

Gifted: Better Late Than Never
First Chapter Excerpt

JENNA KELLEY STOOD AT her bedroom window and gazed outside without really seeing anything. Not that there was much to see—just another dull brick building, exactly like her own. Sometimes, if people left their curtains open, Jenna could see people moving around in their apartments, but they rarely did anything worth watching.

Without being able to see it, she knew there was another identical structure just beyond opposite. Together, the three buildings made up Brookside Towers, the low-income housing development where she'd moved with her mother two years before, when she was 11. It was a pretty dreary place, but it was home, and she wasn't thrilled with the prospect of leaving it. The gray sky and steady rain outside did nothing to improve her mood.

She turned away from the window and went to her chest of drawers. Taking up a stubby black pencil, she added another layer to the already thick line that circled her eyes, stepped back to admire the effect. Kohl-rimmed eyes, short spiked hair, black T-shirt, black jeans . . . No tattoos or piercings yet, but she had a stick-on fake diamond on her right nostril, and it looked real. She hoped the way she looked would startle—maybe even shock—whomever she might be meeting.

In the mirror, behind her own reflection, she could see the empty suitcase lying open on her bed. Ignoring it, she left the room.

The sound of her footsteps on the bare floor echoed in the practically empty apartment. The silence gave her the creeps. She'd spent time alone here before, of course, but she'd always known that her mother would show up before too long. This time it was different. Her mother would be staying in the hospital rehab center for two weeks. Just knowing this made Jenna feel even more alone.

She considered turning on the TV for some companionship but then remembered that all she'd hear would be static and the screen would be a blur. Her mother hadn't paid the cable bill for three months, and the service had been cut off a while ago.

Instead, she went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door, even though she knew there wouldn't be anything edible inside. She removed a half-empty bottle of soda. There was no fizz left in it, but it was better than nothing, and she sat down at the rickety kitchen table to drink it.

What was her mother doing right now? She wondered. Screaming at a nurse? Demanding a gin and tonic? Jenna wanted to be optimistic. Maybe her mother would make it this time, but she couldn't count on it. Her mom had tried to stop drinking before but had never made it beyond a day or two. That very morning, before she'd left, she'd drained what was left in a bottle and then announced that this was the last alcohol she'd ever drink. Jenna had tried to read her mind, to get a more accurate picture of how serious and committed her mother was this time, but she couldn't get inside.

It was funny, when Jenna considered how easily she read minds. Young or old, male or female, smart or stupid—most people couldn't stop her from eavesdropping on their private thoughts. But there were some who were just not accessible. Like her mother.

She used to think her mother's mind was too cloudy and messed up to penetrate. Then she thought that maybe there was another reason, like a blood connection, that prevented her from reading the mind of a family member. Unfortunately, there were no other family members around, so she couldn't test that theory. She'd never known her father—according to her mother, he'd taken off before Jenna was even born. She had no brothers or sisters, and her mother had left her own family when she was young, so Jenna had never met any grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins.

One thing made her doubt that her inability to read her mother's mind was caused completely by the family connection. Just six months ago, when she'd been placed in the special so-called gifted class at Meadowbrook Middle School, she found that she couldn't read the mind of the teacher, a woman they called Madame. She'd tried and tried, but she was completely blocked from getting inside the teacher's head, and she'd finally given up. Maybe it was because Madame knew all their gifts so well that she was somehow able to protect herself from the special students. Gifts . . . It was a strange way to describe their unique abilities, Jenna thought.

She certainly didn't feel gifted.

Having finished the flat soda, she got up and went back to her room. The suitcase on her bed reminded her that she still had a lot to do. She just didn't feel like doing it. Resolutely, she looked away and concentrated on the room that she would be bidding farewell to for at least the next two weeks.

She liked her room, and she'd spend a lot of time making it into a special place for herself—her own private, cozy cave, where she could close the door and shut out the sounds of her mother and her friends partying. The walls were a muddy gray color. She would have preferred them to be black, but beggars couldn't be choosers—the paint had been free. She'd found half-empty cans of black and white paint left on the ground behind a Dumpster, and mixing them together had given her enough to cover the walls. A dog-walking job for a neighbor had given her the resources to buy a black bedspread printed with white skulls as well as matching curtains. There were two vampire-movie posters—one showed the vampire attacking a woman, while the other was a close-up of the vampire himself with blood dripping from his mouth. And just after last Christmas, someone in her building had thrown away a perfectly good set of twinkling lights, with only a few broken bulbs. She'd arranged some garland around her door, and when she turned off the overhead light and turned on the twinkling ones, it was nicely spooky.

What kind of room would she be sleeping in tonight? A basement dungeon? Somewhere ink and white, with ruffled curtains and shelves holding a variety of Barbies? She couldn't decide which would be worse. Both images made her shudder.

Her sad fantasy was interrupted by a knock at the front door, and she groaned. For one fleeting moment, she considered not going to the door and pretending that no one was home. Eventually her visitor would go away.

Only, what was the point? She knew who was standing just outside the door, and she knew the woman wouldn't give up so easily. Even if she went away, she'd only come back, possibly with a police officer or some other official type. And they'd break down the door to get in if they had to. There was probably a law. People who were Jenna's age weren't allowed to live alone, not even for two weeks.

There was another series of knocks, more insistent this time. Reluctantly, Jenna headed to the door. She opened it to see a woman dressed in a tan suit, her fair hair pulled back neatly in a bun. The briefcase in her hand completed her professional look, and she offered Jenna a practiced smile.

"Hello, Jenna, Are you ready to go?"

"No," Jenna replied, knowing full well how rude she sounded and not caring at all. "I haven't even started packing."

The woman's expression didn't change, but now her smile looked a little strained. "Well, perhaps you'd better get going. You won't need much, you know. It's for only two weeks."

"Yeah, whatever," Jenna muttered. Two weeks in a house full of strangers. It might as well be forever. She left the social worker and went back to her bedroom. As she began tossing whatever caught her eye into the suitcase, her thoughts went back to the two temporary foster homes that she'd stayed in before.

She was eight when her mother broke her leg in drunken fall. If Jenna had known what was going to happen, she might have left her to recover at home instead of calling an ambulance. Social services came for her while she waited in the emergency room. She was placed in a house owned by a woman who took in children for the money that the state paid her to keep them. The woman wasn't exactly cruel—she didn't whip her or anything like that—but she basically ignored Jenna and the two other little girls who were there. It really wasn't so bad compared with the second home she went to, when she was 11 and her mother was arrested for drunk driving.

She wasn't whipped there either. She was stuck in a family of do-gooders who were constantly asking her how she was feeling and encouraging her to express her true emotions. She supposed they were trying to be kind, but Jenna could read their pity, and she would have preferred to have been beaten.

Who knew what she would be stuck with this time? Glumly, she contemplated worst-case scenarios, like religious fanatics or vegetarians. Which would be worse—going to church twice a day or being deprived of Big Macs for two weeks? As she dragged her suitcase into the living room, she decided to take a quick scan of the social worker's mind, on the off chance that she might be thinking about the place where she was about to take

her. Jenna wasn't hopeful—the poor woman was probably brooding over the crummy job she had, dragging miserable kids off to foster homes.

But she was in luck—Jenna read her destination loud and clear. And when she realized where she'd be spending the next two weeks, her mood improved considerably.

“Wait a second,” she told the social worker. She ran back into her room and grabbed the old stuffed animal off her bed. She hadn't packed him because she was afraid that the people at the foster home would mock her for still sleeping with a teddy bear.

Or worse, there could be some little kids at the home who would put their grubby hands all over him. Now that she knew where she was going, she could stuff him in the outside pocket of the suitcase, because he'd be safe. And so would she.

Outside the building, as they got into the care, the woman looked at her suspiciously, and Jenna didn't have to read her mind to know why. She probably expected Jenna to be whining and complaining. Her sudden passive acceptance of her fate was making the social worker nervous. Maybe she thought Jenna planned to jump out of the car at the first red light and make an escape. As they approached a stop sign, Jenna couldn't resist edging toward the car door, just to see the look of alarm on the woman's face. But she stayed put until the social worker turned onto a familiar street and pulled into a driveway.

“You've been here before, haven't you?” the woman asked, but Jenna didn't bother to respond. She hopped out of the care and waved to the girl who was standing on the front steps of the house.

Tracey Devon ran toward her. Jenna took a step backward, but to her relief, Tracey stopped short and didn't envelop Jenna in a hug. Clearly, she knew Jenna well enough to realize she wasn't the huggy type.

“Surprise!” Tracey yelled. “No, I take that back; you're not surprised at all, are you? I'll bet you read that woman's mind.”

“Of course I did. Hey, how did you pull this off?”

“I just informed my parents that you needed a place to stay and I wanted you to stay here. So they called social services and made the arrangements.” She took Jenna's suitcase and headed back toward the house.

Amazing, Jenna thought as she followed her classmate. Just a month ago, Tracey wouldn't have dreamed of asking her parents to let her have a friend stay for two weeks. And even if she'd worked up the nerve, her parents wouldn't have heard her. Nobody listened to Tracey Devon back then. Most people didn't even see her. Because when Tracey felt invisible, she actually became invisible, fading away whenever her emotions took over. That was Tracey's “gift”—the ability to physically disappear. Even Madame, the teacher of their gifted class, was never sure if Tracey was there or not.

The Devon parents greeted Jenna warmly.

“It's so nice to have you back with us,” Tracey's father said, and Tracey's mother gave her a little hug, which Jenna managed to bear without flinching. It was hard to believe that these two friendly, welcoming parents were the same people who had been the cause of Tracey's old misery. It hadn't been on purpose—they were really sorry now, and Jenna could see that they were trying to make up for it.

“It's great to be here,” Jenna replied. “I mean, compared with where I could have ended up.”

And then the seven other reasons for Tracey's frequent disappearances came bounding into the room. “Jenna!”

“Hi, Jenna!”

“Jenna, can you read us a story?”

Jenna stepped back in alarm. The septuplets were covered with spots.

“Have you ever had the measles?” Tracey asked Jenna.

“I don't know,” Jenna replied honestly. She didn't remember, and if she'd had the measles when she was very young, her mother had never told her. The chances were that her mother had been so out of it that she wouldn't have noticed if Jenna had been covered with spots, and Jenna would have recovered on her own.

“It's okay—they're not contagious anymore,” Tracey assured her.

Jenna tried to acknowledge their enthusiastic greetings. “Hi, Sandi, Randi, Mandi . . .” She couldn't remember the rest of the names. What was the point? The girls looked alike, and there was no way she could match each with her own name. Even the rash from their measles seemed to be in exactly the same places.

It was the birth of the septuplets five years earlier that had taken Tracey's parents' attention away from their oldest daughter. It wasn't the kids' fault—not really—but Jenna couldn't blame Tracey for having feelings toward them that weren't entirely sisterly. It was only in the past month that Tracey had begun bonding with the little girls.

"Don't bother Jenna now," Mrs. Devon reprimanded them. "She's probably tired."

"And hungry," Tracey added. "Go on up to my room, Jenna, and I'll hunt down some munchies."

Jenna knew where Tracey's bedroom was because she'd spent a few nights there before, less than a month ago, but she wasn't sure if Tracey actually remembered that. Because Tracey hadn't really been Tracey the last time Jenna was there. Their "gifted" classmate Amanda Beeson had been in complete possession of Tracey's body at the time.

Plunking herself down on one of the twin beds in Tracey's room, Jenna thought about Amanda's so-called gift. She was a body snatcher, which sounded a whole lot cooler than it really was. Unfortunately for Amanda, she couldn't just snap her fingers and become an astronaut or a rock star. She could take over someone's body only if she felt sorry for that person. If she felt an abundance of sympathy for an individual, she could find herself trapped inside the wretched person's body.

Tracey had certainly been deserving of pity back then, and not just because she was fading away. She was even more pitiful when she was visible. She was scrawny—so underdeveloped that she didn't even wear a bra. Her hair was limp and stringy, her babyish clothes didn't fit properly, and she had terrible posture. She was nervous and timid, and she always looked frightened. In the eyes of someone like Amanda Beeson, who was one of the most popular girls at Meadowbrook Middle School, Tracey Devon was seriously pathetic.

Jenna knew that Amanda had been miserable stuck inside the body of a major nerd, and she doubted that Tracey had been happy about being possessed by Amanda. Strangely enough, though, it had all worked out for the best. Whether she had meant to or not, Amanda had actually helped the girl whose body she had snatched.

Tracey certainly wasn't pathetic anymore. The girl who came into the room bearing a bag of chips and a jar of guacamole bore little resemblance to the pre-Amanda Tracey. Her hair was shiny and had been cut and styled in a cute layered bob. Her eyes were bright, her shoulders were back, and her newly pierced ears held trendy gold hoops. She was still skinny, but now she took advantage of it, wearing super-slim jeans and a tight halter-top.

But the change in Tracey went far beyond her appearance. The girl who used to be too shy to ask anyone for the time of day sat down on the twin bed where Jenna had settled herself, dumped the treats between them, and faced Jenna squarely.

"I know you don't want to talk about it, so I'm not going to ask you how you feel about your mother being in rehab. And I've told my parents not to bring up the subject either."

"Good," Jenna said, relieved.

Tracey frowned. "That's not the response I was expecting, Jenna."

"Huh?"

"Say it," Tracey ordered her.

Jenna stared at her blankly.

"Remember the magic words? Please and . . ."

Jenna rolled her eyes. "Okay, okay. Thank you."

Tracey nodded with approval. "See? You can show appreciation." Then she smiled. "Look, Jenna, I know you're grateful. You just hate to admit it because you're afraid you'll seem like Little Orphan Annie or something."

She was right, and Jenna knew it. She had a lot of pride, and she couldn't bear the idea of anyone feeling sorry for her. And saying "thank you" seemed to be like admitting that she was needy.

This was how Tracey had really changed. All the old hurts had created in her an ability to understand other people, to know what was really going on with them. She couldn't read minds, like Jenna, but it was as if she could read feelings. It wasn't exactly what Madame would call a gift, but Jenna had to admit that it was pretty interesting, and a little scary, too. Tracey was getting to now her—in spite of herself—in a way that Jenna had never allowed anyone to know her before.

Tracey tore open the bag of chips. “What do you think of my room?”

Jenna looked around. She had a vague memory of Tracey’s bedroom being kind of childish and bland. Now it was decorated in bright primary colors—red curtains, red and blue plaid bedspreads, a gleaming white desk.

“Nice,” she said.

“Thanks. I told my parents I wanted a completely new room, and I made them let me pick out everything myself.”

“Wow!” Jenna said with admiration. “You’ve really got them wrapped around your little finger.”

“Yeah, well, after all those years of neglect, they owed me,” Tracey replied. “Hey, have you done the assignment for Monday yet?”

Her mouth stuffed with guacamole, Jenna could manage only to wrinkle her nose. That wasn’t a response to the food—guacamole was delicious—but to the reference to their homework. Madame had ordered her students to prepare a brief oral report describing when they had first become aware of their gifts.

She swallowed. “No. What about you?”

Tracey nodded. “It was easy for me. The Devon Seven were born and I was reduced to a nonentity.”

“A what?”

“Something that doesn’t exist.”

That was another aspect of Tracey that was different. Once she’d started speaking up, she’s revealed something about herself that no one had ever expected—she was smart.

“It’s not so simple for me,” Jenna said. “I can’t remember when I started reading minds. It seems as if I’ve always known what people are thinking.”

“That reminds me—I’ve got a favor to ask.”

Tracey eyed her eagerly. “While you’re staying here, could you please not read my mind?”

Jenna grinned. “Why? You got some big secret you’re hiding from me?”

“No, it’s just a question of privacy.”

That was what Madame was always telling Jenna—that reading people’s minds was like eavesdropping on private conversations or reading someone’s diary.

“So do you promise you won’t read my mind?”

“I don’t know if I can promise,” Jenna said.

“Sometimes I can’t help it. It just sort of happens. You can’t control your gift, can you?”

Tracey sighed. “No. Ever since I got my body back from Amanda, it’s harder and harder to disappear. I’ve been practicing, though, and I’m starting to be able to fade a little. Have you been practicing?”

“I don’t need to practice. Like I said, it comes naturally.”

“I mean, practice not mind reading. That’s what Madame mean about controlling our gifts—knowing when to use them and when not to.”

Jenna shrugged. “Whatever. You could try to block me. I think that’s what Madame does so that I can’t read her thoughts. Or . . . Wait a minute—I’ve got a better idea. I can’t read my own mother’s mind, so maybe if I think of you as a sister, I won’t be able to read yours either.”

“Could you do that?” Tracey asked. “Think of me as a sister?”

Jenna shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t know,” she replied honestly. Not being a very family-oriented person, it was hard for her to imagine the kind of feelings that sisters might have for each other. On the other hand, if she had to have a sister, she supposed Tracey would be okay.

“Yeah, all right,” she relented. “I’ll be your sister.”

The door to Tracey’s bedroom burst open and seven little Devons ran in. “Can we play now?” “Will you read to us?” “Can I have some chips?”

They were all over the place. Tracey offered Jenna a halfhearted smile. “Not that I need another one.”