

A Year Without Connor
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Junior Prose

“I really could stay like this forever,” said Victoria dreamily as she gazed up at the night sky. The stars were visible between the fir trees.

“Really?” Connor asked, grinning at her. “Lying in the grass, in the dark, with no sign of civilization in sight?”

“Sure, as long as I was with you,” she said to her boyfriend, looking up at him. Her head was resting on his outstretched arm, her long, dark hair soft against his skin.

Connor looked down at her sweet, pretty face. “Wherever you go,” he said, “I will follow.”

“You promise?” whispered Victoria, her lips tugging into a playful smile.

“Absolutely,” Connor replied, kissing her forehead. “Wild horses couldn’t keep me away.”

Victoria sighed serenely. “You know, I’m always happiest when I’m with you.”

Connor gently squeezed her hand. “That’s all I want. For you and I to have happiness. If we’re together, nobody can take that from us. Nobody.”

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The loud blaring of Victoria Brewer’s cell phone dragged her out of the peaceful memory. She awoke groggily, and the familiar feeling of loss settled itself deep within her heart where she always found it after a dream like that. Reaching out blindly, she managed to shut off her alarm.

The silence was heavenly, and Victoria wanted nothing more than to roll over and stay in bed. However, she couldn't do that. She refused to lay in bed and wallow, even on this day of all days. The young woman forced herself to get up, then absent-mindedly cruised through her normal morning routine. Before she knew it, she found herself clean, made up, dressed, and in the kitchen. Lacking a proper appetite on this particular morning, she grabbed a granola bar from the box in the cupboard and headed for the door.

It was cool outside, a few clouds in the sky and a slight breeze blowing; a surprisingly nice day for early March. Although the decent weather did not exactly improve Victoria's mood, she appreciated how quickly the snow had made itself scarce this year. As she approached her car, her cell phone began to ring. She smiled, thinking only one person would be calling her this early in the morning.

"Hello, Desmond," said Victoria, putting the phone to her ear. She hoped she sounded cheerful enough. Her friend was quite the worrier, and Victoria knew Desmond was especially concerned for her right now.

"Hey, Vicky!" came the ever-bubbly exclamation of her good friend. "What's up? How are you? How's it hanging?"

"Nothing's up, I'm okay, and 'it' is hanging fine, I guess," Victoria responded, shaking her head slightly. She opened the car door and slid into the driver's seat. "How are you, Des?"

"Me?" said Desmond after a brief pause. "Oh, I'm great! You sound like you're good. That's good. I'm glad! Sounds like you're up and ready for-"

"Desmond," Victoria interjected, "calm down, okay? Chill."

“Sorry, I...sorry,” Desmond mumbled quietly. “I just, I-I was...are you *sure* you’re alright?”

Victoria smiled sadly. “I’m fine, Des. It’s going to be rough, it really is, but I’m okay.”

“Are you sure you should be going to school today?” Desmond asked, sounding uncertain. “People are probably going to be talking about...you know. We can just skip off if you want! We can, uh...go see a movie! Or you can come over and hang, or-”

“Desmond, considering you’re a super scholar, I really am grateful for your willingness to miss school for me, but I think the best thing I can do is just go about my normal everyday life. Eventually, this will become just another day. For now, I have to grin and bear it.” Victoria put her key in the ignition. “I’ll see you at school, okay?”

Desmond didn’t speak for a few seconds - trying to decide, Victoria suspected, whether or not he should object to this. However, Desmond relented and said in defeat, “Okay. See you in a few.”

Victoria hung up the phone, started the car, and pulled out of the driveway. She anticipated that such sympathy would be shown to her throughout the day, not only by Desmond but by her other friends and classmates, as well. After all, it was a very solemn day. The day that marked a year without Connor.

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“Where do you want to go for lunch today?” Desmond asked Victoria as they left their math class.

Victoria shrugged her shoulders. “Doesn’t matter to me. Anywhere is good. Do you want me to drive?”

“Nah,” said Desmond, waving a hand dismissively. “You drove last time, right? I’m on deck today.”

Victoria nodded, stopping by the door to her next class. “Okay, cool. I have psychology now. Meet you at your car in an hour?”

Desmond grinned pleasantly. “Sure! See you then!”

Victoria watched Desmond disappear down the corridor before heading into the classroom. She found her regular seat – fourth chair in the second row – and plopped down. She could feel eyes on her. As she’d expected, all day she had been receiving disheartened looks and condolences from those who knew her. Who had known Connor. Even Victoria’s parents back home had texted her to see how she was doing. While Victoria really appreciated everybody being so sympathetic and supportive, it was beginning to feel smothering.

“Hello, Victoria!” said a peppy voice she’d come to know well during the past few months. Katie, a blonde, happy-go-lucky cheerleader many of her male acquaintances drooled over, sat in her usual seat beside Victoria. Katie beamed at her, blue eyes bright and joyful. “How are you?”

“Um, fine!” Victoria answered, relieved that at least Katie seemed to be acting normal. *Then again, she thought to herself, she only transferred here this semester. She probably wouldn’t know about Connor. Or, at least, she doesn’t know about him yet.*

This proved to be true. Throughout class, any snippets of hushed conversation between Victoria and Katie did not involve any mention of Connor. However, the peace did not last long. Eventually, Katie came to notice people casting glances in their direction. Leaning towards Victoria, she whispered, “Does it seem to you like people are looking at us?”

Victoria sighed. It was just as well to explain it. If she didn’t, Katie would simply ask somebody else, anyway. “They aren’t looking at you,” Victoria assured her. “They’re looking at me.”

Katie blinked, clearly puzzled. “But, why?”

Victoria kept her voice low so their lecturing professor wouldn’t hear them talking. “It’s because...” she began, trailing off. It had been a long time since she’d said his name out loud. “Because of my old boyfriend, Connor Westcott.”

Furrowing her slender brows, Katie murmured, “That name sounds familiar for some reason.”

“That’s understandable,” Victoria said, absent-mindedly shading in the margin of her paper with her pencil. “They talked about him on the news for a while last year.”

“Really?” Katie’s eyes widened. “What did he do?”

“Nothing!” Victoria hissed, a little too defensively. The professor glared in their direction, and Victoria shut her mouth. When their teacher’s attention was diverted from them once again, she looked back at Katie. “He disappeared. Declared missing a year ago, on this day.”

Katie let out a soft gasp. “Oh no, that’s awful. Were you together long?”

“A little over two years,” Victoria answered, remembering the dream she’d woken up from that morning. That night when she was laying with Connor on the forest floor, staring up at the stars - it was one of her fondest memories with him. She felt a stinging sensation in her chest, and pushed the memory from her mind once again.

Katie glanced around the classroom. “So, that’s why everyone keeps looking at you?” she inquired, still seeming confused.

“Most people at the university knew Connor and I,” Victoria explained. “We were pretty social, and had a lot of friends between us. Nonetheless, Connor and I were attached at the hip no matter who came along. We were unbreakable. Some people even went as far as to call us a ‘power couple’.”

“No offense, Victoria,” said Katie hesitantly, “but you’re pretty quiet. You don’t exactly strike me as the ‘social butterfly’ type.”

“You’re right. I’m not,” Victoria admitted. “But I used to be. Things have changed, I guess. And so have I.”

Katie frowned, regarding Victoria glumly. “And no one knows what happened to him?”

“He practically vanished without a trace,” Victoria told her. “He just left our house one night and never came home.”

“Were there no suspects?” Katie asked.

“They questioned a few people, even me,” Victoria answered, “but the main suspect was Connor’s stepbrother, Len Caldwell. I had the misfortune of meeting him a few times in the past. He’s been in juvie and jail before for assault and gang-affiliation. He and Connor never got

along. Len said on multiple occasions that if he could kill Connor, he would. He even threatened me before.”

Katie winced. “That does kind of indicate he could be responsible, huh?”

Victoria nodded. “A lot of people insisted that Len was most likely behind Connor’s disappearance,” she told Katie, “including Connor’s mother, Len’s father, and me. But Len took off before the police could apprehend him.”

Katie was entirely entranced by this dramatic story. “So, Len’s missing, too?”

“Yes,” said Victoria gravely, “and I’m not sure anyone wants to be the one to find *him*.”

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That afternoon, once school was finished, Victoria made her way back home. She was looking forward to spending the rest of the day in solitude. In several hours, the anniversary of Connor’s disappearance would pass by, and normality would return to its rightful place.

Victoria unlocked the door, stepping inside and taking off her boots. As she removed her jacket and was hanging it up on the rack, she heard sudden movement. She turned, and came face to face with a big, broad man who was holding a - significantly smaller, but much more threatening - gun.

“Hello, Victoria,” Len greeted her politely, a tight smile on his face.

“Len,” Victoria replied drily, keeping the fear building up inside her out of her voice somehow. “Funny running into you today. I was just talking about you earlier.”

“Aw, ain’t that sweet,” he crooned, grinning devilishly. “Thought you would have forgotten about me after all this time.”

“It’s only been a year,” she snapped, glowering at him. “A year to the day, in fact. You certainly have a flare for the dramatic. Now cut the crap, Len. What do you want?”

Len’s strange expression implied that he was both impressed and irritated. “You’re a lot saucier than I remember,” he grumbled, pointing the gun at her head. Holding out his other hand, he demanded, “Give me your phone.”

Of course, Victoria complied, handing her cell phone over to him. He tucked it into his back pocket, keeping the pistol trained on her. “Are you here to kill me?” she asked him, suddenly horrified by the thought that Len might be the last person to ever see her alive.

“You *are* going to die,” Len told her casually, making Victoria’s heart pound painfully, “but if you cooperate, *I’m* not going to be the one to kill you.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked angrily, her steely eyes fixed on him.

“Upstairs,” he ordered, jerking his head towards the staircase. Again, she obeyed, walking upstairs with Len close behind her, fully aware of the gun trained on the back of her head. Once they reached the upstairs hallway, he said to her, “Get a pen and paper.”

“Um, okay?” Victoria said, baffled, glancing back at Len as she wondered where he was going with this. She walked into her bedroom, retrieving a pen and paper from her desk, then looked at him. “What now?”

“Sit,” he commanded. Victoria sat. “Now, you’re going to write your suicide note.”

“What?!” she cried, incredulous. “You must be joking.”

Pressing the barrel of the gun to her temple, he responded icily, “No, Victoria. I’m not. You are going to write your suicide note, confessing to killing Connor Westcott and hiding his body in a place you will not disclose. Then you are going to kill yourself.”

“Len!” she exclaimed, staring at the madman, desperate to get through to any sanity he might still possess. “This is insane!”

“You, my father, and Connor’s whore mother sent the cops after me!” he barked, making Victoria flinch. “This is karma, sweetheart! You’ll confess to a murder, and it’ll be obvious that the guilt is what drove you to suicide. Then I’ll be off the hook.”

“Len, just confess!” Victoria shouted, the panic in her voice rising as she realized his plan might work. “Do you really want another person’s blood on your hands?!”

“Don’t you get it, you stupid bitch!” he bellowed, slamming his hand on the desk. “I! Didn’t! Do it!”

“Then get a lawyer! Go to court!” she pleaded. “Do something, Len! Just don’t do this!”

Len shook his head, determined. “If someone else doesn’t take the fall, then I will. You know my past, Victoria. Nobody’s going to believe I’m innocent.”

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t have been a dirty criminal,” Victoria chastised, provoking Len to forcefully crack her in the skull with the gun. She bit her lip, stifling a cry of pain.

“Don’t be an idiot,” he spat. “Start the letter. And don’t think I’m not going to watch you write every word! You aren’t leaving any sneaky messages, Victoria.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” she assured him curtly.

“Good,” Len said, smiling. He leaned down so his head was beside hers, and Victoria’s heart began to race even faster. Trying to focus on the paper in front of her, she began to write what she figured was a standard suicide note.

“Is this okay so far?” she asked shakily.

“Perfect,” he purred, and she couldn’t help but feel like he was analyzing the curve of every letter. “You know, Victoria, there is a silver lining to all this. By cooperating, you’re giving me a reason not to shoot you. When you kill yourself, you can do whatever the hell you want. Slit your wrists, overdose on Tylenol, I don’t give a damn. You can choose your own way out.”

I’m going to die here, Victoria thought, dread coursing through her veins. Whether I cooperate or not, I’m going to die. I can write the note, or I can refuse. Either choice results in my death. But what else can I do?

She watched Len out of the corner of her eye. His face was still very close to hers, so close she could smell the sourness of his breath. She had to do something. It was her only chance. Quickly, in the swiftest motion she’d ever maneuvered in her life, Victoria swung her arm up and drove the pen into Len’s eye.

Len roared in pain and anger, reminding Victoria of a mythical giant who had been prodded in the eye with a pitchfork. Seizing her opportunity, she bolted out the door, then nearly tripped on her way down the stairs. Hearing Len tromping after her, she pulled open the front door and –

Bang!

Len had fired the gun just as she'd slipped outside. Pain exploded up her arm, momentarily blinding her. Somewhere nearby she heard someone shout her name, and once her vision returned to her, albeit blurry, she saw Desmond pulling into her driveway.

"Oh, thank God!" Victoria cried, relieved, racing towards his Jeep.

"What happened to you?" Desmond asked in horror, opening the door to exit the vehicle. "You're bleeding every-"

"Don't get out!" she screamed at him. Behind her the front door was flung open, slamming loudly against the clapboard of the house.

"Holy...come on, Victoria!" Desmond called frantically, leaning across to open the passenger side door and pull her in. She collapsed onto the seat, just as another gunshot rang out and she and Desmond were showered in glass. Desmond put the car in reverse and sped back down the driveway. Victoria kept her body hunched down low and her face pressed into the seat, but she could hear Len shouting in despair.

"I didn't do it!" Len sobbed, and Victoria was both appalled and astonished by the sheer emotion in his voice. "I...I didn't kill that pathetic...please!"

As the vehicle swung back onto the road, she heard Desmond whisper, "Oh God..."

There was a third and final gunshot, and then...the threat was extinguished.

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Victoria took the rest of the week off school after her altercation with Len. At the hospital they'd mended her arm and put it in a sling, telling her that while she'd most likely need physiotherapy, no unmanageable issues should stem from the injury. Nevertheless, it still hurt like hell - not that

she'd expected anything less after being shot. Victoria was just grateful she wasn't left-handed, so whenever she returned to school she would not be hindered by an inability to write. However, driving would probably be impossible.

That Saturday, Victoria was bored and longing to get out of the house. She called Desmond, who had been checking up on her periodically over the last few days like the dutiful friend he was. Of course, he was more than willing to hang out. He picked her up, and not long afterwards they were taking a lovely stroll in the woods across town.

They spent the first few minutes of their walk in silence, which wasn't broken until Victoria said, "I'm, uh, sorry about your windshield. And the blood in your car. I can pay for repairs and cleaning if you want."

"Nah, insurance will cover that," said Desmond dismissively, waving a hand to shoo away the very concept. "Besides, you shouldn't have to pay for it. It's not like *you* were the one who shot at my car."

"But he was shooting at *me*-" Victoria began to protest.

"Stop," Desmond interrupted, looking pointedly at her. "I don't want to hear it, okay?"

"I put you in danger," she said shamefully, picking idly at the sling cradling her left arm.

Desmond smiled. "You didn't tell me to come, Victoria. I chose to go check up on you to make sure you were still doing okay. And I'd make the same decision again. You would have done the same for me."

"...I would have," Victoria agreed quietly.

“Then there are no worries!” Desmond exclaimed merrily. “The main thing is that we’re both okay. Also, Len isn’t going to harass you anymore.”

Hesitantly, Victoria asked, “Did you...did you see it? When he...shot himself?”

“...Yeah,” replied Desmond, his voice a little less perky than it had been a few seconds before. “It was...fast. He fell like a bag of bricks.”

Victoria shook her head sadly. “If he had just surrendered himself to the police, he’d still be alive,” she said softly, remembering the way Len had shouted in agony. How he must have looked in his last moments. All she could imagine was the big behemoth standing in her front yard looking hopeless, tears falling from one eye and blood streaming from the other. She was glad she hadn’t looked back.

“He would’ve went to jail for a while, though,” Desmond pointed out. “He would have been charged with resisting arrest, possession of a weapon, attempted murder, and probably other stuff. Not to mention anything they could have pinned on him in Connor’s case.”

“Maybe Len thought death was his best option,” Victoria speculated, feeling more than a little depressed.

Desmond shrugged. “Probably, but he put himself in that situation. There’s no one he could’ve blamed but himself. Although, I guess he did seem to blame *you* a fair bit.”

Victoria laughed, nodding down to her injured arm. “You think?”

Desmond chuckled. “Okay, I guess that was pretty obvious,” he admitted.

“Can we stop here for a while?” asked Victoria, looking around once they’d reached a clearing. “I like this spot. If you want, we can head back in a little bit and go to my house.”

“Sure,” said Desmond, plopping down onto the grass and resting his back against a tree trunk. “It’s pretty nice here. I can’t believe I’ve never actually been in these woods before. Then again, I’m not a very outdoorsy guy.”

Victoria smiled, sitting down beside him. “I haven’t been here in a while,” she told him. “I actually used to come here with Connor a lot.”

“Really?” Desmond turned to look at her, big hazel eyes attentive. “What did you do here?”

“Just the occasional walk,” she replied wistfully, remembering all the little hikes she and her boyfriend had embarked on. “We both preferred to sleep and go to the bathroom indoors, so we weren’t really the camping type. But...” Victoria trailed off, the dream she’d had not long ago floating to the surface of her mind.

“But what?” asked Desmond curiously.

“Some nights,” she said, her voice trembling as she fought to control the emotions inside her, “Connor and I would come here and just lay down on the ground to stare at the stars between the trees. We’d talk about everything; past, present and future. We had a lot of deep, insightful conversations out here. Those were my favorite nights.”

“You must miss him,” Desmond whispered, the tone of his voice sorrowful.

Victoria felt conflicted. Did she want to keep concealing what had been going on behind closed doors? She wasn’t sure she felt comfortable enough to talk about everything. However, it *was* Desmond, her best and most trustworthy friend; if she could rely on anyone to keep a secret, it was him. Besides, she had a feeling talking might lift a great weight off her chest.

“Desmond, I...I want to talk to you, but you have to promise you won't repeat my words to anybody,” she stated firmly.

Desmond nodded quickly, his face serious. “Of course I won't, Victoria. You can talk to me about anything.”

Taking a deep breath, Victoria said, “Well, in all honesty, even if Connor had never disappeared...I don't think we would have been a couple much longer.”

Desmond raised his eyebrows, visibly surprised. “Really? Why?”

Victoria felt tears prick her eyes. “I've never actually told anyone about this,” she whispered, her voice wavering. “Connor and I were having some...issues.”

Victoria noticed Desmond shift beside her. “What kind of...issues?” he asked reluctantly, as though he were afraid to hear the answer.

“Connor got a bit...possessive,” she answered, and suddenly scenes were flashing before her eyes.

One night, as she was finishing getting ready to go out, Connor stomped into the bathroom where Victoria had just finished curling her raven hair. “I knew you were too excited about this party! Why do you wanna go so bad, huh?” Connor yelled at her while she stood there in confusion.

“What are you talking about?” she asked, frowning. They'd been planning on going to Roger's party for over a week. “We both wanted to go. Why do you seem so upset?”

“Don't wanna tell me? Fine!” he shouted. “I already know the answer!” Connor held up his hand to show her that he had her cell phone, and then he promptly threw it at her.

“Connor!” she cried, just barely catching it before it hit her face. “Don’t do that! What’s your problem?”

Connor laughed, although he was clearly unamused and unhappy. “Look at your texts.”

Victoria, still baffled by this sudden outburst, looked at her messages. “‘Hey, Vic,’” she read aloud. “‘You still coming to my party tonight? Let me know. It won’t be the same without you, boo.’”

“You hear that?” asked Connor, mockingly putting a hand to his ear. “Why the hell is Roger calling you ‘boo’, Victoria?”

Victoria rolled her eyes. “Connor, it’s Roger, you know he gives everybody pet names. He probably texted you, too.”

“Well, unless he called me ‘sugar, I’m not buying your bullshit,” Connor sneered. “We aren’t going.”

“What?” Victoria exclaimed. “Why?”

“That asshole’s clearly trying to make a move on you and I won’t allow it,” he declared stubbornly.

“Connor, I swear nobody is trying to get with me. Now, you’re clearly in a bad mood, so you can stay home if you want. But I’m going.”

Suddenly, Connor’s eyes darkened. He strode across the bathroom, grabbing Victoria’s arm in a vice-like grip. His expression sent chills down her spine.

“No,” he hissed, “you’re not.”

“By ‘possessive’, what do you mean?” Desmond asked, momentarily dragging Victoria back into reality. “Like, jealous and stuff?”

Victoria nodded, saying, “Yes, but...not just when it came to guys. He got really clingy and suffocating in general. Even when I was out with other girls he’d be texting and calling me constantly to see where I was.”

Another day, while she was hanging out with a girl from her math class, Connor called Victoria. After excusing herself to another room where she was out of earshot, Victoria answered and explained where she was and who she was with.

“You’re hanging out with Wendy Larson?” he asked her, his voice full of disdain. “She’s a skank.”

“Don’t say that!” she scolded him in a hushed voice. “She’s very nice.”

“She’s not good company,” Connor muttered. “I want you home no later than six.”

Victoria couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. If you aren’t back by then, I’m coming to get you.” The coldness of his voice told her it was less of a statement and more of a threat. He hung up, leaving Victoria shaking. She was home by six o’clock.

“-awful,” she caught Desmond saying in disbelief once that memory faded away. “I never would have guessed by looking at you guys that any of that was going on. You always seemed so happy.”

Victoria wanted to spare Desmond the details. Connor had become more of a captor than a boyfriend. His temper had gotten worse and worse, and she'd eventually grown accustomed to being grabbed and shaken.

Victoria felt the tears sliding down her cheeks. "I was in love with Connor Westcott," she told Desmond somberly, tensing up only a little when her friend reached over to gently wipe the tears from her face. "But I couldn't stand the person he turned into."

"If he was that bad about you hanging out with people," said Desmond, putting his arm around her and looking at her worriedly, "he must have hated me."

Desmond was right. In fact, the worst fight between Victoria and Connor had been about Desmond.

"I don't want you hanging out with that little rat anymore!" Connor had screamed at her one evening.

"I'm not going to stay away from Desmond just because you're insecure, Connor!" she yelled back. "He's my best friend. You may have taken everyone else from me, but I won't let you take him!"

Connor lunged forward, grabbing Victoria by her throat and slamming her against the wall. "Listen here, Victoria!" he seethed, glaring at her. "If I find the two of you together at any point in the future, you'll both pay for it!"

"Can't...!" Victoria rasped painfully. Connor was choking her. She was going to pass out. "Con...nor...stop!"

Connor smirked. "Only if you promise to stay away from Desmond."

“P-Promise!” she squeaked. Connor released her and she hit the floor.

Connor leaned down so his mouth was next to her ear. “Don’t bother trying to leave. Remember,” he murmured menacingly, “wherever you go, I will follow.” Stroking her hair, he added softly, “We belong together. You are mine.”

“No, he wasn’t very fond of our friendship, Des,” Victoria responded briefly, not wanting Desmond to feel guilty about the conflict it had caused between Connor and her. Sniffing, she said more steadily, “But, you know what? It’s okay. It’s all behind me now.”

Desmond nodded. “R-Right,” he stammered, pulling her a little closer to him. “I’m...I’m glad you were able to talk to me about it.”

“Thank you,” whispered Victoria gratefully, leaning over to kiss his cheek. “What would I do without you?”

Desmond blushed, grinning at her. “Aw, you’re gonna make me all flustered.”

Ruffling his already messy dirty blond locks, Victoria jumped up. “Enough strolling down memory lane,” she said decisively. “Let’s head home.”

Desmond stood up. “Sounds like a plan. But can I ask you something first?”

Victoria nodded. “Sure, Des. Anything.”

“Do you...think Len did it?” he asked uncertainly. “He seemed pretty adamant that he didn’t, but...maybe he was just crazy.”

The walls of deceit sprung up again, and Victoria replied hastily, “I don’t know. I’ve thought about it a lot, but...I just don’t know.”

“I guess we never will,” Desmond concurred, taking her hand. “Like you said, it’s behind us now. Let’s go, Vicky.”

And so, the two of them began to trek back through the forest. Victoria wasn’t sure she’d ever tell Desmond the *whole* truth. Even after hearing her tales of woe, would he be able to handle the *full* story of what had really happened just over a year ago?

The forest was already pretty out of the way, so Victoria had asked Connor if they could go for a late-night stroll there. She had waited until they were isolated enough, and then she’d struck. She remembered the coolness of the blade, and the thick, hot liquid that was Connor’s blood. She’d simply needed to run back to the car, grab the shovel stowed in the trunk, and dig the hole. A couple of hours later she was home, safe, sound, and alone. The next day she’d reported her missing boyfriend.

Victoria mourned the Connor she had fallen in love with. The Connor she’d murdered could rot in hell.

As she walked hand-in-hand with her best friend, leaving behind the clearing with the weird, almost unnoticeable patch of earth where the grass grew a little higher due to what was buried beneath, Victoria smiled. She looked forward to another year without Connor.