

Chapter One

Thirteen

The changes began the night before my thirteenth birthday. I was sitting at the kitchen table trying very hard to concentrate on my math homework, which was a near impossible task for someone of my age. I mean, really, there were so many other interesting things to focus on; my birthday, my presents, Avery Ketchum. Anyone in their right mind would have to agree.

So, anyway, there I was contemplating the FOIL method of algebra, when I could have sworn I heard my mom say something. "What did you say?" I asked.

"Nothing dear," she answered returning to her dishwashing.

"Are you sure? I could have sworn you said something."

"Dena, I didn't say anything," she snapped impatiently.

"Okay," I answered.

I went back to the math. A few minutes later I heard my mom say, "Sometimes I wish these dishes could wash themselves."

"That would be nice wouldn't it," I responded.

"What would be nice dear?"

"If the dishes could wash themselves, like you just said."

My mother looked horrified, as if I had just spouted off every cuss word in the English language. "I didn't say anything, Dena."

"Yes, you did, I just heard you. You said 'Sometimes I wish these dishes could wash themselves.' Remember, and then I said, 'That would be nice.'"

"Oh, right," she said as if she didn't truly believe it. She wiped her hands on her apron, and quickly left the kitchen.

Moments later, I heard whispers coming from the living room. I got up to peek around the corner. I found my mom and dad huddled together whispering like a couple of schoolgirls. These are my parents, David and Dora Powers. They are the most uncool parents you could ever have. Let's see, they attend every PTA meeting, every school function, even if I don't want to go, and never miss church on Sunday. Worst of all, they like square dancing, and you know what goes hand in hand with square dancing: country music. All that twang and melancholy is enough to drive a teenager into a deep pit of depression. If I have to hear one more song about a lost dog, a cheatin' spouse, or an empty glass, I might just crawl under a rock never again to see the light of day. That would be more cheerful than listening to another country music song. Unfortunately for me, I'm an only child, so my parents can devote all of their waking hours into making my life miserable.

"What are you guys talking about?" I interrupted.

"Um, well, we were just talking about..." mom began.

"Your birthday, yes, your birthday present," my dad finished.

The answer sounded reasonable enough, but the delivery bothered me. They sounded as if they made that answer up on the spot to deter me from

finding out what they were really talking about. I really didn't care. It was probably just some boring adult stuff. I went back and finished my algebra.

Doing homework always makes me hungry, so immediately after finishing I headed to the fridge for a snack. I reached into the fruit and veggie drawer and grabbed an orange. "Anyone else want an orange?" I called to my parents who were watching TV.

"Grab me one," my dad called.

I grabbed his orange, went into the living room and went to toss it across the room to him. Instead of the nice gentle toss I had intended, the orange shot out of my hand with the speed of a bullet. Luckily my dad has good reflexes because he had to duck out of its way. It splattered into the wall behind him leaving a dent. Now both my parents were looking at me horrified.

"Sorry," I apologized. "I think I'll just go to bed now." I put my orange back in the kitchen and headed up to bed. Strange things were starting to happen, but it was nothing compared to what happened on my birthday.

The day began just like any other. I hauled myself out of bed, slugged my way to the breakfast table, and sat down to eat breakfast: toasted oats, banana slices, no milk. My Rottweiler, Zeus, approached, tail wagging ferociously, and sat beside me in hopes of breakfast scraps. Zeus' appearance may lead people to believe he's noble and fearsome, but

inside dwells the spirit of a rabbit, yep, a rabbit; sweet, loveable, and as timid as they come. If Zeus were ever confronted with danger, I'm fairly sure he would whimper away with his tail between his legs.

"Good morning Deedums! How is the birthday girl this morning?" my Dad sang from the other room.

"Tired," I said.

"Then you had better eat your breakfast, so you can start the big day off right. It's not every day you become a teenager!" My mom chimed from the laundry room.

So, there I was, 'starting my day off right' with my toasted oats, another day older, and no wiser than the day before. At least that's what was churning through my head as I stared into my cereal bowl trying to shake off the sandman's magic dust. I thought I would try to get a couple more winks before getting ready for school, so I wearily climbed back up the stairs and reentered my safe haven. On the way to my bed, I passed the full length mirror next to the closet. I decided, since I didn't really feel any older, I should take a look and see if I resembled a teenager in any way. I stood up straight and tall, which isn't saying much since I am the shortest person in all of seventh grade, and gazed into my reflection. Nope. I was the same short, completely ordinary girl as the day before. Oh, well, what's the big deal about growing up anyhow? I see how tired my father is when he comes home from work, or how frustrated my mom gets when she pays the bills. What's it all about anyway?

I only had a few minutes to rest before it came down to 'run out of the house late, miss the bus, get to school on the verge of tardiness' time, so I leapt onto my bed. Funny thing happened though, instead of just hitting the bed like normal, I flew hard into the headboard, and *then* landed on my mattress. It was a strange feeling, almost like I had a jetpack strapped to my back. I attributed it to overtired delusions, and promptly fell asleep.

I woke up and looked at the clock, uh oh, bus leaves in three minutes! I scrambled for clothes, grabbed a hairbrush, and a piece of Minty Fresh gum (no time to brush). I snatched up my backpack, patted Zeus on the head, and zoomed out of the house. Oh no! The bus was half way down the block already. I ran as fast as I could to catch up. I was just behind the bus, I gave an extra push, and suddenly I was right next to it. I ran and ran, until, finally I was right next to the door. One would think I would have been tired, or winded, or unconscious by this time, but I actually felt pretty good, refreshed even. I jumped on the step of the bus and knocked. The bus driver turned to look, and appeared to be at the least, astonished. I don't know what the big deal was, he must have been driving pretty slowly for me to have caught up with him. He stopped the bus and opened the door. I entered to a multitude of staring, gaped-mouthed faces. As I worked my way down the aisle in search of a seat, I felt the gaze of every student on the bus boring into me.

I took the seat that my friend, Rachel Anderson, had saved for me. She was one of my best friends to be exact. She, my friend Mary, and I

were pretty much inseparable. Our three personalities combined are a perfect balance. Rachel is a brain and doesn't mind telling you so. She's a little outspoken, which puts some people off, but I like her just fine. She's short like me, slim and muscular. She's very pretty; olive complexion, eyes the shade of dark chocolate, and hair to match. Of course, she cares nothing about how she looks. Many of the girls in the 7th grade are starting to wear make-up, but not Rachel. She's much too busy for that. Rachel's parents are really nice and as cool as can be. My parents are such nerds. Sometimes I envy her. She seems to have the perfect life except for her little brother, Hazzard. His name totally matches his personality. Expect chaos whenever Hazzard is around. He's a seven year old human tornado. I think he's pretty funny, but I know he drives Rachel up the wall.

My friend Mary Johanssen, is the polar opposite of Rachel. She's more of a humanitarian. She's giving and kind, and for those reasons, is a friend to all. Her parents are kind of new age hippies, and their values have been instilled in her with regards to peace, freedom, and the earth. Her only quirk that I know of is her passion for recycling. She's green to a fault.

Me? Well, I'm short, but athletic. I've always loved to play sports: softball, soccer, volleyball. In the looks department, I'm not near as pretty as Mary or Rachel, though I'm definitely not a dog either. The color of my shoulder length hair I prefer to call onyx, jet black is so passé. My eyes are what I like to call a non-color. Not quite green

or hazel, more like a gray I guess. Personality wise, I can be kind and helpful like Mary, other days, I'm tough and blunt like Rachel. It just depends on my mood du jour. On many occasions, I've had to be a mediator between my two friends, because although they're pals, their personalities clash at times. I remember this one time they got in a fight over Rachel throwing some paper in the garbage. Mary was fuming because she didn't put it in the recycle bin, and Rachel was trying to rationalize it by telling Mary the biodegrade rate of the paper. It got pretty ugly. Anyway, I don't really have a "thing" such as Rachel's technological genius, or Mary's enthusiasm for ecology. I just haven't found anything I'm that enthusiastic about.

As soon as I sat down, Rachel turned to me and said, "What was that all about?"

"What?" I replied.

"The whole Road Runner thing?"

"Oh please, the bus was moving at a snail's pace."

"Whatever," Rachel said.

"Hi, Dena," I heard a sweet voice murmur from behind me. I turned around to find my next door neighbor leaning over the back of our seat, Oliver Jacob Williams III. We call him Ollie. Ollie is different from any boy I know. He's respectful to parents and peers alike, and not in a phony way either, everything he says and does is genuine. We've known each other since we were babies so he's like a brother to me. Our fathers went to law school together and after they graduated, they opened their

own law firm. When Ollie was six, his father died in a car accident. My parents have kind of looked after his mom and him ever since. My dad even sent his mom, Connie Williams, to paralegal school and gave her a job as his legal assistant, so she could make ends meet.

"Hey, Ollie, how are you today?" I inquired.

"I'm good, just a little spent. I was up late practicing my putting."

When we arrived at school, I hopped off the bus, put my backpack in my locker, and went on to my first period class, P.E. I think it should be against the law to make kids take P.E. first thing in the morning. The last thing you want to do right after you wake up is run laps, or do jumping jacks.

At least I had Mary there with me, so we could be miserable together. Sometimes, though, I hated standing next to her there in our gym clothes. She's quite beautiful, but just like Rachel, doesn't care one bit. She's always reminded me of the fairy princesses you read about in stories, tall and thin, with blond hair, blue eyes, a sugary sweet voice and a sunny disposition. She's not a slave to fashion or fad; she wears what she wants and doesn't care what anyone thinks. One day she'll have on a beautiful flowing skirt and knit top, the next day it's a dashiki and blue jeans. On top of being pretty and well dressed, she's also very talented. She's a great singer and is really into art and architecture. She's always talking about the curves and lines in a painting or building, and

she's a fantastic artist in her own right. It runs in the family. Her dad's a high school art teacher, and her mom is a great painter, though it's only a hobby for her. Her two older sisters, Siobhan and Naomi, are both away at college getting arts degrees. Siobhan's a senior at a university clear across the country, so Mary rarely sees her. Naomi's a freshman at Centerville University, which is about a three hour drive from here. Mary and Naomi are really close, but now Mary only gets to see her on occasional weekends, holidays and summer break. Mary's family seems to have a good life, and does lots of fun things together, like go to concerts, and spend the day at the beach. We enjoy hanging out at Mary's house, because we're always given our privacy.

When I arrived at the gym, Ms. Peters told us we were going to be rope climbing. What fun. Not! Although I think of myself as an agile person, rope climbing has never come easy for me. I just don't have the upper body strength for it. Ms. Peters had two ropes waiting for us, and had us form two lines behind each rope. I opted, number one, to be in the same line as Tabitha Berkshire, because everyone knows from experience that she is the slowest rope climber on the face of the planet, and number two, to be last in that line. I thought maybe the line would move so slow that the bell would ring before I would have a chance to climb. I kept my eye on the clock as I inched closer and closer to the rope.

Unfortunately, I arrived at the front of the line with plenty of time to show off my rope climbing abilities. Grabbing the rope with both hands and giving it a big yank, I pulled myself up. It seemed easier than

usual. In fact it was so easy that I didn't even have to use my feet, I just let them dangle below me. Climbing hand over hand I reached the top with ease. I made my way back down just as effortlessly. When I hit the floor, Ms. Peters said, "My, Dena, your climbing has improved significantly. Your technique was flawless, and you were extraordinarily fast today."

"Thanks!" I said, very pleased with myself. As I looked around at my fellow students, I noticed that, for the second time that day, I was greeted by blank stares and gaping mouths. I walked over to Mary, and asked her what everyone was staring at.

"Dena, that was pretty amazing, what you just did. Jenessa wasn't even half way up by the time you came down!"

I looked over at the rope that was alongside the one I had just climbed. Jenessa was still on her way up! That wouldn't be odd if she were just some non athletic nobody, but she wasn't. Jenessa Garcia was captain of just about every girl's sports teams we have, and she could probably hold her own on a football field full of high school boys as well.

Nothing else exceptional happened that day until third period. I met up with Ollie in the hallway, and we walked to History together. We ambled our way to our assigned seats, his three seats behind mine, and just as I slumped down in my chair, I heard Mr. Collins say, "This pop quiz is going to make their day."

I groaned as I slumped further down into my chair.

"What's your problem Powers?"

Upon hearing these words, my neck hair immediately stood on end, for the voice behind this verbal assault belonged to none other than Heather Paine. Major Paine was more like it. If humiliation were an Olympic event, Heather would get the gold every time. She's the one you would call "Miss Popularity", head cheerleader, and always the lead in the plays. I think she must have sold her soul to the devil, because, if she looked on the outside, how she acted on the inside, instead of the beauty queen she is, she would resemble a three-headed warty troll. She possesses all the qualities every schoolboy loves: tall and slim, beautiful blonde hair, flawless skin. She bats her eyelashes at them, and laughs at their jokes. She also has the teachers bamboozled. It's always, "Yes sir, or yes ma'am. Can I carry those books for you? Would you like me to pass out the papers?" It's nauseating, really!

Then there are those of us who are not bewitched by Heather's charm, those of us who are usually the brunt of her cruelty. She spits out insults as if it were second nature. She'll say terrible things about your hair, your clothes, your shoes, the way you walk, pretty much anything and everything. She will reveal any embarrassing information about you that she comes across, without batting an eye. If you like a boy and she finds out about it, she'll use her feminine wiles to make him like her instead. It's just a game to her! She's every young girl's nightmare and a blow to the self esteem. As if this weren't enough, she is also filthy rich. Her father, Horace Paine, is a technology mogul,

founder of one of the largest computer software companies on the planet, aptly named Planet Paine Productions, or as some people call it, P³.

"I said, 'what's your problem!'" Heather repeated.

"If it's any of your business, Heather, I don't think I'm up for a pop quiz today," I announced.

"What pop quiz?" she asked.

"Are you deaf? Mr. Collins just said we were having a pop quiz."

"Are you daft? Mr. Collins hasn't said anything."

I glanced up at Mr. Collins. His back was to the class and he was pillaging through a pile of paperwork and books. I turned around in my desk, and called to Ollie, "Ollie, did you hear Mr. Collins say anything about a pop quiz?"

"Nope."

"I must be hearing things," I thought to myself. Then the bell rang.

"Everyone to your seats!" Mr. Collins broadcasted. "We are going to have a pop quiz."

Heather's head spun so fast, she could have gotten whiplash.

"Freak," Heather whispered contemptuously with a scathing glare. In the next breath came forth sweet melodic tones, "Mr. Collins, would you like me to pass those out for you?"

My day had started out incredibly bizarre, but that was nothing compared to what happened at lunch. I was having a pleasant meal with my

BFF's, for those of you who are acronymically challenged, that's Best Friends Forever. Mary had brought me a birthday cupcake in her lunch. She's the greatest. Then, they all gave me gifts. Ollie gave me the "Breakfast Club" soundtrack. I didn't really know why he was so obsessed with the 80's, but he seemed determined to share his obsession with the rest of the world. "Thanks Ollie," I said.

"It really has some great songs on it. You'll love it."

Next I opened Rachel's gift. It was three way walkie-talkies. "These are high powered long distance walkie-talkies. We'll all be able to talk to each other from our homes. Isn't that cool?"

"Ka-Bam!" I exclaimed. My friends and I say "Ka-bam" a lot, it's like our own personal catchphrase for things that are really cool.

Ollie asked, "Don't I get one?"

"Girls only, sorry," Rachel answered.

Mary gave me a necklace with a letter D encased in a diamond shape. "Oh, how sweet," I cooed giving Mary a gooey expression clasping the necklace next to my heart. "Thanks Mary, I love it."

Lunch was eaten and the presents were opened, so I excused myself to use the restroom. I walked down the hallway leading to the lavatory. In the distance, a shadow started to form. As I got closer, that shadow became a figure, then that figure turned into my worst nightmare. His name is Peter Buttes, pronounced "boots". No one dared mispronounce his name. You'll understand why when I tell you that he is better known as Peter the Beater. He's the last person you want to see in an abandoned

school corridor. With each step, my heart beat faster and faster. I thought maybe if I kept my head down, and didn't make eye contact, I could get by him unnoticed. It was worth a try. He started to pass, and it looked as if it were my lucky day. Just as I was about to let out a sigh of relief, a big thick arm almost clothes-lined me.

"Dena Peena, so nice seein' ya. Where do you think you're going?" He asked snidely.

"The restroom."

"I don't think so. You were supposed to buy my lunch today, don't you remember?"

"Peter, I don't have any money, so you might as well go bully someone else."

"But I want to bully you, Dena. I guess you'll just have to pay with pain. That's the only thing that will satisfy me now."

He grabbed my arm and twisted it behind my back. Struggling through the torture, I desperately tried to reclaim it. I twirled and turned until I was free of his monstrous grip. I started to run, only to be caught by the hair. I gave him an elbow to the gut which caused him to double over in pain. What happened next changed my life forever. I closed my eyes, and shoved as hard as I could. I heard a grunt, a sliding noise, and then silence. When it seemed the storm had passed, I opened my eyes. What I saw before me, both shocked and elated me. There at the end of the hall lay Peter the Beater. He was at least 50 feet away, lying against the lockers that lined the wall. He was unconscious. Just before the bell

rang signaling the end of lunch, I ran to the nurse's office, suddenly feeling queasy. All I could say was, "Sick...go...home." She lay me down on her little cot until my mother arrived to pick me up.

"What's the matter with my Deedums," my mother fussed as she walked into the nurse's office. "Did we have too much cake already?"

"No, I'm just not feeling very good, that's all. I think I need to go home and get some rest."

Once home, I ran upstairs to my room and collapsed onto my bed. Zeus came and laid down beside me. "What could it all mean," I asked myself, the bed, the bus, the rope, the quiz, the bully. My thoughts drifted into dreams, as sleep overtook me.

Next thing I knew, I was on the very top of a skyscraper, dressed in lime green from head to toe. I shouted down to the people below. Many of them looked up and pointed. Some of them were speaking, but I could not make out their words. I jumped off of the skyscraper, but instead of plummeting to my death, I flew over the peoples' heads and off into the clouds. "Hey, I can see my house from here, cool!" Next, I heard a scream. I flew down to see what was happening. There was Peter the Beater, Heather Paine, and Mary. Peter's body was encompassed in flames, fire shot from his ears and his eyes were glowing red. Heather's clothing was stuffed to the gills with money. It was coming out the top of her shirt, her pant legs, and sleeves, as if she were some kind of rich scarecrow. She was pointing at Mary and laughing hysterically.

"Give me my money back Peter!" Mary shouted. "I was going to give that to the animal shelter."

"Or what?" was his reply.

That's where I come in. I hovered over Peter's head, and stated boldly, "Or you'll have to deal with me!"

If this dream wasn't already strange enough, this is where it really takes a turn. Peter looks up in fear, and falls to his knees. With tears in his eyes, he cries, "Not Dena Powers! I am sorry! Please don't hurt me! I will never do it again. I promise to be good, and never pick on anyone ever."

"Okay," I tell him. Then I turn to Heather and state very firmly, "...and you need to start treating people with respect!"

"Make me!" she answered. I zoomed up to her and began snatching the money out of her clothing. I tore and I pulled until I realized that there was nothing left of Heather. All that remained was a pile of clothes.

"Thanks Dena," Mary said gratefully.

Then, with a jolt, I soared up into the clouds, and out of my dream.

"Whoa, that was weird," I said to myself. Dazed and headachy, I sat up, and decided that just because I'm thirteen, doesn't mean I can't still get hugs from my mom. Her hugs always make me feel better.

"Mom!" I groaned. "I don't feel good. I've had a bizarre day, and I just had a weird dream."

"A bizarre day? A weird dream?" *Echo! Echo!* "What on earth do you mean, dear?"

So, I told her about my day, not leaving out even the slightest strange occurrence. That was one great thing about my mom; even though she was kind of a dork, I could talk to her about anything. Of course, the reaction she offered wasn't what I expected. I thought maybe a hug, a pat on the arm, or maybe even some scolding were in order. Her understated reply of, "Oh, dear," caught me off guard. Without saying another word, she went to the phone, and began made a call. It seemed a bit odd that she just walked away after the tale I had narrated. I watched as she spoke into the phone. She turned her back to me, held her hand over the mouthpiece, and whispered to the enigma on the other end. The conversation was brief, and when she hung up the phone, she turned to me and said, "How about a snack dear?"

I sensed something was weird, so, although I was not hungry in the least bit, I took a stool, bellied up to the kitchen bar, and took the carrot sticks and ranch she offered me. A few minutes later, my dad walked through the front door. He's always complaining about how swamped he is at the office, so, when he comes home in the middle of a workday, you know something is up. He went over and gave my mom a peck on the cheek, and then they turned their backs to me and whispered back and forth to each other.

I waited patiently for...let's see...about a minute, until at last, I could stand no more! I screamed, "Excuse me, but I am sure you are well

aware of the fact that I am not stupid, and I am still in this room! So, can we please stop all the whispering and funny looks, and just tell me WHAT'S GOING ON!"

"I'm sorry dear," my mother answered. "You're right. We're being very secretive and silly. It's only a matter of time before you find out on your own, so we might as well just tell you now."

"Tell me what?"

This time, my dad piped in, "Dena, you are a unique child."

Labeling someone as 'unique' is usually just a nice way of saying that there's something terribly wrong with them. So, when they used this word to describe me, I began to panic. "What do you mean by unique? What's wrong with me?"

"There's nothing wrong with you, dear." my mother reassured.

"You are gifted in ways you can't even imagine," my dad added.

"Dena, you have special powers."

Chapter 2

The Power of the Powers

I laughed out loud, grabbing my gut in hysterics, nearly knocking myself off of my stool. When my fit of laughter ended, I wiped the tears from my eyes, and looked at my parents. By the expression on their faces, I came to the conclusion that they were dead serious. I looked from one to the other and then back again, trying to find a hint of sarcasm or even insanity at this point. Freaking out, I anxiously shouted, "You can't be serious!"

"Oh, we're very serious, dear," my mother responded. "You come from a long line of people with special powers, on your father's side."

"Yes, Deedums, our family has been gifted for as long as we can remember," my father reiterated. "We wanted to first see if you had the powers, before we told you about them. You see, sometimes they skip a generation. So, if you didn't show any signs, there was no sense in telling you about them, until it was time for you to have children of your own."

"Wait a minute-," I said, "-you mean, you knew there was a chance I would come into these powers today, and you let me go to school anyway?"

"They normally come in subtly," Dad said.

"We want to keep your life as normal as possible," Mom added.

"We had no idea you would get into an altercation today," Dad said.

"Okay, okay, fine. So what kind of powers are we talking about?" I inquired.

"Well, we can't be certain of that yet, for every person is unique. Usually, the same powers follow those that came before. Our family's powers mostly encompass speed, strength, and powers of the mind. There are others however with the power of invisibility, redistribution, transmutation, and aviation, just to name a few."

"Others?" I replied.

"Yes, Dena, there are others with powers such as ours. We aren't the only ones." I was barely capable of acknowledging the fact that I had powers, let alone that there were other people out there with them too. And what the heck did all these terms mean?

I drew this information in with a deep breath, and very calmly asked, "If people have these powers, how come I've never seen anyone use them? And why aren't you out doing good deeds, fighting crime, or saving the world?"

"Well, first of all I think people hide the fact that they have powers, because they don't want to be seen as different, or become a super army for some government agency. There's also a nasty rumor that after we die other people with powers can absorb *our* power. So, it's good to be discreet. As for your second question, our family has chosen not to use the powers because we were afraid there would be an overwhelming urge to use them for evil instead of good."

"But, the Powers family is a bunch of do-gooders. I can't imagine you, or Grandma Jessie using powers for anything BUT good. I mean, every time you see a cat stuck in a tree, or an old lady crossing the street, you can't help but butt in."

"Yes Dena, you would think that were so, but anyone, when faced with temptation such as that, might falter. In fact, one of us did."

"What!" I gasped in disbelief. "Who was it?"

"Well, it's not anyone you have ever met. He left us a long time ago, before you were even born. His name is, I mean was, Andrew. He was my twin brother."

Even more astonished, I yelled, "You have a brother!"

"Yes, I *had* a brother. We were both blessed with the gift, and it revealed itself, as it did with you, right around our thirteenth birthday. But, at that time, our family still utilized our powers. We used them to help people, as well as ourselves, but not selfishly and always discreetly. Your Grandma Jessie, she mostly used them around the house to help with the cleaning and such, but her brother Charlie, used his powers to fight crime. He was like a superhero, a police officer by day, a crusader named Captain C, by night. You may remember stories about him. That was your Great Uncle Charlie."

"Get out!" was all I could think to say. I had started the day a normal kid, and only a few hours later become some kind of teen oddity with a family full of superheroes. I didn't think Dad could say anything

else to shock me, but I was wrong; because then he went on to tell me about my Uncle Andrew.

"Now, getting back to Andrew; every day we practiced our super speed, tested our strength, and played with our mind control powers. You see, although our powers were already functional, controlling them proficiently is a different story. One very important thing our mother kept reminding us was to never use our gifts for selfish or hurtful reasons. Well, Andrew didn't really agree with that. You see, he figured he was blessed with these abilities for a reason, and he should be able to use them any way he wanted. It started out innocently enough; after all, we were still kids. During a test, he would read the mind of the smartest kid in class to get the answers. He would use his super speed to steal some gum or baseball cards from the corner store. He was in and out of there before the clerk could blink an eye. Looking back, I wished I had done something about it right then, told him it was wrong, or told our mother what he was doing. But, he was my brother, and after all, the things he was doing didn't seem that bad at the time.

"As we grew, so did Andrew's selfish urges. His favorite power was mind manipulation. This included reading minds, as well as controlling them. He was very good at the reading part, but it took much time, practice, and patience to learn to control someone's psyche. When we were in high school, he loved getting into people's heads and finding out their darkest secrets. He would then use that information to extort money from them."

"Let me tell you the story of Alice Chapman, such a sweet girl. She was the head cheerleader, and Andrew had had a crush on her since the 5th grade. He was always reading her mind, trying to get any dirty little secret so she would go out with him. One day Andrew finally got a hold of the information he was looking for. You see, although Alice was sweet as pie, she wasn't very bright. She wanted to be a fashion designer, but her grades just wouldn't cut it. So, it turns out, she cheated on her pre-college test. Don't ask me how, but she did it. Well, next thing you know, she and Andrew are dating. After all, if the news got out that she had cheated, she probably wouldn't be able to get into any college, plus, I'm sure she would have gotten kicked off the cheerleading squad, and maybe even expelled."

"I would watch Alice and Andrew walk down the hall together, his arm around her, happy as can be. Alice was another story. Her step was less lively, eyes less bright. She never smiled anymore. Andrew thought they would be the perfect high school couple, become prom king and queen, and someday get married, but Alice's depression caused him great frustration. She grew more and more despondent. Her already poor grades slipped even more. The cheerleading squad demoted her for not being peppy enough, and finally she cracked."

"Alice went and told the principal that she had cheated. I think the idea of having a future with Andrew put her over the edge. I'm sure she assumed that Andrew would never let her leave him to go to college anyway, so why not tell the truth. So, although she was commended for her

honesty, Alice was kicked off of the cheerleading squad, suspended from school for one week, and had to take the pre-college test over again under heavy supervision. She also broke up with Andrew."

"Being trapped by my brother gave Alice a new purpose. She realized that her dreams and goals were important. She studied like crazy and ended up getting decent scores on her test. Last I heard, she wasn't quite a fashion designer, but she's on her way there. She moved to New York, and is now an assistant to one of the big shot designers there, Orlando Knight."

My dad looked as if tears were welling up in his eyes. I guess this super power stuff had dredged up all sorts of difficult memories for him. Even though he looked as if he had been wrung through the ringer, I pressed him for more information. After all, I know what happened to Alice Chapman, but I wanted to know what happened to my Uncle Andrew.

"Dad?" I asked. He appeared to be lost in some kind of reminiscent fog. "Um, Dad," I repeated.

"Oh, yes Dena," he replied with a little jolt, as if he had just snapped out of a trance.

"I know these memories must be hard for you to talk about, but I would really like to know more about my Uncle Andrew, and what exactly happened to him."

"Of course you do. I'll go on, just let me get some water and take a breath."

My dad went to retrieve his water, and then slumped down at the kitchen table. He drank the water in one gulp! All this story telling must make a man thirsty. He then continued, "Your Uncle Andrew was distraught over Alice's rejection of him. He could not understand why she would rather get in trouble than be with him. I tried to explain to him that you can't force someone to love you; it's a feeling, not a choice. So, he decided that if he couldn't use his powers for love, he would use them for money."

"When we went away to college, Andrew started a poker night. He would invite our buddies over every Friday night, and would then read their minds to find out what cards they held. He would then play the game accordingly. He was smart though, making sure he lost just enough times so that it wasn't obvious that he was somehow cheating."

"That was fine for a while. He bought himself nice clothes, and was even able to buy himself a used car with his winnings. He had Mom convinced that he earned everything by working in the school mailroom."

"I sat idle and watched as he kept taking advantage of our friends, week after week. Pretty soon, the poker money wasn't enough. Our junior year of college, he left, and moved to Vegas to try his hand at the big time. Mom and Dad didn't understand why he wanted to move to Vegas, so I finally told them what Andrew had been up to. Enough was enough. We were now adults, and I no longer wanted the burden of his lies."

"My parents were disappointed that I didn't come to them sooner, but also understood why I protected Andrew. We didn't hear from him for

three years. After college, I went home to live with your Grandma and Grandpa, while working my way through law school. One day Andrew drove up in a bright red sports car, hauling a small utility trailer behind him. He was dressed in flashy clothes, sporting gold from head to toe."

"'Hey mom, hey dad!' he yelled happily. Then he jogged over to me and said, 'Hey big brother,' while slugging me in the arm gently. 'I'm back and better than ever!'"

"Although he looked and sounded okay, I knew he wasn't. Something dark lurked beneath his glitzy exterior. He was a man out of control; I could see it in his eyes."

"He ran over to our mother and said, 'I have something for you.' He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small black velvet box. Mom opened it and inside was a ruby and diamond pendant with matching earrings. She looked up at him with a blank stare, as if he were someone she had never seen before. Then he called to our dad, 'Come over here.' Dad followed him to the trailer behind the car. Andrew opened the doors and inside was a big screen TV. My parents stood there, amazed and disappointed all at the same time."

"My brother then made his way over to me, and said, 'Close your eyes, and put out your hands.' Although my head told me not to, I followed his instructions. I felt something drop into the palm of my hand. When I opened my eyes, I found a set of keys. He made a gesture to the car he had driven up in and said, 'She's all yours!' I would have loved to own such a beautiful car. I knew I couldn't keep it though, just looking at

it made me feel dirty. It might as well have been me who had lied and cheated to get it, all because, I never stopped him back when we were kids."

"I looked him in the eyes, grabbed his hand, and placed the keys back into it. I told him, as nicely as I could, that I could not accept his gracious gift. I explained that I didn't approve of the way he was making his money, that it was wrong. His face turned beet red, his eyes bloodshot and full of wild rage. My parents walked up and my mother said, 'He's right Andrew. We can't accept your gifts either. You've been cheating your way through life, and we don't want any part of it. We love you, but we do not condone the use of your powers for selfish, personal gain. Plus you've been gone for three years! You can't simply buy your way back into this family.'"

"Then Andrew went nuts. He screamed he was never good enough, and that he should be able to use his powers as he sees fit. He even went so far as to say that he's never hurt anyone by doing it. I reminded him that although he may not have hurt anyone physically, he has hurt them emotionally, like Alice Chapman, his friends, and even his own family. He shoved past me got in the car, and sped off."

"That was the last time we saw him, and the last time I sensed his presence."

"Sensed his presence?" I asked.

"Yes," my dad replied. "Twins with powers have a connection like no other. We feel each other's pain, both physical and mental. When he left

I tried to find him in my mind, but he was either too far away, or he fought hard to block me out."

I had to let all of this information penetrate my brain and sink in. My dad's twin brother, who I never knew existed, was a creep and a thief. "What do you think happened to him, Dad, do you think he's dead?"

"No, he's not dead; I would have felt it. I am hoping that maybe he saw the error of his ways and cleaned up his act, but there is the possibility..." The rest of my father's sentence faded out unheard, but I knew what he was thinking. Uncle Andrew was still out there somewhere, and just maybe, he was plotting his next move. We all sat quiet for a moment, pondering what that next move might be.

The next day, I decided that I wasn't going to make a big deal out of my powers. After all, my father stopped using his, as did my grandmother, so I figured I should follow suit. I didn't want to become Uncle Andrew. I got ready for school as usual, and took my five-minute after breakfast nap as usual, and missed the bus, as usual. This time though, I decided not to chase after it. I did not want my classmates to view me as a freak of nature, or start calling me things like, "Running Girl" or "Speed Demon". I arrived at school, tardy of course, and Mr. King, our principal, was waiting.

"Nice of you to join us, Miss Powers," he stated as he handed me a detention slip.

At morning break, as I entered the cafeteria to get a snack, Mary and Rachel both ran up to me, very excited. "Did you hear what happened!" they whispered in unison.

"Uh, no." I replied back. After all, when you get to school late, there's not much time for chitchat.

"You tell it," Mary gestured to Rachel.

"Okay. Well, yesterday after lunch, we all started filtering into the hallway, and it's like every student came to a sudden halt. There at the end of the hall, out cold, was Peter the Beater. We were all standing there in shock when Mr. Collins came into the hall telling everyone to get to class, and asking what was going on. He made his way through the crowd and saw Peter laying there. He ran down and started patting him on the face, and shouting in his ear, 'Peter, can you hear me? Peter?' Peter woke up and Mr. Collins took him to the school nurse. Well, Janie Simms was in the nurse's office with a headache or something, and you know how snoopy she is, anyway, she overheard Peter tell the nurse that he must have fainted or something. But others are saying that someone decided they were tired of Peter's bullying. They say that someone gave him a taste of his own medicine. But of course, Peter won't say a word about it, because he's trying to save his reputation. Isn't that the strangest thing? By the way, what happened to you yesterday afternoon? You weren't in Art?"

I began feeling queasy. First because the idea that I had hurt someone sickened me, even if it was Peter the Beater. Second, word was

now out that Peter was lying and that someone knocked him out. Third, Rachel just asked where I was yesterday, and I didn't have the time or energy to think up a good excuse.

"I wasn't feeling good after lunch. Probably something I ate. I went home early."

"It was probably the cupcake Mary gave you," Rachel joked.

"Very funny," Mary replied sarcastically. "What did you get for your birthday, Dena?"

I pulled out the gift my parents had given me after our big talk.

"Is that a LadyBug?" Rachel asked. A LadyBug was a cell phone, specifically used to call home and not much else. No texting, no pictures, no fun.

"Yes," I answered feeling extremely embarrassed.

"Isn't that a baby phone?" Rachel joked.

"I thought you asked for the D-Sire phone," Mary said. The D-Sire was like the coolest cell phone on the face of the earth, picture phone, keyboard, comes in different colors. It's the only thing I asked for for my birthday.

"I did-," I replied, "-but my parents insisted I start with this stupid phone first to prove I could be responsible. Then maybe later they would get me the D-Sire."

"Bummer," Rachel said sympathetically.

Just as I was about to put my phone back into my pocket, Heather Paine walked by. "Nice phone, Dena," she said waving her pink D-Sire cell in my face.

At lunch, conversation was abuzz about Peter the Beater and the mystery attacker. Janie Simms fluttered from table to table gathering bits of rumor, trying to piece them together as if they were a jigsaw puzzle. Janie is a nice enough person, but invisible to most of the school. She's squat and a real plain Jane (no pun intended); there's really nothing remarkable about her at all. I don't mean that in a malicious way. It's just that, you could walk right by her in the hall, be the only two people there, and not see her. That's why she gossips. Gossip and rumors give her a voice. It's how she gets people to see her. Nothing gets by her. She makes it a point to know every detail of every story circulating through school.

Janie came over to our table, and said, "So, it seems someone actually saw our mystery attacker."

A lump built up in my throat, and I started to sweat, "They did?" I choked.

"Well, yes, and no. I guess they were outside after lunch, and they saw two figures in the hallway through a classroom window. They couldn't even really tell who they were. They did see a scuffle, and the tall one, which was Peter, was shoved out of sight. They said the other one was

much smaller than Peter. May have even been a girl. Hey, Dena, you were in the nurse's office yesterday too, weren't you? Did you hear anything?"

"I was gone before Peter got there. Sorry."

Rachel then mocked, "Thanks so much for your very informative commentary on the Peter the Beater case. I feel so enlightened. B'bye." She then gave Janie a hand motion to 'shove off'.

Janie "humphed", turned on her heel, and left.

Just then, Peter the Beater strolled into the cafeteria, his gang of goons trailing. Someone yelled, "Hey Pete! I heard you were beat up by a girl," and a gale of laughter erupted throughout the dining hall. This insult was hurled by Josh Fletcher, the football team's quarterback. Josh's rugged good looks and an air of arrogance make him perfect boyfriend material for the snobs. He's tall and thin, but has upper body strength, as I suppose any good quarterback would. He's got this sandy brown hair that spirals all around his head. Basically, he's a hunk. Being the leader of the football team, he's not really afraid of anyone, given that the entire team has his back. Peter the Beater is no exception.

"I better not find you in an empty hallway, Fletcher!" Peter threatened.

Then without warning, and totally out of character, Mary shouts, "I'm sure he's shaking Peter, since all you can seem to do in a deserted hallway is get knocked out!"

Once again laughter broke out and echoed throughout the cafeteria. Peter's head twisted around so quickly, he resembled a boy possessed. He scowled at Mary, his mouth agape, as if the most offensive verbal attack as ever heard within the walls of Cecil M. Butters Middle School were about to spew forth. His eyes traveled from Mary to me, the rage in his face dissipating, and being replaced with an expression of indecision. In the end fear defeated him. Peter's mouth slowly closed, his head hung low, and he shuffled out of the building.

"Boy, you sure told him, Ka-Bam!" Rachel proudly asserted to Mary.

"Yeah, I did!" Mary beamed. "I'm just tired of him bullying everyone all the time. I'm glad Peter got put in his place."

I couldn't take it any more. I needed to get this off my chest. It was going to plague me for the remainder of the day and I would feel worse and worse, until something terrible happened, for instance, my head exploding. I mean, these were my BFF's, I should be able to tell them anything, right? I leaned over to Mary and Rachel and whispered, "I need to tell you something, right now, and I need to tell you in private."

We went behind the school, and I stopped to take a couple of deep breaths. Mary and Rachel watched me closely, in anticipation of what was to come next. I took another deep breath, and blurted it out, "I did it!"

They both looked at each other, and Mary asked, "Did what?"

I rolled my eyes at her. Where had she been all day? What had everyone been whispering and gossiping about ALL DAY? "Peter," I said, "I'm the one that knocked him out."

Mary and Rachel looked at each other again, and then simultaneously, broke out into fits of laughter. "Good one!" Rachel snickered. "You really had me going there for a minute, Dena. Geez, I thought something bad had happened."

"Yeah," Mary giggled, then she tried to straighten up her face. "Is there something you really wanted to tell us?"

So I decided to tell them the story, I told them about the night before my birthday, my strange day at school, specifically pointing out the incidents with the bus, and P.E., since they were witness to those. Then I told them about Peter the Beater. They both again chuckled at that part. I told them everything my parents had told me, except the part about Uncle Andrew.

"Prove it," said Rachel, unconvinced.

"Fine," I sighed. "I will run around this building before you can count to ten. Ready, go!"

I ran so fast, that everything was a blur. I came up behind Rachel on the count of eight.

"That had to be a trick, you must have taken a short cut." Rachel was obviously still skeptical.

"Okay, I will read your mind. Think hard about something."

Rachel closed her eyes and I could tell she was concentrating really hard. I closed my eyes too. I had never read anyone's mind willingly yet, so I hoped I had enough control to do it. All of a sudden, shapes start swirling in my mind, then I see Rachel, and she is speaking to me in my head, and she said, "You're crazy."

I opened my eyes, and proudly told Rachel, "You were thinking that I'm crazy."

"Oh, that's really impressive Dena. That's a given, based on the story you just told us."

This time Mary piped in, "Stop it you two. Dena, read my mind, and tell me what I'm thinking."

So I closed my eyes again, and again the shapes started swirling in my head, until Mary's was there saying, "I believe you Dena, and I will help you in any way I can. And I really want some strawberry ice cream." I could tell she added that last part, to make it believable. I opened my eyes and told Mary to whisper to Rachel what she had just thought, so that Rachel would believe. Then I told them what Mary was thinking. They both looked at me awestruck, then Rachel slowly whispered, "Ka-Bam!"

As we were walking back into school, Rachel asked, "So, what are we going to do?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean, with your powers. We could patrol the school, or fight crime, or something."

Mary chimed in, "We could help others! That's so exciting."

I started thinking about my family, especially my Uncle Andrew. I knew I was going to disappoint them, but I replied, "We're not going to do anything."

"Nothing?" They both sounded astonished.

"Yes, nothing. I am not going to be using my powers. I don't want to become a sideshow freak. I just want to be me. These powers are a curse."

"No they're not," Mary said supportively, "They're a gift."