

Open Window

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Submitted: September 4, 2009

Updated: August 10, 2010

Um, just a little something I was working on that isn't a fanfiction. I'm writing a story about a young teenager who hears a life-changing conversation from his new neighbors' window. That's the best I can describe it, but I suck at story descriptions.

Provided by Fanart Central.

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Chapter 1 - Welcome to Seaside	2
Chapter 2 - A Late Breakfast	5
Chapter 3 - Telsa's House	8
Chapter 4 - Odd Artwork	10
Chapter 5 - Guitar Dirge	12
Chapter 6 - Brian	15
Chapter 7 - Family Issues	17
Chapter 8 - Only Eight Days	20
Chapter 9 - Snooping Around	23
Chapter 10 - Brian's House	25
Chapter 11 - Headache	28
Chapter 12 - A Mother's Love	30
Chapter 13 - Stapler	32
Chapter 14 - Family Troubles	35

1 - Welcome to Seaside

Leo's POV

My bare feet pad against the warm sidewalk as I relish the feel of the sun on my back. I love summer. It's always so warm. And this summer, we have new neighbors. I walk casually up to their house, but stop under the porch upon hearing a conversation drifting from the upstairs window.

"How many times must we go over this?!"

"It's hard to hold it in!" screams a high pitched, female voice.

"You can't do it! Not yet!"

"How the heck am I supposed to not do it?"

"Just try, okay?"

"You're not helping."

My new neighbors are officially weird. I know I should probably knock on their door already and quit eavesdropping, but I can't help continuing to listen.

"You just need to change your attitude."

"I said you're not HELPING!"

"Sorry, sorry!"

The girl mutters something, and she speaks in low voices with the guy for a bit. I pick up snatches of conversation.

"...not your fault..."

"...ruined his..."

"...we won't let..."

"...of course, of course..."

"...just wait..."

"...no..."

The voices pick up again.

"It will be okay! You said so!"

"But how many lives must be sacrificed? How many hearts broken? How many battles-"

"Shh! It will work out. It must work out."

"For us."

"You're being too sentimental. His life must be forfeit. We can't allow feelings to mess this up."

"It's my prophecy! I made it! Don't tell me what to do!"

"Lower your voi-"

"No! Don't tell me what to do! Just because you're my older brother doesn't mean you can boss me around! In 10 days it will be fulfilled, and then we will go our separate ways. In the meantime you obey me, not the other way around! Are we clear!?"

"C-crystal clear!"

"Good. And now we wait."

"And now we wait."

I lose by courage to knock and bolt, down the sidewalk and back to my house. This is too weird to comprehend.

"So, did you meet our new neighbors?" Mom asks over the dishes of potatoes, chicken, and watermelon.

I swallow my mouthful of white meat and say, "Yeah." Lie.

"How are they?"

"Weird." Truth.

"Oh, come on! They must be feeling uncomfortable, with all these strangers around. Maybe you and Leanne can take down some homebaked cookies tomorrow!" Mom claps her hands together, smiling at us eagerly. Leanne and I give her "the look".

Leanne and I are twins, me being 26 seconds older. Mom has always expected us to do "cute twin things", or at least be the good kids on the block. We failed her expectations. Leanne and I would rather be out doing our own things - we know each other too well, so we're hardly able to stand one another. In any case, both of us realize that most of Mom's ideas are well-meaning but over the top. Cookies? Really? We aren't Girl Scouts here. Leanne doesn't even want to meet our new neighbors anyways. She's pretty antisocial.

Mom gives us a disapproving look. "Take Leanne down after dinner, at least," she says, ending the conversation.

After dinner, we reluctantly walk down, uneager to get there. I notice that the window is still open, but this time there is no conversation. Before we get to the door, I realize that my lie is about to come out, so I turn around to confess it ahead of time to Leanne.

"I know you lied, so shut up and let's get this over with," she says, practically reading my mind. I hate it when she does things like this. Like I said, we know each other too well.

Frowning, I turn around and slowly walk up to the door. The porch looks normal enough, if not a bit shabby. The green paint is peeling, and the doorbell is the old kind with little lights inside. I have a thing for doorbells. Leanne gives me a small poke, and I quickly press it, the ringing echoing throughout the house.

The woman who comes to the door looks somewhat wild, her short mousey brown hair in complete disarray. Her large eyes flit from me to Leanne rapidly over and over again.

"Uh, hi, I'm Leo, and this is Leanne. We're your new neighbors," I say, gesturing to Leanne and myself as I say our names.

"Are you twins?" she asks, her voice identical to the female one I heard earlier.

"Uh, yeah," I say, taken aback. Leanne and I aren't identical twins; we're fraternal. Most people can hardly tell we're related.

"How old are you?" she asks, tipping her head to one side.

"15 in 10 days," Leanne answers shortly, crossing her arms. Oh boy, I hope she doesn't have one of her outbursts. They are so embarrassing.

"They fit..." the woman half gasps, her eyes somehow getting even wider. I can clearly see her vivid blue irises and round, black pupils, looking out into some other mental world of hers.

"Uh..." Leanne and I say simultaneously, giving her the look we usually reserve for our mom.

"Oh, sorry!" she says, and smiles at us cheerfully, suddenly back in the real world. "My name's Telsa, and I'm living here with my brother Rob. It's great to know we have such nice neighbors! Please, come on in!" We step inside, giving each other the "huh?" look. This Telsa is very confusing.

She leads us into a small, cozy living room, and has us sit down on the couch together. "You stay there, and I'll go get Rob and some snacks. Do you like cheese and crackers?" she asks, still reminding us of Mom.

"We just ate," Leanne says coolly.

"But thanks," I add quickly, not wanting to get on Telsa's bad side. If I'm right and she was the girl I'd

heard from the window, she could have quite the temper.

"Of course! Well, I'll be right back then!" she beams, unfazed as she half skips from the room. I have never seen an adult do that in my life.

"How did you know they were so weird?" Leanne mutters. I simply shrug, and she gives me a disbelieving look that says, "Liar".

"I'm innocent," I eye-communicate back.

"Yeah right."

Telsa walks in then, interrupting our mental conversation. A tall man walks in behind her, creating a very noticeable size difference between them. For the first time I realize that Telsa is short. "This is Rob," she says, gesturing to the tall man. "Rob, these are Leo and Leanne. They're twins." He nods politely to us, and we nod back.

Telsa beams, and seats Rob and herself down across from us.

"Now, onto the important stuff."

2 - A Late Breakfast

Leanne's POV

The "important stuff" was apparently small talk. I hate small talk.

I impatiently run my hand through my curly red hair – both a habit and a warning. Leo shoots me the “no outbursts” look.

I ignore him.

“Look, we really have to go, so we’ll just be leaving now,” I cut in, grabbing Leo’s arm and dragging him up off the couch with me.

That woman – what was her name again – looks up, startled.

“But –“ she tries to protest.

“Goodbye,” I say forcefully, dragging Leo out behind me. No one protests against Leanne.

As soon as we hit the sidewalk, Leo jerks his arm out of my hand. “Gosh Leanne, what was that for?” he fumes.

I calmly walk back home, not looking at him. Why should I? “Like you said at dinner, they’re weird. I don’t hang out with weird people.

He runs forward and plants himself in my path, effectively stopping me. He knows me too well. “That surprises me, seeing as you’re weird yourself.”

I lose control and give chase, screaming after Leo as he runs away. As I run, I promise myself that I will never hang out with our new neighbors ever again.

Hey Brian,

Summer’s been going fine, thanks. Leo’s a pest, as usual. Everyone thinks that having a twin is so cool, but it’s just really annoying.

How are you? Are you still on the swim team? I want to come watch you sometime. Maybe we can go to the beach together! Are you open this Friday? I have nothing going on at all, and it’s five minutes away from my house when you walk.

As always, I love you 4ever!

Love,

Leanne

I finish typing my name and proofread the e-mail to my boyfriend, being careful not to miss a single typo. It’s the very least I can do to show I care about him, and what I say to him. And that’s saying something, because I usually never care what I say to people.

“Leanne,” comes Mom’s voice from my doorway.

“Just a minute,” I mutter, finishing up and hitting send. I spin around in my chair, to see Mom standing there with a loving, sane smile on her face. I smile back; this is a rare occurrence. Ever since Dad died she’s been slightly crazy. That was back when I was five, so for most of my life she’s been like this – crazy, lovable Mom.

“Time for bed,” she says softly.

“Okay,” I agree, not putting up my usual fight. If she can be normal, then I can be less snappy.

“I love you, Leanne. Never forget that,” she says, sounding oddly wistful.

I nod. “I love you too, Mom. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” she says, and she leaves, closing the door.

I get up from my desk and climb into bed, flipping off the lamp and laying in the darkness, completely silent.

I remember Dad’s funeral. I didn’t really understand it then, being only five. Everyone was in black, and crying, and I was just plain confused. I didn’t get why they were sad. Now I do.

Mom wasn’t there. Leo and I went with our uncle. For the longest time I didn’t get why. Then about two years ago I realized that she had been too traumatized to go; Mom had been very much in love with him, and never really realized – or expected – him to die and leave her here. And so she sent us to our uncle’s place for a month. When we came back...she was not the same Mom. Tonight she was an echo of what she had been, of what I could hardly remember. Vaguely I wondered why, then drifted into sleep.

Yawning, I got up out of bed and stretched. How long had I slept? I could never tell; I like to keep my blinds closed. I made a blundering grab at my watch on the nightstand, and read its screen: 11:32 AM. I really slept late this morning! Well, compared to my standards.

I trudge downstairs in my pajamas, expecting to find Mom folding clothes and staring off into space or something. But she’s not there. I look around for about five minutes before finding the note on the fridge:

Leanne -

I went to the store to buy food. I’ll be back soon!

- Mom

Sighing, I open the fridge and pull out the carton of orange juice. Mom has this obsession with buying food. She goes out every morning at 11:00 exactly and buys...well, food. She puts me in charge of juice, which she makes me get every Wednesday at 1:00 in the afternoon. Mom is strange.

In any case, I have enough to make myself breakfast. Leo’s still asleep, so he can fix himself something when he gets up. I stick a piece of toast into the toaster, pour myself a bowl of cereal, get some orange juice, and set to work cutting up a peach. Halfway through slicing it the toaster goes off, and I get my food eagerly. Soon I’m sitting down at the table and reading the newspaper while I eat my breakfast.

“Morning,” says a groggy Leo.

“Morning,” I reply, intent on my newspaper article.

“Where’s the orange juice?”

“Gone.” I drank it all.

“Fine.” He begins rummaging through the kitchen, waking up enough to fix himself brunch.

I clear my plate, sticking it in the dishwasher for Mom to wash later. “Leanne, you do know that you were really rude yesterday,” says Leo. Why can’t he just drop it?

“Yeah, so?”

“I say you should apologize.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Make me.”

“Fine, breakfast can wait.” I feel a shove in my back, and begin trying to dig my heels into the floor so he can’t push me out the door.

Darn, he won. He pushes me down the sidewalk, apparently unaware that we’re in our pajamas. He even pushes me up to the door of their house, and then rings the doorbell. I simply stand there and try to look like I don’t care about what’s going on.

“Hello?” says the crazy woman, opening the door. Her hair is a little neater than yesterday, but otherwise she looks the same.

“Leanne has something to say to you,” Leo prompts me.

“No I don’t,” I say in the classic escape to this situation.

“Yes you do!” he hisses, following the script.

“No, I don’t!”

“Fine, I’ll say it for you! Telsa –“ so that’s her name “Leanne is sorry for the way she acted earlier. It was a mistake, really.”

“Oh, it’s okay! Won’t you stay for lunch? We were just about to start,” Telsa says happily.

The tall man comes up behind her and says, “Don’t pressure them, Telsa.” Almost instantly, I relax. I like this guy. So calm and sane.

Telsa scowls back at him. “Don’t tell me what to do in the house that I bought.”

“But I bought –“ he tries to say, but Telsa puts her hand over his mouth – she has to stand on tiptoe to do so – and mutters something to him. He scowls and nods. My temper flares slightly, noticing that she made him mad. I don’t want her to make him mad.

“Good!” Telsa says, perking up in a wild mood swing. I really don’t like people with wild mood swings.

“Now, will you stay for lunch?”

“Well, actually, I just wanted her to apologize, but thanks,” Leo answers for me. This is one of the times that I’m grateful for him.

“Well, okay, but come any time! Really, please do!” she says, sending us on our way with many waves and goodbyes.

Telsa is officially on my “people who annoy me” list.

3 - Telsa's House

Leo's POV

I walk back home, feeling strangely smug. So Leanne didn't actually apologize – I apologized for her, which is good enough.

Telsa is starting to grow on me. Sure, she's really strange, but perky and happy. She brings up my emotions by just being in the same room as me. Leanne obviously doesn't feel the same way, but that's Leanne. She has a tendency to avoid people like Telsa.

I come back home and finish making breakfast, picking up the paper that Leanne left on the table when I pushed her out. She didn't take it into her room with her when we got back, either, so it's still here. The headline is something boring about school fundings; I skip it and flip to the comics page. I love the comics page.

Ding! The toaster goes off and I grab my toast from it, placing it on my plate and heading to the table. I finish my breakfast, and halfway through putting away my dishes Mom gets home. Oh no.

"Leo!" she cries, dropping her shopping bags and running over to hug me.

"Hi Mom," I say, trying to wiggle out of her grip.

"Did you make breakfast?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, I'll start making lunch!"

I begin to reconsider eating with Telsa. Mom is not good at making lunch.

"Mom, I can make it –"

"Don't be silly! I will make lunch, and you will eat it. It's a normal situation, right?"

"Uh..." It's normal enough if your Mom can actually make lunch and not something that tastes worse than the hot lunch at my old elementary school. Our Mom can't do that.

"Now, do I fry the peanut butter and jelly or do I put it into the oven?"

"Actually, Mom, our new neighbors invited us over for lunch, can I eat there instead?" I'll just have to tell Telsa that I've changed my mind. I hope she can cook.

"Well, okay, but take some money with you to pay the bills."

"Uh, sure." I pretend to grab some money off the table and bolt, not wanting to smell fried peanut butter and jelly ever again.

Before I know it I'm standing at their front porch for the fourth time in the past day. It's already beginning to feel like a friend's house.

"Hello?" Again, Telsa answers the door. I'm starting to think she just likes answering doors.

"Hey, it's me, Leo," I say, feeling slightly awkward.

"Oh, hi there! We were just finishing lunch – we do tend to eat early – but you are welcome to come and visit for a bit if you like!" she says with a smile, and I feel right at home.

"Yeah, that would be nice. My mom is trying to make lunch, and she can't really cook very well, so..."

"Oh don't worry, Rob is an excellent cook! Come on inside!" She ushers me in, and once again I'm lead into the living room. "Rob, Leo's here!" she calls, then sits down on the couch with me. "So, Leo, how's your day been?"

"Well, I've only been awake for about half an hour, but it's been pretty good."

"You're a late sleeper, huh?"

"Yeah."

Rob walks in, looming over us as always. That is, until he sits down; then he just looms over Telsa. “I used to be a late sleeper,” he says in that soft, calming tone of his.

“Yes, you did! And I was always a morning person,” Telsa says with a smile, one of her large ones.

“I’m sure Leo can tell, can’t you?” Rob says, clearly amused.

“Really?” Telsa says, her brow furrowing as if that’s somehow hard for her to figure out.

“Um, yeah, kind of,” I say, stifling a laugh at her confused expression.

“Oh,” she says, still in deep concentration. Rob and I share a look of amusement, then start up our own conversation.

“So, is your name, Rob, short for anything? Like Robert?”

“No.”

“No, it’s not short for anything, or no, it’s not short for Robert?”

“Both. It’s just Rob.”

“That’s cool. I’ve never met anyone with a name like that before.”

“Yes, it’s somewhat unique.”

“So sorry, what are we talking about?” Telsa asks, back in the real world again.

“We were talking about my name,” Rob says. Somehow throughout all of this he’s maintained the same tone – soft and calming. At some points it was also amused, but never loud, and it constantly had a strange soothing effect. It makes me wonder what could have caused him to yell at Telsa yesterday.

“Oh! Now that’s an interesting topic,” Telsa says, leaning in eagerly with a mischievous smile on her face.

“Telsa –“ Rob says, shooting her a warning glance.

“See, back at school everyone just assumed it was short for Robert, right? So the teachers would all call him Robert when they got mad and he’d be like, ‘It’s just Rob’ and then they’d say, ‘No, Robert, Rob is not your real name’ and so he’d say ‘Check my birth certificate! It says Rob on there, not Robert’. Then the teacher would be all like ‘Fine, I’ll check, and prove you wrong’ and so the next day Rob would bring in his birth certificate and prove them wrong and they’d be all like ‘You altered it’ and he’d say, ‘No I didn’t’ and then they’d try to get him in trouble for altering his birth certificate only it would never work because it really was just Rob! So the teachers got in trouble for making false accusations and Rob would be all like ‘Yes!’

“Telsa, that only happened once with that stupid biology teacher in my junior year of high school.”

“Well, that’s weird. I could have sworn it happened at least three times.”

“I don’t know how you got that, Telsa, but it’s incorrect.”

“Then what was your birth certificate doing in your binder those other two days?”

“Telsa, how did you get into my binder?”

“Heh heh heh...” Telsa laughs nervously. “Why don’t we talk about something else now?”

“You’re avoiding the quest – oh, never mind. We’ll talk about this later,” Rob says, his voice losing its calming air momentarily and just sounding annoyed.

“So, Leo, are you hungry?” Telsa asks, sounding just a tad too bright.

“Not really, since I just finished eating breakfast – or brunch, you could probably call it.”

“I would just call it a slightly early lunch,” says Rob, his voice right back to the way it was.

“Okay, let’s go with that,” I say, smiling happily at them. I suddenly feel very serene. Poor Leanne, I vaguely think as we head off into other topics. She has to put up with baked peanut butter and jelly.

4 - Odd Artwork

Leanne's POV

"Leanne!" Mom calls up to me. When did she get home?

"Coming!" I yell back, shutting my laptop screen and trudging downstairs...oh no, Mom made lunch. Looks like she tried to bake the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches again.

"I made lunch!" she says brightly, holding out to me a plate that has burnt PB'n'J, some way too soft peach slices, and carrots drenched in mustard. Where the heck is Leo, and why isn't he getting this treatment too?

"Mom, I just ate," I say, and she looks crestfallen.

"But I made you lunch..."

"I just had breakfast, like I said. Can I go outside or something?"

"Fine! Leave your mother all alone in this cold, cruel world..."

"Mom, come on. Leo and I go to school year round without you."

She looks stumped. Have I won?

"Fine, but grab a jacket, it's cold out there."

Yes, I won! But now I have to grab a jacket...battle #2 has begun. "It's summer. It's hot. No one needs a jacket at this time of year."

"Really? I could have sworn it was lightly snowing when I came back. Are you sure this isn't winter break?"

"Mom, have I ever been wrong about these things? Do you want me to go get my laptop and prove that it's summer?"

"Oh, fine, but put on sunscreen, Leanne. Sunburn is bad for your skin." No duh...but at least I won both battles with her. I grab some sunscreen off of the living room coffee table as I head outside, slathering some on my arms, chest and face before I head out.

To my surprise, I see Leo heading back with a big smile on his face. Ooh, the nerve of that guy! I bet he was at their house. Again. "Leo, you idiot!" I call out to him, feeling the scowl etch into my face.

"Hey Leanne, I love you too," he says, inexplicably happy.

"Well I hate you! You left me all alone with Mom's cooking, which you very well know is gosh darn awful! You could have at least dragged me over with you!"

"But would you have enjoyed it?"

"Who cares? You left me alone with Mom!"

"Wow, that wasn't a normal sentence."

"Leo, that is completely irrelevant!"

"I know, but still." He continues to remain in this tranquil, happy phase. Nothing I say is working!

"Leave me alone, you freak-loving creep!"

"Aw Leanne, that's not a very nice thing to say!" he says, extending the a in say.

"No duh!" I half scream, then storm back into the house and to my room. Furious, I snap open my laptop and begin typing angrily into Word, trying to vent out some steam before I e-mail Brian back. I wouldn't want to say something I'd regret towards him. The exercise works; soon I'm opening my inbox and reading the letter he wrote as a reply to the one I sent last night.

Leanne –

Thanks for the letter you sent me last night. It really made my day!

I can see where having a twin would get annoying. Any sibling would be annoying.

Yeah, I'm still on the swim team, thanks for asking. We have a meet this Thursday at 9 (in the morning); you should come! Going to the beach would be great, but I have family coming over on Friday and I can't go anywhere – could we arrange a different day? I'm open all day tomorrow and after the swim meet on Thursday.

I love you too, sweetheart.

Love,

Brian

Aw, he is so sweet! Smiling, I quickly type a reply:

Brian –

I would love to go to your swim meet! I'll ask my mom to drive me, she's always up early. I'm open all day tomorrow too, why don't we go then? I'll call you when I wake up to arrange a time.

I can't wait to see you!

Love,

Leanne

I proofread, hit the send button, and click my laptop closed, now in a much better mood – almost serene. Maybe this day can work out after all.

Struck by sudden – and random - inspiration, I reopen my laptop and bring up Photoshop Elements. I open a blank file, and pull out my sketchpad from my cramped desk drawer, flipping to a blank page and grabbing a pencil. A bus begins to form on the paper. It's hitting something; what is it? I draw on, finding out that it's hitting a car. The bus driver looks astonished and scared. The car driver is thrown forward into an extended airbag, and looks winded. Curious, I let my hand draw the driver on a separate sheet of paper. His face is split into a smile in this picture.

He's Leo?

Confused, I scan both drawings, ready to Photoshop them.

Within two hours, the car crash is done – but the Leo drawing still has a long way to go. As I work, I realize that it's not Leo – it's Leo with my nose, my eye shape (only slightly different than his, but still), and my mouth.

Why do I get the feeling that I know this guy from somewhere – besides my brother? Why do I feel like I know him personally?

5 - Guitar Dirge

Leo's POV

"Hm hmm hmm hmmm hm hm hm hmm, mmm hmm hmmm," I hum to myself as I strum chords on my guitar. My head moves instinctively as I play, letting my ears guide my fingers to the song on the radio. It's a good song; I've never heard it before.

I like my room. Even though it's small, it has all I need – a radio, a place to play guitar, a desk for homework, and of course a bed. I've always loved music, and it came as no surprise when I realized that I had musician's ear. Ever since, playing my guitar to songs on the radio has been a favorite hobby. This is a nice song. I grab the remote, turn up the volume on my radio, and play louder. I hope Leanne can hear. I think she'd like this song.

"Leo, turn it down! I do not like this song!" she yells. I guess she doesn't like it after all. I don't turn it down though. The song is just too good to do such a thing.

"Leo!" she screams again, extending the o in my name.

"No way!" I shout back, and continue to play. I lose myself in the music, and keep playing even when the commercials come on. Leanne comes in and turns it off, but I continue to play. To my surprise, she stays behind. My playing continues, and continues, and it just won't end.

"Leo," she finally says, her voice soft, like it gets when she's either reminiscing or trying to hold back tears.

"Yeah?" I ask, and cut my playing off. Huh, I guess my fingers are sore. Really sore.

"Point one, it's almost time to make dinner. It's your night. And point two, that's a dirge. Dad's dirge," she says, her voice breaking when she says Dad.

It surprises me that she'd bring him up. We never talk about Dad, or his death, or the funeral. It's an unspoken agreement not to bring up painful old memories. But now that she mentions it, I hear what I just played with a startling clarity. She's right.

It sounds kind of cool on guitar.

"You're right," I say, and she nods, her face twisting up as she tries not to cry. We both remember that day.

FLASHBACK

"Hey, sweetheart, how was your day?" Mommy says, her face pulled up into a happy smile. She's leaning on the counter causally. Leanne and I are drawing on pads of paper.

"Oh, that's great! So you'll come home and we'll head to your sister's place?"

I quit paying attention to her and show Leanne my drawing, which I'm very proud of. It's a cow. "Look what I drew!"

"Oh yeah?" she counters, holding up her drawing. It's a good one of our family. To my dismay, I realize that she's a better artist than I am. As I'm about to protest this unfair occurrence, Mommy's voice turns urgent.

"Alex? Alex, where are you? Alex, sweetie, are you there? Can you hear me? Alex!" We look over at her, confused. She hangs up, calls again, hangs up, calls again, and goes through this about five more times. Then she gets us in the car, rushing to get to somewhere that we don't know about.

"Mommy, where are we going?" I ask.

"To see Daddy, Leo," she answers, her voice tense.

We drive around for what seems like eons, and then we see the crash. A bus is collided with Daddy's

car, and Mommy gasps, stopping the car and getting out, leaving us in there alone. We watch silently as she runs up to the ambulance, talking urgently to a policeman. He replies to her, her face goes pale, and she pulls out her cell phone, calling someone. She walks back to the car as she goes, but is finished talking by the time she gets back. She then takes off, going to who knows where.

"Mommy, where's Daddy?" Leanne asks.

"He was in a car crash. He's in the hospital, and we're going to go see him." Her voice is breaking; we've never seen Mommy like this before. We're both silent again. I'm scared by the tears on Mommy's face. I don't want to see her cry.

Eventually we come to a big white building, which can only be the hospital. Mommy takes us in, and we have to run to keep up with her. Her cell phone rings, and she opens it eagerly.

"Yes, this is Jennie."

Someone talks for a brief span, and she looks somewhat relieved. "Thank you, Doctor. We'll be right there." She hangs up, and walks over to a group of people, all of whom look different. The short lady looks kind of like Daddy, than there's a tall guy who just looks intimidating. The other guy is short, like the lady, only his hair is pitch black and he just looks...different. The short lady is arguing with a nurse. Mommy walks over confidently, and says to the nurse, "I just got a call from the doctor saying it's okay to visit Alex Jacobson. I'm his wife, these are his kids, and these are his siblings. Will you please let us in?"

The nurse leads us to Daddy's room, along with the strangers. We're all very silent, and the white walls are intimidating.

We finally get there, and a doctor walks out of the room.

"I'm sorry to all of you, I truly am," he says, and Leanne and I stare at him in confusion.

Mommy gets it, apparently. "You mean he's —" she says, but breaks off as the doctor nods sadly. What's going on?

The tall man hugs Mommy, and she cries into his shoulder. The small woman hugs us, holding us together. I don't get it. Why are they all so sad?

"What's happening?" Leanne asks as we lean into the small woman.

"Oh, sweethearts, I don't know how..." she trails off, her voice breaking. I start to cry too, but I don't know why. Why are the grownups so sad? They're not supposed to cry. "Shh, Leo, shh, shh," she says, comforting me, being a good adult.

The doctor says, "He told me to tell you guys that everything will be okay."

"Where's my daddy?" Leanne asks, beginning to cry too.

"He's gone, honey," the doctor says, bending down so we can see him. His voice is soft and gentle like a blanket to smother our worries.

"Where'd he go?"

"He went to a place where everyone is always happy."

"Can I go?"

"You will, eventually, but not yet. You'll go when it's time."

"Then why is everybody sad?"

"Because they miss him."

"But won't we call him? Can't he come home and wait for us?"

"No, he can't, sweetheart. Once you go there, you can't come back. And they don't have phones to call home in that place."

"Why did he leave without us?"

"Because you can't choose when you go."

Leanne begins to cry, I cry harder, the short woman comforts us through her tears, and Mommy's sobs echo through my head. I want Daddy back.

END FLASHBACK

Tears glisten in Leanne's eyes, and I realize that I'm crying too.

"He's in a happy place now," she says, her voice a whisper.

"I'm sorry I played the song, Leanne, I was hardly aware of myself," I apologize, since it was my playing that started the sad memories.

She grins. "You can make it up to me by actually making dinner tonight and not procrastinating." Her voice is still thick, but she'll be over the sadness soon enough.

I roll my eyes at her and trudge downstairs, only doing this for her. Of the two of us, she was the one who suffered the most from Dad's death. I have a suspicion that her unfriendliness may have been the result of losing him – and Mom as we knew her.

6 - Brian

Leanne's POV

I walk slowly into my room after Leo leaves, scared of what I just saw. He was so distant, so...not here, otherworldly, when he played, that it creeped me out. Put that with the fact that he was playing Dad's funeral dirge, and I am scared out of my wits. I am so having nightmares tonight about him.

All in all, this has been a very weird day, but I think that Leo and I connected more than we have in years. I suppose that's a plus.

Still feeling freaked, I open my laptop and continue working on my picture of the Leo-person. Time to start shading.

I shade until dinnertime, at which point I save and quit, not intending to work on it again tonight. Leo's dinner is mediocre, as usual – soup, toast, and carrots. He can't cook all that well, but at least he's better than Mom.

Our dinner is quiet and uneventful.

Leo seems lost in thought, and so does Mom, oddly enough. Looking at them, I can see a resemblance in their faces, the way they lose emotion and the way in which the blankness controls their features. They have the same eye shape too – the one that's slightly different than mine, slightly smaller. The color is different, their hair is nothing alike, and their body shape is opposite, but tonight I can completely tell they're related.

After dinner I head up to my room again, and open up Photoshop again. I should be surprising myself that I continue to work on this so obsessively, but somehow I expected it.

Before long it's 11:30 and I climb into bed, exhausted. The picture's not nearly done; I've found so many little flaws that I need to fix. If I weren't so tired I'd have a hard time falling asleep.

Like I expected, I have nightmares.

I'm walking down a long, white, hallway, trying to get to the end, where there's music playing, and Brian is waiting for me. About halfway down, a pale white face stares out at me through a window. It looks dead, and I start running, but there are more, looking in from each window. There are so many windows.

Eventually I get there, and I smile as I reach out to Brian, but then he morphs into Dad – a dead Dad, looking like he just rose from the grave. I scream, but Dad just falls down, not a zombie after all. Then I realize that the music has stopped, and behind Dad's body is Leo, on a golden throne. He's holding his guitar, and he looks down at me. He smiles, and his skin peels back so his face becomes a skull. Then his hands – now just bones – begin to strum, and Dad rises from the floor, his sightless gaze on my face. He stretches out his hands to grab my head –

- And I wake up screaming at 4:00 in the morning. "It's just a dream," I whisper to myself, hugging my knees and rocking back and forth on my bed. "It's just a dream, it's just a dream."

Soon I fall back asleep, and I fall into another nightmare where Leo is sitting on his throne – again – and he plays his guitar while I dance around with no control of my limbs. It's the music, I want to scream, it's the music, but I can't move my mouth. He smiles as he plays, a cruel smile, and I continue to dance. I'm wearing a beautiful, elegant red dress that flares out when I spin. It looks medieval or something, and he wears a black robe that is lined with a heavy red burgundy fabric. His guitar plays, and his hands strum, and I dance.

"Leanne, someone's at the door!" Mom calls, and I wake up sweating.

“Coming!” I shout, pulling on a bathrobe. Sure, it’s summer, but my pajamas are too ratty. I don’t want anyone to see them – it’s bad enough that Leo dragged me out yesterday!

I tromp down the stairs, my eyes still feeling heavy. I’m so tired after only having seven hours of sleep.

“Hello?” I mutter groggily.

“Oh, did I just wake you up?” says Brian, looking perfectly awake and perfectly sorry. So gorgeous. I smile up at him, my day brightened.

“It’s okay. Did you want to go to the beach?”

“Yeah, if you’re awake,” he says with a grin.

“I’m awake enough, just let me get my clothes,” I say, beckoning him inside with a smile and a wave.

He steps in, and I lead him up to my room.

Luckily, the only messy thing is my bed, which is seriously messed up but he doesn’t ask questions.

Instead, he says, “Nice room.” I thank him, and blush under his praise. I drag out my swimsuit and a red cover-up, and he steps outside so I can change.

Soon we’re walking down the street together, ready to get to the beach. Of course there will be tourists – why Mom chose to move to Seaside beats me – but we can find our own little area.

Soon we get there, the beach. Hotels line the sidewalk opposite, and tourist shops go down Broadway Street. The roundabout has tourists going all over the place, taking pictures by the sign, crossing to get down the stairs to the beach or to the hotels. We slip right by them, and pitch camp in an area far down the beach, and with few people.

He talks about the swim team, about his weekend, about his family, about his life. He’s so light and carefree, a personality that matches his golden blonde hair that falls down in long casual bangs at the front, and is about the same length in the back, with a rough cut. His brown eyes are friendly and open, and his emotions are on his sleeves constantly.

I talk about my summer, about how crazy Leo is, about my new neighbors, a little bit about Mom, about my friend Tanya, who moved all the way up to Seattle last year. I haven’t heard from her in three days, so she must be busy. I feel lighter with him around – not calmed, like with Rob, but more open and talkative.

He moves closer, and I do too, the conversation becoming more personal.

It randomly occurs to me that I’m head over heels in love with this guy, and if it lasts, I can see us getting married and having kids. Living a happy life, unlike mine.

He holds my hands, his own as gentle as a sheet of silk. We scoot closer, and friendship makes way for romance.

“I really love you, Leanne,” he says softly, and I gaze back at him, a small smile parting my lips slightly.

“I love you too,” I whisper back, and he leans in to kiss me full on the lips for the first time.

I started going out with him this past spring, only about a month ago. We would have kissed earlier, but it always takes me a while to build up trust in people. However, once I do, I never let them go. And now, in this second, I knew that I would never let Brian go.

7 - Family Issues

Leo's POV

I stretch and yawn, glancing at the clock. 10:45. I'm up early today.

I could go back to sleep...nah, not this time. Today feels important. I get out of bed and walk downstairs to find Mom sitting in the kitchen with a photograph in her hand.

She looks up. "Hello, Leo," she says, her voice calm and articulate.

"Hey Mom," I mutter, taking a tiny step back. She's not normally like this.

"It's okay, Leo," she says, her voice soft. Right now she looks so...normal. Not the happy, crazy mom that I've come to know. "Let me show you something." She beckons me forward, and I come, curious. I look down at the picture in her hands, and look at her. "It's us, our family portrait from back when you guys were four."

I see it now; I'm the little boy with the big smile and light brown hair. It's darkened over the years.

Leanne is the little girl who has wild red hair, and, like me, a big happy expression on her face. We're about the same height; now I'm taller than she is. Mom is the woman standing behind us, her curly red hair – just like Leanne's – tucked back in a headband.

And then there's the guy next to her, who can only be our dad. He has my hair, and my blue eyes that I also share with Leanne. He looks happy to be with Mom, to be with us. He looks like he would have been a good Dad.

"You guys were so cute back then," she murmurs, looking reminiscent.

I agree, and quietly leave. Wouldn't want to ruin the moment for her.

I walk down the sidewalk, silent as I think. Why did Dad have to die? Why did he get in the stupid car crash? And why the heck did he look like Telsa in that picture?

Questions, questions, questions. Why can't I have some answers? And there we go. Another question.

A question about answers, double points for that. Or am I taking away points for each question? In that case, I lost double points and then lost another double points for the last question I did, the one about questions. So far I have...negative eight points. As soon as I get an answer, I get more points. An answer about answers is worth...two points, and answers about questions (not an answer to a question, there's a difference) are also worth two points. Otherwise I get one point per question.

I'm at Telsa's house. How did I get here? I guess my feet just carried me. Shrugging, I ring the doorbell, and Telsa answers. Does she really like answering doorbells that much? Darn, now I'm at negative nine points.

"Hey Leo!" she says happily. I don't know how she does it in the morning.

"Hello Telsa." She invites me in for breakfast, and I join her gladly. Rob appears to be gone, and she says nothing about him. Until I bring him up.

"Where's Rob?" I ask. Negative 10 points now.

She looks down at the table, not meeting my eyes. "He's...busy," she says finally, her words reluctant.

"But we don't need to worry about him."

"Why?" Darn, I got a point and then I went and asked another question. Back to negative 10.

"He'll be fine, trust me. Besides, I'm on your side."

"My side?" Okay, that counts as half a question. And because she half answered my last question, I'm still at negative 10.

"Yes, your side. There are two sides here, and I'm on yours."

“ So Rob is on the other side.” That was NOT a question!

“Yes, he is. We’re on the better side, trust me.” Down to negative 9! Yes! But...oh no...

“Is Leanne involved in this?” Crap.

Telsa looks hesitant. “Yes...yes, she is, but she’s on the other side.”

“So she’s with Rob.”

“Uh-huh.” Telsa is quiet, playing around with her last bit of scrambled eggs.

“What are these sides, exactly?” I take a chance with asking another question, in hopes that I’ll get a few answers.

“You’ll find out.”

Darn. Nine and a half.

“Leo...there’s something I should tell you,” she continues after an awkward pause.

I look up, determined not to ask – or think – the question that is bordering on forming into words.

“We’re related.”

I stare at her, fighting a mental battle not to think any questions and to keep my mind blank.

“Um...See, your father and I...”

Oh no. She’d better not say ‘had an affair’.

“...we’re siblings. Rob, your dad, your Uncle Howard, and me are all siblings.”

So that explains the resemblance between picture Dad and Telsa. I’m up to negative eight and a half points. But why do Rob, her, and Uncle Howard all look so different?

Darn, down to negative 9 and a half.

You know, maybe I should have started at zero.

“There’s...not much resemblance,” I note, and she nods.

“Yeah, we all look completely different, except for your dad and I.”

“So, back to the sides thing...”

“Um, you really don’t need to know right now.” Telsa looks awkward, but I press on. I have to at least try to get into positive numbers.

“Please, Telsa, I need answers!”

“You can call me Aunt Telsa. And I can’t give you answers.”

“What? Why not?” You know, to heck with this questions game. I’m totally losing.

“I’m not allowed to tell you. It’s part of the Rules.”

“The rules?” I repeat, giving her my best I’m-confused-please-help look.

“The Rules.”

“That doesn’t explain anything.”

“Well, sorr-ee, mister! I can’t explain anything to you and that’s final!” she screams, looking furious. I suddenly can see how it is possible that she was mad at Rob, and lean back from her angry words.

“Sorry, sorry.”

“Sorry, Aunt Telsa is what you say!”

“Sorry, Aunt Telsa.”

“Thank you!”

She leans back in her seat, exhaling with a huff. “Rob will be home soon, you’d better go,” she sighs, tipping her head back. I nod and get up, grabbing my plate to take into her kitchen...only I don’t quite know where it is.

“Telsa?” I ask.

“ That’s Aunt Telsa.”

“Fine, Aunt Telsa?”

“Yes?”

“Where’s the kitchen?”

“Oh, let me get that.” She gets up and snatches my plate out of my hands, walking into the kitchen. I tag after her, feeling useless.

“Leo, I love you, I really do, but you have to understand that I can’t tell you anything about what’s going to happen. If I do...well, you wouldn’t believe me, for one thing, and for another, you wouldn’t like it.” She says all this as she sticks my plate into her dishwasher, and I nod in reluctant agreement.

“All right, I get it. But what do you mean, what’s going to happen? People can’t see the future, can they?”

“People can’t. That’s true.”

“Are you saying that you’re, like, not human?”

“I really can’t tell you, I’m sorry. Trust me, I want to so badly, and it’s hard to resist, but I have to. It’s just one of those things, you know?”

“I...guess...” Telsa’s kind of weirding me out.

Then the door opens.

“Oh no! Leo, get out the back door right now!” she gasps, and shoves me outside.

“Telsa?”

“Coming Rob!”

The door shuts behind me, and I walk around to the front yard, confused by her reaction. Why can’t I see Rob? He’s such a nice guy, and I don’t think he minds me that much.

Whatever. I’d better head home anyways.

8 - Only Eight Days

Telsa's POV

FLASHBACK

I dial my cell, calling Alex to see how his day's going. Ever since he had those twins, he's been stressed. Him and his wife, Jennie.

He picks up the phone on the first ring, sounding happy. "Hello?"

"Hey Alex, it's your sister. How are you?"

"Oh hey, Telsa! I'm great, actually. Best day of my life."

"Really? That's awesome!"

"Yeah. The kids were great this morning, Jennie's as lovely as ever, I got to work early then got promoted halfway through my morning, and now during my lunch break you call to check on me."

"Wow, that is a great day!"

"Yeah, and the lines at Starbucks today were almost nonexistent! It's like the world has suddenly decided to give me a day off of stress!"

"Wow, I'm really happy for you! Do you want to head over with Jennie and the kids after work? I would love to have you!"

"That would be awesome, thanks Telsa!"

We say our goodbyes, and hang up. I'd better call Rob and Howard next, to invite them too.

"Hello?"

"Rob, it's Telsa, and you need to head over after work."

"I do?"

"Yes. It's Alex's lucky day, and I'm having a party at my house for him and his family after he's done with work. You need to come."

"Why...?"

"Because it would be nice to have all of us together, that's why. I know we hate each other, but we can work though it for Alex."

"Fine, I'll come."

"Yes!" I say, and hang up.

Call number two now – Howard.

"Hey?"

"Hey, it's Telsa! Come over after work!"

"Um, okay."

"To my place, Howard. I'm having a party."

"Is Mom or Dad coming?"

"Parents, shmarents! They'd ruin it all."

"True. I'll be there."

"Okay. Bye!" I say, and hang up again. I then set about getting everything ready, such as snacks for all, juice for the kids and a selection of drinks for the adults.

Just as I'm heading back from the store to get some balloons, my cell phone rings. I pick it up: Jennie? Why is she calling?

"Hellooo?" I answer.

"Telsa, it's Jennie. Alex's been in a accident on 4th Street, we can't come," she says, her voice thick.

She's been crying.

"What happened?"

"He-he got hit by a bus."

"In the car or as a pedestrian?"

"In his car. He's been rushed to the hospital." I can feel my face drain of color, and I pull over before my concentration fails completely. Alex can't die. He can't.

"Are visitors allowed?" I ask quietly, and she says no, not yet.

"..."

"I'll call you when they are, Telsa."

"No need, I'll wait there the whole time," I say, and hang up, getting back on the road and heading to the hospital. My mind's blank, seeing nothing but the road in front of me. This can't be happening. I walk through the hospital doors, to see Rob and Howard already there, their faces mirroring my blankness.

"Anything?" I mutter, and they both shake their heads. I sit down, putting my head in my hands. What will happen next?

A vision flashes briefly through my mind – Alex, pale and unmoving, being lifted into a coffin.

"No," I gasp, and flag over the nearest nurse. "We need to see Alex Jacobson now. It's an emergency."

"I'm sorry, but he's still undergoing surgery, you'll have to wait," she says, and she's clearly not going to give up on her position. Hmm. Looks like I picked the wrong nurse.

"He's going to die, we have to see him before that happens," I plead, almost in tears. My brothers look over at me, shock freezing their faces. They understand my visions.

"Hopefully that won't happen. Now, I'll let you know once it's okay to go see him," she says, just not getting it. Then in comes Jennie with Leo and Leanne – thank goodness! She'll get us in.

She walks confidently up to the nurse, and says, "I just got a call from the doctor saying it was okay to visit Alex Jacobson. I'm his wife, these are his kids, and these are his siblings. Will you please let us in?" The nurse relents, seeing the half-insane, half-miserable expression on Jennie's face. We all walk to his room together in silence, the kids confused, the adults sad and apprehensive.

Before we can go in, the doctor comes out, and I suddenly know that we were too late.

"I'm sorry to all of you, I truly am."

"You mean he's –"

The doctor nods, and they all jump to the conclusion that I reached long before them. All except the kids, who are still adorably – and saddeningly - clueless.

Jennie breaks down, crying into Rob's shoulder. I hold onto the kids, rocking them back and forth.

One thought zips through my head – the best day of his life was the worst of ours.

END FLASHBACK

"Telsa," Rob says, tapping me on the shoulder to snap me out of it. He glances once at my face, now back in the real world, and walks away, knowing that he did his job.

"They've grown up so much," I mutter to myself.

"Who?" Rob says absently. He grabs a piece of leftover toast from the counter. I always make way too much for two, so it doesn't surprise him that there's still leftover pieces. He doesn't suspect anything.

"Alex's kids."

"Yeah. Leo's nice." Ha ha. So you think now. You won't the next time you meet him. He's with me.

"I wonder about Leanne, though. How will she take it?"

"She'll get through the heartbreak. She's tough."

"Will she?" I ask, and I look over at Rob, my eyes filling with tears. She may not be on my side, but I'm a compassionate person. I care for her future – she's still my niece!

He looks back, pondering my words. "Yes. Everything will be all right."

"That's what the doctor said Alex's last words were, and now nothing is all right. His own kids are involved in my prophecy! My prophecies never end up all right!"

"Telsa, calm down, please," Rob says, looking down on my devastated face. "I'll call Howard. Maybe he can help."

"Yes, maybe," I agree, brushing away my tears. Howard will be able to help. He may not be what Alex was, but he's still helpful.

We'll make it through this. Only eight days left.

9 - Snooping Around

Leo's POV

"Home," I call out to Mom, who...isn't here. Hmm. I guess she's at the store, buying her food. That's probably where she is

. Maybe I should call her, but I just don't feel like it.

I look around, taking in our cluttered little kitchen. It's not much, but it sustains us well enough.

Connecting to it is our dining room, which isn't much better. We never have guests over for dinner so we never bother to make it look nice. It's a pain in the butt, as Leanne would say. Well, as she would say if she disliked cleaning. The only reason she doesn't clean it much is because she never has any time. Our living room is in front of our eating area, along with a tiny bathroom. These we make look somewhat presentable, because this is usually the only part of our house that guests ever see. But most of the time it has laundry and sheet music scattered everywhere. Oh, and cat hair. Our cat sheds a lot, and we don't vacuum often enough. Speaking of our cat, where is she? I haven't seen her in a few days. Oh well.

The stairs are on the side of the kitchen closest to the front of our house, and I climb up them to get to my room. It's right next to Leanne's. She keeps hers nice and neat, but mine's a pigsty. The fact that it's small just adds to the messiness. Everything stays in its general area, but within the areas I can never find anything.

Now I'm searching for a notebook, which Leanne gave to me for my birthday last year. I still haven't used it.

Aha! There it is! Triumphant, I pull it out from under my old school stuff and flip it open. I head the paper: Odd Things That Have Happened This Summer

Then I continue to write underneath it.

Some new neighbors moved in who happen to be Dad's siblings.

Telsa hinted at the fact that she's not human...?

Mom has been having random moments of saneness.

I once played the guitar for an hour or more without realizing that I was playing.

The new neighbors – well, one of them – has been talking about 'sides' and other weird things like that. I frown and chew absently on the end of my pen. I think I named everything. I should have Leanne form a list and we can compare.

Well, now what?

Leanne's gone to who knows where, Mom's out shopping, Telsa just kicked me out of her house, and all of my friends are gone on vacation together. Mom wouldn't let me go with them. Apparently they've been having a lot of fun without me – they only bothered to send one e-mail, which compromised of (and I am not exaggerating):

Hey Leo,

Wish you were here. It's really fun! Hawaii's the best. See you in July!

- Mark, Adam, Teddie, and Orland

Yeah, and that's all they sent. They'd better be back soon.

Maybe I can go exploring Leanne's room. I haven't been in there for years. This could be fun.

I silently open the door and creep into a well organized, very neat room – all, that is, except for her bed. It looks like she was thrashing around like an eel last night and forgot to make the bed before she went

and disappeared. The furniture even matches – it's all composed of dark brown wood, and everything else is a dark purple, like her bedsheets and the walls. She has a few posters of bands she likes posted around the place. They're old posters, because Leanne always likes older songs – hey, I didn't know she liked Elton John! I always thought she liked 50's music. What has she been hiding from me all these years?

Then I see her laptop.

Grinning in a very evil way, and with a nasty giggle to match, I flip open the top of her white MacBook. Photoshop Elements is open to one of her projects. It's an odd one – a picture of a guy that looks like me is open. It looks like an almost perfect replica, but with deliberate mistakes...hey! It's Dad! She did a picture of Dad! I don't know how she knew what he looked like, but hey, that's Dad. Amused, I open up her other file.

It's rather sad and gruesome, actually. A guy in a car getting hit by a bus, like Dad. Why the heck would she do that?

I just sit there and stare at it, confused.

After a while I leave her room, carefully returning her computer to what it was like before I came along. I go back into my room and add something to my list of strange things.

Leanne drew two weird pictures, one of Dad and another of a car getting hit by a bus.

I sigh, and turn on my radio.

"Naaaaa, na na na na naaa, na na na na naaa, na na na na naaa..."

It's Crocodile Rock, by Elton John. If only Leanne were here to listen.

I pick up my guitar and strum a few chords, then tune it, not happy with the way it's sounding. I repeat the procedure, then play along with the song on the radio. It's my way of relaxing after a somewhat stressful morning.

10 - Brian's House

Leanne's POV

I sigh happily, wiggling my bare feet in the sand. Brian looks over at me and flashes a smile. I grin back – it's not hard at all, seeing as I've been grinning for the past...uh...while. Ever since we broke apart from our third kiss.

We're silent, but it's okay. The silence is like a warm fuzzy blanket in the wintertime. It covers us but it's really comfortable. It feels right.

Just by chance, I glance down at my watch – it's 12:15. Two things hit me at once – I'm really hungry, and that it's Wednesday. My day to go get juices and whatnot.

"I have to go," I say, and get up off the sand, brushing it off my legs. He gets up too, startled.

"Why?" he asks, bringing me into his warm embrace. I can feel his minty breath on my skin, and I suppress a shiver of pleasure.

"I'm really hungry, I never ate."

"I'll get you something."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. Come on over to my place." His hands rub over my back, and I find it hard to concentrate on what he's saying. But I do.

"O-okay. I'll stop at my house on the way there to let Mom know where I'm going."

"Sounds good, sweetheart." He picks up my red cover-up, draping it over my shoulders and trapping my tangled red hair beneath it.

"I should put this on," I say, and he lets me go briefly as I slip the terrycloth dress over my head. Then Brian takes my hand, and we walk back, past all the tourists and hotels.

"Mom, I'm back!" I call, and she sticks her head out the living room door, busy folding laundry to music on her mp3 player. She nods to me absently, and I continue talking. "I'm going to Brian's for lunch, 'k?"

She nods again, and goes back to her laundry, but not before smiling at Brian. She likes him, unlike most of my friends. Which is basically only Tanya and Gina.

Gina's gone on a technology-free vacation into the mountains, which makes my Mom happy because she hates Gina. She calls her a "bad influence". Which I guess she is. Her parents are divorced, and her dad is always drunk. Gina takes after him in two major ways: she's a total cheater (in so many ways, believe me) and a drug addict. We've been friends since 7th grade, when we had drama class together and she came up to me and asked to be my partner. Mom has never liked her.

Her dislike of Tanya makes no sense to me, though. She's a very nice person. When Mom objects to our friendship, I get just plain mad.

But she adores Brian. I can see why – he's one of the cutest guys at school, he's involved in swimming and cross country year round, and he's always nice to her. He's nice to everyone.

We walk over to his house, his arm around my shoulders. I'm nervous – this is the first time I've met his parents. He gives me a light squeeze, seeming to sense the fact that my nerves are acting up.

After what feels like an eternity of nervous agony, but is really ten minutes, we come to his house. It's nice – light, open, welcoming, and not old like ours. It looks like something that we wouldn't be able to

afford because of all the junk Mom buys instead. He walks me up the porch and into the house. "Mom, I'm home!" he calls, and I fidget anxiously. She pops her head into the entryway from their kitchen.

She's so normal. A normal mom, that cares about the grades he gets in school, who isn't crazy, who probably already knows that we're going out rather than just being friends. She smiles and quickly walks over, carrying a dishcloth in her hands as though they're wet.

"Hey, Brian. Is this Leanne?" She looks over at me, still smiling.

"Yeah. Leanne, this is my Mom. Mom, Leanne," Brian introduces, taking his arm off my shoulder so he can gesture to each of us in turn. I try not to feel disappointed that he did.

"How nice to meet you, Leanne! I've heard all about you," she says, flashing a mischievous look at her son while she shakes my hand. Brian rolls his eyes at her.

"Thanks, Mrs. Cole." My heart is still pounding a million miles an hour.

"You can call me Sophia," she says kindly, and asks us if we're hungry. Which we are.

Soon we're sitting at Brian's kitchen table eating the BLTs his mom made us. She's a good cook, unlike my mom. She's so much better than my mom. We all chat for a bit, and I can feel myself gradually loosening up around her.

I glance down at my watch and see that it's 12:45. I need to go now if I'm going to get to the store by 1. I stand up. "Sorry, guys, but I need to get going, I have shopping to do."

Brian looks up at me, confused. "Are you sure you have to go?"

I nod regretfully. Who would want to leave? I'd only leave if I had to. Which I do.

He sighs, and gets up too. "I'll walk you home, 'k?"

"That would be great!" I accept enthusiastically, and his face brightens.

We leave and walk home together, his mom waving goodbye from the door. I'm relaxed this time, and the walk goes by quickly.

"I'll see you later, Leanne," Brian says as we stand in front of my front door. I nod, reluctant to leave him but resigned to it.

He turns to go, but then something possesses me to cry out, "Wait!" Brian turns around, and I look desperately up into his eyes.

And then I kiss him one last time.

We're both smiling as we break apart – only his smile is huge, and mine is small. Small and sad, sad that I have to leave him. "See you later," he says again, and I let him walk off home.

I'm glad I have him. It makes my life so much easier. Without him –

"Leanne!" screams a voice from behind me. I whirl around to find Mom standing there, looking shocked and horrified from behind the screen.

"What?" I say exasperatedly.

"He KISSED you!" she screams, and I mentally slap myself. She totally saw us.

"No, Mom, I kissed him," I say, and cross my arms.

She stares at me like I've come from another planet.

"What the heck is so wrong with kissing a boy that I like?"

"Your birthday is in a week," she says, completely off topic.

"Yeah, so?"

"So you can't date him! Not until after!"

"After what?"

"Your birthday!" Mom's face is livid as she glares at me. I continue my calm stare into her narrowed chocolate brown eyes.

"I can date who I want, when I want. I love him and you can't make me let him go." I don't know why I'm not yelling. Something is forcing me not to; something's calming me down. My vision of what's

happening is clear, and I feel that it's blindingly obvious that I'm going to win. So there's no point in yelling.

"That's the problem! You CAN'T love him! He's so sweet, and so therefore I don't want you to love him! Go fall in love with someone the world could do without."

"I can't control who I fall in love with. He's right for me. You've always said that that's what matters."

"I don't want him to DIE!"

What?

Mom sinks to her knees and begins to cry, loud gasping sobs. I run up to my room, change into some shorts and a t-shirt, and plod back downstairs.

I walk away from the house, feeling guilty that I made her cry that hard.

But it was necessary, I tell myself in that calm, soothing tone that isn't me at all.

I walk to the store, arguing with myself the whole way. But the closer I get, the stronger the calm me gets. As I walk up to the door, my normal angry self puts up a last effort.

"But I SHOULDN'T have!" I scream.

A woman walking by with two young gives me a look, and ushers them away. She needn't have worried; I've calmed down by now. I walk in the store, feeling peaceful and tranquil. Everything will be for the best.

And then I see my new neighbor, Rob. He looks me right in the eye and smiles. I smile back, bouncing on my feet a bit.

"What a pleasure, Leanne," he says, then walks over to hug me. I hug him back, and find that despite the heat outdoors he's not in the least bit sweaty; he's cool as if he's been standing in the store all day.

We release each other and he puts his hands on my shoulders, a proud smile on his face. He nods.

"Your Mom raised you well," he says. "You're a strong girl."

Rob leads me out of the store. "A strong girl," he repeats. "Someone who won't die."

11 - Headache

Rob's POV

Leanne looks up at me, her emotions easy to read on her face. She's confused.

"What?" she says, her tone mirroring her voice. I can't help but smile. If only she knew what Telsa saw her doing in the future...

"You won't die," I repeat.

"Yes I will."

"Eventually, yes. But not this month."

She looks down, then back up. She's still confused, but she's calm and collected as well.

"Why?"

Was she planning suicide? "Because that's how Telsa saw it."

"What does she have to do with anything?"

"Unfortunately, she has everything to do with everything."

"What do you mean?" Curious, and unafraid to speak her mind. I like Leanne.

"I'd tell you if I was allowed to." Which I'm not.

"I see," she says lightly, and smiles. I smile back at her. A curious one, she is.

I decide to change the subject off of the near future. "Did you come here for a reason?"

"Oh yeah, I came to get some groceries."

We walk in together, and she goes shopping. I follow behind her in silence, mentally taking inventory of what she's buying. Orange juice, apple juice, lemonade, more lemonade, pink lemonade, lemonade, limeade, more pink lemonade – they must really like lemonade. White grape juice, more orange juice, more orange juice, and water. Water, water, water. Lots of water.

A voice crackles to life in my head. "Experiment number 00001, report to database."

I sigh, and mutter under my breath, "In a grocery store, postpone an hour."

"Postponed for 10 minutes. Countdown begins now."

They never listen. "Allow me to escort you home," I say to Leanne. We're outside, and she's pushing the cart home.

"Thank you," she says, and again we're silenced.

Soon we're at her house. "Four minutes," crackles the voice in my head.

"I'll see you later, Leanne," I say, and walk off.

"You will?" she asks, like it comes as a surprise.

"Yes, yes, of course." I speedwalk back to my own house, entering the doorway as the voice says,

"Three minutes and thirty seconds."

Telsa is starting her own report. "Found 00003's family here in Seaside. Children Leo and Leanne would make good candidates for the Implant. Strong kids."

She's silent for a bit. "Two minutes," says my voice.

"Shut up," I tell it, listening to my sister.

"Memories to come, still developing. Leo looks like 00003, Leanne like the mother."

We're both silent. "One minute and thirty seconds," the voice in my head drones.

"Memories coming." A look of intense concentration crosses her face and lasts about a minute.

"Thirty seconds."

Telsa relaxes, and continues. "Memories sent. Have made a connection with Leo, friendship possible."

Mentally, I scoff. Possible? True is better than possible. Friendship may be a difficult step, but I've

already achieved it.

“Fifteen seconds.”

“00004 out.” Telsa finishes her report and looks over at me looking at her.

“You heard all of that, didn’t you?” she hisses.

I smile, but it’s erased as the ten second countdown starts. “10…”

I swear, and Telsa gives me a look before bouncing away.

“9…”

“8…”

“7…”

“6…”

“5…”

I walk over to sit in a chair, mentally preparing myself for it.

“4…”

“3…”

“2…”

“1…”

I sigh. “0. Your time is up. 00001, report.”

“00001, reporting. Found 00003’s family –“

“Already been informed. Skip.”

I close my eyes briefly against the throbbing pain that’s beginning to build up. Again. “Have made a connection with Leanne, friendship eminent.”

“Good, good. Well done, 00001.”

“Thank you.” I press my hands against my forehead, willing the pain to stop. But it doesn’t. It never does.

“You may sign out now. Enough information gleaned.”

“00001 out.”

The connection closes with a click and leaves me with yet another killer headache. I groan, and lean back in the chair.

Telsa bounces back in, takes one look at me, and sighs. “That’s what you get for being born first.”

“It wasn’t my fault that I was oldest! Would you like to switch sometime!?” I scream, succeeding in making my pounding head feel even worse.

“No,” she says simply. “I really wouldn’t care to have malfunctioning machinery in my head.”

I get up slowly, feeling anger rise up as I do. My vision is obscured briefly, and then the anger flash-over appears over it. Now it feels as if my head were about to explode, but it’s worth it if I can get a shot in at Telsa.

She looks at me warily, and then I strike, the flash-over directing me exactly where to hit her face.

She shrieks as my fist makes contact with the center of her forehead, and she topples over, her light body easy to knock aside.

My anger dies down, the flash-over disappears, and my headache eases a little bit. Telsa sits up, glares at me, and gets up to stalk out of the room. The bounce is completely taken out of her step.

I groan again, and go off in search of my headache medicine.

12 - A Mother's Love

Leanne's POV

"Tell me more."

Mom shakes her head firmly, completely cooled off by now. But her eyes are still red from the crying she did.

"Mom, tell me!" I can feel my temper rising, and make no effort to stop it. I need to know why I can't date the guy I want to. Why she has so much against him all of a sudden, when before she absolutely adored him.

She continues to fold clothes, hands steadily moving in an almost hypnotic pattern.

"Tell me NOW!" I demand. "I bought all our stupid drinks. I took the cart back to the store. I've cleaned my room and would be cleaning down here if you'd let me. Now don't I at least deserve an explanation!?"

Mom sighs. "I suppose. But I'm not supposed to tell you anything. I shouldn't have even told you he might die."

"Well you did, and now I need some sort of explanation."

"I'm sorry, Leanne, but I can't help you."

"You HAVE to!" I scream, jumping off my position on the arm of the ratty chair. "I deserve to KNOW! It's about ME!"

"Leanne, I can't –"

"Dad would tell me!" Tears push at my eyes, and I glare furiously at Mom.

Her mouth is opening and closing like a fish's. She's blinking rapidly, and breathing heavily, on the verge of tear like myself but for entirely different reasons. "Leanne...."

"He would, and you know it! He actually loved me!"

Mom flinches back, blinks sadly back up at me, and turns around. I cross my arms, furious with her and with the whole world.

I guess the calming thing I had going on earlier has worn off.

Then Leo walks in, carrying a stack of papers. "I heard yelling...." He trails off uncertainly.

"No duh," I say, allowing my anger to fuel a scathing edge to my voice.

Leo appears unaffected. "I made lost cat posters for Butter."

I glare at him, but can't think of a comeback. Butter, our cat, has been gone for three days, and I love him as much as Leo does.

Mom turns her head around to face us. "We have a cat?"

"Yeah, for about two years," Leo says, and I roll my eyes. Then I see the posters.

"Those were made with a computer...."

"So?"

"The only computer in the house is mine..."

Leo gulps. I've caught him red-handed.

"You used my computer, you ignorant little twerp!"

"Technically I'm older than you –"

"You used my computer without permission! Leo, you –" I fire some nasty words at him, and each time he hears a swear he gets this peculiar little look on his face. Oddly enough, it pleases me.

Once I stop for air, he says, "Now Leanne, there's no need for that."

I ignore him. "I TOLD you not to use my computer without asking first! What did you see?"

"Nothing," he says, really quickly like he always does when he's lying.

By now Mom's gone back to her folding with her back turned.

"Leo," I growl. "What did you see?"

He sighs and fesses up. "I saw one of your Photoshop drawings."

"You what?"

"I saw one of your drawings on Photoshop. It was really good."

"Flattery isn't going to let you off the hook. What was it?"

"A picture of Dad and a picture of a bus hitting a car."

I gasp quietly. So that's who that was in the picture.

After the small moment of revelation, I turn a glare onto his face.

"That wasn't open for viewing," I say menacingly.

"I'm sorry, it's what was on there. I'd better go put these up."

Somehow he escapes the house without getting torn to shreds by me, so I turn my anger back to Mom.

"No one will tell me ANTHING! If you were a good mom, you'd tell me."

She sighs, and, to my surprise, says "Fine."

I shut up, sufficiently silenced.

"On your birthday, the one who you are currently dating is supposed to die. Someone will kill them, she didn't say who."

"She?" I manage.

"Your aunt."

"Aunt Catelyn?"

"No, a different one. Your father's sister."

"Who-what's her name?"

"...Telsa."

"The annoying person who moved into the neighborhood?"

Mom looks shell-shocked. "She's here?"

I nod, and suddenly my mother looks murderous.

"How dare she bring her....stupid fortune telling....good for nothing....my children she's messing with..."

Mom continues to mutter to herself, and says no more.

"I don't like her either," I say, and Mom looks over at me.

And for the first time in a long time, we exchange a hug.

She rocks me back and forth, assuring me that it'll all be okay. Tears I didn't know I had come spilling down my face. I don't even know why. I feel her secure grasp hold me safe, and feel like a kid again.

It's nice.

She acts normal, loving, caring. She holds me close to her, rubs my back, lets me cry for no reason at all.

And I realize that she's tried so hard to be a good mom. She loves Leo and I more than anything. Who cares that she's crazy? Who cares what disgusting lunches she makes? She may be insane, but she still has room in her heart for her children. We're not lost to her. She still goes to work in the afternoons with her job for the theater. She works hard to keep that job, all for us.

I realize I've taken her for granted. And to take your family for granted should be a sin.

I cry harder, and she holds me still, calming me, soothing me.

Being Mom as I knew her to be, in my heart.

13 - Stapler

Leo's POV

I slapped another lost cat poster to the pole, holding it in place with one hand while the other reached for the mini stapler in my pocket. I have big pockets today. Presssss, release. Presssss, release. Thunk thunk thunk, staple staple staple. It's hard to staple things to these poles. Maybe I should have found a staple gun.

I step back and admire my handiwork. Five posters, all neatly placed on. Time to move onto the next pole.

I really want Butter back. Who knows how long he's been gone? He was my cat in the first place too. Leanne says that he was hers but I know better. He's mine. He likes me better.

As I'm about to staple another paper to another pole, someone says, "You'd better let me do that." Telsa? What's she doing here? She looks relaxed, as if coming up on me unexpectedly is something she does every day. "Why?" I ask. Out of all the questions, like what are you doing here, I choose to ask the question why. Oh well.

"Because you'll staple yourself otherwise, and I want to spare you the pain and embarrassment when you have your thumb stapled to a large pole."

"Oh."

"Yeah, let me take that." She grabs the stapler and expertly put up the paper. She motions for me to hand over my stack, and we begin to walk around town as she does all my work for me.

We talk as we walk. "So, Leo," she says, "Why are you putting up lost cat posters?"

"My cat's lost."

"That would make sense." I grin briefly, and then feel it slide off my face with her next question.

"Do you really expect to find him?"

We stop, and I turn to face her. She looks sad, defeated in a way. "Yes, I do, actually," I say, challenging her to give me a better way.

"You won't find him. He's gone."

"How do YOU know?!" I scream suddenly, not caring that we're in a public place where everyone can hear us. "I've trusted you when you say things to me that make no sense, I go along with your little game, but you tell me hardly anything in return! You tell me about myself – you know everything about me somehow! And I know nothing about you! Tell me something!" I lower my voice so only Telsa and I can hear. "You said once that you were not really human. What are you?"

She gives me a sad, heartbroken, puppy-dog-eyes look. "I'm sorry," she says, so softly I can barely hear. She hangs her head, and turns away.

"I just want to know something about you. Don't you think it's fair that we have an equal exchange of information?"

Telsa's silent. "I-I can't," she chokes eventually, sets my papers and stapler on the ground, and walks off.

The only thing to do is follow her, I think, and pick up the stuff so I can run after her.

"Telsa!" I call. She didn't run, so how did she get so far ahead. "Telsa! Telsa!"

She whips around suddenly, and somehow she's right by my face. Something seems different about her...I can't pinpoint it precisely, but from the last minute I saw her until now, it seems like her skull subtly shifted or something. Her eyes seem glossier, but that could be from the tears. Then what's that

silvery line around her irises...? I realize that I've never seen her face this closely before.

"Leo," she starts, and some chord in it (that, once again, I can't pinpoint) causes my inner instinct to rise up and try push me in the opposite direction as her, "It is not safe for you to be here right now." I ignore instinct. "Here as in..." I gesture vaguely. "Around you."

"I gave you your warning," she says, completely controlled. I wonder why she said it was dangerous until I feel an icy fist drive into my gut, leaving me gasping and choking and very much winded. It punches a second time, and I think of two things before I pass out: shouldn't I be stronger than this, and next time I'll listen to my instinct.

I wake up and I don't know where I am. That's always a bad sign. I sit up slowly, taking in my surroundings.

The wallpaper is a light, nondescript pink with faded flower pattern. I'm in a rickety old bed, and the only other pieces of furniture are a desk and a dresser. Then I see Telsa sitting in a chair, looking at me calmly.

"Where am I?" I ask.

She smiles. "In my bedroom."

"Um..." How did it get in Telsa's bedroom? That is wrong in so many ways. It's not even funny.

"How do you feel?" she asks.

I ignore her. "Why the HECK am I in your bedroom? The last I checked, I was in the street."

"Well, did you think I was going to just leave you there? I'm your aunt, I don't want to get hit by a car or anything. So I brought you here."

"You couldn't have taken me to my house, seeing as you know everything."

"...I have my reasons."

I don't think she realizes how creepy that is. "Look, why can't I go to my house?"

"YOU can. But I can't take you," she says, and then adds on in a quieter voice, "Your mom hates me."

"...Oh."

"Yeah. So I brought you here, and because Rob would hate you if he knew you were here, I had to stick you in my room."

"I guess that makes sense."

"Yeah, it does. Now, how do you feel?"

"Fine, I guess." Nothing hurts.

"Good." She nods and we're silent for a bit.

"How did you do that?" I ask after a while.

"Do what?"

"Punch me so hard."

"Oh, that..." She trails off, and holds up my stapler mysteriously.

"That's my stapler," I say unnecessarily.

"I know."

"So...you did it with my stapler."

"Yes."

"Telsa killed me with the stapler, in the street," I say in an overdramatic voice. Clue is so much fun. She grins widely. "Are you sure I didn't do it in the study?"

"Oh, I'm positive." We have a silent eyebrow-raising contest. Darn, she won.

"So, Telsa, I meant what I said before you knocked me out about telling me stuff," I say, forgetting humor for a minute. "I need to know what's going on."

Telsa looks pained. "I can't," she says.

"Can you at least tell me why not?"

"It's not good to know what the future holds. Knowing your fate will just lead to more...complications."

“Complications? My fate?”

“Well, to be specific, your fate and your sister’s fate and your sister’s boyfriend’s fate.”

“Well, that’s...nice.” Leanne has a BOYFRIEND? Since when? I don’t have time to get angry, though, because Telsa continues.

“And besides, don’t tell Rob this, but even I don’t know entirely what’s going to happen. After the confrontation, nothing is concrete. All I know is that you’re on my side, and Leanne’s on Rob’s side.”

“You mentioned these sides last time. What are they? Why am I on your side?”

“Because you are.”

“Telsa, whatever my fate is, you can tell me. I can deal with it, I’m responsible.” Sort of.

“It doesn’t have to do with responsibility, it has to do with whether or not you can handle the knowledge. It’s pretty, ah, weighty stuff. Most people wouldn’t be able to handle it.”

I frown, thoughtful. “I think I can handle it....”

Telsa gives me a critical look, then says, to my utter astonishment:

“Okay.”

14 - Family Troubles

Leanne's POV

I slam the tennis ball back against the wall with my racquet, channeling some of my pent-up energy into the swing. The ball comes bouncing back, and I hit it again. And again. And again.

Nothing but me and the tennis ball. All of my energy is devoted into keeping the pattern going and doing it as well as I possibly can. I use forehand, backhand, any stroke you can name. Anything to keep my game going.

Eventually I slow down and stop. I put my hands on my knees, and breathe heavily.

Tennis is the reason I love summer. Leo loves it because he can go around barefoot, and we both like swimming to some extent. But tennis is my main reason why I love summer. It keeps me sane while being cooped up with my family for three months.

I can't play all day – I still have to prepare dinner – so I check my watch. It's almost 5 already, so I grab my racquet and tennis ball and head home.

It's gotten really warm out lately, a sure sign that my birthday is coming. Only eight more days. Well, you can't really count today, so I guess it's seven.

My birthday makes me think about the warning Mom gave me. "On your birthday, the one who you are currently dating is supposed to die. Someone will kill them, she didn't say who."

And Mom also told me that "she" is Telsa. And that Telsa is my aunt.

Aunt though she may be, I still hate her. I hate everything about her. Heck, I hate the very fact that we're related!

I walk angrily down my road when I see a dark, fancy sports car pull up to Telsa and Rob's house. What are they doing with people who are rich enough to own that car?

But then the owners get out. It's Uncle Howard and Aunt Catelyn, complete with my least favorite cousin, Alexandria. They are definitely rich enough to own that car. And they're related to Telsa and Rob. Of course.

Sometimes I hate my family.

I run off before I can see any more. When I get home, I'm so angry that before I can even begin making a meal, I have to go up to my room and have a screaming match with myself. Of course, I win – that's what I love about competing with myself. I always win.

The satisfaction of victory settled, I head downstairs to start dinner. Tonight I'm making a seafood salad – one of my personal favorites. But then I open the fridge and my nose curls up in disgust. Something or other's gone bad. And my heart sinks with the heaviness of dismay and frustration as I realize that it's my fish that's gone bad.

"Leo!" I scream, hoping he's at home so I can make him go to the store and get more salmon. But there's no reply. I scream his name a few more times before giving up. He's not here. Mom's out at work, so I can't ask her. I really don't feel like getting it myself, either.

Well, time for a change of plans, then!

For starters, I throw out the rotten fish. Next step: peruse the fridge for something I can make edible. Ah ha! Sausage! I eagerly pull it out, check the expiration date – still good – and place it on the countertop. I move over to the pantry, and search for good bread. At least nothing's gone bad in here. Well...I could always just take normal breakfast bread and make some toast. Or! I'm suddenly hit with inspiration. I could make pasta. Yes, that's a good idea. Pasta, sausage, salad. I'm liking the sound of this. I happily

find enough pasta to feed us for tonight, and begin cooking.

Midway through this whole process, Leo comes home. "There you are, snooper!" I yell at him. I still haven't forgiven him for looking at my computer without my permission.

"I'm sorry, okay?!" he says, sounding exasperated, tired, and kind of...scared? What's up with that?

"What's your problem?" I say, but he's already left for his room. And his music, no doubt.

Just to make my day worse, as I'm about to put food on the table, the phone rings. Before I can grab it, Leo gets it from upstairs. I sigh, and begin serving dinner. Then Leo comes down and says, "Mom's working late tonight. She can't come home for dinner. I'll take my plate up to my room, thanks." He grabs a plate from the counter and walks off.

"You're welcome!" I yell after him, getting ready to settle into a lonely meal by myself.

After I eat, I begin to clean things up. Just as I finish loading the dishwasher, Mom comes in. "Hey Leanne!" she says, hugging me. "I'm so sorry I wasn't home for dinner. Did you save me some food?"

"Uh, yeah, over there on the counter," I say absently. I hear Mom thank me, and seat herself at the table. The sausage and pasta is cold, but she probably doesn't care. I don't. I climb up to my room and sit at my desk for a bit, thinking. Just thinking. And I'm hit with the urge to draw again. I pull out my pad of paper, and begin sketching something – looks like a guy with a gun.

The doorbell rings, and we all go over to get it. Mom gets there first, however, and just because the world seemingly wants me to have a bad day, it's Uncle Howard and Aunt Catelyn. With bratty Alexandria in tow. Mom welcomes them in, with many an "excuse the mess". They don't seem to care – except for Alexandria. Then Leo abandons me – he's acting weird tonight – and I'm stuck with her. She looks down at me critically for a while, and then finally, she speaks. "Don't you ever use a straightener on your hair?"

Straighteners. Please. Don't remind me.

I can't help but remember the Straightener Incident. Tanya and I had decided to straighten our hair at her house. I did hers first – so far, everything was fine. She looked great. Then it was my turn. By the time we were done, something had clearly gone wrong. To this day, neither of us have figured out what exactly happened. My hair was a frizzy mess. And it didn't go away for another two days. Enough time for the entire school to laugh at my terrible hair.

I've never touched a straightener since.

So I tell the bratty little girl in front of me, "Don't you ever keep your trap shut? I might have a very good reason for leaving my hair as is."

She puffs up. The look on her face makes my want to burst out laughing. "You can't talk to me like that! I'm going into high school, for your information. Therefore, I'm older and more mature than you are, midget!"

No one calls me a midget and lives to tell the tale. "Newsflash – I'm already in high school. And don't judge a book by its cover, little girl, because I could kick your @\$\$ so bad you'd need to go to the E.R." A big exaggeration, but it's worth it to drive her nuts.

"Well then, my Dad could pay for all the expenses, easy! Unlike you. Especially since you don't have a dad. And then we'd sue you once I got out of the E.R. – again, unlike you. You could try, but you'd never win. My dad has money on his side. And money never loses."

I explode. "Y'know who never loses!? Me! Me, okay?! And if you talk about my dad like that one more time I'll-!"

"You're wrong! I never lose. And I'll talk about anyone any way I want – I have money, remember? Money can do anything."

"Oh yeah? Well it's not your money, it's your dad's."

"So? If it's his, it's mine."

"Well then," I say softly, closing in on her face. "If money can do anything, bring back my father. Your

uncle. Try using money for that.”

She waits a second, smiles, then says, in an equally quiet voice, “Why would I want to do that?”

I snap, and bring my fist straight into her right eye. She screams, and runs out into the dining room to the adults. “You’ll pay for that, Leanne Jacobson!” she yells back at me.

I yell to her, “Make me!”