

GIFTED
The Super Seven – Book 2
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Chapter 1 - Deep in the Woods

Thirteen-year-old Chrissy had always known she could read people's minds. Oh, and she could do a few neat tricks such as levitating small objects. But all of that seemed of very little importance as she found herself face to face with a huge, brown bear!

She had been picking berries from a large saskatoon bush for almost an hour. Hearing noises from the other side of the bush, she had assumed it was one of her sisters. But no. As she picked her way round to the other side, she finally saw the cause of the noises. A bear. Happily eating the purple berries from the branches with its huge mouth. She stood frozen for a moment, just staring. The bear didn't seem to notice her as it continued its berry feast. She looked down at the full pail of saskatoons in her hand. She had heard that it was wise to leave what you carried behind to make good your escape...but these berries were for mother! They were going to have pie!

Slowly, Chrissy backed her way round to the other side of the bush. Then, despite her mother's repeated warnings about not running from wild animals, she sprinted from the bush and up the steps of the small cottage. She threw open the door and then shoved it closed with both hands. Chrissy turned to see the wide, startled blue eyes of her mother.

"Mom!" she gasped. "A bear! Outside!"

Inward laughter sprang up, replacing the building panic. Her mother smiled.

"Of course there are bears! We're living in the middle of nowhere, Chrissy. Animals still live out here." Her mother's laughter calmed her racing heart. *We are safe. We are safe.* Her mother also had the gift.

Chrissy moved into the kitchen and set the berries on the counter. She gazed out the large picture window. She saw the bush where she had been picking berries but she didn't see the bear.

"There really is a bear out there, Mom. Right on the other side of that bush," she said, pointing.

"Oh, I believe you." Her mother studied her for a long moment as Chrissy continued to look outside. "Chrissy...you look so much like your father. Of the three of you girls, you remind me of him the most. Your thick dark hair, your dark eyes, even the freckles on your nose..." She clutched her hands together; her fingers seemed intent on having a war with one another. *It's too bad you're not more like him.*

Chrissy turned on her mother. "I'm glad I'm not like him! He abandoned us, Mom. I'm never going to be like him!"

"Chrissy," her mother reached for her, "I just meant...it's too bad you're gifted. My third and last daughter...I had hoped you would escape that curse."

"Mom, no!" she protested. "I love what I am. I love being like you."

"But if you weren't like me," her mother whispered, "I could keep you out of danger."

Chrissy and her sisters had been home-schooled and had experienced very little of the outside world. The Gifted weren't appreciated by most 'normal' people. And it didn't help that most of the Gifted used their special abilities for selfish gain. Many of the Gifted had become criminals. When their father had left, their mother had sold their little house in the city and bought this cabin, deep in the woods, far away from people.

"He did what he had to do to protect us," her mother said calmly, smoothing the apron she wore over her floral print dress. "Don't be angry with him, Chrissy."

"He left us, Mom. Never visits. Never even calls. He must not love us anymore."

"Chrissy, that's not true..." *Your father...he's a good man.*

She hugged her mother then; the concern and sorrow coming from the older woman was just too much to bear. *All will be well, Mother. I am glad for what I am. And, one day, you will see... I have been made right.* She stroked her mother's hair as she cried. They were almost the same height now. Chrissy would protect her mother, just as her mother had always protected her. Evil might come but it wouldn't win. She wouldn't let it. Then she turned away from that line of thought. No use dreaming up trouble.

Then I wouldn't have to send you away, too. Chrissy almost didn't catch the stray thought as she worked to master her own emotions.

"Send us away?" She pulled back to look into her mother's face.

"My child...I'm sorry. I'm going to send you and your sisters to boarding school. It's just...safer."

Chrissy's tears began to flow then, too, as she hugged her mother again. She and her sisters had never been separated from their mother, not even for one night.

"I don't agree!" said Chrissy. "The best place for me is with my family!" Tears glistened on her cheeks.

"You need to learn how to use your gifts. And you'll have your sisters with you."

At the end of summer, when the leaves were changing color, it was time for the three girls to go away to boarding school. Their mother had decided that she would drive them the six hours to the School for the Gifted and then return to the cabin.

The day they were to leave, the three of them were decked out in their school uniforms: a yellow and teal skirt and a teal blouse. Yellow and teal were the colors of the school, apparently.

"These skirts are just lovely," remarked Tammy.

"Yes," replied Alexia, "and it's going to be nice to meet other kids."

Tammy nodded as they walked out to the car together.

Chrissy thought the uniform was hideous. She would rather wear a nice pair of blue jeans any day. She couldn't believe they were so happy. Her sisters were older, though, sixteen and seventeen. Chrissy was pretty sure what they meant by 'other kids' was boys. But she didn't want to meet 'other kids' or boys. She wanted to stay with her mother in their cabin, deep in the woods. Silently, Chrissy followed them out to the car but she didn't allow their bubbling feelings of optimism to affect her. She didn't want to go.

The long drive to the school's 'secret' location was uneventful. They stayed mainly on the large highway and the traffic wasn't bad. But as soon as her mother turned onto the long driveway that led to the school, Chrissy sensed something was wrong. Very wrong.

Chapter 2 - School for the Gifted

"Mom," gasped Chrissy, "I don't feel well." Another wave of...whatever it was hit her and her stomach lurched. "Mom!" She felt panicky. "Pull over!"

Their mother pulled the antiquated car over and stopped. Chrissy flung the door open. She struggled with her seat belt, then threw herself out of the car and retched violently. The remains of her breakfast sullied the otherwise neatly trimmed lawn.

"Chrissy!" exclaimed her mother. "Are you okay?"

"What's wrong?" asked Alexia, a grave look on her face. She was the strongest telepath of the four of them.

"I..." Chrissy, on her hands and knees beside the car, struggled to breathe. "I don't know." She heaved again but, this time, there was a terrible burning in her throat. Fire suddenly spewed from her mouth and nose. Chrissy tried to catch her breath. Ice formed beneath her knees and palms. Her arms slipped out from beneath her and she hit her head on the ground. Abruptly, she shot up to hover two feet in the air, then dropped back down onto her belly. Chrissy was winded. Her hands and arms winked out of sight! She felt the darkness begin to take her, and she surrendered to it. There was too much in her mind...too much.

When she came to, Chrissy was lying on a cot in a white-walled room. Her mother sat beside the bed, holding her hand. A strange man sat with her mother, talking to her.

"...it seems Chrissy has an extremely rare condition. It has been termed 'proximity associative allocation'."

"What does that mean?" asked her mother, patting Chrissy's hand at seeing that she was waking up.

"Whatever gifts she's near to, those are the gifts she will exhibit. She will display the gifts of all the people she is close to, possibly even within a radius of several miles. It means that she isn't telepathic at all and it is only her condition that caused her brain to mimic that gifting."

"Oh, my!" exclaimed her mother. "Perhaps this isn't the best place for her after all!"

For a moment Chrissy's heart soared, despite her throbbing head. It couldn't be true, what the man was saying. *I want to come home with you!* she thought at her mother.

"Quite the contrary," said the man smoothly. "This is the perfect place for her. It is important that Chrissy learn to cope in society with the Gifted, and, even more importantly, without the Gifted or the gifts. I recommend that she wear a suppressor most of her time here. It is a helmet, lined with lead to block sub-atomic particles from entering her brain. It is the entangled sub-atomic particles, generated by the minds of the Gifted, to which she is susceptible."

"I think we should try whatever you think is best, Mr. Kerberos. You're the principal here so I'm sure you've had experience with these types of things before?"

"Yes, yes, I have. I truly think it's vital that Chrissy be able to thrive in a world where she is not dependent on the gifts of others."

"That makes sense." Her mother nodded.

Chrissy's heart sank. Shock, grief, and dread filled her all at once. To be abandoned here in this strange place and to be deprived of her power of telepathy...and for him to say that she was never telepathic at all...only pilfering the gifts of others...

"I believe I have a suppressor here." Mr. Kerberos walked out the door and they could hear him moving things in the other room.

"Mom!" Chrissy protested. "Please..."

They were interrupted as Mr. Kerberos returned, carrying a bulky white helmet under one arm.

“Ah. Here we are,” he announced. “You may wear this one for now and I’ll have my secretary order you something more fashionable.” The man helped her sit up and put the helmet down over her head. It was too big, heavy, and awkward. Immediately, the headache was gone. The brief relief was followed by a wave of fear. Her fingers scrabbled at the helmet to tear it away. Mr. Kerberos held her wrists.

“No, Chrissy. It’s okay.”

“But I can’t hear anyone!” She burst into tears as she realized what it would mean. *I’m alone.*

Later that day, sitting in the cafeteria by herself, with the heavy helmet on her head, Chrissy pondered her fate. She noticed a boy had approached her otherwise-empty table.

“Hi. Can I sit here?”

He was tall, lanky, and blue-eyed. He had red hair, and freckles stood out on his nose. Chrissy ransacked her brain for his name. They had the same Math class and she was sure she had heard the teacher address him by name.

“Sure...ummm...Cain.” Yes. That was it. Cain.

He scowled and plunked his tray down across from her. “You can call me Michael.”

“Oh, sorry, did I get it wrong?”

“No. My dad named me Cain but I like to go by Michael.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

Michael shrugged. “Because Cain’s a dumb name.” He ate in silence. She watched him wolf down his food but she had no appetite. “You gonna be eating your food?” he asked, staring at her tray.

“No.”

“Can I have it?”

“Knock yourself out.” She slid the tray in his direction. “Is that why you chose to sit here?”

“Nope.” He pushed his tray aside and started in on her food. “Just wanted to meet the other freak in the ‘School for the Gifted’.” The way he said ‘School for the Gifted’ disturbed her. Should she fear this place? She longed to rip the helmet off but Chrissy didn’t want to get in trouble on her first day.

“The other freak?” she echoed.

“Yeah.” He met her gaze. “It’s just the two of us.”

“You’re a freak?” she asked.

“Well, no. I’m normal. But round here, that’s freakish. And my father’s uber-gifted and I was supposed to be his ‘special’ child. Instead, I turned out to be an embarrassment to old Mr. Kerberos.”

“To...the principal? He’s your father?”

“Yup. Anyway...” Michael wiped his mouth with a napkin. He lowered his voice, and their eyes locked, “If it gets too bad...” he pursed his lips and looked around, “let me know. Maybe we can help each other.” And with that, he stood and walked away, leaving her to clean up his tray as well as her own.

Over the next two weeks, Chrissy settled into life at the school. Every day had an identical

pattern of repeating classes, even the weekends. Her new helmet came in. It was sleek, shiny-black, and much lighter than the other one. Chrissy added several glossy pink flower stickers and studied the effect in the mirror. It still looked weird. She hated it. Each student got a private room at the School for the Gifted and, for that, she was very thankful. She had been assigned a special, lead-lined room that was supposed to shield her from the entangled brainwave particles caused by the Gifted. But, as she had discovered on her first night, it didn't work. Thoughts, feelings, and new senses had assaulted her the moment she removed the helmet. In the beginning, it had frightened her and, that first night, she had slept with her helmet on. Chrissy had thought about telling Mr. Kerberos that the room was defective but now she was glad she had thought better of it.

Shucking the helmet and her clothing, she got ready for sleep. She donned the now too-small, pink pajamas her mother had bought her when she turned twelve. Then Chrissy sat down on her bed in the darkened room and let her mind fill. First, she tried reaching out to the minds of her sisters. They were both asleep. They were happy. Then Chrissy focused on a pen that sat on the desk across the room.

The pen rose and then flew in a slow circle above her head. She liked to start with the easy stuff. She'd started to learn telekinesis at the same time she'd started to learn how to walk so this was a piece of cake. Quietly, the pen glided back down to rest on to the desk. She grinned in the darkness. Now, to practice her new skills. Oh sure, Mr. Kerberos had said they weren't her gifts. But she was gifted. She knew she had been designed right. So she would practice her gift - the gift of sharing in the giftings of others.

She summoned a flame, the size of a candle, and let it dance above her outstretched palm. After watching the flickering yellow light for several moments, she drew water from the air about her and doused the flame with a small splash. She froze the water mid-air before it reached her sheets. Chrissy picked up the now frozen splash with her mind, carried it into the bathroom, and set it in the sink. There, she gave the ice a quick-thaw, and the water trickled down the drain. Once she had begun practicing, bending the elements was almost as easy for her as the telepathic skill set.

Chrissy had saved the two skills she found the most difficult for last. But they were her favorites. She stood in front of the bathroom mirror as she tried to focus her mind in the new way. Chrissy shot upwards and her head hit the ceiling with a dull thud. She suppressed a gasp of pain. She fell straight down but managed to land on her feet and avoid hitting the counter. That was enough for one night. She rubbed her head. Too bad she couldn't wear her helmet for safety. However did the flyers do it? They always seemed to pull off such graceful maneuvers.

Chrissy went to bed and lay absolutely still. Focusing more and more inward, she drifted toward sleep. She reached for the elusive switch in her mind. Just as she grasped it, sleep took her consciousness. As her breathing pattern changed to deep sleep, Chrissy winked out of sight."

Chapter 3 - No!

Chrissy's mouth fell open, despite her resolve to show nothing, no matter what he might say. "May I please phone my mother?" She had been called down to the principal's office where she now sat on an uncomfortable, orange, plastic-backed chair.

"There's no need. I have the signed permission notice from your mother right here." Mr. Kerberos patted a paper on his desk. "Chrissy, if this operation is successful, you will be able to go home to your mother. You will be able to live a normal life."

Chrissy concentrated on not responding. She willed her emotions toward calm.

"You don't have to worry, my dear." He stood and came around from behind the desk and put his hand on her shoulder. "The chances of something going wrong with the surgery are very small. And the chance of permanent brain damage is almost next to nil. Wouldn't it be nice not to have to wear that helmet all the time?"

Chrissy swallowed hard and tried not to flinch away from his touch. "Yeah...I guess."

"That's a good girl," he said patting her. "There's nothing to worry about. This will turn out for the best. You'll see. We'll schedule the surgery for just as soon as possible - likely within the next couple of days."

Again, Chrissy willed away her words and focused on her thumbnail to keep from responding.

"You may go to your room. It's almost light's out," Mr. Kerberos said finally, moving back to sit behind his desk once more.

Shock numbed her mind and carried her from his office down the halls to her dorm room. Sitting on her bed, she mentally reviewed her situation and considered her options. No. They would **not** be cutting out a piece of her brain. She had been born for a purpose and having her brain dissected was not it. Then she thought of Michael. He had offered to help. But could she trust him? He was Mr. Kerberos' son. It came down to either trusting Michael or escaping alone. Chrissy sat in silence for a moment. Her mother wanted her to have the operation. Chrissy couldn't go back to her mother now. And all alone...she wouldn't know where to go. She decided that she would trust Michael.

Chrissy took the helmet off and let the hateful thing drop to the floor. She watched herself in the mirror as she winked out of sight. Only minutes later, she was in the boys' dorm, searching for Michael. She sensed at each door, listening for his brain. Chrissy didn't even know how she'd be able to tell when she found him, as she'd never 'heard' him before. The worst of it, though, was dodging the boys who tromped down the hall. Invisible as she was, her cover would be totally blown if one of them knocked into her.

She stood outside one of the dorm rooms. From within, she felt loneliness tolling...anger and...and a deep-down resolve to do right. Chrissy hoped it was Michael as she let herself in and slammed the door behind her.

"What?" He sat up. "Who's there?"

Chrissy released and let Michael see her.

"Okay," she said, "I'm ready. Let's get out of here!"

Michael nodded and stood. He walked to his dresser and pulled a leather satchel from the top drawer. She sensed some fear in him but, mostly, overwhelming determination. They **would** escape.

"Okay, I'm ready too. I've been ready to get outta here for a long time." He stood looking at her expectantly.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Money," he replied. "Well, more specifically, it's gold. Gold coins."

"Gold coins?" she asked. "Where did you get them?"

"I won them in a friendly, little competition. Look," he said abruptly, "are we were going to get out of here or did you just want to stand around talking?"

"I want to go," Chrissy affirmed.

"Okay then," he snapped.

They stood looking at each other.

"So..." she said, not understanding the reason for the silence.

"You've got to be kidding me!" said Michael. "You don't have a plan? You came here without a plan?!"

"You said if I needed help, I should come to you," she reminded him. "I thought you would help me. Don't *you* have a plan?"

Michael sighed loudly. "Look, you're the uber-super, and I'm just the stupid kid with no gifts."

"You're the nice kid," Chrissy countered, "who offered to help me...Michael...Mr. Kerberos wants me to have surgery...They want to cut out part of my brain."

Michael's pale face got even whiter. "I will help you, Chrissy, and they won't catch us," he asserted. "Let's think." His blue eyes wandered to the ceiling as his mind flipped through the possibilities, searching for a plan. "What can you do?" he asked, after a while. Chrissy could see his ideas coming together like pieces of a puzzle.

"I can do pretty much anything anyone here can do," she replied, "so long as we're in range."

Michael shot her a dark look and, even though she could read his thoughts, she couldn't guess its meaning.

"Fine then," he said briskly. "Let's just fly, cloaked, directly from my window for as far as we can, until we're off school grounds at least. And then we can figure things out from there."

He flung his window open as wide as it would go. The sun had almost set; the faint glow in the west lingered just at the horizon. The School for the Gifted was an old building with a decorative stone ledge beneath the windows, wrapping its way around the structure, complete with the heads of lions and eagles. Chrissy hesitated. Should she tell him that she had only practiced flying in her room, that she had never done it from so high? She moved to the window and looked down. His room was on the seventh floor. It was unlikely they would survive a fall that far.

"Let's go," he commanded.

Chrissy felt the confidence he was exuding and was filled with courage. She could do this. Chrissy moved to the window and clambered out onto the ledge. Michael came out behind her. Making a quick flip in her mind, she wrapped them both in cloak.

"What direction shall we travel in?" she asked.

"North. I've heard tell of a mystical resort north of here. I've always wanted to go."

"Your father doesn't know you want to go there, does he? We don't want him to be able to guess where to look for us."

"My father doesn't know a thing about what I want," Michael said, waves of anger flowing from him.

"North it is, then."

Slowly, the black anger dissipated.

“You will have to hold onto me very tightly,” she warned.

“I understand,” he said. “Perhaps I should wrap my arms around your middle; that way I’ll be riding on your back once you’re flying.”

“That sounds right,” she agreed. He leaned down a little behind her, put his arms around her waist, and held on tight. Chrissy had a sudden urge to giggle but she suppressed it. She had to concentrate. She focused inward. They lurched off the ledge, upwards, at a crazy angle. Then they began to plummet toward the ground. Still she felt Michael’s arms, wrapped tightly about her middle, and his determination. They **would** make it. They **would** get away.

Chrissy leveled out just before striking the earth. Then, slowly, she brought them up, over the tree line.

“Wow! Some ride!” he said, shifting a little for comfort but still keeping his grip on her.

She could breathe. They were okay. The full moon lit their way as they skimmed over the forest. She came out over a farmer’s field and saw a river off to her right. The white light of the moon played upon the water like a silver ribbon in the darkness. Chrissy shuddered and they dropped a few feet. She began to lose connection with that which held them aloft.

“Get us lower!” Michael yelled.

Chrissy turned back the way they had come. Her control grew stronger again and she brought them down neatly on the edge of the farmer’s field.

“Phew! That was a close one!” said Michael, releasing her. “Good flying, by the way. Excellent job.”

“Thanks.”

“Come on,” he said, as he set off across the field. “We’ve got a very long walk ahead of us.”

She marveled at his long strides and hurried to catch up. She knew she had been right to trust him.

Chapter 4 - Mountain Springs Resort and Spa

It was a steep climb up the path to the hillside resort. Chrissy and Michael had been on the run for almost two days - walking steadily when it was light out and resting when it was dark. They had slept one night in a barn and one night in a field of long grass. They had encountered no one on the way.

"Is this the only road?" Chrissy complained. "My feet are killing me and my shoes are almost slipping off."

Michael stopped abruptly. "Do them up tighter, then."

Chrissy sighed as she saw he was waiting for her to comply. She untied her laces and then cinched them up tightly.

"There is another road," he said, "through that ditch and beyond the hedge of trees. The service road. But it's just as steep and that's where the heavy trucks drive. This is the best path. I've looked this stuff up online when I was back at the School for the Gifted. I've always wanted to try to get to this resort."

Once Chrissy finished, they resumed their trek.

"Why did you want to come here, anyway?" she asked him finally. The days of silence and his brooding were beginning to wear on her. That and all the walking, compounded by the non-stop silence in her head, made her feel very unhappy.

"The waters in the pools of this place are said to be healing waters. My father...he always maintained that I would grow into my gifts. That I **had** to be gifted because he is and my mother was. I'm hoping these waters will be able to unlock whatever's inside me...if there is anything inside. This is my last and best hope."

She was quiet then. The heat of the day made Chrissy feel faint. She had no hat and they had brought nothing to carry water with them. With her next step, she swayed a little.

Michael noticed and stopped to stare at her. "You don't look well. Let's rest for a few minutes."

Gratefully, she followed him to the shade of a tree at the side of the road.

"Sit down," he instructed.

With relief, Chrissy sank down into the soft grass. She leaned her back against the rough bark of a thick tree and closed her eyes. Sleep overtook her and she slipped into blissful unawareness. When she awoke, the sun was already setting in the western valley below. The clouds were pink and the light was golden. Michael was sitting near her, studying her face. She blinked in surprise at seeing him so close.

"Finally," he said gruffly. "Let's go. I wanna get up this hill before dark."

"Why didn't you wake me sooner?" Chrissy protested.

But Michael made no answer. Soon they had gained the crown of the hill and stood beside sand-colored, stone walls surrounding the resort. The thick wooden doors of the gate were still open but black metal bars blocked the entranceway. Michael shook the bars.

"It's locked."

"Call for someone?" Chrissy suggested.

"Good idea." He looked at her expectantly.

Chrissy sighed. "Hello?" She called into the small courtyard beyond. "Hello? Is anyone there?"

A very tall man, at least nine feet in height, stepped into view.

"How can I help you?" he asked placidly, upon reaching the gate.

"I've heard about the healing pools you have at this resort. We'd like to book a room for a few days." Michael retrieved the small bag of gold from an inner pocket and held it up to the tall man.

Without so much as another look, the man removed a locking bar from the gate and opened it to admit them. The daylight was almost completely gone.

"This way," said the man, "I'll show you to your room." He led them to a luxurious sleeping area, hung with tapestries and lit with oil-burning lamps. Chrissy took off her shoes and felt the softness of the thick burgundy carpet beneath her feet.

"Ahhhhhh," Chrissy exclaimed as she made her way to one of the two beds. "It's nice here."

Michael closed and locked the door. Chrissy poured herself a cool glass of water from a pitcher on the table.

"Let's sleep," Michael said. He flounced down on the other bed, kicked off his shoes, and threw off his coat. He didn't bother to climb under the covers.

Chrissy finished the water and snuffed out the lamps before allowing herself to sink down into the soft bed. Again, she was asleep almost instantly.

The sunlight filtering through the high window was already a strong yellow when Chrissy awoke. And Michael was no longer in the room. She jerked out of bed. Chrissy was not used to being alone. She hurried out of the room in search of Michael. The hallways were quiet but she heard something from beyond an archway that led out into the sunlight. Following the sound, Chrissy tried to calm her racing heart. Stepping out into the light, she saw seven pools of clear turquoise water in a large open area. The pools were cut directly into the sand-colored stone. She saw men in some of the pools and women in others. She noticed the tall innkeeper relaxing in the water...and there was Michael! He grinned as she approached. Wearing a pair of shorts, he sat neck deep in the water.

"It's fantastic here," he said, looking up at her. "Some of the pools are hot and some are cool."

"Yeah?" she queried, looking deep into his blue eyes. She couldn't tell if that meant he thought it was 'working'. With so many people nearby, it wouldn't do to ask. She hated being without her ability to read people. It was like missing an arm. He was grinning at her. Chrissy decided she liked the way his eyes crinkled at the edges when he smiled. She smiled back, shucked off some of her outer clothing, and slipped into the pool beside him. There was a gasp from one of the women in a different pool, and several people muttered under their breath. Michael's grin broadened.

"I think you just broke a rule," he explained. "Typically, men and women here bathe separately."

Chrissy felt a blush burning on her face, despite the coolness of the pool.

"It doesn't matter," said the innkeeper from an adjacent pool. "You have different customs. We welcome you."

The other patrons averted their eyes. Chrissy pulled her head under the clear water and resurfaced. The water felt wonderful. Perhaps it would do them some good.

Later that morning, after a scrumptious fruit breakfast in the outer courtyard, they returned to the pools. Chrissy still had not had a chance to speak with Michael privately, to ask him if he felt any different. This time, Michael chose a warm pool and Chrissy followed him in. She pointedly ignored the glares from several of the women and sat close to him on the bench cut from stone. The mountain air was cool, so that, even during the heat of the day, the warm pools didn't feel too hot.

The sound of heavy trucks approaching broke the tranquility of the morning. Shouting in a language she didn't understand overwhelmed the sounds of the coming trucks. Men spoke rapidly to one another and leapt from the pools. They were pulling clothing on as they rushed toward the main gate. The women, apparently having been told something by their men, scurried for the shelter of the inn. The tall man was also out of the water, carefully drying himself with a large white towel.

"What's happening?" Chrissy asked Michael in a low voice.

"I don't know," he replied. "Let's check it out."

They got out of the pool and jerked on the white robes provided by the inn. Still barefoot, they went in the direction that the men had gone. They found them, now armed with a variety of crude weapons, at the main gate. Chrissy and Michael stood with the group and looked down into the valley. No one was on the path leading to the Mountain Springs Resort.

"They're on the service road," explained one of the men in a thick accent. "It's the Black Empire."

The tall man came toward the group, also wearing a white robe.

"Come away from there, my brothers. Let us close the door and perhaps they will not breach this fortress."

But the men made no move to comply. They only leered out the doorway.

"Come," he said again, and turned away from them, toward the inner courtyard where the pools were.

Men dressed in black, with covered heads and faces, rushed up from the bushes toward the resort.

"Come on," said Michael, taking Chrissy's arm, guiding her away. "Let's get out of here!" They followed the tall man into the pool area. Scuffling and shouting began behind them.

"It's best not to rush toward trouble," said the innkeeper, closing the heavy wooden inner door, blocking the sight of men getting thrashed, and muffling their cries. "Rather, let it come to you, if it must."

They stood with the innkeeper, waiting. The howls of agony ceased and all was silent.

"Go inside the inn," said the tall man quietly. "You will be safe there."

Michael didn't move.

"I have turned them back, time after time," said the innkeeper. "I will do so again."

Finally, Michael relented and led Chrissy into the building. "How will he be able to vanquish that whole army alone?" he lamented aloud as they walked down the short hall to their room.

"He said he's done it before," said Chrissy.

"Yes but...how?"

They went into their room and locked the door. Chrissy sat down on one of the beds and Michael came to sit next to her. She reached for his hand and held it. He didn't say anything but gripped her hand in return. Chrissy felt a heat rising from her face. It seemed odd...she didn't think she felt embarrassed to touch him. All at once, she felt as though she couldn't breathe. Could he really have such an effect on her? They had touched before. Then, with a sickening feeling of dread, she lurched away. The feelings weren't because of him at all. She was changing.

"Open the door, Michael." The words were a struggle. Chrissy collapsed onto the floor. Her head resting on her knees, she felt as though the world were spinning. She heard the click of the dead bolt sliding aside and the whoosh of the door being flung open. She stood and staggered

toward the exit. Chrissy didn't see Michael anywhere. The last thing she remembered, as the color faded from her vision, was feeling thankful he had the sense to stay out of the way.

Chrissy awoke, feeling pain all over and seeing the black and white image of a terrible beast nearby and the arms of another such creature even closer. And she felt...rage. It was a battle, where the men that came at her were like insects to be slapped away. Her conscious mind closed off again, leaving only an animal behind.

Then she was lying on her back in the outer courtyard, eyes open, staring up into the sky. Chrissy sat up and saw the innkeeper in a fresh, white robe.

"What happened?" she asked, looking down at her own robe that was torn and...was that blood? "What have I done!?" she gasped.

The tall man moved toward her, as if remembering her for the first time. "Only what was needed, my child." He bent down to help her stand. "Only what was necessary to drive the rebels away and save all of those inside."

She squeezed her eyes shut but the dreaded memory of what had happened did not come.

"Go and rest," the man commanded.

Michael took her arm and gently led her away. She leaned on him as he guided her to their room. Chrissy took off the sullied robe and fell into the bed. As she drifted into sleep once more, she thought she heard Michael saying that they would leave the next morning. She was glad but...where would they go?

Chapter 5 - To Slum City

The next morning, Chrissy and Michael sat eating fruit with the innkeeper in his private courtyard. The platter was filled with the choicest of fare. Chrissy selected a strawberry and popped it into her mouth. The innkeeper was drinking a large cup of fresh coffee. It smelled delicious but, having tasted the vile brew before, Chrissy had opted for milk instead.

"So," said the tall man to Chrissy, "I finally meet one. You are Aylward."

"Aylward?" she echoed.

"Yes. One able to wield all the gifts. Your kind is meant to be a noble protector of our people in times of need."

Chrissy nodded as she pondered his words. *Yes. A protector.* That was what she wanted to be. She glanced at Michael. The expression on his face was dark and angry.

"My gift..." continued the tall man, "seems a violent one. But it can be useful. And thank you for your assistance yesterday."

She nodded again, trying not to bring up those memories.

"The pools," interrupted Michael, changing the topic, "do they truly have healing power?"

The tall man laughed. "No. Not exactly. The natural springs that flow from this mountain do produce very special water. It is a natural inhibitor. These waters suppress the giftings but only while the person is wet."

"Oh!" cried Chrissy.

"So now you see why this place is so important to me." He smiled faintly. "I used to have difficulty controlling my gift. But here...here I'm not a danger to anyone. Here I can make it stop."

Chrissy nodded. "This place...it must be such a relief to you." She had experienced his gift and it frightened her.

"Yes," said the man, solemnly.

"Why do the rebels keep coming?" asked Michael.

"They want the water too. The rebels have been trying to get it for over ten years. They want to use it to wipe out Slum City."

"Slum City?" Michael prompted.

"It's a city near the sea, comprised almost entirely of the Gifted. It's a bad place with no laws. But still...to wipe them all out...the innocent along with the guilty...that must not happen."

"How would the rebels use the water to wipe them out?"

"My guess would be that they would use water bombers to disperse it over the entire city. Then the people would be defenseless since their giftedness is the city's only protection."

"That's where we should go," said Michael.

"What?" asked Chrissy, looking at him sharply.

"You would be safe there," said the tall man. "The place is a haven for those Gifted seeking refuge from persecution. Whenever Black Empire or government forces come near, the whole city shifts and winks out of sight. I have seen it with my own eyes. And you would be well able to protect yourself, Chrissy, with every gift in existence at your disposal."

Slowly, Chrissy nodded. "To Slum City, then."

"I will provide a car and driver to take you there." He held out his hand. Chrissy reached out and the tall man held her hand for a moment. "You are special, Aylward. Follow the One to your destiny. Do not be afraid." He released her, stood, and left to make arrangements for the car.

Michael was scowling. How she wished to have her telepathy back!

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing." Michael avoided her gaze as he bit into a slice of watermelon.

When the car was ready, they said goodbye to the innkeeper, just outside the front gate of the resort. The tall man shook Chrissy's hand and then Michael's.

He held Michael's hand longer than expected while he looked down at the youth. "Take care of her," he said finally. "You, too, have an important role to play."

A sleek, shiny limo rolled up to the gate.

"The driver is a friend of mine and a friend to the Gifted," said the innkeeper. "You have nothing to fear."

"Oh, wow!" exclaimed Chrissy.

Michael shrugged. "You've seen one limo, you've seen them all."

The limo driver got out of the car and held the door open for them. Michael and Chrissy clambered into the back.

Once the car was in motion, Chrissy looked at Michael again.

"What is wrong, Michael?"

"Nothing. I don't want to talk about it."

"I think you should. Sometimes talking about things helps."

He clenched his fists, then unclenched them, and looked out the window. Silence followed. Chrissy looked out the window on her side. She watched the grass and trees streak by, as the car sped down the mountain.

"My father...he's like that too."

"Like what?" She turned back to look at him but Michael deliberately continued to stare out the window. "Like what?" she repeated.

"Like you."

"He's like me?" she asked, not comprehending.

"He likes to pretend that he has several giftings but, in reality, he can use them all, just like you. He uses the gifts of others. That's why he started the School for the Gifted in the first place. So he could be all-powerful."

"But...I don't understand," said Chrissy. "Then why would he say I needed surgery? Why would he say that I needed to be 'fixed'?"

"I don't know," said Michael. "Maybe he didn't want the competition."

Chrissy tried to let his words process. She felt like she was slipping down into darkness. "Please don't be angry at me, Michael." She reached across the empty seat between them and took his hand. He held her hand but didn't look at her.

"I'm not angry with you," he said quietly. "It's just that...you're everything my father wanted me to be and...now I have to finally accept the truth. I'm not gifted. And never will be."

Chrissy squeezed his hand and slid closer to him on the bench. "Everyone was made for a purpose, Michael. Gifted or not. You were made right."

"Thanks," he said quietly and gave her hand a squeeze back. "I'm glad we're friends."

The window dividing the front seat from the back of the limo slid down. "We're almost at Slum City," said the driver.

Chrissy could see it. The city was vast; she couldn't even see the sea - only the buildings, as if the city stretched to the end of the world. She had never seen such a place. Then she felt new senses and awarenesses filling her mind. There were Gifted nearby. Many of them!

Chapter 6 - Trouble in Slum City

The limo let Chrissy and Michael out at the edge of the city.

"Let's hold hands," Chrissy suggested. "That way, I can wrap us both in cloak more easily. We should try to stay out of trouble."

"No problem," Michael said and held out his hand. "And you don't have to make excuses. I don't have to be telepathic to know you like me."

Chrissy took his hand and glanced at him. He was grinning at her. And, all at once, she realized that she could hear his thoughts. *I like you!*

They walked that way for several hours, into the heart of Slum City. Chrissy touched the minds in the houses and shops as they walked. She was searching for the presence of good. They needed to find someone they could trust.

"Mmm..." said Michael, "I smell fresh baking. I'm starved. We still have some money. Let's see if we can buy something."

He led them to the source of the sweet aroma.

"A bakery!" said Michael, releasing her hand and pulling open the door. "Let's go in."

Chrissy quickly let them become visible. Then she entered first. Baked treasures of all kinds lined the shelves. Behind the counter stood a round, old woman. She smiled kindly.

"It's the first time I've seen you," she said. "And you look like you've come a long way. Here." She opened a large glass jar and pulled out two shortbread cookies with pink frosting. "Have a cookie."

Chrissy felt no ill will from the woman so she moved to accept. Michael followed her lead.

"I'm Anna," said the woman, "and this is my bakery."

Chrissy was halfway through the cookie when she realized what had struck her as odd. "You have no gift!" she blurted.

"Of course I do." Anna smiled. "Baking is my gift."

With the cookie finished, Chrissy wandered around the bakeshop while Michael continued to sit on the stool near the counter.

"Do you two have a place to stay?"

"No," answered Michael.

"No folks?"

"It's complicated...It's like we're refugees, I guess."

"I have a living area above the store," said Anna. "There's a spare room where the two of you could sleep. My delivery boy quit three days ago, so I'm looking for new help. You could work for me in exchange for food and lodging."

"What kind of work would we do?" asked Chrissy, returning to the counter.

"Your main job would be delivering baked goods to different areas of the city. And you could help out around the shop on days when there aren't many deliveries to be made."

"That sounds fantastic!" said Michael. Chrissy nodded.

Anna showed them around upstairs and offered them a loaf of fresh white bread.

On their second day of working, they had a little trouble with a delivery. Two thugs stepped out of a shadow, on the street in front of them.

"What you got in the package?" asked the taller of them.

"It's only bread," said Michael, holding the package tighter to his chest.

"We like bread," said the man, reaching for the package.

Chrissy and Michael backed away from the men.

“Oh, you don’t want to do that,” said the man. He put his hands out in front of him and conjured a large fireball. “You give that package to my friend or you’ll have this coming your way.”

Chrissy could see that Michael was not handing over the package. Clearly, what this situation needed was water, lots of it. The city around them thrummed with the powers of the gifted. She concentrated on a spot above the men.

He followed her gaze and noticed the cloud forming above him. The man hurled the fireball at them. Chrissy shielded herself and Michael with ice and water. The man flung a few more small flaming orbs before a large amount of water splashed down onto the two men. Then Chrissy flung several ice globs, freezing the mass of liquid and trapping the men to their shoulders.

“You’ll pay for this,” said the smaller one, writhing.

Chrissy shrugged as she sent water to douse the half dozen little fires that burned in the garbage on the street.

“Let’s go,” said Michael.

“Do you think they’ll be okay?” asked Chrissy.

“Sure,” said Michael. “Look, he’s using his heat to melt the ice already.”

They ran, then, and made the delivery in record time. Unfortunately, the two guys just happened to belong to the most powerful gang in Slum City: Rex’s Doom or RD for short. That same day, Rex himself paid a little visit to the bakery.

Michael and Chrissy were in the back when they heard the bakery door fling inwards with a crack! Chrissy felt for Anna. Her demeanor was calm. They moved to where they could hear what was said but Chrissy pulled Michael back so he would not be seen.

“What can I do for you, Rex?” Anna asked loudly. Confidence remained strong in her mind as the seconds ticked by and there was no answer.

“Where are the two new kids?” he growled.

“Oh, you mean my delivery kids? I expect they’re about somewhere. Why?”

“They had a run-in with two of my boys. They’re coming with me, Anna.”

“Oh, no, they’re not,” she retorted.

“Look, old woman, you don’t even have any gifts. You can’t stop me.”

“Rex, don’t you take another step,” Anna chided. “This is my shop.”

“Move out of my way!” came the deep, angry reply.

“The only way for you to get those children is to come through me first. And you know I’m the best baker in the city. What would you do without me?”

Shockingly, they heard a deep chuckle.

“Very well, Anna. Very well. But this isn’t over. Those two kids of yours had better watch out!” And then they heard the bells ring again as the front door opened and closed. They burst out, only to see Anna nonchalantly wiping the counter.

“You stood up to Rex!” Michael exclaimed.

“Of course. Couldn’t let him take you, could I?”

“But you stood up to Rex!” he said again. “And you won! And you have no gifts!”

“Oh, you and your ‘gifts’.” Anna chuckled softly. “I have all the ‘gifts’ I need.”

Two weeks later, Michael and Chrissy were coming home from making a delivery. They had been very careful since Rex’s visit to the bakery and had managed to avoid any further run-ins.

“I like it here,” Chrissy announced, as they walked down the narrow, litter-lined street.

“Me too.” Michael grinned at her. He had been doing more of that lately.

“I miss my family,” Chrissy continued, “but...I could get used to living here.”

“I don’t miss anyone,” replied Michael, kicking an empty soda can.

Then she felt it. She touched his arm and they stopped. “Trouble,” she whispered. Two of Rex’s thugs were only half a block away and gaining.

“Run!” shouted Michael. They sprinted toward the sanctuary of the bakery.

They turned the corner into the alleyway behind Anna’s Bakery. Rex’s goons were too far behind to catch them. She felt them break off the pursuit. Chrissy would have breathed a sigh of relief but all the running had left her gasping.

Suddenly, fingers as hard as steel bit into her bicep. She cried out as someone shoved something heavy onto her head and bound her hands behind her back. Her gifted powers clicked off. She was turned around roughly, and she saw four men dressed in black, ninja-like garb. Michael still struggled. It looked as though he might fight them off. Chrissy wiggled against her captor’s grip but he only held her harder. One of the men pulled an electric rod from his belt and zapped Michael in the back. He went limp for a moment, and another man snapped handcuffs onto his wrists. He was captured.

“Your father’s been looking for you, boy,” sneered the man holding her. “But you...” He gave Chrissy a shake. “No one’s ever going to find you.”

Chapter 7 - By Sea

The men placed duct tape over Michael's and Chrissy's mouths and threw them into the back of a black van.

"You'll be going by way of the sea," said the driver over his shoulder. "It really is lovely, this time of year." The men snickered.

Chrissy wasn't sure how long they drove but, finally, the van came to a stop. The men got out. In a few minutes, they came back and slid the van door open. There was the ocean! Chrissy had never seen so much water before. It sparkled in the sunlight. The men grabbed Chrissy and Michael and shoved them from the van onto a pebbly beach and then onto a wharf. Empty boats rocked in the waves and, other than a lone seagull, silence reigned. At the end of the wharf bobbed a large, sleek-looking inflatable craft, with a big motor on the back.

Chrissy felt a rough shove from behind and she fell into the boat. Michael lay sprawled beside her. The ninja men stepped lightly into the watercraft and took their seats. In a moment, the engine roared to life. Soon they were zipping along, skipping over the waves. Chrissy looked out over the water and smiled as the wind whipped the hair from her face. Even here...there were things to be thankful for. She felt a tug and noticed that one of the men was tying her legs together. *It doesn't matter*, she told herself. But then she saw what he was tying her to - an anchor.

"She's all set," said the man gruffly.

"Toss her overboard," said the driver.

"No!" cried Michael, lunging toward her.

Chrissy felt herself being hauled up and pushed over the edge of the boat. She heard Michael yelling. Splash! Ice cold water. Chrissy was sinking. As she struggled, the realization came that she would not be able to resurface. Chrissy opened her eyes and saw the sunlight dancing on the water above her. But the light was fading. Fear pulled at her like the anchor tied to her legs, dragging her down into dark panic.

Through the murky water, she saw a shape quickly approaching her. *A shark?* Her lungs were burning now from holding her breath. Whatever was coming was making lots of bubbles. Her oxygen starved mind finally made sense of the form. A scuba diver! Way out here? How could it be possible? Just as she was wondering if she were already unconscious and her mind was imagining hope, the diver pulled up beside her on some sort of underwater propulsion device. He grabbed her with strong arms, stopping her descent. The diver pushed something bubbling toward her mouth. She opened her mouth a little and he fit it inside. Then he filled a mask with bubbles and placed it over her mouth and nose so the water was pushed out. Chrissy took a deep breath through the device in her mouth. Gratefully, she filled her lungs with blessed air. Then the diver pulled a knife from a sheath in his belt. He reached down and cut the rope that tied the anchor to her legs. It fell away. She watched it sink, down, down, down into darkness. The diver looked at her hands behind her back but, seeing handcuffs there, he sheathed the knife again. Carefully, the diver maneuvered her between the water scooter and himself. He turned the device on, and they were propelled forward, pushing quickly though the ice-cold water.

Finally, they came up on a beach. The man hauled her to her feet, pulled off her diving mask, and marched her to the shore. He kicked off his flippers and gathered them up in one hand; he carried the water scooter in the other. The man directed Chrissy toward a blue van parked on the side of the road. He slid the door open.

"Get in."

Chrissy struggled in, her fingers and toes numbed by the terrible cold and her hands still cuffed behind her back. The man got in too and slid the door closed.

Gently, he lifted the helmet from her head. She had forgotten about that. Gifts turned on in her mind again. They must still be close to the city. Telepathy settled back into its place just as the man took off his diving mask. Chrissy gasped.

“Father!”

He grinned. “Are you okay, my darling?” Then, not waiting for an answer, he flipped open a toolbox that was in the back of the van. He pulled out a slender, metal object. “Here.” He moved behind her and, a moment later, her hands were free. “Are you okay?” he asked again. This time his dark brown eyes locked with hers.

“Yes,” she said, icily.

In less than ten minutes, they were driving down the ocean road, with the van’s heater roaring full blast. Chrissy was wearing some of her father’s clothing and was under a thick blanket in the passenger’s seat.

“How did you know I would be there, in the ocean?” she asked, finally.

“I’ve been shadowing Kerberos’ men for weeks, ever since you disappeared from the boarding school, waiting for them to lead me to you.”

Chrissy wasn’t surprised that he was able to find her. She wasn’t surprised that he had access to the equipment needed to save her. He was one of the top men in the agency -the powerful, semi-secret organization supposedly working for the good of mankind.

“I’m surprised you even cared,” she said sharply. Chrissy’s telepathic gift should have been working...but she couldn’t read the man at all. He had to be shielding his mind somehow, either through technology or military training.

“Chrissy,” said her father, “leaving you, your sisters, your mom... and staying away...It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done. I had to save my family, Chrissy. It was the only way. Don’t you understand? Once certain people knew who I was and that I worked for the agency...I became a target. I couldn’t put you all at risk. The only way for me to protect you was to leave.”

“But you never even called.” Tears filled her eyes. Suddenly, she could feel his emotions, calling to her through the pain of her own loneliness.

“Chrissy,” he said, reaching across the distance that separated them, “I love you.”

She didn’t pull her hand away. Her vision blurred and hot tears spilled out on to her cheeks.

Chapter 8 - Agency Headquarters

To her surprise, Chrissy saw Slum City out the front window.

“Where are we going?”

“I’m taking you to the agency headquarters.”

“But Michael...” Chrissy protested.

“He’s safe. His father’s not going to harm him. And we have him under surveillance, just in case.”

“But...he thinks I’m dead.”

“That’s good. So does his father.”

She squeezed her father’s hand and let go, so that she could rest her hands on her lap.

“Agency headquarters is in Slum City?”

“Not exactly.”

When they had almost reached the city, her father turned off onto a side road. They drove up to a farm, and her father eased the van into a large old barn which had once been red but was now grayed with age and peeling paint.

“This is the agency headquarters?!”

“You’ll see,” her father chuckled. He pressed a button and the large barn door slid closed. The ground shuddered beneath them and the whole car moved downward.

“It’s an elevator!” Chrissy exclaimed.

“Cool, right?” said her father.

She nodded.

“Agency headquarters has been built directly under Slum City, the ideal location. There are ten hidden entrances.”

“Under Slum City is the ideal location?” Chrissy asked.

“It’s the last place anyone would think to look for us. And...there are other reasons, too.”

They drove down a tunnel wide enough for three cars to drive side-by-side. In the dim light, she made out a rounded ceiling far above them. In front of the van, the tunnel stretched out for as far as Chrissy could see.

In silence, they drove ten minutes more before they came to a large parking garage.

“Here we are,” he said.

They got out of the van and her father led them to a heavy metal door in the thick wall. He pulled it open and they stepped through.

“It’s not locked?” asked Chrissy. “There are no guards?”

“Everything’s under surveillance. They know we’re here.”

Three austere hallways led away in different directions.

“This way,” said her father, choosing the one to their right and setting out at a brisk pace.

He spoke as they walked. “Kerberos has been under surveillance for a long time. He’s been the mastermind behind a lot of really bad stuff. Kerberos is a gift-user; he can access all the gifts. And now he’s surrounded himself with the Gifted. He’s considered armed and extremely dangerous.”

“Dad...I’m one too. I mean...I can use all the gifts, too.”

“I know,” he replied. “That’s why you’re here.”

“But...” She stopped abruptly. Her eyes burned and she tried to blink back the tears. “I thought you saved me because you love me.”

“Of course. I rescued you because I love you.” Her father walked back to her and drew her

into an embrace. He spoke softly, close to her ear. "I love you very much." Then he released her, held both her hands in his, and looked deeply into her eyes. "But I brought you here because we need you."

Understanding blossomed inside her. *He does love me! And he needs me!*

"Are you up for this, Chrissy?"

"Yes." The new knowledge filled her with confidence.

"Then let's go." He released her hands and continued down the hall.

Before they had walked much farther, they heard footsteps coming up a side passageway toward them.

"Hello, hello!" they heard a friendly voice say. Chrissy was surprised when the man came into view. He was a little person, shorter than she was by almost half!

"You're to report to the director," he said to her father, "while I give this lovely young lady a tour of the facility." The man grinned broadly at Chrissy. She could read him plainly. No guile. He was a nice person.

"Very well," said her father. "I'll see you in a while, Chrissy." He turned and walked away, his long strides carrying him swiftly down the corridor.

"Hi," said the friendly little man, sticking out his hand in greeting. "I'm Ted."

They shook hands.

"This way!" he called, leading her back the way he had come.

Soon they entered a busier area. People flowed up and down the hallways. Ted introduced her to everyone they passed. Her head swam with names and faces.

"And this is the treasure room," announced Ted, swinging open a round, heavy, metal vault door.

Chrissy gasped. Inside was money of every currency, gold, silver, gemstones, jewelry, and all types of valuable, ancient relics.

"Ted!" Someone called from behind. "Ted! I need to speak with you."

The little man sighed. "Feel free to have a look around, Chrissy. I'll be back."

Chrissy walked into the large vault. She had never seen such things. The money held no interest for her but the pendants, necklaces, rings, and the other ancient artifacts were incredibly beautiful. She inspected the golden treasures closely, even handling a few of them, but she didn't dare to try anything on. Chrissy didn't want to get in trouble.

"Okay, I'm back," Ted called from the entrance to the vault. "Ready to move on?"

Chrissy followed the little man to a large open area. People were clustered about computer consoles or other contraptions.

"Research hub," Ted explained.

"Look out!"

Chrissy turned in time to see that a heavy light fixture was falling from the ceiling. Directly below sat a woman looking into a microscope. Almost as fast as thought, Chrissy moved toward the woman. Her feet hit the floor twice in a mad sprint, and then she was in the air. She snatched the woman out of her chair and phase-shifted them both for good measure, just as the huge metal fixture came crashing down on the woman's workstation.

"Oh, my!" exclaimed the woman, as they phased back and Chrissy set her down beside the pile of debris. "Thank you!"

"I'm so sorry," called a man from up in the rafters. "We're installing some new lighting. I can't believe that one got away from me."

The woman frowned up at the man who shuffled away.

“Good job, Chrissy. Well done!” exclaimed Ted. “That certainly was more excitement than we usually get around here.”

Chrissy breathed a huge sigh of relief. *That was a close one.*

“Shall we continue the tour?” asked Ted.

She nodded in agreement and they exited the research hub through a hall on the other side.

“These are the practice rooms,” said Ted excitedly, as they walked down a hall with many doors leading off to both sides. “All the rooms are lined with metal and then padded with thick, fire-proof foam. We want to keep our gifted agents-in-training safe.”

“Help! Help!” Chrissy heard someone calling from one of the rooms.

“What’s wrong?” she wondered aloud.

“Let’s check it out,” said the little man.

They walked down the hall toward the sound of the cries. In one of the small practice rooms, they found a male youth, trapped up to the neck in a thick block of ice.

“What happened?” Ted asked the boy.

“I was practicing water control and I got myself stuck!”

“Well, you know the policy,” said Ted, turning to walk out of the room. “You got yourself into it. You get yourself out of it.”

“No! Please!” cried the boy. “I’m really stuck! It’s so cold...it’s hurting!”

Back out in the hall, Chrissy turned on the little man. “He’ll get frost bite and hypothermia; he could die.”

“He’ll probably not die,” said Ted. “He’ll just learn not to do that again. And if he doesn’t make it...well...then...that’s too bad.”

“That is **not** okay,” said Chrissy, marching back into the room.

“Don’t help him,” Ted called. “That will be breaking the rules. You’re gonna get yourself in trouble.”

“That’s a stupid rule,” Chrissy fired back as she focused her mind and sped up the molecules within the ice. With a whoosh, the water released and splashed to the floor.

“Thanks,” said the boy, smiling at her. “I owe you one.”

“Let’s go,” said Ted briskly, from the doorway. “I think you had better have a talk with the director.”

They walked in silence down several hallways until they came to a door labeled with a metal plaque that read “Director”. Ted opened the door and they both walked in. There stood her father and a man with white hair. Large viewing screens hung on a wall behind a massive wooden desk. But the men weren’t looking at the displays. The screens were turned off. The director and her father were both looking at her. Chrissy felt a twinge of fear but shoved it away. She had done the right thing.

“I’m pleased to report that Chrissy has passed all the tests,” announced Ted from beside her.

“Yes, we know,” said the director. “We’ve been monitoring her progress from here.”

“Tests?” Chrissy gasped.

“Yes!” said Ted. “The test of honesty, the test of speed and strength, and the test of compassion.”

“Of course,” the director confirmed. “We had to assess your skills and integrity before we could offer you the position of special agent.”

“But that light fixture falling toward the lady...”

“All planned,” Ted explained. “There was a force shield that could have been activated had you failed to ‘save’ her.”

“But the boy trapped in the ice block?” she asked helplessly.

“A volunteer,” said Ted, chuckling. “If you didn’t help him, others were standing by to let him out.”

“And...it’s policy...?” she asked, incredulously.

“Bah, that’s not the policy,” Ted countered. “That would be a stupid rule, wouldn’t it - not helping others?”

“But I sensed no deception!” she sputtered.

“Ah, we know a few tricks you haven’t caught on to yet,” said Ted, chuckling again.

She turned her focus to the director. “You want me as a special agent?”

“Yes. I see, now, that your father was right. We want you on the team, Chrissy. We need your help to stop Kerberos.”

Chrissy wasn’t sure what to say. She always hated the agency for taking her father away. But now...

“Chrissy...” said her father, “the children at the School for the Gifted,” *your sisters*, “they are not safe while he is in charge there. And he has plans - diabolical plans. He needs to be stopped.”

“Very well,” said Chrissy. “I’ll help with this. But afterwards...I’m not sure.”

“That will do for now,” said the director. “Things are already in motion. There is no time to waste.”

Chapter 9 - Ungifted

It was dark when a stealth chopper took Chrissy to the farmer's field where she had begun her adventure only three weeks earlier. She was dressed in black and wore a black backpack. In it was a special helmet. Her mission was to get the helmet on Mr. Kerberos. The helmet, in addition to being lead-lined to block his connection to the gifts, was also battery powered. It sent out a signal that caused the wearer to pass out. Chrissy hugged her father goodbye and then winked out of sight. She soared up into the air, over the forest, toward the school. Neither the principal's office nor his private rooms had any windows. But Chrissy thought she knew how she could get to him.

She flew directly to the window from which she had left. After landing lightly on the ledge, she peered inside. The window was open. Michael was sitting on the edge of his bed, with his head in his hands. She 'listened'. *Sorrow. Loss.* He missed her!

Climbing in the window, she went to sit beside him on the bed. Michael felt it as she sat down. He looked around, wide-eyed. Chrissy remembered she was still cloaked and she flipped it off. Michael gasped. *A ghost!*

"No," she whispered. "Michael, it's me!"

"But I saw you drown!"

"No. You saw me sink down into the water. I'm not dead. I'll explain the rest later." She took her backpack off. "Right now," she pulled the black helmet from her bag, "we need to get this onto your father. He has to be stopped."

Michael nodded. "I think my father will agree to see me. You come in with me - cloaked. Can you also cloak your mind?"

"I think so."

Michael plucked the phone from his nightstand and dialed his father's number. He waited with the phone to his ear, concern causing a crease in his forehead.

"Hi, Dad. I was wondering if I could come and see you now."

Silence.

"Yes, I know it's late but...I haven't seen you since I got back. We really need to talk."

Longer silence.

"Okay. I'll be there in a few minutes." Michael clicked the receiver back into place. "He said yes."

Michael walked slowly to his father's suite. Chrissy matched him, step for step, under cloak. She carried the helmet in her hands. She felt ready. Michael stopped at a large door and pressed a doorbell in the wall. The door opened, revealing Mr. Kerberos, in his pajamas.

"Come in, Cain," he said tersely.

Michael walked in and Chrissy entered quickly behind him, before Kerberos closed the door and slid the lock back into place.

"What is it, Cain?"

Then, suddenly, Chrissy found herself flat on her back. Kerberos was on top her with his fingers wrapped around her throat. The helmet had been flung out of her hand. She clawed futilely at his arms as blackness began to creep in at the edges of her vision. All at once, his grip loosened. He was slumping over and Chrissy found she could scramble out from under him. Then she saw Michael. He was cradling his father's limp body. Michael had put the helmet on Mr. Kerberos.

In the morning, Chrissy heard a knocking at her door. As she awoke, she realized that she had slept in her clothing. She hurried to see who was at her door. Michael and Ted stood in the hallway.

"The director wants to talk to us," Michael informed her.

"Okay," said Chrissy, following them into the hallway.

"Can you find your way without me?" asked Ted. "I have other matters to attend to."

"I think so," said Chrissy.

"I'll see you later then," said the little man, moving off down the hall.

"What's wrong?" Chrissy asked Michael. Sadness and guilt were washing from him in waves.

"My father..." said Michael, "they did that operation on him. The one he was going to make you have."

"Oh!"

"Yeah. I guess they had to. Now he won't be so dangerous. But...he will be utterly devastated."

"Is he okay?"

"The doctors told me that the operation went well. There shouldn't be any brain damage... apart from the fact that he lost everything he was...everything that mattered to him."

"Michael, he was a very, very dangerous man. He had too much power. He tried to kill me...twice. And you know that would have just been the beginning."

"Oh, it wasn't the beginning. I know some of the stuff he's done. He was a very dangerous, very bad guy."

"So it must be for the best, then, that they've taken his power away."

"Yeah, I guess. But I'm sure he would rather have died if he had been given the option...I guess now he's ungifted. Just like me."

"Mr. Kerberos has been un-gifted," said Chrissy. "But you...you're not ungifted. You just have different kinds of gifts." They looked at each other for a long moment. Slowly, a smile spread over Michael's face, making his eyes crinkle in the corners.

"Yeah." He nodded. "That's true. I think...I think I've been made right, too."

"Yes, yes, you have," said Chrissy, reaching for him. Hand in hand, they walked together down the corridor toward the director's office.

Chapter 10 - A New Destiny

It was some time later when Chrissy and Michael actually reached the director's office. Apparently, Chrissy wasn't as good with directions as she had thought.

"Come in. Come in," he said, motioning them to the chairs opposite his desk.

"Sorry we took so long," Chrissy apologized.

"It's not a problem." The director smiled and Chrissy realized that he probably had been monitoring their progress for the last forty-five minutes, on his very large view screens.

They sat down.

"Chrissy, we would like you to become a permanent member of the team. And Michael, there is a position open for you here as well."

"Yes!" said Michael.

Chrissy looked at him.

"What?" he asked. "Have you seen the cool stuff they have around here? It's awesome! Plus we'd be working for the good guys, Chrissy."

"I'm just not sure," she said finally. "What would we do?"

"You remember all those practice rooms we have, Chrissy?"

"Yes."

"Did you notice that most of them were empty?"

"I never thought about it."

"We have only a very few Gifted working for us. To make this world a better and safer place, to turn the tide on evil, we need to recruit more of the Gifted. We need to bring them to our side. That's where you'll come in."

"You want us to go back to the School for the Gifted?" asked Chrissy.

"Oh, no," said the director. "The new principal, Ms. Sterling, works for us. She's going to try to recruit the Gifted there. We want you to recruit from Slum City."

"Slum City?" exclaimed Michael. "That's pretty dangerous."

"Yes, it is," replied the director. "Most of our agents don't last three days. But you were there for several weeks. We are confident that the two of you will thrive in that setting and we'll be watching. So if anything bad does happen, someone will be there to back you up."

"Let's do it!" said Michael. He turned to Chrissy, grinning.

"Well...we did like living there," said Chrissy, smiling back at him. "What would we do, exactly?" she asked the director.

"You would go back and work for Anna at the bakery, as undercover agents. Three evenings a week, you would come here to train. The rest of the time you would live, top-side, in Slum City. We would want you to try to get close to those Gifted who might be willing to work for our side and, when the time is right, offer them an 'in'."

Surely there can be no better way to be an Aylward, a protector of my kind, than by helping them choose good instead of evil.

Chrissy noticed her father standing in the doorway.

"I want to do it, Dad. What do you think?"

"I think," he said slowly, with a smile, "that it is part of your destiny."

Note from Author Celesta Thiessen

Thanks for joining me on this super adventure! Some of you may want to know a little about me so here goes. I live in Steinbach, Manitoba, Canada with my husband and two young daughters. We're homeschoolers and entrepreneurs. My husband and I make iOS apps and I write stories. Being a writer is magical - spinning nothing into stories - stories that can light the way to a different world.

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