the balance beam in her gymnastics competition that day. Only Terri didn’t fall—not then. But at her competition the following weekend, she tumbled off. And Terri actually blamed Emily for it, telling her *she* put the idea in her head!

“Ready?” her mother asked.

Emily picked up her backpack and followed her mother outside. But just as her mother was locking the door, she had another vision. It was funny how this could happen. She could go for days without a vision and then have a dozen in one morning.

“Mom, I forgot something. I’ll be right back.” Ignoring her mother’s protests, she ran back inside and down the hall to her room. She found what she needed in her bookcase, stuck it in her backpack, and hurried back to join her mother.

“What did you forget?” her mother wanted to know.

“A book I have to lend Jenna,” Emily replied. Which was the truth—she just omitted to say how she knew Jenna would need the book.

The five-minute drive to Meadowbrook Middle School was free of visions, but the image of the gifted class without Carter was still in her head. When she arrived at school, she considered looking for Madame to tell her about it, but Madame was always warning her not to speak up too quickly. She’d told Emily to think about her visions, to examine them and consider them before jumping to conclusions. Emily wasn’t so sure about that—she saw what she saw, and that wouldn’t change just because she thought about it. But Madame seemed to think otherwise, so she decided to wait until the gifted class met. Maybe she would have a clearer vision by then.

She was still vision-free at lunchtime, when she set her tray down on the cafeteria table next to Tracey and across from Jenna. Jenna was in the process of trying to get Tracey to use *her* special gift on Jenna’s behalf.

“Ms. Stanford always does her photocopying during fourth period, and you’ve got study period then, so you won’t miss a class. Just get yourself into the teachers’ lounge and look at the test while she’s copying it. You don’t have to memorize the whole thing—I just need to know what the essay question is going to be.”

Clearly this discussion had been going on for some time. Wearily, Tracey shook her head. “That’s cheating, Jenna. I can’t help you.”

“Of course you *can*,” Jenna grumbled, narrowing her kohl-rimmed eyes. “You just *won’t*.”

“Actually, it’s both,” Tracey said. “I can’t always go invisible on demand.”

“You’re getting a lot better at it though,” Emily pointed out.

“Yeah, but it’s not easy. Remember why I started disappearing? It was because no one paid any attention to me. If I tried talking to people, they didn’t hear me. I’d raise my hand in class and the teacher wouldn’t see me. Even my own parents ignored me. I *felt* invisible, so I became invisible.”

Jenna gazed at her quizzically. “But you don’t feel invisible anymore, do you? How come you can still disappear?”

“I have to try and remember how it was back then, when I felt like nobody. That can be pretty depressing, so I don’t like doing it. But if I’m feeling too confident or strong or really good about myself, it’s *really* hard.”

For Emily, it was comforting to hear that others couldn’t always rely on their gifts. Tracey couldn’t disappear just by snapping her fingers. And Jenna, who could read minds, couldn’t read *everyone’s* mind. With some people, she had no problem—their minds were an open book. But she couldn’t read her own mother’s mind, nor Madame’s, nor Carter’s. And with the other gifted students, she complained about how sometimes she could read them and sometimes she couldn’t. Of course, her classmates would recommend that she shouldn’t even try, but Jenna, being Jenna, didn’t take advice well.

“I’m sorry, Jenna,” Tracey continued. “I know you think I’m being a prig, but cheating is wrong. Why can’t you just study for the test like everyone else?”

Jenna made a face. “What’s the point of learning everything when you only really need to learn what you’re going to be tested on?” Then she brightened. “Hey, I just had a brilliant idea. I could ask Ms. Stanford some questions about the test. Then she’ll start thinking about it, and I’ll read her mind!”

Emily thought that was a pretty good idea, but Tracey disapproved. “It’s not right, Jenna. It’s still cheating.”

Jenna shrugged. “It’s the teachers’ fault. I wouldn’t have to cheat if they didn’t give us so much work. I’ve got an essay due on Thursday, the test tomorrow, a book report to give today—” she stopped suddenly, and snatched up her backpack. Frantically, she began to search the contents.

“What’s the book?” Tracey asked.

“*The Diary of Anne Frank*. And I left it at home.” She dropped the backpack and looked at the others mournfully. “Can you believe it? I actually read the whole book, I wrote the report, and I marked passages to read out loud. And now I don’t have the book.”

Emily reached into *her* backpack. “Surprise,” she said, handing over her own copy of the book.

Jenna snatched it out of her hands. “Wow! Thanks, Em.”

“How did you know she’d need it?” Tracey asked Emily.

“Jenna told me she was reading it last weekend. Remember, Jenna? You said it made you cry.”

“It made me *sad*,” Jenna contradicted her. “I didn’t *cry*.”

Tracey shook her head impatiently. “No, how did you know she would forget to bring her copy to school?”

“I had a vision,” Emily said proudly.

“Cool!” Tracey exclaimed. “You had an accurate premonition.”

Jenna disagreed. “But you can’t say for sure that you were predicting the future.”

“Why not?” Emily asked.

“Because you know how I’m always forgetting stuff, and you knew I was giving this report today. So you brought me your copy of *Anne Frank* in case I left mine at home. Which was nice of you, and I appreciate it. But you didn’t know for sure that I’d forget the book.”

“But I *did* know,” Emily insisted. “I saw it.”

Tracey backed her up. “Emily’s been getting better and better at making predictions, Jenna.”

Jenna looked at Emily. “Hey, I’m not saying you don’t have a gift. You just don’t know how to use it very well.”

It was typical of Jenna to speak like that—frankly, without always thinking about other people’s feelings. Emily tried not to take it personally, but she couldn’t help it.

“So you think my gift is worthless.”

Tracey was much kinder. “She didn’t mean that, Emily. Okay, maybe you don’t have much control over your gift right now, but you’re definitely improving.” She glared at Jenna, demanding a confirmation.

“Yeah, I guess you’re getting a little better,” Jenna acknowledged.

It wasn’t much of a compliment, and it didn’t make Emily feel any happier. She was glad to hear Tracey change the subject.

“How are things at home?” she asked Jenna.

Jenna produced her usual nonchalant shrug, but she punctuated it with a grin and said, “Not bad.” Given her resistance to sounding overly positive or optimistic, “not bad” could easily mean “excellent.” Emily remembered that Jenna had stayed with Tracey’s family for two weeks while her mother was in the hospital, but her mother was home now, and Jenna was back there with her. Emily ventured a question.

“And your mother, she’s . . .” she hesitated, unsure as to how to put this delicately. Pretty much everyone knew that Jenna’s mother had been in rehab. “She’s doing okay?”

Jenna rephrased this in her own blunt way. “You mean, is she sober? Yeah, so far.”

“I bet she’s going to make it this time,” Tracey declared.

“Maybe,” Jenna allowed. She shot a look at Emily. “Don’t you even *think* about making any predictions.”

“I have no intention of even trying,” Emily assured her. She knew Jenna didn’t mean to insult her, but Emily couldn’t help feeling a twinge of irritation. She got up before her feelings could show on her face. “I’m going to get some water.”

Just by the water dispensers were a row of bins where students emptied their trays. Emily saw Sarah Miller, another of her classmates, poking around the contents of one of them.

“What are you doing?” Emily asked her.

Sarah looked up. Her heart-shaped face was utterly woebegone.

“I lost my ring,” she wailed.

Emily winced. Being someone who often lost or misplaced things, she could totally empathize.

“Did you take it off?”

“I don’t think so. I leave it on all the time, even when I wash my hands. It must have fallen off, but I don’t know where or when. I just noticed that it wasn’t on my finger.” She touched the ring finger on her right hand as she spoke. Emily stared at it. If she concentrated very hard, she might get a vision. Sometimes this worked, sometimes it didn’t.

She was in luck—her vision began to blur and her eyes glazed over. An image began to emerge . . .

“You’ll find it.”

Since Sarah was in the gifted class, too, she knew about Emily’s ability, but unlike Jenna, she actually had some respect for it. Her eyes lit up. “Really? Where?”

“It’s in your coat pocket.”

Sarah’s brow furrowed. “You know, that’s possible. I wore a coat today, and I forgot my gloves so I kept my hands in the pockets. It could have come off there.”

Emily nodded. “It was a pretty clear vision. It was in the bottom of a coat pocket.”

Sarah was getting excited. “So I could find it, right now, if I go and look.”

Emily hesitated. This was the weakest area of her gift—the question of “when.” She might see an event, like Terri Boyd falling off the balance beam, but she might not be sure when it would happen. But in this particular case . . .

“If that’s where it fell off, it must be there now,” she said decisively.

Sarah looked at the clock on the wall. “The coat’s in my locker. If I hurry, I have time to look before class. Thanks, Emily!”

Emily beamed as she watched Sarah run out of the cafeteria. But her smile faded as she noticed the girls at a nearby table staring at her. She really had to learn to think before she spoke. Britney Teller and Sophie Greene were gaping at her, with open mouths and wide eyes. Amanda Beeson, Emily’s gifted classmate, was with them, but her expression was very different. She was glaring at Emily, with “urge to kill” written all over her face.

Britney spoke first. “Emily, can you *see* things? Like a psychic?”

Emily didn’t have to respond—Amanda took care of that for her.

“Yeah, sure, Emily’s a gypsy fortuneteller,” she declared. “Show us your crystal ball, Emily.” And just in case anyone didn’t hear the sarcasm in her voice, she started giggling in an especially mean way, something she could do very well, in keeping with her reputation as one of Meadowbrook’s top mean girls.

Immediately Britney and Sophie joined in, doing their best imitation of Amanda’s laugh. Emily could feel her own face redden. She had about as much control of her complexion as she had over her predictions.

She made her way back to her own table, where Jenna and Tracey gazed at her sympathetically. Obviously they'd heard everything.

"In all fairness," Tracey said, "Amanda did the right thing, covering for you like that."

"I know," Emily replied glumly. "But did she have to do it so *loudly*?"

"You can't really blame her," Jenna said. "*We* know she's not really that nasty, but she has to work at maintaining her reputation if she wants to keep her status with those kids she hangs out with."

This was all true, but Emily was still feeling embarrassed. She looked forward to the gifted class, where Sarah's gratitude might cheer her up.

But when she entered room 209, she could see at a glance that Sarah wasn't any happier than she'd been when Emily first saw her in the cafeteria. Her disconsolate classmate had her elbows on her desk and her chin in her hands, and there was no ring on her finger.

She looked up as Emily approached. "I checked all my pockets. It wasn't there." Her tone wasn't accusing—Sarah was too nice for that—but Emily tried to defend herself.

"Maybe it's in the pocket of another coat," she offered, but without much conviction.

Sarah shook her head. "I haven't worn any other coat recently."

"I'm sorry," Emily said.

Sarah gave her a sad smile, as if to assure her she didn't blame Emily, but Emily felt guilty anyway. She took her seat and mentally checked her score for the day. She'd known that Jenna would forget her book (even though Jenna refused to consider it a prediction), so she gave herself a point for that. But Sarah's missing ring put her back at zero. What other premonitions had she had? There was her mother's hair, but she wouldn't know the answer to that one till she got home.

She'd predicted something else . . . Of course! Carter Street. According to her vision, he shouldn't be in class today. It was almost time for the bell, and she surveyed the room. Martin, Jenna, and Amanda were in their seats . . . Charles rolled in, followed by Tracey, and at the last minute, Ken hurried into the room.

The bell went off. As it rang, Madame entered and closed the door. Emily felt a rush of satisfaction—Carter was missing!

Madame went to her desk and looked over the room. "Where's Carter? Has anyone seen him?"

Nobody had. Madame's brow furrowed. "I can't remember Carter ever missing a class." She looked at a piece of paper on her desk. "He's not on the approved absentee list."

"Maybe he's cutting class," Martin ventured.

Madame wouldn't even consider that, and Emily understood why. Carter was like a robot—he did what he was supposed to do and what he was told to do. Nothing more, nothing less. He didn't speak, his face showed no expressions, and according to Jenna, he had no thoughts—yet somehow he functioned, physically at least, like a regular person.

No one knew who he really was or where he came from—he'd been found a year earlier on Carter Street, and that was the name he'd been given. So far, he hadn't exhibited any particular gift, and Emily didn't know why he was in their gifted class. Maybe it was because he was just different, like the rest of them.

She could tell that Madame was concerned, and her initial joy at being correct in her premonition evaporated. Carter's absence wasn't a good thing, and Emily was ashamed for taking pleasure from it.

It was warm in the classroom, and Madame started to take off her suit jacket.

"Oh, I almost forgot." She put a hand in her pocket. "Does this belong to anyone?"

"My ring!" Sarah cried out. She went to the desk to take it. "Oh, thank you, Madame. Where did you find out?"

"On the floor," the teacher replied. "It must have slipped off your finger and rolled away. You might want to have it made smaller so it won't be loose, Sarah."

"I will," Sarah said, and returned to her desk. She didn't look at Emily as she passed her, but Emily sank down in her seat anyway. So the ring had been found—she'd been right about that. But not in Sarah's pocket.

But wait . . . what had she envisioned, exactly? Had she actually seen *Sarah* put her hand in her pocket? All she'd seen in the vision was the ring in a pocket. And that was where it had been. It just wasn't in the pocket she'd assumed it would be in. So in a way, she'd been right. She just hadn't understood her own premonition.

But that didn't make her feel much better. She had visions—so what? She didn't know what they meant. What was the good of having a gift if you couldn't even understand it?

She didn't have any more visions at school that day, and her mood didn't improve. This wasn't helped by the fact that she went home with an unusually large amount of homework.

At least the homework required all her attention, and she didn't think about her mother and her hair appointment. But when she heard the door open and her mother's call of "I'm home," the memory of her premonition came back. She hurried out to the living room.

Her mother was just taking off her coat. "Hi, honey. How was your day?"

When Emily didn't respond right away, her mother repeated her question. "Em? Did you have a nice day?"

"Oh, yeah, it was okay. Sorry, I was looking at your hair."

Her mother patted the nicely trimmed soft curls. "Do you like it?"

Emily nodded. "Tony did a nice job."

"Actually, Tony was called away on a family emergency, so I had Lauren this time. What shall we do about dinner?" She breezed past Emily and went into the kitchen.

Emily couldn't think about dinner—she was too busy pondering the implications of another messed-up premonition. Was it just because Tony hadn't been there and another hairdresser had done the job? Would her mother's next appointment with Tony be a disaster? Or was it just a false prediction?

It was all too depressing. This talent she had—it could be so precious, so valuable. So many people would love to have her gift, and they could do wonderful things with it.

But in her own clumsy hands—no, in her own clumsy brain—it was worthless.