

## This Is Our Story

### Chapter One

“All right everybody, you’ve got your assignments. Remember, article deadlines for your next updates are this coming Tuesday. Oh, and we’re going to need to get some pictures from the state academic decathlon finals. Any volunteers?” Conner asked his crew.

Like he expected, the yearbook staff one and all directed their eyes anywhere but at their editor-in-chief. He’d been warned about this by his predecessor last year, when he’d been a lowly assistant editor. Everyone was happy to volunteer photography for school dances, football and basketball, pep rallies. But ask that someone give up a few hours on a Saturday to get a couple shots of an academic team... he may as well have asked if anyone was willing to pony up a kidney.

“Fine,” he said with a sigh when the awkward silence became too much for him. “Looks like I’ll be covering it. Again.”

“Attaboy, Conner – now you got something to do this weekend, eh?” gloated Jordan with his trademark smirk. Conner didn’t know how women could find the face of a guy capable of that insufferably smug expression handsome, but they did.

“Thanks, Conner,” said Heather before he could even attempt a rebuttal. Not that he would’ve. Conner was a writer, and his witty banter flagged under the pressure of immediacy. He was glad in this case. Making a fuss in front of Heather would just make him feel even lamer. Ah, Heather. One look and two words from that mouth and he forgave the lot of them. She didn’t deserve the mantle of assistant editor, but she batted those eyelashes at him and he’d been unable to resist helping her pad her transcript.

Before he could formally conclude the meeting, the bell rang, signaling the end of the period, and as it was last period, the end of the day. Everyone was on their way out the door, and Conner listened as they made plans to meet up at Bean Bag Cafe, a coffee shop near campus. The editor-in-chief perked his ears up to see if he’d be extended an invite this time, but as always, it was a closed small group affair. Just Don, and DeShaun, and Marissa, and Siobhan, and Heather, and six or seven of the others. So, basically all the upperclassmen but him.

As he stayed back and tidied up the office, he forced himself to let it go. That group had been a clique since they’d joined up, and he’d never had that skill at breaking into social groups. It was fine. A positive, really. It meant the team got along and had low drama, and it was easy to form teams for assignments. That he was often the odd man out meant that his own work was done to his high standards.

“Conner? What’re you still doing here?” came a voice behind him. Miss Coszic-Lewandoski – known by all as Miss C, for obvious reasons – was coming back to the room from their small computer lab; though she was the teacher of the Northridge High School yearbook class, she generally let her editor-in-chief run the show. Miss C said she didn’t like to step on his toes and often used the period to tend to the rest of her workload. She touched base

with him to make sure all ran smoothly and otherwise spent her time instructing the freshmen writers.

“Oh, just tidying up. Looks like I’m heading up to Indy this weekend to get pics of the academic decathlon, so I need to borrow one of the laptops and cameras.”

The young teacher put her hands on her hips – hips he might admire if she wasn’t his teacher and his mentor. At times, even a friend. “Conner. When are you going to start delegating?”

He forced a banal smile as he packed one of the department cameras in his backpack. “It’s OK – I don’t mind. Who knows, maybe I’ll meet one of those decathlete babes.”

She chuckled. “Best of luck, killer. Oh and hey, since you’re taking one of the laptops, you’re the first to know. We got that grant for some new software. I just got it installed on all the machines. You’re going to love it, intuitive as heck. We’ll go over some of the features on Monday, but I think you’ll be able to figure it out.”

“Oh. Anything I need to know for the weekend?”

“Nah. Just use your school ID to log in, and it’ll prompt you to set up a password.”

“Cool cool. Thanks, Miss C.” He carefully tucked the laptop behind the camera, then signed both out on the sheet. “Have a good weekend!”

“You too, Conner. And hey,” she said, placing a slender hand on his shoulder, so he turned. “Remember. You’re editor-in-chief. That means you’re in charge, OK? Don’t be afraid to start acting like it.” She gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze, and he let himself out into the empty halls.

Academic decathlon was every bit as exciting as he thought it was – a bunch of four point something GPAs taking tests in closed rooms. He’d hoped to get the team together for a few shots at the start of the day, then see if he could coax a few posed shots out of them and head back home. It was nearly a two-hour drive each way, after all. Instead, the team had beaten him there and immediately scattered to half a dozen places around the host school. It had taken almost eight hours before the team finally reunited, and then his picture was interrupted by the start of the award ceremony, which went on for another hour and a half. When that finally ended, he managed to plead with the team to pose long enough for a single picture before getting back on their bus to head home.

Thanks to a hell of a rainstorm on his drive back, the two-hour trip became three and Conner made it home past eleven o’clock Saturday night. By then, he was so irritated and so exhausted that he went straight to bed.

“So how was the spelling bee thing yesterday?” his mom asked as he shuffled groggily to the table the next morning. “Must’ve been pretty groovy if you didn’t make it in until going on midnight. One egg or two?”

“Ugh. One, Mom, thanks. But ugh. You go to an academic decathlon meet knowing it’s got to be about the most boring thing in the world, but then you get there, and it’s somehow even *more* boring than you thought it could be.”

She set a cup of apple juice down for her son. “That’s too bad. At least you had time to get your work done, so you can enjoy your Sunday.”

He shook his head. “I wish. See, Hailey McManus was there. Remember I told you about her, how she’s, like, obsessed with me?”

“That’s the girl from the, what, the dance last year, right?”

Was it ever. Conner had gone with this girl Katalina; he’d been a junior and her a senior. He’d known his date was just a friend thing, and they’d really just gone to get dressed up and have some fun dancing. (Also Conner was taking pictures for yearbook.) Then he’d found Hailey crying in a stairwell all by herself. Conner recognized the heavysset girl from a shared class or two over the years, but didn’t really know her; still, a crying woman was a crying woman. He asked if she was all right, and learned her date had dumped her for her pretty friend two days before the dance. She’d come here tonight to confront them, but the boy had just held up his nose and made a pig noise and told her to lose some weight.

Genuinely moved, Conner had sat down beside her and put an arm around her shoulder, saying whatever he could come up with to comfort her. He hadn’t meant to convey even the least romantic interest, but ever since then she’d been carrying a torch for him. For a while he’d had to pretend he had a girlfriend from a nearby school, but after a few months he’d accepted that while he was claiming to be in a relationship, he couldn’t date anybody else, Hailey or not. Now he just tried to avoid one-on-one proximity with her without being too rude about it – a feat which yesterday’s event had rendered impossible.

He hadn’t known she’d been on the team; if he had, he might’ve preemptively taken Miss C’s advice about delegating. Conner had brought along his novel for German, some pre-cal homework, and figured if he had time he could always check out the new yearbook software. Instead, he barely finished the reading. Every time she finished a test, there was Hailey. She brought him drinks, showed a fervent interest in his schoolwork (that she was preventing him from working on), insisted on taking him to lunch... she wound up coopting the lion’s share of his day. At one point he’d tried hiding in a little nook behind a trophy case, but sure enough she’d found him. Like a hunting dog following a scent.

Conner didn’t dislike the girl, per se. It was simply that she had no self-esteem. Maybe that was an appeal to some guys, knowing a girl would be at one’s beck and call and felt she had no choice but to tolerate whatever she had to in order to keep her man. For Conner, it just made him sad. Hailey was a smart girl, and in ten years the world would sort itself out, and she’d use those smarts to land a career doing something that brought her happiness. But this was now, not a decade hence, and like Hailey, Conner was grappling with the now.

A now that, last night, had culminated in Hailey nervously asking him if she could ride home with him from the meet, and him replying in what was probably transparently bullshit that

his mom didn't let him drive with other kids in the car. Her capacity for rejection exceeded, she'd just nodded and made her way to the team bus, and he to his car. Conner hoped it hadn't hurt her feelings, even as he hoped she'd been hurt enough to leave off.

"You oughta go ahead and give her a shot, man. You're not exactly beating them off with a broom," said his step-sister Angelica as she settled into the table. "Plenty of *other* beating off though, I bet..."

He glared. Her dad had married his mom just two years back, and their children had never learned to get along. Luckily she was away at college most of the year, but she'd just gotten home for their fall break while he'd been gone yesterday. "Well I'd tell you to just date every jerk who shows an interest in you, but it looks like you already took my advice."

"*Kids*," his mom interjected before they got worse. "She does have a point, you know, Conner. It'd do you some good to do a little dating."

He wolfed down his eggs, glowering at his plate. "Thanks for breakfast, Mom. I'm gonna get some work done."

"Work," he's calling it now," said Angelica with a grin.

"I thought your kind burst into flame in direct sunlight," he grumped back.

Back in his room, Conner buckled down and got to work. The bulk of his homework only took a couple hours, slowed down somewhat because his friend Owen wouldn't stop pestering him to hang out, despite his assurances that he no longer had the time. A promise to make an effort that evening was the only thing that finally shut Owen up. With them pacified, and his homework done, he finally got out his borrowed laptop and logged in.

The program was obvious; it was named for the working title of the NHS yearbook. *This Is Our Story*. He double-clicked the program, and after a lengthy load time, a login box popped up. He used his default school login like Miss C had said, and from there it popped a second box asking me for his "user level," with a bulleted list he could click. There was staff, editor, senior editor, faculty, and another one that was a box I could type into.

Editor-in-chief had been a hard-won title. All across America, the top student position in yearbook was senior editor. Only in rare cases of massive operations or for truly exceptional talent and effort did a school elevate a student to the title of editor-in-chief. Conner had joined yearbook in middle school, before there was even a class for it. Back then, he'd simply asked the faculty editor if he could join him in putting it together. Ever one for nostalgia and mementos, he'd grown up helping his mom with her scrapbooking and his interest had grown from there. Fast forward five years and he was the work horse of the yearbook staff, always on call, always ready to get the quote, take the photo, write the spread.

It had been Miss C's suggestion to elevate him to editor-in-chief, and dorky or no, it had been one of the young man's proudest moments. With a fond smile for his teacher, he entered the title in the box and clicked enter.

*Checking...* said a new box, and the mouse turned into a rotating hourglass. "Checking for what?" he muttered, but let it do its thing. A few minutes later, a new box appeared.

*Editor-in-chief privileges granted. User has override authority in regards to other users. Caution: this setting is still in beta test. Note that some features may not fully function or may cause unintended effects. Do you wish to use Editor-in-chief mode?*

He could click yes or no. Beta test? Override other users? He wondered if that even included Miss C. It would be handy to easily edit his peers spreads, he supposed, though he knew his perfectionist tendencies could make him over-do it. He worried about the prospect of glitches, but figured they wouldn't have bought this software package if it was still so buggy. Conner clicked a confident Yes.

Once he was in, the software was pretty similar to what they'd used before, though it seemed more integrated. There was the list of student names indexed to their photos, which he could easily use to tag them in photos elsewhere in the yearbook. There was a dizzying number of menus and options, so for now, he restricted himself to only those needed for his academic decathlon spread. He made a few notes on what he'd like to see in the full text – a quote from a member, from the coach, something about the seniors, any details about outstanding achievements.

From there, he organized the spread and inserted one of the photos. With the team roster in hand, he labeled the ones he recognized, then went back and used their names to look up ID photos to get the rest. Luckily school pictures had only just been taken, so people still looked mostly like their pics. By the time prom came around, it was sometimes a crap shoot trying to match haircuts and fashion styles. Most people dressed up and did their hair nicer for picture day, after all, and some cleaned up better than others.

On a lark, he brought up Hailey McManus's school picture. There she was, doughy Hailey, her hair doing its best to overcome its stringy nature. Poor thing. Doomed to go through high school awkward and miserable just because she didn't have the DNA of the girl pictured next to her, Hayleigh McKnight. Though also a Hayleigh in pronunciation, it was there any resemblance ended. A copper-skinned goddess with an unlikely mane of pristine auburn hair that Conner swore was more at place in a shampoo ad than his yearbook; face of an angel's hotter sister; an abundance of cleavage that even their best editing couldn't keep out of her yearbook photo; a butt that made the boys of NHS want to cheer for any teacher who put her in the front of the room.

Hailey McManus, Hayleigh McKnight. A typo in creation and that could be her as homecoming queen, popular and either beloved, envied, or feared by all. With a pitying smile, he clicked and dragged Hayleigh's photo where Hailey's was. *Confirm swap?* It asked. Conner rolled his eyes at the unnecessary security and clicked Yes. What the hell. For a few minutes, let Hailey be beautiful, even if only for him.

Only...

"What the *fuck?*" he said aloud after tabbing back to the academic decathlon photo. He'd done a double-take after entering Yang Na's name in its ordered place on line two. There,

standing in the front row was none other than Hayleigh McKnight. She was most definitely not on any academic teams. Then why was she...

She was standing right where Hailey McManus had been when he'd added her name to the roster not ten minutes ago. The roster still read the same. As Conner studied the spread, it became clear that somehow, the program had gone and edited the academic decathlon photo to show what, according to his photo swap, was the appearance of Hailey McManus.

This was insane. No matter how he zoomed in, he couldn't see the slightest trace of editing. He was no pro, but he'd used enough digital photo editing programs to know how to keep things smooth. This was flawless. Weirder, upon checking he realized it wasn't even like it used Hayleigh's school picture. That was a wry smile, head tilted off to the left; the academic decathlon photo was a toothy grin straight on. Could it be inserting a photo of Hayleigh McKnight from one of her own photos elsewhere in the yearbook? If it was, he couldn't find where the thing was stored. He'd assumed all their previous spreads would have to be ported over from the old system, and nothing here suggested otherwise.

Before he could make sense of it, Owen was back at it again, and Conner finally gave in and made his way across the street to his friend's house. It was a basic understanding that Owen's place was for hanging out; Conner's was for fine dining. While Conner's mom may be a pretty good cook, Owen had a finished basement that they pretty much had all to themselves.

"Took you long enough, man," Owen chided as he made his way down.

"Yeah, sorry. Miss C got--"

Owen interrupted him with a decidedly feline-like sound. "I know what that C ought to stand for. It's--"

"No you don't, and don't be gross, and shut up. Anyway, and she got this new yearbook software, and like... it's weird. Like, I swapped Hailey McManus and Hayleigh McKnight, and it, like, swapped them out in another shot I'd tagged."

"You got a pic of Hottie Hayleigh? Anything good?"

"No, the picture of McManus, but, well, it became one of... look, just weird."

"Dude, don't turn this into another gripe session about Hefty Hailey's McMan-crush on you. I'd rather listen to you bitch about Jordan again than that. At least he's just another asshole; Hefty is just... sad."

Conner frowned. "How are you single?"

"Better to die single than crushed under one of the hocks of Hefty Hailey, man," Owen laughed.

"Oh come on, she's not even *that*... You know, nevermind. I don't know why I tell you stuff."

"Because it beats writing more shitty emo poetry on the internet."

"One time. One time! That's it. Put some PvP in. I need to kill you."

The boys settled in for a lively round of Obliterator, and much mutual killing ensued. Conner's curfew came up before either boy's bloodlust was sated, but they knew they'd make time later. They always did.

Like that, Sunday gave way to Monday in its graceful way, and school was back in session. He saw Hailey in the hallway before school and gave her a little smile, but she didn't even seem to glance in his direction. Maybe his refusal to give her a lift Saturday night had stung more than he'd thought. He supposed that, since he'd lied to her, she was entitled to be a bit frosty.

The day dragged on, all of it a tedious obstacle to the only thing he was really interested in, namely talking to Miss C about the weird bug in the software. That kind of graphic modification was unheard of in his experience, and for this program, it was just a feature! Because the program shortcut was named for the Northside High yearbook, *This is Our Story*, and didn't seem to have an About Us in it that he could find, he didn't even know how to look up more information on it. He couldn't wait to pick his teacher's brain about where she'd found such a treasure.

That is, until around 12:30. That Monday, in the NHS cafeteria, during lunch – some kind of pasta nightmare that called itself baked ziti – Conner's life changed forever. It began, in quite uncommon fashion, with a hand on someone's butt.

"Owen." His friend didn't look up from the block game he was playing on his phone. "Owen. OWEN!" Conner snatched the phone and held it back. "Dude, look!"

After a moment griping about the theft, Owen finally followed where Conner was pointing. There in the lunch line stood Jayce Deacons, the richest kid in school and good enough looking that his money made sure he was in the in crowd for life... and he was standing there with his arm around Hailey McManus's shoulder, his hand resting inside one of the back pockets of her jeans.

"What?" Owen asked. "What, you mean the lunch lady wearing crocs?"

Conner conveyed how stupid his friend was being through an exasperated look. "Yeah, the crocs, you got me. Not, ya know, *Deacons' hand down the back of Hailey's pants*, you moron!"

Owen looked again, then back at his friend. "Yep. What I wouldn't give..." He snatched his phone back. "You ruined my game, a-hole. Hope you're happy."

"What you wouldn't give... what? To have his hand on *your* ass?"

"Har har."

"No, seriously – that doesn't freak you out just a little?"

Owen arched a brow. "Should it? He's treated her like she's his dad's property since they started going out in sophomore year, man."

Conner shook his head, then even rubbed his eyes. Nope, he wasn't seeing things. He pointed again. "Are you freaking near-sighted or something, Owen?! That's Hailey McManus, not Hayleigh McKnight!"

Now Owen finally reacted with the alacrity the situation called for, snapping his head around to witness the scandal. A moment later, though, he turned back to the front and rolled his eyes. "Very funny. Now quit it with the pointing. Deacons sees you eyeballing Hailey's ass like that and he's gonna make you pay."

In fact, Conner realized Mr. Rodriguez, a math teacher who was also a lunch monitor, had also seen his pointing, and followed it to the target. He pounced in true teacherly fashion, striding quickly over to the couple. They were too far away to hear, but when Jayce and Hailey turned to face their accuser, he finally got a look at her face. Yep, definitely McManus. Not that there had been any doubt. She'd styled her hair differently, he thought, but otherwise...

The two of them both glared at Mr. Rodriguez but complied, then clearly made some uncharitable remarks about him once he'd turned his back and headed back to his post near the side doors to the cafeteria. Once they seemed to have gotten it off their chests, Jayce leaned down and gave Hailey a quick kiss on her puckered lips. Her self-satisfied grin was the last he saw of her face as they turned back toward the front of the lunch line.

Owen went back to his game. Conner, meanwhile, watched the lunch room to see when there would be some kind of outburst. Other people pointing, or a burst of laughter from Deacons and his friends when they decided to stop toying with Hailey. But nothing. They bought their ziti, sat at the usual popular table, enjoyed banter that seemed genuine from where Conner was sitting. It was like nobody found it the least bit strange that...

Hailey was standing in for Hayleigh.

Conner was on his feet in the next second. Scanning... scanning... There. There she was, Hayleigh McKnight, wearing a pair of loose-fitting overalls and sitting by herself at the end of a table in the dimmest corner of the cafeteria. She was staring intently at a tablet, probably reading the e-book she'd been trying to interest him in yesterday. It struck him that in all the years he'd known her, he couldn't recall seeing Hayleigh without people around her.

This couldn't be happening.

Owen took no notice as his friend made his way across the expansive room to the young woman. There was no plan here, not even a firm grasp on the world around him. By the time he'd walked up to her, he'd only managed as far as...

"Hi, um, Hailey." Hayleigh?

She looked up, blinking in surprise before breaking out in smiles. God, but she was beautiful. "Conner! Hi." He was instantly sure this vision of a girl didn't have the old Hailey's voice; this one was a soft, warm purr.

"Do you mind if I, um...?"

The real Hayleigh McKnight would've told him to get lost, but this version smiled like she'd scratched off a winning lottery ticket. "Sure, have a seat. Have a good weekend?"



“Yeah, just, you know, normal stuff.”

“Sorry you had to waste half of it on dumb ol’ ac dec. We didn’t even win. Still, got my medal, that was cool. Did you see? I didn’t see if you were around during the awards show. I was looking for you but the lights are in the back so when you’re sitting in the front you can’t see anything behind you, so... um yeah, I’m talking a lot, aren’t I.”

This couldn’t be real. The same old Hailey McManus stream of consciousness pouring out of the lips of Hayleigh McKnight. (Good lord, those lips!) What could be happening? The most plausible explanation was utterly insane – but the most possible explanation seemed so unlikely. He had to be sure.

“No, I was there. And remind me, you won...?”

“Physics. I didn’t even think I did that well on the test, but some of them you can just reason through without doing all the work, ya know? Like there was this one question. You have two trains of a certain mass – and it tells you the mass but I don’t remember, obviously – anyway, they’re on the same track moving in the same direction. If the front train was moving at eighty kilometers per hour and the back train was moving at a hundred and ten kilometers... was it miles? No, that seems too fast...”

I blinked. OK, there was no way Hayleigh McKnight could do such a stunning impression of Hailey McManus. Everything was perfect – the cadence, the babbling, the way she was too shy to make eye contact... Even the unabridged science problem was trademark Hailey.

He was staring in shock as she rambled on to a close. “... so I didn’t have to do the math to know the right answer was b. I mean, the front train speeds up and back train slows down. Duh, right?”

“No, totally, yeah, duh,” he agreed. Holy crap, was he mindlessly agreeing with Hailey? That was a trap he fell into in those rare occasions he was working with a hot girl, like when he and Heather tackled an assignment together and the smell of her shampoo just shredded his capacity to form independent thoughts.

Suffice to say, he had never had this problem with Hailey before. Now just one more thing to double check. She answered to Hailey/Hayleigh, but he had to make sure Owen’s accepting the big girl on Jayce Deacons’ arm as McManus wasn’t a fluke. “Oh, and yeah, I was working on the academic decathlon spread for yearbook, and wouldn’t you know it, I totally forgot how to spell your last name.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Don’t you have access to a student roster?”

“Oh. Yeah. Just, I didn’t, um, have it at home with me. You know, when I worked on it. At home. Over the weekend.” Stop having such perfect hair, damnit Hailey!

“Um, well you’re back in school now, so I guess you’ll have to look it up.” She burst into giggles a moment later. He recognized that laugh only too well. “No, it’s McManus. Spelled mick not mack, and only one ‘n’. People screw that up all the time.”

So there it was. This woman, this gorgeous, perfect, goddess of a woman was somehow Hailey McManus to everyone... but him. And nobody was acting any different. This couldn’t be

a hoax. People like Hayleigh (the real one) and Jayce didn't go to such lengths to prank a nobody like Conner Fishers. Somehow, as impossible as it sounded, swapping those pictures in the yearbook had swapped the actual appearances of the two girls in the real world.

Chubby Hailey McManus was now dating one of the most sought-after guys in school. Flawless Hayleigh McKnight was now a social pariah with an enormous crush on none other than...

Holy shit.

"Hailey, do you wanna go out sometime?" he blurted. Conner winced at his own over-eagerness, like his brain shot out the ask before anyone else could realize what was going on.

The look on Hailey's new face was priceless, an adorable combination of surprised, elated, nervous and overwhelmed. "Really? With you?"

Conner nodded. "Of course with me."

She clasped her hands together, immaculately manicured nails interlaced. "Yes! That would be amazing! When did you wanna do it? I mean, 'cause I'm free pretty much any time. No, not any time, like, I do have things sometimes, but I mean..." She paused for a breath. "I just mean I'm flexible."

As a girl who'd shed the better part of a hundred pounds overnight, he'd bet she was flexible. "How about tonight?"

The bell rang then, drowning out her first attempt at a response. "Sounds great!"

The two parted ways then, and it was only midway through next period, his mind reeling from this turn of events, that he received a text from her reminding him of what he'd forgotten.

*Are you picking me up? My address is 6326 Opal Park Way, behind the east side grocery store. What are we gonna do? Do I need to dress nice? Bring anything?* Thereafter was a torrent of bright smiling emojis.

Conner stared long at those words before responding, and when he did, he wasn't proud to say that the response was written primarily by the raging hard-on he'd been sporting since the moment she'd said yes. *I'll pick you up at 6. Wear something sexy.*

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