



Powerless (The Hero Agenda Book 1)

By Tera Lynn Childs, Tracy Deeb

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Kenna is tired of being "normal."

The only thing special about her is that she isn't special at all. Which is frustrating when you're constantly surrounded by superheroes. Her best friend, her ex-boyfriend, practically everyone she knows has some talent or power. Sure, Kenna's smart and independent, but as an ordinary girl in an extraordinary world, it's hard not to feel inferior.

So when three villains break into the lab where she interns, Kenna refuses to be a victim. She's not about to let criminals steal the research that will make her extraordinary too.

But in the heat of battle, secrets are spilled and one of the villains saves her life. Twice. Suddenly, everything Kenna thought she knew about good and evil, heroes and villains is upended. And to protect her life and those she loves, she must team up with her sworn enemies on a mission that will redefine what it means to be powerful and powerless...

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Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

Gr 7–10—Even though she doesn't have a superpower herself, Kenna has grown up immersed in superhero culture. After a group of villains break into her mother's lab, Kenna's outlook on the superhero world starts to unravel as she realizes that the do-gooders she has always admired are engaging in malicious deeds. Now she must work with the most unlikely of characters (villians!) in order to set things right. There is no shortage of action as this band of teenagers tries to sneak into several well-guarded facilities, but unfortunately other aspects of the novel don't hold together as well. Characters such as Kenna's rebellious best friend "Rebel" and her "dark-and-scowly" love interest are not very original or well developed. While teens in these situations may spend a lot of time arguing about what next step to take, too much of the novel is spent on the characters' bickering. The major theme explored here is the thin line between good and evil, and while there is an interesting parallel that can be drawn to the current actions of U.S. government organizations, most of Kenna's narrative is lacking in subtlety. With a cliff-hanger ending and plenty of dangling threads, there is ample opportunity for a sequel. Marie Lu's *The Young Elites* (Putnam, 2014) offers a more nuanced portrait of young superheroes and Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* (Tor, 2008) presents a better glimpse into corrupt government behavior. VERDICT Fans of fast-paced action and superhero books may enjoy this, but readers looking for more complexity should search elsewhere.—Carrie Shaurette, Dwight-Englewood School, Englewood, NJ

About the Author

Tera Lynn Childs is the RITA-award-winning and bestselling author of teen fiction about a mythological high school, mermaid princesses, monster-hunting triplet descendants of Medusa, and dark fae princes.

Tracy Deeb is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling and critically-acclaimed author who writes under many pseudonyms, including young adult novels about surfing mermaids and technological armageddon.

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Chapter 1

If I could have any superpower, right now, I'd choose the ability to reach through glass. One thin, little pane is all that separates me from bliss...of the midnight-snack variety, to be exact. The chocolate bar hangs halfway to freedom but refuses to take the plunge, as if the vending machine is mocking me, taunting me.

As if it knows I'm powerless.

Annoyed, I slam my palms against the glass. Everything inside shudders. My chocolate bar-pure Swiss milk chocolate dotted with toasted hazelnuts-doesn't budge.

"Come on," I beg as if the candy can hear me. "Just a little farther."

No such luck.

Then again, when have I ever been lucky? I'm just glad no heroes are around to see me lose a battle with a

vending machine. I would be the punch line to every joke for a year.

Thankfully, the lab is pretty much empty at this time of night. Even Mom went home two hours ago, leaving me to transcribe the notes from today's sessions. I prefer to work when no one is around. My experiments fall into a gray area in the Superhero Code of Conduct, and even though I'm not technically a superhero-yet-I try not to piss off the powers-that-be. The last thing I need is to lose my lab privileges before I've perfected my formula.

Copying down Mom's scribbles is like deciphering some previously unknown ancient language. It isn't exactly the most glamorous summer job ever, but it pays okay and gives me access to the facility.

I'm almost done with tonight's transcription from the digital white board Mom and her team spent all day filling with chemical equations for her newest power-enhancing formula. Maybe twenty more minutes, and then I can get back to my test samples.

My stomach rumbles in protest, reminding me that I skipped dinner. I really want that stupid chocolate bar. But since I just used my last quarters, my only hope is that one of the security guards upstairs has change for a ten.

I turn away from the vending machine alcove and start back around the corner to grab my wallet from the lab.

Right before I make the turn, I hear hurried footsteps. Not wanting a repeat of last week's collision with Dr. Harwood-my favorite jeans still smell like sulfur-I hang back a step.

But the boy who rushes around the corner looks nothing like the balding, old scientist who works nearly as many late nights as I do.

No, this guy is tall and lean, but not too skinny. He's got major biceps and I can see the outline of some pretty impressive muscles beneath his shirt. Yum. He's probably about my age or a little older, eighteen or nineteen maybe. And everything about him is shrouded in black-his tee and jeans, his heavy-duty boots, his shoulder-length hair-everything but his eyes.

If we weren't in superhero central, I'd say he looks like a stereotypical villain.

You'd think with all that darkness, he'd be nothing more than shadow. But he's all angles: his cheekbones, his jaw, even the collarbones I can see peeking out from the low neckline of his tee. Light seems to reflect off him like moon glow at midnight. Surrounded by all that sculpted darkness, his icy blue irises burn like the hottest flames.

Our gazes collide, and though I know it's vain, I instantly wish my hair wasn't pulled back in a messy braid and that I was wearing something-anything-more appealing than my dad's ratty old 1996 Stanley Cup Champions tee.

Hot guys in the underground lab are few and far between-Who am I kidding? Hot guys in my life are few and far between-so most of my wardrobe choices involve comfort and whether I mind if the garment gets ruined by acid, dye, or any of a million other compounds we work with every day.

If my best friend, Rebel, were here, she'd be doing an I-told-you-so dance because she's been wanting to give me a makeover forever. That, and she'd already have his number and email address, and they'd be making plans for their date this weekend. Me, I can't even manage a simple "hello."

The fact that he's scowling at me, those dark brows slashing low over those bright eyes, isn't helping anything.

"The lab is supposed to be empty," he says.

His voice is flat, but his comment almost feels like an accusation.

"I'm working late," I answer, trying not to sound defensive. "What are you doing here?"

He lifts an eyebrow. "You're working in the hall?"

"I needed a break to come get chocolate," I say, gesturing at the vending machine behind me.

He nods down at my empty hands. "You don't have any chocolate."

"That thing hates me. Took my money and kept the candy bar."

In a graceful movement that looks almost choreographed, Dark-and-Scowly steps around me and up to the greedy machine. He presses his palms to the glass, just like I did. Hey, maybe he has the power to reach through glass. After all, around here pretty much everyone but me has some kind of super ability.

When his hands don't immediately sink through the surface, I say, "I tried smacking it already. Didn't work."

Moving his hands closer to the edge, he curls his fingers around the frame. Then, with his boots braced on the floor, he gives the whole machine a solid shove. The heavy hunk of metal rocks back once, then comes forward, its front legs hitting the tile floor with a sharp thud. On impact, the chocolate bar sails against the glass before falling into the trough below.

He turns to face me, a cocky smile twisting one side of his mouth. "Takes a special touch."

I duck down and reach through the hinged door to grab the candy bar.

"You're my hero," I joke.

He snorts. "Right."

I stand up, chocolate clutched safely in my hand. There's an awkward silence that stretches into uncomfortable territory. When I can't take it anymore, I wag the candy and say, "Well, thanks."

I start to walk around him, to head back to the lab, when he steps into my path.

"So, what boring work do you have to take breaks from?"

I try to sound casual, like I'm not eager to keep talking to him. "I'm transcribing notes in the manipulation lab."

As I point down the same hall he came from, he turns his head to follow the direction of my gesture. I automatically check for the mark of the League beneath his right ear. If it's there, I can't see it behind his hair. He could be a hero. Or he could be an ordinary, just like me.

Suddenly self-conscious, I tug a piece of hair forward to cover my unmarked skin.

When he looks at me again, his scowl is back in place and even deeper.

He asks, "You're working in Dr. Swift's lab?"

"She's my mom. I'm helping her out." I shrug. "There are worse summer jobs."

He gaze skims over me. "You're Kenna Swift?"

And that's the end of that.

My mom is famous in hero circles. She's developed more than a dozen different formulas for the superhero world, from sprays that thaw victims of freeze rays to supplements that keep thought-readers out of someone's mind. She's earned the League Medal of Valor three times. And those were just for the inventions they know about. She's their very own Einstein, Edison, and Jobs rolled into one.

The only thing I'm famous for is being the powerless daughter of a superhero. My dad was one of the best of the best. And I'm...nothing.

I shift my weight, wanting to redirect the conversation away from me. "You never answered my question. What are you doing down here so late?"

Those bright blue eyes sear into me as he takes a step back. "I have to go."

His sudden evasiveness makes me suspicious, so when he starts to move past me, I sidestep into his path. "Excuse me," I say, "but this is a secure level. Are you even authorized to be down here?"

"My dad," he says, scowling at me. "He's a security guard."

A security guard? The facility might be so big that I can't keep track of everyone who works in every lab, but I know all the guards by name. Especially the night guards, since I'm usually the last one here.

Travis and Luther are on duty tonight. Travis and his wife just had their first baby, a girl named Tia. Luther is old enough to be my great-grandfather and he never married.

I take half a step back as my suspicions turn to concern. "Who's your dad?" I demand.

This guy definitely has the look of a villain.

What if he really is one?

He glances nervously over his shoulder. "He's-"

I shake my head and start to walk away before he can finish the lie.

He reaches for me, but I shrug him off. My heart is beating way too fast. This could go way bad, way quick.

"Please, just listen." He waits until I'm looking him in the eye before he continues. "You know me," he says, his voice taking on this weird, hypnotic tone. "We've met before."

His eyes start to burn brighter and brighter. Oh crap. He must be a villain, and one with a psy power. The vilest kind. Fear and anger collide inside me as I wonder what to do about him trying to mess with my head. How to play this? I can't exactly tell him I'm-

Suddenly, the floor beneath my feet shudders violently, knocking me off balance. I lurch forward into Dark-

and-Scowly's arms. He catches me, grabs my upper arms, just as a concussion wave of air and sound hits us.

That sounded-and felt-like a bomb went off in the lab. If we weren't a hundred feet underground and shielded by every protection science and superheroes can create, I'd think the supervillain Quake had struck. But that's impossible.

Then again, impossible doesn't always apply in the superhero world. After all, impossible didn't keep Dark-and-Scowly from being where he doesn't belong.

Suddenly, every alarm in the facility blares. I freak. The lab! All that research-Mom's and mine-is priceless. The superhero blood samples alone are more valuable than anything else in the building.

Panic overrides judgment and I push away, but his grip only tightens. The jerk. A little super strength would be really useful right now.

"You can't go in there."

"Who are you?" I demand, struggling to get out of his grasp. If he really is a villain, I don't want him near me or this lab. Not with what villains are capable of. "What have you done?"

He doesn't answer. More pissed than ever, I fake left and pull right. He follows my fake-out, and as his hair swings with the momentum, I see the mark I'd been looking for earlier. Not under his right ear like the superheroes. Under his left.

Shit.

"You're a villain." It's not a question. I struggle harder. "What did you do? Let me go!"

"Don't!" he shouts above the roaring sirens. "If you go in there, you could get hurt. They're upset-"

I might not have superpowers, but I know how to knee a guy in the nuts. Before he can finish his sentence, he's doubled over, gasping for breath. I dash for the corner, but I don't get two steps before his hand clamps around my elbow.

"No, Kenna, you can't!" he shouts. "Trust me. If you-"

Anger overwhelms me. I've spent my whole life running from villains-from what they've done to my family. From what they might do to me. And I'm sick of it. I'm fed up with the whole steer-clear-of-anything-remotely-dangerous thing my mom's had me doing for so long.

Just because I don't have a power doesn't mean I'm powerless.

I turn on him with a furious growl and, using the karate-chop technique Rebel taught me, land a solid hit to the side of his neck. He releases me and I wrench open the door to the janitor's closet, use my entire body weight to shove him inside, then slam the door in his stunned face.

Holding the door handle with one hand, I use my other to dig out my security badge. I run it over the reader pad until I hear the lock engage. I leave him pounding against the door.

Who's the helpless ordinary now?

I sprint down the hall and around the corner to find the area outside the lab full of smoke. I hold my arm up

to my face, covering my mouth with my sleeve as I look around.

The windows that line the wall between the lab and the hall have shattered, covering the floor with a million shards of safety glass. No ordinary bomb could have done that. Whoever that v-bag in the closet is, he obviously has help. There's another villain here. One with some kind of explosive power.

For a moment, fear paralyzes me. A villain like that killed my father, used his evil power to blow Dad up right in front of me. That same villain would have killed me if the heroes hadn't come along and stopped him. I was only four, but I remember watching my dad die. One moment he was yelling for me to run. And the next he was gone, nothing more than scorch marks on the tile.

Rage rips through me at the memory, burning away the last of my fear and sending me careening straight toward the lab. Villains have already taken my father from me. No way are they getting their disgusting paws on my mother's lab-and my research-too. Between the smoke and the strobe lights from the fire alarms, the lab looks like a better-lit version of the club Rebel always wants to go to. Or a designated disaster area.

Through the haze, I pull open the door. I know every inch of the lab by heart. Even smoke-blind, I can find my way to the emergency ventilation button.

Weaving around stools and counters, I hurry along the front edge of the room. Seconds later my stomach connects with the counter that lines the far wall. I lean forward, tracing my fingers up the tile until I feel the big, red button.

I smack my palm against the plastic. A whooshing sound fills the lab, so powerful it almost drowns out the alarm sirens. Faster than I expect, smoke gets sucked up and out of the room through the massive vent in the middle of the ceiling. As the haze dissipates, the shadow of a figure emerges. A man stands in the back corner of the lab, facing the vault.

And the door is wide open.

I'm too late. I've failed.

"No," I whisper, terrified at what the villains might get their hands on.

I have to find a way to warn the League. Right now. The system automatically sends alerts, but there have been a number of false alarms lately. I don't want them to dismiss this as another one.

I glance around wildly and see my cell phone charging on the other side of the lab.

Using the counter to push off, I launch myself into a sprint. Only I don't take into account the stool I had pulled into the center of the room while working on the transcription earlier. I crash into it and send myself stumbling into the nearest lab table.

"What have we here?" a sneering voice asks with a crisp British accent.

I turn to the guy standing in front of the vault. Like Dark-and-Scowly, he's dressed in all black. Must be the standard-issue villain uniform these days. Except that his shock of red hair-which is currently standing on end-and the look of surprise on his face make him seem more startled-matchstick than villain-capable-of-blowing-up-the-vault.

That is, until he narrows his eyes at Dark-and-Scowly, who has somehow appeared in the blown-out doorway. I have a moment to wonder how the hell he got out of the janitor's closet before Matchstick hisses,

"I thought you were supposed to take care of problems like this."

"I am," Dark-and-Scowly answers. "I've got everything under control."

The other guy snorts. "Don't look like it to me."

"You'd better go," I tell them, disappointed by the unsteady tremble in my voice. I'm still angry, but the fear is creeping back in. I'm trapped down here in this lab with two villains. The last time I was this close to the bad guys, my father was murdered and I...I was-

I cut off that train of thought before it can go anywhere. I'm not that helpless little girl anymore, and anyone who thinks otherwise is going to be in for a big shock.

"Leave now," I tell them. "Before it's too late."

Matchstick starts toward me. "Why is that, sweetheart?"

"The guards are coming." I steel myself for whatever comes next. "Their response time is less than thirty seconds."

He starts laughing before I finish. Smirking, he says, "Your guards aren't coming. Aren't even in the building." He steps into the center aisle. "They took an unexpected vacation."

I don't want to believe him-he's a villain, after all-but the cockiness in his tone tells me that, at the very least, he believes the guards are gone. Besides, it's been at least thirty seconds since the alarms started blaring. Help should be here by now.

Which means I'm on my own.

Calling the League is the only option.

I try not to think just how badly a confrontation with two villains can go as I glance at my phone, still twenty feet away, and then back at the redheaded villain. His eyes flick to the counter, and when his gaze returns to me, he's shaking his head. He can't have missed my hot-pink case against the stainless-steel countertop.

Matchstick spreads his arms wide, his fingers stretched to maximum breadth, and his palms begin to glow. And I stop breathing.

This isn't going to be good.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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