

1. CONTROL

It wasn't easy being different. I thought about this a lot. I didn't LOOK different. A lot of girls were 5'6" tall. I wasn't thin or overweight. I had average hair. It wasn't dark, it wasn't blonde, it wasn't straight, and it wasn't curly. I looked completely normal. But I didn't feel like everyone else. I was special. Everyone wanted to be special, right?

Maybe?

Well, probably not.

Most people just wanted to fit in. I knew for a fact what most people wanted. I knew this because, for lack of a better term, I was an Empath.

That Monday morning was just like every other school day. My alarm went off at six o'clock and I smacked it. I stumbled through the dark hallway toward the bathroom, almost tripping over the cat on the way. "Shush, Kitty!" I mumbled as I closed the bathroom door. Every morning the cat continuously chirped in her high, squeaky, pitiful meow until she got fed. I found it irritating early in the morning.

After I showered and got dressed, I felt better and decided to brush and feed the cat. My mom would be upset if she got up and the cat hadn't been fed. As I was brushing the cat, I heard my mom stirring at the other end of the hall. Since my mom had her own bathroom, we each had our own spaces to get ready in the morning. That was definitely a good thing when there were two girls in the house.

I went downstairs and turned on the TV. Then I heated a quick toaster pastry for breakfast. I sat on the overstuffed ottoman in front of the fireplace warming my toes as I munched my breakfast. This was one of the best parts of my day, especially on a cold January morning. There were no strong emotions coming from my mom and no other people around to break my solitude. My cat wondered by with a little "mew" and I once again didn't know whether to be thankful that animals' emotions didn't affect me. Since it was still peaceful, the neighbors probably weren't up yet.

After eating and turning off the TV, I went back upstairs to finish getting ready. As I was working on my hair my mom came out of her room. I was often told how much she and I looked alike. My mom thought it was great, since we were often mistaken for sisters. I didn't mind too much, since that usually meant that the person thought I was older. What 15-year old doesn't want to look just a little older? My mom was about a half inch shorter and a size or two larger than me – though she wasn't really fat. We had the same hair color and hair type, and it was about the same length. Though I wore contacts, my mom wore glasses. We both had intelligent eyes, but my mom's eyes were more of a golden hazel and mine were aqua hazel. Our face structures were similar, but there were differences. My mom thought that I looked more like my dad than like her.

"Jen, make sure you pack your soccer gear for this afternoon," my mom said to me on my way downstairs. She was a software engineer at a corporation that had its headquarters in

Lexington. Though my mom could wait to go into work at 9:00, she usually tried to go to work when I left for school so we could have more time together. If my mom was heading downstairs and gathering her stuff, I'd better pick up the pace. Putting the finishing touches on my lip gloss, I bounded downstairs.

As I pounced at the bottom of the stairs, I felt a wave of anger wash over me. I got a flash of my next door neighbor yelling at his son. I growled to myself and went into the kitchen where my mom was packing a lunch. "Mom! That's MY yogurt!" I yelled at her. "Why do you always do that?"

"Jen, don't start!" she said in an exasperated voice.

I stomped around and started slamming drawers and cabinet doors in frustration. First my mom was yelling at my about packing my soccer gear. Like I'd forget! Then she was taking my stuff! I shook my head and slammed another drawer.

"Jen! Straighten up right now! What is your PROBLEM?" my mom asked, starting to get angry.

"You're so selfish! Why do you take my stuff?" I glared at my mom.

"Jen, if you look in the refrigerator, you'll see that I bought extra of the flavor yogurt you asked for. There's plenty left for you. Please don't accuse me of something when you don't have all of the facts." My mom gave me a stern look as she zipped up her lunchbox and went to the entry. "I'm heading to work. Make sure you turn off the fireplace before you leave."

I heard the side door close and the garage door being opened. I felt a wave of frustration and concern rolling off of my mom. And I could feel that she was only concerned for me. I felt like crap. That's how my "ability" worked. If someone nearby (whether they were in the room, in an adjacent room, or even in a nearby building) had a strong emotion, for a second that same emotion would consume me. Sometimes the remnants of it would affect my relationships. I'd yell at my friends and family for nothing because someone else was angry. Or if they were really angry, that feeling would just multiply through me.

The only good thing about my ability was that I could always read someone's intentions. If I was having a conversation with someone or watching someone across the room and I focused, I could tell what their intentions were. That was kind of cool sometimes. Not so cool right now. Now I felt guilty for hurting my mom unnecessarily. I pulled out my cell phone and texted a quick apology to her, feeling a little better as I did it. I gathered up my soccer backpack, school bag, and purse and headed out to catch the bus.

2. BACKFIRE

My school district didn't pick kids up at their houses, so my bus stop was a block away. As I walked, I put on my headphones and concentrated on walking and listening to my music. That's how I had learned to block out the emotions. By concentrating on the music and focusing on how it made me feel, I was able to keep the emotions of others at bay. I could sense them shimmering around me, but I didn't have to feel them. I was getting better at keeping up my concentration when I tried. But at times like this morning when my guard was down I could still be consumed by someone else's feelings. I first started getting the "benefits" of my abilities when I was 12 or 13 years old. As if girls didn't have enough to deal with at the onset of puberty! At first, the emotions were scattered and just felt like they were my emotions. I'd get angry for no apparent reason. I would start to cry or suddenly be in a great mood. My grandmother had given me a brochure on managing teenage hormones. Ugh!

Over the past couple of years I'd noticed that people seemed to experience more anger and sadness than happiness - at least the experiences that happened on a strong enough level that I was overcome by them. At first, I could only feel people's intentions toward me. If someone was planning to be outright mean to me (like to play a trick on me) I could feel it. That really came in handy in middle school. But now as I got older, I could feel emotions farther away and stronger. I could intentionally determine what pretty much anyone's intentions or emotions were. And I had been working hard to learn to block that information unless I sought it out.

The worst part about my abilities was that they made me feel lonely. Even when I was with friends, I didn't feel like I fit in. I'd hinted around very carefully to my mom and my dad and my best friend and other family members, but no one seemed to be waiting for me to say something so they could let me in on the big secret: that I wasn't alone in my abilities.

I made it to the bus stop and saw my best friend, Serena Halcian waiting. I pulled off my earphones and stuffed them in my pocket. "G'morning, Serena. You ready for this Biology test?"

Serena rolled her eyes, "When are any of us ready?" Our sophomore science class was actually Advanced Biology. Science Magnet students had to apply and take tests to be able to take harder classes. Whose bright idea was that? Oh yeah, our parents. It was GOOD for us. "You know that half the class is going to fail the test and Mr. Perez is going to have to curve the grade again," she said.

I smiled and rolled my eyes back at Serena. That was the way that their science classes had been since they started at Lexington High School last year. Although there were five high schools in Lexington, LHS was the oldest. Serena and I had gone to different middle schools. We became friends within the first week of high school. We complimented each other very well. Where I was athletic and outgoing, she was bookish and shy. We were both the same height, but she had beautiful straight blonde hair that I envied. And Serena was totally jealous of the way that sometimes I would have straight hair, sometimes it would be curly, and sometimes it was just wavy. She could never get her hair to be anything but straight.

Serena was always very emotionally controlled. She was so constant and mature. She never got really angry and never got really excited. She thought she was boring but I found that trait very calming after being bombarded with other people's emotions. And Serena thought that

I was so fun to be around. I was always excited about something or upset about something. My mom called it Drama (with a capital D!), but Serena called it joie de vivre – the joy of life.

Where I was lean but muscular, Serena was curvy. But she was so shy that she didn't even know that the guys in school were always flirting with her. And I never told her, since most guys weren't interested in my friend's quick mind and good heart. I felt very protective of her.

Our relationship was far from perfect, however. I had tried bringing up the supernatural to her a couple of times. I was trying to gauge whether she would be open or interested in my ability. Both times she completely shut me down. She was mentally closed to the supernatural and was a very logical person. She was caring, don't get me wrong. When one of her friends had a problem, Serena would jump in to help solve it. She wasn't terribly sympathetic when there was an action that could be taken.

Serena and I were distracted by a group that was forming on the adjacent street corner. I was overcome with jealousy. I blocked that emotion quickly as Serena and I walked over to the growing crowd. There were 2 boys in the middle of the crowd. One was tall; around six feet. He was gangly and had cute shaggy brown hair. The other was shorter, maybe an inch taller than me. He had short dark hair and was slightly muscular. I reached out mentally and found that the taller boy was feeling jealousy. His intention was to find out what was going on. The shorter guy was just trying to calm his friend down. His intention was to keep a secret for someone else.

I saw the taller guy look over at another guy who was sneering. He was blonde and very good-looking, though he looked like a complete jerk. I could feel his intentions were just to start trouble. The shorter guy was saying, "I wasn't talking to her, really. She came up to me. I'm not interested in her. You know that, Brad." He was circling gently away from his friend.

The taller guy (Brad apparently) squinted his eyes, "You expect me to believe that you weren't talking to my ex-girlfriend when I saw you talking to her. I saw her smile and HUG YOU!!!" His face was turning red and he was starting to shake. I was having a hard time controlling my emotions as Brad got angrier.

The troublemaker looked at the shorter guy and said, "Dude, you were hugging his ex-girlfriend? What kind of friend ARE you? Man, you don't touch another guy's girl!"

I couldn't take it anymore. I ran up to Brad and touched his arm. "Don't listen to this guy," I said, pointing to Mr. hot, blonde, and evil. I stuck my thumb out at the shorter guy. "He's your friend. You have to trust him. You said she was hugging him. Was he hugging her? Maybe she was talking to him about you. Did you ask what he was talking to her about?"

I could feel Brad starting to calm down, but the shorter guy was getting angry. Oops. And Blondie was getting upset that I was ruining his fun. "Dave?" Brad said, looking at his friend.

Dave looked at me and glared. "You stay out of this. You don't know anything!" He looked at Brad again. "You have to trust me. I'd never do anything to hurt you."

Blondie snorted. "That wasn't an answer. Why are you listening to this dumb chick? Maybe Dave here thought you liked this chick. Though I don't know why. She's nosy and not even pretty." The crowd laughed. "He probably thought it was okay to go after your girl." That

sent Brad over the edge. He lunged for Dave. As they scuffled, people started moving back to give them more room. Unfortunately for me, I didn't get out of the way fast enough and got taken down by a flying leg. I hit the ground hard on my behind and scraped my hands on the sidewalk.