

The Union

T.H. Hernandez

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To Ernie, for believing in me

I wonder if I would've spent so much time agonizing over my future if I'd known I'd be dead so soon. Something tells me I would have done a lot of things differently. If I'd known, maybe I would have done everything differently.

When I try to breathe in deeply, wrenching pain stops me short. Every inch of my body is consumed by a bottomless ache, including my lungs.

It's been days since I've had anything to eat, but I no longer feel hungry. I know this is a really bad sign.

Lifting my head sends a sharp twinge shooting through my skull, and I grimace, stretching my bottom lip until it cracks and bleeds. The burned coppery taste of blood hits my tongue, making me retch.

I curl into a ball, trying to hide from the pain, but there is no escaping. The packed dirt, small jagged rocks that scrape my cheek, and the putrid odor of decaying leaves all remind me of where I am.

Despair flows from my soul, drowning every last remnant of hope. I begin to cry, but without enough fluid left in my body to produce tears and a throat so ravaged no sound comes out, my body heaves with dry silent sobs until I am empty.

Soon the emptiness gives way to an unexpected calm. I lift my hand over my head and study the tiny rivers of dried blood crisscrossing my palm before it floats to my chest like one of the many brown and lifeless leaves that surround me.

With a resigned sigh, I close my eyes, no longer afraid it might mean never opening them again. In just a short time, I've gone through the five stages of grief and have arrived at acceptance.

What I know of death comes from entertainment. Movie deaths are noisy and dramatic, filled with action and brutal emotion. By contrast, mine will be silent and serene.

I wonder if they'll ever find my body out here or if my family will be left to always wonder what happened to me. My heart breaks for what losing me will do to them.

In my last moments of life, I try to piece together the events that brought me here. It all started that evening in May when I took Barklyn for a walk in the park to clear my head. Back when my biggest concern was the lack of any plans for my future.

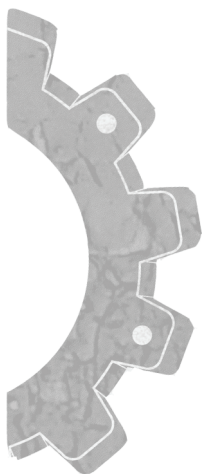
Now I know my future. My life ends here. Alone. In the Ruins.

Book 1 – The Union

100 Years After the Second U.S. Civil War

“It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves.”

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



1 My Biggest Concern

It's no big deal, just the rest of my life.

I'm no closer now to picking a career than I was a week ago, a month ago, or even a year ago. With graduation only a few weeks away, the pressure to choose something increases every day.

Before the war, people had more time to sort out their futures – four additional years of school. Of all the changes the Union made, enhancing our first twelve years of education, eliminating college, and sending us straight into internships, was one of the better ones. The idea of spending even one more day in a classroom is gag-worthy.

I drop my electronic tablet with my history notes onto the bed and blow out a slow breath, sending crazy red curls flying in a dozen directions.

The late afternoon sun cuts a bright swath across my room. Outside the open window, desalinated ocean water gurgles along the channel, delivering fresh water throughout the Union. But neither the cheerful sun nor the sounds of the manmade stream do anything to improve my mood.

Rolling off my bed, I pad across the wood floor and fling open my bedroom door. I make my way down the curved staircase into the great room where my mom sits at the kitchen counter reading her tablet. My twin half-sisters, Katie and Rachel, are sprawled across the cream-colored velour couch watching some idiotic tween show.

Our dog, Barklyn, a purebred Havanese, leaps down from where he'd been curled up between Thing 1 and Thing 2, and bounds over to me, tongue out, head cocked to the side.

We could both use a change of scenery. I grab his leash and tell my mom I'm going for a walk.

She glances up from her tablet, her crystal green eyes taking in my attire. "Like that?"

I glance down at my gray yoga pants and faded Epic Vinyl rock T-shirt and shrug. "Sure. I'm only going to the park."

"Evan, I wish you'd pay a little more attention to how you dress when you go out."

I roll my eyes so hard, I nearly fall over. As a former model, she's far more concerned with appearances than I'll ever be.

My sisters have their father's dark coloring and our mother's height and beauty. I inherited my cheekbones, full lips, and nose from her, but my hair is the result of a recessive gene somewhere down the family line. My bi-colored hazel eyes and short stature are courtesy of my bio-dad, Epic Vinyl frontman, Eddie McIntyre.

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“I refuse to be a walking billboard for M Clothing.”

“No one is asking you to, but could you at least put on a shirt without holes?”

The holes aren’t the problem, but she’ll never admit it. I hate this shirt and only wear it to annoy her. Mission accomplished.

When I don’t make a move to change, she waves me off with a huff. “Joe will be home in an hour. Be back by then for dinner.”

“Fine.”

I let myself out the front door and walk down the curved path, dodging a delivery drone bringing a package to our neighbor. Taking my favorite shortcut, I cross through the plaza, pass the greenhouses, and swing open the iron gate leading to the park.

Tall trees on either side of the path reach out tangled fingers and pull at one another, creating a leafy canopy. Late spring flowers fill the air with aromas of lavender and orange. Other than the slapping of my flip-flops against my feet, the park is quiet, but even immersed in all this serenity, my mind won’t shut up.

Frustration billows inside me like an angry cloud, the pressure building to epic proportions. Okay, so maybe I’m being a bit dramatic, but between my mom, stepdad, and bio-dad, I feel like a three-sided wishbone with the winner getting the broken me.

I don’t know why I’m having such a hard time with this. All my friends have declared and lined up summer internships, but I don’t know what I want to do. What I do know is I want to do something that matters, to make a difference in the world.

I let Barklyn off his leash and he zips across the park, a blur of brown and white fur. He spots a group of pigeons and lowers his front paws, raising his back end, before launching himself at them.

The terrorized birds scatter in a burst of beating wings and flustered coos.

Barklyn has the perfect life, and it hits me that I'm envious of my dog. Food magically appears in his bowl, he gets belly rubs whenever he wants, and the biggest decision he'll ever need to make is which tree to pee on first.

My wallowing in the pool of self-pity is disrupted when a beautiful husky wanders into the park followed by his equally beautiful owner, Bryce Vaughn, sending my central nervous system into a frenzy.

Bryce's skin is the color of cappuccino and his slate gray eyes are like the winter sky. And if that combination wasn't striking enough to make my knees turn to jelly, the dimples that appear when he smiles make my heart forget how to beat.

I whistle for Barklyn and he bounds over to me, giving up on the birds. But the whistle also catches Bryce's attention, and he turns and waves. Oh dear god he's coming over here. To talk to me. And I'm wearing my rattiest shirt. Yep, spiting my mom worked out *just* great.

I snap on Barklyn's leash and steel myself, turning to face him. Bryce is currently dating Alivia Benton, Queen Bee of Moores Academy and my arch nemesis. This could be craptastically awkward. Hopefully it's a short conversation. But when his eyes meet mine and my lungs stall, I could stay here forever, just staring at him.

"Hey, Evan." His smooth and sexy voice causes my pulse to do funny things.

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“Bryce.” I nod my head in what I hope is a casual acknowledgment, but the jerky movement probably looks more like I have nerve damage somewhere in my neck.

He stands with his hands shoved into the front pockets of his jeans. “Do you live nearby? I’ve never seen you here before.”

I glance at his dog sniffing the plants Barklyn just peed on. “Uh...yeah, over there.” I point in the general direction of our apartment, struggling with something else to say as my mind goes blank. “Uh...I...I usually come right after school,” I blurt out, “but today I had to study for my history final.” I’m not normally nervous around boys, but Bryce isn’t a normal boy. He has superpowers that zap my ability to function coherently.

“I took it this morning. It’s not too hard. Mostly it focuses on the American Revolution, the War on Terror, and the government regulations on greenhouse gasses and guns leading to the second Civil War.”

“I’m okay with that stuff, but trying to remember all those dates freaks me out. Does it really matter if the first shot was fired on...” Oh hell, I can’t remember the date.

He smiles. “July 4, 2052, for the record.”

“See? And I heard half the test is dates.” A breeze sails across the park, sending pieces of hair into my eyes. I twist my head to get them out of my face, using my hand to shove one of the more offensive curls behind my ear.

“No one can remember dates, at least not easily. The only way I can remember them is to make up poems. Like the one we learned in grade four, ‘In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.’ So I came up with a bunch of new ones, like ‘In February, 2065, the war ended with more dead than alive.’”

“Clever, and yet oddly morose.”

He pulls his hands out of his pockets, shifting his feet, as if he’s nervous, which is totally bizarre. In no universe would Bryce Vaughn be nervous around me. “The secret is to make them as twisted as possible.”

I struggle to pay attention to what he’s saying instead of staring at those perfect, kissable lips.

“...but what I want to do is mix my love of history and literature. Write about the people who founded the Union. It must have been so cool to live back then.”

I imagine what his lips would feel like pressed against mine and smile.

“What?” He asks, a spark of amusement in his eyes.

Crap, crap, crap. He caught me ogling his mouth. Color creeps into my cheeks. “You seem so...I don’t know, excited, I guess, about your career choice.”

“Well, what’s yours? Surely you feel the same way.”

I stare at my toes, wiggling them. “I haven’t declared yet.”

“That’s not unusual. Lots of kids take the summer after graduation off.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I glance up and get pulled into his eyes. “I’m probably going into the family business anyway. My stepdad wants me work for him. Hell, he expects it.”

“He’s a pretty big deal.” His gaze drops to my T-shirt, probably wondering why a fashion slob would consider going into the biz. “Tons of kids at school would kill to work for him.”

No doubt his girlfriend is one of them. She was a child model for M Clothing until Joe fired her for tormenting me. “Yeah, I suppose, but not me.”

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“You should do what you love, Evan. Find out what that is and don’t settle for less.”

I like the way he says my name, it makes little swirly happy feelings dance in my stomach. Mental head slap. He’s *totally* off limits.

Barklyn pulls at his leash, smelling something out of range. I reach down and unhook him so he can investigate. “Go on, Barklyn.” He darts off followed by Bryce’s dog.

Bryce raises his eyebrows. “Barklyn?”

I roll my eyes at the stupid name. “Yeah. My mom’s idea. She combined Brooklyn from Old New York, with bark because, well, he’s a dog... She does that. Combines stuff to come up with weird names. Like mine.”

A smile tips up the corners of his mouth. “She named you after Evansville, Indiana?”

I laugh. “Funny, but no. She named me after my grandmother, Eve, and my grandfather, Nathan.”

His smile broadens, revealing his dimples. “It suits you. It’s beautiful and unique.”

I arch an eyebrow. Is he flirting with me? This conversation just detoured into dangerous territory. It’s safe to dream about Bryce from a distance, but in the real world, he has a girlfriend. And she *hates* me. If she finds out her boyfriend is flirting with me, I am so dead.

I whistle for Barklyn and snap on his leash. “I should be getting back.”

Bryce throws me a casual wave. “Maybe I’ll see you and Barklyn here again sometime.”

T.H. HERNANDEZ

I turn and walk to the steps but can't resist a quick glance over my shoulder.

He's watching me go, his devastating smile lighting up his face. "See you tomorrow, Evansville."



2 Tomorrow

C*rap*, I overslept by fifteen minutes. Throwing off my sheet with a loud groan, I stumble out of bed. Sleep was nearly impossible last night. My conversation with Bryce replayed in my head until I convinced myself I imagined the whole flirting thing. Except I'm pretty sure I didn't.

Barklyn, lying at the end of my bed, lifts his head and yawns. He watches me for a few seconds before rolling to his side and closing his eyes again. Even he's not ready to get up.

I shuffle down the hall to the bathroom, my sisters' voices rising in anger from the kitchen below. Apparently they can't agree on which boy band has the hottest lead singer.

After a quick shower, I return to my room and dress in a pair of faded jeans. I grab a T-shirt from my drawer, but my gaze shifts from the shirt in my hand to my closet. My mom keeps it stocked with the latest fashions from M Clothing, my stepdad Joe

Minelli's company. I rarely wear any of it, preferring comfort over style, but this morning I'm second-guessing my fashion philosophy.

Inside my closet, a white ruffled swing tank from Joe's spring collection catches my eye. I slip it on, but now my flip-flops seem too casual. I cross the hall to my mom's room and rifle through her shoes, finding a pair of strappy sandals that perfectly match the top. Yay Mom.

I examine the results in the mirror and cringe at my hair. The frizzled mess that greets me is a complete disaster. With enough time, a big round brush, and a blow dryer, I can coax my hair into soft waves. Today, I have to settle for applying some product and twirling the strands into ringlets.

When I'm satisfied with my hair, I add a touch of mascara and a little lip gloss. I'm blessed with long, thick lashes, but they're a shade lighter than I'd prefer thanks to the same mutant gene responsible for my hair color.

By now it's too late to eat breakfast. Fashion sucks. All I did was change my shirt. Somehow that one small decision created a domino effect. Seriously, who the hell has time for this every day?

I rush back to my room, jam my tablet into my shoulder bag, and fly down the stairs, taking care not to trip over the heels I'm not used to wearing. After grabbing a protein bar from the counter, I kiss my mom goodbye, and race out the door.

The commuter station is overflowing with bodies, and I have to wait until the third train to board. By the time I get on, all the enclosed seating areas are full. I prefer those, because they're quieter, sort of like mini isolation chambers.

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Scanning the car for any open seat, I find one in the galley. When the train pulls out, I stumble, nearly landing in the lap of the woman sitting next to the seat I'm aiming for.

"Sorry," I mumble, dropping down next to her. I lean my head against the teal padded seat back and close my eyes. The soft hum of the electric motor is soon drowned out by the buzz of dozens of conversations. A mixture of body odor and coffee assaults my nose.

I do my best to block out the external stimuli and run through history dates in my head. Numbers rush behind my eyelids and Bryce's rhymes come to mind. Thinking about his dimples instead of my final makes me smile. I force my thoughts back to history, working my way from Christopher Columbus through Union Formation Day. I'm sure I forgot a few, but the overhead voice announces my stop is next.

My feet silently flip me off as I step off the train and walk across the terminal. The pain is a constant reminder that I'm dressed very differently than normal. What was I thinking? Oh yeah, Bryce. What if everyone figures out I dressed up for him? What if Bryce figures it out? Oh god, I can't do this. Screw my history final.

I cross the tracks to catch the train back home, but spot my best friend, Colin Jennings, getting off another train. He smiles and waves. *Busted*. There's no escaping now.

He lopes over and throws one of his long arms over my shoulder, his shaggy brown hair falling into his dark eyes. "Hey, looking good today, EvTay."

Colin is fascinated by all things twenty-first century, from music and movies to fashion and food, and especially pop culture.

Mashing up first and last names is his ultimate tribute, and a fad that died out long before the first shot was fired in the Second Civil War.

“Thanks,” I mumble.

We make our way from the train station to Lisa’s apartment. She flings the door open when Colin knocks and takes in my attire. Her blonde eyebrows notch up, but she wisely keeps her thoughts to herself. She knows me well enough to understand there’s a reason I spent more time getting ready this morning, but the look I shoot her keeps her from asking me about it.

The three of us head to the congested sidewalk, bumping shoulders with other pedestrians. We pass shops and restaurants with dark wood exteriors and brick facades that create the illusion of a pre-war Manhattan neighborhood.

Lisa chatters about her summer plans on the three-block walk to school. She’s been accepted into the internship of her dreams at a trendy restaurant in the Western Province.

“So, I lined up an apartment, and I’m going to spend the summer out west,” Lisa says. “I’m gonna miss you guys.” She shoots out her hand and grabs my arm. “Oh my gosh! I have the *best* idea. You guys should come with me. Stay at my place. Ev, you can sort out your... issues...” She waves her hand in front of my face. “...while lying on the beach, maybe indulging in a summer romance... You could use a little boy action.”

I shake my head. “My mom’s head would explode if I take off for the summer. Anyway, I’m not interested in dating right now.”

“Fine, just look then.” She rolls her dark brown eyes. “I don’t get you, it’s not like you have to sleep with a guy to date him. Besides, no one gets pregnant by accident anymore.”

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“You mean no one besides my mom.”

She crosses her arms over her chest and levels her gaze at me. “You’re not going to end up like your mom.”

“Your mom’s life isn’t so bad,” Colin says.

I turn to face him, eyes narrowed. “If you tell me my mom’s hot again, I’m going to smack you into next week. That’s just creepy.”

Colin flushes bright red. “No...I mean...for having been a teen mom, she’s got a pretty good life. You guys live on the top level. Most people would kill for that.”

“She gave up everything she wanted because of some guy, and then he dumped her the second she got pregnant,” I huff out. “That’s not gonna be me.”

“I’m not saying you should follow in her footsteps,” Colin mumbles. “But you could pick a worse role model.”

I try hard not to roll my eyes.

“When was the last time you went out on a date?” One corner of Lisa’s mouth tips up and she raises her eyebrows. “I happen to know Winston Tate has a major crush on you,” she singsongs.

“Winston Tate? Wait, you mean Stone Tate? From trig?” I ask. She nods.

“He’s cute.” Although I can’t help thinking he’s no Bryce Vaughn. I give a half-second’s thought to telling them about the park last night, but I’m still not sure exactly what happened. “Getting back to your plan...I don’t think I can go. Plus, I’m probably going to work for Joe. At least over the summer.”

Lisa halts and spins me to face her. “You already know you’re gonna hate it. Three more months working there won’t change anything. Plus, I can tell by your tone you haven’t really decided.”

I pull my arm loose and resume walking. “He’s counting on me. I haven’t told him yet I don’t want to.”

“Just because you haven’t told him, doesn’t mean he doesn’t know,” Lisa says. “He’d have to be blind not to see it.”

This is going nowhere. I need to change the subject. “So I talked to Eddie last night. He’s not coming for graduation, surprise, surprise. Apparently, my evil stepmommy is trying to get sole custody of the half-sibs. He’s afraid if he leaves, she’ll claim abandonment or something. He’s sending me a ticket to visit him over the summer. Maybe I’ll go for a week or two next month. I can spend a few days with him then hang out with you guys.”

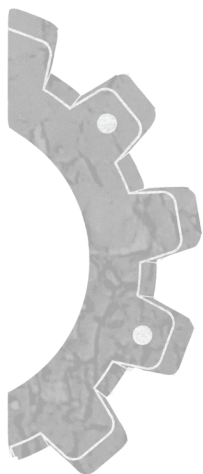
Lisa waves her hand in front of my face in exaggerated fashion, like a mini fan blade. “You don’t want to work for Joe. What are you going to do after summer? You’ll never leave. You’ll end up working at M Clothing until you die.”

“Geez, Lis,” Colin says. “That’s kinda harsh.”

Lisa shakes her head. “It’s reality, and if she doesn’t make some tough choices now, she’ll end up even more miserable than she already is.”

I stop and put my hands on my hips. “Hey, I’m standing right here. I can hear you.”

“Good.” She throws me a sly smile. “I was hoping you could.”



3 A Change of Subject

We push through the front doors and climb the wide staircase to the second floor. The front walls of the school are solid glass, providing an unobstructed view of the gardens. They also create a soundboard for voices and laughter to bounce off of in a deafening barrage. Lisa and Colin go left at the top of the stairs to their first class, and I round the railing, heading right.

I spot Bryce leaning against the wall talking with his jock friends. He's wearing loose jeans and a faded navy T-shirt that makes his eyes look more blue than gray. His head turns, as if he senses me coming, and he directs his intoxicating smile my way.

I give him a quick smile in return and can't resist glancing over my shoulder after I pass. Bryce is watching me, still grinning, his dimples making my heart spin on its axis.

BAM. My head slams into something solid and a sharp pain shoots through my skull. I take an unsteady step back, my feet sliding out from under me, and I land ass-first on the floor.

Muffled giggles and all-out raucous laughter bombard me from all sides. My face is so hot I'm surprised I haven't spontaneously combusted. I inhale a quick breath and glare up at the offending classroom door.

A smooth, brown hand reaches down to me, and I squeeze my eyes shut, praying for the floor to open up and swallow me. But I'm never that lucky. With a heavy sigh, I lift my gaze to meet Bryce's, and I'm surprised to find sympathy in his eyes, not humor. I let him pull me up, his fingers lingering longer than necessary, making my pulse quicken.

"You gotta watch out for those doors, they've been known to kill people."

I actually giggle, something I would've thought impossible only seconds ago. "Thanks."

Bryce reaches out and tucks a curl behind my ear. The gesture is intimate and unexpected. "Are you okay?"

His eyes lock onto mine, sucking me in. I could drown on those babies. Being this close to him, his hand still holding mine, heats the air around me, and I struggle to keep my breathing even. My surroundings disappear and voices blur as I'm pulled into the vortex of Bryce.

I swallow hard. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just...embarrassed."

The continuous hum of voices around us halts and everything snaps back into focus. When I glimpse Alivia out of the corner of my eye, the lingering heat from Bryce's proximity freezes over.

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She stands with one hand on her bony hip and narrows her icy blue eyes at us.

My throat is dry and my voice comes out rough. “Your girlfriend looks *massively* pissed, though.” I pull my hand back and duck under his arm, dashing down the hall to my first class before the daggers from her eyes can impale me.

I slip into my seat without looking around and snap my tablet into the docking station. Tears flood my eyes, blurring the display, and I’m thankful I decided to wear my hair down today. It creates an effective curtain for me to hide behind.

“Good morning students.” My history teacher, Mr. Caldwell, enters the classroom seconds after the bell rings. “Everything on today’s final was covered in class. If you paid attention and studied, you will pass. Click the ‘Caldwell-History’ app on your tablet and tap the ‘Final’ icon.”

I do as instructed, temporarily restricting access to my other apps. After finishing ahead of most of my classmates, I press *Submit*, returning control of my tablet to me. I pull the tiny wireless ear buds out of my bag, pop them in, and launch my music app.

The music thrums in my ears, and my thoughts drift to the day I met Alivia. We were both eight, and I’d accompanied Joe to a photo shoot for his kids’ clothing line. Alivia was one of the models on set, and we immediately clicked. For weeks I begged my parents to let me go to Moores Academy with her until they’d finally relented.

Alivia began to show her true colors a couple of years later. The beginning of the end of our friendship was five years ago when Eddie made his grand appearance in my life. She was my

best friend, and I assumed she'd be a friend when I needed one. I almost laugh at how naïve I was.

At first I thought she was just embarrassed to be seen with me. I mean, I was the girl even her own father didn't want. But now, I think she couldn't handle the fact that I was getting more attention than she was.

Joe fired her after she started bullying me, but that only made things worse. My mom tried to convince me to return to public school. I refused to give Alivia the satisfaction of chasing me off. Sometimes I act against my own best interests.

These days, Alivia either ignores me, which I prefer, or goes out of her way to humiliate me. When she's not around, her minions, Gia and Montreal, do her evil bidding for her.

Not wanting to think about Alivia anymore, I close my eyes and get lost in the music until the bell rings. When class is over, I stuff my tablet in my shoulder bag and escape before anyone can talk to me. I keep my head down, avoiding eye contact and almost bump into Lisa and Colin.

"Evan, what happened? Everyone's talking about it," Lisa says.

Oh no. "Uhh, I made an ass of myself in front of half the school."

Colin pulls me around to face him. "What are you talking about? We heard Bryce Vaughn was flirting with you in front of Alivia, and she totally went off on him."

I glance from Colin to Lisa, trying to fit this new information into the puzzle. "I missed the aftermath. I ran into a door and butt-planted on the floor. Bryce helped me up. He was just making sure I was okay, but Alivia was cheesed off."

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We turn and head down the main staircase toward our next class. I catch some people staring at me when we pass.

Colin drapes his arm across my shoulder. “Word on the street is Bryce was playing with your hair.”

I shrug his arm off, anger pulsing through me. “It wasn’t like that.” I loathe being talked about. When Eddie decided to show up, my life became tabloid fare. In my experience, being the center of attention is never good, and this is just further proof.

“Well, what *was* it like?” Lisa asks. “How long have you two been friends?”

“We’re not. I mean, we talk in class and stuff, exchange hellos between classes. Last night he was at the park with his dog when I took Barklyn for a walk. We talked. That’s all.”

“You didn’t bother to mention this?” Lisa’s voice rises, and I glance around to make sure no one else is listening.

“Mention what? Nothing happened,” I hiss. Something actually did, I’m just not sure what any of it means yet.

“Right. Nothing happened, but you’re suddenly wearing makeup and making your hair all...*this*.” She flicks one of my curls.

I jerk my head away from her hand. “Stop. It doesn’t mean anything. He’s with Alivia. He was just being nice.”

Colin and Lisa exchange a look. “I wouldn’t be so sure,” Lisa says. “Apparently things got ugly between them.”

“Awesome.” This is going to get nasty fast. “I wish she’d get over Joe firing her already. That was five years ago. She models for all kinds of companies now.”

Lisa snorts. “You really think that’s what this is about?”

“Of course it is. She’s made me her personal punching bag ever since the whole ‘Eddie McIntyre is my real dad’ thing. What else could it be about?”

“How can you be so smart and so dumb at the same time? Come here.” Lisa grabs my wrist and pulls me into the girls’ bathroom.

My shoes click on the tile, echoing off the bare walls as she pushes me up to the counter. She takes my face between her hands and points me at the mirror. Colin stands behind us, and I try to twist around to make sure no one else is in here, but Lisa holds me firmly in place.

“Look.” She lets go of my face and moves to stand next to me “You’re beautiful, Ev. Alivia hates you because she’s jealous of you.”

I know I’m not unattractive, but Alivia’s tall and model thin with a flawless complexion. Even zits are afraid of her.

As if on cue, the door opens and Alivia walks in, because apparently my day doesn’t suck enough already. The rims of her eyes are red and her face is all blotchy.

Her expression hardens when she sees us. “I always thought you were secretly a girl, *Colleen*.”

“You got me *Ohhhh-livia*.” Colin drags out the “oh” sound.

He turns to leave and Alivia calls after him, “It’s Uh-livia with an A, not Oh-livia with an O.” I roll my eyes. We’ve heard that about a thousand times. She catches my eye-roll. “At least I don’t have a boy’s name.”

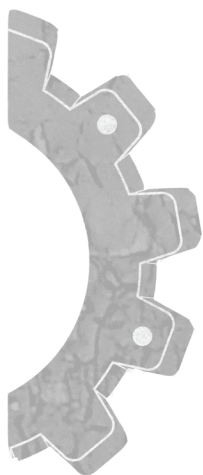
“Stunningly original, Alivia,” I reply.

Lisa turns to me. “I’m going to class. Coming?”

“I need to pee first. Be there in a few.”

THE UNION

I head into the stall and close the door. Maybe my friends are right, not that it matters, because even if Alivia and Bryce break up, that does mean anything. I'm not sure what's going on between me and Bryce, but I doubt it's what I wish it was.



4 Really Nasty

The bathroom door opens and closes, and I'm pretty sure Alivia left. At least until Montreal says, "Liv, there you are. I just heard—"

I can only assume her abrupt silence is the result of one of Alivia's death stares. Alivia clearly doesn't want me to overhear whatever Montreal was about to say. Animated whispers follow then someone enters the stall to my left.

I contemplate staying in here until they leave, but refuse to let Alivia intimidate me. Taking a deep breath, I open the stall door. Alivia and Montreal lean against the counter in front of me, arms crossed. Montreal's cat eyes are narrowed, staring me down. I take a step toward the sink, assuming they'll move aside.

A sharp pain ricochets through my skull, and I stagger to my right before regaining my footing.

Gia stands next to the open stall door on my left, a satisfied smirk on her face. “I hear you like doors upside the head.”

A horrific ache replaces the initial sting, and I fight back tears of pain and shock. “What’s your problem?”

“Like you don’t know,” Gia says.

“No. I don’t.” I expected Alivia to verbally assault me for having the audacity of talking to her boyfriend. Perhaps trip me in the hall or start vicious rumors, but this is over the top, even for her.

Movement in the mirror alerts me to what’s coming, but I can’t react fast enough to stop it. Gia grabs my hair and yanks my head down.

“Ow!” I yell.

Before I can stand up, Gia slams her knee into my face. The pain is blinding, and light flashes behind my eyes. A warm trickle of blood seeps from my nose. I wipe it with the back of my hand and stand up, the room tilting.

Montreal kicks me in the stomach, sending me flying into the stall. I land on my butt, my head jerking back and striking the porcelain edge of the toilet. A bursting shot of mind-numbing pain races through my skull.

“You think you’re such hot shit because your dad’s a rock star. But you’re *nothing*,” Montreal says. “You’re the redheaded stepchild no one wants.”

Her words hit closer to home than I care to admit, but they also snap me out of my daze. Pumped with adrenaline, I pull myself up and ball my fists, throwing a punch at Montreal’s face with my full weight. A sickening crack accompanies the searing pain in my knuckles and nausea rolls through me, making me gasp.

THE UNION

“You’re a slob with frizzy hair and a big rack. Guys are only looking at your boobs,” Alivia says.

“Jealous you don’t have anything for them to look at?” I ask before lunging at her and knocking her to the floor.

“Bitch,” she screams.

I hold her down while she flails beneath me, screaming like a crazed animal. Montreal and Gia kick me, and I yelp when one of their stupid pointed shoes connects with a rib. I attempt to dodge their feet while somehow hanging onto Alivia. We’re making so much noise someone is bound to come in any minute.

A hand grabs my hair and pulls my head back, allowing Alivia to wiggle out from under me. Alivia bends down until her face is next to mine and narrows her eyes. “If you *ever* talk to my boyfriend again, this will feel like a day at the beach compared to what I’ll do to you.”

I know she’s trying to scare me, but I refuse to allow her to get to me. I spit a mixture of saliva and blood in her face. “Bring it on, OH-livia. You know, the next time I see him, I might just kiss him.”

Whoever is holding my hair lets go and my head falls to the floor.

Alivia’s boot connects with my temple and everything fades to black.



“Evan...Evan, wake up.”

A hand gently rocks my shoulder and something cool presses against my cheek. It's a struggle to lift my eyelids, but I do, and trendy purple sneakers come into focus. *Lisa*.

I try to push myself up, but excruciating pain convinces me to stay on the floor. I drop back down, closing my eyes. It's nice down here.

"Colin, go get help. Hurry!"

Someone lifts me and my ribs scream in protest, but only a small groan escapes my lips.

"Sorry," comes a whisper.

I take a shallow breath and surrender to the darkness.



My eyes fly open and I blink to clear my vision. When the room stops spinning, I can tell I'm in the school's health office. Clive, the school nurse, is waving something under my nose.

Lisa stands behind him, her twisted face relaxing. "Oh, thank god. What happened?"

Everything comes rushing back to me. My voice cracks and I clear my throat, but a sudden bout of nausea overtakes me. Clive thrusts a bin in front of me, and I lose what's left of my breakfast bar.

I lie down on the cot as the room tilts under me. "Alivia," I whisper.

"Alivia? Alivia did this to you?" Lisa's screech bores through my skull and splits my head in two.

"Not alone." I move to sit up, but when ripples appear in my vision and I list to the side, I change my mind.

THE UNION

“I called for an ambulance,” Clive says. “You may have a concussion and other internal injuries.” He hands me a glass. “Here, this will settle your stomach. Lisa, can you call her parents? Phillips Memorial is closest. They’ll take her there.”

Colin enters and gives me one of his crooked smiles. “That must have been one helluva door you walked into.”

I start to laugh, but the movement only intensifies the pain slicing through my head. My laughter turns to tears, and soon I can’t stop crying. Colin’s eyebrows draw together and his mouth drops open. He wraps me in his arms and kisses the top of my head, telling me repeatedly how sorry he is.

Lisa pops back in a few minutes later. “The ambulance is here and your parents are on their way to the hospital.”

Two paramedics arrive, and after taking my vitals, they transfer me to a stretcher. I watch the lights pass overhead before turning to check out the crowd gathering in the hallway. They watch the parade of crazy going by, a few visibly recoiling.

I turn to Lisa who’s walking beside me. “How bad is it?”

She winces. “You look fabulous. But you know in a puffy-eyed, blotchy faced, beat-the-crap-out-of sort of way.”



I have two cracked ribs, a couple of broken bones in my hand, a crapload of bruises, and a concussion. The worst part is my face, which resembles an eggplant that’s been thrown against a brick wall a few times.

My family left to get dinner when the police arrived to take my statement. Now they’re gone, too, and I’m alone in my hospital

room for the first time since being admitted. Surrounded by silence, I've got nothing better to do than think.

Supposedly Bryce dumped Alivia. At least according to Lisa and the Moores Academy rumor mill. Obviously I'm not the reason they broke up, so I don't get why Alivia decided to flip out all over me.

Even if Alivia thinks I am the reason, her reaction was completely overblown. I suppose she could be in love with him and thought they'd do the whole long-distance thing after graduation, even though everyone knows that never works.

Knowing Alivia, this is less about Bryce and more about her image. If people are saying Bryce dumped her for me, that would be enough to get her foaming mad.

What I find most bizarre, is she just ruined any chance of a long-term modeling career. Even her daddy can't get her out of this mess. I don't get why she'd risk everything. She's far too self-centered to let a personal vendetta get in the way of her goals.

I'm still trying to sort all of this out when I hear voices outside my room.

"Thanks for taking care of my niece."

"You're welcome, Governor. She's in good hands."

Super. If my uncle's here, things are about to go from nasty to downright ugly.