

Gifted: Out of Sight, Out of Mind  
First Chapter Excerpt

THERE WERE 342 STUDENTS at Meadowbrook Middle School and three lunch periods each day. This meant that during any one lunch period there could be no more than 114 students in the cafeteria the noise and commotion, however, suggested that half the population of mainland China was eating lunch together.

Students roamed the cavernous space, shouting, racing from one end to the other, knocking over chairs, banging trays own on tables. There were a couple of teachers who were supposed to be supervising the scene and maintaining order, but they couldn't stop the occasional flying meatball from that day's Spaghetti Special or the far-reaching spray from a soda bottle that had been intentionally shaken before being opened.

From her prime seat at the table, Amanda Beeson surveyed the chaotic scene with a sense of well-being. The cafeteria was noisy and messy and not very attractive, but it was part of her little kingdom—or queendom, if such a word existed. She wasn't wearing any kind of crown, of course, but she felt secure in the knowledge that in this particular hive, she was generally acknowledged as the queen bee.

On either side of her sat two princesses—Sophie Greene and Britney Teller. The three of them were about to begin their daily assessment of classmates. As always, Amanda kicked off the conversation.

“Ohmigod, check out Caroline's sweater! It's way too tight.”

“No kidding,” Sophie said. “It's like she's begging for the boys to look at her.”

“And it's not like she's got anything on top to look at,” Britney added.

Amanda looked around for more victims. “Someone should tell Shannon Fields that girls with fat knees shouldn't wear short skirts.”

“Terri Boyd has a new bag,” Britney pointed out.

“Is it a Coach?”

Amanda shook her head. “No way. It's a fake.”

“How can you tell from this far away?” Sophie wanted to know.

Amanda gave her a withering look. “Oh, puhleeze! Coach doesn't make hobo bags in that shade of green.” Spotting imitation designer good was a favorite game, and Amanda surveyed the crowd for another example. “Look at Cara Winters's sweater.”

“Juicy Couture?” Sophie wondered.

“Not. You can tell by the buttons.”

Sophie gazed at her with admiration. Amanda responded by looking pointedly at the item in Sophie's hand. “Sophie, are you actually going to eat that cupcake? I thought you were on a diet.”

Sophie sighed and pushed the cupcake to the edge of her tray. Amanda turned to her other side.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” Britney asked.

“You've got a major zit coming out on your chin.”

Britney whipped a mirror out of her bag.

“It's not that big,” Sophie assured her. “No one can see it.”

“I can,” Amanda declared.

“Really?” Britney stared harder into the mirror.

Amanda thought she saw her lower lip tremble, and for a moment she almost felt sorry for her. Everyone knew that Britney was obsessed with her complexion. She was constantly searching her reflection for any evidence of an imminent breakout, she spent half her allowance on face creams, and she even saw a dermatologist once a month. Not that she really needed to give her skin all that attention. If Britney's face had been half as bad as she thought it was, she wouldn't be sitting at Amanda's table. But she was still staring into her little mirror, and now Amanda could see her eyes getting watery.

Oh, no, don't let her cry, she thought. Amanda didn't like public displays of emotion. She was always afraid that she'd get caught up in them herself.

Three more of their friends—Emma, Katie, and Nina—joined them at the table, and Britney got more reassurance on the state of her skin. Finally, Amanda gave in. “You know, I think there's a smudge on one of my contact lenses. Everybody look like they've got zits.”

Britney looked relieved, and Amanda made a mental note not to waste insults on friends. She didn't want to have to feel bad about anything she said. Feelings could be so dangerous.

Luckily, Emma brought up a new subject. "Heather Todd got a haircut."

"From Budge Scissors," Amanda declared, referring to a chain of cheap hair whackers.

"Really?"

"That's what it looks like."

Katie giggled. "Amanda, you're terrible!"

Amanda knew this was intended as a compliment, and she accepted it by smiling graciously. Katie beamed in the aura of the smile, and Amanda decided not to mention the fact that Katie's tinted lip-gloss had smeared. Besides, there were so many others who were more deserving of her critical attention. Like the girl who was walking toward their table right now: Tracey Devon, the dreariest girl in the eighth grade, the most pathetic creature in the entire class—maybe even in the whole school.

In Amanda's experience, in all honesty, she knew that even the most deeply flawed individuals had something of value about them. A complete social nerd might be a brain, an ugly guy could be a great athlete, and an enormously fat girl might have a nice singing voice. But Tracey Devon had absolutely nothing going for her. She was thin—not in a top-model way, but so scrawny and bony that her elbows and knees looked abnormally large. No hips and, worse, no boobs.

She didn't shave her legs. The fact that she was blond and the hairs barely showed was beside the point. Every girl Amanda knew had started shaving her legs at the age of 11. Then there was the hair on her head—flat, stringy, and always looking in need of a wash. Her face was bland and colorless, she had no eyebrows to speak of, and her lips were so thin that she looked like she didn't have a mouth either. The best anyone could say about her face was that she didn't have zits—but she had enough freckles to make up for that.

As for her clothes, forget designer stuff—Tracey's outfits went beyond terrible. Mismatched tops and bottoms, puffed-sleeve dresses that looked like they were made for five-year-olds, shoes with laces, and ankle socks. Socks!

And that wasn't all. Tracey's special and unique ickiness went way beyond the surface. She walked around with her shoulders hunched and her head bowed. She talked in whispers—people could barely hear her, and when they did, she never seemed to say anything worth hearing. It was as if she wasn't even there, wherever she was. But as that very moment she was definitely at their table, and Amanda stiffened. "What do you want?" she demanded.

Tracey mumbled something, but the only word Amanda caught was Katie. She called to the other end of the table. "Katie, your new best friend, Tracey Devon, needs to talk to you."

Katie's brow furrowed. "Who?"

"Tracey Devon! Are you blind? She's standing right here."

Katie glanced vaguely at the unwelcome visitor. "Oh right. What do you want?"

Somehow, Tracey managed to make her request audible. "Could I borrow your notes from yesterday?"

Katie still looked puzzled. "Notes for what? Are you in one of my classes?"

"History," Tracey said in a whisper.

"Oh yeah, right. Why do you need my notes?"

"I wasn't in class. I was sick."

"Sick," Amanda repeated. "That's interesting. I didn't know ugliness was a disease."

It wasn't one of her best wisecracks, but it got a response from Tracey. She raised her head just high enough for Amanda and the others to see the flush that crossed her face and the tears welling up in her eyes. Then she turned and scurried away.

"I just remembered—she's borrowed my notes before," Katie remarked.

A flicker of concern crossed Britney's face. "Is she sick a lot?"

Katie shrugged. "Who knows? I never notice if she's there or not. It's like she's one of those people you don't see." She took a bite of her sandwich, and the others followed.

But Amanda couldn't eat. She was too—too something. Angry? Maybe. Because it was so infuriating, the way Tracey was. It was her own fault that Amanda could mock her so easily. It was as though she wanted to be

picked on. She didn't make the slightest effort to improve herself, and she just took Amanda's insults without making any attempts at retaliation. There were plenty of other creepy types at Meadowbrook, but at least they stood up for themselves. Like Jenna Kelley, the girl who dressed in black and had a terrible reputation. If you accused her of being a vampire, she'd tell you where to go. Why didn't Tracey ever fight back?

Amanda's friends had gone back to eating and chatting by now. Clearly, they'd forgotten all about Tracey's interruption. They probably considered Tracey beneath their contempt, not even worth an insult. Only Amanda was still seething.

She clenched her fists. Uh-oh! This wasn't good. She could feel her face getting warm and her heartbeat quickening. Too much feeling.

"I've got to get something from my locker," she muttered to the others. Before anyone could respond, she turned and hurried to the exit. She didn't have a hall pass, and if a monitor spotted her, she could be hauled to the principal's office, but she had to risk it.

Luckily, she was able to make it to the end of the hall and down two flights of stairs to the school basement without being caught. There was a rarely used restroom there, and she ducked into it. Splashing some water onto her face, she gripped the sides of the sink, stared into the mirror, and concentrated on pushing any sympathy, any anger—any feelings at all for Tracey Devon—out of her mind.

Do not feel sorry for her, she ordered herself. She doesn't deserve any sympathy.

Actually, Amanda wouldn't have minded if someone wanted to take pity on Tracey Devon. But that someone could not be Amanda Beeson. She knew too well the terrible consequences of caring. And to make sure she remembered, she allowed the memories to play out in her head.

The very first time . . . she couldn't have been more than five. She saw herself on a cold winter afternoon, walking along a busy shopping street, clutching her mother's hand, and looking at the people they passed. One in particular grabbed her attention.

She was huddled in the entrance of an old abandoned building, her back against the boarded door. A bowl with a few coins in it lay beside her, and there was a hand-scrawled sign propped up against the wall. Wispy gray hair poked out of a dirty bandanna that was wrapped around her head. Her body was clothed in filthy rags, and even though Amanda wasn't close enough to smell her, she somehow knew that woman exuded a nasty odor. And even though Amanda couldn't read the sign, she knew the woman was hungry.

Amanda's mother hadn't noticed her, but she had paused in front of the store window next to the building. Something in the display must have caught her eye, because she spent some time looking at it, which gave little Amanda more time to look at the poor woman.

Now, eight years later, Amanda could still remember how she had felt—sad, unbearably sad, sadder than she'd felt when her pet goldfish had died. Why did this woman have to sit there in the cold, all alone? Didn't she have any family? Didn't anyone love her? That poor woman! What was she feeling?

Then, suddenly, Amanda knew what the woman was feeling. Because she was the woman. Cold and hungry, and confused, too. And she was looking at a little girl—a pretty five-year-old, with long, glossy hair topped by a wooly hat. Sturdy, bright-eyed, and wrapped in a puffy jacket. Holding the hand of a well-dressed, elegant woman in a fur coat.

And if Amanda had turned inot the old lady, who was the little girl staring at her?

Her mother spoke. "Amanda, where are your gloves?"

"They're in my pocket," the little girl replied in Amanda's very own voice.

"Put them on. It's getting cold," her mother said.

"Okay." She took her gloves out of her pocket and put them on just as Amanda would have done. Amanda-the-old-lady was bewildered. So, she was here—and she was there. How could that be?

In the turmoil of her confused mind, there were feelings that stood out—envy, longing, loneliness. Oh, it was so awful being this woman that Amanda couldn't bear it!

It took only a jerk of her mother's hand to pull her back into herself. In the next moment, she was on a street corner at her mother's side, waiting for the light to change. She knew the sad woman was just behind her, but she didn't dare turn back to look.

The next time it happened, she was older—eight or nine. It must have been summertime, because she

as in the backyard, wearing shorts and a halter-top, having a picnic with a couple of friends. From the house next door came the sound of two people shouting at each other. Amanda recognized the voices even before the man and woman emerged—Mr. Blakely first, followed by Mrs. Blakely. Amanda like Mrs. Blakely—she had a little baby boy, and sometime she let Amanda hold him. Mr. Blakely wasn't as friendly. Just then, Mr. Blakely looked very angry, and Mrs. Blakely looked scared. Then, to Amanda's horror, Mr. Blakely hit Mrs. Blakely—he slapped her right across the face—and Mrs. Blakely started to cry.

It was awful—Amanda had never seen an adult cry like that before. How could that mean Mr. Blakely do that? And why didn't Mrs. Blakely hit him back? Nice Mrs. Blakely, who baked chocolate-chip cookies and sang to her baby and promised Amanda that she could baby-sit for him when she was old enough! Why was this happening? What could she do? What was Mrs. Blakely going to do?

Nothing. Because her husband was stronger, and angry, and even though he hit her sometimes, she loved him so much and she was afraid he'd leave her alone with the baby . . . Amanda knew all this because she had become Mrs. Blakely, and when Mr. Blakely hit her again, it was Amanda who felt the stink on her cheek. It was terrible; she was in pain, and just over the hedge she could see two little girls watching in horror along with Amanda, who didn't look upset in the least. It was as if she didn't have any feelings at all. Which made a weird kind of sense, because the Amanda-with-feelings was in the body of Mrs. Blakely.

The rest of the memory was a blur, but somehow Amanda got back inside her own body. Soon after that, Mr. and Mrs. Blakely moved away.

There were other experiences. Two stood out—that time in the fourth grade when she saw a classmate get hit by a car in front of the school and then felt herself lying on the street, frightened and in pain and hearing the sound of the ambulance. And another time, just three years ago, when she became a boy—a skinny, nerdy, whiny boy named Martin, younger than her, who had lived across the street. Nobody in the neighborhood like Martin, and his mother was always complaining to other mothers about the way their kids treated him. But then one day she saw him surrounded by bigger boys, who were pushing him back and forth and laughing at him, and she felt sorry for him . . .

That was the last one. Because by then, she'd figured it out. Feeling too much—that was the problem. When she felt bad for someone else, that was when it happened. Now, at the age of 13, she knew the words: sympathy, compassion, pity. Those were the emotions that triggered the bizarre bodysnatching that transported her into other people and made her feel what they were feeling.

Once she understood, she knew what she had to do to prevent it from happening again. She had to stop feeling these emotions. If she didn't care about someone, she wouldn't become that person.

So she stopped caring. It wasn't easy, and often she had to struggle, but it was worth it so that she never had to suffer the experience again. At first, she just tried to block the feelings of sympathy, but then she realized it would be useful to actually fight them. She focused on behavior that would word contrary to compassion—mockery, ridicule, creative insults. And in the process she discovered a strange truth—people admired her meanness, or else they were frightened of her. In any case, it worked to her advantage.

And now she had a fabulous life. She was the Queen of Mean and she ruled the school—or at least the eighth grade, though she felt pretty sure that her fame extended to the younger grades. She was never alone; classmates sought her approval and she was held in awe. She knew there were people who claimed to hate her, but she had no doubt that what they really wanted was to be her.

After a few deep breaths, another splash of water on the face, and a quick makeup repair, she was ready to go back to the cafeteria and pick up where she'd left off. And she made it through the day without feeling sorry for anyone again.

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But later that night, in her beautiful pink and white bedroom, lying in her four-poster bed under a lacy canopy, Amanda thought about the strange event of the day and wondered how it had come to pass. Why had she felt a glimmer of pity for Tracey Devon? True, Tracey was pathetic, but she wasn't a victim like Mrs. Blakely or the girl who had been hit by the car.

What did she know about Tracey anyway? Not much. She knew that Tracey was one of those “gifted” kids who attended a special class at Meadowbrook. Which was sort of hard to believe, because she didn’t strike Amanda as being any kind of genius. They’d gone to the same elementary school, and Tracey had been in Amanda’s second-grade class. They hadn’t been best friends—she was just another classmate—but there had been nothing especially awful about her. Tracey had been okay back then.

In fact, she had been almost famous. Everyone in town was talking about Tracey’s family that year—her mother had just given birth to septuplets, seven identical baby girls. They were on TV, on the news. The “Devon Seven”—that’s what the reporters called them. The babies were in commercials, and they posed for ads, and every year after that at TV news program included a special segment showing them on their birthday. The Devon Seven were famous.

But not Tracey Devon. She wasn’t on those special TV shows. That wasn’t surprising, in Amanda’s opinion. Who would want to see a nerd like Tracey on TV?

Amanda realized then what really annoyed her—the fact that Tracey didn’t have to be a nerd. She didn’t have to dress so badly or act so nervous. Why didn’t she stand up for herself? Why did she take all the abuse that everyone heaped on her? She was more than a nerd—she was a wimp, never fighting back, not even trying. She was a total, complete, absolute loser . . .

Amanda was aware of beads of sweat forming on her forehead. She was getting all worked up again. This wouldn’t do at all. She couldn’t let Tracey bother her. Everyone else just ignored her, so why couldn’t Amanda?

She had to calm down or she’d never get to sleep.

She did sleep finally. When she next opened her eyes, there was sunlight pouring in the window . . . which was odd, because her other always woke her up when she came in to open the shutters on Amanda’s windows. But there was no one else in the room . . .

She blinked. Where was her canopy? Why was she looking at a ceiling? Had she fallen off her bed? Because this didn’t feel like her bed—it was harder. As her eyes began to focus, the first real stirrings of fear began. She noticed the chest of drawers in front of her. It was yellow, not pink. And what were those flowered curtain doing at the sides of her window? No . . . not her window. Not her room.

She sat up suddenly, and that was when she noticed her hands. What had happened to her manicure—the nice rosy polish? Whose stubby, bitten fingernails were these?

Her heart was pounding furiously, but her body moved in slow motion. Lifting legs that weren’t her legs. Putting feet onto the floor, experiencing the new sensation of a carpet instead of a fluffy rug. Walking toward a mirror that hung above the unfamiliar chest of drawers. Looking in the mirror and seeing . . .

Tracey Devon.