



CHAPTER ONE

CLASSICALLY HAUNTED

“We are almost there, stop asking already. It hasn’t even been twenty minutes.”

He wasn’t wrong, and the time on the dashboard made that clear. Nineteen minutes since I was picked up from my shift. I still had the stain of some Red Number Forty that some blonde drunk bitch spilled on me when stumbling for the bathroom. Fruity pink drinks were never my preference, or I guess the people who drank them weren’t. Always entitled women who were too loud for the space they consumed, craving attention from any and all men. They’ll claim they are so confident, that the strangers around them don’t matter at all, yet they feed off their stares. It fueled their fragile ego, and for a second, they can give some horny loser hope that their recycled pick-up line means something. Until they giggle that aspiration away, with a flash of some fake almost a carat engagement ring.

“You could’ve at least let me change first,” I said.

“Well, I wanted to get there before sundown, and if you would stop pouting for more than two seconds, you’d know that I packed you something else to wear,” he said. His face crunched in a smile laced in snark, as he turned to me with both hands still on the steering wheel. Connor had his hair pulled back into a loose bun that sat on the crown of his skull and wobbled around like a bobble head in the breeze of the hot wind from the open window. The natural highlights of long hours in the sun looked white against the amber of his roots.

As the forced wrinkles of his mocking expression snapped back with the elasticity of youth, irises with the same contrast cut through the dark of his tan and heavy straight brows. His

lids were narrow, concealing the silver that surrounded his pupils. The attitude left his puffy lips, as they pulled upward into a grin. It was annoying how perfect his teeth were, not even braces could create that God given magic. All but one sat aligned, yet you'd never be able to tell unless you ran your tongue along each tooth to check.

“Thank you,” I muttered through forced misery. Connor made it hard to stay upset, he was too thoughtful, he had always been too thoughtful. That's why I shouldn't have been surprised when I looked in the back seat to find a small red box tangled in ribbon, sitting on top of a matching envelope.

“What is this for?” I asked.

“Open it and find out,” his gaze switched back and forth between me and the road, as I slid my fingers between the sealed creases of crimson paper.

White card stock, with swirled black writing painted the front flap.

-Happy Anniversary-

My cheeks burned into the color of the packaging.

I Forgot.

“Well go on, read it out loud,” Connor ordered. Spit cleared from my throat, as I sucked back the tears forming in the wells of my vision.

“Although the days are long, the years have gone by in a matter of moments with you by my side. Like a time traveler, you have sped up every second of agony, and made a life that is worth living for. I can’t wait to explore the decades with you, even if they pass too quickly, we’ll have all of eternity,” I recited, while I could no longer hold back the salted, warm water my lashes tried to conceal.

“Why are you crying?” He asked

“I just really love you,” I replied.

Long fingers unattached from the circle of worn rubber grip and brushed the stream of sorrow from my cheeks. When he pulled away, his hooked digits took me along, and his mouth engulfed mine. Each taste was sweet, and syrupy, I wanted to drink him into me. The strength he possessed made its way to the back of my neck; while his thumb steadied my jaw, forcing me to stay put. My breath was stolen into his lungs, and only regained when the grooves at the side of the road vibrated against the treads of our tires, breaking the trance of lust.

My driver swerved back between the lines, while some truck laid on their horn as they passed us. I shoved my arm across Connor to flip off the other traveler before the seatbelt yanked me back to my chair.

“Easy, Tiger, his ride is a lot bigger than ours,” he interrupted himself with a chuckle that prompted my own. “You still have one more thing to open, well one more for now.” Connor winked at me before grabbing the small box and handing it to me.

He had always taken care of everything that I needed. Made sure there was food on the table, a roof over our heads, and that I always had someone I could run to whenever I felt alone. The days without his presence weren't worth remembering, my whole existence had been filled with him.

Acid in my stomach ate away at the lining that held it and burned with the coals of guilt. A deep swallow suppressed the bile that attempted to make its way out, and the built-up steam released through my nose, minimizing the sound of the sigh.

“Connor,” I started.

“Just open it.”

With a small tug at one of the ends, the reflective bondage released the lid, and the onyx cushion within held the most vibrant emerald stone that was attached to a slender silver chain. It was simple, elegant, and something that I never expected the man who sat beside me to give me. I wouldn't allow myself to think about things of luxury, let alone speak the desires out loud. Deep in the back of my mind is where they were shoved into a corner, marked with heavy packaging tape, and labeled One Day.

“Do you like it?” he asked, while his eyes mimicked those of a puppy waiting to be praised. It was then I realized just how long I had been speechless.

“Connor.”

“Don't worry about it. Do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful.”

“This is my vow to never make you cry again, Izzy. A symbol of my word.”

Raised voices had been the default form of communication between us for what felt like months. When the anger subsided, the tenseness that laced each fiber of my body with the will to fight, deflated into despair. I just didn’t have it in me anymore.

Without my recollection, the car had come to a halt.

“Will you wear it for me,” he asked.

Unable to make a sound, I tilted my head down and back up in agreement, then he reached behind me to secure the clasp around my neck. There was only one adjustment, which made the thin links hug the flesh covering my throat, with just enough slack to keep it from being a dainty collar. My airflow was restricted as he made sure it was fastened, and when he was confident of its seal, the stone nested in the center of my throat between the blood that flowed into my skull upon his release.

“Promise me you won’t take it off?”

“I don’t think I’d be able to without your help anyway,” I said, as a grin smeared across the blush that seared into my cheeks.

A quick shake of the head, and his expression mimicked mine. Connor grabbed my fingers and pressed a kiss into the bones between my knuckles, before returning them to my lap with the added addition of his. The warmth he radiated was massaged into my inner thigh against

the bare skin hidden under the fabric of a black pencil skirt. A few more strokes brushed against me before he returned to the gear shift.

“So, are we almost there?” The lingering sentiment was never easy for me, and moments of silence made it impossible to ease a flustered subconscious that spoke overall logic and reason.

“So impatient.”

He pulled off onto an exit, and the smooth paved concrete of open road turned into potholes surrounded by trees and fields of thick, tall grass. It was safe to say it had been twenty-five minutes, and hard to believe that the city couldn't seem further from us. We had never really left the two blocks that we had lived on for most of our memorable life, we never had a reason to. Existence had been a simple routine of work, sleep, and eating whenever we had the chance to catch our breath. On rare occasions, we had the opportunity to slip away and grab a burger from this hole-in-the-wall joint called Johnny's. It was just a simple grill and bar with sliders, beer, and fried appetizers, but it became something special that we could look forward to. It was the only time we ever had a chance to spend alone outside of car rides home and nights cuddled up.

The change in scenery kept me skeptical of his intentions, and the more we pulled away from the freeway, the more the world we had known dissipated. My heart fluttered, as a gust laced with precursor to evening slammed against the frame of the car with enough force to shift

our direction. Beams of light melted like butter over the horizon and painted the sky in different shades of violet and fuchsia. Clouds took the pastel version of each hue, and the further back from the setting, the darker they became. It was strange to see the world as flat and linear, without anything blocking the view of the skyline that was sinking into the sun.

I assumed that the pastures were farms of some sort, with all the open space they needed to have some purpose besides just growth, but there was no sign of it. Not one animal, no vegetation that looked of any value to society, not a tractor, house, or human. To the right was the same circumstance, but instead of grass, dense trunks stood beneath a shadow of leaf-covered limbs. Families of mice must borrow in the roots of the trees, mama bears, and their cubs must take shelter in the dark holes of rock and earth, and the birds must huddle together in their nests made of twigs and mud. It would've been nice not to have the false pressure that people of this world created. Maybe it would be a fight of life or death, but it was a straightforward battle.

If only I could've asked one of the beasts, maybe they would take me in, and let me live in the cave beside them. Hunting seemed easy enough, water couldn't have been too far, and if it was, I could've collected rain from all the August storms. I knew how to start a fire and keep it going throughout the night.

“What are you thinking of?” Connor asked, breaking my train of thought.

“Just wondering what kind of animals live out here.”
“Probably some deer, maybe a couple of rabbits, and a bunch of fucking bugs.”

“Yeah, most likely. I was thinking foxes, wolves, maybe even bears,” I countered.

“I don’t know about all that, but maybe.”

He took the lead in almost every conversation, and even though he was just three years older than me, I let him. Any form of confrontation seemed pointless, and I was too tired to argue the point, or any point for that matter. In particular, what kind of animals lived in the woods.

“You’re right, it has to be a lot of deer.”

My sight strayed back to the bark that made the army of pines, and I watched as bushy tails attached to small critters launched from branch to branch. They were like acrobats, the way they soared through the air, never missing their mark upon landing. Heights weren’t something that I was fond of, I preferred my feet to stay on the ground, but I’m sure if I had to, I could climb a tree.

“Why don’t you get changed, we are almost there.”

“Where is there?” I asked, hoping he’d let our destination slip.

“Just get dressed.” His eyes rolled deep into the skull that held them.

“Did you get a good look at your brain on that one,” I chuckled.

“I did actually, yeah. It’s funny because it’s something you’ll never get to experience.” Connor’s laugh was breathy and playful. Such a calming voice, that carried a good amount of bass, but didn’t overpower the melody that seemed to serenade the air it infiltrated.

I scoffed, unbuckled, and shimmied my body over the center console. A sharp sting tingled over my ass, as I bent over trying to steady myself. “You’re not funny,” I snapped.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t help myself.

“I’m sure.”

Landing in the backseat wasn’t as graceful as I dreamed it’d be. A muffled wheeze coughed from the crackled, chipping, gray leather, and made me feel heavier than I was. The vehicle was older than myself, and every day I was in disbelief that it would even still start. Knock on wood. It always smelled of cannabis, dried tobacco, and takeout. I tried to clean it once, but the scent couldn’t be washed away no matter how many cleaning products I used, or how many hours I scrubbed.

The beige paint chipped off the edges of the frame and left the metal beneath rusted. There were indents and scrapes from reckless intoxicated driving, and city traffic. Connor got the car from some very distant cousin, or friend, I wasn’t sure of how it landed in his possession, but I know even if we were able to afford something else, he would've never gotten rid of it. Acid-washed skinny jeans, a black hoodie, and a pair of canvas high-tops.

Connor stalked me with the sight the rearview mirror had granted him. He watched me unzip the side of my skirt, slip it down my legs, and pull it off my ankles. Then the same with the tainted shirt of my uniform. His eyes darted with each movement I made. From unbuttoning the top few plastic circles that kept my breasts from being exposed to the fabric leaving my skin, he never once looked away. We were lucky the road was straight.

“Would you like me to just stay in this?” I asked in the most facetious way I could and just gestured to the matching cobalt lace bra and panties.

“You are still far too clothed for what I want to do to you.”
“It’s your job to take the rest off of me.”

“I will soon enough, but for now I want you dressed in what I brought you.”

“Interesting outfit choice, by the way.”

“It’ll make sense in just a second.”

“What are we going to rob a bank?”

There wasn’t a response that time, and I went back to shimmying my appendages into the denim. Maybe I had gained weight, I swore those pants used to be loose around my hips. Leftovers from work seemed to be catching up to my laziness after late hours. At least they fed me at that hellhole. I was never a fan of loud music or drunk idiots, yet I couldn’t judge with my limited options.

Light had dimmed around our atmosphere, and in a matter of moments, we were stopped outside a rusted gate, tangled in a web of overgrowth at the start of a gravel and stone driveway. Each small rock popped under the car’s mass and ricocheted off the steel with a ping. If I was being honest, it didn’t even have the width to be considered a driveway. Weeds seeped between each open space, and the grass encroached its distance.

“We’re here!”