



Connor (Total Sinners #2)

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Category: Romance

Description: I should've known one night with Connor fucking McIntyre would cost me everything.

A steamy, angsty dark romance featuring the kind of toxic love that leads to accidental pregnancy, shattered trust, and the kind of second chance that doesn't come easy. A relationship that breaks you down... And builds you into something stronger.

Summer Blake has spent her whole life loving Connor McIntyre—her brother's best friend, the boy everyone warned her about. He was chaos wrapped in leather and smoke, a walking mistake she promised herself she'd never make. But one reckless night changed everything.

Now she's pregnant, alone, and trying to rebuild her life in a town that never lets you outrun your past.

Cut off from his privileged world, Connor is spiraling fast, and doesn't even know she's carrying his child. With old wounds still bleeding and new ones opening, neither of them is ready for what's coming.

Now, Summer and Connor have to decide if what's left between them is worth saving—or if it's just another beautiful disaster waiting to happen.

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Summer

I shouldn't be here.

I knew it before I slid behind the wheel, before my fingers clenched too tightly around it, before the streetlights blurred past in streaks of regret. My pulse pounded a steady don't do this, don't do this, don't do this—but I never turned around.

Not even when I parked. Not even when I sat in my car, staring at Connor's front door, heart hammering.

The vibration in my lap made me jump.

Victor: We're leaving early tomorrow. Don't stay out too late.

My throat went tight. I stared at the words like I could rewrite them, then swiped the notification away. I was a shitty sister. Vic had no idea where I was. No idea who I was about to see. And still, I got out.

The night was thick and humid, heat clinging to my skin as I crossed the pavement, climbed the stairs, and stopped in front of his door. My breath was uneven. My nerves crackled under my skin.

I knocked. Sharp. Insistent.

The door swung open. Connor McIntyre leaned against the frame, wearing just a pair of gray sweatpants, shirtless and sweat-slicked, blond hair a tousled mess. My

stomach twisted. I should've left. I should have turned around before I saw something I couldn't unsee.

But I didn't.

Connor's green eyes flicked over me, his brow creasing. "Summer?" His voice was rough—sleep-laced, whiskey-soaked. Maybe both.

I swallowed hard. "Connor, I—" The words tangled in my throat. "Please let me in."

A pause. His lips moved, like he might say yes. Then he pressed them together and shook his head. "No. I can't do this tonight, Summer."

He started to close the door.

"Why?" I blurted. My voice was sharp. "Is someone else here?"

It wouldn't be the first time. This—whatever the fuck it was—was just sex.

His eyes darkened. For a second, I thought he'd deny it. But he didn't. Somehow, that was worse.

Panic flared. I moved without thinking, pressing my hand flat against the door as he tried to shut it again.

"Connor, please." My voice cracked. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

His gaze locked onto mine, something flickering beneath the surface. He saw too much—he always did. But fuck, this thing between us had lasted a year, and the thought of leaving, of leaving him, left me in knots.

“What the hell are you doing here, Summer?” His voice was rough.

I swallowed. “I don’t know.”

He dragged a hand through his messy blond waves, shaking his head. “You always do this,” he muttered. “Why do you make this harder for yourself, baby?”

His words hit me with all the force of a slap. The endearment... what he was saying. One part of me was addicted to hearing him call me by a nickname, the other part furious that he wasn’t fighting for me. For us.

It’s just sex, I reminded myself.

“Do what?” I snapped.

“Show up when you shouldn’t.” His green eyes burned into mine. “We agreed this wouldn’t happen again.”

I opened my mouth. Closed it.

He shook his head, stepping back, his expression unreadable. “You’re leaving town in a few hours, Summer.” His voice curled like smoke, like the words tasted bad. “Why the fuck are you here when you should be packing?”

It sliced through me. He was right. I should be.

“Are you really so eager to see me go?” I shot back, my voice sharp enough to mask the ache beneath it.

His lips sneered, but there was no humor in it. “We weren’t ever anything serious, Summer. I’m done keeping secrets from Vic. It should never have gone on for as long

as it did.” His voice was cold now. “You should go.”

Hearing my brother’s name—our secret laid out like a threat—made my stomach lurch. Vic would kill me if he knew. But still, I didn’t leave—somehow, the thought of doing that hurt me worse.

“Summer,” Connor warned, his voice rough.

I took a breath, ready to say something—anything—but I faltered.

Seeing my indecision did something to him. Connor ran his fingers over his lips and swore under his breath. “Fuck it.”

In a swift motion, he grabbed my wrist and yanked me inside. The door slammed shut. My back hit it hard. And before I could breathe, before I could think—

His mouth was on mine, rough and desperate, and my body answered before my mind could. His hands grabbed my waist, fingers digging in like he was afraid I’d disappear.

I tangled my hands in his hair and pulled him closer, needing more—but he tore away, breath ragged, forehead pressing against mine. His fingers circled my wrist, his thumb brushing over my pulse—measuring just how much he still owned me.

His next kiss was harder.

Frustrated. Desperate. A clash of teeth and tongues and too many unsaid words. His hands were everywhere.

I met him with equal force, nails digging into his shoulders, matching his frustration with my own.

My whimpers were swallowed instantly as he sucked on my tongue, his hands sliding beneath my shirt, scorching against my bare skin.

And when he lifted me, pressed me against the door, stripped me down to my underwear—I let him.

Because this was goodbye. Because no one else would ever make me feel this way.

His body was all heat and hard muscle, his mouth tracing over my jaw, my throat, the hollow between my collarbones. Licking. Sucking. Biting.

I gasped when he picked me up properly, hands around my thighs until I wrapped them around his waist tightly. The same way I wrapped my arms around his neck, clinging to him as he carried me through the living room and down the hall.

Connor's breath hissed into my mouth when I bit his bottom lip, sucking on it and only letting go to groan when my back thumped against a wall. He used the momentum to rock into me, cock hard and teasing.

It distracted me so much, I barely registered the moment he pulled me away and walked through the door of his bedroom.

Not until my back hit the mattress. All I could focus on was him—the press of his lips, the teasing hum that rumbled from his chest as his fingers pressed against my soaked panties.

The fabric tore, my panties were discarded. Two fingers slipped inside me—shallow, teasing, not nearly enough. My breath hitched, and his smirk deepened.

“Connor—”

“Headboard,” he ordered.

My stomach flipped. My thighs clenched. I twisted onto my belly then reached up, curling my fingers around the wood.

Connor growled his approval, his hands already reaching out to strip me bare—slow, deliberate. My clothes landed somewhere on his bedroom floor. His hands reached to touch me, palming my breasts and stroked my body before pulling away again.

I heard a zipper, and couldn’t resist peeking at him over my shoulder.

My mouth went dry at the sight of his jeans crumpling to the floor and his cock in his hands.

Connor was big—thick, hard, veined—and he knew it.

He grabbed his cock as he climbed onto the bed, pulling back my hips to drag the tip along my slick folds. “Ready for me, Summer?”

I nodded, tilting my ass higher.

“Good,” he murmured. “Because I’m not stopping.”

Then he slammed into me, and I lost myself.

“You’ll feel my cock for weeks,” he snarled, his thrusts brutal. “No one else will make you feel like this. No one.”

I whined. Each snap of his hips drove me deeper into the mattress, forcing strangled moans from my lips. His fingers digging into my flesh as he stretched me, filled me, claimed me.

He knew my body too well. Knew how I trembled, how I clenched around him, overwhelmed but unwilling to stop.

“Look at you,” he murmured, watching the way I arched into him, the way my thighs quivered. His thumb brushed my clit, slick and swollen, pressing just enough to make my body jerk.

I whimpered.

His lips curled.

“Gonna cum for me, Princess?” His voice was all taunt, all wicked amusement.

I hated him for it. But my body didn’t care. Pleasure coiled tightly, my breath catching as I clenched around him. He felt it—saw it—and his smirk deepened, dragging me to the edge with ruthless precision.

“Connor—” I gasped.

“I know.” His thrusts turned devastating, his fingers pressing, circling—forcing me over.

I shattered.

It was too much. Too intense. I screamed his name, my body locking as waves of pleasure ripped through me.

Connor groaned, his pace faltering, his cock pulsing inside me as his hands returned to my hips and he chased his own release. But it wasn’t enough. Not for him.

His breath was hot against my throat as he rolled his hips, keeping himself buried

deeply as his cock throbbed and jerked inside of me.

My body still trembled, oversensitive, wrecked from the orgasm he tore from me.

The last thing I expected was for him to spread my ass and run a finger over my tight hole.

“Connor.” I stiffened. But he knew how to unravel me. His arm crept around my waist, dipping low between my legs until his fingers could brush my clit. My cunt spasmed at the touch.

“You’re still so fucking wet for me,” he whispered. “Let me in, Summer. I want to feel your ass squeezing my fingers when I make you cum again.”

I should’ve pushed him away. That was a boundary we hadn’t crossed yet—but the thought of leaving made my heart ache.

Connor moved again—his softening cock pushing into me with a slow grind that reached deep enough to make my toes curl. My resolve shattered.

“...Fine.”

His breath hitched. “That’s my girl.”

I wished he’d kiss me, but I settled for his finger pressing into my hole, teasing me open, preparing me. I whimpered, burying my face into his pillow until all I could smell and feel was him .

Connor took his time, stretching my hole slowly but surely and twisting his other fingers around my clit. When my body locked and my breath hitched, when I fought against the stretch , he murmured, “Breathe for me, baby.”

I did.

I couldn't deny him anything.

His fingers stroked, teasing my clit, my body still too raw from my orgasm, too sensitive, too responsive. He felt the way I shuddered, the way my hips twitched against his touch.

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“Tell me you like this,” he whispered, pressing a kiss on my neck. “Tell me you don’t want me to stop.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, hating that he was right. His body weight kept me in place, his thighs pressing against mine, his cock twitching deep inside me. All the sensations... God, it was wonderful.

I bit my lip, hard, trying to keep from making a sound. But Connor could feel it in my body. He could feel the way I tensed, the way my breath hitched, the way I was already melting beneath him, already caving.

His breath caressed my skin. “I’m going to add another finger, baby.”

I let out a shaky breath, fighting against myself.

I should say no. I should push him away.

I should walk away from this for good. But then he moved again—slow, grinding movements that made me aware of exactly how wet I was between my legs.

And how it dripped down my thighs. That combined with how his hands were still teasing my clit, coaxing pleasured spasms between my legs.

My resolve shattered. I turned my face away, ashamed of how easily he won.

“...Fine.”

Connor's breath caught.

"That's my girl." He stopped to pull my arm until I was twisted into a pretzel who could kiss him, and his lips devoured mine, hungry and victorious as he pulled that first finger out and gathered up the wetness before he returned to my ass.

He coaxed his fingers between my cheeks, spreading me, dragging a slick fingertip over the place he wanted and I jerked instinctively, shame crawling up my spine.

"Relax," he murmured against my lips, voice thick with amusement. "Or this is gonna hurt."

I clenched my teeth, face burning. His other hand was still working my clit, fingers slick and insistent, making my hips twitch against him.

"I—" My breath hitched as he pushed just the tip of both fingers inside, slow, careful, but still too much.

I made a noise—something between a whimper and a protest—but he ignored it, easing his fingers deeper while I squeezed on every ridge and bump.

The first knuckle passed and I inhaled a shaky breath while he pushed more.

Until he reached the end of his fingers, and I felt his thumb tease the edge of my pussy, where his cock was slowly starting to harden again.

I whimpered against his mouth, and felt Connor's teeth scrape against my lower lip, felt the heat of his breath as he slowly started thrusting two fingers inside my asshole, using his thighs to spread me even wider beneath him.

"There you go," he murmured and I pulled away to bury my face in the mattress,

trying to ignore how exposed I was, how my body was betraying me, how Connor was watching me squirm for him.

“You’re so fucking tight,” he rasped as he dragged his finger in and out, slowly, deliberately, making me feel every stretch, every invasion, every filthy movement.

“God, I hate you,” I whispered, but it came out too breathless, too weak.

Connor chuckled, but sounded forced. “If you did, we wouldn’t be in this position, Summer.”

Tears pressed against my eyes, and I choked on a sob. God, I was going to miss him.

He added another finger, forcing me open more, his other hand teasing my clit, keeping me distracted, trapped between pain and pleasure. The pressure built. The burn of stretching, of being spread for him, sent a fresh wave of shame curling through me.

Connor pressed a kiss against my cheek, mockingly sweet, before murmuring, "You take me so fucking well, baby." Then, finally, he pulled his fingers free and reached for his wallet.

I heard the rip of foil. He pulled his cock out of me. My breath hitched. Please, god, don’t tell me he was going to... “Connor—”

"Shh," he murmured, I heard the slick sound of him pumping his cock. “Don’t move.”

I didn’t, frozen in place as his heavy cock brushed against me again. Not my pussy, but my ass.

“Connor,” I whispered again, hearing the click of a bottle cap. Cold liquid squirted on my ass and I squealed as he thrust it into my tight hole, spreading me wide and squirting more, deep inside. “Connor!”

“Breathe for me, baby.”

I barely got a chance to inhale before he pushed in. Fuck, it was so big. I cried out, my whole body locking up as he stretched me, claimed me, forced me to take every inch of him.

“Fuck, Summer,” he groaned, burying himself deeper, forcing me open more than I already was.

The burn was sharp, overwhelming, consuming—but he didn’t stop. He rolled his hips, inching in deeper, his breath hot against my neck, his voice hoarse with restraint.

“So fucking tight,” he rasped. “So fucking perfect.”

I whimpered, cheeks burning, shame taking over, mixing with a dark pleasure I’d never felt before. Connor took his time, making me feel every ridge, every inch of him.

I clawed at the sheets, body aching, shaking, overwhelmed—but when his fingers found my clit again, teasing, circling, pressing, I broke all over again. I came harder than ever before, screaming as every muscle inside of me clenched. As my ass milked him, giving him exactly what he wanted.

Connor fucking lost it.

With a ragged growl, he thrust deeply one last time, his whole body tensing, his cock

jerking inside me as he came hard, emptying himself into the condom, holding me tight against him as if he could keep me there forever.

For a moment, there was nothing but heavy breathing, the sound of skin against skin, the lingering pulse of shared pleasure.

Then Connor pulled out, discarded the condom, and scooped me into his arms.

I blinked, too exhausted, too drained, too overwhelmed to react as he carried me through the dim apartment. My breath hitched when I realized where he was taking me. The bathroom. He set me down gently, flipping the shower on before grabbing a towel.

This wasn't what we did. We fucked. We used each other. We didn't take care of each other. But Connor didn't speak. Didn't let me go.

He cleaned me all over, his hands slow, methodical, lingering just a little too long, like he wasn't ready to stop touching me yet and I tried not to cry.

We showered, and my heart felt like it was breaking the entire time. I could barely look at him as he washed the both of us. It wasn't supposed to be this hard to let him go.

I got out of the shower, grabbing a towel and watching him in the mirror. God, if he just asked—I'd stay. There wasn't a home without him.

But he didn't. I dried myself and Connor finished washing. My heart broke again, and I wiped away the tears before he could see. I should've known it wouldn't be that easy.

"You should probably go," Connor said, his voice rough, scratchy. "You've got an

early start in the morning, right?"

It shouldn't have hurt. But I'd be lying if I said it didn't.

"Yeah," I whispered. "You're right." I swallowed hard and walked out of the bathroom, my eyes blurry from tears as I searched for my clothes, pulling them on with shaking hands.

I couldn't leave without looking back to see him one last time. I stopped in the door frame and turned to find him walking to his bed with a towel around his hips as he looked around for his cigarettes.

His back was to me, and my heart shattered all over again. This would be the last time we'd ever do this. I wanted him to stop me. To ask me to stay. But he didn't. He just lit a cigarette.

So I whispered, "Goodbye, Connor," and walked out the door.

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Connor

I shouldn't have checked my phone again. But I couldn't seem to help myself. I pulled it out of my pocket and returned to the group chat I had with the guys. Vic's message was still waiting for my reply, but I didn't know what to say.

Vic: Sorry man, can't make it. Heading up to see Summer this weekend. Gotta check how she's settling in.

I was the one who asked if he was busy. It was a casual, throwaway question. One I almost hadn't sent, like some part of me already knew I wouldn't like the answer. But then Vic had to go and type out her name and my mind was in turmoil all over again.

Two months.

It had been two months since she walked out my door, since I let her leave. Since I watched her disappear, knowing I couldn't stop her, knowing I wasn't supposed to.

I ran a hand down my face and locked my phone, setting it facedown on the desk.

The moment it left my fingers, I wanted to pick it up again.

I wanted to open up the last text message I received from her, the one that told me she'd arrived at her new apartment safely.

The one that told me to message if I needed anything.

The one that had been sitting on my phone for two months without a reply from me.

I wanted to reply now. Check if she texted me back. If she still thought about me. But I knew better than to open that can of worms. I pressed my thumb against the rim of my cup and dug it in, grounding myself in the sharp bite of pain. It was better than messaging my best friend's little sister.

My office door was thrown open, and it slammed into the wall, leaving a crack in the plaster. I didn't flinch.

"Where the hell have you been?" David McIntyre's voice was cold, quiet—the kind of quiet that made your blood turn to ice.

I took a sip of coffee before looking up to see my father in the doorway.

David stepped inside and shut the door behind him, his jaw ticking and his steps quiet. Deliberate. His nose flared as he took in the sight of me.

It wasn't a good sign.

He didn't speak right away. Just stood there, watching me, like he was already making his decision about how this was going to go. I knew that look, but for the first time in my life, I couldn't have cared less what the fuck he wanted to do with me.

"Three hours late." His voice was calm. Too calm. "You were supposed to be here at eight."

I dragged my gaze to the clock, and yeah, it was a quarter past eleven. Any other day, I would've cared about that, but not today. I set my coffee down, leaned back in my chair, and shrugged. "Got held up."

His jaw ticked again. "Doing what?"

Thinking about Summer. Trying to distract myself with another blonde who sucked cock like it was her favorite thing in the world. He would've murdered me if I said that though, so I shrugged instead. "Sleeping."

The air shifted. Just a little. Barely enough to notice. But I felt it.

"You think this is funny?" His voice stayed smooth, controlled, but I could hear it—the edge. The thing buried under the surface.

I smirked. "You think I'd bother showing up if I did?"

His nostrils flared. "The client left. Aiden had to cover for you."

"Sounds like he handled it."

His fingers flexed at his sides, and I looked out the window, seeing the hundred or so sparkling new cars in the parking lot.

He'd chosen to come in now because everyone else was far too fucking busy trying to make their sales for the month that they wouldn't hear if he shouted. It didn't bode well for me.

That was the thing about my father. He didn't lash out immediately. He liked restraint. He liked control. He liked making you wait for it.

"That's not the point, Connor," he said, voice measured.

I tilted my head. "No? What is the point?"

"You've been fucking around for months." His tone didn't rise, but his eyes burned. "Drinking. Showing up late. Talking back. Making a goddamn fool of yourself in front of clients. And for what?"

I let the words settle. "Guess I'm just tired of putting on a show."

Unlike him.

"Tired?" His lip curled into a sneer. "You're not tired, you're fucking spoiled."

I should've left it alone.

I should've nodded, apologized, let him believe he'd won.

But my chest was too tight. My blood ran too hot. And this—this was better than sitting at my desk staring at Vic's fucking message, thinking about Summer.

So I leaned forward, resting my arms on my desk. "Must be exhausting, Dad. Keeping up the perfect businessman act when we both know you're just a fucking—"

The punch landed before I finished the sentence. Fast. Hard. Bone against bone. I hadn't even seen him leap over my desk, but he'd done it in seconds. Guess it paid to be a retired athlete.

Pain exploded along my jaw, sharp and brutal, my head snapping sideways from the impact. A breath caught in my throat. My ears rang. And for a second, I just sat there, still, my body processing the hit, the metallic taste of blood coating my tongue.

It wasn't the first time I'd bit it. I learned long ago that it was easier to just roll with the punches, literally and figuratively, when it came to my father.

Blood smeared across my knuckles. "Feel better?" My voice came out low, rasping.

David shook out his hand like he wasn't the one at fault. Like I'd made him do it. I bet it fucking killed him that I wasn't on the floor, wasn't apologizing, scrambling to fix whatever I'd broken. That's the thing about growing up, though. You stopped reacting to shit you knew was coming.

"You better come in early tomorrow," he said, his voice low. "I'm doubling your sales expectations for the month and if you don't make it, then you're out of here."

Like I gave a fuck. I smiled, slow and sharp, and leaned back in my chair. "You done?"

His hand twitched. A flicker of movement, like he might swing again. But then his eyes darted toward the door. Laughter reached my ears, an employee entering the building. And just like that, he smoothed out his tie. The businessman act slid back into place. He exhaled, rolling his eyes.

But his voice was quieter when he spoke. "Get your shit together, Connor. Or I'll do it for you."

Then he turned and walked out, the door slamming behind him. I sat there, blood on the back of my hand, jaw aching, pulse pounding in my ears. And for the first time that morning—I didn't think about Summer fucking Blake.

The door didn't open right away. I heard the knock first. Light. Two short taps. A pause. Another. Then it creaked open, and Aiden stood in the doorway, leaning on his cane and holding a bag of ice with his other hand. His green eyes flicked over me.

I sighed and wiped my mouth again, smearing more blood onto my knuckles. "You know, you don't have to knock. You're my brother, not my fucking secretary."

Aiden stepped inside without a word. He closed the door with his foot, his cane tapping against the floor as he walked over to my desk. The limp was slight, but I knew he was in pain. He always was.

He tossed the ice pack onto my desk. "For your face."

I glanced at it but didn't pick it up.

Aiden dropped into the chair across from me, resting his cane against the armrest. "What happened?"

I huffed out a laugh. "What do you think?"

"You pushed him again, didn't you?"

I smirked. "Define 'push.'"

Aiden didn't look amused. He reached for the ice pack himself, popped it against my bruising jaw, and held it there when I didn't move. The cold bit into my skin, sending a dull ache down my face. I sucked in a sharp breath and knocked his hand away.

"Jesus, I can do it myself," I muttered, snatching the ice pack.

He sat back, watching me. "You could've just shown up on time."

"You could've just minded your own business," I shot back.

Aiden didn't blink. "Not when you pull this shit. Not when I know exactly what you're doing."

I held the ice against my jaw, keeping my expression neutral. "Do you?"

"Yeah, I do."

I scoffed. "Alright, Dr. Phil, go ahead. Diagnose me."

Aiden didn't take the bait. He just leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. His voice dropped low, even. "You wanted him to hit you." I went still, and he studied me, waiting for me to deny it. I couldn't. He shook his head. "That's not normal, Connor."

I let out a slow breath and shifted in my chair, tossing the ice pack onto the desk. The cold had started to burn. "Yeah, well, neither is growing up with him as a father. Can't exactly get angry at me for being fucked after everything that's happened."

Aiden dragged a hand over his face, exhaustion leaking into his features. He looked older than he should have. Some days, he felt like my older brother. Other days, he felt like the only adult left in the room.

"Look, I get it," he said. "You're pissed off. You feel like shit. You think acting out is gonna make it better, but it won't."

I smirked. "And here I thought you were the smart one. It already made me feel better."

Aiden's eyes flashed with something sharp. "Do you think this is a fucking game?"

I arched my brow. "No. I think it's a fucking joke."

His nostrils flared. Not because he was angry. Because he was frustrated. Because he'd been trying to pull me back from this edge for months, and I kept pushing further, seeing how close I could get before I finally tipped over.

Aiden let out a slow breath, steadying himself.

I expected him to start on his whole forgiveness bullshit again, but he didn't.

His expression was carefully neutral—but I wasn't stupid.

I knew that look. He was pissed. Not our father's kind of pissed, not the simmering, restrained kind of rage that made the air feel heavy.

No, this was worse. This was Aiden being disappointed.

"You need to get your shit together," he said. No preamble. No room for me to brush it off.

I huffed out a laugh and leaned back in my chair. "You and Dad are rehearsing your speeches together now?"

Aiden's jaw twitched, but his voice stayed even. "No speeches. Just facts."

I didn't say anything. Didn't need to. I could feel him waiting. I stared at my desk instead, watching the way my fingers tapped against the wood. My stomach still felt like shit from the night before.

Aiden sighed. "Connor."

"What?"

"You tell me. What the fuck's going on, man?"

If I knew the answer to that, I'd be able to solve the fucking problem. But I didn't. So, I scoffed, shaking my head. "You're gonna have to be more specific."

Aiden let out a slow breath, the kind that meant he was choosing his words carefully. “You were late. Hungover. Again.”

“And?” I shrugged.

“And,” he said, his voice low but firm, “Dad’s looking for a reason to be an asshole.”

I met his gaze now, smirking. “Why? He doesn’t usually need one.”

Aiden didn’t smile.

I sighed, dragging a hand through my hair. “Jesus, Aiden, you here to lecture me? Because if so, you can save your breath—”

“What’s going on with you?”

That made me pause. I knew this game. Aiden didn’t come at people head-on. He wasn’t like Dad. He pushed softly, gave you space to walk yourself right into admitting the truth. I didn’t take the bait. I stretched my arms, feigning a yawn. “Dunno, man. Just bored, I guess.”

My brother’s eyes narrowed slightly. Shit. Maybe that was too casual. So, I grabbed my coffee, taking a slow sip. “You’re making a big deal out of nothing.”

“Am I?”

“Yeah.” I leaned back, forcing a lazy smirk. “Come on, you’ve seen me doing worse.”

His lips pressed into a thin line. Yeah. He had. We both had. That was the problem. Aiden sighed. “Mom’s staying with me again.”

My fingers stilled against the desk. I placed my coffee down slowly, leveling him with a look. “For how long?”

Aiden’s mouth twitched, hesitation flickering behind his eyes. That was all I needed to know. I sucked in a slow breath. “Connor,” Aiden said carefully.

I forced a smirk. “What, did she miss your cooking?”

He didn’t laugh and my smirk dropped. I breathed out, trying to push back the sudden tightness in my chest. “Is she okay?”

“She’s fine.” Aiden’s voice was too even. “I took her to the hospital. It’s only a broken wrist this time.”

“You’ve been pushing him,” Aiden continued. “Showing up late, talking back, making it real fucking easy for him to snap.”

I let out a slow breath. “Yeah, well, it’s not like he needs an excuse.”

“No, but you’re giving him one anyway.” My stomach turned at his words, and Aiden leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. His voice softened—not gentle, but steady. A warning, not a plea. “You can fight him all you want, Connor, but Mom’s still the one picking up the pieces.”

Something cold settled in my chest. There it was. Reached for my coffee again just to have something to do with my hands.

I hated that he was right. I hated that he was sitting here, trying to get me to see the reason, trying to fix me before Dad made me someone who couldn’t be fixed. Hated that a part of me wanted to listen. I took another sip of coffee, swallowing the bitterness. “You done?”

Aiden studied me for a long moment. Then he sighed, shaking his head as he stood up. “Not even close.”

He didn’t wait for me to say anything else. He just walked to the door. Paused. Then, without looking back, he said, “You keep going like this, it’s not gonna be long before Dad finally loses his shit for real.”

Then he left.

I let out a slow breath, staring at the door long after it shut.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Summer

The knock came just as I flattened out the last corner of the sheet on Vic's makeshift bed.

I stepped back, tilting my head, evaluating my work.

It wasn't perfect—the sheets were a little wrinkled from being stuffed in my suitcase, and the pillowcase didn't quite match the comforter—but it would do.

At least I'd managed to put something together before he arrived.

I wanted it to feel like home, or at least as close to home as I could make it.

The knock came again, louder this time.

"Alright, alright," I called, hurrying toward the door, smoothing my shirt down as I reached for the handle.

When I swung it open, Vic stood on the other side, grinning like he hadn't just spent four hours in the car.

"What, no balloons? No welcome banner?" he teased, stepping inside before I could invite him in. He set his bag down by the couch and stretched. "You're slacking, little sister."

"Yeah, well, the parade got rained out."

He huffed out a laugh and pulled me in for a quick hug, squeezing just a little too tight before letting me go. “I missed you, kid.”

I swallowed against the lump in my throat and stepped back, forcing a smile. “Missed you too.”

It wasn’t a lie. I did miss him—more than I wanted to admit. But having Vic here, standing in my tiny new apartment, made something twist in my chest. It felt like I was seeing a ghost of my past life. My real life. The one I left behind.

And that life included Connor and the pseudo-relationship we’d had. I pushed the thought away before it could take root.

“C’mon, I made up the couch for you,” I said, stepping aside and motioning toward the setup. “Not exactly five-star accommodations, but...”

Vic flopped onto the couch with zero hesitation, bouncing slightly on the cushions before stretching out with a satisfied sigh. “Nah, this is great.” His hand patted the pillow. “Hotel Blake has top-tier service.”

I snorted, shaking my head as I moved back toward the boxes I had yet to unpack. “Is this all that’s left?” he asked, eyeing the small stack.

“Yeah. Just random stuff. Nothing important.”

That was only half true. Most of what was left were things I didn’t need right away—some books, a few decorative things, old keepsakes I wasn’t sure why I even brought. Things I had packed and unpacked three times before finally setting them aside for later.

And now, later had arrived.

I bent down, prying open a box, the scent of old paper and forgotten memories hitting me at once. The first thing I pulled out was a framed photo of Vic and me from two summers ago. He had me in a headlock, both of us grinning like idiots.

I smiled, brushing my fingers over the glass. “Remember this?”

Vic peered over the back of the couch, his grin widening. “Damn, I forgot about that day. We’d just finished that insane hike, right?”

“The one you swore would only take an hour?” I shot him a pointed look.

He laughed. “Hey, I was mostly right.”

I rolled my eyes, setting the frame aside before reaching for another item.

My fingers brushed against something soft, and when I pulled it out, my stomach clenched.

A hoodie. Connor’s hoodie. I didn’t even remember packing it.

Didn’t remember shoving it into the bottom of this box.

But now it was here, in my hands, the fabric worn and familiar, the scent of him long gone but still there in a way I couldn’t explain.

I should put it back. I should shove it to the bottom of the box and pretend I never saw it. Vic could recognize it. He’d have questions. But putting it away felt like an impossibility.

Instead, I swallowed hard and set it in my lap, keeping my hands busy smoothing out invisible wrinkles.

Vic, thankfully, hadn't noticed. He was too busy stretching out on the couch, rubbing a hand over his face.

"You hungry?" I asked quickly, my voice a little too high.

"Starving."

"Pizza?"

"Always."

I grabbed my phone and pulled up the delivery app, pretending to focus on scrolling through the menu while my heart raced for an entirely different reason. Because now, Connor was in my head. And I couldn't shake him.

The pizza arrived twenty minutes later, and by then, I'd managed to shove Connor's hoodie back into the box, out of sight but nowhere near out of mind.

Vic had kicked his feet up on the coffee table, flipping through channels on my tiny TV while I set the food down on the counter.

"Pepperoni and extra cheese," I announced, opening the box and inhaling the scent of melted cheese and garlic. "Your usual."

Vic turned, grinning. "God, I raised you right."

I snorted, tossing him a paper plate before grabbing a slice for myself. "Alright, college girl," he said, taking a huge bite and talking around a mouthful. "How's it feeling?"

I shrugged, chewing slowly. “Like I’m in someone else’s apartment.”

Vic arched a brow. “That bad?”

“No,” I admitted. “Just... weird. Like, I’ve been looking forward to this for years, you know? Getting out, starting over. And now that I’m here, I don’t know... I thought it would feel different.”

Vic nodded, wiping his fingers on a napkin. “That’s normal. First year’s gonna be an adjustment. But you’ll settle in.”

“I know.” I nudged my crust across my plate, suddenly restless. “Just wish it didn’t feel so...”

Lonely.

Empty.

Wrong.

Vic watched me for a second, then smirked. “You need to stop overthinking. You got your classes all set?”

I nodded. “Yeah. The first day is Monday. Intro psych, English comp, and some gen eds. Nothing crazy.” I hadn’t decided on a major yet, but Vic was pushing for me to study business like he had.

“You’ll be fine,” he assured me. “I mean, don’t procrastinate or anything, but if you do, at least make sure you’re drinking something decent while you pull all-nighters.”

I scrubbed my jaw. “Solid advice, big brother.”

He grinned. “That’s what I’m here for.”

We ate in comfortable silence for a while, the TV playing some random sitcom in the background. I let the moment settle, let myself enjoy it, but as soon as Vic reached for another slice, I saw my opening.

“So,” I said casually, picking at my crust. “Have you talked to Connor lately?”

Vic didn’t even pause. “Yeah, I saw him a few days ago.”

I fought to keep my expression neutral. “Oh, yeah? How’s he doing?”

Vic shrugged. “Same as ever. Working, drinking, fucking anything that moves.” He smirked, like it was some kind of inside joke.

My stomach twisted. I waited, hoping he’d say more, but when he didn’t, I pressed on. “How are things going with Aiden?”

Vic arched a brow, chewing slowly before swallowing. “Why?”

I forced a small laugh. “No reason. Just... I dunno.” Except, I did.

Connor always worried about his brother and his mom.

I could never figure out why, and he always tried to make it seem like he couldn't care less. But on the nights when we were laying in his bed, he’d start talking, I’d run my hands over his chest...

and God, it used to feel like we were more than just fuck buddies.

I couldn’t exactly tell my brother that, though. “Never mind, I guess I’m just missing

home,” I tried to joke.

Vic frowned, leaning back against the couch. “He hasn’t said much. I think he’s just been busy.”

Busy.

That word sat heavy in my chest, even though I had no right to be upset. I was the one who left. I was the one who walked out of his apartment, knowing it was over.

I shouldn’t care.

But I did.

“Why, are you missing home already ?” Vic nudged my foot with his.

I forced a smirk. “Just a new place, new rules. I guess I’m struggling to fit into a normal life now that I left you all back in Reverence.”

Vic chuckled, shaking his head. “You’re impossible.”

I hummed in response, but my mind was spinning.

I should be relieved that he bought that. Instead, it just made the apartment feel a little colder.

Vic polished off his last slice and stretched out with a satisfied groan. “God, I needed that.”

I nodded, but my mind was still stuck on Connor. He hasn’t said much.

That shouldn't bother me. I shouldn't care that he wasn't talking, or that he hadn't even answered the message I sent him that night I got to my apartment feeling like I'd left a piece of my heart back home. This was exactly what I'd wanted, right? A clean break.

Then why did it feel like I'd been the only one who actually had to suffer through it?

I swallowed hard and forced myself to focus back on Vic, who was now eyeing me with a look that made me uneasy. "What?" I asked, feigning innocence.

"You tell me," he shot back, tilting his head. "Something's up with you."

Shit. That was exactly what I needed, Vic getting suspicious the one weekend he was here just to visit.

God, now I had to figure out something to say that wouldn't make his protective instincts that much worse.

I shrugged, reaching for my soda to buy myself a second to think. "Just tired. A lot on my mind."

Vic didn't look convinced. "You sure?"

"Positive." I took a sip, hoping he'd drop it. "So, tell me more about what I should expect. Any horror stories from your freshman year?"

That did the trick. Vic relaxed back into the couch, launching into some story about a guy from his dorm who almost set the fire alarms off making grilled cheese with an iron. I let him talk, nodding in all the right places, laughing at his ridiculous descriptions.

But even as I smiled, my thoughts drifted. Connor . What was he doing right now? Was he with someone now? Another girl he could bury his dick into just to forget he had a heart? Did he ever think about me at all? I hated that I even wanted to know. I hated that it still hurt.

“...and then the RA walked in, and this guy just bolts , leaving the iron in the middle of the room,” Vic was saying, shaking his head. “Dumbass got written up, but honestly? Worth it.”

I snorted. “You really met the best people in college, huh?”

“Oh, for sure,” he said, grinning. “And don’t even get me started on group projects. Hope you like doing 90% of the work, because—”

Ding.

My phone lit up on the table, cutting him off.

I didn’t know why my stomach flipped, why my stupid heart jumped for just a second before my brain caught up. It wouldn’t be him. It wouldn’t—

Vic leaned over and glanced at my screen. “Who’s texting you this late?”

I grabbed my phone before he could see, turning it over. “Just an email from school,” I lied. “Probably about class.”

Vic yawned, stretching again. “Ah, right. You got all those new people to meet now.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, staring down at my phone. It wasn’t Connor. Of course it wasn’t. I should stop waiting for something that is never going to come.

Vic stood up to grab another slice of pizza. “Alright, I’m wiped. You gonna be up much longer?”

I shook my head. “Nah, I’ll probably turn in soon.”

“Cool. Thanks for letting me crash.”

I smiled, though it felt a little forced. “Anytime.”

He ruffled my hair on his way to the couch, and I let him, too tired to protest.

As he settled in, I grabbed my phone, checking the message in the privacy of my bedroom. It wasn’t Connor. But it didn’t stop me from staring at my screen, wondering what he was doing. Wondering if he ever stared at his phone, wondering about me.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Connor

The blonde was still in my bed when I rolled out of it.

I barely remembered her name. Mandy? Mindy? Something with an M. Didn't matter. I shoved my hands in my pockets, wincing at the dull throb behind my eyes. My mouth was dry as hell, tasting like whiskey and regret, but mostly whiskey.

"Morning," she murmured, stretching out in my sheets, her lips curling into a lazy smile. She reached for me, bare legs tangled in my comforter. "Come back to bed."

I scoffed, bending down to snatch her bra off the floor. "Yeah, that's not happening."

Her smile faltered. "What?"

"Get up. I gotta go." I tossed her bra onto the bed, then grabbed the rest of her clothes, throwing them at her one by one. A dress. A single high heel. A scrap of lace that barely counted as underwear.

She blinked, clearly not used to this routine. "Wait—are you serious?"

I shot her a look. "Do I look like I'm joking?"

The answer was obvious. I wasn't in the mood to play nice.

I was late. Again. And the last thing I needed was some girl making this morning harder than it already was.

I put on the first pair of jeans I could find, a wrinkled T-shirt next, barely bothering to check if it was clean.

Didn't have time for that. Didn't have time for a shower either, even though I probably smelled like sweat, sex, and bad decisions.

She finally sat up, huffing as she pulled her dress over her head. "Wow. Charming."

I ignored her, grabbing my keys off the dresser.

"You're an asshole," she snapped, slipping on her heels.

I smirked, holding the door open. "And you're still here."

Her eyes narrowed, but she didn't argue. She grabbed her bag and stormed past me, the sharp click of her heels against my hardwood floor the only sound as she slammed the door behind her.

I sighed, running a hand down my face.

Late. Again.

Traffic was a bitch.

I drummed my fingers against the steering wheel, my jaw tight, my head pounding. The clock on the dash mocked me, the red numbers glaring.

11:14.

I was supposed to be at the dealership at ten today.

By the time I finally pulled into the lot, my father was waiting.

David McIntyre stood at the front doors, arms crossed over his chest, posture stiff as he watched me climb out of my car. Aiden was next to him, leaning on his cane, his expression unreadable.

My stomach twisted.

Fuck.

I shoved my hands into my pockets, as I made my way toward them. My father didn't say a word, didn't move, didn't blink—just turned and strode into the building without looking at me.

Aiden breathed, shaking his head. "You really gonna keep doing this, man?"

I didn't answer. Didn't have to.

I followed them inside, the air-conditioned lobby a stark contrast to the suffocating heat outside. The employees barely spared me a glance, used to my shit by now. But there was tension in the air, thick and heavy, crawling under my skin.

David led the way, straight into the conference room, and as soon as the door shut behind us—

"Sit."

I smirked. "Not a dog, Dad."

"Sit. Down."

His voice was sharp. I dragged the chair out slowly, deliberately, sinking into it as Aiden dropped into the seat beside me. My father stayed standing, his fingers braced against the table, his knuckles white.

"You think this is a joke?" His voice was quiet. Too quiet. It made my stomach knot.

I leaned back, stretching out my legs. "Guess it depends on what this is."

David's nostrils flared. "You show up late every goddamn day. You drink yourself stupid every goddamn night. And now, now you're showing up looking like you crawled out of a fucking dumpster."

"Come on, it's every third night," I said lazily. "Don't you think you're being a little dramatic?"

"Shut your mouth."

I tilted my head, but I did.

He ran a hand over his mouth, exhaling through his nose like he was this close to snapping.

"I've given you every opportunity," he said, voice controlled, like he was struggling to rein it in.

"Handed you a job. A career. You could have been something.

And this—" he gestured to me, his lip curling in disgust "—is what you choose to do with it? "

I clenched my jaw.

Aiden cleared his throat. "Dad—"

"You stay out of this," my father snapped.

Aiden's mouth pressed into a thin line, but he didn't argue.

David turned back to me. "You have two choices, Connor. You either straighten the fuck up and start acting like a McIntyre—"

I snorted. " A McIntyre? "

Should I marry a woman half my age and beat her every weekend? Would that make him feel better about how I acted? Would it make me seem more like him?

He slammed his fist on the table. The whole room shook. "DON'T FUCKING INTERRUPT ME!"

I let him believe I was thinking it over. My father's eyes darkened. His hands flexed, the veins in his neck taut with fury. "Get the fuck out of my sight," he bit out.

I stood, shoving my chair back. "Gladly."

I turned, already making my way to the door, when his voice stopped me cold. "And you better start packing your shit at the apartment."

I froze. David's voice was calm. Too calm. That was the worst part.

"I'm selling it this afternoon."

"You're fucking joking."

His expression didn't waver. "You wanna fuck around and find out?"

I barely remembered walking to my car.

One second, I was in that conference room, my father's voice ringing in my ears, and the next, I was sitting in the driver's seat, my hands clenched in my lap. My pulse roared, my blood fucking boiling, but the worst part? I didn't even know where the fuck I was supposed to go.

Fired. Homeless. And all before noon. This had to be a personal best for fuck ups. I guess I could add it to the list along with ruining Quinn's reputation, and fucking my best friend's little sister.

I clenched my jaw, staring straight ahead through the windshield. The dealership's parking lot blurred in my vision, the words McIntyre Auto standing out like a fucking joke.

"You gonna drive, or you planning on breaking the wheel first?"

Aiden's voice cut through the static in my head. I hadn't even realized he'd followed me. He leaned against my passenger door, cane braced against the concrete, watching me with that same unreadable expression he always wore when he was trying to figure out how much damage had just been done.

I unlocked the door. "Get in."

He didn't hesitate. Didn't ask where we were going. He just sank into the seat,

shifting to get comfortable with his leg, then let out a slow sigh. "Christ, that was worse than I thought it'd be."

I scoffed, shoving the car into reverse and peeling out of the lot. "Yeah, well, that makes two of us."

The drive was silent.

Or, at least, we didn't talk.

My father's words played on repeat in my head. He was selling my apartment. Where did that leave me then?

Mom's apartment flashed behind my eyes. The smell of burning cigarettes.

The way she'd smile like she hadn't been crying just hours before.

All the bruises I'd seen in different places, and the makeup that rubbed off onto my shirt or skin every time I accidentally brushed a spot she'd tried to cover up.

I swallowed hard. The thought of going back there made my stomach twist. Aiden didn't say a word, but I knew he was watching me.

He didn't speak until we pulled up to my building.

"You want me to come up?"

I stared at the complex like it was a tombstone. I'd never been this upset about losing any other place before. All the houses that Dad dragged us out of when the neighbors found out. "Do whatever you want."

Aiden sighed but didn't argue. He grabbed his cane and stepped out, following me up the stairs as I unlocked the door to what used to be my home.

Everything looked the same.

Couch still messy. Kitchen still a wreck. Empty beer bottles lined the counter, the remnants of last night sitting exactly where I'd left them. The same stale air, the same low hum of the fridge, the same goddamn emptiness.

Except now, it wasn't mine anymore.

The real estate agent will be here soon.

I let out a sharp breath, trying to smother the urge to punch a hole through the fucking wall.

"Fuck," I muttered.

Aiden shut the door behind us and leaned against it, watching me carefully. "Wanna wreck it before he gets here with the estate agent? We can make a huge mess, let them clear it up."

I let out a humorless laugh. "Don't tempt me."

He shrugged. "Just saying. Probably won't help, but might feel good for a second."

He wasn't wrong.

I clenched my teeth, dragging a hand down my face. My jaw still ached from earlier in the week, the dull throb reminding me what was in store if I did exactly that. I wish leaving meant some kind of freedom, but it didn't. Same shit, different angle.

I looked around, suddenly at a loss. My father had yanked the rug out from under me, but the fucked-up part? I wasn't even surprised. He'd probably been waiting for the excuse.

I should have seen it coming.

I should have done something .

Aiden sighed, adjusting his cane. "Look, man. You don't have to figure this all out right now."

"Yeah?" I scoffed. "Then when? Before or after my shit gets thrown out on the curb?"

He didn't flinch. "You can stay with me."

My stomach clenched. I didn't say anything, but Aiden must've caught onto the hesitation, because his voice softened. "Just for now. Until you figure out what you wanna do."

I swallowed, staring at the floor. There was one question I couldn't ask. One I wanted to ask so fucking bad . But I couldn't handle the answer to it. Was Mom there?

Would she be in the apartment, curled up on the couch, eyes red, hands shaking? Would she be avoiding my gaze, the way she always did when things got bad, pretending she couldn't see the bruises on my jaw? Would she act like nothing happened at all?

My jaw locked. I didn't ask. Didn't have the fucking guts. I'd find out anyway when we got there. "Fine."

Aiden didn't press. Didn't ask if I was sure. Didn't say a damn thing. Just turned to

the kitchen and started opening up drawers. Hell , I guess I should get some boxes.

The superintendent had a few spare boxes in the basement, old Amazon packaging and shit from past tenants. He barely glanced at me when I asked. Just handed them over like he was already used to people coming through here, packing up, moving on.

I carried them upstairs, the weight light in my hands but heavy in my fucking chest.

Aiden was in the kitchen, still rummaging through drawers. Probably making sure I didn't forget anything important. Or maybe just giving me space.

I dropped the boxes on the floor and let out a slow breath, staring at them.

Summer did this, too.

I could see her, clear as fucking day, sitting on her bedroom floor back home, shoving clothes into a suitcase.

Her brows furrowed, lip caught between her teeth, eyes glassy but determined.

She was running, but she wouldn't call it that.

Not her. She was leaving for something better. A fresh start. A new life.

She left because she wanted to. Because she chose to.

Me? I wasn't running. I was being shoved the fuck out.

I swallowed hard, my throat dry as I knelt down, opening one of the boxes. The

sound of cardboard scraping against itself filled the silence.

Summer had been here.

She never stayed the night, but she left traces of herself everywhere.

Little things I hadn't thought about in months.

Things I couldn't get rid of. A pack of hair ties tucked under the couch.

A forgotten T-shirt, buried under the mess of clothes in my closet.

A book with a cracked spine that I'd buried in my nightstand drawer, the bookmark still stuck somewhere in the middle.

I reached for it before I could think better of it.

The edges were frayed, the pages worn.

I traced my thumb over the cover, my chest going tight.

She used to sit on the edge of my bed, knees drawn up, reading under the shitty glow of my bedside lamp while I sprawled out beside her, half-listening as she muttered under her breath about the plot. Sometimes she'd read aloud, just to annoy me.

And fuck, I'd let her.

Because she was Summer, and I was weak when it came to her.

I clenched my jaw, flipping it open. Her handwriting was in the margins. Messy. A little rushed. This guy is a fucking idiot.

I let out a loud exhale, something between a scoff and a breath of laughter. One guess who she'd been writing about. I snapped the book shut.

Summer has to pack for something new. Me? I was just trying to hold on to whatever scraps were left. I tossed the book in the box and kept moving. Aiden didn't say anything. He just kept sorting through the cabinets like he hadn't noticed me hesitating.

But I knew he did.

Because Aiden always noticed.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Summer

I was getting ready for class the next morning when I pulled Connor's hoodie over my head before I even realized what I was doing.

The fabric was worn, soft in a way that came from too many washes, too many nights of being thrown to the floor, yanked over his head, shoved into the backseat of his car. It didn't smell like him anymore—just detergent, just me—but I still buried my face in the collar, inhaling deeply, pretending.

I slept in it last night. I wasn't supposed to. I told myself I wouldn't. But when I curled up in bed, staring at the too-white walls, the empty space beside me, I caved. And when I woke up, I didn't take it off. I couldn't.

Even now, standing in the middle of my too-new apartment, I tugged the sleeves over my fingers, playing with the cuffs like they might hold me together. It wasn't about him. Not really. It was about comfort. About familiarity. About pretending, just for a little while, that I wasn't lonely.

Was it wrong for me to say I missed Vic?

He'd left two days ago to get back to Reverence and a small part of me wanted to get on the phone and call him to come back.

Growing up was harder than it seemed when you were the only one making sure you were doing what you were supposed to.

Eating when you were supposed to. Cleaning... the list went on and on.

I set my bag down carefully, like the wrong move might shatter something. Maybe that was stupid. Maybe it was just exhaustion. Or nerves. Or the weight of everything I'd left behind pressing down on me all at once.

My stomach twisted, tight and uncomfortable. I pressed a hand against it, willing the nausea to settle. It was just stress. That's what I told myself. That's all it was.

The air smelled too clean, like fresh carpet and cheap vanilla air freshener. The walls were blank, the furniture generic. It was the kind of place that could belong to anyone. That should have made it easier. A blank slate. A fresh start.

Then why did it still feel like a mistake?

My phone buzzed against the counter. The sound was too loud in the quiet, sharp enough to make me jump. I swallowed hard and turned, already knowing who it would be before I even glanced at the screen.

Victor: Have an awesome first day, kid. Call me afterwards to let me know how it went. Love you.

My throat went tight.

I should answer. I should tell him I was fine, that everything was great, that I didn't feel like I was standing in the wreckage of a life I couldn't go back to.

But I didn't.

Instead, I did my best to try and shake the unease settling deep in my chest. I had to move. Had to distract myself before the silence swallowed me whole. Because the

problem with running from the past wasn't the running.

It was knowing that, sooner or later, it would always catch up.

I sighed again, pressing my fingers against my temples before shoving the phone into my pocket without replying.

Not yet. God only knew what was going on with me today, but I felt like I was one word away from crying like a little baby.

So no, I wasn't going to message Vic back.

I didn't trust myself to talk to him just yet, not even if it was just a message.

Looking around once more, I swallowed, then grabbed my keys and walked out the door.

I hadn't been expecting to see North and Quinn on the first day. North should've been working, and Quinn was two years ahead of me in college. The juniors only returned to school a week later.

I thought I'd have time to adjust to my schedule.

Time to breathe, to build the walls I needed to keep myself from unraveling.

But the universe never really cared about my plans.

I was halfway through the day and exhausted from trying to keep track of everything I needed to do, think, and say around all these new people.

I didn't know anyone, and my stomach was rumbling when I stepped into the campus cafeteria. The campus café was buzzing with life. Students shuffled between tables, trays clattered, conversations overlapped. The scent of coffee and freshly baked bread filled the air. It should have been comforting.

Instead, my stomach twisted with unease. I was waiting in line, trying to convince myself that I felt fine. That I didn't want to go home and cry my heart out over something ridiculous—then the girl in front of me twisted around with her iced coffee in hand, and took one look at me before scowling.

"Summer."

Quinn. Her smile was tight, her eyes unreadable. North stood beside her, I realized dumbly as he turned around. He had his hands in his pockets, and the frown on his face melted as he found me there behind him.

"You're really here," Quinn murmured, shaking her head.

"Yeah," I said, keeping my voice even. "Guess I am."

She scoffed, looking away. "Never thought you'd actually leave town."

"Yeah, well..." I had.

Silence took that statement. Neither Quinn nor I knew how to break it. That's when North nodded at me. The same greeting he'd given me since we were kids. Then he tilted his head. "Vic says you haven't been talking much."

I stiffened. "I've been busy."

North didn't look away. He never did.

I hated this. There was a time when Quinn would have hugged me, when North would have thrown an arm around my shoulders, teased me about being late to everything, and turned the moment into something lighter.

But that time was gone.

Quinn let out a sharp breath. “Why this school, Summer? You could’ve gone anywhere.”

“I wanted to come here,” I said, voice firm, but we all knew that wasn’t the full truth.

North’s eyes narrowed slightly. “And that has nothing to do with Connor?”

My stomach flipped, but I kept my expression neutral, hoping neither of them recognized the hoodie I was wearing. “This has nothing to do with him.”

Just because it was the closest school to home didn’t mean I was here because of Connor. Right?

I wish I could answer that question. Quinn laughed like she knew what I was thinking, and there wasn’t a trace of humor in her tone as she nodded her head. “Right.”

Silence hung between us. Heavy. Awkward.

I shifted on my feet, clearing my throat, desperate to fill the space. “How have you been?” The moment the words left my mouth, I regretted them. It was the safest question. The worst one.

Quinn let out a quiet laugh, low and humorless. Her lips pressed together. “Like you care.”

North sighed. “No use pretending things aren’t different.”

“I’m not pretending,” I said quietly. I’d fucked up last year, and it ended up hurting Quinn. I couldn’t make up for that, but could she really judge me when North fucked up worse? He was the one who took the video and showed everyone at the party. That wasn’t me. No, all I’d done was stay quiet.

Just like Connor asked me to.

“Could’ve fooled me.” Quinn grabbed her coffee from the counter, not even glancing back as she muttered, “See you around.”

She didn’t want to do this. Not here.

But North? North lingered a second longer. His voice was low, steady, but there was an edge to it. “Why did you come here, Summer?”

I swallowed hard. “For school. Like everyone else.”

He scoffed. “Bullshit.”

I bristled. “You don’t get to say that.”

Something flickered in his gaze—anger, maybe. “You really think you can just come back and pretend to be her friend?”

“I’m not pretending.”

“Aren’t you?”

My pulse roared in my ears. The weight of everything—the guilt, the regret, the

resentment—crushed down on me all at once.

I met his gaze, steady, unwavering. "No more than you are."

North's eyes flicked over me once more, something sharp in his gaze, like he was still deciding what to do with me. He'd always had that intensity about him.

Then, without another word, he stepped back. I should have been grateful. That he didn't say more. That he didn't push. That he let me go.

But instead, all I felt was hollow.

The café was still loud, still bright, still buzzing with the kind of easy, careless energy that belonged to people who hadn't ruined their own lives.

A girl laughed somewhere behind me. A barista called out a name that wasn't mine.

Someone brushed past me in line, and I flinched like I'd been burned.

I didn't belong here.

My stomach twisted violently. This was a mistake. I shouldn't have come here.

Inhaling, I steadied myself. And because I'd spent my whole life running, I did what I did best. I walked away.

Not fast. Not like I was fleeing. But with just enough distance that I wouldn't have to see whatever expression was on North's face. Whatever was left of Quinn's interest.

I stepped out into the afternoon sunlight, the heat pressing against my skin, thick and suffocating.

The campus stretched in front of me—students sprawled across the quad, leaning against trees, laughing, living.

It all felt too loud. Too big. Like the edges of the world had blurred, like I was floating just outside of it, unable to slip back in.

Vic wasn't going to be happy with me. I was supposed to go to class. I was supposed to try. Instead, I turned in the opposite direction.

My apartment was only a ten-minute walk away, but it felt longer. I kept my head down, kept my arms crossed over my stomach, kept my breath steady, even as something inside me clawed at my ribs. I told myself I was fine. That this was fine. That I just needed a second.

But by the time I reached my door, I knew better.

The second the lock clicked into place behind me, the weight of it all crashed down.

I pressed my back against the door, squeezing my eyes shut, my breath coming too fast, too uneven. My fingers trembled at my sides, and I curled them into fists, like I could keep myself from falling apart if I just held on tight enough.

It didn't work.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I swallowed hard, forcing my breathing to slow before I reached for it. One new message. I didn't know why I was scared to look, but a small part of me already knew it was Quinn.

My thumb hovered over the screen for half a second before I forced myself to check. Yeah, it was her.

I barely had time to register her name before my stomach lurched.

The phone slipped from my fingers, clattering onto the floor as I bolted for the bathroom.

I barely made it to the toilet before I dropped to my knees, my whole body shuddering as I emptied my stomach.

It wasn't just the nausea. It was everything. Being alone, starting a new school, breaking up with Connor. I squeezed my eyes shut, bile burning the back of my throat. I shouldn't have come here. I should've chosen another school. Quinn's message only made that more fucking clear.

Quinn: You could've gone anywhere else, Summer. Why the hell did you choose the college I'm going to?

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Connor

Laughter filled the apartment—soft, warm, familiar. It curled around the edges of the room, seeping into the walls, sinking into the furniture. If I closed my eyes, I could almost pretend things were normal. Almost.

Aiden sat across from Mom, legs stretched out, his cane balanced against the coffee table. He was shaking his head at something she said, a smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth. She was laughing—really laughing. The kind that made her eyes crinkle.

I watched them from the hallway with hands balled into fists at my sides. Mom's sweater sleeve slid up as she reached for her glass of wine, exposing the dark stain blooming across her forearm. A perfect imprint of Dad's fingers, like he'd branded her.

My stomach twisted. I swallowed, forcing down the bile creeping up my throat.

Aiden saw it too. His gaze flicked to the bruise, his smile faltering for half a second before he forced it back into place, keeping the moment intact. But I caught it.

We weren't going to talk about it.

Because we never did.

I ran my tongue along my teeth, jaw tight.

One week. That's how long I'd been here, sleeping on Aiden's couch, pretending like

I wasn't suffocating under the weight of it all.

I should have been grateful. He let me crash without asking for anything in return.

But every time I stepped through that door, I felt the walls pressing in on me, felt the silence creeping in through the cracks.

Felt the fucking lie we were all living.

Mom caught me staring. Her laughter softened, then faded, replaced by something unreadable. She pulled her sleeve down over the bruise like that would make a difference, like it would erase the fact that I had already seen it.

"Connor." Her voice was too gentle. "Come sit with us."

I couldn't.

Not when I knew exactly where that bruise had come from. Not when I could still hear my father's voice in my head, cutting through the phone call that had ended with me slamming my fist into the wall.

She had told me she fell.

Like that made it better.

Like I hadn't heard her voice tremble when she said it.

"I'm heading out."

Aiden's brow lifted slightly, but he didn't say anything. He just leaned back into the couch, twirling the stem of his glass between his fingers, waiting for me to get to the

part where I told him where I was going.

I wasn't going to.

Mom frowned. "Connor, it's late."

I forced a smile. "That ever stop me before?"

Aiden sighed, shaking his head like he was already tired of this conversation. Maybe he was.

Maybe I was too.

Mom hesitated, like she was debating whether or not to insist, but I could see the answer written in the bruises she was trying to hide. She wasn't going to fight me on this. She never fought anyone on anything.

I grabbed my jacket from the hook near the door. "Don't wait up."

And before Aiden could tell me how fucking stupid this was, before Mom could try to convince me she was fine—I walked out, pulling my keys out of my back pocket as I headed to my car.

I slid behind the wheel of my car. I barely registered the action of turning the key in the ignition, didn't notice the engine's hum as it roared to life.

I pulled out onto the road, my pulse hammering a steady rhythm in my ears.

I didn't need to think about where I was going.

My body already knew the way. Muscle memory took over, guiding me through the

streets, past the glowing neon of liquor stores and gas stations, past the familiar turns I'd taken too many times.

It didn't take long before I reached the bar.

I parked in the same spot as always, the one near the flickering streetlight, the one that made it easy to get in and out without thinking too hard. My hands flexed around the wheel once before I let go.

The moment I stepped inside, the weight in my chest loosened just a little. It smelled like smoke and beer, the low murmur of conversation broken up by the occasional laugh or clink of glass. The jukebox in the corner hummed with a song I didn't recognize, something slow and aching.

I walked to the bar without hesitation and Frank, the bartender, barely looked up when I sat down.

He was already reaching for a glass, already pouring me a drink before I had the chance to ask. He knew better. I knew I didn't come here for the company, and I didn't come here to talk.

The amber liquid hit the bottom of the glass, smooth and familiar, and he slid it across the counter with a practiced ease.

"Rough night?" he asked, voice gravelly.

I scoffed, picking up the glass. "Aren't they all?"

Frank let out a quiet grunt, wiping down the counter with slow, methodical movements. He'd been working at this bar longer than I'd been of legal age to drink in it, long enough to know when to pry and when to leave things the fuck alone.

I tossed back the first sip, feeling the burn slide down my throat, hot and numbing. It settled in my stomach, pooling there like lead. I wanted more. Needed more.

Frank said nothing when I drained the rest in one swallow and nudged the glass forward.

He just poured me another.

And another.

By the time I was three drinks in, the noise of the bar faded into background static, the heat in my chest spreading, taking the edge off. It wasn't enough. It was never fucking enough.

I let my head tip forward slightly, the cool rim of the glass pressing against my lips.

The memories still clung to me.

Summer's voice. Summer's touch. The way she looked at me the night she walked out of my apartment, eyes glassy, fingers trembling. The way I didn't stop her. The way I should have.

The way I fucking couldn't.

"Slow down, kid," Frank muttered, eyes flicking to me. "Drinking like that won't fix whatever's got you looking like hell."

I laughed, humorless. "Who said I'm trying to fix anything?"

"Suit yourself." But he didn't pour me another.

Not yet.

The barstool beside me scraped against the floor, and I barely glanced up as someone slid into the seat next to mine.

A woman. Red hair. Dressed to be noticed.

She drummed her nails against the counter, then glanced at me with a small smile. "You look like you could use a distraction."

I let out a slow breath, tilting my glass toward her in a lazy acknowledgment. "You offering?"

Her face brightened, her eyes flicking over me like she was making a decision. Then she lifted her fingers and signaled Frank for a drink.

I watched her, detached. I should have been into this. Should have taken her up on whatever she was hinting at. It would have been easy. Just another night, just another warm body, just another way to forget.

But as she leaned closer, as her perfume wrapped around me, something in my chest twisted. I glanced at her. "Depends. You looking for conversation or something stronger?"

Her lips curled at the edge. "Maybe a little of both."

I thought about it. "Then by all means."

She crossed her legs, her knee brushing against mine. "You look like trouble."

I let my eyes drag over her bare neck, the teasing dip of her collarbone. "You have no

idea."

She leaned in, voice just loud enough to cut through the music. "Maybe that's exactly what I'm looking for."

I finally turned to face her fully, tilting my head. "You always go looking for trouble in places like this?"

She sipped her drink, watching me over the rim of her glass. "Only when I need to forget something. Or someone."

That hit a little too close to home, but I didn't let it show. Instead, I smirked, leaning in slightly. "And is it working?"

"Not yet." She traced a fingertip over my forearm. "But I have high hopes."

I hummed, hope building in my chest. "You expecting me to help with that?"

She set her glass down, turning toward me, her body angled closer. "You offering?"

I laughed a low chuckle. "I don't do attachments."

She grinned. "Good. Neither do I."

It should have been easy. Just another nameless girl, another distraction, another night that blurred into the next.

But even as she pressed closer, her thigh warm against mine, her fingers teasing at the hem of my shirt, my mind drifted.

I shouldn't have cared. I shouldn't have noticed the way she wasn't Summer. But my

body did.

She noticed my hesitation and smirked. "You hesitating, handsome?"

I shook my head, downing the rest of my whiskey and setting the glass down with a hollow clink. "Not at all."

She took my hand, pulling me toward the door. I followed, not because I wanted her, but because stopping meant thinking. And thinking meant remembering a girl I'd much rather forget.

We barely made it through her apartment door before I had her against the wall—clothes ripping, teeth biting, nails clawing. It wasn't love. It wasn't passion. It wasn't even fucking want.

Just need.

A filthy, mind-numbing, gut-churning need to bury myself so deep inside someone else that I could forget the goddamn weight pressing against my chest. Her dress was gone in seconds, torn from her body, tossed aside like trash.

Her tits bounced free, nipples hard, begging for something rough.

I didn't bother appreciating the view—just grabbed her by the back of the neck, shoved her to her knees, and unzipped.

"Suck," I ordered, yanking her hair, dragging my cock across her parted lips.

She moaned, tongue darting out, trying to tease, but I wasn't in the mood for games.

I pushed forward, using my fingers to pop her jaw open and thrusting in.

Until her eyes bulged and my dick cut off her air.

Until all I felt was the heat of her mouth and the spasm of her throat as she tried to swallow.

Her hands clawed at my thighs, choking, gagging, tears streaking her face. She tried to pull back—I didn't let her.

“Take it,” I growled, thrusting deeper, shoving her nose to my pelvis.

Her throat convulsed, spit dripping down her chin, her nails digging in harder as she fought for air.

I held her there, relishing the way she struggled, the pathetic whimpers muffled around my length.

Only when I felt her body start to give did I let her go.

She gasped, drool trailing from her lips as she stared up at me, eyes glassy, ruined.

“Get on the fucking bed,” I snapped, shoving her onto the mattress.

She scrambled up, ass high, spreading herself for me like a desperate little whore.

I didn't bother teasing—just grabbed a condom, rolling it on with shaking fingers before slamming inside her without warning.

She screamed, body arching, fingers clutching the sheets, and fuck, it was tight. Searing. Perfect.

I set a brutal pace, hips snapping, cock spearing into her dripping cunt with wet, obscene sounds.

“You like that?” I growled, grabbing her by the throat, pulling her back against me, forcing her to take every inch.

She whimpered, nodding frantically, and I chuckled darkly. “Of course you do. Fucking slut.”

Her moans turned desperate, broken cries filling the room as I used her, shoving my dick as far as it would go and leaving bruises.

I slapped her ass, hard enough to leave prints, then wrapped her ponytail around my fist, yanking her head back as I fucked her deeper. “Fucking take it,” I spat, slamming into her with every filthy thrust.

Her walls clenched, her body seizing, and I knew she was close.

Knew she was about to fall apart. “Not yet,” I growled, pulling out, making her sob because of the loss.

I flipped her over, pinning her down, spreading her legs wide before ramming back inside.

She shrieked, nails raking my back, legs wrapping around me as she came hard, body spasming beneath me.

I didn't stop. I fucked her through it, fucked her until my balls drew tight, until the pressure built so goddamn much I had no choice but to spill into the condom with a guttural groan.

I pulled out, tossing the used rubber aside, watching as she lay there—fucked, trembling, breathless. A ruined mess.

“We’re doing that again, right?” she panted, eyes hazy with lust.

I grunted, heading for the bathroom. And again. And again. As many times as it took to get my mother’s bruises and Summer fucking Blake out of my head.

In the morning, I woke up to the dull throb of a hangover and the sound of soft breathing beside me. Sunlight spilled through the window, casting sharp lines across the bed, across her . She was sprawled out, makeup smudged, skin warm where it pressed against mine.

I should’ve felt something. Regret, maybe. Disgust. But all I felt was nothing .

My mouth was dry, my body heavy, my mind already aching. I didn’t remember her name. Didn’t even remember if I cared enough to ask.

I stared at the ceiling, exhaling slowly, hands resting against my stomach. My phone buzzed from the nightstand. I didn’t check it. I already knew it wasn’t my father. Not even Aiden.

Not Summer. And even if it was —what would I say? I turned my head, watching as the blonde shifted in her sleep, completely oblivious. I envied that. I wanted that.

To be unbothered. Unaffected.

But I wasn’t. Not even close. My cell phone screen was bright when I finally picked it up and opened it. Mom’s name popped up among the messages, the words blurring

as I focused on the background picture.

It was wrong to have a photo of Summer as my background, but there she was—her body curled around mine, her eyes shut and a sunbeam reaching across her face.

Fast asleep and wrapped around me like she would never leave.

God only knew why I believed that at that moment, and maybe if things were different, we could've been so much more.

Dragging a hand down my face, I let out a sharp breath and murmured to myself, voice hoarse, heavy with something I refused to name—

“Jesus Christ.”

I sat up, running a hand over my mouth, trying to ignore the gnawing emptiness in my chest. My clothes were scattered across the floor, my wallet dumped on the bedside table. I reached for it, pulling out a few crumpled bills and leaving them there before standing up.

The blonde stirred but didn't wake as I pulled on my jeans, buttoning them with slow, deliberate movements.

I needed coffee. I needed air. I needed to stop feeling like my fucking chest was caving in.

By the time I stepped out into the too-bright morning, the cold hit me like a slap. I lit a cigarette with shaking fingers, exhaling the smoke slowly, letting it curl around me like a shield.

I didn't know where I was going.

Didn't know what the fuck I was doing.

But I knew one thing for certain.

I was still thinking about Summer. And no amount of whiskey, no amount of meaningless sex, was going to change that.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Summer

My hands wouldn't stop shaking.

I grabbed the bathroom counter, staring down at the test like maybe, if I looked long enough, I could make it change. Like maybe I'd imagined the whole thing. But the proof was right there—two pink lines, bold and unforgiving, taunting me with their finality.

I blinked. Once. Twice. Nothing changed.

The nausea curled in my stomach, thick and suffocating, but this wasn't just from stress anymore. No, this was something worse.

I sank down onto the closed toilet lid, pressing the heels of my palms into my eyes. My pulse pounded against my temples, loud, frantic. My entire body felt like it was short-circuiting, my mind spinning in endless, useless circles.

This can't be happening.

But it was.

My fingers curled into my lap, nails biting into my palms, breath shuddering in my throat. I was careful. Always careful. But maybe not careful enough.

Two months.

The weight of it slammed into me all at once.

I didn't have to do the math—I already knew.

That last night with Connor.

My lungs locked. My throat stiffened. My heart beat so hard it hurt.

I clamped my hands over my stomach, trying to steady myself, but all I could hear was his voice.

All I could feel was him. His hands holding my hips, his body pressing me down, the sharp bite of his teeth against my skin.

The way we lost ourselves in each other, over and over, like we could make time stop if we just held on tight enough.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I had to stop thinking about it. About him.

About how I was alone in this now.

A choked breath scraped past my lips, something dangerously close to a sob. I wasn't even sure when I'd started crying. I reached up, swiping at my face with trembling fingers, forcing myself to breathe, to think.

I had options.

I could call Victor.

Tell him the truth.

He'd come. Of course, he'd come.

But then what?

I could already picture it—the way his jaw would lock, the way his hands would curl into fists, the way he'd see this as just another reason why Connor McIntyre was a goddamn mistake.

And maybe he was right. Maybe I already knew that.

But that didn't change anything.

I sucked in a shaky breath and let my hand drift to my stomach. My fingers splayed over the fabric of my hoodie—Connor's hoodie. I hadn't realized I was still wearing it. Hadn't realized how tightly I was clutching it until my knuckles ached.

I let go.

I had to let go.

Victor couldn't know. Not yet. Not until I figured out what the hell I was going to do. Because this wasn't just about me. This wasn't just about Connor. This was about a baby . A living, breathing, human.

I pushed off the toilet seat, grabbing the edge of the sink like it might hold me together. My reflection stared back at me, pale and wide-eyed, lips slightly parted, chest rising and falling too fast.

I looked like I was about to be sick again.

Maybe I was.

I forced myself to move, each step toward my bedroom feeling heavier than the last. The door clicked shut behind me, sealing me inside the too-quiet space, but it didn't make me feel safer. It didn't make this any less real.

I grabbed my phone from the nightstand with shaking fingers and collapsed onto the bed, curling my legs up beneath me. The screen lit up, the glow too harsh in the dim room, but I barely noticed. I tapped open the browser and hesitated, fingers hovering over the keyboard.

I didn't even know what I was supposed to look up.

I swallowed hard and typed: What to do when you're pregnant and nauseous.

The search results loaded in seconds. Morning Sickness: What Helps? Tips to Ease Nausea in Early Pregnancy ... Is Morning Sickness Normal?

I clicked the first link, my breath shallow as I skimmed through the list. Eat small meals. Keep crackers by your bed. Sip ginger tea. Avoid strong smells. None of it helped. None of it made me feel like I wasn't about to fall apart.

My stomach clenched again, this time for an entirely different reason.

I went back to the search bar and stared at it. My heart pounded against my ribs, a steady don't do it, don't do it, don't do it— but I ignored it.

Slowly, carefully, I typed: How to tell your family about an unexpected pregnancy.

I squeezed my eyes shut and pressed enter, then realized it wouldn't help and peeked open to see the screen filled with results.

Telling Your Parents You're Pregnant: A Step-by-Step Guide .

How to Break the News About an Unplanned Pregnancy...

How to Tell Your Family You're Expecting (When They Won't Be Happy). ..

My throat felt tight. My fingers trembled as I scrolled, reading the same advice over and over. Be honest. Stay calm. Give them time to process. Have a plan. Like it was that easy. Like they had any idea what my family was like.

I couldn't remember the last time Vic or I had spoken to my parents.

Three years ago on my sweet sixteen, maybe?

No... Mom had said she'd come but then was given the opportunity to walk at a fashion show.

She loved the runway more than she loved the children who wrecked her beautiful body, and Dad...

Dad preferred his secretaries and the job he had in California.

They could give all the excuses they wanted, but they weren't ever part of our lives and that wasn't changing very soon.

If it weren't for Vic... God, I didn't know where I'd be.

The only persons I could tell my secret to were Vic and Connor.

Those two were the only ones that mattered.

I knew Victor would drop everything, pack his bags, and show up at my door before I even finished the sentence.

I knew he'd tear apart the shaky walls I was trying to build just to make sure I wasn't alone in this.

I knew he would hate Connor if he ever found out.

I clenched my jaw and closed the tab, exhaling sharply. My fingers hovered over the keyboard again, frustration curling in my chest.

I didn't know what I was looking for. Answers. Solutions. A way to make this all go away. But instead, I landed on a site I never should have clicked. Teen Pregnancy Forum: Your Stories.

I hesitated, my thumb hovering over the screen. Then, before I could stop myself, I tapped the link. The page loaded, filling the screen with an endless scroll of posts.

"I found out last week, and I don't know what to do."

"My boyfriend left as soon as I told him."

My finger stalled on the last one. How would Connor react? We weren't in any relationship for him to leave, how the hell would he react when I told him? I had to, didn't I? I continued reading, my breath disappearing as more and more results popped up.

"Is abortion the best option if I have no support?"

"Thinking about adoption. Does it ever stop hurting?"

My breath hitched, and I realized I was shaking.

I needed to stop reading.

I needed to close the damn site.

But I couldn't.

Not when the words were right there, staring at me, forcing me to acknowledge the truth I hadn't let myself think about yet.

Abortion.

Adoption.

Keeping it.

My pulse roared in my ears. Why was I freaking out? I didn't need to read the sites to know that those were my options. There wasn't a way out of this. No magic fix. No undo button. No matter what I did, my life was about to change forever.

I had no idea how to handle it, but my finger pressed the exit button all on its own and I went to my messaging app—I found myself hovering over my last message to Connor. Then I switched the phone off and stared at the ceiling instead.

The next few days passed in a haze.

I barely ate. Barely slept. Every time I tried to force something down, my stomach rebelled, leaving me hunched over the toilet, dry heaving until there was nothing left.

It wasn't just the nausea—it was the exhaustion, the weight pressing down on my chest, the constant feeling that I was standing on the edge of something I couldn't see the bottom of.

I went to class, but I didn't absorb a word. The professors' voices turned into background noise, the scribbles in my notebook meaningless. The nausea came in waves—sometimes dull and manageable, other times sharp and unbearable. I tried to hide it, but I knew I wasn't fooling anyone.

People noticed when you barely touched your food.

But no one said anything.

Maybe because I didn't give them a reason to.

I was careful. Careful to sit in the back, careful to keep my head down, careful to pretend everything was normal even though I felt like I was falling apart.

And maybe I was.

Maybe I already had.

I needed air.

By the time Friday rolled around, my legs carried me out of the apartment before I could talk myself out of it. The air was crisp, the last traces of summer heat fading into something cooler. I wrapped my arms around myself as I walked, my sweater too thin for the slight bite in the wind.

I didn't know where I was going until I was already there.

The diner sat on the corner of the street, its neon sign buzzing faintly in the early evening light. I hadn't been inside yet, but I'd passed it enough times to know it was always open, always warm, always smelled like sugar and coffee and something fried.

I hesitated for half a second before pushing the door open.

The bell jingled overhead, the scent of butter and cocoa wrapping around me instantly. The place wasn't crowded—just a few people scattered in booths, nursing coffee cups, picking at plates of fries.

I let out a slow breath and made my way to the counter, sliding onto one of the stools.

A waitress in a blue apron wandered over, her brown curls piled on top of her head, a pen tucked behind her ear. She gave me a polite smile as she pulled out her notepad.

“What can I get you, sweetheart?”

My throat was dry. My stomach still twisted with nausea, but this—this was what I wanted.

“Hot chocolate,” I said, voice softer than I meant it to be. “With whipped cream, if you have it.”

Her smile warmed. “Best in town.”

She turned, grabbing a ceramic mug from the stack, and I let my hands rest on the counter, fingers tracing invisible patterns against the surface.

It had been days since I let myself breathe.

Days since I let myself stop thinking about the test sitting under my bathroom sink, about the clock ticking down inside my own body, about the decision I still couldn't bring myself to make.

But here, under the soft hum of diner music, with the murmur of conversation around

me, and the smell of fried food and something sweet in the air—just for a second, I felt like maybe I could pretend.

Pretend that I was just a girl waiting for a drink. Not a girl carrying a secret too big for her to hold.

The moment shattered as soon as the door swung open.

I didn't look up at first. I kept my eyes on the counter, fingers curling around the warm ceramic of my hot chocolate as the waitress handed it to me, letting the steam brush against my face.

“Thank you,” I murmured, already moving toward a quiet table in the corner.

The rich scent of cocoa and melted whipped cream should have been comforting. Should have been grounding.

But then I heard them.

A familiar laugh—low, a little rough around the edges. North. And then Quinn's voice, light and teasing, as they stepped inside. My stomach clenched.

I kept still. They hadn't seen me yet. They were too caught up in their own conversation, their presence folding into the background noise of the diner.

I told myself I could sit here. That I could stay unnoticed. That I could sip my hot chocolate and let them pass right by me, that it wouldn't matter, that it wouldn't mean anything.

But my body had other plans.

The nausea surged without warning.

One second, I was fine—well, as fine as I had been for the past few days. The next, my stomach twisted sharply, the rich scent of chocolate suddenly unbearable, cloying, suffocating.

No. Not now.

I barely made it inside before I collapsed in front of the toilet.

The nausea ripped through me, violent and unrelenting. My fingers dug into the cool porcelain as my body tried to rid itself of something that wasn't even there. I squeezed my eyes shut, waiting for the worst to pass, waiting to feel like I wasn't coming apart at the seams.

But then—footsteps. Slow. Measured. Stopping just outside the bathroom door. Then a voice. Low. Familiar. North. And a quieter voice. Quinn.

“Summer?” she murmured, knocking on the door.

I froze. Shit.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Connor

The suitcase by the door was the first thing I saw. A red Louis Vuitton suitcase with a tear on the side from overuse. It was one I was more than familiar with and my steps faltered.

It was packed. Zipped up. Positioned perfectly upright like someone had set it down, ready to grab and walk out without a second thought. My fingers twitched at my sides, something sharp and sour curling in my gut.

The house was too quiet. That kind of loaded silence that stretched through the air, pressing in from all sides.

I found her in the kitchen.

Mom stood by the counter, fingers curled too tightly around a coffee mug, her gaze locked onto the surface like it held answers she couldn't find. She looked so much smaller right then. Smaller than she should have been.

I didn't speak right away. Just leaned against the doorway, my arms crossing over my chest as my eyes flicked back to the suitcase. I could still see it, and everytime I looked, I felt like a kid again—just waiting for my mother to tell me she'd be back in a few weeks.

"Where are you going?"

She didn't look at me. "Not now, Connor."

I scoffed, pushing off the doorframe. "Not now? You've got your shit packed by the door, and you're just—what? Sipping coffee before you disappear? Or are you just making sure to say goodbye this time?"

Her jaw ticked, but she still didn't look up.

It pissed me off.

The suitcase sat there like a goddamn monument to every bad decision she kept making, and she wouldn't even look at me?

I dragged a hand through my hair, my breath sharp as I stepped fully into the kitchen. "Let me guess," I said, voice lower now, rougher. "He called you. Said all the right things. Told you he missed you. Promised he's changed."

That's when she finally moved. Not much. But it was enough for me to notice. Then, in a quiet, voice, she said, "He didn't call me."

I stilled. A slow, humorless pulled at my lips. "Bullshit."

Her gaze flicked to mine, just for a second. "I'm serious, Connor."

Something hot curled under my ribs, something sharp, something mean. I let out a breath of laughter, shaking my head. "Right. So you just woke up and thought, hmm, maybe I should pack my bags and go back to the man who beats the shit out of me for fun?"

She flinched. Just barely and I felt like shit for even slightly raising my voice at her. Like father used to—like he still did.

Then she stiffened and her eyes hardened. "I am not doing this with you."

"Yeah?" I took a step closer, voice dropping. "Then what are you doing, Mom? Explain it to me. Make it make fucking sense."

She inhaled slowly, steadying herself. "I'm going back because I have to."

I scoffed. "Oh, yeah? And why's that?"

She hesitated. I saw it right there—the second she debated telling me the truth. The second she considered lying. Then, finally, she set her mug down with a sharp clink and looked at me fully.

"Because this is the only way you can get your job back," she said. "And I won't sit here and watch you destroy yourself because of me."

Silence. For a second, I just stared at her, my pulse a slow, dull thud-thud-thud in my ears. Then I laughed. Low, bitter, cold.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me."

Her posture squared. "I'm not."

I dragged a hand over my mouth, trying to breathe past the rage spiking up in my throat. "Why the hell would you do that?"

"You've been spiraling ever since your father cut you off, Connor," she snapped, her voice cracking slightly. "Drinking. Sleeping around. You think I don't know? You think I haven't seen how bad it's gotten?"

My jaw locked.

She kept going. "You used to be strong. You used to fight for what you wanted. And

now? Now you're just burning through your life like you're waiting to hit rock bottom."

"Jesus Christ."

"Tell me I'm wrong," she challenged. "Tell me you're happy, Connor, because you're not acting like you are!"

I closed my eyes in desperation for a second. Because she was right. And I fucking hated her for it. I took a step back, my vision tunneling, my skin crawling. The suitcase sat there, waiting, watching, taunting.

I wasn't happy. But how the fuck was her leaving going to help?

My voice was tight, sharp, and dangerous. "You really think crawling back to him is gonna make me better?"

She swallowed. "It's my job as your mother to make sure you're living your life to the fullest."

Something inside me snapped.

I turned on my heel, grabbed the suitcase by the handle, and yanked it away from the door.

"Connor," she started, voice sharper now.

I ignored her. I kept walking.

"If you leave this by the door, then you're saying it's an option," I muttered. "And I'm not letting you walk back into that house just because of me."

“It isn’t because of you, it’s for you.” Her voice rose. “And I am going back.”

I stopped.

My pulse pounded against my skull. Of course, she was. Because she always did. What if I was wrong? Was she just using me as an excuse?

Slowly, I turned, locking eyes with her across the room. My mother—this woman I had spent my whole damn life trying to understand, trying to protect—stood there, ready to let herself get swallowed whole.

I wanted to break something. I wanted to shake her. “Why?” My voice wasn’t loud, but it hit hard.

“Because this family has been broken for far too long, Connor, and I should’ve done something about it sooner. Because when my baby comes home smelling like random women, I want him to be able to tell me why he’s acting like his heart’s broken.”

My heart stopped. Heart broken? As fucking if.

I barked out a laugh, opening my mouth to speak—but I couldn’t. What was there to say?. “How does going home fix that?” How long would it take her to realize that it only ever got worse when she went back?

Summer was silent. I let go of the suitcase handle, and it hit the floor with a hollow thud. I didn’t move for a second. Didn’t speak. But something inside me cracked. I was done.

“Stay,” I warned Mom before turning toward the door, already reaching in my pocket for my cell phone.

“Connor,” she sighed, but I was already shaking my head.

“No. Just stay, I’ll fix this.”

I had to.

My hands were shaking as I scrolled through my contacts to find Aiden’s name and number. My pulse hammered against my skull, my mind spinning, searching, scrambling for something—anything—to fix this.

I needed Aiden. I needed him here. Now. He was older than me. He was better at this. The phone rang. Once. Twice.

Pick up, damnnit.

Three times.

"Come on, Aiden," I muttered under my breath, pacing near the curb.

Voicemail.

"Fuck!"

I ended the call and immediately dialed again. Ringing. Again. No answer. I could feel my heartbeat in my throat, in my skull, in the backs of my eyes. The reality of it hit hard. She was really gonna go. She was really gonna walk out that door, willingly, just to fix my mess.

My own mother thought I was too far gone to help myself. I squeezed my eyes shut, breathing through the anger, the helplessness, the suffocating fucking guilt. No. I could fix this. I had to.

Maybe if I—

Maybe if I just—

Think, Connor.

If I could convince Aiden to come home, maybe she'd stay. Maybe she'd believe we could be a family again. Because that's what this was really about, wasn't it? She thought she had nothing left here. She thought I was incapable of making responsible decisions..

Jesus.

I swallowed hard, staring at my phone like it might suddenly give me the answers I didn't have.

She wasn't wrong. That was the worst part. The drinking. The women. The self-destruction. It wasn't just a bad phase. It was me, running myself into the fucking ground, and for what? To spite my father? To forget about Summer?

I sucked in a slow breath. My fingers hovered over my contacts again, scrolling to Aiden's name. One more time. The phone rang. Twice. Then—finally—he picked up.

"Connor?" His voice was sharp, alert. "What's wrong?"

"Where are you?"

A pause. Too long. Then, "Connor—"

"Don't fucking 'Connor' me," I snapped, my voice edged with something too raw, too desperate. "Just answer the goddamn question."

Another beat of silence. Then a quiet sigh.

"I'm still at the clinic."

My stomach clenched. Right.

His therapy sessions. The ones I never asked about. Because Aiden was doing what I wasn't. He was fixing himself. While I was out here, digging myself deeper.

I clenched my jaw. "I need you to come home."

Silence. Then, "What happened?"

"Mom's leaving."

Aiden cursed under his breath. "You're sure?"

I let out a sharp, humorless laugh. "I saw the suitcase, Aiden. She's already decided."

Another pause, then Aiden's voice softened. "And you think me being there is gonna change her mind?"

I didn't know. But I needed to try something. I needed to try everything.

"Just—come home, man." My voice cracked slightly, and I fucking hated it. "Please."

Silence. Then, carefully, "Connor, I think she's more worried about you than about herself."

I stiffened. "That's not what this is about."

Aiden sighed. "Isn't it?"

I could hear it in his voice. The concern. The exhaustion. The fucking disappointment. He thought I was gone, too. Just like her. My throat went tight.

"I'm fine," I muttered, but it sounded like a lie even to me.

Aiden didn't respond right away. Then, quietly, "I know you don't want to hear this, but—maybe Mom's not wrong."

"About what?" I forced the words out, even though I already knew.

"You," he said. No hesitation. No softness this time. "You're not okay, Connor. And we can't keep pretending you are."

I hated how fast the words cut through me. Like a knife straight through the ribs. "You think I don't fucking know that?" I snapped.

"Then do something about it," Aiden shot back.

Silence hung thick between us. I couldn't breathe.

I felt exposed. Raw. Cornered. And for the first time in months, I realized—I was fucking terrified.

I was so goddamn lost I couldn't even see the way back.

But before I could say anything—before I could even process it—my phone buzzed with an incoming call.

Another name flashed across the screen. North. I let out a breath, pressing my fingers

against my temple, my pulse racing.

What the hell did he want? My chest felt hollow, like something had been scooped out and left to rot.

"You used to be strong." Mom's voice rattled in my skull, looping over and over. "You used to fight for what you wanted."

What had I wanted? My job? No. My mother to stay?

No. I wanted to stop feeling like a ghost of myself.

I wanted to stop waking up next to women who weren't her.

I wanted to stop hearing Summer's voice in my head every time I drank too much, every time I let myself fall apart, every time I fucked someone who meant nothing.

I wanted to stop remembering the way she whispered my name that last night, like it was something precious—like I was something worth keeping.

But she left. And I let her. And now I didn't know how to be anything other than this.

The phone buzzed in my hand. Sharp. Suddenly.

Incoming Call: North.

My stomach twisted. I almost didn't answer. Not now. Not when I was—

I swiped the screen. "What?" My voice was raw, strained.

North's voice was clipped, sharp, cutting through the static in my head like a blade.

"Connor, you need to get here. Now."

The air was still. "What? Why?"

What was so important that he needed me there right now?

"It's Summer."

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Summer

The can of ginger ale sweated against my palm, condensation dripping onto my fingers, but I barely felt it. My stomach was still a mess, my head pounding, but none of it had anything to do with the nausea. Quinn and North knew.

I hadn't said anything, but somehow, they still knew—and just like that, all the tension and remorse about what happened two summers ago was gone.

I had my friend back again, and she refused to leave me in that bathroom stall.

She brought me home, not forcing me to admit it even as she told North to call Connor.

Not Vic.

Connor.

And now he was coming.

I forced a sip of the ginger ale, but it tasted like metal. The bubbles burned down my throat, but nothing settled. My fingers flexed around the can. Quinn sat across from me, curled into the far end of the couch, scrolling through her phone like she hadn't just been forced into playing babysitter.

North was in the kitchen, leaning against the counter, arms crossed. Watching. Waiting. He hadn't said anything since he ended the call, but he didn't have to.

I knew exactly what he was thinking. I shouldn't have come here. I shouldn't have chosen this school. And I definitely shouldn't have let my legs carry me into that goddamn diner, because if I'd known—I would what? What would I have done?

God, I didn't even know. The weight of it settled on my chest, pressing, crushing. My stomach clenched harder.

"You're holding that can like you're about to crush it," Quinn muttered, not looking up from her phone.

"I'm fine," I lied.

Quinn's laugh was hollow. "Yeah? You didn't look fine when you sprinted to the bathroom like you were running from a murder scene."

North said nothing, but I could feel his eyes on me. Assessing. Calculating.

He wasn't stupid. Quinn wasn't, either. I had maybe five minutes before Connor got here, and I had no idea what was going to happen when he did. Would he be angry ? Would he be hurt ? Would he tear through the door, eyes burning, teeth gritted, voice sharp enough to leave me in ribbons?

I didn't know. And that was the problem.

I shifted, trying to get comfortable, but the couch felt too soft, the tension crackling.

Quinn sighed and finally set her phone down, tilting her head. "You want to tell us what the hell is going on?"

I stiffened. "Nothing's going on."

She scoffed. "Right. So you just happened to be puking your guts out in a diner bathroom, pale as a ghost, looking like you were one second away from passing out?"

I swallowed. My stomach twisted again, and for a moment, I was terrified I'd have to bolt for the bathroom a second time.

Quinn's gaze flicked to North, then back to me. They were waiting. For the lie. For the cracks. For me to admit it. I looked away, forcing another sip of the ginger ale. "I just wasn't feeling well."

"Try again," North said, his voice low, unreadable.

The bubbles burned all the way down. My heart beat too fast, thudding against my ribs like it was trying to escape. I squeezed my eyes shut.

I wasn't ready.

BANG.

The first knock made me flinch. A heartbeat passed. Then—BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

The entire door rattled in its frame, the aggression behind it vibrating through the floor, sinking into my bones.

"NORTH!" Connor's voice slammed through the apartment, sharp and vicious, and my stomach dropped.

I was halfway to putting the can of ginger ale on the table, but hearing his voice had it slipping from my fingers. It hit the coffee table with a sharp clatter, but I didn't move to grab it. My pulse roared. My vision blurred. I wasn't ready for this.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

"Where the hell are you? Fucking open up!" he snarled. I grabbed the couch cushion, every muscle locking up.

North was already moving, his steps slow and deliberate as he crossed the room. Quinn stiffened beside me, her phone forgotten.

Connor slammed his fist against the door again, the entire apartment vibrating with the impact. "I swear to fucking God, North, if you don't open this fucking door in the next three seconds—"

North twisted the lock. The second the latch clicked, the door flew open—slamming against the wall with a deafening crack.

Connor stood in the doorway.

Wrecked. Wild. Livid.

His chest heaved, his breathing harsh and ragged, his green eyes burning with something lethal. He was barely keeping himself from tearing the entire place apart.

His gaze flicked to North first. Then to Quinn. Then—to me. His entire body went still. And in that moment, I knew. I was so, so fucked.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Connor

She stood with her arms wrapped tightly around herself. Summer's eyes were red-rimmed.

My stomach dropped, my body tensing the way it did whenever Dad took a step too close to Mom.

And yet, now that Summer was in front of me, real and close enough to touch, my pulse kicked up, my breath caught somewhere in my throat.

Two months. Two fucking months without seeing her, without hearing her voice, without the sharp tang of her sarcasm needling under my skin.

Two months of pretending I didn't care, when in reality, I missed her so much that all I wanted to do was pull her close and make up for not kissing her goodbye the last time.

Fuck, I'd been such a fucking idiot. And now here she was—looking so fucking fragile that it made my mouth dry, and my stomach swoop.

I should've said something. Asked if she was okay, if she needed me. But my tongue felt thick, my brain sluggish as I drank her in. Her face was thinner, the shadows beneath her eyes darker. Her hair was messy, falling in tangled waves around her neck.

She looked tired. She looked worn. And still, all I could think about was how much I

wanted to pull her against me, bury my face in her neck, and breathe her in like she was oxygen after drowning.

Instead, because I was an idiot—because I was angry that I'd come all this way just to find her staring at me like I was the last person she wanted to see—the first words out of my mouth were—

"Well, shit. You and Quinn besties again?"

Summer didn't react. No quick comeback. No rolling eyes. No biting remark to sting me where it hurt the most. Just silence.

And for some reason, that pissed me off more than anything else.

Before I could say something even worse, North gave me a sharp look. "Stop being a little bitch and come inside."

My jaw clenched. Best friend or not, I hated the bastard when he got all high and mighty like that. Always had. But I did as I was told, brushing past him into the apartment.

North and Quinn exchanged a look—one I didn't understand, one I didn't fucking like—before Quinn muttered something under her breath and followed North down the hall.

"Don't fuck this up."

I snorted. "You have so little faith in me."

Quinn didn't even turn around. "Yeah. I wonder why."

And then they were gone. Leaving me alone with Summer.

I was exhausted. I shouldn't be here.

Summer looked worried.

Still, I was too fucking angry to care. Angry that she hadn't called me herself. Angry that she was here with them when she should've been with me. So instead of listening to the part of me that was concerned, I let the other part—the reckless, self-destructive part—take control.

"What the hell is going on?"

Summer hesitated. Her fingers twisted in the hem of her shirt, her throat working like she was swallowing something sharp.

"Connor, I need to tell you something."

My chest felt too tight. My patience was razor-thin.

"Then fucking tell me."

"I'm pregnant."

The words hit me like a fist to the gut.

I froze.

No. No, that couldn't be right.

My heartbeat slowed, then sped up, then slowed again. My mind grasped for

something—some kind of logic, some kind of sense. She wasn't lying. Summer wouldn't lie about something like this.

And yet, I couldn't make myself believe it.

Before I could stop myself—before I could even think—I laughed. A sharp, hollow, ugly sound that made Summer flinch, her face paling.

But I couldn't stop.

Because if I let myself believe her—if I let myself feel what this meant—the walls might actually cave in.

And worse, if I let myself feel it, if I let myself want it, I'd never fucking recover.

I scrubbed a hand over my jaw, shaking my head. "That's cute. Who's the father?"

The second the words left my mouth, I wanted to take them back. Wanted to shove them back down my throat and choke on them. Because I knew. I fucking knew.

It was mine.

It had to be mine.

And that should've terrified me. Should've sent me running for the door before the weight of it crushed me.

But instead, there was something dark and possessive curling in my chest. Because Summer was pregnant with my fucking kid, but my father was shit and I didn't know how to be anything different.

I didn't know how to be anything more than the fuck up.

The thought was so goddamn overwhelming that I had to push it down. Had to bury it beneath something sharp, something cruel, before it swallowed me whole.

Summer stiffened. And then—her expression went blank. Dead. Like I wasn't even standing there.

"Get out."

But I was already spiraling. Already letting the anger eat me alive because if I stopped, if I let myself feel—

No. It was easier this way.

I stepped forward. "What? Don't tell me it's me, Princess? It's been two months, and I'd be a fool to think you haven't shown that pretty pink cunt to anyone else—"

The crack of her palm against my face echoed through the apartment.

My head snapped to the side, the sting blooming across my skin. But it was nothing compared to the ache in my chest.

Silence.

I lifted my hand, pressing my fingers against the spot she hit, my breath coming too hard, too fast. I should've said something. Should've apologized. Should've told her she didn't compare to any other women, no matter how many I used to try and erase the feel of her. No one else came close.

But it was better this way, and even though I hated myself when tears welled in her

eyes, I didn't bother to apologize as I turned on my heel and walked out, slamming the door so hard the walls shook. I didn't look back. Not at the doorway. Not at the apartment. Not at her.

I didn't know where the fuck I was going. I didn't care. But there was no way in hell I could look at her. If I gave in and showed her how I really felt, I'd hurt her. There was way too much fucking history for me not to, and that was the last damn thing I wanted.

I wasn't my father. Blood or not. I refused to be a dipshit like he was.

I just knew I needed to leave before I said something even worse.

Before I did something I couldn't take back.

The night was cold. My footsteps were too loud against the pavement.

I should go home. But the only thing waiting for me at home was my mother's accusations that stung a little more after my conversation with Summer.

So I kept walking. Kept burning every bridge in my path.

Because fuck it.

It's what I did best.

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Summer

The apartment was too quiet.

The air still vibrated through the walls from the force of the door slamming shut. I swore I could feel the echo of it in my chest, rattling against my ribs. I stood there, frozen, my jaw clenched so tight it ached,. Every part of me was aching, my mind spinning, but I refused to cry.

Not yet.

Not in front of them.

Quinn and North were watching me carefully, waiting.

They'd come back after Connor stormed out, slamming the door behind himself.

Their eyes were heavy, weighted with something like expectation, or maybe it was pity.

I hated that. Hated the way they looked at me like I was something fragile, something that might shatter under the weight of their concern.

I took a shaky breath and forced the words out, my voice coming out flatter than I expected. "I told him."

Quinn's expression darkened instantly. "And?"

I swallowed hard. My throat burned. "He laughed."

But that hadn't even been the most hurtful part, it was what he'd said afterward.

Connor and I might have never been in a relationship, but for me, sleeping with anyone else felt like an impossibility.

To me, Connor was everything I'd ever wanted, flaws and all.

I couldn't replace that. I couldn't just replace him.

He was my first everything—first kiss, first fuck, first heartbreak, and now, the father of my child.

This was such a fucking mess.

North muttered a curse under his breath. His jaw clenched so tightly I could see the muscle tick beneath his skin.

"And then," I added, forcing the words out before I lost the courage, "he accused me of lying."

Silence.

Quinn's entire body went still. Then—

"That son of a bitch."

The words cracked through like a whip, sharp and venomous.

I flinched, not because I disagreed, but because hearing it out loud made it real.

Connor had looked me in the eye and denied the fact that I was—that we'd made—I couldn't even think it and it shouldn't hurt this much, but it did. God , it did.

"You're staying here tonight."

I shook my head before I even realized I was doing it. "No."

Quinn's eyes narrowed. "Summer—"

"I just want to go home."

She stared at me like she was trying to understand, trying to see the logic in it. There wasn't any. Not really. But I couldn't stay here. I didn't want to talk anymore. I didn't want to feel anymore.

I just wanted to crawl into bed and disappear.

Quinn didn't like it, but after a long beat, she sighed and grabbed her keys. "Fine. But I'm driving you."

I didn't argue. I didn't have the energy to do much more than follow her to the car.

North stayed behind, and we didn't speak during the drive home... I stared out the window, arms wrapped around myself, trying to hold it together. I was failing. The lump in my throat was growing, the pressure behind my eyes unbearable.

Quinn sighed heavily, breaking the silence. "I can't believe him. I can't believe he'd do this to you. After everything."

"Really?" I asked her, my lower lip wobbling. The question was rhetorical. What happened last summer had been proof enough that Connor, and North, and even Vic,

were callous enough to ruin someone without a thought.

Quinn winced at what I was referring to and the rest of the drive was silent. What was there to say? She knew I was right. It was cruel, but this was Connor .

"You know you don't have to do this alone, right?" she continued, glancing at me. "Have you spoken to Victor yet?"

"Are you kidding?" I laughed dryly. "He'll fucking kill Connor if he finds out about this."

"He's going to find out eventually," Quinn answered, her voice soft. "Unless you don't go ahead with the pregnancy."

"I don't want an abortion," I stated, cutting her off. It wasn't because I had anything against abortions, but rather that I couldn't see myself getting rid of the only piece of evidence I had that Connor and I were once good together.

"You still have time to decide exactly what you want," she responded gently.

Not wanting to argue further when my heart was already breaking, I nodded, but my throat was too tight to respond.

"For now, feel free to phone if you need anything."

"Sure," I whispered and I wanted to believe her.

To believe that they'd come if I called, regardless of what happened between us, but this wasn't something anyone could fix for me, and there was a lot more that would have to happen before Quinn and North were friends of mine again.

The car went silent again and I fiddled with my things as we passed pedestrians and houses alike.

When Quinn pulled up outside my apartment, she finally spoke. "If he comes back—"

"He won't."

Not before he'd get fucked up drunk like always and find a girl to warm his cock.

Quinn didn't look convinced, but it had been a year since she'd seen Connor. She didn't know how much he'd worsened

I forced a wobbly smile. "Thanks for the ride."

She hesitated, then said, "You deserve better than this."

I nodded. I knew. But that wasn't going to change anything now, and knowing didn't make it hurt any less. I had better things to worry about now. School, the baby. Other things besides how Connor was slowly wrecking every bit of my heart.

Quinn's car idled as I made my way to my front door, and I didn't bother to look back in case she saw the tears falling down my cheeks. I was so fucking screwed, it wasn't even funny.

I unlocked the door then shoved it open, waving my arm over my head to let her know everything was alright before I entered.

As soon as the door was closed and locked, I dropped my mask and spun around to face my empty apartment. Not even bothering to switch on the tv like I normally did, I stumbled to my bed before I collapsed onto the mattress.

I told myself I wouldn't cry.

But the tears slipped out anyway. First one. Then another. And another. And then I was breaking apart all at once, my face buried in the pillow, silent sobs shaking my body. This wasn't what I wanted. None of this was what I wanted.

I cried until I had nothing left, exhaustion finally dragging me under. But sleep didn't last long before a loud thud against my door ripped me out of my bad dreams.

For a moment, I didn't know where I was, my heart pounding as I sat up, trying to shake off the fog of exhaustion. Then—another thud and a voice. Slurred. Loud. Angry. So fucking familiar that my heart ached.

"SUMMER! Open the damn door!"

My stomach dropped and I stumbled out of bed, my pulse hammering, reaching the door just as the next fist collided against it.

"Connor, what the hell—"

Then I saw him. He was drunk. Beyond drunk. His eyes were bloodshot, his posture unsteady, his jaw tight with something unreadable. And standing next to him, arms crossed, looking just as exhausted—North.

"What is he doing here?" I asked North, my voice low.

"He showed up at my place. I figured it was better to bring him here than let him drive off a cliff."

Connor scoffed. "Like I'd be that lucky."

His words cut deeper than they should have. I stepped forward, ignoring the pounding in my head. "Connor, you need to go home."

He laughed . A sharp, bitter sound. "Home?" His eyes darkened. "Pretty sure I don't have one of those anymore."

My throat closed. I didn't know what that meant. I didn't know what he wanted from me. Then he stepped closer, his voice dropping, his gaze flickering over my face. "You really meant it, huh?"

My breath caught. "Connor—" Like I'd ever lie about something like this. And for what? To have him call me a whore?

But he was already reaching for me, his hands sliding across my waist, his touch heavy, unfocused. I became still. His mouth brushed against my jaw, his breath warm against my skin, tinged with whiskey .

"We could forget about all this for a little while," he murmured. His lips trailed lower. And despite the way my body softened at his touch, I still put a hand out to stop him.

"Connor, stop."

He didn't. His hands slid up my back, his voice thick with something desperate. "Come on, baby. We could forget all about this for the night. Just let me—"

I shoved him. Hard . More forceful than I should've, but fuck if I'd let him call me his baby after he accused me of being a whore. I'd always been Princess, or Summer. There was no way in hell I was going to allow him to drop me to that category now. Regardless of where we stood on the baby issue.

Connor stumbled back, blinking in surprise and my anger grew.

He probably hadn't even realized, but I did.

That nickname was supposed to be mine. Reverence was such a small town that everyone knew everyone, and when no one knew you were fucking Connor McIntyre then no one had any reason not to tell you the gossip of his flings.

That was my torture, just like the nicknames had become my only pride—back when I was still certain he might've given a shit but was just hiding it.

I wasn't so sure anymore.

"I said stop!" I shouted, unimpressed. He would've, I knew that. But I didn't feel like being held by him any longer after what he'd said— what he'd fucking accused me of .

He stared at me. And for the first time tonight, he actually looked sober .

"I'm not dealing with you when you're like this," I said, my voice shaking but firm.
"Not after what you did. Not after you hurt me."

Because those words had hurt me. They'd fucking ripped my heart in two.

I'd given this man everything. My first kiss.

My virginity. My love . And yes, I knew that he never asked for any of it, but he could at least act a little more fucking responsible rather than accusing me of sleeping with someone else.

Connor swallowed hard. And for a second—just a second —I saw something break in

his expression. Regret . Maybe even shame . But then it was gone. Replaced by something colder . That familiar mask that he liked to hide behind. "Fine."

He stepped back, his eyes unreadable. North was already at his side, already pulling him away. "Come on, man."

Connor didn't fight it. He just turned, walked away, disappeared into the night and this time, I didn't cry.

I just locked the door, pressed my back against it, and breathed.

I should feel relieved. I should feel safe.

But all I felt was empty . I'd only ever felt that way with him, and how fucked up was it that I wanted him to come back and apologize again?

To show me he still cared? Even if there was only a small part of him that did?

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Connor

Music pounded, a relentless, mind-numbing throb that rattled the cheap glass in my hand.

The whiskey inside barely rippled, the only thing still in this hellhole.

Sweat, sex, and stale smoke clung to the air, thick enough to choke on.

The bass vibrated through my ribs, but it still wasn't enough to drown out the echo of her voice in my head.

I'm pregnant.

I dragged the whiskey to my lips and downed it in one burning gulp. The cheap shit scraped its way down my throat, scorching, punishing. But not enough. Never fucking enough.

I tipped the bottle, refilling my glass with an unsteady hand. I wasn't drunk enough yet. Not even close. The woman draped over me cooed in my ear, running sharp nails down my chest. She smelled like vanilla and tequila, her tits pressing against my arm, lips trailing over my jaw.

"You're quiet," she murmured, shifting in my lap, grinding against my cock. She was trying to make me hard, trying to drag me into the moment. I should've been responding by now. Should've been grabbing her ass, slipping my hand between her legs, seeing how wet she was.

Instead, I let my head tip back against the sticky leather of the booth, eyes closing.

I fucking hated that she wasn't Summer .

She felt wrong. Smelled wrong. The noises she made in my ear were too breathy, too rehearsed. She wanted to be fucked, wanted me to bend her over the nearest surface and break her in half, and on any other night, I would've done it without a second thought.

A second set of hands slid over my shoulders from behind, another girl—red lips, dark hair, bedroom eyes. The kind that didn't ask for anything but a rough night and a ride home in the morning. She pressed her lips to my neck, teeth scraping, tongue tasting the salt on my skin.

They were both waiting for me to react, waiting for me to feel something.

I should've gotten up, dragged them to some dark alley, fucked them raw against the bricks until they screamed. Until I couldn't hear her voice anymore.

Instead, I drained my drink and shoved the blonde off my lap. "Let's go."

They both giggled, hands already tugging at my belt as I led them outside into the humid night.

The door slammed behind me, sealing us in the kind of heat that stuck to your skin, thick with the scent of sweat and bad choices.

The apartment was a shithole—cracked walls, a mattress without a frame, empty bottles lining the nightstand.

The kind of place where no one expected anything more than a hard fuck and an even harder goodbye.

The blonde's hands were on me first, nails raking down my chest, tugging at my shirt. The brunette was already sinking to her knees, licking her lips like she knew exactly what she was about to do.

I let them.

I let them grab at me, let them unzip my jeans, let their eager little fingers wrap around my cock, stroking it between them like it was some fucking prize.

They were so desperate for it. Like it mattered. Like I mattered. It should've done something. Should've sent fire through my veins, made me want them like they wanted me.

Instead, I felt fucking empty.

I couldn't even remember their fucking names, but I didn't want to.

"Fuck, he's big," the blonde moaned, running her fingers over my length while the brunette kissed my thighs. "I can't wait to have you between my legs. I'm already wet."

They thought this was a game. Thought I was going to take my time, tease them, draw it out. I wasn't.

"Would you let him fuck you while I eat your ass?" the brunette teased, pressing kisses against her neck before returning to me. My body jolted as she licked the tip of my cock, moaning like she was tasting something divine, then took me into her mouth, hot and wet and fucking eager.

I waited for it.

That familiar throb. That pulse of pleasure. That deep, dark hunger that usually took over the second a girl wrapped her lips around me.

Nothing.

“Yes,” her roommate moaned, already sinking her fingers inside herself.

I clenched my jaw, threading my fingers through her tangled hair, gripping tight as I forced her down. She gagged, her body jerking, but she let me, moaning around me as she tried to take it all. I gave her no choice.

I held her there, watching her throat constrict, watching her eyes go hazy as she fought to breathe around my cock. Her hands scrabbled at my thighs, nails digging in, her body tensing, her moans turning into desperate, wet, choking sounds.

Still nothing.

Still fucking nothing.

Anger curled in my gut, burning through me like gasoline. This wasn't working. Why the fuck wasn't this working?

I should've been hard as a fucking rock, ready to burst, ready to break them.

Instead, all I could hear was her.

Summer.

The way she used to look up at me when she was on her knees. The way she wanted

me. The way she whispered my name like it meant something. I growled, yanking the brunette off my cock so hard she coughed, saliva dripping down her chin. Her eyes were glazed, pupils blown wide with lust.

She thought I was being rough because I liked it. Thought this was me losing control. She was so fucking wrong. “Get on the bed,” I snapped.

She scrambled to obey, breathless, legs shaky.

The blonde smirked, already pulling her dress over her head, baring her tits. “Jesus, I love a brutal man,” she purred, brushing her fingers over my chest. “Make it hurt, baby. I want to see your cock stretching her pussy until she’s screaming.”

I ignored her. Ripped open a condom. Rolled it on. Grabbed the brunette’s hips and slammed into her in one brutal thrust.

Her back arched, hands grabbing the sheets, her whole body jolting forward with the force of it. “FUCK—” she sobbed, pushing back against me. “Jesus, you’re fucking huge—”

I didn’t slow down. Didn’t let her adjust. Didn’t give a single fuck.

I pounded into her, snapping my hips so hard that the bed frame slammed against the wall. The room filled with the sharp, obscene slap of skin on skin, with her breathless, gasping moans.

The blonde moaned beside us, rubbing herself harder while she watched. “That’s it. Fucking wreck her,” she panted, licking her lips. “Then afterwards you can give me my turn.”

I clenched my jaw, thrusting harder, faster, my nails biting into the brunette’s hips.

She wailed, her body jerking forward with every brutal snap of my hips, her moans turning into gasps, into broken little cries. I should've been close. Should've been right on the edge.

I wasn't.

The blonde next to me moaned her release and fury curled through me, cold and sharp. Why? Why wasn't this enough? I closed my eyes, gritted my teeth, and tried to pretend it was Summer's body shaking under mine. That it was Summer's moans filling my ears. Her nails clawing at my back.

For a split second, I almost believed it. A rush shot through me, a spark. My thrusts turned frantic. There it was— And then, like a fucking slap to the face, it was gone. I snarled in frustration, shoving the brunette onto her back. Still hard. Still fucking furious.

The blonde giggled beside us, dragging her nails down my chest, her voice sultry. "God, your stamina is insane. You just keep going and going—"

I grabbed her by the throat and shoved her down. "Shut up and suck on her tits."

She whimpered, but obeyed while the brunette moaned beneath me, her , legs wrapped around my waist as I fucked her into the mattress. Hard. Fast. Merciless.

I barely heard her over the slap of skin on skin, over the blonde's breathless gasps as she suckled on her roommate's nipples, her fingers trailing down her friend's body and slipping between her thighs until she could circle her clit.

"Yes!" the brunette groaned, rubbing her clit as her hips bucked. "God! More! I'm so fucking close," she blubbered.

I didn't answer. Didn't react. I just grabbed her throat, squeezed, and fucked her harder until she choked out a gasp, eyes rolling back. "God, yes," she sobbed. "Fucking choke me—use me—"

But it still wasn't enough. Still fucking nothing.

Why? Why wasn't this working?!

The brunette licked her lips, voice low and teasing. "I think you're hitting my cervix," she whispered, arching her back higher. "You're so fucking deep."

The blonde moaned at that, twisting her head to face her friend, her lips slick, swollen, wrecked. "I want a turn."

"Yeah?" the brunette panted, voice filthy. "You want a turn? You're going to make him bruise your pussy until it's gushing for me, baby."

"Please," her roommate whispered, bending to suck on her nipple again. Her friend wrapped her fingers over the back of her neck and pushed her between her legs until blonde hair tickled over my abs and cock.

"Suck my clit," the brunette ordered. "Make me cum, then you can suck on him."

A breath hissed out through my clenched lips as she wrapped tightly around me. Her friend's lips suckled hard on her clit until her thighs jolted and wetness flooded my cock. Sparks lit up my vision—almost.

Almost—

Fuck—I nearly had it, my thrusts quickening, balls slapping against her ass while her friend struggled to hold on to her clit.

The brunette was wailing, but it all blurred as I climbed higher and higher—

Almost there... Until it disappeared and I gritted my teeth as she pushed me back, yanking the blonde off my cock, flipping her onto her stomach. My cock throbbed, aching, fucking furious.

The blonde leaned down, licking a slow, dirty trail up my shaft, humming as she tasted the other girl on my cock.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” the blonde groaned, panting around my cock.

“You like tasting my pussy on his dick, baby?” Her friend responded distractedly. Her fingers were already between her legs, circling and circling to the sight of us. Until her back arched again and she came with a shuddering moan.

The blonde moaned, swirling her tongue over the tip. “Mmm, he tastes like your slutty little cunt.” She flicked her gaze up to me, wicked, teasing. “Bet I can make him come first.”

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She was so fucking wrong. I grabbed her by the hair and shoved my cock down her throat. She gagged, choking instantly, but I didn't stop. Didn't let her breathe.

"Fucking take it," I growled, thrusting into her mouth, watching the spit leak down her chin, watching her throat bulge.

She whimpered around me, moaning, drool dripping onto the sheets. The brunette spread her legs beside us, fingers slipping into her soaked pussy, moaning as she watched. "God, you're using her like a fuckdoll," she panted. "Bet she loves it, don't you, baby?"

The blonde whined around my cock, nodding, eyes glassy.

I pulled out with a wet, messy pop, spit and precum glistening on her swollen lips.

"Get on all fours," I snapped.

She obeyed, panting, trembling, ass in the air, soaking fucking wet. The brunette moaned, crawling behind her, spreading her ass open with her fingers and looking between her legs where her friend's pussy was already clenching with need.

"Fuck, she's dripping," she murmured, licking a filthy stripe up her friend's slit. "Mmm, I think she's ready for your cock."

I grabbed the blonde's hips and slammed inside. She screamed, the sound wrecked, broken, perfect. The brunette shuddered, licking her friend's pussy as I fucked her, moaning as she tasted the mess I was making of her.

“Jesus fuck—” the girl underneath us gasped, voice strangled. “You’re—Jesus, you’re gonna fucking split me in half.”

I didn’t let up. I fucked harder. Ruthless, brutal, tearing her apart. She clawed at the sheets, her body shaking, moaning into the pillow as her friend ate her out.

“You like it rough, baby?” the brunette cooed, fingers slipping between the blonde’s legs, rubbing her swollen clit. “You like getting used like a little fucktoy?”

The other girl wailed , body clenching, writhing, breaking. I clenched my jaw, waiting for it. Waiting for that fire, that pull, that inevitable rush. But it wasn’t happening. I snarled, furious.

The blonde moaned, then she twisted her head and looked at me.

“Come in my ass,” she panted suddenly. “I want you to fucking ruin me.”

I froze. The words hit me like a fucking bullet, lodging deep, ripping something open.

I had a condom on. But, I’d only done it once with Summer and never again.

I spread her cheeks and spat on her asshole, watching my spit slide down her pucker and to her pussy lips, watching as she trembled beneath me, her breath hitching as I pushed a finger inside.

My thoughts stuck on Summer. On the kid growing in her stomach.

I snapped. I grabbed the blonde, shoved her onto her stomach, pinned her wrists to the bed. She moaned, rubbing her cheek against the sheets like she loved being handled. I grabbed the lube from the nightstand, spat in my palm, spread her open, forced my fingers inside her tight hole.

She shivered. Moaned. “God, you’re stretching me—”

I lined up. Shoved inside. And she screamed, her body going rigid, trembling, shaking. And then—finally. That pull. That heat. That goddamn fucking release. I snarled, thrusting deeper, harder, hips slapping against her until she sobbed against the sheets.

“Fuck, you’re breaking me,” she whimpered, clenching, choking on moans.

I barely heard her. Because at that moment—it wasn’t her. It was Summer. It was her body under me, her moans, her gasps, her voice begging me not to stop— “Don’t stop, Connor, please don’t stop—”

My breath hitched. My cock throbbed, burned, ached—And then I was coming.

Hard. A violent, mind-numbing explosion that nearly fucking ruined me.

For a second, I let myself believe it. For a second, I let myself think it was her.

And then, it was gone. And she wasn’t there.

I pulled out, ripping the condom off, tossing it in the trash like it meant nothing.

The blonde collapsed, limp, ruined. The brunette whimpered, curling up beside her. “Holy fuck,” she breathed.

I ignored them. Grabbed my jeans and pulled them on.

Already fucking running. Because the second my body stopped shaking, the second my head cleared, the truth hit me like a freight train.

I could fuck a hundred women like this. Could ruin them, wreck them, bury myself in their bodies, fuck them until my bones ached. And it still wouldn't be her.

Summer was still there, still under my skin, still wrapped around me like a noose. Because no matter how dirty, no matter how fucking reckless, no matter how much I tried to drown in someone else...

It was still her I wanted. And it always fucking would be. The girl didn't even react, just stretched out across the mattress like she'd done this a hundred times before. Maybe she had. Maybe she didn't give a fuck.

Neither did I as I returned to North's place to find him glaring at me from the porch. He looked pissed. I couldn't give a shit, and I ignored him as he followed me to the bathroom. I had to wash that bitch's scent off of me.

The pipes rattled, the water coming out in a weak, rust-tinged stream before turning clear.

I stepped under, letting it scald my skin, but I didn't adjust the temperature.

I scrubbed harder than necessary, dragging my hands over my face, across my chest. Like I could wash away the last few hours.

Like I could scrub away the weight of what I'd done.

But no matter how much steam filled the tiny bathroom, no matter how raw my skin felt by the time I turned the water off—I still felt fucking filthy.

I dried off quickly, wrapped a towel around my waist, and walked back into the room. North was still fucking there. Still glaring. I couldn't give a shit about him though, so I pulled out my bag and grabbed a pair of pajamas, not even looking at him as I got

dressed.

The silence irritated me though, and I snapped before he did. “Would you just fucking say it?”

“What?” he asked, his voice cold. His stare directed at the ceiling. Prickly fucker. “That you’ve been fucking Vic’s sister? Or that you got her pregnant? No, wait... that’s not it.”

I didn’t reply. He wasn’t looking for one.

“Oh, wait! I got it,” he snapped his fingers, “Maybe it’s the fact that you just ran off and fucked someone else like a fucking pussy?

Or the fact that you broke Summer’s heart in my living room?

What do you want me to say, Con? Because I don’t have any fucking words for you right now that explain how fucking angry I am right now. ”

“I fucked up,” I snarled, throwing my towel into the basket in the bathroom. Quinn was scarier than North on any day. I’d prefer to be on her bad side then his. “I fucking know that, okay? I. Fucked. Up.”

“How long?” he asked, and I swallowed hard.

“We started that summer,” I whispered, sitting next to him. I sighed. My body was exhausted, but my mind wouldn’t shut the fuck up. The mattress dipped beneath my weight. He stayed quiet. “During your party. I didn’t know she was a virgin until after. Vic doesn’t know.”

“For fuck’s sake, Con,” he murmured, shaking his head.

I laughed bitterly, knowing what he meant. There wasn't anything to say though, so I just stared at the ceiling, listening to the sound of my own breathing, and then, her voice crept in. I'm not dealing with you when you're like this. Not after you hurt me.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Tried to get out of my head, but it wouldn't stop. It wouldn't fucking stop.

It was the way she'd looked at me, standing in that doorway, her arms wrapped around herself like she was trying to hold herself together. The way her voice shook when she said it.

I'm pregnant.

And the worst fucking part? I believed her. I did. But I couldn't go back now. I couldn't take back the things I'd said, the way I'd laughed in her face, the way I'd ripped her apart when she'd given me nothing but the truth.

"Summer's as much of a little sister to me as she is to Victor," North continued, his voice rough. "I'm not happy about how you handled it. It's too much like—"

My heart squeezed. Too much like my father.

"I know."

He left then, and I got into bed, remembering the feel of Summer's fingers when she used to run them through my hair. The pillow was soft, but it wasn't the same as when her body was pressed against mine.

I turned onto my side, staring at the wall, willing myself to sleep. But sleep didn't come. Only the ache in my chest. Only the lingering taste of whiskey and regret. Only her voice, repeating over and over in my head.

I'm pregnant.

It felt like I'd slipped over the edge of the cliff and now I was just falling, spiraling, and I didn't know if I'd ever stop.

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Summer

The cursor blinked at me.

Once. Twice. A steady, rhythmic pulse that somehow felt louder than my own heartbeat.

The confirmation email sat open on my laptop screen, the bright white background burning into my retinas.

The words were simple. Routine. An appointment scheduled for next week, a date, a time, a reminder that this was happening.

That it was real.

My stomach twisted, nausea rolling through me in slow, thick waves. Not the kind that sent me bolting to the bathroom. This was different. Heavier. Colder.

I could still pretend it wasn't real. That this was all some bizarre, drawn-out fever dream that I'd eventually wake up from.

That the test was wrong, that the words on the screen weren't tethering me to something I couldn't undo.

But if I clicked that button, if I confirmed the appointment—there'd be no more pretending.

, My free hand drifted to my stomach. My fingers splayed over the soft fabric of my hoodie—Connor's hoodie. I'd been wearing it all morning without thinking, the scent of faded cologne and old whiskey lingering in the fabric, barely there but enough. Enough to remind me. Enough to make it harder.

I didn't know how long I sat there, staring at the screen, paralyzed by indecision. But then—

Knock. Knock.

The sound snapped me out of it, sharp and unexpected, sending my pulse into overdrive.

I closed the laptop on instinct, the confirmation still pending. For a split second, I thought— Connor. That maybe last night had done something to him. That maybe he'd come back, maybe he was finally ready to fix the mess we'd made.

But when I swung the door open, it wasn't him.

It was Victor.

And my stomach dropped.

"Hey," he greeted casually, but his gaze flickered over me, taking in my messy bun, the dark circles under my eyes, the hoodie two sizes too big on my frame. "You ready for lunch?"

Shit.

My throat closed. I forgot.

His stare lingered, just for a second too long, like he was searching for something, like he could see straight through me. And for a terrifying, suffocating moment, I was convinced he knew. That he saw the panic written all over my face, that he somehow felt the secret pressing against my ribs.

But then, just as quickly, the moment passed.

He didn't know.

Not yet.

I forced my muscles to unlock, swallowing hard as I tried to school my expression into something that wasn't guilt, wasn't terror, wasn't the overwhelming urge to tell him everything just so I wouldn't have to carry it alone anymore.

I lied instead.

"Yeah," I murmured, rubbing at my temple like I could erase the tension coiling there. "Just tired."

Victor didn't move right away. His brow furrowed slightly, but he nodded, accepting my answer even if he didn't believe it. "Come on then," he said, stepping back, gesturing toward his car.

I grabbed my purse with unsteady fingers, exhaling as I followed him out.

Lunch was going to be hell.

The car ride was mostly quiet, the hum of the engine filling the space between us.

Victor didn't push, but I could feel it—the tension, the way he kept glancing at me like he was waiting for me to say something.

I didn't.

I couldn't.

Instead, I stared out the window, arms wrapped tightly around myself as the world blurred past in streaks of muted color.

My stomach was still unsettled, a constant knot that refused to loosen.

I should have eaten something before we left.

Maybe then the nausea wouldn't feel like it was sitting at the back of my throat, waiting for the right moment to choke me.

Victor eventually turned on the radio, filling the space with soft rock. I recognized the song. One of his favorites. He drummed his fingers against the steering wheel in time with the beat, like it was second nature. Like we'd done this a million times before.

We had.

But everything was different now.

By the time we pulled into the parking lot of the diner, my nerves were frayed, my heart pounding so hard it made my hands tremble. I shoved them into the front pocket of my hoodie, as I stepped out of the car.

We slid into our usual booth near the window. The waitress, an older woman with kind eyes, gave us a warm smile as she approached. We'd come here enough times

that she recognized us, and I tried to smile back but it fell flat. "Hey, sweethearts. The usual?"

Victor nodded. "Yeah, thanks, Maggie."

I hesitated, then cleared my throat. "Just a tea for me."

Victor's brow lifted, but he didn't comment. Not until Maggie walked away.

"Tea?" He rested his arms on the table, lacing his fingers together as he studied me. "Since when do you drink tea?"

I forced a shrug. "Just not really hungry today."

That was half-true. The other half was that the thought of greasy diner food made my stomach twist into knots. Victor was quiet for a moment, his gaze flicking over my face. Searching. Again. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Just tired. Classes have been a lot."

He didn't say anything right away, and I knew he was weighing whether or not to push. I held my breath. Finally, he just nodded. "I get that."

Relief uncurled in my chest, but it was short-lived.

Because lunch was hard. The conversation was stiff, broken up by long stretches of silence.

Victor talked about work, about how one of his clients was being a pain in the ass, about how he was thinking of visiting one of our old spots over the weekend.

I tried to respond when I was supposed to, tried to laugh in the right places, tried to pretend I wasn't falling apart right in front of him.

But I could feel his eyes on me.

Noticing the way I picked at my napkin instead of eating. The way my fingers curled and uncurled against the edge of the table. The way my voice was just a little too flat, a little too wrong.

When the check came, I reached for it, but Victor got there first, sliding his card into the holder without a second thought.

"Got it," he said.

I swallowed. "I could've paid."

He smirked. "Yeah, but we both know you weren't going to."

I rolled my eyes, but it was weak. Forced. Victor didn't say anything as we walked back to the car, but I could feel it. That undercurrent of concern. The weight of it pressing against my back like a physical thing.

He knew something was off.

He just didn't know what.

When we got back to my apartment, he lingered near the door, crossing his arms as he studied me. "You sure you're okay?"

I forced a smile, but my chest was tight. "I'm fine, Vic."

His eyes narrowed slightly. Like he didn't quite believe me. But he didn't push. He just exhaled, nodding slowly. "Okay. Just... let me know if you need anything, alright?"

I nodded quickly. "I will."

I wouldn't.

"Heading off to work?" I asked, my voice light, casual. Anything to distract him.

"Yeah," he said after a beat. "See you later?"

"Yep," I lied.

He didn't look convinced, but he didn't call me out on it. Instead, he just gave me a lingering look before finally stepping out the door. I pressed my back against the closed door, my fingers curling around the hem of my hoodie.

I just needed to get through today.

That was all.

I pushed off the door and moved on autopilot, slipping into my bedroom to grab my bag before heading back out.

I needed air. I needed space. I needed—I didn't know what I needed, but I knew that I still had a few things I had to research at the library so that should keep me busy until I could figure it out.

Connor

The scent of garlic and butter lingered in the air, mixing with the sharp bite of freshly brewed coffee. North had actually cooked—which was rare—but from the way Quinn was curled into his side, grinning up at him like he'd hung the damn moon, you'd think he'd just saved a litter of puppies.

"I'm just saying," Quinn murmured, dragging her finger through the condensation on her glass, "this is the first time in months you've made something that didn't involve a takeout container."

North smirked, lifting his mug to his lips. "If I'd known you were this easy to impress, I'd have put in the effort sooner."

Vic groaned. "Jesus. Can you two keep it in your pants for five minutes?"

Quinn just beamed, pressing a quick kiss to North's jaw before going back to her food. I stared at my plate, barely touching it, while Vic sat across from me, absently swirling the water in his glass, watching the ice clink against the sides.

"Anyway," Vic drawled, cutting into his steak. "Before I was blinded by whatever the hell that was—Quinn, you still thinking about getting your master's?"

She perked up immediately. "Yeah. I mean, maybe. I haven't decided if I want to stay in Reverence or move somewhere new."

North scoffed. "She's staying."

Vic raised a brow. “That right?”

“North,” she huffed. “Stop.”

He chewed, looking completely unbothered. “You love when I steal your fries.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t argue. Instead, she sighed dramatically and pushed her plate closer, like she was resigning herself to a fate she had long since accepted.

Vic grimaced. “That’s disgusting.”

North just shrugged. “She knew what she was signing up for.”

Quinn smirked, leaning in to murmur something in his ear. North’s expression shifted—something lazy flickering behind his eyes before he tipped his head down, whispering something back.

I did not need to see this.

Vic made a face, rubbing a hand over his jaw. “I feel like I should throw something at you both.”

Quinn grinned. “Jealous?”

“Of what?” Vic scoffed, slicing into his steak again. “The fact that you two can’t have a single conversation without making everyone else in the room uncomfortable?”

Quinn snickered, popping a fry into her mouth, while North just sat there, smug as hell.

I picked at my food, hoping my stomach would settle. But it wouldn't. It had been twisted in knots since the moment Vic walked through the door.

I should've left before he got here. Should've seen it coming the second North mentioned he was dropping by. But I hadn't.

And now, I was stuck.

Vic sipped his water, watching me. "You good, McIntyre?"

The question hit harder than it should have.

I swallowed. "Yeah."

His eyes narrowed, scanning my face, looking for something. I didn't know what, but I sure as hell wasn't giving it to him.

Vic finally leaned back in his chair, exhaling slowly. "You look like hell."

. "You always know how to make a guy feel special."

"Yeah, well," he muttered, setting his glass down. "You look like someone ran you over, reversed, and did it again."

North snorted. Quinn, too.

I did not laugh.

Vic's gaze lingered, a little too sharp, a little too knowing. Then— "Are you drinking again?"

The casual buzz of conversation died. North's spoon paused mid-stir in his coffee. Quinn stopped fiddling with her damn fries. My stomach dropped.

"No," I said, my voice steady.

Vic tilted his head, watching me like a fucking lie detector. "You sure about that?"

My jaw locked. "I said no."

Finally—Vic nodded. Slow. Measured. But his gaze didn't move. Didn't waver. Didn't let me breathe.

Quinn speared a fry on her fork, twirling it absently as she leaned forward. "Have you seen Summer yet?"

My stomach clenched as Vic's knife scraped against his plate, pausing mid-cut. I knew that tone. Casual, but not really. Light, but digging.

I didn't react, just reached for my glass. But my throat felt tight. North didn't look up from his coffee, but I saw the way his fingers twitched against the handle.

Vic was still. "Yeah," Vic said, finally slicing through his steak again. "I saw her this afternoon."

The room quietened. The way it always did when Summer was brought up in a room she wasn't in. Quinn's expression softened slightly. "Oh? How's she doing? She wasn't feeling too well earlier in the week."

Vic didn't answer right away. He chewed, swallowed, set his fork down with a quiet clink. His fingers tapped against the edge of the table, like he was debating something. Then he dragged a hand over his face, his voice lowered when he finally

said, “She’s... off.”

My pulse spiked.

Quinn frowned. “What do you mean?”

Vic hesitated, then shook his head. “She looked exhausted. Really exhausted. And she wasn’t eating. I asked if something was up, but she just brushed it off.” His jaw flexed. “She does that thing, you know? Where she smiles but it doesn’t reach her eyes?”

My stomach twisted.

I knew exactly what he was talking about.

Because I’d seen it too—the other night, when I ended up banging on her front door, drunk off my ass and wanting to make amends.

When she looked at me like I wasn’t anything more than a piece of dirt on her shoe, then let me inside anyway. The memory burned.

Quinn let out a breath, sitting back. “That’s... not great.”

“No,” Vic muttered. “It’s fucking not.”

He reached for his drink again, swirling the ice around in his glass, his expression unreadable.

“I don’t know what’s going on with her,” he admitted, voice quieter now.

“She’s always been independent, but this feels different.

I know you guys aren't really friends, but do you know if she was seeing anyone? ”

I nearly choked, my gaze turning to Quinn. Was she seeing someone? It wasn't impossible. Two months ago, I would've said no, but Summer was gorgeous and the last thing I expected from her when she left was to wait for me.

Vic rubbed his jaw, his stare flicking between North and Quinn, like he was trying to piece something together. Then, finally—his eyes landed on me.

“You staying in town for a while?” he asked. The question was so carefully casual that it felt like a loaded gun. I nodded before I even thought about it. His brows lifted slightly, like he hadn't expected that answer.

“Yeah,” I said, forcing a shrug. “For a bit.”

I couldn't tell him why. Couldn't tell him that I had nowhere else to go. That I'd burned through every escape and found myself circling back to the only thing I still cared about. So I lied. Used the one excuse I knew he'd buy.

“Mom,” I said, exhaling slowly. “She's staying with Aiden. We got into a fight, I decided this was better than hearing her talking about going back to him .”

Vic's expression darkened instantly. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

North muttered a curse under his breath, and even Quinn grimaced.

I just shook my head. “Wish I was.”

Vic leaned back in his chair. He looked away for a second, staring off into the middle distance, his jaw tight. Then—he sighed. Shaking his head. “That woman,” he muttered. “I swear to God.”

He didn't say more. Didn't need to. Because we both knew there was nothing else to say.

Summer

Connor was sitting on the steps of my apartment when I got back from school on Wednesday.

My first instinct was to turn around and walk the other way. Not because I was afraid. Not because I couldn't face him. But because I knew myself—knew him—and if I opened my mouth, I wasn't sure I'd be able to stop.

He looked like shit. Dark circles under his eyes, his fingers laced together like he was barely holding himself up. He looked like he hadn't slept, like he hadn't eaten, like he had been suffering. And maybe that should've made me feel something. Maybe it would've before.

But now?

Now, I wanted him to suffer.

I wanted him to feel every ounce of pain he had shoved into my chest when he laughed in my face. When he accused me of lying. When he spread some other bitch's thighs while I sat at home trying to figure out how to breathe through the wreckage he left behind.

My fingers grabbed my keys, pressing into my palm hard enough to leave indentations. The pain kept me grounded. Kept me from marching up those steps and slapping the exhaustion right off his face.

I didn't slow down. Didn't hesitate. I took the stairs two at a time, shoving my key into the lock. If he wanted to sit there and drown in his misery, fine.

He deserved to choke on it.

But then— His head lifted and his eyes met mine and suddenly, I wasn't just angry and depressed anymore. I was raging. Fuck him. I tore my gaze away, jaw clenched so tight my teeth ached, and kept moving. He wasn't worth the air it would take to tell him to get the fuck off my porch.

But then—his voice came. Low. Wrecked. Like he had any fucking right to sound like that.

“Summer.”

The syllables crawled under my skin, hooked themselves into my ribs and pulled. My fingers clenched around the doorknob.

I should have kept walking. Should have slammed the door in his face. Should have done anything but what I did—because I was better than this.

Or at least, I used to be. I forced my expression into something flat, and pushed the door open.

I didn't invite him in. I didn't tell him to follow.

But I left the door cracked just enough.

Because if he wanted to say something—if he wanted to stand in my living room and try—if he wanted to lie to my fucking face again—then fine.

Let him. Let him choke on the words before I threw them back in his face. I kicked off my shoes and walked into the living room, my pulse thrumming against my skull. The air behind me shifted, a new weight pressing into the walls, and I knew—knew—he had stepped inside.

Connor lingered near the door.

He should be bracing.

I crossed my arms, my heartbeat hammering against my ribs, barely restrained fury curling hot and tight in my chest. “Say what you came to say, Connor.” My voice was sharp. Cold.

His jaw flexed. A muscle twitched in his cheek. He took a slow breath like he was trying to calm himself down—like he had any fucking right to be the one who needed calming.

“I’m sorry.”

A bitter laugh shot out of me, sharp enough to cut. “For what?” I snapped, tilting my head. “Be specific, because there’s a lot to be sorry for.”

“For everything.”

I scoffed. “That’s convenient.”

“I mean it, Summer.” His voice was rough. Strained. Like saying those words was physically painful.

I stepped closer, voice low and dangerous. “Do you?”

His nostrils flared, but he nodded. “Yeah.”

I let that sit between us for a second. Let him think that those two syllables would fix anything before I ripped the ground out from under him.

“Good,” I said lightly. “Because if you didn’t, I’d really hate for you to go around fucking strangers with a clear conscience.”

His entire body locked up. There it was—that was all the evidence I needed. My blood boiled.

“You always were good at that, weren’t you?” I continued, voice syrupy-sweet with venom. “What was it this time, Connor? Did you tell her she was the best you ever had? Did you get bored halfway through? Did you picture me?”

I should’ve stopped. I should’ve shut up and let my silence be the last thing I ever gave him.

But I wanted to see him hurt.

I wanted him to feel the exact fucking agony that had been sitting in my chest since the moment he opened his mouth and called me a liar. He stepped closer, crowding me, his breath sharp.

“Is that what you think?” His voice was lower now, a growl beneath the anger, something raw and dangerous.

I tilted my chin up, refusing to back down. “I don’t have to think, Connor. I know.”

His lips curled, but there was nothing amused about it. “Yeah?” His voice dipped, sharp and cutting. “Then tell me, Princess—” The old nickname was a mockery now,

laced with bitterness. “What do you know?”

My pulse was a violent rhythm against my ribs.

“I know you couldn’t even look me in the fucking eye the other night.” My voice wavered, but I pushed through. “I know you ran straight to the nearest open pair of legs to make yourself forget.”

Connor’s expression flickered for half a second. But that half-second was everything.

I laughed, harsh and empty. “That’s what I thought.”

He was vibrating now, his hands clenched into fists, his breathing harsh. “You wanna talk about fucking other people, Summer?” His voice was sharp, dangerous, a threat wrapped in desperation. “Go ahead. Tell me how long it took you before you let someone else between your thighs.”

I saw red. Before I could think, my palm slammed against his cheek. The sound cracked through the air, echoing through the tiny apartment.

Connor didn’t flinch. He just took it. That smug, self-satisfied, infuriating look that made me want to claw his fucking face off.

“Oh?” He chuckled darkly, tilting his head, taunting me. “That struck a nerve, didn’t it?”

“You’re a piece of shit.” My voice shook.

Connor took another step forward, closing the distance, towering over me, his breath ragged. “And you still want me.”

“I don’t.”

I hated how weak it sounded. How it wasn’t convincing. How I didn’t believe it myself.

“I have a child to raise, Connor,” I spat, voice shaking with fury, with exhaustion. “And I’m not raising you too.”

The words were a slap to the face. Harder than the one I’d actually given him. He went still. Silent. And then—he nodded. Once. Sharp. Resigned. But his eyes—fuck, his eyes told another story. Something cracked open between us. Something violent and ugly and unfixable.

His jaw worked. His chest heaved. He swallowed, like he was about to say something. But he didn’t. Instead—without another word—he turned and walked out.

The door slammed shut behind him. I stood there, shaking.

Fury burned beneath my skin. It was too much. I wanted to scream, to break something, to burn this entire fucking apartment down just so it would stop feeling like him.

I wiped my face, hating myself for how my hands trembled.

If he wanted to fuck away his pain, then so could I.

Fuck Connor. I was so done waiting for him to come back to me. The silence in the apartment bothered me and the longer I stood there, the more I started shaking.

My breath came in sharp, ragged bursts as the echoes of Connor’s voice rang through my skull. His anger. His desperation. The way he had looked at me—like he still

fucking wanted me.

My stomach churned. My hands trembled. I forced myself to move.

I grabbed my phone off the counter. The screen lit up, notifications blurring in my periphery. I didn't care. My mind was already racing through names, flipping through conversations, grasping for anything to ground me—to drag me away from the lingering weight of him.

And then—I found it. My study group's messages. I scrolled through the messages until one number stood out.

Nate.

Tall, broad-shouldered, always sitting just a little too close in study group, laughing a little too hard at my jokes, dropping casual, flirtatious comments that I had brushed off before. He'd been trying to get me alone for weeks. I never gave him the chance.

Until now.

I opened our last conversation. The messages were easy, harmless. A few study notes. A joke about our professor's terrible handwriting. Nothing serious. Nothing important. But that didn't matter.

I took a breath. Typed.

Summer: Hey. You busy?

It took him less than thirty seconds to respond.

Nate: Not for you. What's up?

I hesitated. Only for a second. Then—I made my decision.

Summer: Do you wanna come over?

I saw the three dots pop up instantly.

Nate: Now?

Summer: Yeah. Now.

Nate: On my way.

I swallowed hard as I stared at the words. He'd be here in fifteen minutes. Maybe less.

I wasn't nervous. I wasn't second-guessing. I was done second-guessing.

If Connor could run to some random woman and forget me between her thighs, then I could do the same. I could burn away the memory of him, wipe him from my body, replace the way he touched me, the way he felt inside me, the way he ruined me over and over again. I could do this. I needed to.

I moved on autopilot, walking to my bedroom, stripping off the hoodie and tossing it onto the floor like it was poison. I pulled my hair down, ran my fingers through it, forced myself to look in the mirror.

My reflection stared back.

Eyes rimmed with red. Cheeks flushed from the argument. I looked... different. Not like myself. Good. I didn't want to look like myself tonight.

A knock on the door jolted me out of my thoughts. I turned, my pulse kicking up. Not from excitement. Not from want. Just—adrenaline.

I walked to the door and pulled it open.

Nate stood there, leaning against the frame, grinning. His blue eyes flicked over me, darkening slightly as he took me in. “Damn, Summer,” he murmured, stepping inside. “This is a nice surprise.”

I shut the door behind him. “Glad you think so.” I didn’t give him time to talk. Didn’t give myself time to hesitate. I grabbed his shirt and pulled him into me.

He barely had time to react before my mouth was on his, desperate, messy, demanding.

Nate made a pleased sound, his hands sliding to my waist, his body pressing into mine as he kissed me back. It wasn’t bad. He was a good kisser, I guessed. Confident, knowing exactly what he wanted. His lips were soft. His hands were steady.

But it wasn’t Connor.

I told myself that was a good thing.

I tilted my head, deepening the kiss, parting my lips to let him in. His tongue flicked against mine, slow, teasing. His fingers brushed my bare skin, skating beneath my shirt, making me shiver—but not in the way I wanted. Not in the way that made my breath stutter, my body melt.

Not in the way that felt like fire. I didn’t stop. I couldn’t stop. I pulled at his belt, tugging him toward my bedroom, not letting myself think as he followed, his hands already moving lower.

We fell onto the bed in a mess of tangled limbs and heated desperation. His hands were on me, sliding under my shirt, tightening my hips, pressing his weight into me. His mouth traced my jaw, then my neck, then lower.

I let him.

I let him pull my shirt over my head, let him strip me bare, let him kiss a path down my stomach while his fingers dipped lower, slipping between my thighs, seeking, teasing.

I arched into his touch. Not because I wanted to—but because I was supposed to.

I forced myself to moan when he slipped a finger inside me.

I forced myself to react when he kissed me again, when he pushed inside me, when he let out a sharp breath against my lips like this was exactly what he'd been wanting.

Nate pulled out his cock and slipped a condom on, then spread my legs wider and slipped inside me. He felt nothing like Connor. His dick wasn't curved the way I liked it, nor was it as thick. But more than that, he didn't make me cum before driving into me.

My body moved like it was supposed to, but my mind—my mind was somewhere else.

Somewhere in the past.

Somewhere in the middle of hot, tangled sheets and rough hands and Connor's breath against my ear, growling my fucking name like it was the only thing that mattered.

This wasn't him. It would never be him.

Nate thrust harder, groaning in my ear, his fingers digging into my hips like he was trying to leave a mark. But all I could feel was the absence of something.

The space where Connor should be. I squeezed my eyes shut, nails biting into Nate's shoulders, and let it happen. Let him use my body the way I was using his.

Let him finish, let him shudder against me, let him murmur something sweet that I didn't fucking hear. And then—it was over and he collapsed beside me with a breathless, lazy grin stretching across his lips. "Jesus, Summer," he murmured. "That was—"

So fucking terrible? Yeah.

I rolled away from him, sitting up, pulling the sheets around me as I ran a hand down my face. He was still talking. Still looking at me like we were something now. But all I felt was empty. I let out a slow, shaky breath and forced myself to smile. Fake it.

"Yeah," I whispered, staring at the ceiling. "It was something."

It was nothing. I didn't feel better. I felt like I had just made the biggest mistake of my life. But it was too late for that now. I turned to Nate, brushing a hand over his chest, leaning in just enough to fake interest. "You want some water?"

He grinned, still basking in his post-fuck haze. "Yeah, that'd be great."

I nodded, slipping out of bed, wrapping a sheet around me. But as I walked to the kitchen, as I caught sight of my reflection in the hallway mirror, I stopped. I didn't recognize myself.

My lips were swollen. My skin was flushed. My hair was messy, tangled.

But my eyes...

My eyes looked fucking dead.

And I hated that. I hated that Connor had left me feeling like this.

But I hated myself even more for wondering how the fuck he managed to fuck other people—or if maybe he preferred it this way.

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Connor

I should have stopped.

I fucking knew I should have.

Every day, I told myself it would be the last time. That I'd get some goddamn sleep, sober up, and let Summer live her life without me dragging her down any more than I already had.

But then night fell.

And I found myself back here.

Standing across the street from her apartment, hands shoved deep into my pockets, stomach twisted in knots. I didn't go inside. Didn't knock. Didn't do a damn thing except watch. Like some fucking stalker.

"This is fucking weird."

North's voice came from behind me, but I didn't flinch. I'd been expecting it. Him or Quinn. They'd been keeping tabs on me ever since I got kicked out of the dealership just before the last fight with Summer. I had a feeling that they were afraid I'd go completely off the rails.

Joke's on them. I already had. Why else would I go back to my Dad to ask for my job, then fuck it all up and leave with a concussion and bruises across my face?

I know what Summer thought they were, but there hadn't been another woman since the bitch who begged for my cock in her ass.

I couldn't really deny it though, not after all the other time's I'd shown up like that.

Beaten and bloody, with only one excuse on my lips.

Someone's husband. Someone's boyfriend, or brother.

She didn't need to know it was always the same person. None of them did.

North stepped up beside me, hands in his jacket pockets, watching Summer's window like he could see what I saw. "You look like some Lifetime stalker villain."

Quinn crossed her arms, unimpressed. "If you're trying to prove you're father material, this ain't it.

" She buffed her nails against her pants, then blew on them like she wasn't shoving a fucking knife into my ribs.

"Maybe try, I don't know, flowers? An apology?

Getting down on your knees and promising you'll never be a dickwad ever again? "

I ignored them both.

Because I couldn't stop.

Because if I stopped watching, if I turned away, if I let myself sit with my thoughts for even a second, I might actually have to face what I'd done.

It had been four days.

Four days of standing here, night after night, punishing myself. Four days of not knowing where she stood, what she was thinking, what the hell she was going to do.

And then I saw her.

Through the window of her apartment.

She was sitting across from some guy. His back was to me, but I could see her. See the way she smiled. See the way she laughed. The breath locked in my lungs. Then the guy stood, gathering his books, and said something that made her smile even wider before he walked out the door.

I didn't think. I was already crossing the street. Already heading for her door. By the time she turned around, I was pushing my way inside.

She gasped, stumbling back. "Connor, what the fuck?"

My chest was burning like I had swallowed fire. "Who was that?" My voice came out rough, dangerous.

Her brows furrowed. "Excuse me?"

"Don't play dumb. Who the hell was he?"

"A study partner."

I let out a sharp, humorless laugh. "Right."

She glared. "You don't get to do this. You don't get to storm in here like—"

"Like what?" I stepped closer, my voice dropping lower, thick with resentment. "Like I fucking care who my baby mama is fucking?"

Disbelief flashed in her eyes. "You're unbelievable." She moved to shove past me, but I caught her wrist. Gently.

"Let me go," she snapped.

My voice came out low, rough, shattered. "You slept with him, didn't you? Was it that easy to replace me, Summer? Did he make you scream his name when he bent you over for him?"

My jealousy was insane, I had no right to be this way after everything I'd done and for a second I heard my father's voice in my words—in my tone. Her eyes flashed with rage.

Then everything snapped.

I grabbed her. I took her. I kissed her like I was trying to drown in her, die in her, take every last breath she had left and make it mine.

She moaned into my mouth, her nails clawing at me, tearing at my shirt, at my skin, like she needed to hurt me back. Like she needed this just as much as I did.

I ripped her against me, dragging her up my body, lifting her onto the counter like she weighed nothing. My lips tore down her throat, my teeth scraping, biting, leaving love marks that wouldn't fade by morning.

I pocketed her panties, and pushed her dress up, bunching the fabric at her waist, baring her to me. She shuddered as I traced my fingers over her skin, rough, worshipful, my mouth pressing kisses down her collarbone, across her chest, my lips

mouthed the words I couldn't fucking say out loud.

I kissed down her stomach, sucking at the soft skin just above her navel. I bit at her hip, dragging my tongue over the sting, making her gasp, her nails scraping my scalp.

I dropped to my knees in front of her, spreading her thighs wide, breathing her in.

"Fuck, baby, look at you," I rasped, dragging my fingers through her slick heat, watching her tremble for me.

"Connor," she whimpered.

"I know, baby," I murmured against her skin, teasing her entrance, barely pushing inside, enough to feel her clench around me. "You're soaking for me. Did you miss me that bad?"

She nodded, breath ragged.

I chuckled, dark, broken. "That's my good girl."

Her thighs trembled as I slid a finger inside her, slow, torturous, my palm pressing against her clit.

I watched her fall apart, watched her head tip back, her moans turning into cries, her legs wrapping around me, her body writhing as she fucked herself on my hand.

"You want more?" I teased, curling my fingers inside her, dragging them against that perfect spot, the one that made her shake.

"Yes," she gasped.

"Say it."

"Please, Connor," she whined.

I groaned, adding another finger, stretching her, working her open. "That's it, sweetheart. Take what I give you."

She was so fucking wet, slick and coating my fingers, making obscene noises every time I fucked her deeper.

I pressed my lips to the inside of her thigh, kissed the spot where I'd leave another mark, biting down as I rubbed her faster, harder, watching as her entire body tensed, her whimpers turning into high-pitched gasps.

"Connor—"

"Give it to me, baby," I growled, pushing her over the edge, watching her shudder, watching her come so fucking hard she nearly collapsed against the counter.

I didn't let her rest.

I grabbed her waist and flipped her over, bending her against the counter, spreading her legs apart with my knee. Braced her still flat belly with a soft palm. She was still shaking, still pulsing around nothing, her thighs slick, her breath coming in short, ragged gasps.

I pressed against her, sliding through her wetness, teasing her entrance, rubbing my cock through the mess I'd made.

"Tell me you fucking missed this," I whispered, voice rough against her ear.

"I missed it," she gasped.

I slid in an inch.

She whined.

"Missed what?" I taunted, nipping at her earlobe.

"You," she panted. "I missed you."

That was all I needed.

I slammed into her, bottoming out in one brutal thrust, her moan breaking into a scream.

"Fuck, Summer," I groaned, grabbing her so fucking tight, my hands leaving fingerprints on her hips. "You take me so well, baby."

I pulled out and drove into her again, my hips snapping against hers so hard the counter creaked and she moaned a high and helpless sound.

I slid my hand around her throat, tilting her head back, letting my lips drag along her pulse.

"You love this, don't you?" I growled, fucking her harder, my other hand squeezing her ass, spanking her once just to watch her jolt.

"Yes," she gasped.

"You love me ruining you," I whispered against her ear, biting down on her earlobe.

"Connor," she sobbed.

I groaned, dragging my fingers to her clit, rubbing slow, teasing circles.

"You wanna come again for me, baby?"

She nodded frantically, her body tensing, shaking.

"Then do it," I demanded, thrusting deeper, feeling her squeeze me so tight it was unbearable.

She came with a cry, her body locking up, her moans turning into helpless little whimpers, and fuck—she was so fucking tight, so wet. I lost it.

I buried myself as deep as I could, my groan breaking as I filled her pussy, groaning roughly at the squeeze of her cunt on my bare cock, my mouth mouthing apologies against her neck. I never meant to hurt you, baby.

I stayed inside her, my forehead pressing against her back, my hands smoothing over the bruises I'd left on her skin.

Then, slowly, I pulled out, still painfully hard even after cumming inside her.

I dropped to my knees and spread her open, my breath catching as I stared at the mess I'd left behind—the bruises on her hips, the bite marks along her thighs, the way she was still soaking, still wrecked from me.

Our combined released dripping out of her swollen pussy lips.

"Fuck," I whispered, pressing my lips to her trembling thigh, inhaling her scent. I should have left it there. I should have let her breathe. But I couldn't. Instead, I licked

up the inside of her thigh, spread her wider, and groaned.

"Fuck," I whispered again, already wanting more.

I dragged my fingers through her folds, feeling the hot, wet slickness that wasn't just her anymore.

My cum, still inside her, mixed with her release, coating my fingers as I traced the mess between her thighs, spreading it over her swollen clit.

My cock twitched, already aching to spend again.

"You feel that, baby?" My voice was dark, rough, my fingers lazy as they slid through her slit, rubbing the evidence of what I'd done to her in slow, teasing circles.

"That's all me. That's my fucking cum inside you."

She moaned, her thighs shaking, her breath catching. I grinned against her skin, pressing my lips to her hip.

But I wasn't done.

Not yet.

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I dragged my fingers through her, gathering more of our mess, and pushed it back inside her, watching the way her walls fluttered around the intrusion, how her breath hitched when I curled my fingers and fucked it deeper.

"Connor," she whimpered, her voice wrecked, her body arching against the counter.

I groaned, sliding my tongue over the curve of her ass as I fucked her slow, deep, teasing, letting her feel every inch of my fingers moving inside her.

And then, without thinking, my touch drifted lower. My thumb circled the tight, untouched hole of her ass, slicking it up with our combined release, teasing her, pressing just enough to feel her tense beneath me.

My cock twitched.

"You going to let me have this part of you again, Summer?"

"My voice was low, rough, possessive as I kissed along her lower back, my breath warm against her skin.

Maybe it was fucked up, but I wanted to see my cum dripping out of every part of her.

"If I wanted to fuck your ass, would you let me do that to you again, sunshine?"

I smirked, pressing my lips to the base of her spine. "Tell me, Princess."

She hesitated, her breath ragged, and then slowly, timidly, she nodded. My cock throbbed at the sight. "Good girl," I murmured, my lips trailing lower. "I'll take care of you. I promise."

I pressed my thumb against her tight little hole, applying just enough pressure to feel her gasp, her hips jerking at the unexpected sensation.

She shuddered, her moan high, needy, desperate.

I groaned, sliding my other fingers back inside her dripping cunt, fucking her with both hands, my thumb pressing in carefully, stretching her inch by inch while my fingers curled inside her pussy, pressing into that perfect spot that made her tremble.

"That's it," I whispered, hypnotized by the way she clenched around me, by the way her body took me so perfectly, everywhere at once. "So fucking tight, baby. You're gonna let me ruin every inch of you, aren't you?"

She moaned something incoherent, rocking back onto my hand, needing more, completely lost to the pleasure, the filth, the utter fucking depravity of it.

"That's my girl," I growled, pressing my thumb deeper, my fingers pumping into her, feeling her tense, shake apart under my hands.

She was so close.

I felt it— the way her moans turned high and helpless, the way she rocked onto my fingers, chasing the friction, completely fucking ruined for me.

"You gonna come for me, baby?" I rasped, biting into her hip. "Gonna make a fucking mess all over my fingers?"

She nodded frantically, her breath shattered, her body pushed past the point of sanity.

I smirked, pressing my fingers deep inside her, sliding my thumb in perfect rhythm, making sure she felt everything.

"Then do it, sweetheart," I ordered, low, rough, dominant as fuck. "Come for me."

She screamed, her entire body convulsing, her walls clenching around my fingers, the tight ring of her ass squeezing my thumb, every inch of her shuddering as she came so hard that she squirted all over my hand.

"Jesus fucking Christ," I groaned, watching the way she gushed, her body flooding with release, her legs shaking beneath me.

I kept working her through it, fucking her slow and deep, watching her ride the aftershocks, watching the way her body responded to me, only me.

When she finally collapsed against the counter, breathless, shaking, I slowly withdrew my fingers, my cock still aching, leaking, desperate to take more from her.

I brought my slick fingers to my mouth and sucked them clean, groaning at the taste of her, of us.

"Look at you," I murmured, grinning darkly, pressing a final kiss to her spine. "You really are my perfect little mess, aren't you?"

She shivered at my words, still too fucked out to speak, still spread open for me, dripping, completely ruined in the best way possible.

And I?

I was already thinking about how many more times I could make her come before sunrise. But she froze as I turned her around and picked her trembling body up. Her hands pressed against my chest.

"No."

It was like a bucket of ice water had been dumped over me. I stilled, every muscle in my body locking up as she pushed me away. God, it fucking hurt, even if I deserved every moment.

She was breathing hard, shaking, her eyes wet, burning. "I can't do this anymore."

The words hit like a fucking bullet. My stomach dropped. "Summer—"

"No, Connor." Her voice was tight, pained, the edges razor-sharp. "You don't get to do this. You don't get to ruin me and then come back just because you can't handle seeing me move on."

My pulse pounded, my throat closing up.

She took a step back, pulling down her dress, wrapping her arms around herself like armor.

"I'm really, really done this time."

My chest fucking hurt.

But I didn't show it.

Instead, I stepped back too, running a hand over my aching jaw, forcing my face into something unreadable.

"Fine."

Summer blinked, caught off guard. "Fine?"

I nodded once. "If that's how you want it."

She crossed her arms, defensive, hurting. "It is."

I tilted my head, studying her. Hiding my panic as I tried to find something to change her mind, and then, I shouldn't have said it, but—"But if that kid is mine, you can't expect me to leave you alone."

Her breath hitched. "What?"

My eyes darkened. "You want me gone? Fine. But I'm not just gonna disappear while you're pregnant. I need to make sure you're taking care of it."

Summer stared at me, her pulse fluttering at her throat. And for the first time, I saw real fear in her eyes. Not fear of me. But fear of what I meant. Fear of what this meant. And that was the first thing that made me feel like I was still in control.

Summer

I knew he was still here before I even stepped into the kitchen. The smell of toasted bread, butter, and something else—probably ham, maybe turkey—hit me the second I opened my front door. I'd left this morning, assuming he would too, but Connor had to prove me wrong every since time, didn't he?

I kicked off my shoes, rubbing my temple as I walked into the kitchen, my bookbag slumping to the floor with a dull thud. And just like I knew he would, he was there, standing at the counter, making himself at home.

Like he belonged.

Like we hadn't fought. Like he hadn't forced his way into my apartment. Like I hadn't meant it when I told him I was done. Like we hadn't had filthy, monkey sex on my kitchen counter.

God, I hope he cleaned that counter. It was sticky and gross when I saw it last. I didn't even check this morning, too embarrassed about what I let him do to me. Dear god, what was wrong with me?

Connor didn't look up, didn't acknowledge me at all as I walked toward the fridge. My scowl grew more intense when I saw he had, in fact, cleaned the damn counter. Instead of saying anything though, he finished making a sandwich, cut it in half, and handed me a plate without a word.

I stared at it.

I should have refused. Should have shoved it back into his chest and told him to get the fuck out.

But my stomach was already twisting with hunger, and I hated how casual, how familiar it all felt.

He knew I'd eat. He knew I wouldn't just throw it out. He knew that, no matter how much I wanted to hate him, I wouldn't throw out a sandwich. Not when, at one point, he'd been the one making me lunch and dinner sandwiches with Vic when Mom and Dad were out of town.

And that pissed me off more than anything.

I grabbed the plate, turned away without thanking him, and leaned against the counter, taking a small bite even as resentment boiled under my skin.

Connor, on the other hand, didn't hesitate. He finished making his own sandwich, then dropped onto my couch like it was his own personal throne, legs spread, completely at ease.

Like we hadn't been at each other's throats. Like we weren't falling apart at the seams. Like I didn't still need him, pussy throbbing, even after all the rough, hot sex last night—or maybe because of it.

I clenched my jaw, forcing myself to swallow before speaking. "You're not staying here."

He looked up, unfazed. "Yes, I am."

I gritted my teeth. God, he was so fucking stubborn. Fine, if he didn't want to go after I explicitly told him to, then I could just get rid of him by making his life hell.

"If you're going to be in my life, then we're setting some fucking rules."

Connor smirked, tilting his head. "Like what? You gonna make me sign a contract?"

I ignored the jab. "Like you sleeping on the couch. Like you not pulling the shit you did last night. Like you not thinking you can just control me because of the baby."

Connor breathed out sharply. It seemed like guilt flickered behind his eyes, but he didn't argue.

"I don't want to control you, Summer."

I lifted an eyebrow. "No? Because forcing your way in and accusing me of sleeping around sure as hell didn't feel like you were giving me the freedom to live my life the way I want to."

His jaw ticked, but again—he didn't argue.

That irritated me more than if he had. Because this wasn't Connor.

Connor never backed down. Connor never let me have the last word.

But now, he just stared back at me, something lost, something fraying at the edges, and I hated that it called to me. Hated that some part of me still cared.

Hated that I still wanted to fix the cracks he refused to acknowledge.

"You can stay. For now. But this doesn't mean anything."

Connor shrugged. "Didn't ask for it to."

Liar.

I expected him to apologize at some point. To admit he'd been a jealous, possessive, unbearable asshole. To say something—anything—that resembled remorse. But he didn't. He sat there, ate his sandwich, and acted like nothing had happened.

Annoyed, I finished my food, stormed to my room, and slammed the door.

Four days later, Connor was still here. Still taking up space, still acting like nothing had happened, still moving through my apartment like he belonged in it.

I hated it.

I hated that a small, disgusting part of me didn't.

Because he wasn't just existing here. He was doing things. Making food. Cleaning dishes. Doing laundry, even though I never asked him to. I came out one morning to find him wiping down the counters like he fucking lived here. Like he was trying to be responsible.

As fucking if. This was Connor I was talking about. The man didn't do responsible. He did running away . He did fucking things up . He never stayed behind to make sure my heart wasn't bleeding out, but this time it was different. Like he wanted to prove something.

I should have told him to leave. I should have thrown it all back in his face.

But when I got home from work—the job he didn't know about, the one I was keeping to myself because I didn't want him to act like he had a say in any of it—and

there was food waiting for me, when the sink wasn't piled with dishes, when my apartment didn't feel like it was caving in on me...

I melted.

And I hated myself for it.

Because it was the bare fucking minimum.

Because this wasn't Connor.

Connor wasn't a responsible person. He wasn't the guy who stayed. He wasn't the guy who did nice things just because. And yet, here he was. Cooking. Cleaning. Making sure I ate. Like he was trying to be the person I once thought he was. I didn't know if I believed it.

I didn't know if I should.

And I didn't know if I should just fucking kick him out before I got too comfortable.

The next morning, I sat at the kitchen table, scrolling through job listings on my laptop. The job I'd gotten was at that restaurant Quinn found me at. And I didn't have anything against waitresses, but damn it was hard making tips when you refused to flirt with the pigs that came through the door.

Connor was at the stove, flipping pancakes, acting like this was just a normal morning.

"Want some?" he asked, his voice casual, like we weren't locked in a cold war of

silence and stolen glances. I didn't answer. Didn't look up. Didn't acknowledge him at all. And I heard him chuckle under his breath, the sound low, knowing, fucking insufferable. "Suit yourself, sunshine."

My eye twitched at the nickname, but I kept my focus on the screen, even though I hadn't actually read a single word ever since he walked out of the bathroom in a towel and nothing else.

Connor sat down across from me, taking a bite of his food, eyes locked onto mine, watching, waiting.

Then—like the last week hadn't been pure, agonizing tension—he said, way too amused. "Heard some strange noises last night, Princess."

My body tensed. Noises. I gulped, face heating as I remembered pulling out the vibrator I'd bought just over a year ago.

"Sounded like you were having some troubles," he purred.

My jaw locked.

"Because damn," he continued, biting into a piece of bacon, "just a couple of days ago that little pussy was squeezing me like it didn't want me to pull out. But last night you were huffing and puffing like you couldn't hit that special spot. Did you need me, Princess? You know you can just call me, baby girl. Couch was only a few feet away."

I slammed my laptop shut. "I could make all that tension fade, sunshine. Make your pussy nice and noisy, and relaxed."

"Fuck you!" I hated him.

I stood, chair scraping against the floor, grabbing my coffee, needing space before I did something stupid. Like grab that towel and see if he was still hard after his shower. My face flushed again, for another reason, one I refused to admit had me turned on ever since I walked in on him.

Connor, still lounging like he hadn't just said the most fucked-up thing imaginable, leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms behind his head. "What, you know I'm good for it," he called after me, then murmured normally, like he was talking to himself. "It's all I can fucking think about."

I gritted my teeth. "Shut up."

His grin was all sharp edges and trouble.

And then, before I could walk away, before I could shove my way past the bedsheets and pillows in the living room—I learned yesterday that they were Quinn's when she angrily growled out about having to fucking redecorate her perfect spare bedroom —, he spoke again.

"That shower head you got would help a lot, too. But I prefer your shampoo when I can't replace your slick. "

I froze, unwillingly turning to face him as my pussy clenched. Connor licked syrup from his thumb, watching me, watching my reaction like it fed him.

"You liked that, didn't you?" he said, voice lower now. "Didn't say a damn thing when you caught me earlier, did you, sunshine? Just stood there, listening. Suppose you needed it though, Princess. Your pussy's probably still frustrated from last night."

He leaned back, clapping his thigh the same way you'd call over a dog and I bristled.

A smirk darkened that face of his. “Come on, Princess. Let me make you feel better. Use me.”

Please, that haunted look in his eyes said and, I just fucking couldn’t. Stomping off to my room, I slammed my door in response.

And Connor? Connor fucking laughed like he knew what I was about to do even before I pulled out my vibrator and went to town losing all that fucking tension he was talking about.

And when I heard him groan from the living room, I reimagined what I’d found when I walked into the bathroom this morning.

His rock hard cock and the panties he’d stolen from me, sopping wet from the water and slick from the shampoo as he roughly fucked his fist.

Jokes on him because it sure as hell sounded like he’d been having just as much trouble as me, releasing all that fucking tension .

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Connor

The couch dug into my back, the springs unforgiving, and when I woke up, everything fucking ached. The walls felt smaller every day, pressing in on me, reminding me that this wasn't my place.

I didn't belong here.

It had been days of this. Days of waking up in a life that didn't feel like mine.

Days of existing in a space where I wasn't wanted.

Days of being ignored by the one person I couldn't stop thinking about.

It was driving me insane. I just needed one fucking sign from her that we'd get through this.

Fuck if I even knew what this was, but I couldn't go back to how things used to be.

I needed Summer. Needed her to look at me the way she used to.

Her anger was fucking killing me.

I should leave. I knew I should.

Instead, I dragged myself into the kitchen.

I needed to do something. I didn't care what—just something to take up space, to remind her that I was still fucking here.

The eggs sizzled on the stove, the smell of coffee filling the air. My hands moved on autopilot—cracking shells, flipping bacon, buttering toast—muscle memory from years of making breakfast for me, Aiden, and Mom, when she couldn't.

Then I heard the door to her bedroom open.

I didn't turn.

Didn't react.

She walked past me, brushing against my arm, but only because the kitchen was too small. Not because she wanted to. I could smell the faint scent of her shampoo—something floral, something that drove me fucking crazy—but she didn't look at me. Didn't acknowledge me.

Nothing.

I, leaning against the counter, watching her. "Morning, sunshine."

Silence.

Not even a glance.

She used to melt for me. Now? She didn't even flinch. That was worse than if she were screaming. She ate her breakfast, got ready, then left. The door clicked shut behind her, leaving me alone with the sound of the ticking clock and the burnt edge of frustration curling in my gut..

Then I saw it. A small, glossy photo on the counter. My eyes narrowed, and I stepped forward, fingers hesitating before picking it up.

It took me a fucking second to figure out what I was looking at, but then something about the blobs started to make a little more sense. It was a sonogram. Jesus.

There wasn't even anything there yet, just a red marker circling what would eventually be something. Someone. Our kid. My head spun.

I swallowed. Hard. Then, with shaky fingers, I put it back down and stepped away. My phone buzzed in my pocket, and for a second, I almost ignored it. But something told me to check.

I pulled it out, barely glancing at the screen before answering. "Yeah?"

Aiden's voice came through, tight and low. "Mom's in the hospital."

Everything inside me went cold. "What?"

"She went back to Dad," he said, voice clipped. "I don't know what happened yet, but I got a call from the hospital. She's there now."

Rage exploded through my veins, hot and blinding. "Fucking hell, Aiden, are you serious?"

"Connor—" he started, but I was already moving, grabbing my keys, putting on my jacket. I felt sick. Sick and furious and fucking helpless. My mother—

"I knew she'd do this," I spit out. "I knew she'd fucking go back to him."

"Connor," Aiden snapped, cutting through my anger. "She went there to ask for a

divorce."

I stopped dead in my tracks.

The words slammed into me like a sledgehammer. Divorce? My mother, who had spent years making excuses, covering up bruises, whispering that things would get better, had finally—

She meant it.

She fucking meant it.

I squeezed my eyes shut, my chest a mess of anger and relief and something else I couldn't name. I dragged in a breath, forcing my voice to steady. "Where are you now?"

"On my way to the house. I'll see you there."

The line went dead. I stood there, breathing hard, then pulled out my phone again, typing out a quick message to Summer.

Connor: Something came up. Won't be home for a bit.

I didn't wait for a response. Didn't expect one. Instead, I slid my phone back into my pocket and walked out the door, ready for whatever the fuck was waiting for me at home.

The drive to Dad's house was a blur. Aiden's voice echoed in my head. She went there to ask for a divorce.

It didn't make sense. For years, our mother had lived in denial, always believing that things would get better, that he would change, that his love—his sick, twisted fucking version of love—was worth enduring.

And now she wanted out?

Now, when the damage was already done?

Now, when Aiden and I were already too fucked up to ever be whole again?

I wanted to be happy for her. I really did. But all I felt was fury. Fury at her for waiting this long. Fury at my father for making her believe she had no other choice. Fury at myself for still giving a shit when I should've cut them both off years ago.

The house came into view, as I pulled up to the curb, heart pounding in my ears. There were two cop cars parked outside, red and blue lights flashing in the dark, bathing the neighborhood in an eerie glow. My stomach twisted.

I barely threw the car in park before I was out, slamming the door behind me. The night air was cold, but I barely felt it.

Aiden was standing near the porch, arms crossed, his face a mask of tension. He turned at the sound of my footsteps, his dark eyes locking onto mine.

"Where is he?" I asked, my voice tight, sharp.

Aiden ran a hand over his short beard. "Gone."

My heart slammed against my ribs. "Gone where?"

Aiden's lips pressed into a tight line. "Jail."

I blinked, barely processing the word. “What?”

“The cops picked him up about an hour ago. Mom pressed charges.”

For a second, I just stood there, the words bouncing around in my head like I couldn’t make sense of them. Mom pressed charges.

She’d gone through hell with him. Stood by him through every drunken rage, every slammed door, every ugly fucking night he let his fists do the talking. And now—she’d finally done something about it?

A bitter laugh clawed its way up my throat, sharp and humorless. “She actually did it?”

Aiden’s jaw clenched, but he nodded. “Yeah.”

I shook my head, dragging a hand over my face. This was—fuck. I didn’t even know what this was. My father, in jail? That bastard had gotten away with everything for so long, it had felt like some unspoken rule of the universe that he’d never actually face consequences.

And now he was gone.

For a second, I let myself feel something like relief. Then the weight of everything crashed back down on me.

“What happened?” I asked, my voice lower now.

“She showed up, told him she wanted a divorce. He lost his shit. Guess he started screaming, throwing shit. A neighbor heard and called the cops before it got worse. They got there just in time.” His eyes flicked up to meet mine. “Connor, he had a

fucking knife.”

My stomach dropped.

A knife.

Of course he did.

My father had never been the type to just let things go.

Aiden must’ve seen the look on my face because he shook his head.

“It’s done,” he said firmly. “He’s gone, and she’s pressing charges this time.”

I laughed again, the sound grating. “Yeah? And how long do you think that’s gonna last? How long before she changes her mind and takes him back again?”

Aiden’s expression darkened. “She won’t.”

I scoffed. “You sure about that?”

Something flickered in Aiden’s eyes, something hard, something I wasn’t sure I wanted to name. “Yeah,” he said, voice quiet but sure. “This time, I’m sure.”

I swallowed hard, my throat tight.

This time.

I wanted to believe him. I really did.

But I’d spent too many years watching our mother fold under the weight of love

twisted into something ugly. Watching her flinch when she thought no one was looking. Watching her make excuses. And I knew better than anyone—people don't change.

Not really.

Aiden shoved his hands into his pockets, exhaling slowly. "She's at the hospital. I was gonna leave after the cops were done with my statement. They can figure out the rest themselves. I want to get the fuck out of here. You coming?"

I hesitated. I wasn't sure I could handle this.

Wasn't sure I had anything to say to her that wouldn't come out sharp-edged and too fucking cruel.

But then—somewhere deep down, underneath all the anger, all the resentment, all the shit I hadn't figured out how to deal with—there was something else. Something softer.

Something that still cared.

I nodded once, and we headed to his car.

The hospital smelled like antiseptic and something else—something stale, like the air had been recycled too many times. The harsh fluorescent lighting made everything look paler, washed out, like the life had been drained out of the place.

I hated hospitals.

Too many memories of waiting rooms, of stitched-up knuckles, of long nights hoping Mom wouldn't lie for him again.

Aiden and I walked in silence, past the nurses' station, past the hushed conversations and the beeping machines. My chest felt tight, my pulse an uneven rhythm I couldn't get under control.

Mom was awake when we got to her room.

She looked smaller than I remembered. Like whatever fight she'd been holding on to had drained out of her the second she wasn't standing in front of him anymore.

There was a bruise blooming along her cheekbone, dark and ugly, and a cut on her lip that looked fresh.

But she was sitting up, her hands folded in her lap, her gaze distant until she saw us.

Then—her face softened.

“Connor,” she murmured, like she hadn't expected me to come.

I swallowed hard and stepped inside, Aiden right behind me. He went straight to her, his hand squeezing her hand, quiet reassurance in his touch. She patted his hand gently before looking back at me.

“Didn't think you'd want to see me,” she admitted, voice quiet, careful.

I shoved my hands in my jacket pockets, shifting my weight. “Yeah, well. Here I am.”

Her lips twitched, like she wanted to smile but didn't quite have the energy. “Yeah.

Here you are.”

Aiden pulled a chair up next to the bed, sitting beside her. I didn’t.

For a long time, none of us said anything. I could feel her watching me, like she was waiting for something. And fuck, maybe she knew exactly what was on my mind because suddenly, the words were tumbling out before I could stop them.

“I’m sorry,” I admitted, my voice rough. “About how I’ve been behaving. There was a lot going on and I couldn’t figure out what was happening in my head.” I swallowed hard, thinking back on our previous conversation. She’d accused me of being heartbroken. “You were right.”

“About?” Mom questioned, and even Aiden eyed me strangely as I tugged at the collar of my t-shirt then sighed.

Instead of explaining, I just grudgingly stated. “It was Summer.”

“What was Summer?” Mom questioned, then Aiden’s eyebrow flickered up.

“What, Summer Blake?” he asked as I went to sit on the seat on Mom’s other side.

I told them about the affair, about the fact that Vic still didn’t know about us.

About how she deserved better than what I could give her...

afterward, there was only one thing left to tell her and I hesitated, scratching my jaw before blurting it out, “There’s more, but I swear, I didn’t know until just a few weeks ago. ”

Mom’s brows pulled together, confusion flickering in her eyes. “Know about what,

baby?”

“That Summer was pregnant.” The words tasted different out loud. Heavier. Real. And for a second I couldn’t believe I’d actually said it. Or that it was actually happening.

“Oh.”

I nodded, swallowing around the lump in my throat. “Yeah. Oh.”

Aiden stiffened slightly beside her, but he didn’t say anything. Didn’t react. He just watched.

Mom’s eyes softened as she took me in, reading me like she always had. She might’ve been blind to a lot of things, but never me .

I dragged a hand through my hair. “I don’t—I don’t know what the fuck I’m supposed to do with that.

I don’t want to be a father. I don’t even know how.

” My chest was tight, my pulse hammering against my ribs.

“I mean, look at what I came from. Look at who raised me. You think I could ever be good at this?”

She was quiet for a moment, her hands folding neatly in her lap. Then—softly, simply—she said, “You are not your father, Connor.”

I flinched. The words were so gentle, but they hit me like a wrecking ball, knocking the air from my lungs.

“You hear me?” she continued, her voice stronger now. “You could never be him.”

I clenched my jaw. “You don’t know that.”

She tilted her head, studying me. “Yes, I do.”

I looked away, swallowing hard.

She sighed, reaching for my hand, fingers weak but steady as she held on. “Do you care about her?”

I stilled. The question wasn’t unexpected. I knew it was coming. But still—it felt like something sharp against my ribs.

Aiden’s eyes were on me now too, waiting, watching.

I could lie. I could say it didn’t matter. That Summer didn’t mean anything anymore, that I’d fucked things up too much for it to matter anyway.

But then—her face flashed through my mind.

The way she’d looked at me when she told me she was pregnant. The way her voice had cracked when she said she wasn’t getting rid of it. The way she had let me in, over and over again, even when she should’ve slammed the door in my face.

The truth was sitting heavy on my tongue, burning, demanding to be spoken. And I couldn’t lie. Not here. Not now. I swallowed hard and nodded once.

Mom smiled, like she already knew the answer. “Then that’s all that matters.”

I scoffed, shaking my head. “It’s not that fucking simple.”

She squeezed my hand firmly. “It is.”

“I don’t even know if she’ll let me be around.”

Mom’s gaze softened. “Then you show her that she should.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “Yeah? And how the hell am I supposed to do that?”

She didn’t answer right away. Just held onto my hand like she wasn’t ready to let go yet. Like she needed me to understand something before I walked away.

Finally, she said, “You just do the opposite of what your father and I did. You don’t hurt her, and you don’t leave.”

The words were simple. Too simple. But fuck—they hit hard.

Because she was right. I’d spent my whole life running.

Running from him. Running from Reverence.

Running from the things I couldn’t fix. Running from the things I didn’t want to feel.

And I’d run from Summer, too. Just like I’d hurt her.

Even when I should’ve stayed. When I should’ve told her she didn’t have to worry because even when I was with other women, she was a film reel that played constantly in my head.

Maybe I couldn’t fix what I’d done. Maybe I couldn’t make her love me again. Maybe I couldn’t be a good father. But I could be there. And maybe, just maybe, that was enough.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Summer

The second I saw Connor's text, I sighed in relief.

Connor: Something came up. Won't be home for a bit.

Good.

Things had been getting too damn tense. His presence was everywhere—in the way the apartment felt smaller, in the way I couldn't breathe without feeling him nearby.

The worst part? It wasn't even what he was doing—it was the things he wasn't. The way he wasn't pushing me. The way he wasn't arguing. The way he wasn't trying to make me forget how much of an asshole he'd been.

He was just here. Cooking, cleaning, taking up space in my life like he belonged. And that was what was getting to me.

So, yeah. I needed a break.

Alone in the quiet, I walked into my room, pushing the door shut behind me.

I hesitated before pulling it out—the hoodie I'd tucked away the second I realized Connor wasn't planning on leaving. His hoodie.

I didn't even know why I hid it. Maybe because the smell of it was still him, and I wasn't ready to face that. Maybe because it felt too personal—too much like

admitting something I wasn't ready to admit.

But now, I pulled it over my head without thinking.

The fabric was soft, worn, familiar. I let my fingers graze over the material, letting the sleeves cover my hands. It was huge on me, swallowing me whole, but it was warm, and for some reason, that warmth settled something inside me.

Then—I froze.

My fingers hovered over the hem, over my stomach, and I hesitated.

I wasn't used to seeing it yet. Wasn't used to feeling it. But now, standing in front of the mirror, I couldn't not see it.

It wasn't huge. Not yet. But it was there. A small curve where my stomach used to be flat, barely noticeable to anyone who didn't know. But I noticed, and I had a feeling from Connor's heated stare the other morning that he had as well. I really hadn't thought it had been that obvious, but it was.

Jesus. I looked pregnant.

Three months. Just three months, and I was already showing.

My breath hitched. I placed my hands over the bump, pressing against it lightly, like I needed proof that this was real.

This was happening.

There was no denying it anymore.

I let out a shaky breath, my throat tight, my pulse uneven. The hoodie suddenly felt too much, like wearing it was some kind of admission that I wasn't ready for. I started to pull it off—

Knock. Knock.

Shit. Was that Connor now? I turned, my stomach dropping as I stared at the door. I didn't realize I was crying until I went to pinch my nose and encountered the tears dripping from my eyes.

Jesus, not now. I couldn't do this right now.

Another knock sounded, sharper this time. "Summer, open up."

My breath stalled in my lungs. Vic.

Fuck.

Heart hammering, I scrambled for my phone, my fingers shaking as I typed.

Summer: Vic's here, I'll message you when he's gone.

The second the message was sent, I took a deep breath and pulled the door open.

Vic stood there, his broad frame filling the doorway, a bag slung over his arm.

His brows lifted slightly as he took me in, and I knew he saw the tears.

His expression hardened, then softened as he took in the hoodie and the sweatpants I was wearing, then his mouth twitched slightly and he shook his head.

"Seriously? You answer the door looking like a damn gremlin? "

I rolled my eyes. "Nice to see you too."

He smirked and pushed past me, dropping his bag onto the couch like he'd already decided he was staying. "Well, since my little sister is apparently dodging my calls, I figured I'd take matters into my own hands."

I was tense. "Vic—"

He waved a hand. "Nope. I'm here for a brotherly intervention. You don't get to argue. I took leave for the weekend. You and me, kiddo. Just like old times."

I forced a smile, trying to shove down the unease rising in my chest. I just needed to keep him distracted. Keep him from—Vic went silent and I frowned, stopping behind him.

"Would you move, damnit?" I cursed, bumping him with my hip as I scowled up at him. "Dude, what's wrong with you?"

His whole posture had shifted, his stance going rigid, his expression darkening in real time as his eyes flicked around the living room.

And that's when I saw it too. The boots by the door.

Connor's boots. The hoodie slung over the couch.

A favorite of Connor's, one that had taken precedence after he thought he'd lost the one I was currently wearing.

Then there was the bag sitting in the corner, and the rumpled book on the side table.

Vic's expression hardened, something dangerous flickering in his eyes. His gaze landed on the mess of evidence scattered around my apartment, each item screaming what I hadn't told him.

And then, slowly, he turned back to me,

His voice was low. Too calm.

"Summer," he said, his stare pinning me in place. "Explain."

My stomach twisted into knots.

Shit.

My heart pounded against my chest, my fingers curling into the hem of Connor's hoodie like it was a shield. But nothing could protect me from this.

From Vic.

From the way his jaw clenched so tightly it looked like it might shatter. From the way his hands fisted at his sides, his nostrils flaring as his gaze cut into me like a knife.

I should have hidden it all. Should have thought this through.

But I hadn't. I'd been too busy trying to avoid him, too busy drowning in my own fucked-up emotions to think about what would happen when he finally saw the truth staring him right in the face.

And now it was, and I didn't know what to do about it.

I could see him slowly realizing something, but I bet he wasn't close to the full extent

of how badly Connor and I had fucked up together.

His chest rose and fell in sharp, angry breaths. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

I swallowed hard. "Vic—"

He didn't let me finish.

His bag hit the floor with a dull thud as he stormed out, yanking the door open so hard it slammed against the wall. My pulse spiked in panic as I stumbled after him, my breath coming too fast, too shaky as I grabbed his arm.

"Wait—wait, where are you going?"

He wrenched free, his entire body vibrating with barely restrained fury. "Where do you think, Summer? I'm going to find that piece of shit and beat his fucking face in."

My stomach plummeted.

"Vic, no! He's your best friend," I shoved past him, planting myself in front of the door, blocking his path. "You can't—"

"Exactly! He's my best fucking friend, who should've known better," Victor snarled, leaning down until his eyes glared into mine. "Go back inside, Summer. Move."

I shook my head, my nails biting into my palms. "Vic, it's not what you think."

Actually, it was worse.

He scoffed, taking a step closer. "Not what I think?"

Summer, his shit is all over your apartment!

" His eyes burned into mine, filled with betrayal. His eyes narrowed, his fury curdling into something deadly. "Tell me you haven't been sleeping with him. Summer, I swear to God. Tell me you haven't been sleeping with my best friend. "

My stomach clenched.

My throat went dry. Every inch of me screamed to lie. To deny it. To make this go away. But I couldn't. Because Vic wasn't stupid.

And lying wouldn't change the truth.

I forced myself to look him in the eye. My lips parted, but no sound came out. My chest ached, my lungs felt too tight, my vision tunneling as every instinct begged me to run. But instead—

I nodded.

Just once. Small. Barely there. But Vic saw it.

And everything fucking snapped.

His face went blank, and for a split second, I swore he stopped breathing. Then, slowly, too calmly, he whispered— "Are you fucking serious?"

Tears started dripping down my face again. "Vic, come inside. I swear, I can explain."

I just had to figure out how to tell him the truth first.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Connor

I got Summer's message while I was at the hospital. Mom and Aiden encouraged me to leave, telling me that they'd sort everything else out and would let me know how it all went.

The nerves didn't hit me until I was staring at her front door, though. My hand dropped to my pocket and I dug around for my keys before realizing the door was probably open. After taking another breath, I stepped inside while I was still dropping my keys back into my pocket.

I barely had a chance to close the door before the first punch landed.

Pain exploded across my jaw, snapping my head to the side. My back hit the doorframe, the taste of copper flooding my mouth. I had no time to recover before another hit came, slamming into my ribs like a sledgehammer.

Fuck.

I grunted, catching myself before I stumbled, my tongue swiping across my split lip. The sharp sting told me it was bleeding. My vision blurred for a split second, but I didn't fight back. Didn't even try.

Because I knew this was coming.

I knew the second I got that text from Summer telling me to stay away. I knew the second I saw Vic's car parked outside. I knew when I walked through that fucking

door that my best friend—the guy who was like my goddamn brother—was waiting for me with nothing but pure fucking fury.

And I didn't blame him.

Vic's chest heaved, his fists still clenched. His knuckles were already red, the force of his punch obvious from the way my mouth throbbed.

"You fucking piece of shit," he snarled. "You think you can just sneak around behind my back? You thought I wouldn't fucking find out?"

I exhaled slowly, swallowing the blood that pooled at the back of my throat.

I didn't wipe my mouth. Didn't even lift my hands to defend myself.

Because I had nothing to say. He wasn't wrong.

I was a piece of shit. I was fucking his sister.

And even if I had the balls to try to explain it, Vic wasn't in the mood to listen.

Another hit. My ribs this time. I gritted my teeth, swallowing the groan that threatened to rip out of my throat.

Vic grabbed my shirt, yanking me forward, his breath hot with rage.

"She's my fucking sister, Connor!" His voice cracked with fury.

"You were there when I had to drop her off at school, for fuck sake's!

You were there when we were making sandwiches for dinner.

You were supposed to watch out for her. Not—" His voice broke.

His nostrils flared, his pupils blown with rage. "Not this."

I clenched my jaw, my heart hammering.

And then Vic pulled his fist back, his expression tortured and furious—

"STOP!"

The scream was sharp, piercing, panicked. The sound shot straight through me, slamming into my chest like a wrecking ball. My stomach clenched, every nerve in my body going rigid at the sound of her voice.

Summer.

I turned fast, shoving Vic away from me. He let go of my shirt, his fists still tight, his rage barely contained.

I didn't give a fuck.

I didn't give a fuck about my split lip, or my bruised ribs, or the fact that I probably deserved every second of this beating. Because Summer was scared. And I'd be damned if I let anyone—even Vic—make her feel like that.

I turned my back on him, my breath still heavy, and found her standing near the couch. Her hands were shaking. Her lips were parted, her face pale, eyes wide with panic. She looked so fucking small.

My stomach fucking twisted, flashbacks of my mother reminding me of how she'd looked in similar situations.

"Enough! You're scaring her."

Vic stilled.

His chest still heaved, his hands still clenched at his sides, but something in his face shifted when he saw Summer. His rage didn't disappear, but his brows furrowed like he was just realizing what he'd done. Like he hadn't meant to let his anger get that fucking loud.

I turned back to him, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, tasting blood.

"You wanna hit me?" My voice was rough, but steady. "Fine. I deserve it. But you don't fucking drag her into it."

Vic's jaw flexed, his breath still sharp with betrayal. But he didn't argue. Instead, he took a step back, shaking his head. Disgusted.

"How long?" he demanded, voice still rough but quieter now. "How long have you been fucking my sister?"

Summer tensed, but before she could speak, I answered for her.

"Over a year," I said flatly, watching the shock ripple through him. "Since last summer."

His jaw locked. His fists curled again. "You've been screwing her this whole time? Lying to my fucking face?"

I didn't lie.

I didn't deny it.

I didn't even flinch.

Because fuck it—I wasn't going to play dumb. I wasn't going to act like this was some one-time thing, some mistake we both regretted.

Vic took a sharp breath, nostrils flaring. "You're telling me this wasn't just some fling?"

I stayed silent.

He huffed a bitter laugh, shaking his head. "So what, Connor? She's just some girl you fuck when you're in town? Just something to keep your dick warm?"

My vision flashed red.

Before I could stop myself, I stepped forward, closing the space between us, my own anger rising like wildfire. "Don't talk about her like that," I warned, voice like steel.

Vic scoffed, shoving me back. "Oh, now you care about respect?" He let out a humorless laugh. "You're so fucking full of shit, man. This whole time, you've been sneaking around, fucking her behind my back, and you want to act like you give a fuck?"

I opened my mouth, but before I could say anything—

"Vic. Please stop."

Summer's voice was small. Uneasy. She took a step forward, her fingers clutching the hem of the hoodie she still wore—my hoodie.

"You don't understand," she murmured.

Vic laughed, the sound empty, furious. "Oh, I don't? You've been sleeping with one of my best friends, lying to me for months, and I don't understand?"

Summer swallowed. And just by looking at her expression, I knew. I fucking knew she hadn't told him about the baby yet. And Vic—for all his rage, for all his fury—hadn't put it together yet, either.

Shit.

The room was too fucking tense.

Summer stood there, clutching the hem of my hoodie like it was the only thing holding her together.

And then, just like that—she broke. Tears welled in her eyes, spilling over before she could stop them.

A small, shaky inhale wracked her body, and she turned away, dragging a sleeve across her cheek like she could wipe away everything that was happening.

"Sit down," she said, her voice thick, raw.

Neither of us moved.

"Sit the fuck down!"

That did it.

I dropped onto the couch, my jaw still aching from Vic's punch. He hesitated before lowering himself onto the armchair across from me, rubbing a hand over his face.

Summer sniffled, still refusing to look at either of us before she spun on her heel and stormed off toward the bathroom.

I rubbed at my mouth, feeling the sting of my busted lip. Across from me, Vic had his arms crossed, seething, his knee bouncing, like he was ready to jump up and start swinging again.

I wasn't in the mood to humor him.

"You got another punch in you?" I muttered. "Or are you done acting like a raging asshole?"

Vic shot me a sharp look. "Oh, fuck you. I've got plenty more where that came from."

I huffed, shaking my head. "Wouldn't be the first time you've taken a swing at me."

Vic scoffed, voice low, sharp. "Yeah, well, it's the first time I meant it."

That shouldn't have hit as hard as it did. Before I could say anything else, Summer returned. She held a first aid kit in her hands, her jaw set in a firm line, her expression carefully blank—except for her puffy, red-rimmed eyes.

Neither of us spoke as she sat down beside me, flipping open the box and pulling out antiseptic wipes. She was quiet, her touch gentle as she pressed the damp cloth to my lip.

I winced, but she was so stuck in her head that she didn't even acknowledge it. Just kept going, focused, her lashes still damp.

Vic shifted in his seat, watching.

"I'm sorry," I muttered, voice low. It was partially my fault we were in this fucking mess to begin with.

Summer didn't look at me. Didn't say anything. Just dabbed at my lip with careful precision, ignoring me like I was just another problem she had to clean up.

She moved on to my ribs next, but I caught her wrist before she could lift my shirt. She froze, her eyes finally flicking up to meet mine, uncertainty flickering in those big, brown depths.

"I'm fine," I muttered.

She stared at me. A long, heavy moment stretched between us—before she ripped her wrist from my hold and turned to Vic instead. She crouched in front of him, opening the kit again and my stomach twisted at the sight of her cleaning up his knuckles—the same ones he used to split my fucking lip open.

Vic scoffed.

"You gonna kiss it better, too?" he muttered, still pissed as she rubbed ointment over his bruised skin. Summer didn't react beyond a pinch of her lips. Just kept working like she was determined to fix us with her bare fucking hands. Not until Vic's tone darkened and he scowled at me.

"Why him Summer? He fucks everything that moves. Why the hell are you with him?"

She didn't answer, and he continued. "You know he's been sleeping around, right?"

My stomach dropped. Summer's breath hitched, but she didn't look at him. Vic kept going, oblivious to the way her face paled. He let out a bitter laugh. "Connor's been

fucking anything that breathes for years."

"Vic," I warned.

He ignored me.

"So, what? You think he just magically stopped?" His voice was dripping with sarcasm. "That he suddenly grew a conscience?"

I gritted my teeth as I saw it. The way Summer's expression cracked. The way her mouth parted, her fingers trembling as she held the first aid supplies.

She didn't say a word. Didn't look at me. Didn't even fucking blink. Instead, she dropped everything in her hands. The gauze. The wipes. The whole fucking kit. And then—she stood. Turned. And walked toward her room. Not fast. Not frantic. Just silent.

That was somehow so much worse.

The door clicked shut behind her. And I lost it. I turned to Vic so fucking fast I barely even thought before I shoved him back into the couch.

His eyes widened, shocked at the force of it.

"You dumb motherfucker," I snarled, voice low, sharp, deadly. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

Vic's expression darkened. He shoved me back, but I barely moved.

"Oh, don't I?" he shot back. "I know you, Connor. I know how you are. You gonna stand there and fucking lie to me?"

I clenched my jaw so hard it ached.

Because, no. I wasn't gonna lie. I didn't need to. I didn't have to. Because Summer already knew. And it had already fucking destroyed her.

I swallowed hard, my chest heaving, my hands shaking as I tried to calm the fuck down.

Vic's brows furrowed, his breath still sharp, his anger still simmering beneath the surface. "Summer's always had feelings for you, but I thought you knew better, man."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I bit out.

"It means that you've never had a relationship before. Why the fuck would you go after my sister when you know she's the exact opposite? What the fuck are you thinking, man? You don't belong with her."

Summer

I woke up feeling like hell.

My eyes were puffy, my limbs heavy, my heart a slow, aching thing in my chest. Sleep had been a joke—tossing, turning, fighting off the weight of last night. Fighting off the truth I wasn't ready to face.

Victor had punched Connor. Connor had let him. And I had stood there, letting them rip each other apart, while I cried in the other room.

I dragged myself out of bed. My body was stiff, my muscles tight, but I ignored it. I needed to get out of this room.

I'd fallen asleep in my a maternity bra and panties.

It was the most comfortable thing when you were sweaty and exhausted.

So before I left the room, I put on the first thing I could find—a tank top and some sweatpants.

I didn't care. I just needed air, needed something to distract myself from the fucking mess that had become my life.

The moment I opened my bedroom door, I heard them. Voices. Low, sharp, heated. They were in the kitchen. Still arguing. For fuck's sake.

I stormed down the hall, my pulse thudding in my ears, irritation curling hot under my skin. Hadn't I made myself clear last night? I stepped into the kitchen just in time to hear Victor say— "You really think you can just sit here like you belong?"

Connor scoffed. "Jesus, Vic, I'm not trying to—"

Then Victor's eyes turned to me. He was rubbing at his face, dark circles under his eyes pointing out how little sleep he'd had.

But I saw when he looked at my stomach, and it felt like the whole world stopped turning for a second.

The anger melted into something else. "Vic?" I started, confused by the way his gaze had zeroed in on me.

Or more specifically—on my stomach. My stomach.

Fuck. The baby belly. I wasn't wearing a hoodie like last night, so it was more visible.

The oversized sweaters, the loose-fitting clothes I'd been hiding behind were still in my room.

And now? Now there was nothing to conceal the truth.

Victor's face twisted. His jaw locked, his eyes burning with something wild and unforgiving. Then— He lunged at Connor.

"You got my sister fucking pregnant?"

Connor barely had time to react before Victor's fist collided with his nose. The

sound—sharp, brutal, raw—cracked through the kitchen. Connor stumbled back, his head jerking to the side, blood spraying. But he didn't fight back.

He just wiped his mouth, and braced for more. Even I could tell my brother wasn't done.

“You piece of shit!” he roared, going for him again, his fury uncontainable.

“Vic, stop!” I screamed, my voice piercing.

But neither of them listened.

Victor shoved Connor, his rage blistering, his body vibrating with pure, unfiltered wrath.

“Say something!” he snapped at Connor. “Fucking say something, you goddamn coward!”

Connor didn't argue. He didn't defend himself, and he didn't deny it, and that? That only made Victor angrier.

I felt sick as I watched them. This was exactly what I'd been afraid of. My hands were shaking. My breath was uneven. And I couldn't fucking think.

They were still fighting, still throwing words at each other, but I didn't hear them. All I heard was the roaring in my ears, the sound of my own pulse pounding, the way my entire body felt like it was shutting down.

I couldn't do this.

“Both of you, get the fuck out.”

The words came out cracked, and that seemed to get their attention.

Victor snapped his head toward me, his chest still heaving. Connor wiped his bleeding lip, his shoulders tense but resigned. Neither of them moved. Neither of them listened.

I lost it.

“Did you fucking hear me?” My voice shook, my vision blurring with rage and exhaustion. “I said GET OUT!”

Victor looked at me like he couldn’t believe it. Like I was taking Connor’s side just because I didn’t want to watch them tear each other apart.

“Summer, he—”

“I don’t care!” I cut him off, shoving past them,. “I don’t fucking care! You don’t get to do this, Vic. Not in my home.”

His nostrils flared, his jaw locked. “He knocked you up, and you expect me to just fucking let that slide?”

“Yes!” I shot back, my voice cracking. “Because this isn’t your problem.”

Connor stiffened beside me. But I couldn’t look at him.

I couldn’t breathe.

Victor tugged at his collar, looking like he wanted to argue, fight, punch something else. His lips pressing into a thin, furious line.

“Fine.” His voice was rough, dark, edged in betrayal.

Then, before I could say anything else, he stormed out, slamming the door so hard behind him that the walls rattled.

Connor didn’t move.

He just stood there, his knuckles still bloody, his expression unreadable. Waiting. For what? For me to say something? For me to tell him that I was okay? I wouldn’t, because that was a lie, and I didn’t owe him one. Regardless of how he was feeling.

“You too.” My voice came out quieter this time, but no less sharp.

His brows furrowed. “Summer—”

“Get out, Connor.”

I turned, walked into my room, and slammed the door right in his face.

A few seconds later, I heard the front door open. Then close.

And just like that, I was alone.

I wasn’t sure how I got to the library. The whole day was a blur.

One second, I was standing in my room, trying to catch my breath. The next, I was on autopilot—showering, dressing, grabbing my bag.

The air outside had been too sharp, too heavy, and my phone had been blowing up

with missed calls from Victor, Connor, and Quinn.

I ignored them all. Now, I sat at a corner table in the library, my textbooks spread in front of me. But I wasn't reading. I was staring at the words on the page, but not really seeing them.

Because my mind? It wasn't here. It was back in my apartment. Still replaying the fight and hearing Victor's voice, raw and furious. Still feeling Connor's hesitation. The way he just stood there, silent. The way he let me kick him out without a fight.

I was getting so fucking tired of being the responsible one.

I was so fucking tired of his non-reactions, and how he always run away instead of staying to fight for what he wanted.

If he even wanted me, because with the way things were going, I wasn't sure about that anymore either.

For a while, I thought things were getting better.

I thought maybe—just maybe—he was in this. But someone who stayed quiet, who didn't fight back when they were getting accused of something? He'd just let Victor beat him up, not doing or saying anything both times until I did something about it.

The chair across from me scraped against the floor and I looked up. For a second, I thought I was imagining things. Because Quinn was sitting down, pulling out her books, flipping open a notebook.

Like this was just another study session.

Like this was how it had always been.

I blinked. “Quinn?”

“You’d never guess who showed up at my place this morning,” she murmured, her eyes speculative. I didn’t have to guess, I already knew it was either one or both of the fucking idiots I kicked out.

“There was a whole lot of fighting, but I guess you already know about that.” I didn’t respond and she shrugged.

“Let’s just say it made me late for class and now I have a new assignment to finish before the end of the week so I came to the library. Saw you... and figured, if we’re both miserable, we might as well do it together. A nice little pity party slash study session.”

Things between us hadn’t been normal in a year. But now? Now she was here. Acting like it was nothing.

I swallowed hard. Nodded.

“Yeah,” I said, my voice a little too soft. “That’d be nice.”

And for the first time in a long time, it actually felt like the truth.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Connor

I should've known it was coming.

Victor was still pissed. And that was saying something, considering he'd already broken my nose this morning. I thought maybe the bruises on my face would've been enough to satisfy him for the day. Guess not.

After Summer kicked us both out, we ended up at North's.

The conversation didn't start civil. Victor let loose the second we walked in, and I let him.

Because he wasn't wrong. Because I didn't have a single fucking argument against anything he said—even if he was repeating shit from the night before.

But it was the last thing he said that stung enough for me to leave.

"You don't deserve her."

That one. That one fucking hurt the most. Because he was right.

And just to fucking prove that, I ended up back at the bar while I kept my messages open to the last thing I got from Summer.

That message warning me Vic was at her place.

I don't know why I kept looking, it was already past eight at night and she hadn't phoned or messaged.

I knew she wouldn't. I didn't know why I wanted her to, but I knew she wouldn't.

I had three whiskey shots lined up in front of me, the burn hitting deep, dulling the ache in my jaw, in my ribs, in my fucking chest when the woman slid in beside me. Before I even looked up, I felt her. Close. Too close.

The brunette from before. The one I'd fucked with her little blonde friend. From another fucking night that got me into this mess with Summer.

She didn't say anything right away. Just reached out, her long fingers trailing up my arm, her nails scraping lightly over the fabric of my shirt. Her touch was practiced, confident. Like she'd already decided how this was gonna go.

Like she'd already had me once and knew she could do it again.

"Didn't think I'd see you here again," she whispered, tipping her head to the side.

I didn't respond, didn't even look at her, but she took that as an invitation. Her hand drifted lower, teasing, brushing just over my ribs. Familiar. Like she thought she already knew the outcome.

"Rough night?" she asked.

"You could say that."

She hummed, leaning in, her perfume too strong, too sweet.

Nothing like Summer. But her lips grazed my jaw, offering a familiar comfort, and

her fingers traced down my arm, her thigh pressed against mine.

I closed my eyes at her touch, and for a second—just a second—I almost let it happen.

Almost grabbed her waist. Almost let her drag me into the dark.

Almost let her wipe away the mess of emotions I'd been drowning in all fucking day.

Because that's what I did, right?

I ran.

I distracted myself. I buried my hands in someone else.

I let someone else's body drown out the guilt.

And fuck, I wanted that right now. Needed it.

But then—I saw her face the night before.

Summer's. The way her eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

Then I heard her voice this morning, the way her voice cracked when she told us both to leave.

The way she looked at me when I didn't fight it.

The way I just stood there, saying nothing. And suddenly, my stomach fucking twisted.

The brunette shifted, sensing my hesitation. She let out a quiet, knowing hum. “You overthinking it, baby?”

Her brows furrowed. “Oh, come on. You were all over me last time.”

Yeah. Because I was a fucking idiot last time. I pushed back my stool, tossing a few bills on the bar. “Not tonight.”

Her lips pursed in annoyance, but she didn’t argue. Didn’t matter. I was already walking away. I pulled out my phone, my fingers already flicking to my messages.

Nothing. Of course not. I swallowed hard, my thumb hovering over her name. Summer. I should leave her alone. Connor was right, I didn’t deserve her. I should go back to North’s place and sleep this off.

I should—

But I was already out the door.

Already heading home.

The apartment was dark when I finally managed to get the key in the door and open it.

I locked it behind myself, swearing all the while.

I could barely see a fucking thing. But by the dark and the quiet, I could assume Vic wasn’t here at least. Good.

Probably still at North's, venting, drinking, maybe planning another hit to my jaw for the next time he saw me.

Didn't matter. What mattered was that I was here. Even though I shouldn't be. Even though I knew Summer probably didn't want to see me. Even though I'd told myself I wasn't going to crawl back to her again. Yet here I was.

I shut the door behind me, locking it out of habit, my boots heavy against the floor as I moved further inside. I could feel her before I even saw her.

Summer.

Like some kind of gravitational force, pulling me in, keeping me anchored to a place I wasn't sure I had the right to be anymore.

Her bedroom door was open just a crack. Enough that I could see inside, enough that I could see her. My stomach clenched as I moved forward. Instincts driving me to her side while the rest of me was still trying to make sense of what I was feeling.

Summer was asleep when I nudged the door wider and slipped in. She was curled on her side, her breathing slow, steady, her hands tucked beneath her cheek. She looked... peaceful. And fuck, something about that hurt.

Because I wasn't peaceful. I wasn't fucking anything except a mess. A disaster of a man who had no business standing in her doorway, watching her like some creep.

I knew I should've turned around. Walked away. And I almost did it, too. But then she made a sound. Soft. Small.

And then another sound—a sob.

My jaw locked and I stepped forward before I could stop myself.

She shifted in her sleep, her brows pinching together, her lips parting around a small, broken sound that made something inside me snap.

She was dreaming.

And whatever she was dreaming about—it was hurting her.

I hated that. Hated that she was still feeling like this, even in her sleep.

Hated that I might be the reason. I hesitated, my fingers twitching at my sides, itching to reach for her.

To wake her up. To pull her close. To tell her I was fucking here.

But I didn't. Because what the fuck would that even fix?

She shifted again, rolling slightly onto her back, her breath catching, a fresh tear slipping down her cheek. And before I knew what I was doing, before I could think about how fucking stupid this was—I moved. I crouched beside her bed, careful, slow, watching the way her breath hitched.

My fingers itched to brush that tear away. Intent on fixing something I didn't have the knowledge or the experience to fix. But I knew —I fucking knew— that I was probably the one who had broken her in the first place.

And how the fuck do you fix something when you're the reason it shattered?

I swallowed hard, my voice barely above a whisper. "...Sunshine."

Her lashes fluttered, a small tremble moving through her.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, even though I wasn’t sure if I meant for her to hear it. Maybe she wouldn’t. Maybe it would just float in the air, lost between us. But I needed to say it anyway. Even if she didn’t believe it. Even if she didn’t hear me at all.

I should have left.

I should have turned around, walked out, and let her sleep in peace.

But when she sighed my name—so soft, so fucking wrecked—I stopped breathing.

Her fingers twitched against the sheets, flexing open, closing again. Reaching. Searching.

For me.

I stood there, frozen, my heart slamming against my ribs.

I wasn’t strong enough for this.

I wasn’t strong enough to walk away.

So I didn’t.

I moved without thinking. Without hesitation. Like some part of me had already made the decision before my mind could catch up.

My fingers went to the hem of my shirt, it over my head before I let it drop to the floor. The jeans were next, the belt buckle clinking softly in the silence before I

shoved them down. And then I was slipping into bed beside her.

She sighed at the movement. It should have been awkward or wrong. But it wasn't. It felt too fucking natural.

Her scent curled around me, that familiar mix of vanilla and something softer, something that had haunted my fucking dreams for months. The warmth of her body seeped into mine, and I could feel it—the slow, steady rhythm of her breathing, the way her chest rose and fell in perfect time with mine.

And when she moved, when she shifted closer, pressing into my chest like she belonged there—

I broke.

I slid my arm beneath her, careful, slow, hesitant—until I had her pulled against me. Until she was tucked against my body, her cheek pressed to my bare chest, the weight of her soft and warm and so fucking real.

And for the first time in weeks—maybe longer—I felt like I could breathe. Like the chaos in my head, the war in my chest, had stopped. She murmured something in her sleep, her fingers curling against my side, and my throat burned.

Because I knew. I knew I was a selfish fucking bastard. I shouldn't have crawled into this bed. Shouldn't have touched her. Shouldn't have held her like this was something I could keep. But I couldn't help it. For just one night, I needed to let myself believe this was okay.

That she was still mine. That maybe—just maybe—I could still be hers. So I closed my eyes. And for the first time in a long, long fucking time—

I slept.

Summer

I woke to warmth.

It was slow at first, creeping in from the edges of sleep. The weight of something solid and steady wrapped around me. The scent of him— smoke and whiskey, something deep and familiar —filled the space between dreams and reality. And for one blissful second, I let myself sink into it.

Connor.

His arm was draped over my waist, his palm resting against the gentle swell of my stomach. His breath was slow, steady, brushing against the back of my neck. It was grounding. Safe. Like all the times he had held me before.

But then reality came crashing back.

I stiffened, blinking hard, my heartbeat a steady drum against my ribs.

Because this wasn't right. He wasn't supposed to be here.

He wasn't supposed to be holding me like this was something we did, like he hadn't spent months running, like I hadn't spent just as much time trying to convince myself I didn't need him.

I sucked in a breath, ready to shove him away, but then—I smelled it. Perfume on his skin. Sweet like vanilla, but with a hint of spice to it.

My stomach dropped.

It was subtle, faint beneath the scent of him, but it was there and it wasn't mine. The realization was a slap to the face. I clenched my jaw, willing myself not to react. It doesn't matter. It shouldn't matter. He wasn't mine. Not really. Not anymore. This? This was a mistake.

I swallowed against the tightness in my throat, but my mind was already racing—already whispering—already painting pictures I didn't want to see.

Where had he been? Who had he been with? Had he fucked her? Had he whispered her name the way he used to whisper mine? Had he touched her like how he was holding me right now? Like I still fucking belonged to him?

My throat burned. I hated that he had climbed into bed like it meant nothing. Hated that even now, my traitorous body wanted to lean into him. I closed my eyes.

No. No, I wasn't doing this. I wasn't going to be that girl. I wasn't going to sit here, waiting for him, pretending this was anything more than it was. It was better this way. It had to be.

And yet—it still fucking hurt. The ache was deep, hollow, curling low in my stomach like something sick.

He didn't stir at first. Not until I was standing, arms crossed, staring at him with my chest tight, my skin burning..

His body shifted, muscles flexing, his fingers twitching against the sheets before his eyes fluttered open. Bloodshot. Unfocused. His lips parted slightly, brow furrowing as he took in the empty space beside him—then me .

And just like that—his whole body stilled .

"Summer..."

His voice was wrecked . Groggy. Rough with sleep. And— fuck him —but there was something in the way he said my name that hurt .

But I wasn't soft anymore.

I wasn't his to hurt. I crossed my arms, my voice sharp and cold, holding back the fucking rage clawing its way up my throat. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

Connor blinked, slow and heavy, his muscles tensing. His jaw ticked. He fucking knew what I meant.

For a second, he didn't speak. Didn't move. Just watched me , his eyes unreadable.

Then—his voice dropped, low and rough, the rasp of something broken beneath it. "I'm staring right at it."

My stomach twisted. Because that? That wasn't fair. My fingers dug into my arms, my nails biting into my skin. I hated the way my heart ached . The way his words made me want to believe him. But I couldn't.

I wouldn't.

"You don't get to do this."

His brow furrowed. "Do what?"

I let out a bitter laugh, shaking my head, eyes burning. "Disappear. Leave me alone with all these thoughts. Let me think you're out there fucking someone else."

His whole body tensed. "You really think that?"

I hated the way his voice sounded. Like the thought alone was a fucking insult. Like he wasn't the one who had given me every reason to believe it.

I let out a hollow laugh, but there was nothing funny about it. "I don't know what to think, Connor. I don't know anything anymore."

He pushed himself up, the sheets slipping down his chest, muscles taut beneath them. He stared at me. Something dark flashed in his eyes. Something dangerous.

"I didn't fuck anyone tonight," he said, voice firm, rough, certain.

My stomach clenched.

I wanted to believe him. Fuck, I wanted to believe him.

But I shook my head, looking away. "It doesn't matter."

"It fucking does." His voice sharpened, raw, like it was the only truth he knew. "Why the fuck would I be with anyone else when you're the one on my mind?"

His words hit —sharp and jagged, cutting deep.

"Because you've done it before," I whispered, swallowing the painful lump in my throat. Connor's expression slackened, and remorse filled in the gaps while I took a step back.

“Don’t do that, baby,” he whispered, and before I could stop him, he was standing and walking toward me.

A rough, desperate clench at my waist. A firm tug that had me stumbling into him, my breath catching. His fingers dug into my skin like he was afraid I’d slip away, like if he held on tight enough, he could fix all the ways he’d already fucked this up.

And I should have pushed him away.

Should have shoved him back and told him this isn’t how we fix things. But I was so damn tired of fighting him and myself.

His mouth crashed against mine.

It was reckless. It was messy. It was so fucking raw.

I gasped into his lips, my hands brushing his hair, pulling him closer instead of pushing him away. And all the anger, all the pain, all the confusion—it melted into something else. Something hot and desperate and unavoidable.

Connor growled into the kiss, his hands everywhere. He walked me back until my knees hit the bed, until I was falling, until he was on me, heavy and solid and real.

And fuck—fuck—I let him.

Because this?

This might not be love.

But right now, it was the only thing we knew how to do.

Connor handled my waist like he was staking a claim, fingers digging into my skin, his breath ragged, his chest rising and falling like he was barely keeping himself in check.

"Fuck, Summer," he groaned against my neck, his lips hot and open-mouthed, teeth scraping along my pulse, making me shudder. His fingers flexed, pressing into the softness of my waist, like he wanted to grab, to hold, to never fucking let go. "You have no fucking idea what you do to me."

I did know.

I could feel it.

His cock, thick and hard, pressed against my stomach through his boxers, already leaking against the fabric. The heat of him, the sheer size—God, I had missed this, missed him. And now? Now I had him exactly where I wanted him.

Or, well. Almost.

"Wha—" Connor grew confused when I pulled away.

"I want you on your back," I told him. Then I shoved him on the bed, and I took off my clothes. His cock was rock hard and his boxers were tented. I did my best to work them off, avoiding taking him in my mouth when it started to water.

Not now.

I needed more than his cum on my tongue at that moment.

As soon as we were both naked, I straddled him. My pussy was wet despite my best efforts to ignore his effects on me, and for the first time I didn't bother to avoid it. I

rocked my hips against him, teasing, feeling the sharp inhale that rattled through his chest.

"You like this, don't you?" I whispered, dragging my nails down his stomach, feeling the tremor that ran through him. I hoped he didn't hear the self-consciousness in my voice.

I shouldn't have bothered thinking about that. Connor tipped his head back against the pillow, his eyes fluttering closed for half a second before locking back onto me—blown wide, dazed, hungry.

"Fuck yeah, I like this," he rasped. His hands slid up, over my ribs, palms spreading over my full, sensitive breasts, pinching and plucking my beaded nipples. I gasped, arching into his touch, and his lips curled, slow, predatory. "Like watching you use me."

I swallowed hard, my skin burning under his stare, under the raw, open hunger carved into his face.

"Then let me," I whispered.

His pupils blew wide.

"Fuck." His hands dropped to my hips. "Take it, baby. Take whatever the fuck you need."

I reached between us and palmed his cock, pumping it slowly until he hissed and arched beneath me, slowly growing impatient. The thick length of him flushed dark, already slick at the tip. My mouth watered. Connor groaned when I wrapped my hands around him.

"Shit, Summer," he ground out.

I smirked, shifting above him, rubbing the head of his cock against my slick folds, teasing him, watching the way his stomach tensed.

"Do you know how much I hate it?" I murmured, dragging him through my wetness, coating him. "The fact that every time I'm with you, I'm wondering about who you were with before? And whether you thought about me... if it was transactional, or if those women gave you something I couldn't."

His eyes snapped open, feral.

"Summer." His voice was a warning, raw and low, but his hips rocked up instinctively, chasing the heat, the slick. "Don't do this now, baby. Don't—"

I sank down in one smooth motion, taking him in deep and Connor snapped.

His hands flew to my waist, a strangled groan ripping from his throat as I took every thick, pulsing inch of him in one agonising movement. Fuck—fuck, it felt so good it almost knocked the air from my lungs.

His jaw clenched, his hands trembling against my skin.

"Jesus Christ," he gritted out, his voice wrecked. "You're so goddamn perfect, baby. Fuck—"

I moaned, rolling my hips, feeling the way he filled me so perfectly, so deeply.

"Goddamn," he muttered, his thumbs stroking over my sensitive nipples, watching the way they hardened under his touch. His tongue darted out to wet his lips, his expression fucking starving.

"You like that?" I panted, moving slowly, dragging my hips up and down his cock, feeling every thick inch of him stretching me open the further down I got.

His fingers kneading my breasts, rolling my nipples between his fingers.

"I fucking love it," he growled.

He sat up suddenly, mouth latching onto one aching peak, sucking hard. A cry tore from my throat, holding him there as he licked, sucked, teased until I was shaking in his lap, riding him harder, faster.

"You're so goddamn perfect," he rasped against my skin. "Look at you, riding me so good, taking me so fucking deep—"

I whimpered, grinding against him, his words making everything tighter, hotter.

"Connor—"

"That's it, baby," he coaxed, voice low and filthy. "You gonna come for me? Gonna make a fucking mess all over my cock?"

I shuddered, the heat building, spiraling, my thighs trembling as I bounced on his cock, riding him faster, harder, the sound of our bodies slapping together obscene.

"I need—" My voice cracked, desperate, my nails biting into his shoulders.

"I got you," he murmured, one hand dropping between us, his fingers finding my clit, circling just right.

My entire body locked up.

"Connor!" I sobbed, my orgasm slamming into me so hard I nearly collapsed against him. My walls fluttered around his cock, squeezing, milking him, and he groaned, brutal, his arms wrapping around me, holding me tight as he fucked me, chasing his own release.

"Jesus fucking—" He snarled, his rhythm turning erratic, his cock throbbing inside me.

"Come inside me," I begged, breathless, wrecked. "Please—"

His entire body tensed. His hips snapped up, burying himself deep as he broke, a rough, guttural growl tearing from his throat as he spilled inside me, filling me with his warmth.

We shook together, both panting, breathless, clinging to each other like we were afraid to let go.

Silence stretched, nothing but the sound of our breathing, the lingering tremors, the heat still simmering beneath our skin.

Then—his arms grabbed me.

His lips brushed my temple, soft, lingering.

"No other women could ever compare to you, Summer," he murmured, voice hoarse, possessive. "I've spent enough months trying to forget you—and that's all the others were—but they couldn't compare to the way I feel when you're with me... When we're together like this."

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Connor

Summer's curled into me. My arm still draped over her waist, my palm pressed against the soft skin of her stomach. It's a thoughtless thing, something I must have done in my sleep.

Because for the first time, I really saw it.

The bump.

It's small, barely there, but it's there. Real.

That's my kid. Our kid.

My pulse hammered in my ears as my fingers flexed slightly, brushed over the curve of her stomach.

The heat of it seeped into my skin, and fuck—fuck—this wasn't just some abstract concept anymore.

This wasn't just Summer saying she's pregnant, or Vic swinging at me because I knocked up his sister, or North rolling his eyes. This was real.

And I haven't been acting like it.

I've spent so much time fighting everything.

But Summer's right. Vic was right. North was right.

Even Quinn, who can't fucking stand me, was right.

I needed to grow the fuck up. I needed to start acting like someone who deserved to be here, someone who deserved to be in this kid's life. Someone who deserved her.

Because I've spent too many years looking for something to numb me—women, alcohol, fights, running away. Always running. But there was no running from this. No escaping the weight of what I've done. What I've created.

And for the first time in my life, I didn't want to run.

I just wanted to be better.

Summer shifted slightly. She murmured something in her sleep, her body pressed closer to mine. Like she felt it too. And fuck, my heart was hurting with how much I wanted this. How much I needed this.

No more fucking up.

I pressed my lips to her temple, inhaled the soft and familiar scent of her before whispering, "Time to wake up, sunshine."

She groaned as she buried her face in my chest. "No."

"Yes. You're going to be late for your classes."

She grumbled something I can't hear, but I caught the way her lips twitch. That alone made me feel something unfamiliar.

Something like hope.

She finally peeked at me, her eyes still heavy with sleep, and fuck, she's so goddamn beautiful I almost forget what I'm supposed to do. Almost.

Then she blinked, her brows furrowing slightly. "You're still here?"

That hit somewhere deep. And it fucking killed me that she had to ask.

"Yeah, baby," I brushed my thumb over her hip. "I'm still here."

Her expression flickered —like she doesn't know whether to believe me or not. I pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth and slid out of bed.

"What do you want for breakfast?"

That woke her up fast.

"What?"

"You heard me."

She's sitting up now, watching me like I just said I was planning to rob a bank. "I would love anything you make."

Twenty minutes later, she was standing in the kitchen, arms crossed, watching me like I'm some kind of alien.

"I love when you cook."

I smirk, flipping the eggs.

She snorted but sat down at the counter. Eggs, toast, bacon—simple, but delicious.

I grabbed my own plate and leaned against the counter.

"Mhhmmmm."

I grinned. "That good?"

I chuckled, shook my head as I took a bite. She kept eating, still watching me, still wary, like she's waiting for me to fuck it up somehow. And I got it. I really did.

I've given her every reason to doubt me.

But I was not going to let her doubt me anymore.

After breakfast, I helped her grab her things for school, and tossed her bag over my shoulder like it's the most natural thing in the world.

"Connor," she started. "I can carry my own bag—"

"I got it," I say simply.

She stared at me for a second. It was so fucking domestic, I almost laughed.

But I liked it.

I loved it, actually.

I walked her to my car, opened the door for her without thinking. She slid in, while

she was still watching me like she was waiting for the catch. L

I hated that I've made her feel like that.

I got in, started the engine, and started driving. We pulled up in front of the university, and I put the car in park.

"I'll be home by dinner."

She blinked, startled. "What?"

"What? You think I was just gonna disappear?"

She pressed her lips together like she didn't want to admit that, yeah, she kind of did.

I leaned in, pressed a slow, lingering kiss to her lips. "I'm not running anymore, Summer."

She still didn't say anything.

But when she got out, she hesitated for half a second. And I saw a faint smile across her face.

My chest ached.

Because fuck, maybe that wasn't much.

But it was something.

And I would take every little something I could get. I was a complete asshole to her all this time and I must win her back. It is my duty as a man, as a father to be and as a

man who fell in love with the most kind and beautiful woman there is.

With one last glance at the entrance, I pulled away from the curb and head toward home. Mom was getting out of the hospital today, and it's time I faced my childhood home.

I pulled into the driveway of the house I grew up in. It looked smaller than I remember. Or maybe I just grew up. Either way, it was unsettling to see after spending so much time trying to forget about it.

The windows were dark, the paint was faded, and the porch sagged slightly—like the house suffered just as much as the people who lived inside it.

I killed the engine and came out. My boots hit the pavement with a dull thud, and the sound grounded me. Taking a deep breath, I headed toward the door, pushing it open without knocking.

Aiden was already inside, and by the look of things, he was sorting through boxes in the living room.

He didn't look up when I entered, but must've known I was there. "Took you long enough," he muttered, pulling a box off the shelf and setting it down with a heavy thud.

"Nice to see you too, asshole," I shot back, shutting the door behind me.

He finally glanced up, his expression unreadable.

"Mom's in the kitchen," he said, nodding toward the back of the house.

I nodded, my stomach twisting as I walked through the hall, past the scars in the walls, past the memories I wished I could erase.

I found Mom standing by the counter, a half-empty cup of tea in her hands. She looked up when I entered, and for a moment, she just stared.

Then, slowly, she smiled.

"Hey, baby," she murmured.

I cleared my throat, rubbing at the back of my neck. "Hey, Mom."

I expected her to comment. To lecture me, to sigh in that oh, Connor kind of way she always did. But she didn't.

Instead, she set her cup down and stepped closer, lifting a hand to my face.

I froze.

Her fingers brushed over the bruises gently, like she was trying to fix something she couldn't. Her expression changed, her mouth pressing into a thin line.

"You got into another fight," she said, but it wasn't really a question.

"Not really," I muttered.

Her brow lifted, and I sighed, shifting my weight. "Vic punched me."

A pause. Then— "I see."

She didn't say anything else. Didn't ask why. Didn't push. Because she already

knew. Her hand dropped, and she stepped back, exhaling as she looked around the kitchen.

"I'm leaving this place behind," she said quietly. "For good, this time."

I swallowed hard. It was weird, hearing her say it out loud. "Where are you gonna go?" I asked.

"Aiden's helping me find a new apartment. Something small. Safe."

I nodded. It was the right call. Still, standing in this house, in this place—I could feel it. The past, wrapping around my throat, whispering all the old doubts, the old fears, the old version of me.

"You're not staying," she said suddenly, pulling me from my thoughts.

I blinked. "What?"

She turned to me, her gaze sharp. Knowing. "You're here now. But you're not staying."

I crossed my arms. "No, I'm not."

She nodded like she had expected that. "Because of her?"

"Because of both of them," I admitted.

Her lips twitched slightly. Not a full smile, but something close. "Good," she murmured. "That's good."

I glanced away, swallowing hard. "You think I can do this?" I asked quietly.

She didn't hesitate. "I know you can."

I huffed a humorless laugh. "You have a lot more faith in me than I do, Mom."

She shrugged. "Then borrow some of mine."

Something in my chest clenched.

She patted my arm, stepping past me, heading toward the boxes Aiden had stacked in the corner. I watched her go, my mind still a mess, my emotions tangled into something too complicated to unravel right now.

But one thing was clear. This place didn't own me anymore.

I turned, heading back into the living room, where Aiden was still sorting through shit, muttering under his breath.

"You ready?" he asked without looking up.

I nodded.

"Yeah," I said. "Let's get this done."

And for the first time in a long fucking time, I meant it.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Summer

The apartment was quiet. The kind of quiet that felt like a held breath. Or maybe I was just holding my breath.

I sat on the edge of the bed, my knees pulled to my chest, watching Connor.

He stood by the window, shirtless, his back to me, the dim glow of the streetlights casting long shadows across his skin.

The faint flicker of a passing car highlighted the muscles in his back, the curve of his spine, the tension that still lingered there, even now.

Something felt different tonight.

Maybe it was the way he seemed lighter, freer— present in a way I had never seen before. Maybe it was the fact that he had actually come home early like he promised, picked me up from school, and made me dinner like he belonged here instead of just passing through.

Or maybe... maybe it was just me.

Maybe I was finally ready to say what I had been afraid of for months.

"You were gone all day."

Connor turned lazily. His jeans hung low on his hips, his stomach tight, the light

catching the fresh bruises on his ribs—remnants of Victor's fists. The cut on his lip had faded some, but there was something else about him tonight. Something quieter.

"Had some shit to take care of," he said simply.

I studied him.

There was no edge in his voice, no bite, no challenge. Just... something even. Something settled.

I should have asked where he went. Should have demanded to know what had changed, why he looked so damn okay all of a sudden. Because that wasn't how this worked. Connor didn't just stop being restless. He didn't just stop fighting the air around him.

Unless...

Unless he didn't need to anymore.

The thought made my stomach twist.

Maybe he had figured it out. Maybe he had finally decided. And maybe—maybe—it wasn't me.

I wanted to say something that would make me feel like I still had control. But instead, my voice came out softer than I intended.

"You seem different."

Connor smirked. "Good different or bad different?"

I didn't answer.

Because I didn't know.

Because all I could think about was the way he had looked at me that morning. The way his hands had lingered on my stomach like he was finally starting to believe this was real. The way he was still here.

And suddenly, I couldn't hold it in anymore.

I didn't care if it was reckless. Didn't care if it hurt. I had to say it. "I love you."

It was a desperate whisper. One I hoped would change his mind, if he really didn't want to leave. So soft I almost wondered if I had said it at all. But I knew I did. Because the moment the words left my lips, Connor froze.

My heart slammed against my ribs, my lungs tight, my pulse hammering in my ears.

But I wasn't done.

"And I need to know if you want to stay or if you just feel obligated to, because I think it's going to ruin me if you leave again. I need to know you're all in, Con."

I had never sounded so small.

Connor didn't move.

He just stared at me.

Like he was processing every possible way to react. Like he was fighting every instinct he had to run.

And just when I thought this was the moment he destroyed me—

He moved. Slowly. Carefully. His footsteps were soft against the floor, his body lowering, lowering—until he was kneeling in front of me.

My breath stuttered.

His hands cupped my face, warm, steady, his thumbs brushing over my cheekbones like he was trying to memorize me. I felt the rough callouses of his fingers, the heat of his skin, the way he was close, so fucking close—but not saying a word.

Then—he leaned in. His forehead pressed against mine. His breath was warm, even. Grounding. And when he finally spoke, his voice was rough and quiet. "I'm not going anywhere."

My breath caught. Because it wasn't an I love you too.

It wasn't some perfect, romantic declaration.

But it was Connor. Connor who'd told me over and over we weren't anything.

Connor who'd told me over and over that he was going to break my heart.

I guess he had, but now he was telling me he'd stay.

And right now? That was enough. Because he was still here.

His words settled over me like a weight—heavy, solid, real .

I wasn't sure how long I stayed there, just breathing him in, feeling his skin against mine, his presence grounding me in a way I hadn't even realized I needed. My heart

thumped, unsteady, like it wasn't sure how to process what had just happened.

He wasn't leaving.

He wasn't running.

And that terrified me.

Because I had been bracing for it. Preparing myself for the moment he pulled away, grabbed his keys, and disappeared like he always did when things got too close, too real .

But he didn't.

Connor stayed.

And for the first time since this whole mess started, I felt something inside me loosen .

His hands hadn't moved, still cupping my face, thumbs stroking absentmindedly over my cheekbones. His touch wasn't rough, wasn't demanding. It was careful. Like he was waiting for me to tell him what to do next.

I should have said something.

Should have asked what this meant. Should have pushed for something more, something I could hold onto, something that told me this wasn't just another moment in a long line of almosts.

But instead, I just whispered, "Okay."

Connor exhaled, his forehead still pressed against mine. I felt the way his body softened, just slightly, like I had given him permission to breathe. Like I had given both of us permission.

I lifted a hand, hesitating only a second before I pressed my palm against his bare chest. His heartbeat was steady, strong beneath my fingers. I swallowed past the lump in my throat.

"I'm scared."

The words barely made it past my lips, but I felt the way his muscles tensed.

"Me too," he admitted, voice gruff.

I let out a quiet, shaky laugh, my throat tight. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." His fingers trailed down my jaw, slow, thoughtful. "But I meant what I said, Summer. I'm here."

I searched his face, looking for any trace of hesitation, any sign that this was just another fleeting promise. But all I saw was him. His green eyes locked on mine, unwavering.

I believed him.

For the first time, I really believed him.

And that? That was almost scarier than him leaving.

Because if he meant it—if he was really staying—then I had to let go of the version of him I had been clinging to for so long. The version that left. The version that didn't

care. The version that was easier to hate.

I had to let this Connor in.

The one who had been showing up. The one who was trying. The one who wasn't perfect but wanted to be better.

And maybe... maybe I was finally ready to let myself want that, too.

I swallowed hard, pressing my face into the warm skin of his neck. His scent wrapped around me, that mix of soap and something inherently him. My fingers curled against his chest, gripping him like I was afraid he'd slip away.

But he didn't.

Connor held me.

His arms wrapped around me, solid, unyielding, anchoring me to him. His lips pressed to the top of my head, lingering there, his breath slow, steady.

And for the first time in a long time—maybe ever—I let myself believe this didn't have to end in heartbreak.

Maybe, for once, I could let myself hope.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Connor

I didn't sleep much anymore.

Not because of the nightmares, or the ghosts I'd spent years chasing at the bottom of a bottle.

Not because I was restless, or angry, or trying to fight my way out of a life I didn't know how to belong to.

I didn't sleep because I didn't want to.

Because for the first time in as long as I could remember, I didn't need an escape.

I wanted to be awake. I wanted to be here.

I lay beside her, my body half-draped over hers, my fingers tracing slow, lazy circles along the inside of her arm.

The apartment was quiet, warm, dimly lit by the soft glow of the streetlights outside.

It had rained earlier, and I could still hear the occasional drop against the window, steady and rhythmic.

Summer was curled against me, her body soft, warm, familiar. She was barely awake, her breath even, her lashes fluttering against her cheeks. My hand drifted to her stomach, fingertips brushing the soft curve that had grown over the past few months.

It wasn't just a bump anymore. It was undeniable.

Everything about her had changed, and yet, she was still Summer. Still the same sharp-tongued, impossible girl I'd loved for years before I even realized it.

Loved.

The word still sat heavy in my chest, but it wasn't the kind of weight that dragged me down. It was the kind that grounded me. The kind that made me feel whole.

She shifted slightly, letting out a soft sigh as she pressed a sleepy hand to her stomach. And then—

I felt it.

A kick.

Soft, but real.

Everything inside me stilled.

My pulse fucking stuttered.

I pressed my palm flat against her belly, waiting, holding my breath.

And then—there it was again.

I knew this was real. I'd known for months. I'd seen the sonograms, heard the heartbeat, watched her body change. But this?

This was different.

This wasn't an abstract idea. Wasn't just some distant future I couldn't wrap my head around.

This was our baby. Moving. Alive. Right here, beneath my hands.

I hadn't even realized I said it out loud until the words left my mouth.

"I love you both."

The second they were out, I froze.

I hadn't planned on saying it. Hadn't thought about it, hadn't second-guessed it. It had just... happened. Slipped from my lips like it had always been there, waiting for the right moment.

Summer stilled.

I knew she'd been waiting. Waiting for me to say it. Waiting for something more than just promises and good intentions. Waiting for me to stop holding back.

Slowly, she tilted her head to look at me. Her eyes were wide, searching, like she was waiting for me to take it back. Like she wasn't sure she could trust it. I didn't take it back. I just pressed my hand more firmly against her stomach, grounding myself. Grounding her.

"I mean it, Summer."

Her breath hitched.

Her fingers curled around my wrist, holding me there, keeping me close.

And then— She smiled. It was small. Barely there. But fuck, it was real. And I saw it. I felt it. She believed me. For the first time since this all started, she really believed me. And that?

That was everything.

THE END

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Evie

The whiskey burned on the way down, a slow fire settling deep in my chest, but it didn't numb me the way I needed it to.

Three drinks in, and I was still too fucking aware.

Aware of the way my fingers drummed against the bar, restless.

Aware of the way my stomach twisted every time I glanced at my phone.

Aware that I was supposed to be anywhere but here.

I should've stayed home. Should've locked the doors, turned off the lights, pretended I didn't exist. Because my big brother was coming to town, and he wasn't just pissed—he was fucking livid.

I'd sent the email weeks ago, knowing it would take him time to read it, to process it, to react.

But now that the reaction was here, barreling toward me at full speed, I needed something stronger than whiskey to take the edge off.

The bartender didn't hesitate when I signaled for another shot. I tossed it back before the burn even registered, my lips curling slightly at the taste.

Tomorrow, I'd deal with the consequences. Tonight, I just wanted to forget.

The air in the bar was thick with smoke and sweat, the bass from the speakers vibrating in my ribs. I let myself get lost in it, closing my eyes for a moment, letting the heavy pulse drown out the thoughts threatening to pull me under.

Then the seat beside me shifted, and I knew before even looking who it was.

Victor Blake.

His presence was too sharp, too fucking familiar. He didn't say anything right away, like he was already regretting sitting down.

"You look like you need a shot," I muttered, still not looking at him.

He scoffed, rubbing a hand over his face. "You look like you need a better coping mechanism."

I smirked, finally turning to meet his gaze. "Pot, meet kettle."

His eyes were the same—dark, intense, the kind of stare that could flay a person open if he wanted to. He was still built like a damn linebacker, still carried himself like he could ruin someone's life with a single glare. It appeared that he still wasn't over what happened with Connor and Summer.

I heard about it—hell, I was invited to their wedding last spring and I got to meet their beautiful baby girl myself.

We drank in silence, not because there was nothing to say, but because neither of us wanted to be the first to say it.

Victor wasn't going to bring up North. And I sure as hell wasn't going to talk about my brother.

So instead, we just sat there, two people running from different things, colliding in the same place.

It was more boring than I thought it would be. Don't get me wrong, the company was nice, but I could think of a dozen better things—Actually... I could do a dozen better things, too.

I turned to him, tipping my head slightly. “You looking for a distraction tonight, Vic?”

“Are you?”

“Always.”

We didn't make it to a bed. Hell, we barely made it to privacy.

The storeroom in the back of the bar was dark, cluttered, too small—but none of it mattered.

Because the second the door clicked shut, Victor had me pinned against it.

His breath was hot against my neck, his hands around my hips.

My fingers curled into his shirt, pulling him closer, and when our mouths met, it wasn't soft.

It wasn't sweet. It was messy and fevered and full of all the things we weren't saying.

I should've stopped. Should've told him it was a bad fucking idea. But instead, I pulled him down harder, kissed him deeper, let him drag me under like a riptide.

And Victor? He let me.

Because maybe he was trying to forget something too.

He ripped my shirt over my head, his lips searing against my throat, his teeth grazing just enough to make me shiver as he mouthed the outside of my bra—I screamed when he bit down, catching my nipple between his teeth.

Fucking sadist!

His mouth softened, sucking on the silk and me until I gasped, head tilting back against the door, and that was all the invitation he needed. His fingers slid down my spine, nails scraping, possessive and unrelenting as he yanked me against him.

“I should make you beg,” he muttered, voice rough against my skin.

“Should,” I whispered back, defiant even as I arched into him. “But you won’t.”

He growled.

“You’d look pretty on your knees, Evie,” he murmured, his free hand trailing down, fingers reaching up my denim skirt to tease underneath my panties.

His rumble of approval told me he liked how wet my pussy was, and as he dragged his fingers through my swollen folds he muttered, “I should punish you for thinking you can say no to me.”

I opened my mouth to argue, to say something biting, but then he tore my underwear and glided his fingers back between my legs.

My words vanished in a sharp gasp. He knew exactly what he was doing, exactly how to make me shatter.

This wasn’t the first time, and if history proved right, it wouldn’t be the last either.

My nails scraped against the door as he worked my pussy open. Two fingers thrusting through my wetness. My pussy clenched at the thought. Vic was bigger than any of the other guys, and despite how much of a fucking nerd he was, his dick was pierced as well.

So, him working me? It felt good, but it was fucking necessary too. He'd destroy me if he fucked without it.

I wanted to fight him for it, wanted to push back just to see what he'd do. But then he pulled away entirely, leaving me aching, breathless.

"Ready?" he asked, voice low, deadly.

I turned my head just enough to meet his gaze, my lips curving in a slow, knowing smirk. "Oh, yeah. Fuck my pussy, Vic. Show me you know what to do with a woman's body."

He huffed out a laugh, his fingers bruising my hips and fingers digging in like he wanted to brand himself onto my skin. His mouth was everywhere, rough and demanding, tasting me like he was fucking starving. I gasped as he shoved me harder against the door, his knee spreading my thighs apart.

"Beg me for my cock, pretty girl," he growled, breath hot against my cheek, his hand reaching up to tighten around my throat just enough to make my pulse spike.

My mind softened just like it always did when Vic did that.

His hold was soft, his arm pressed between my breasts as he squashed me up against him.

My back to his front. His dick sliding through my folds, teasing my clit.

It felt fucking amazing. I hated that he brought out the submissive side of me, but he did, and I arched back even while I taunted him in a dry voice. “I don’t think so, Vic. Girls like me don’t beg. So, shut the fuck up and fuck me like you mean it.”

In the silence, I pictured his nostrils flaring like they did when he was annoyed. The thought thrilled me, leaving me pliant when he dug his fingers into my hips and my neck, directing me until I reached over for the nearby shelf.

Then the hand around my neck was pulled away. He yanked my denim skirt out of the way and pressed between my shoulder blades, forcing me to arch for him. A sharp slap cracked across my ass, the sting erotic, electric, making me gasp before I could stop myself.

“Yeah,” he murmured darkly, his fingers still digging into my hip, controlling every inch of me while he spread my legs wider—and thrust. “That’s what I thought.”

He didn’t go easy. He didn’t tease. He just took, filled, stretched me so hard I had to bite my lip to keep from crying out.

Those piercings of his brushed against every nerve inside of me and I shuddered. “F—Fuck,” I gasped, nails clawing at the wood, the pressure coiling hot and tight inside me.

He chuckled darkly, his hold on my throat contracting just enough to remind me who was in control. “That’s right. Take it. Be a good fucking girl and take my cock and if you beg nicely, I’ll even let you come on it.”

I clenched around him, earning another growl, another punishing thrust that sent me careening over the edge. My moan was sharp, raw, swallowed by his palm when he covered my mouth, not letting me scream for him the way I wanted to.

His pace didn’t slow, didn’t let up, driving me into another orgasm before I could

catch my breath. He fucked me like he hated me, like he wanted to break me, and I loved every second of it.

Then he slammed in one last time, groaning low as he spilled inside me, his body shaking, fingers still holding me like he couldn't let go.

For a long moment, we just stood there, breathing hard, bodies slick with sweat, reality creeping back in.

Victor finally pulled away, adjusting his clothes, his expression unreadable. I was still panting as he dipped his fingers between my legs and swirled our combined releases around my clit.

Knowing what he wanted, I opened my mouth as he pulled it back out, then pushed his fingers down on my tongue.

No one made me into more of a slut than Victor Blake.

Sucking softly, I tipped my head back and moaned, watching his eyes darken. "Don't tease me, Evie. You won't like what you get."

Snorting, I turned to lean against the shelves, watching him as I caught my breath, a smirk curling my lips. "More sex?" I guessed, giddy from the high.

Victor rolled his eyes as he helped me dress, then held open the door for me to leave. "We're not talking about this," he muttered, running a hand over his mouth.

I let out a breathless chuckle. "Never happened."

But we both knew that was bullshit.