

# Feedback

## D L Richardson

Copyright 2012 D L Richardson

Published by D L Richardson  
[www.dlrichardson.com](http://www.dlrichardson.com)

Digital ISBN: 9781310452925

First electronic publication: April 2012 *Etopia Press*

Second electronic publication: September 2014

First print publication: April 2013 *Etopia Press*

Second print publication: October 2014

## 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 Four

*Thursday, November 10<sup>th</sup>*

*Florida Bowman*

I closed my eyes, and for a moment, pictured myself up on the stage—chin lifted high, toes pointed out, eyelids heavy with glittery makeup, and everyone gazing adoringly at me. I could have died right there. Sixteen and brilliantly happy. I planned my grand finale with a blissful smile.

The imaginary warm beam of light grazed my cheeks. It beckoned me to dance the way the sun invites a flower to bloom. Dammit, I belonged on the stage. Even the nurses at the hospital said so.

Their exact words were, “Florida Bowman, you belong on the stage, not in Triage.”

No point arguing with nurses, especially while they stuck needles into my veins.

Music began to play, an up-tempo tune floated from the upright piano, something that sounded like it was from the 1900s. Still, in my fantasy my right leg extended out in front of me. On an invisible, slow-moving hinge, my leg moved backward. I bent my torso to the left, and reached my arms out over my head to make the shape of a T. I rose

up on the toes of the foot still planted on the floor, twisting my toes until I rotated. I balanced all of my weight on the tiny wooden insert inside my sequined ballerina slipper.

As if I were ice skating and not dancing, my turns sped up until my arms and legs resembled the blades of a slow-spinning helicopter. A very slow-spinning helicopter. Maybe my fantasy would have worked better on ice.

The music stopped.

An instant rush of cold forced my eyes open to stare at the back of a head that reeked of cheap perfume. I distinguished a vapor trail that nobody else cared to notice.

Miss Redkins stood too close to my shoulder, trying to conceal her fingers flying over her cell while she sent a text message.

My best friend in the world, Melanie Palmer, though I called her Mels, pressed up against my right arm in an attempt to make room for an overweight girl. We had recently petitioned for wider seats for the auditorium to no avail. Apparently such action was considered discrimination, and the teachers frowned on that at The Cormorant School for Young Ladies. Forcing a dying student to squish into a crowded room somehow passed as acceptable.

I choked—like a fish for water or a bird for air. Someone else stole my spot on the stage. I wasn't likely to reclaim my rightful place any time soon, if at all. Somewhere along the way, I should have learned to control the metaphors of death that sprung to mind.

Born to dance, yet forced to sit in the audience like the two hundred other students waiting to be entertained, I knew by looking that the dancers had no talent. My chest constricted, and I brushed a hand across my eyes. I should have slapped away my self-pity instead, but I couldn't.

Resentment wasn't my mood of choice. Most days, I tried to remain positive and polite. Today, my mood stung like a nasty bug burrowing under my skin. Bitter didn't

begin to describe it. I could almost nibble the thick air. Sour, like mouthwash stirred through lumpy gravy.

Wanting to run out of the auditorium and actually running out were two different things. For many reasons. My legs were like concrete pylons, numb from sitting on the plastic chair for so long. The acrid perfume wafted toward me again like an invisible web, trapping me to the seat. Miss Redkins blocked my exit, and the incessant *beep-beep-beep* of her phone from texting the encyclopedia acted like a sensor alarm. I'd never liked the sense of being trapped.

I nudged Melanie, and she begrudgingly moved over half an inch. No amount of fresh air would appease me. I should be the one up on stage, not Katrina.

"Sit where you can watch me," Katrina had demanded during breakfast this morning.

"She's practiced real hard," Mom had added, kissing Katrina on the cheek. "She's always wanted to be a dancer like her big sister."

The spotlight dimmed. I wanted to cheer and applaud Katrina's tiny feet in first position, but my heart had sunk to somewhere stinkier than the bottom of the trash can.

I slid down into the chair. If I had to be stuck here, at least I'd attempt to shrink into myself. Hiding behind my fringe would have been a good option, except that clips held my hair on top of my head. I couldn't lift up the collar of my school blazer. It hung in my locker. I might have used the collar of my white shirt to shield my face from the crowd, but that look was so last year. My final hope lay in covering my face with my hands, but I doubted I'd be able to stop the flow of tears if I did.

Why couldn't Katrina have been born with a bad kidney? She'd be in the audience and I'd be the one up there on the stage.

But Katrina didn't have a defective kidney. She had a tutu and a dance coach.

I pretended to scratch my temple, the innocent gesture concealing the dabbling of tears. I wanted to hide all the emotion before anyone noticed.

Sometimes, I wanted to punch people for asking me how I felt. "Take an educated guess," I wanted to shriek.

Some days I wanted to scream, smash things, burn stuff, jump up and down, and kick the shit out of everything within reach. Some days, no matter how often I told myself to stop acting like a selfish brat and be happy for everyone else, my resentment filled me till I bloated with it. If the teachers at school were aware of my aggressive undertones, they never let on.

Melanie nudged my arm. "You okay? You're real quiet."

Melanie was the only person I allowed to ask this question. When she said it, it didn't get that hollow ring to it. Still, it took more effort than I possessed to voice my damning opinion of myself. Instead, I grunted my usual response. "Mmmm. Fine."

Melanie squeezed my arm. "Your sister will never dance like you."

I translated this to mean, "Gee, Florida, what a good sport you are to sit here and watch your sister dance the Black Swan. Isn't this what you've dreamed of since you were in diapers?"

My face burned so hot it'd have melted an igloo. My stomach rolled. I should've eaten breakfast. If I threw up, I'd be sent home. At least when Katrina danced at home, none of my friends had to watch me squirm.

Melanie continued to smile, and I couldn't stay mad at her, so I smiled back. Our friendship presented the only light in my bleak world. Melanie had coined the term "TT," an acronym for "The Trouble," so that I didn't ever have to say the words "kidney disease." The first time I'd said those words out loud in the hall, the entire school gave me a wide berth for weeks afterward.

I couldn't hold a smile forever. Why smile when a pout conveyed so much more for such little energy? "Sorry, Mels. I'm just a little off today."

Melanie nodded. She turned to face the stage, and I wished she'd look back. I'd have a hard time getting out of my dragged-from-the-pits-of-hell-mood if left to do it on my

own.

At last, I flicked my glance up to the stage. Katrina wasn't the worst dancer I'd ever suffered to watch. And since she was six, I tried to cut her some slack.

I failed dismally. With every pirouette, a new body of rage tore through me like fallout from a nuclear bomb. Glaring at the dozen or so six-year-old kids with intensity, what tears I had left in my eyes vaporized. I couldn't get the blinding rage—which came from being cheated out of a life I'd worked extremely hard to get—out of my head. If I cleared my mind of negativity, the battle would be won.

\* \* \*

### *Two Years Ago*

Mom pushed the shopping trolley toward the checkout with the shortest line. Brendan, a cute guy who packed bags, happened to be working on the busiest register. I steered her over in that direction and slipped in behind the trolley.

"Mom, you forgot a few things," I said. "You get them while I wait in line."

Luckily, I'd caught her on one of her frazzled days. She didn't question me, just spun on her heels and marched off down the aisles. By the time she returned with a confused shake of her head, we were at the checkout.

I slipped past Mom to hover beside Brendan.

"You don't go to my school," he said.

"Well, you don't go to mine either."

I kicked at the tiled floor in hope that I'd slip on spilled milk and crack my head so I could suffer amnesia and erase the lame retort from memory. Flirting came naturally to some girls. Sadly, not to me.

"I meant, no, I don't go to your school."

Brendan chuckled. Instead of blushing or thinking it sweet that he considered me amusing, blistering rage erupted inside. How dare he consider my attempts at flirting a joke?

I avoided him after that. But a week later, when I no longer peed like everybody else, instead something similar to hydrochloric acid passed through my urethra, I wondered if flirting with Brendan had resulted in a sexually transmitted disease. The health education teacher often warned us about them. I hadn't realized they were that easy to catch. Jeez, I'd only talked to the guy.

I had to tell Mom. For a few reasons. Five girls in a house meant never enough bathroom space. Privacy came from drawing a line down the middle of a room and demanding none of my sisters cross it. And girls gossiped.

I woke up with a pinch in my bladder, but lay in bed ignoring the alarm on the bedside clock.

The pinch turned into a piercing pain, forcing me to rush to the bathroom only to find the door locked.

"Get out," I shouted, pounding on the door.

"Get lost," Serena screamed. The burring sound of the hair dryer in motion meant she'd be in the bathroom forever. I doubted I'd make it to the bathroom downstairs. So holding my groin and crossing my legs, I'd performed an awkward series of shuffled steps toward my parent's bedroom—they had an en suite.

I burst through the door and made it to the toilet. I bit down on my lip. The pain forced tears to my eyes.

There on the toilet, blinded by the tears and with the pain obviously showing on my face, I told Mom about my painful pees.

"Could be the washing detergent," she said. "I switched brands a while ago. I'll switch back right away."

Nothing changed. If anything, the pain increased.

Mom found me once more, sitting on the toilet, with blood on my lip from biting it, and with tears in my ears.

She planted her hands on her hips. "That's it. We're going to the doctor."

I couldn't miss practice and an impending trip to the doctor promised I would. "But I'm okay."

"I'm sorry, but this is serious." She pulled the door closed and left me to my misery.

\* \* \*

### *Present*

The constant pill popping, nausea, fatigue, and no appetite were annoying symptoms, but I tolerated them. The swelling...I hated that most. A dancer's legs were everything. Supple. Nimble. If they must resemble any part of a tree, let it be the limb that extends to the heavens, not the thick, hairy trunk that squirrels used as a scratching post. Some days, it looked as if two different sized girls were sawed in half and wrongly put back together.

I sat in the audience and willed myself to get off the pity wagon. Other girls in school couldn't wait to get the flu so they could invoke sympathetic gestures from their boyfriends. A broken limb earned her jewelry or flowers. A burst appendix was better than gold.

Fake pity. I'd have spotted it a mile away, but I'd also have welcomed it. Better that, than the genuine, bone-aching, dragged-deep-from-the-pits-of-hell pity that served to remind me I would die and everyone else got to skip the ride and dream about boys. I hated pity. I also hated no pity.

Boy, was I in a mood today.

Satisfied that sticking around would only drive me crazy, I got up from my seat, pushed past Miss Redkins, and walked out of the auditorium. At the exit, I turned around to see if anyone had noticed me leaving. Expectation sent a flurry of warmth through my veins, but when I noted everybody's eyes fixated on the dancers up on stage—even Melanie couldn't be swayed to come after me—the cold that crept in settled like frostbite on my heart.

At that moment I hated everyone. If the two hundred students and teachers in the auditorium dropped dead of the plague, I'd have thrown open the doors and invited the town to the party.

I was dying. Didn't that mean anything?

Maybe they wanted a spectacular death. Unless a miracle happened, I only offered a slow, boring one.

\* \* \*

Melanie found me sitting on the swing set in the playground. Designed with first graders in mind, the plastic seat nipped at my butt, and my knees almost touched my chin. Totally uncomfortable, yet I found security in the tight restraint.

Melanie squeezed herself into the second chair. "Didn't you say you were fine?"

My insides warmed. She'd found me.

Sometimes, it amazed me that she and I were friends; we were nothing alike. Melanie hardly had to make an effort to be warm and fuzzy, while I had to bust a gut to appear civil.

"I'm sorry, Mels. I'm trying real hard not to get miserable and depressed."

"You can if you want to."

Trust Melanie to grant me permission to spill my internal war out into the real world. Unlike her though, I wouldn't be able to exercise control if I gave in to my anger. I wasn't sure I'd want to either, which explained why I tried so hard to keep it inside. Trouble was, I kept *everything* inside. The hope and the hopelessness.

"I don't want to be miserable."

"Course you do. And everybody would totally understand."

I sighed. Sure, everyone said they understood, but how many people actually did? Of all my friends, I trusted Melanie the most, and even her empathy had its limits. Pushing at the ground, I twisted the swing until the chain wrapped around on itself. After a few seconds, I lifted my feet up, setting the chain into an unwinding spiral. When I stopped, the dizzying effect didn't. My head wobbled on my neck. I smiled. The last time I'd made myself dizzy for no good reason I had pigtails and a gap in my mouth where two teeth used to be.

"What are you smiling about?" Melanie asked.

There used to be a swing set in my backyard. Getting pushed back and forth into the air had never appealed to me. From a young age, I was conscious of how dancers twirled. If going back and forth had appeal to me, maybe I might have wanted to be a trapeze artist instead. "Nothing."

She poked me on the arm. "Liar."

I stood up, the imaginary and the real swing seat forgotten. "You know what? Just 'cause I can't dance professionally, doesn't mean I can't dance for fun."

Melanie smiled, but the left side of her mouth quivered in confusion. "Yeah? Great, I guess."

I knew I'd blow her away with my suggestion. "We're gonna sneak into The Keeper this weekend."

The Keeper was a bar in Raven that played live music on Friday nights and had a DJ

on Saturdays. Or, so the gossip went. I'd only ever viewed the place from the outside.

"We'd easily blend in. Everyone who goes there on a Friday night is dressed in black."

Melanie chuckled. "Remember that time they wouldn't let the guy in because he had on a yellow shirt."

I doubted I'd ever forget. Melanie and I had sat in the café across the street till near midnight, just to check out how the cool half of town lived. Turned out they had rules of their own.

"He went there on the wrong night. It's Goth night on Fridays—"

"And Glam night on Saturdays," Melanie finished.

I lifted my left leg a few inches and examined it. "I'd like to try both nights, but no way will I expose these tree trunk legs to society. So Friday it is."

Melanie shook her head, hair the color of night flew free of her combs. "First of all, stop putting yourself down. Your legs are not tree trunks. Second of all, how are we gonna get in?"

I reached a hand out to hug her and at the last second changed my mind and brushed my fingers over my eyes. She never said things like, "Don't be stupid we'll never get in" even though we both knew we wouldn't. She never played Devil's advocate, or tried to talk me out of my attempts to inject a little excitement into my hopeless world. When I stopped to analyze it, Melanie was the one who waved the red flags that spurred me on.

Well, I could do a little flag waving of my own. And the fact that we were fiercely loyal and protective toward one another meant we stood a good chance of pulling off our little escapade. Or at least, I trusted Melanie not to go blabbing to the whole school.

"What if we disguise ourselves?"

Nerves and numbness tickled my legs. I gave in to the buzz and paced back and forth the way thieves paced when they planned robberies, or at least the way they did in the

movies I'd watched. I paced now because I'd never planned anything this daring before and it seemed the thing to do.

"The costumes from the play would make good disguises," Melanie said. "No one will recognize us dressed as Vamps."

I stifled a gag, picturing the outfits our drama teacher had bought for us to wear on stage in front of the entire school. "Ew, Mels. That black satin'll make us look like giant balloons. Did I tell you I went to the Op Shop and got a cute shirt with frills around the neck? And my mom has an old locket I can pin to the collar. Oh, and I got a red vest. It's velvet or something."

Melanie's smile faltered slightly. "Oh. I thought we liked the costumes."

"We don't. We hate them. I forgot to tell you." I twisted my face in disgust. "She hasn't even seen the movie, Mels. She thinks vampires go round wearing capes."

Beneath my current bitter mood lay one totally hyped about gaining the role as Alice, Edward Cullen's vampire sister in the musical play of *Twilight*. Incorrect clothing was the least of our problems. Four hundred students and not a single Y chromosome among the lot. The drama teacher subscribed to the theory that unrequited love portrayed well if the male characters were written out of the script.

I didn't care about the play's success or failure. Let it flop. The girls in this school would come to watch us simply to have something to bitch about the next day. And having them bitch about me appealed more than having them avoid me.

Melanie's smile dropped a little, and in that second I got whacked with a glimpse of her finding another best friend, one that didn't go off the rails so much. It freaked me out. Of the few things I'd have given my good organs never to lose, her friendship ranked at the top of the list.

"I bought the vest for you, Mels. It'll totally go with that vintage dress you wore to my birthday party."

Her face beamed at me, and I knew I'd said the right thing. Once upon a time, it'd

been stage lights that had warmed my face. Now, that inner glow came from my best friend's smile.

Melanie stayed seated in the swing. She lifted her head to the sky and pushed at the ground till her hair whipped about, trying to catch up. "How are we gonna get home?" She ducked her head and giggled. "And will we drink? You know, alcohol?"

"Maybe if we stay away from the bar, we won't get kicked out," I cautioned.

The bell rang. Melanie stopped swinging, and her eyes slid toward the school building and back.

"I don't wanna go back to class, either," I said. "But we have to. Only so much self-pity allowed per day."

Melanie pushed herself off the swing. "You are so wasting the opportunity to milk this for everything its worth."

I laughed. "Come on."

\* \* \*

We ran to our next class and made it on time. "At least we have rehearsals to cheer us up," Melanie whispered while the history teacher dragged chalk across the board.

We flipped through our textbooks to the page written on the board. "I'd rather be cheered up by our plans for this weekend."

"One day at a time."

I burst out laughing. The teacher didn't give me a second glance. "I could drop dead in her classroom and she would never notice."

Melanie gasped. "Don't say that."

She covered her face with her hands. Only then did I realize that Melanie possessed a sensitivity I could only dream of.

“Sorry, Mels. I don’t really want to drop dead.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “I just wish you wouldn’t say things like that. It...hurts.”

I reached across and gently shoved her shoulder. “Sorry.”

Now I was the one speaking hollow words.

Melanie nodded and smiled, though it lacked her usual brilliance. One of these days I’d push things too far, and she’d trade me for someone less problematic. I’d die if that happened, and that wasn’t a hollow promise.

I scribbled in my textbook, tore off the square of paper, and slipped it under her hand.

Her face brightened at the picture of a heart I’d drawn. She mouthed the words, “Thank you” and tucked the piece of paper inside her textbook.

The best way to get over a stumbling block was to barge right through. I did that by steering the conversation back on track. “It’ll be dark on the way home. You know, when we try to sneak into the nightclub. We’ll want to stick to main roads.”

Melanie giggled. “Cops patrol the main roads more than the back roads.”

“Do they? I’d have thought it was the other way around. Maybe we should take a taxi.”

The teacher called for us to be quiet while she droned on and on about early man. I absently flicked through pages of my textbook, feigning interest. Mostly, I kept one ear out to listen for the page and paragraph she’d ordered one of the students to read.

I kept my finger on the page and leaned over to Melanie’s table. “And exactly how is that you know which roads are patrolled anyway?”

“My sister drove around for a month on a suspended license.” She closed her textbook and scrunched her face. She scanned the back cover. “Hey, didn’t we cover this subject in the third grade?”

I pulled my lips into a straight line before the teacher’s searchlight eyes landed on me. Thankfully, she didn’t want questions answered, but the rest of the period she

quoted Neanderthal this, Neanderthal that.

At last, the bell rang to shuffle us to the next class. Science was my least favorite subject. Who cared about formulas and neutrons, right? Like I'd ever use any of this stuff in the real world. At least Melanie and I were partnered up. We were supposed to change green goo into a green solid, and while the entire class diligently went about the task, I drank in every replay in my mind of the scenario where I took control of my life by sneaking into a nightclub.

Melanie handed me the eyedropper that contained a chemical to solidify the goo. "Should we get dressed before we leave home?"

I squeezed a few drops of the solution into the glass bowl. Nothing.

"All of the solution needs to go in, Miss Bowman," the teacher sang out from the front of the room.

I discharged every last drop into the bowl. The green stuff began to swell and blister. "Oh, my God, it's working. I'm a friggin genius."

Melanie stuck a finger inside the bowl. "So, genius. Do we take the costumes with us and get changed in the service station around the corner?"

"Might have to. If I leave home in costume before opening night, my mom will be suspicious. She may call me by the wrong name occasionally, but the one thing she never forgets is the days and times she drops me at rehearsals."

This happened to be my mom's greatest skill. I was one of five daughters, and we needed a notice board at home to track everyone's whereabouts. When I'd had to quit dancing, Mom had switched my name on the board with Katrina. I refused to pick up her painting class and reading group, though.

Katrina, at six years of age, was the baby. Next down from me was Serena. Twelve years old and always stomping around the house in an emotional flurry of tears. Breana and Deana were below Serena in the family tree. Twins, age eight—or eighty depending on the cycle of the moon—and at that know-it-all stage where they quoted stupid facts

in duet.

I'd never get away with this if I took it home.

"Let's get dressed at my place," Melanie offered, reading my mind. "My mom will notice, but she won't say anything."

Melanie's parents were in the middle of a divorce, and lately, they'd upped the level of competition for Melanie's and her sister's affection. If Melanie tried hard enough, her mom might drive us there and pick us up. Heck, Mrs. Palmer would probably escort us inside and buy a round of nachos.

"Plus, my sister has a fake ID. I bet I can borrow it without her noticing."

Someone whispered my name. I looked up. Kate's serious stare bore into my face. She leaned forward, tapping her pen against the table. "What are you two whispering about?"

My face instantly heated. How much had Kate learned? Her sly smile unnerved me. Kate couldn't keep a secret if you threatened her with tar and feathering. I'd need to dig deep to get out of this pickle. I didn't have a role in the school play for nothing.

I shrugged. "Just saying how this green lump looks like dried dog poo."

Kate scowled at me. "Well, can you do that after class? I need this grade."

After that, I kept my mouth shut. That's when the significance of this experiment took stock.

Since the announcement to myself that I would take control of my life, I'd searched for signs. And this reeked of a big one to me.

My life was goo, and it was about to morph into something of greater substance.

I stared into the depths of the glass bowl. A second ago, I'd said this hardened goo resembled dried dog poo. Had I got the message wrong? Did this mean that my life was crap? No, that pushed things too far, even for me.

"Listen up class. You need to use the solution in the second eyedropper to transform the hardened substance back into its original state."

We didn't have a second eyedropper. I didn't want one either. I had finally understood the meaning behind this experiment, and it had nothing to do with science. This was my moment where I stopped being the girl made of goo and started being the girl made of stronger stuff.

Yeah, it might take forever for a donor to come along and give me back the life I'd had before, that didn't mean I had to carry on as if my life totally sucked. Worse things might happen.

\* \* \*

Like everyone else waiting on a transplant list, I understood that road deaths were statistically the best source of donor organs. Of course, it felt wrong to think in those terms, but wasn't it more wrong to be a teenager waiting in a long line to get a new kidney that had a very real possibility of never showing up?

For a long time, I hadn't been able to get the road deaths out of my head. Once they'd started, I'd pondered my own road to death.

Just the other day, Zoe, a girl in my drama class asked a group of us if we'd started trying on dresses for the prom.

"Jeez, Zoe," I cried. "It's November. Prom isn't until next year."

She stared at me like I'd just landed from another planet. "You have to order in the fabulous dresses. I'd rather die than show up in something off the rack."

"Would you now?" I glared at Zoe.

It hadn't registered to her that her innocuous statement was like a punch in my gut.

Melanie grabbed my arm. "She's not worth it," she said in a low voice.

I shook off Melanie's arm and grew hot from anger swelling inside. I launched

myself at Zoe. "Just like you'll die if you don't get an A in English. Or you'll die if your boyfriend doesn't call."

Zoe folded her arms across her chest. Her dark eyes and raised brows challenged me. "You're not the queen of issues. We all have them, you know?"

Melanie grabbed my backpack and pulled me away. Out in the hall, she said, "Zoe's always been a bitch. Don't listen to her."

I looked back over my shoulder. Zoe and her friends stood in a circle laughing. "I don't think I'm the queen of issues. How dare she say that?"

But I did. I acted like my problem overruled everyone else's. I hated that girls like Zoe shoved their stupid, insignificant, petty dramas in my face day in, day out while I woke up every morning thinking it was a frigging miracle to be alive.

\* \* \*

Now, I sat on the floor of the bathtub watching the shampoo race toward the drain when my mom came rushing in to the bathroom. "Baby—"

"Hey," I cried out, startled. My mind was deep down inside the well of self-pity and it usually liked to resurface in slow mo and with the aid of hot cocoa. "Can't I have some privacy?"

"We got the call," Mom said, shaking the shower curtain. "Just now. It's a miracle, baby."

Real fingers tightened around fistfuls of my wet hair and invisible fingers tightened around my heart. "What...?" My voice came out a squeak and I cleared my throat. "What call?"

"The hospital. They have a kidney waiting for you. Hurry up and finish—"

I slipped my head under the stream, rinsing away the shampoo suds. A bit of water ran into my ear canals. For a second, I couldn't hear a thing except the da-da-da-da-da of my heartbeat.

I pulled my head out of the water.

Mom shook the curtain harder this time. "Aren't you excited?"

A yes or no answer was all I had to give. The words trapped in my throat.

"All this time, baby. It's finally here." She tapped her fingernails against the tiles. "Florida? Are you still there?"

I'd slipped down the drain with the suds. I opened my mouth to say this, but found it clogged like the drainpipe after a strenuous hair washing.

Mom's voice had a wobble to it. That cinched it. If I spoke, nothing short of a scream would escape.

"Oh, baby, it's a miracle. It's—"

Mom's voice snapped like a dried twig. Gentle sobs pulled at my heartstrings. I'd have liked to have joined my mother in shedding tears of joy, but for reasons unknown to me, I wanted to be the strong one.

"Can't I have some privacy?" I croaked.

"Sure, baby." Mom sniffed. The swish swish sound over by the door told me she'd grabbed a handful of tissues. "Don't be long, huh? Dad's loading the car."

The water pooled around me while I surrendered to the volley of questions. Was the kidney in great condition? Who had donated it? Male or female? Did it make a difference? Did I care about the donor's identity? Should I be the slightest bit upset that I didn't care? Did not caring make me a bad person?

The bathroom door clicked as it opened. The toilet flushed. It had to be one of the twins. Great joy was had by spoiling everyone's shower time with a flush of the toilet. "Dad said to hurry up and get in the car or he's going without you."

"Get out!" I shouted. I threw an almost full shampoo bottle at the door.

Panic gripped me. I pressed my hands up against the tiles and struggled to stand. My legs didn't want to work. This was actually happening and everyone was rushing me. No matter how long you prepared for a day like this, you were never truly ready.

On the ride to the hospital, my mom asked me the question she'd asked while in the bathroom. "Aren't you excited, Florida?"

I couldn't admit to excitement when guilt like poison snaked along every living fiber of my body. Somebody had died to give me this kidney. My mom couldn't hide her excitement. I couldn't blame her. I also couldn't stop thinking how the donor's mother might feel right now.

Serena, sitting on my right, kicked me in the shin, lightly, yet constant enough to be majorly annoying. Katrina, who sat on my left, fidgeted as if she were sitting on a nest of ants. Missing was the infuriating *thump-thump-thump* from the seat behind.

"Mmmm. Fine," I said, finally answering my mother's question.

"Fine," Dad bellowed. "This is the best day of your life, and the only word you can use to describe it is fine."

"Fine can mean good." Mom's voice contained a trace amount of suggestion. "Right?"

Why couldn't I be seated next to a window where at least one side of my body would be free of the kicks and slaps of my sisters?

"Fine can also mean bad," Dad said. "Right?"

I hadn't realized my parents were waiting for me to speak until Mom turned around in her seat to stare at me. "Well, which is it? Good or bad?"

"I'll tell you after the operation," I mumbled. Then I recognized what the absence of kicking from behind meant. I spun around. "By the way, you've left something at the house."

In their rush to get to the hospital, my parents had forgotten to bring the twins.

\* \* \*

My hands shook as I grabbed my cell phone out of my purse and sent a quick text message to Melanie.

*"TT is over."*

I didn't wait for a reply. I shoved the phone into my handbag when Dad pulled into the driveway. Mom raced inside to get Breana and Deana, shooting me an apologetic look on the way. At least this false start wasn't as bad as it could be. I couldn't cope if the hospital gave my kidney to somebody else. Reports of that happening ripped through hospital wards faster than germs.

Next time someone said, "I'll die if they give that scholarship to someone else," I'd walk right up to them and slap them in the face. Nobody had died from not being asked to the prom or from embarrassment or from getting a bad grade. Plenty of kids like me had died because the hospital found another kid in more need of an organ transplant than them.

## Chapter Six

*Thursday, November 10<sup>th</sup>*

*Jake Inala*

Sitting at the computer with my headphones plugged in helped keep the distractions out. I had to write the essay on the benefits of salt. It went on fries. How was I supposed to write a thousand-word essay based on salt? If only I'd done it yesterday like I'd planned instead of scrambling to write it before school, I'd be reading one of my books by now.

Still, I'd climbed to the top of my English class for a reason. I excelled at arguing the point of anything. The key to writing this essay was a matter of viewpoint. Brainstorm how salt might benefit a tribal culture that didn't have the ease of storing food, such as electricity and refrigeration, and the essay wrote itself.

My older brother, Tye, barged into my bedroom. "What are you doing?"

“What does it look like?”

He kicked my door open wider. “I’ve been calling you for ages. Dad’s getting ready to leave.”

“Didn’t hear ya,” I mumbled.

A lie.

I avoided going downstairs. The shooting pain in my left side made movement impossible. I barely tolerated sitting upright.

He kicked the door again. “Well, hurry up. Mom’s made Belgian waffles.”

I ripped the earbuds out of my ears and slammed my pen down on the textbook, glaring at Tye. “Not hungry. And stop kicking my door.”

Belgian waffles ordinarily would have lured me to the table, but my appetite had increasingly taken a nosedive. Everything I ate tasted like straw. Mostly due to the medication crammed into my stomach—vitamins, blood pressure pills, calcium bicarbonate—and then there was the unbearable nausea. Having a liver disease would ruin even a cow’s appetite.

Tye grabbed the pen off my desk. “Come on. You have to eat.”

“Get out!” I shouted, snatching the pen. “If I don’t finish this essay, I’ll fail.”

My other older brother waltzed into the room. Todd was Tye’s twin. Sixteen and a half years old, the twins were a little over a year older than me. The three of us were nearly six feet tall, and we had blue eyes and wavy hair the color of dirty sand. Teachers were always trying to get one Inala boy or the other to join the basketball team, but all three of us had other plans for our futures.

Todd banged on the bedroom door. I swear I don’t know how it didn’t fall off. “Breakfast’s ready.”

“He says he’s not hungry.” Tye folded his arms across his chest. “He says if he doesn’t do his homework he’ll fail and won’t go to college. If he doesn’t go to college, he won’t be able to become an officer in the Navy.”

“The Marines, jackass,” I growled.

The Marine Corps fell within the Department of the Navy, reporting to the Navy Secretary, but it had its own command structure.

Tye grinned, and I knew instantly that my brother said this solely to wind me up. Everyone in the house understood the difference between the Navy and the Marines as easily as they understood the difference between state and federal law.

“So are you getting up or what?” Todd moved into the room and poked his finger at the pile of textbooks on my desk. None of them had anything to do with school. On top of the pile sat *Hero of the Pacific—The Life of a Marine*. Below that, four more books on the same subject.

Todd pushed half of the pile of textbooks to the side and picked up one, which he absently flicked through until I realized there was nothing random about it. He was conducting a search. I doubted he’d find anything useful. I also hoped my body language didn’t give off any suspicious signals.

Getting poked and prodded was the biggest part of my liver condition. Scrutiny bothered me as much as it bothered a zoo animal. Like a zoo animal, my keepers had careers where inspections and examination were job requirements. This awareness of the techniques used in inspections meant I exercised creativity when it came to hiding my stuff.

Most people gazed at eye level or below. Nobody ever noticed the ceiling. Years ago, I’d unscrewed the light fixture and cut through the dry wall. My secret stash was safely hidden in the roof cavity. Sometimes, I needed to let my older brothers find something to keep them away from the good stuff.

“Aha.” Tye tossed a rolled up wad of dollar bills at Todd who caught it with one hand. It had fallen down behind the stack of textbooks. I’d completely forgotten about the twenty bucks.

“We’ll take this,” Todd said.

I pretended to care that my brothers had taken my cash. Really, all I had to do was tell my parents and the idiots would be forced to give it back. I didn't need it.

I worked stocking at the local supermarket a couple times a week. Plus, a few times a month, I sold homework to the rich jocks.

My family believed I saved for buying a car. Wrong. Some kids collected stamps. Others, action figures. I collected weapons. I had three swords, bought off the Internet from people who didn't comprehend their real value. Blunt, and for decoration only, a particularly favorite of mine was the Civil War replica. Due any day now was a fencing sword. It would arrive at the post office box I had set up a year and a half ago when my range of weapons had grown too big to fit in the mailbox.

Also in the ceiling were five knives—two hunting, two fishing, and one antique with a carved ivory handle. I'd exceeded the limits of patience to get a gun, but there were strict laws preventing me from doing so. Still, I'd recently gotten hold of a replica pistol that shot plastic pellets, which I'd swapped for an entire semester's worth of homework. It would have to do me for a while. I was still a few years off from making a legal purchase.

Sometimes, though not often, I had the house to myself and when I did, my favorite thing to do would be to get out my private collection. Sometimes, I would stare at it. Sometimes, I would practice swinging blades or jabbing knives. Mostly, I did a check to make sure nothing had been swiped. I couldn't help but be wary of everyone, including my own family.

Correction.

Especially my own family.

A fake gun wasn't the only reason I needed an infallible hiding spot. If my parents got a whiff of my stash of weapons in the roof cavity, they'd have gone nuts. Mom worked part time at a lawyer's office and Dad was a cop.

\* \* \*

Yesterday, my class played baseball on the school field. Waiting to bat, I sat in the cage with my gaze on the horizon. The metal bench shifted beside me.

"You're up, Jake," Doug whispered. "Dude, you only gotta hit the ball, and I'll run the bases for you."

"I can run."

"Not fast enough. We're behind by two points. This is no time for pussies who can't run to seek glory."

Doug rarely held back when he yielded his blunt knife. His tactlessness aggravated me no less than if he'd attempted to sweet-talk me. "I'll run the bases on my own."

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to," Mr. Gregory said while I practiced a few swings over the batter's plate.

My teacher already waved his hands for another batter to take my place.

"I'm okay," I growled. "Give it a rest."

And since I was fed up with everyone treating me like a leper, I hit the ball to outfield. I bolted toward first base, would've made it to second, maybe third base if I didn't have a sharp pain in my abdomen. Just a stitch, but bad enough to keep me stuck on first.

Bad move. The next batter up was Pete. Pete usually hit the ball straight to the second baseman. Anyone stuck on first would have to run straight into Tim. Tim liked to give runners bruises the size of small dogs.

"You might as well surrender now, Inala." Tim pounded his fist into his mitt.

Lose the game or lose a pint of blood. Tough choice.

Tim didn't scare me. No amount of pain inflicted by a human was worse than the pain of the chronic liver failure I'd experienced over the past two years.

Pete, as I'd predicted, hit the ball straight to Tim. Pete bounded toward first base the way a gazelle bounds when a lion's on its tail. I took off for second. Tim took two steps sideways, waving me in like a Naval flag operator guiding a fighter jet onto a battleship's deck.

Doug was right. I couldn't run fast enough. Even with a healthy liver, running had never been on the list of things I'm good at.

From the corner of my eye, everyone—including Mr. Gregory—waved their arms for me to turn around and go back.

Pete pushed me from behind. Tim stood ready to crush me. I stumbled and fell.

My head hit a thick patch of grass. Instead of pain, the memory from five years ago, of the night I'd woken up with a terrible pain in my abdomen and a high fever popped into my head.

Mom and Dad were working a tag-team shift, which meant fried chicken was on the menu for dinner. I loved the days when Mom ran in through the door after a busy day and sang out, "Chicken." Then, she'd unload a box of fried chicken and cartons of sides onto the table.

Like usual, Mom dumped three sacks containing food on her way to the bathroom.

"Please don't eat like animals," she called over her shoulder. Her instruction fell on deaf ears. We were boys; we had no reason not to eat like animals.

Mashed potatoes floated in gravy. Tubs of coleslaw glistened like sugary-sweet candy. Home-style buttermilk biscuits begged to soak up the grease. My dream dinner sat piled in front of me, and instead of drooling, I swallowed down rising vomit.

After only a few minutes, Todd said, "Last piece." He bit into the chunk of coated chicken with a satisfied smile on his face.

Tye patted his belly. "Couldn't fit another one in." He reached across the table for the tub of potatoes and gravy and used his finger to clean off every last trace.

"But you can finish off the side dishes," I said with a chuckle.

“Don’t forget to clean up,” Mom sang out from the bathroom.

“Jake’s turn,” Tye said. He licked the grease off his fingers.

“Yeah, Jake’s turn,” Todd agreed, tossing the empty carton onto the table.

The sight of the empty containers churned my stomach worse than when my brothers held onto me by a wrist and ankle each and swung me through the air. The delightful aroma of greasy food stunk like rotten eggs. My stomach did backflips.

We’d had health education in school today. Learned the names of bacteria in dirty water and why we shouldn’t eat week-old food. These caused stomach bugs. At ten, I believed everything I heard. I’d recently drunk out of a garden tap and eaten leftovers. I gathered that my churning stomach had a lot to do with the bug buzzing around inside me.

“Not my turn. I took out the trash last night.” I loosened the drawstring on my flannel pajamas; maybe that might ease the tightening in my guts.

“I’m eating,” Todd said.

“Me too,” Tye said.

My two older brothers took great pleasure in ganging up on me. The food in my stomach decided it wanted to get out and it wanted out in a hurry. One second I felt bullied into doing my brother’s chores, and the next I leaned over the table and purged everything I’d eaten. What a horrible waste that’d been. At least it had gotten me out of trash duty.

Mom emerged from the bathroom a short while later and went ballistic at the mess which none of us had bothered to clean up. Todd and Tye refused to touch anything with my spew on it. I curled up in a ball on the chair, crippled by the pain in my stomach. The last thing I wanted to do was tidy up my sludge. My body shook and sweat tickled my hair. Mom went into military mode.

“You two,” she pointed at Todd and Tye, “are cleaning this up. I’m taking your brother to the emergency room. A burst appendix, I’ll bet,” Mom said. She flew off to change out of her bathrobe and into whatever she first grabbed out of the closet.

Doctors never liked to agree with a patient’s diagnosis, but they tested for a burst appendix anyway and found mine to be working fine. After a few more tests, they inserted an endoscopic tube into my mouth and pushed a camera down my throat to check on my bile ducts.

“The fever is due to acute hepatitis,” the doctor told my parents an hour later.

Dad had by this time been summoned and he and Mom kept a close vigil at my bedside, which I’d been told by the doctor would be my bed for the remainder of the night.

“Hepatitis? How would he get that?” Dad asked.

“It could be fungal, parasitic, bacterial,” the doctor explained.

Mom clenched her hands together. “Yes, but how?”

He shook his head. “We don’t know.”

It turned out that the doctors had no idea how I’d contracted the disease, but what they were able to tell my parents was that I’d need a new liver.

At the time, I’d told myself I had two choices—complain about my liver disease or get on with life. I’d chosen to get on with life for the simple reason that there was a chance I would make it.

Now, I sprang up from the ground and charged straight at second base for the same reason that I’d chosen to get on with life when my liver had packed it in—surrendering was not an option.

Tingles shimmered over me when I barreled into Tim. Or had he barreled into me? Semantics. The leather mitt wrapped around a fist of steel had caused the most damage. The tingles gave life to slivers of knifelike pain while capillaries below my skin burst into tiny spiderweb patterns. I’d be bruised for a month.

The pain was worth it. Pain meant I was still alive.

\* \* \*

The bruise along the length of my body resembled the blueberries that mom now scooped onto my waffle.

"Your teachers give you too much homework," Dad said.

In that brief moment, I realized that either Tye or Todd had blabbed about my finishing homework before school.

"Me in particular, or kids in general?" I asked. I squeezed a load of maple syrup on the waffle. The whole thing sat there staring up at me. I wanted to throw up.

"Both."

"I can handle it." What I couldn't handle was eating.

"It isn't homework. It's—" Todd said.

"—studies for when he's a Marine," Tye finished.

Dad's smile was proud and warm as he slurped up his coffee. "Jake, there's plenty of time to study Marine textbooks. You've got to finish school first."

"Waffles are good," I told Mom, changing the subject.

"How would you know?" Tye barked. "You've hardly eaten anything."

"Tye." Mom's voice held an edge of warning in it.

"I'm just saying he's wasting away to nothing."

"All right. Quit badgering me." I scooped a spoonful of blueberries into my mouth and did my best not to spit them back out.

After breakfast, I raced upstairs to get dressed for school.

"Hurry up or you'll be walking," Dad called out from the bottom of the stairs.

"Give me a second," I shouted back.

In the privacy of my bedroom, I pulled down my track pants and stared at the mirror. The ground had done a real number on me. A dark blue stain ran down the entire left side of my body—chest, leg, and arm—as if someone had thrown a bottle of ink at me and did a half-assed job at cleaning it off.

“Dammit. That’s my best side, too.”

I snapped a photo on my phone and sent it to Doug. He was likely to text back “*Told U so.*” I could take it. A bruise this big was worth sharing. Hell, it was worth posting on the Internet.