



I went invisible for the first time on my twelfth birthday.

It was all Whitey's fault, in a way. Whitey is my dog. He's just a mutt, part terrier, part everything else. He's all black, so of course we named him Whitey.

If Whitey hadn't been sniffing around in the attic . . .

Well, maybe I'd better back up a bit and start at the beginning.

My birthday was on a rainy Saturday. It was a few minutes before kids would start arriving for my birthday party, so I was getting ready.

Getting ready means brushing my hair.

My brother is always on my case about my hair. He gives me a hard time because I spend so much time in front of the mirror brushing it and checking it out.

The thing is, I just happen to have great hair. It's very thick and sort of a golden brown, and just

a little bit wavy. My hair is my best feature, so I like to make sure it looks okay.

Also, I have very big ears. They stick out a lot. So I have to keep making sure that my hair covers my ears. It's important.

"Max, it's messed up in back," my brother, Lefty, said, standing behind me as I studied my hair in the front hall mirror.

His name is really Noah, but I call him Lefty because he's the only left-handed person in our family. Lefty was tossing a softball up and catching it in his left hand. He knew he wasn't supposed to toss that softball around in the house, but he always did it anyway.

Lefty is two years younger than me. He's not a bad guy, but he has too much energy. He always has to be tossing a ball around, drumming his hands on the table, hitting something, running around, falling down, leaping into things, wrestling with me. You get the idea. Dad says that Lefty has ants in his pants. It's a dumb expression, but it sort of describes my brother.

I turned and twisted my neck to see the back of my hair. "It is *not* messed up, liar," I said.

"Think fast!" Lefty shouted, and he tossed the softball at me.

I made a grab for it and missed. It hit the wall just below the mirror with a loud *thud*. Lefty and I held our breath, waiting to see if Mom heard the

sound. But she didn't. I think she was in the kitchen doing something to the birthday cake.

"That was dumb," I whispered to Lefty. "You almost broke the mirror."

"You're dumb," he said. Typical.

"Why don't you learn to throw right-handed? Then maybe I could catch it sometimes," I told him. I liked to tease him about being left-handed because he really hated it.

"You stink," he said, picking up the softball.

I was used to it. He said it a hundred times a day. I guess he thought it was clever or something.

He's a good kid for a ten-year-old, but he doesn't have much of a vocabulary.

"Your ears are sticking out," he said.

I knew he was lying. I started to answer him, but the doorbell rang.

He and I raced down the narrow hallway to the front door. "Hey, it's *my* party!" I told him.

But Lefty got to the door first and pulled it open.

My best friend, Zack, pulled open the screen door and hurried into the house. It was starting to rain pretty hard, and he was already soaked.

He handed me a present, wrapped in silver paper, raindrops dripping off it. "It's a bunch of comic books," he said. "I already read 'em. The *X-Force* graphic novel is kind of cool."

"Thanks," I said. "They don't look too wet."

Lefty grabbed the present from my hand and

ran into the living room with it. “Don’t open it!” I shouted. He said he was just starting a pile.

Zack took off his Red Sox cap, and I got a look at his new haircut. “Wow! You look . . . different,” I said, studying his new look. His black hair was buzzed real short on the left side. The rest of it was long, brushed straight to the right.

“Did you invite girls?” he asked me, “or is it just boys?”

“Some girls are coming,” I told him. “Erin and April. Maybe my cousin Debra.” I knew he liked Debra.

He nodded thoughtfully. Zack has a real serious face. He has these little blue eyes that always look faraway, like he’s thinking hard about something. Like he’s real deep.

He’s sort of an intense guy. Not nervous. Just keyed up. And very competitive. He has to win at everything. If he comes in second place, he gets really upset and kicks the furniture. You know the kind.

“What are we going to do?” Zack asked, shaking the water off his Red Sox cap.

I shrugged. “We were supposed to be in the backyard. Dad put the volleyball net up this morning. But that was before it started to rain. I rented some movies. Maybe we’ll watch them.”

The doorbell rang. Lefty appeared again from out of nowhere, pushed Zack and me out of the

way, and made a dive for the door. “Oh, it’s you,” I heard him say.

“Thanks for the welcome.” I recognized Erin’s squeaky voice. Some kids call Erin “Mouse” because of that voice, and because she’s tiny like a mouse. She has short, straight blond hair, and I think she’s cute, but of course I’d never tell anyone that.

“Can we come in?” I recognized April’s voice next. April is the other girl in our group. She has curly black hair and dark, sad eyes. I always thought she was really sad, but then I figured out that she’s just shy.

“The party’s tomorrow,” I heard Lefty tell them.

“Huh?” Both girls uttered cries of surprise.

“No, it isn’t,” I shouted. I stepped into the doorway and shoved Lefty out of the way. I pushed open the screen door so Erin and April could come in. “You know Lefty’s little jokes,” I said, squeezing my brother against the wall.

“Lefty *is* a little joke,” Erin said.

“You’re stupid,” Lefty told her. I pressed him into the wall a little harder, leaning against him with all my weight. But he ducked down and scooted away.

“Happy birthday,” April said, shaking the rain from her curly hair. She handed me a present, wrapped in Christmas wrapping paper. “It’s the only paper we had,” she explained, seeing me staring at it.

“Merry Christmas to you, too,” I joked. The present felt like a CD.

“I forgot your present,” Erin said.

“What is it?” I asked, following the girls into the living room.

“I don’t know. I haven’t bought it yet.”

Lefty grabbed April’s present out of my hand and ran to put it on top of Zack’s present in the corner behind the couch.

Erin plopped down on the white leather ottoman in front of the armchair. April stood at the window, staring out at the rain.

“We were going to barbecue hot dogs,” I said.

“They’d be pretty soggy today,” April replied.

Lefty stood behind the couch, tossing his softball up and catching it one-handed.

“You’re going to break that lamp,” I warned him.

He ignored me, of course.

“Who else is coming?” Erin asked.

Before I could answer, the doorbell rang again. Lefty and I raced to the door. He tripped over his own sneakers and went skidding down the hall on his stomach. So typical.

By two-thirty everyone had arrived, fifteen kids in all, and the party got started. Well, it didn’t really get started because we couldn’t decide what to do. I wanted to watch a *Terminator* movie. But the girls wanted to play Twister.

“It’s *my* birthday!” I insisted.

We compromised. We played Twister. Then we watched some of the *Terminator* movie until it was time to eat.

It was a pretty good party. I think everyone had an okay time. Even April seemed to be having fun. She was usually really quiet and nervous-looking at parties.

Lefty spilled his Coke and ate his slice of chocolate birthday cake with his hands because he thought it was funny. But he was the only animal in the group.

I told him the only reason he was invited was because he was in the family and there was nowhere else we could stash him. He replied by opening his mouth up real wide so everyone could see his chewed-up chocolate cake inside.

After I opened presents, I put the *Terminator* movie back on. But everyone started to leave. I guess it was about five o'clock. It looked much later. It was dark as night out, still storming.

My parents were in the kitchen cleaning up. Erin and April were the only ones left. Erin's mother was supposed to pick them up. She called and said she'd be a little late.

Whitey was standing at the living room window, barking his head off. I looked outside. I didn't see anyone there. I grabbed him with both hands and wrestled him away from the window.

"Let's go up to my room," I suggested when I

finally got the dumb dog quiet. “I got a new video game I want to try.”

Erin and April gladly followed me upstairs. They didn’t like the movie, for some reason.

The upstairs hallway was pitch black. I clicked the light switch, but the overhead light didn’t come on. “The bulb must be burned out,” I said.

My room was at the end of the hall. We made our way slowly through the darkness.

“It’s kind of spooky up here,” April said quietly.

And just as she said it, the linen closet door swung open and, with a deafening howl, a dark figure leapt out at us.



As the girls cried out in horror, the howling creature grabbed me around the waist and wrestled me to the floor.

“Lefty — *let go!*” I screamed angrily. “You’re not funny!”

He was laughing like a lunatic. He thought he was a riot. “Gotcha!” he cried. “I gotcha good!”

“We weren’t scared,” Erin insisted. “We knew it was you.”

“Then why’d you scream?” Lefty asked.

Erin didn’t have an answer.

I shoved him off me and climbed to my feet. “That was dumb, Lefty.”

“How long were you waiting in the linen closet?” April asked.

“A long time,” Lefty told her. He started to get up, but Whitey ran up to him and began furiously licking his face. It tickled so much, Lefty fell onto his back, laughing.

“You scared Whitey, too,” I said.