

Their memories have made them targets.
Their actions will make them heroes.

RESIDENT SPY

A blue-tinted cityscape at night, featuring several skyscrapers. In the foreground, a silhouette of a man stands with his hands on his hips, looking towards the city. The overall mood is mysterious and dramatic.

D L RICHARDSON

Resident Spy

D L Richardson

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PART ONE

DEATH

Chapter One

Wednesday, November 9th

Ethan James

AC/DC's "Thunderstruck" blared through the speakers. Apt music considering the weather conditions. Rain pounded the windshield of the Lamborghini. Crushed beneath the noisy rain, the music took a beating, too. I flipped the volume control to the max, drowning out the steady slap of water on the roof.

The dark shroud of night cloaked the striped lines to my left and right. Street signs blasted yellow warnings to drivers to slow down on wet roads. I ignored them.

Instead, I pushed the car to one hundred and twenty miles per hour. Coming around a curve in the road, I flew up on a van and sharply jerked the wheel to avoid ramming the Lamborghini up its rear end. I owed my life to my quick reflexes.

Pity.

I drove for another half mile at suicidal speeds, drumming my fingers on the steering wheel to the rhythm of the guitar riff. Another half mile. Then another. Just when the buzz of the ride plunged to a level of indifference, the car hit a pothole, veered me across three lanes, and like a punch from nowhere, it was game on.

A tsunami-sized wave of water fell from the sky. Momentarily blinded by the useless wipers, I sucked in my breath when two rows of lights cut through the haze. Two white lights on the bottom and six or more yellow ones on top—the bright circles headed straight at me.

Semitrailer. Not good.

Gritting my teeth, I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. The truck swerved at the last second, missing killing me by about half that length of time. The driver blasted four long bleats of the horn.

I laughed out loud as I spun around.

I accelerated till the car caught up to its former one hundred and twenty miles per hour. The chorus kicked in, and I helped with the backing vocals. “Thunder. Na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na. Thunder.”

Whether driving under a dome of blue, or a sky darkened by storms like tonight, I liked to push cars to their limit. It didn’t matter what sort of car, but slow cars tended to break apart sooner under extreme pressure. Fast cars handled the punishment of driving at stupid speeds much better.

Speeding made the rush last longer. It filled a void and carried me to a place where I let go of the angst over a waste of a life spent waiting to die of kidney failure. The rush reminded me that seventeen-year-old kids should wish for a professional ice hockey career instead of wishing to still be alive by Christmas.

The song ended, and in that second of silence, my thrill took a dismal nosedive. Images of the hospital I attended every week flickered across my vision. So, I increased the speed. Bad enough the bleak place filled my head and haunted my dreams, but to interrupt my fun—not going to happen.

The next song on the CD kicked in, and it did the trick of hauling me back to the driver’s seat, where I replaced the hospital corridor for a rain-slicked freeway. I figured if I had to die young, I’d do it on my terms. No doubt the doctors would have something to say about this philosophy. If I crashed the car and ended up in the hospital, I’d tell them I reached out to touch life. Better than dwelling on my postpubescent life spent hooked up to a dialysis machine.

I'd probably get pulled over by the cops first, and I couldn't have that. Aside from speeding, I'd stolen the Lamborghini from a mall parking lot half an hour earlier, and I didn't have a license.

A crack in my concentration appeared like the lightning bolts streaking the sky. The car drifted into the next lane, and I let it go. A set of lights rushed toward me, and I expertly got the car under control, but at this speed, and despite the car's sporting capability, the Lamborghini was all over the shot.

Buzzed from pushing the car, I kept going.

At this speed, streetlights floated like satiny white ribbons. The rain-slicked road made it impossible to judge the lines marking the lanes. Curves were hard to anticipate.

Sometimes I oversteered; sometimes I didn't steer enough and had to yank the wheel to the left or right at the last second. Other drivers blasted their horns. I didn't care about the rules of the road. Rules were for pussies.

For each minute I survived this suicidal cruise, I'd get two points. So far, I'd accumulated over two hundred. Fifty were up for grabs if I made it home alive. I had a lot to lose if I crashed the car. I had nothing to lose if I killed myself.

I jumped in surprise when a car came up on my left and honked its horn, whizzing by in a blur of chrome. "I don't think so, buddy."

I accelerated. If the cops wanted to stop me, they'd have to use air support. Getting myself on TV only added to the thrill of the chase.

Concern over my reckless driving should have registered, but it didn't. The speedometer now read one hundred and forty miles per hour. AC/DC screeched about "Hells Bells," and the rain didn't lessen. If I lost control now, I'd smash into the concrete barriers lining the highway. It'd be game over. No way I'd survive the impact. What a shame this last train of thought wasn't on whether I'd survive or not, but on whether I'd care.

Lightning bolts exploded across the sky and lit up the windshield. In that brief flicker of visibility, I spotted the plane on fire, blocking the highway—and the spaceship blowing up a bridge with luminous green laser beams. I let go of the wheel, idly watching the Lamborghini plow into the concrete barrier. Metal fragments and orange flames danced in front of me. The sound of something exploding boomed through the speakers. The words GAME OVER flashed across the television screen.

The plane had been okay, but the spaceship insulted me. For sure, the makers of the game reckoned it'd be a hoot to throw unrealistic obstacles in my path.

I tossed the Xbox controller aside and scratched my numb backside. My life couldn't get any worse...might as well go to school.

* * *

The rumors weren't true.

From the top of the Raven High School arts building, you couldn't see a quarter of a mile out to sea. No oil riggers. No boats on the horizon. Just an endless ocean of red-colored roof tiles, concrete roads, and a few taller buildings I recognized as the hockey rink and library.

A strong gust of wind blew in, shaking what remaining leaves clung to the elm tree I'd used to climb up onto the roof. I wrapped my arms around my knees, anticipating the chilly bite of the breeze. None came. Instead, Mother Nature's warm breath blew over me. Strong enough to bully the foliage, but not strong enough to topple me over.

If I fell, would anyone care? It wasn't like my death would come as a total shock.

"There you are, Ethan. What are you doing up on the roof?"

Startled at being busted skipping class, I reached out for the nearest thing on hand. My fingers lost their grip on the tiles, and I slid down a few feet, cracking my head against a thick branch that stretched above the roof. I recognized the teacher's voice.

I leaned over the edge of the roof, the tree safely supporting me, though it dug tiny bits of wood into my forehead. I'd probably bruise.

Mr. Lee stood with his back up against the trunk of the elm. He kept his arms folded over his chest, the same way he did in class. Most of the teachers in Raven High wore shirts and ties. Not Mr. Lee. No, he wore white T-shirts with the occasional tweed jacket. Judging by the number of Bruce Lee posters on the walls, he chose T-shirts simply to show off his biceps. If it weren't for those posters and his semicool behavior, I'd have missed more math classes than the other jocks.

At least he'd turned up alone. I wasn't in the mood for an audience.

“Ethan, I asked you a question.”

“Right,” I answered around a smirk. “I’m counting the tiles, which I’m going to multiply by eleven and divide by three.”

Mr. Lee pointed his finger, directing me to get down. “Quickly. You don’t want me to have to call your parents.”

“Parent, sir. My mom...”

Went loony and ran away.

Those words always stuck in my throat. Crazy or not, I had one mom and I loved her. From snippets of conversation, I sort of knew why she’d left and wouldn’t be back. Wherever Mom had run away to, I hoped the place and people in it kept her happy.

Mr. Lee didn’t push the conversation. I didn’t expect him to. The major factor in his being considered a semicool teacher among the class stemmed from his talent for letting the students figure their own problems out.

In the background, kids yelled. I took the teacher’s silence to mean he’d left to mediate. I shuffled my butt along until I once more slid out of sight and returned to contemplating whether or not anyone would notice if I fell off the roof.

It’d have been easier to solve one of his algebra questions.

Suddenly the tree shook. I grabbed onto the nearest limb and dug my shoes into the gutter. Okay, so the thumping in my chest might mean I hadn’t totally accepted my impending death.

Mr. Lee had stepped back so his head appeared in my field of vision. “Well? Are you jumping or hiding?”

My heartbeat slowed to normal. The buzz gone, I swung my legs out over the edge and stared at the horizon. The fact that he considered me suicidal should have offended me. Wishing for death and making it happen were two different things. Kind of like wishing to do a three hundred and sixty degree spin on a dirt bike and actually attempting it. No matter what idiotic notions possessed me at one time or another, I valued life. Just mine in its current state remained questionable.

I could only answer this question with the one he’d first posed. Why had I climbed up onto the roof? “Hiding, sir.”

“Why don’t you come on down and we can sit in the teacher’s lounge? I’m not only a math whizz, I also have an empathetic ear.”

Hollow words. I closed my eyes and banged my head against the branch—intentionally this time. He didn't know what it meant to live with a crippling disease.

"I know what you're thinking," Mr. Lee sang out. "I don't understand what you're going through."

Never in a million years would he get me. I opened my eyes; the thick, gnarly branch running up the side of the building like Jack's beanstalk blocked him from view. I leaned further over the edge, swinging my legs. Mr. Lee stared up at me, not with pity, but with something else—something only reflected in the eyes of patients at Blackbird Regional Hospital.

Either he had mind-reading abilities, or he'd had a similar experience.

"You're not the first person on the planet to need life-saving surgery. And you won't be the last."

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a voice warned me that teachers weren't supposed to speak this way—open, honest, and as if we were equals. Last time I would complain about being treated like a child.

His bluntness unnerved me. So did his waiting stare. Almost-black eyes drilled into mine. I shouldn't have been able to notice the exact color because normal people didn't look at a dying kid's face.

The intense scrutiny forced me to scoot a few feet back up the roof to escape it.

Mr. Lee reached toward me, one hand hovering in the air separating us. "Wait. I'll tell you a secret if you promise to come down."

I froze. My senses on high alert, I suspected an ulterior motive. "Tell me your secret first."

He flicked a glance in the direction of the principal's office. "Will you *then* come down?"

My chest swelled with pride at his nervous expression. I'd done that. A failed kidney rendered me dysfunctional, but deep down, a part of the real Ethan James remained. I stood up and pretended to sway, hoping for another reaction. Mr. Lee waved his arms like a bird taking off. I hid my laugh, dropping my chin to my chest. "I'm not sure I'm ready to come down. Let me think about it."

His face drained of color, and his words flew out of him in a rush. “A few days before my twelfth birthday, my family was in a car accident.” He lifted up his pants. A metal rod protruded out of his shoe. “I lost the lower part of my leg.”

“Great. The Terminator is teaching me math,” I muttered.

To have found me up on the roof, he had to have possessed the tracking skills of a polar bear. To hear my comment, he had to have possessed the hearing of a hawk. I wouldn’t underestimate him again.

He smiled as though pleased at the reference. Every trace of concern had disappeared when he said, “I’ll start showing my metal rod in class if you say it’s cool.”

I squeezed my head with my hands. Jeez. Where had he gotten that idea from?

“It’s not cool.”

“The car accident nearly killed me,” Mr. Lee continued. “Worse, it ended a promising sports career.”

I absently kicked at a loose, roof tile. Aside from a few kung fu posters on the wall of his classroom, a chess set sat on his desk. Sometimes he held month-long games where he pitted himself against the team of combined students. “Chess isn’t a sport.”

Mr. Lee scowled at me. “Of course it isn’t. It’s way more serious. I’m talking about gymnastics.”

I shook my head in commiseration. I’d lost count of the number of arguments me and the guys had gotten into over this subject. “Gymnastics isn’t a sport, either.”

Mr. Lee folded one arm over the other, the way he did in class when no one understood the question. “Oh, really? I trained for the Olympics. Heard of them?”

“Not lately.” But of course I had. Ice hockey was an Olympic sport.

Mr. Lee raised an eyebrow, the way he did when unimpressed by the answer.

“Okay, maybe gymnastics is a sport,” I said. “And maybe you almost died. Still doesn’t mean you know what I’m going through.”

A gust of wind blew across the rooftop. It carried with it a handful of colorful, fall-turned leaves. I stood on the roof, transfixed by the dancing clusters of red, orange, and yellow. One by one the leaves did a nosedive into the gutter, taking refuge from the wind. A tiny bird with brilliant blue feathers flew past my head, seeking shelter inside a jumble of elm bough that resembled a cage. The sky clouded over and a sense of gloom hovered above the school grounds.

Maybe it merely hovered over me.

The wind picked up once more, this time whipping my burgundy-and-gold striped tie against my cheek. My school uniform—white shirt and cream slacks—was now covered in muck from the tiles dirtied by leaf litter and smog blown in from the freeway. I couldn't stay on the roof much longer, and the threat of the coming storm had little to do with this decision.

Sometimes I wanted to play a one-man's game of hide-and-seek, but getting found by an unwitting party tended to rip out the fun.

"You feel isolated, Ethan. I understand. We live in the twenty-first century in a first world country. With today's technology, there is no reason for anyone to feel alone. There is always someone to talk to." Mr. Lee spoke in a soothing voice, and for a second I almost fell for it.

My dad, my aunt Fee, even my transplant coordinator badgered me routinely about talking to someone. What would I say? "I'm dying" ended more conversations than it started.

Anyway, isolation happened to be the least of my reasons to climb up onto the roof. I still had a few more years of partial normality—school, exams, acne, losing my virginity—and sometimes the notion that I might not live long enough to enjoy these few milestones hit a nerve so raw I went in search of a quiet place to reflect. Other times, I wanted to act like a normal kid who found a tree and just had to climb it.

Mr. Lee ripped his fingers out of his pits and waved both hands at me. His relaxed attitude fled from sight. In that action the moment shattered. His jaw stiffened. His gaze drilled into me. He returned to being a teacher rounding up a truanting student.

"Come down. If you want to hide out, you can do so in the teacher's lounge." He turned and walked away, but stopped after a few feet. When he turned back around, he had a huge grin on his face. "We have a waffle maker. If that doesn't convince you to come down, I don't know what will."

* * *

I'd let Mr. Lee talk me down from the roof, but I'd refused to be caught dead anywhere near the teacher's lounge. So, I spent the rest of the morning in the school library—the safest place for a kid to hang without the hassle of teachers accusing you of skipping class. After a few minutes of randomly flicking through the magazine rack, I selected one on fishing and hunted around for the darkest, quietest corner. Before I'd even opened the magazine, the conversation with Mr. Lee leaped to mind.

What my teacher had said held some truth to it. I did live in the modern era. At the click of a button, I could chat with anyone anywhere in the world—kids with similar problems to my own, normal kids, rich kids, poor kids, geeks and freaks. I had billions of people to choose from. The simplest option in the world was to pick up the phone, dial a toll-free number, and talk to a trained counselor. At school, too, there were teachers, like Mr. Lee, willing to listen.

Would talking make a difference? Or would it make me more vulnerable?

I flicked through a few pages, too deep in my own little world to notice the headlines or the photos. Something niggled at me. It had nothing to do with my disease. It had nothing to do with isolation. It didn't even have anything to do with hospital checkups.

The absence of a life without purpose kept me up at night. I used to have goals—practice, make professional grade, make lots of money. Everyone needed at least one goal. I had none. Just get up, do stuff, go to bed. Next day, same shit.

Seeing red, I threw the magazine at the wall. It landed with a swoosh. A handful of pages flew out and settled on the carpet a few inches from the magazine. I regretted my outburst the second I'd had it. When my head fell into my hands, I let the tears flow.

Why me?

I never used to believe in fate. Things happened because you made them happen, or you nagged your parents till you got what you wanted. Fate suited people who believed in fairies and Santa Claus. When had I jumped ship? Since when had I been living among the fate believers? I knew when. Ever since I'd gotten diagnosed with polycystic kidneys two years ago. Luckier than some people, I'd immediately been placed on the organ-donor registry.

I sat in the library, and in between sobs I tried to figure out how to escape a fate I didn't want to believe in, let alone accept existed solely for me.

Chapter Two

Thursday, November 10th

Ethan James

Blue skies surrounded me. A cold wind peeled my clothes off. Someone strapped to my back weighted me down. An altimeter clung to my wrist.

A dive instructor popped into view with a jumble of arms and legs splayed out, mimicking a starfish. A video camera was attached to the instructor's helmet, and I received the thumbs-up signal.

"I have so much to tell you," the instructor shouted. "You want me to tell you why I left, don't you?"

With the wind pushing the oversize goggles up the bridge of my nose, I hadn't noticed that the instructor and my mother were the same. I opened my mouth to speak, but fast-rushing air smacked into the cavity, almost giving me a tonsillectomy.

Before I spluttered or coughed, my body abruptly halted, smacking into an invisible wall. Our descent to earth slowed while Mom's body shot toward the ground. I screamed. She didn't have a parachute strapped to her back.

In the real world, a distinct *tap-tap-tap* echoed inside my skull, like a Morse code signal.

I forced myself to answer the SOS and woke up.

Shrill squeals of tires on pavement screamed through my head. Intrigued, I lifted my torso up by my elbows to stare out my bedroom window. A car tore down the street.

My Xbox waited for me downstairs in the living room, so I played a different game.

What color? Red. Make and Model? Corvette 2010 Grand Sport. Male or female? Definitely male. Not that I discriminated against women drivers. I'd played this guessing game so many times, I relied on the odds. And the odds were this driver had chest hair.

As a kid with a defective kidney, I stayed home a lot. Usually with nothing better to do than stare out my bedroom window and watch idiots try to kill themselves on the

relatively quiet streets of Raven.

Halfway down Millpond Avenue, the car came into view.

“Jeez. Can I get a break?”

Not a Corvette. Not an American car. Not even red.

A Ferrari 360 F1 Spider tore down the road. Raven was home to working class families. Usually, when I played this game, the speeding car turned out to be a Honda or a Subaru.

New game. Explain the presence of a hundred thousand dollar car roaring through Raven at nine o'clock in the morning.

In another second, the driver would need to brake for the curve in Millpond Avenue—the one right in front of my house—or plow straight into our living room.

I shook my head to clear the fog. The Ferrari had me stumped.

Drug runner fleeing a dodgy deal.

Couldn't be. No other cars. No gunfire.

Hollywood stunt driver.

Secret agent on a mission.

Clown late for a kid's party.

I yawned. “It's too early for this game.”

Short of throwing myself in front of the car and demanding the driver stop, I had no way of confirming any of my theories, though I had my suspicions. At the end of Millpond Avenue, an eight-foot-high, wrought iron gate stood sentry to a proposed housing development known as Tallwood Estate.

Rural in name only, the twenty-acre parcel of land backed onto the freeway. The sad-looking sticks poking out of the ground made the place appear contaminated. The developer had gone bust, even before the global financial crisis my dad kept harping on had hit.

Outside the estate stood a billboard displaying hundreds of mirror-image houses containing poster-perfect families tossing Frisbees in the park. What actually stood inside were ten single-level houses with doors and windows on the outside and not much on the inside, plus a few shells of buildings.

Totally devoid of people, Tallwood Estate resembled a 1950s nuclear bomb testing site.

Before any construction had begun, the streets had been laid, and now snaked around the land—unnamed. Officially anyway. The local kids had given the streets their own names. Skater Street wrapped behind the concrete shell of a building. Grazed Knee Grove ran through the middle of a bunch of lifeless trees that the poster outside declared as the proposed park. Burnout Boulevard, a straight stretch of concrete crisscrossed with scorch marks of burned rubber, existed for stolen cars.

In the absence of domestic bliss, Tallwood Estate developed into Raven’s illegal drag strip and fun zone.

The Ferrari hurried to get there. Ten feet from the curb outside my house, it braked so hard I sucked in my breath. “Please don’t hit the house.”

It pulled up and slid into the curve before accelerating again. I got a clear view of the driver—late twenties, he had short, dark hair, aviator sunglasses, the hint of stubble on the chin, a tanned arm leaned on the edge of the door, a black sleeve displayed the tattoo of a giant spider on the biceps.

I got four points for guessing male driver and alone, but the fun had gone out of the game. I punched my pillow and shouted out the window. “Just another jerk driving a stolen car.”

* * *

I’d earned a few more hours of sleep. The lingering worry that the nightmare might return—and the likelihood it meant some sort of a major fall—really promised for a crappy day, so I hit the remote control for the TV. I left the volume on low, hoping the white noise would keep my subconscious occupied as I drifted in that light phase of sleep.

The cordless phone at my bedside ringing woke me. The news reporter on the TV announced that global climate change resulted in poorly cultivated tea crops in India. It amazed me what warranted a five-minute segment on the news.

I burrowed further under the quilt, ignoring the phone, and pretending to be asleep. After the fourth set of chimes, I reached out a hand from underneath the blanket.

“Yeah,” I grumbled.

“Why are you answering the phone?”

Hit by a wave of guilt over causing this anxious tone, I said, “Why are you checking up on me?”

“Because I’m your father.”

I scooted further beneath the covers, taking the cordless phone’s handset with me.

“You should be in class.”

I moaned, sounding more like my preteen sister than my almost-adult self. “What’s the point?”

Dad groaned in that way that let me know I’d smashed his hot buttons. “To get an education, leave home, meet a lovely girl, and one day harass your own teenage son about getting himself to school.”

“Again, what’s the point?”

A series of *tut-tuts* fed down the line. “Ethan.”

I moved the phone from my ear. The guilt stayed. “Fine, I’ll go to school. Quit stalking me, okay?”

I kicked off the bed covers and promised myself next time I happened to be sleeping in while the phone rang, I would let it ring off the hook. Yeah, right. As sure as night changed into morning I’d pick up the phone. Living in hope that a transplant coordinator’s cheery voice would sing out, “We have a kidney for you” kind of tipped the scales in favor of a cell phone, cordless phone, even a smoke signal being answered.

I didn’t know how much longer I could wait.

Gritting my teeth and reminding myself that “the call” might come, I sorted through a pile of clothing on the floor until I found my Metallica T-shirt. Giving it a good sniff to make sure it would withstand another day’s wear, I lifted it over my head and stepped into the en suite bathroom.

The first pee of the day always took forever. A condition of my kidney disease was that the organ couldn’t concentrate urine so it produced more than normal. After washing my hands in the sink, I dried my fingers by running them through my shaggy brown hair. The thick fringe caught between my knuckles and I leaned forward to untangle them. There, on my forehead, the bruise stood out against my pale skin. Fresh. Dark purple. The size of a plum pit.

I pressed the tip of my finger into it. “Ow. Idiot.”

Yesterday, on the roof, my head had bumped up against the tree, for a second. I should have known better. These days, it only took banging into a strong breeze to turn me into the poster child for domestic violence.

Before my health had totally deteriorated, I’d played center position for Raven High School’s ice hockey team, cleverly named the Ravens. Playing an aggressive sport meant I’d usually worn the battered-and-bruised look, so it’d taken a while to separate the bruises from the rink from the ones that mysteriously popped up. Playing an aggressive sport also meant I’d avoided the questioning stares from teachers when I’d undergone tests.

The face staring back at me now looked nothing like the old me. Tired eyes, hollow cheeks, a greenish tinge to my face. Dark circles around my eyes made it appear as if I got into regular fistfights. Wouldn’t have minded the bruised look, except I couldn’t afford to get into fights.

There were other changes I hated, too. At six feet tall, I used to intimidate opponents without the padding of the hockey gear. Now, strings of Christmas lights outbulked me.

I hated everything I had turned into since my illness—weak.

Shaking off this self-loathing, I tracked down a clean pair of jeans. After a quick raid of the kitchen pantry, I tossed down a handful of pills with milk straight from the carton. I was on my way to school only fifteen minutes after my dad had called to chase me off—two hours late for class. Both new records.

I sent a quick text message to my dad. “*On way now.*” Hopefully Dad read more into the message, such as “*Sorry 4 being pain in ass.*”

There were days when it bordered on impossible to get up. Forget jumping out of bed with joy over my new routine of shower, dress, take meds, apply the totally redundant social science of mannerism.

My old-model Toyota was parked in the driveway. Faded and chipped blue paint, broken aerial and side mirror, bent front fender, a nonfunctioning air conditioner, and tires a feather would poke through waited for me. I shouldn’t have felt sorry for myself; I should have felt sorry for my car. A severe lack of finances had sealed its destiny a long time ago. Fated to be driven till it well and truly died.

The wind blew, and with it came the roar of a car engine. Screaming like someone

twisted a knife into the belly of a dragon. Without turning around, I guessed the driver of the stolen Ferrari had finished with his joyride and hurried to ditch the evidence.

The black car whizzed by creating turbulence. Leaves lifted off the ground and darted at my face.

“Hey, slow down, jackass,” I yelled, shoving my middle finger high into the air.

The brake lights of the Ferrari lit up, and I suddenly worried the driver would back up.

The car didn’t stop. It merely braked for a curve in the road, and sped out of sight.

I’d have rather slid into the Ferrari’s driver seat than the one in my rusty heap, but at least the Toyota faithfully kicked over on the first go.

Temptation to take all day driving the four blocks to school gave way to reason. I didn’t go straight in. I sat inside my car for a minute, contemplating turning around and hanging out at the video arcade instead. Ever since fate had slapped me with a big stick, I considered school a huge waste of my time.

However, my conscience—or more accurately my dad’s ability to telepathically project guilt into my brain—got the better of me. I shuffled from the parking lot to the science room.

David Riddle sat at a table three back from the front. David was a pudgy nerd who had befriended me while everyone else had fled in horror of catching an uncatchable disease. He often covered for me when I missed class. He quite often did my homework for me.

I should have considered David a good friend, but instead he was one of many lifestyle adjustments I resented.

I kept my head low while I strode over to the table.

“Where have you been?” David whispered.

“Watching a drag race outside my house.”

David scoffed. When a few heads turned our way, he concealed his reaction with a few fake coughs. “In your dreams, maybe.”

A rare smile lifted my cheeks. I settled my hands on the nape of my neck and I leaned back in the chair. “No. For real.”

“Yeah? What sort of cars?”

“Just one. A Ferrari 360 Spider Convertible.”

David swore so loud everyone spun around to check out what he'd done. He lowered his voice. "European crap." He snorted. "Hey, you coming to my place after school? I've got Demonic Streets and you are way overdue for a thrashing."

I laughed and let the chair fall back into place. The legs slapped onto the floor, cracking loudly. "You'll never beat me in a video game. It's all I'm good for now."

I sensed the air shift. It grew heavy, dark, and hushed. Still as a deer, I lifted my head inch by inch to find Zeb standing over the table. He played my former position of center for the Ravens. Zeb had exposed my kidney disease to the entire school. There were times when I wanted to hate him. There were times when I wished we were best friends again.

"You losers with your joysticks," Zeb said with a sneer. "If you got near a real car, you'd crap yourselves."

Zeb began rubbing his crotch and making obscene noises. Giggles and snickers gushed from behind me. The cheerleaders, no doubt. How I would have liked to punch Zeb in the face, but Zeb's partner in crime strode toward us. Craig played left wing for the Ravens. Neither he nor Zeb were shy about throwing retaliating punches.

The floor screeched when Craig pulled up a stool. "The only fast car these dorks will ever get inside of is an ambulance."

Zeb laughed. He sat a butt cheek on the table. "Seriously, why are you here, Ethan? Shouldn't you be in the hospital? Or are you planning on stealing the liver from a dead frog?"

"He's waiting on a kidney, not a liver," David said, quietly. "And that's a low blow, Zeb, even for you."

Zeb gave me an incredulous look. "You not only associate with this dork, you let him speak for you?"

Outwardly, I must have appeared unresponsive, almost catatonic—stoned on meds. Inwardly, I contemplated whether or not I would win in a fight against two hockey players. A well-placed blow might bring on internal bleeding. If a donor kidney came in while my body recovered from a fight, I'd say good-bye to the new life my father kept promising me waited around the corner.

Zeb and Craig won. I lost. I couldn't afford to get into a fight with a dead fish.

All the time I'd held this internal counsel, my hands kept pumping themselves into

fists underneath the table. I played out how the fight would go down.

First, I'd break Zeb's nose with a right hook. Swinging my left arm, I'd break Craig's jaw. Quick jabs would split both sets of lips. Further jabs would cut the tender flesh above their eyes. Blood would spill over the floor. The girls would scream.

A voice in my head told me to stop this crazy fantasy, but I continued to deal imaginary blow after imaginary blow until the faces in my mind resembled ground beef.

In the real world, the arrogant look on Zeb's face turned to one of mild concern. "Relax, dude. I'm kidding. Jesus, you're easier to rile up than a bear in a cage."

The teacher walked into the room. The fantasy fight ended when he told us to open our textbooks. Zeb gave me a two-fingered salute before he strode off to take his usual place at the rear of the classroom. I didn't move. I couldn't. Anger had glaciated every muscle in my body.

"I can't believe you used to hang out with those assholes," David whispered.

I uncurled my fists, savoring the flow of blood. Like a robot, I answered, "Yeah. Slight lapse in brain function."

"Obtuse more like it."

I dragged on a deep breath and let it out in time to the pounding of blood flowing inside my head. "Yeah. Obtuse."

After a minute, when I had calmed down, I snuck a glance toward the back of the classroom. Zeb and Craig flirted with the cheerleaders. In another life, I had flirted with the cheerleaders. My anger rose again and, missile-like, directed itself straight at Zeb and Craig.

"Maybe the cheerleaders will give those assholes herpes and their dicks'll fall off." David chuckled.

I wanted to be cheered by David's attempts at getting me to find fault with Zeb and Craig. For the rest of the class, I tried to stay angry at them, but my anger shot off in every other direction. It landed on the teacher for getting to live to be eighty-five years old. It jumped onto the cheerleaders for being bitches. It flung itself back at me for wanting to date the cheerleaders, even though I despised them. The dark spark even landed on the dead frog I'd been accused of coveting a kidney from, because it'd had the luxury of a quick death.

And like that, a wave of calm washed over me and it fizzled out my anger. Not

completely. Anger never went away. Like a pot on a stove, it simmered away till it boils over. Left unchecked, it had the potential to burn the entire house down.

* * *

Midway through English, the cell phone in my pocket vibrated and my mind snapped instantly from Shakespeare to alert mode. Nobody beside Dad and David called or texted me. David sat beside me. That meant...

I fished the cell out of my jeans pocket and ran out of the classroom. "Dad?"

"Ethan. I'm outside the school. I just got the call. You're getting a kidney."

Somehow I had gotten from the classroom to the parking lot without realizing it. My feet pounded up and down toward my car under their own volition. My keys had magically appeared in my hand and my backpack on my shoulder. The only parts of my body not on autopilot were my lungs.

I let out a huge gasp of air. "For real? They're not going to drag us down there again only to give it to someone else?"

"The transplant coordinator promised me this kidney is for you. It's a perfect match."

The blood rushed from my head. My feet slid out from beneath me, and I leaned against the driver's door to keep vertical.

"Ethan...Ethan, are you there?"

"Yeah I'm here." If I didn't collapse into an unrecognizable, shriveling mess.

"Come on. We haven't got all day. Leave your car in the school lot. I'll get it later."

Running out the gates to meet my dad, I passed beneath the Raven High ice hockey banner. It moved in the wind, cheering me on. Too late for this season, I vowed, next year I'd make a comeback to be the county's best player ever.

Good-bye pathetic life.

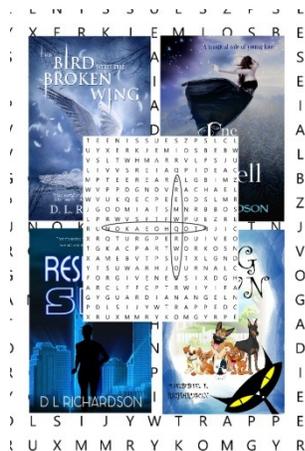
I inhaled a few deep breaths while I ran, savoring the sweet tang of my old life. My old life was all I'd ever wanted. Well, mostly all. There was still the matter of my mom.

I hope you enjoyed this taste of “Resident Spy”. It’s easy to purchase the complete book to find out what happens to Ethan, Florida, and Jake.

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