

Gifted: Finder's Keepers
First Chapter Excerpt

KEN WAS TRYING TO ignore the voice in his head.

Everyone else in the room was involved in a lively debate with Madame, their teacher. His classmates were paying attention, and they actually looked interested. Even Jenna Kelley, who generally affected an expression of boredom, was getting into it.

“What’s the big deal, Madame? Okay, so maybe there are bad guys out there who want to get their hands on us. But we can take care of ourselves. We’re gifted, for crying out loud!”

“Yes, you have gifts,” Madame responded patiently, “but you don’t know how to use them properly.”

Sarah spoke softly. “Wouldn’t it be better if we just didn’t use them at all?”

“And let the bad guys use them?” Charles asked. “No way. We have to fight back!”

“Couldn’t we just stay away from the bad guys?” Emily wanted to know.

“That’s easier said than done,” Tracey pointed out. “I’m with Charles. We have to be prepared to do battle.”

Madame was getting frustrated. “But you can’t go to battle when you don’t know how to use your weapons!”

Ken wanted to be a part of this argument—to listen and maybe even join in. But how could he participate when some old dead guy was yelling at him?

Listen, kid, ya gotta help me! Talk to my granddaughter—make her see some sense. If she marries that no-good scoundrel, she’ll regret it for the rest of her life!

Nobody else could hear the man—only Ken. This was his so-called gift. And he hated it. This voice was louder than most of the voices he heard. Ken thought maybe the man was hard of hearing. His own grandfather couldn’t hear very well and he talked really loudly. Ken had to yell back at his grandfather to be heard. At least with *this* old guy Ken wouldn’t have to yell. He only had to think his response and the man would hear him. Ken didn’t understand how this wordless communication worked. It was just the way it happened.

He “spoke” to the man. *Look, I’m sorry, but I can’t help you out. I don’t even know your granddaughter.*

The man replied, *I’ll give you her address.*

Ken wondered if the man could hear his silent groan. He didn't know what else to tell him. With other voices he could be tough, even rude, ordering them to leave him alone and get out of his head. But how could he be nasty and disrespectful to an old man?

"Ken? Ken!"

This voice was coming from outside his head.

Madame spoke sharply, and to Ken's relief her stern tone drove the dead grandfather away.

"Are you listening, Ken? We're talking about something important."

"I'm *trying* to listen," he replied.

Her stern expression softened slightly. "Is someone bothering you?"

"He's gone now," Ken told her.

"Good. Then pay attention, because this concerns all of you. Surely by now you've all realized that there are forces in this world who present a grave threat to you. Be aware. Be alert. And never, never let anyone know what you're capable of doing."

From the corner of his eye, Ken saw Amanda yawn. She politely covered her mouth with her hand, but she was directly in Madame's line of vision, and the teacher saw her.

"Am I boring you, Amanda?" she asked, making no effort to hide the annoyance in her tone.

"No, Madame. I just have something else on my mind. Something I need to tell the class."

"And I'm sure it's something very important," Madame said smoothly. "You'll be able share it with us later. Right now, I need your full attention. It's very important that you all realize how your gifts could be exploited. I don't want to frighten you, but you need to be aware of the danger. Do you understand this?"

Jenna raised her hand. "Amanda thinks you're exaggerating, Madame."

Madame frowned. "Jenna, I've told you again and again, you are *not* to read minds in this class." Her eyes shifted to Amanda. "And I am *not* exaggerating. Perhaps some of you need to recall some recent events. Emily? Emily!"

Ken knew Emily couldn't use hearing voices as an excuse for not paying attention. She was just daydreaming. But not like an ordinary daydreamer might. Emily's dreams had a disturbing tendency to come true.

"Emily!" Madame barked. "Would you mind not thinking about the future and joining us in the present?"

Emily jumped. "Sorry, Madame."

“Remind the class of the potential dangers they could encounter.”

“Why me?” Emily asked plaintively.

“Because, if I’m not mistaken, you were the first to encounter a real threat this year.”

Madame was rarely mistaken, and Emily knew this. Still, she looked confused. From behind her, Jenna poked her shoulder.

“Serena Hancock, Em. Does the name ring a bell?”

Emily slumped back in her seat. “Oh, right. The student teacher.”

“Would you remind the class what Serena did to you?” Madame asked.

Emily was clearly uncomfortable, but she obeyed.

“She hypnotized me and tried to make me tell her the winning lottery number for the next drawing.”

“And why did Serena choose you as her victim?” Madame prompted her. “Why didn’t she threaten Jenna, for example, or Sarah?”

Emily sighed. “Because she knew I could see into the future.”

“Precisely,” Madame declared. “She knew what you could do, and she wanted to exploit this. Let’s move on to another example of a recent threat.” She looked pointedly at Jenna. The goth girl scowled. Madame spoke briskly. “I know it’s a painful memory, Jenna, but it’s important that we remember.”

Jenna gave an elaborate shrug. “It wasn’t *painful*, just boring.”

Ken caught Amanda’s eye, and they exchanged knowing looks. This was so Jenna—to act tough, like nothing could really upset her. Not even a man showing up out of nowhere and claiming to be the father who had disappeared before Jenna was even born. Not even when this man turned out to be a fraud, someone who wanted to use Jenna’s mind-reading skills to win a lot of money at poker.

“Wait a second,” Charles broke in. “What happened to Emily and what happened to Jenna just happened to *them*. This doesn’t have anything to do with the rest of us.”

“I disagree,” Madame said. “What threatens one of us threatens all of us. I cannot stress this enough. We need to think of ourselves as a team.”

Ken hoped his own reaction to that notion didn’t show in his expression. He respected Madame and all that, but to call this class a team—that was completely bogus. Ken knew all about teams—as an athlete he’d played on lots of them, including Meadowbrook’s soccer team. And he’d been on teams in other classes—working on science projects, stuff like that. Being on a team meant being connected in some way, working together toward a common goal. Looking around this room, he couldn’t imagine

working with any of his classmates. And he certainly didn't feel connected to any of them. Without the gifts, they had nothing in common. Jenna was a sullen goth girl with a less-than-stellar reputation. Amanda was a superpopular queen bee. Even though he wasn't involved in playing soccer anymore, Ken still considered himself a jock. There was no one else in the class who was even interested in sports.

And each of them dealt with their gift in different ways. Space-cadet Emily sometimes acted like her gift frightened her. Amanda wasn't too crazy about her gift, and Sarah absolutely refused to use hers. Only Charles, who was stuck in a wheelchair, and whiny, wimpy Martin seemed like they enjoyed the powers their gifts gave them. And what about Carter? Who could have anything in common with a total mystery? The strange, silent boy was little more than a zombie.

As far as Ken was concerned, the only thing they all shared was this class. The gifts—and the students who had them—didn't have any connection at all. Sometimes, like now, he wondered if Madame had a gift like Jenna's. At that very moment she was looking at him, and she could have been reading his mind.

"I realize that you might not think of yourselves as a team, but that may well be how our enemies think of us. Surely I don't need to remind you of your most recent adventure?" When there was no response to that, she shook her head wearily. "Or maybe I do. Amanda, would you please refresh our memory?"

Martin piped up. "Why are you asking *her*? She wasn't even there!"

"Yes, I was!" Amanda snapped.

Martin glared at her. "Hey, I'm not stupid. I would have noticed if you were there. It was me, Tracey, Emily, and Sarah. Oh, and Carter was there for a while at the beginning."

Sarah spoke gently. "I wasn't really there, Martin. Amanda had taken over my body. I didn't get there till the very end."

"I can't believe you didn't know that, Martin," Tracey declared.

"Didn't you notice Sarah wasn't acting like herself?"

Jenna snorted. "Are you kidding? Martin never pays attention to anyone but himself."

Charles laughed. "I'll bet Martin was too scared to notice anything."

"I wasn't scared," Martin replied hotly.

"You sure acted like you were," Tracey said.

"*Tracey!*" Madame said in a warning tone, and the other students frowned at Tracey, too. Teasing Martin was a big no-no. That was when his "gift" came out, and nobody was eager to see mass destruction or suffer

personal bodily injury, which might easily happen if Martin's superstrength kicked in. Of course, Tracey wouldn't have to worry if Martin went on one of his rampages. She could always disappear. Personally, Ken thought she had the most interesting gift of all of them.

"Let's get back to the subject," Madame said. "Amanda, could you give us a brief synopsis of what happened to some of you?"

"We were kidnapped," she said, "by this woman named Clare and two men."

Tracey supplied the names. "Howard and George."

"Yeah, whatever," Amanda said dismissively. "They were just flunkies. Clare was in charge. Anyway, they wanted us to rob a bank for them. They took Carter first, then Tracey, Martin, and Sarah. And Emily." Madame nodded. "And they chose each of you for a reason. Emily could predict the scene at the bank, Martin could break down doors, Tracey could sneak into the vault without being seen. And Sarah could force people to do whatever the robbers needed them to do."

"Except they didn't really have Sarah," Emily noted. "They got Amanda instead."

Jenna laughed. "I almost feel sorry for the bad guys. Can you imagine getting stuck with Amanda? It's not like she could help anyone rob a bank." She paused. "Actually, I take that back. Maybe she would have helped with the robbery if she thought the vault contained shoes. Or handbags. Otherwise her gift is pretty worthless."

Amanda's obsession with fashion was well known, and everyone laughed—except Carter, of course, who never smiled or laughed or showed any emotion at all on his face. Which made Ken think about something that had puzzled him ever since the kidnappings. "Why did they want Carter?" he asked out loud.

The room fell silent, and everyone turned to look at the figure sitting in the back of the room. As usual, the pale, round-faced boy wasn't perturbed by the sudden attention. His expression was as blank as it always was. Ken knew everyone had to be thinking the same thing: Did Carter even have a gift? Or was he only in this class because he was—well—weird? Charles broke the silence. "I want to know why they didn't kidnap *me*. I've got *real* power."

Charles was known for his bragging, but no one could deny the truth in what he was saying. Being able to make things move with his mind could have made him very useful to someone with criminal intentions.

Emily had an answer for him. “The house didn’t have disabled access, Charles. The doorways were too narrow for a wheelchair and you wouldn’t have been able to get up the stairs.”

“Clearly the kidnappers had done their homework,” Madame said. “They knew who they wanted, who they could use. This is what I want to impress upon you. There are people out there who know all about you. And if those people ever got together and pooled their information . . .”

Sarah spoke. “You’re saying we’re all at risk.”

“Exactly,” Madame replied.

“Except Ken,” Charles piped up.

Madame frowned. “Why do you say that, Charles?” “Dead people talk to him—big deal! How is that going to help a criminal?”

Martin joined in. “Yeah, his gift is totally useless.”

“You don’t know that,” Madame declared. “I’m sure there are people who would find Ken’s gift extremely interesting.” She looked at Ken, as if she wanted him to back her up.

Ken just shrugged. Because in all honesty, he pretty much agreed with both Martin and Charles on this subject.

Madame continued. “Now, I’d like you all to share your thoughts on how you can best protect yourselves from exploitation.”

Several hands went up, but Ken’s wasn’t one of them. As far as he was concerned, he’d rather learn how to protect himself from his own gift. From the very beginning, when he realized he had this gift, it had been nothing but a headache.

At first he thought he could use it to help a certain dead person with a problem left unresolved on earth, and he had tried—he’d really tried—to respond to this person’s needs. But the result had been disastrous, and now he, Ken, had an ongoing problem to deal with. He hadn’t been bothered by it much lately, but there was no telling when the problem would pop up again. Just thinking about the possibility gave him a headache, and he pushed it out of his mind. Okay, maybe there had been a couple of times when his gift had been useful. He’d been able to alert Jenna to the fact that the man who claimed to be her father was a fraud after Ken got a message from beyond the grave that confirmed it. And he’d learned the whereabouts of a guy who’d helped kidnap some of Ken’s classmates when the kidnapper’s late mother told Ken where to find her son.

But events like that were rare. Most of the time the voices made demands. And ever since that first demand, the one that turned into a mess, he’d made every effort to ignore them. It wasn’t easy. There were so many dead people, so many sad stories. Many of the voices wanted him to

communicate a message to someone left behind. A man might ask him to apologize to a friend for something he'd done when he was alive. A woman would ask him to tell her husband that she'd loved him. A thief who'd repented might want him to return money he'd stolen, and other people asked Ken to deliver souvenirs. One time, there had been a man who wanted him to tell the police that his death wasn't an accident—that his ex-wife had killed him. But Ken didn't want to get involved. He'd done that once, and he was still paying the price. Besides, how could he do what they asked?

Excuse me, miss, but your dead grandfather thinks your boyfriend is no good.

Excuse me, officer, but do you remember the man who died when he fell down the stairs? And you thought it was an accident? Well, I know for a fact that his ex-wife pushed him.

They wouldn't believe him. How could he possibly explain what he knew without telling them how he got the information? And then they'd think he was nuts. Besides, as Madame was constantly telling them, they should never let anyone know about their gifts.

So if Ken couldn't do anything with his gift, his only option was to get rid of it, to make every effort to silence the voices. And he'd been getting a little better at it. Pleading, arguing, ordering the spirits to go away and leave him alone was beginning to have an effect. He had to be tough with them, get angry—even nasty sometimes. He hated being rude, but what else could he do?

Ken . . . Hey, Ken, what's up, man? Are you there? Can you listen?

Ken slumped back in his seat. This was the one voice he could never order to leave him alone.

Yeah, I'm listening.

And as the voice in his head began to talk, Ken's thoughts went back to how it all began for him . . .