

Questions to consider while reading:

1. Is Lise's character believable or is it obvious that she was written by someone who's not a 15-year-old girl?
2. Is the story interesting or does it feel cliché and predictable?*
3. Do these first 5 pages make you want to read more?
4. Does the pace keep you hooked or does it move too slowly?

Chapter 1

The last thing I wanted for my 15th birthday was to blow up a city.
But sometimes we get things we never wanted.

I walked out of the bathroom, patting my cornrows on my way to my closet. I flipped through jeans, skirts, and dresses, but none of them felt right for a mother/daughter birthday brunch. I walked over to the dresser and rummaged through sweatpants, shorts, and my softball uniforms, but still found nothing.

What was the weather like today, anyway?

I walked to the window and pressed my hand against the glass and felt the warmth on my palm. It was warm, but not too warm--a perfect little September Saturday that hit that balance between sundress and skinny jeans just right. The Sun was hanging just above the Hudson River, setting the New York City skyline on fire like a chrome mountain range. This view was literally the only thing I loved about Paulus Hook. I'd rather actually live in Manhattan. Or at the very least anywhere in Jersey City but Downtown.

I spun back to the closet as an idea came to me and pulled out some khaki pants and a white button-up then snatched some leggings and a Princess Leia graphic tee from the dresser. I held up the two outfits and faced the posters on my wall of Einstein and Lara Croft.

"What are we thinking, guys?" I asked them. "Studious?" I held up the pants and button-up. "Or sporty?" I held up the graphic tee. I gave them a second then nodded to myself. "Sporty. I agree. Good call."

I got dressed then waltzed into the kitchen where my mother was leaning against the counter sipping her coffee.

"Rise and shine," she greeted me. "Leave it to Lise to sleep in on her birthday. It's almost three."

"Is it?" I pretended to be surprised.

"Happy birthday," she said as she walked over and kissed my forehead.

"Thanks, Mom," I grinned.

"You ready for your birthday adventure?"

"Can I guess where we're going?"

"Sure," Mom nodded, taking another sip. "As long as it doesn't turn into another argument."

"Journal square?" I tried. "The Heights? Lincoln Park?"

She furrowed her brows at me, disappointment all over her face. "You...didn't even guess any...restaurants?"

"I don't care," I confessed. "I just wanna go anywhere but Paulus Hook."

"Here we go again," my mother rolled her eyes.

"Mom, it's so boring here. You know what they call it on Reddit? 'Hoboken—minus the parties.'"

"Why are you even on Reddit? That's *my* generation."

“Are we at least going to a restaurant that’s not downtown?” I begged.

“Yes,” she nodded, raising her mug to me.

My eyes lit up. “Which one? Is it Jacobs? I could really go for some *duriz blanc* and *lalo*.”

Duriz blanc and *lalo* is a classic Haitian dish and is just white rice and spinach--except the spinach is cooked with jute leaves, stewed beef, and crab legs for a tender mash of mind-blowing goodness.

“You are so Haitian,” she laughed.

“Whose fault is that?”

“Touche,” she said. “Come on. I could tell you where we’re going, but I’ll do you one better.”

She led me into the living room where my chemistry blocks had been stacked up in a lifesize Periodic Table. I had been wondering where these had gone. The columns were all a few blocks higher than my head and the rows stretched wide enough that from the Alkali metals on the left to the Noble gases on the right reached just outside of my wingspan.

“This is your first birthday present of the day,” my mother announced, clearly proud of herself.

Chemistry was my thing, not hers. She could lecture the pants off her Columbia students in astrophysics, but anything smaller than a neutron star was like Greek to her. So she was feeling herself for coming up with this riddle for me.

“It’s a puzzle,” she whispered.

“I know,” I whispered back. But there was no sarcasm. I was genuinely excited. I loved puzzles and she knew it and my brain had already figured out that something was off about the table. For one, the Alkali metals row was shorter than it was supposed to be. There were elements missing all across the table. A few elements, actually. I scratched my chin as I scanned the columns. Sodium was gone and so were Osmium, Thorium, and Rhenium. And if I rearranged their symbols, it would spell, “ReNaThOs.” My eyes went wide again. Now I saw why she was so proud of herself.

“Renato’s!” I shrieked. “Yes!” I threw myself onto her and wrapped my arms around her neck as I kissed her cheek over and over again.

Renato’s was the best pizza place in all of Jersey City and if anyone said any different they could fight me. They weren’t called “Pizza Masters” for nothing. Their BBQ bacon cheddar was to die for. And their buffalo chicken? Out of this world good. My mouth was already starting to water thinking about it. The quick high from the puzzle combined with the anticipation of culinary greatness was the perfect start to my birthday. Nothing could bring me down now.

“That was really clever Mom,” I punched her shoulder, almost spilling her coffee. “I’m actually impressed.”

“Thank you. Thank you.” She curtsied dramatically. “I guess I’ve been picking up a few tricks from your Dad. Speaking of which, he’s gonna call you today.” Then she took a quick sip like she hadn’t just dropped a bomb.

“Holy smokes, Mom!” And just like that, my fuse was lit. “Are you kidding me? We were having a moment. You ruin everything.”

“Really?” she sucked her teeth. “C’mon. Still the cool mom with the clever puzzles.”

I turned my back to her and shut my eyes. My fists clenched, my cheeks were hot, and I felt the veins pumping in the sides of my forehead. I took a deep breath, willing myself to slow down the fuse. But it was easier said than done.

“I don’t wanna talk to him,” I spat.

“I know, baby,” my mother said softly. “But he wants to talk to you. He’s really not that bad, Lise.”

She wasn't helping the fuse. I spun on her and demanded, "How is he not that bad when he abandoned me for fifteen years?"

"Ten," she corrected.

I clenched my jaw. "Right. Sorry that I didn't give him credit for the 5 years I can't remember."

My mother let a beat of silence go by before speaking again. "Your father...is a complicated man."

"Why are you always defending him? He left you, Mom." I felt the fuse change direction, shifting my anger from being for myself to being for her.

"It's not that simple," she said.

I shook my head. "When people love you, they don't leave you. It's as simple as that."

I waited for her to say something else, to add some silver lining to the black hole that was my father. But she didn't.

"You're right..." she conceded. Then she cleared her throat as she walked over to the couch. I took a few breaths to settle myself before joining her. She pulled out a skinny white box the size of a pen and handed it to me. "Birthday present number two."

I took the box, allowing myself half a smile, and slowly lifted the lid. Inside was a silver necklace with a nucleus-shaped pendant. I lifted it up and the intersecting electron rings flipped past each other with a soft chime.

"Wow," I whispered. "It's so cool." I tapped one of the rings to make it spin faster.

"You're nuclear, Lise Francois," my mother said to me. "There's power inside of you that's gonna change the world."

I stifled the smile that wanted to come out. She always told me I was "nuclear". She'd named me after Lise Meitner, who'd discovered that nuclear fission produces massive amounts of energy. But all the credit went to the men instead of to her. She was still a boss chick, but I could never shake the feeling that I wasn't going to change the world. With all this anger inside of me, I was more likely to destroy it instead. But whose fault was that? Let's not go back there.

I shook my thoughts back to focus then lifted the chain over my head and let the nucleus hang over my chest. This was from my mother and that was all that mattered. "Thanks, Mom."

She grinned. "Lise. There's something I wanna tell you."

I rolled my eyes. "If this is about Dad..."

She paused then pressed her hand to her stomach. "Lise...I'm pregnant."

My jaw dropped. "What? With who? With Dad?! Mom, if you've been sneaking out and--"

She threw her head back and laughed. "You should've seen your face."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "You suck."

"Oh man, that was priceless," she wheezed, wiping tears from her eyes.

But I had to admit--the fuse was completely dead now. She had a way of always knowing how to calm me down. "What did you really wanna tell me?"

She chuckled a few more times then took a deep breath. "I was gonna tell you this at the end of the day, but...I feel like the moment is right."

I shifted in my seat to face her. It felt like whatever she was about to say was gonna be super important and I wanted to see her eyes when she said it.

She grabbed my hands and looked straight at me. "It's about you."

I felt my throat constrict and my chest tighten. This was it. She was gonna tell me I was too much for her. It was too hard raising an angry teenage girl by herself. I shouldn't have let myself get so carried away over my father. I had ruined this day for myself and for her.

“You’re not exactly...” she started.
My chest tightened.
“How do I say this? You are--”
But I never got to hear what she was going to say.
Because the next thing I knew, the front door exploded.

Chapter 2

My mother and I hit the floor and it was a miracle no stray shards of wood gave us splinters in our eyes.

“What the heck was that?” I asked her, sitting up behind the couch. I turned to the doorway and my heart stopped at what I saw. A human-shaped machine with a smooth, black, glossy body was standing in the hallway, too tall for me to see its head. It looked like a Naked Storm Trooper and its hand was stretched out, exposing a sizzling palm that was glowing orange. A Naked Storm Trooper that could...shoot plasma beams? Was this real? Was this really a robot that could shoot plasma beams? That would explain why there was no flying wood. It had just incinerated the door with no trace.

“Lise, run!” my mother screamed behind me.

But I didn’t move. I was trapped somewhere between fear and wonder--but mostly wonder.

The machine ducked its head as it stepped into the apartment and three other machines joined it. The first one turned in my direction and aimed its palm at me.

“LISE!” my mother screamed again.

Her voice snapped me out of my geek-induced daze and I sprinted towards the other end of the living room. But I wasn’t fast enough. I made it three steps before I heard the distinct sound of a giant string being plucked—like an electric viola—and my body started falling up.

You read that right.

I went up feet first and within a second I was crashing into the ceiling along with all of the Chemistry blocks. My mind was racing faster than my heart as I took in the implications. These things could magnetize too? But then I remembered I wasn’t wearing a belt. And the blocks were made of plastic not metal. Was this telekinesis? Couldn’t be. They were robots—they didn’t have minds. Or did they? But I wasn’t being pinned by some invisible force. Besides the blood rushing to my head, it didn’t even feel that unnatural. I was able to stand back up like normal, as if this was how it was supposed to be. Then it hit me.

It was gravity.

These machines could manipulate gravity.

“Mom!” I cried, scanning the ceiling for her.

But instead of seeing my mother, I saw all four machines lying on their backs on the ceiling, climbing to their feet.

“Whaaaaat?” I whispered to myself.

I looked down at the floor and there was my mother with both hands stretched at the ceiling.

It wasn’t the machines. It was her.

Chapter 3

I blinked several times, trying to make sure I was seeing this right. My mother was manipulating gravity. How was this possible?

The machines weren't nearly as impressed and one of them shot a plasma beam at her feet. It dissolved a hole through the floor the size of a basketball and I saw our neighbor's kitchen table. The shot must've thrown my mother's concentration off because everything fell--the machines, the blocks, and obviously me. I landed on my shoulder and all the Neon gases pummelled me in the head. But I ate all the pain. My mother was in trouble and she needed me. I jumped to my feet, rushed into my room to grab my softball bat, then came out screaming.

"Leave her alone!" I ran behind a machine and swung my bat against the back of its head with the force to knock a fastball out of the park. But the machine barely flinched and I caught the slightest hint of a dent in its metal skull.

That was unexpected.

It turned around and wasted no time grabbing me by the neck and lifting me off the floor with ease. My feet dangled as I dropped the bat and I felt its fingers crushing my windpipe. Just when I thought I was about to breathe my last, I heard another stringed note--but this was higher pitched like a violin--and a blue flash of electricity snaked through the machine's upper body. It dropped me and I gasped as I hit the floor, gripping my throat. I swiped the bat as I crawled away across the floor and searched the room for where that electricity had come from and saw a tall black man standing in the doorway. His hand was still aimed at where I'd been getting strangled half a second before and the other three machines were reacting weirdly to him. They all froze when they saw him and if I didn't know any better, I'd say they were actually surprised to see him. Which made four of us because this man was my father.

"Mark, on your left!" my mother cried.

Mark spun just as one of the machines geared up to fire a plasma beam and waved his hand. There was another violin-like strum, a ring of blue electricity flashed over the machine's body, and the plasma beam came out in a harmless burst of dull orange light. I didn't have time to be amazed. I got up just as my mother sent a machine dropping to its knees without touching it and I smacked my bat across its head again and again.

"That's! My! Mom!" I shouted with every hit.

But the machine caught the bat and flung me across the room. My skull smacked against the wall and I slid to the floor in a heap. My head was spinning and my vision was blurred. So I wasn't sure if there were actually eight machines now fighting my parents. And I wasn't sure how long I was swinging in and out of consciousness. But one thing I was sure of was the moment I saw a machine grab my mother, jump out the window, and blast away with her.