

Chapter 1

“Terra, for fucks sake, come back to the house now! You can’t be there by yourself!”

“And why, exactly?” I shrug with my whole body. Not sure why since I was having this conversation over the phone.

“Because!” Mark snapped loudly in my ear, “People will figure out you’re by yourself, and they’ll-”

“I’ll be careful,” I let out an exasperated sigh, “I’m not skipping on going to this haunted fair just because you bailed on me.”

The Shadow Fair. I haven’t been able to afford to go until this year, and I’ve been living in this area for three, almost four years now! It was the biggest haunted attraction in the state that wasn’t at an amusement park.

“I’m sorry, but it’s just not safe. I’ll reimburse you, I’ll come get you now-”

“No!” I shout before immediately walking away after receiving a few puzzled looks from strangers. “I’m a grown-ass woman; I can do what I want, and what I want is to be chased through a huge corn maze and a mind-bending haunted mansion by gory monsters and psychopaths.”

“You don’t know the kind of people who work at those things,” he spat back into the phone, “who knows what kind of sick fucks they hire?”

Well, I must be a sick fuck for enjoying these types of places. I thought about telling Mark that, but the sound of his voice was starting to make my skin crawl in all the wrong ways. I didn’t want to listen to him any more than I already had to.

“Look, this is what I like to do. I go to haunts, I go home to snuggle my cat, and I sleep peacefully. I’ve been doing this since I moved here, and I’m not about to stop because you wanted to sucker me into being alone at your house. You keep acting like we’re together, but for the millionth time, we aren’t! If you want to stay my friend, then you-”

“Do you always dress like *that* when you go to these things?” He cut me off. He didn’t acknowledge my reminder that I wasn’t his girlfriend. Again. We were never together like that, but Mark wasn’t about to let that tidbit stop him.

I looked down at my outfit for the night. I went with a black sweater with Ghost face that covered half my hands from the length of the sleeves. The left side hung low on my shoulder, exposing my bra strap. My distressed shorts poked out from under the sweater. Fishnets hugged my legs comfortably before disappearing into my favorite black high tops.

Along with my black nails, various rings, and my standard piercings along my ears, I looked pretty fucking cute tonight. My dark hair flutters in the light breeze. I had put it up in a loose bun, so several strands were falling down.

“Like what?” I asked innocently.

A beat of silence. A beat for Mark to not call me a slut again.

“Terra,” he sighed, “you don’t know who is around you. So many things could happen to you. Your mom is worried about you, too.”

I cringed, emotionally and physically. My mother had decided that Mark and I were meant to be together. The perfect match to pump out grandchildren for her.

“Why are you *still* talking to my mother?”

“Because she shares the same fear I have with you being out alone.”

I rolled my eyes. I haven’t talked to my mother since my senior year of college. She cared about knowing where and who I was with at all times...even as an adult.

“Well then,” I laugh, “maybe you can get together and lament about what a disappointing slut I am again. Where did you two leave off last time I had the displeasure of your company? Oh, right! My so-called one-night stand with mystery man number...what are we up to in these imaginary men? 32?”

“Terra,” he lowered his voice, “I didn’t mean it.”

“Okay,” I let out a strangled laugh. Mark always didn’t mean it. But that never stopped him from saying it.

A beat of silence. I checked to see if he had hung up. Unfortunately, he didn’t.

“Are you coming back now?”

“Oh, yes, I’m skipping off into another stranger’s car to drive right back into your arms for another night of doing what you have deemed safe and appropriate for little ol’ me.”

“So you don’t like being with me?”

“Not really,” I said before I thought about it. My heart started beating fast. I had to remind myself he wasn’t here to push me against a wall again. He didn’t know my new address yet, either. I was fine.

Mark only huffed out a laugh, “Wow.”

“Yep, disappointment. Have I fulfilled it enough for you?” To leave me the fuck alone.

“Nope.”

“Great,” I deadpanned, “Now, I’m going to get chased by many masked strangers in secluded areas. Like I paid for.”

“Terra,” Mark’s voice turned domineering like a father lecturing his daughter.

“Oh!” I chipped, “Do you think, like, I’ll get chased into a dark, isolated space by a masked stranger who will take me in all the right ways?”

I could just imagine Mark’s stupid gaping mouth in the silence. His angry breaths filled the phone, and I couldn’t hide my smirk. Mark already thought I was sucking dick in the dark corners of clubs I have never stepped foot in. Why not voice what he was already thinking?

“That’s not fucking funny, Terra.”

“Sounds like an amazing time to me. I hope they’re tall.”

“Ter-”

“Might even be a hell of a way to die.”

“Fucks sake, Terra!”

“Mark, honestly, fuck off!” I bark out a laugh, “I gave you a chance to enjoy something with me, something I enjoy, and you decided to bail in the hopes I’d bail too and maybe end up sucking your dick while watching something *safe* tonight. I can only watch Casper so many times.”

“That’s not-”

“You’re right,” I cut him off, “It’s not any of your fucking business! Anyway, I’m going to enjoy my night. Don’t contact me again.”

I hung up. My phone instantly started buzzing again. I hung up again. The buzzing almost sounded like Mark’s anger channeled through it as it started again. An annoyed sigh escapes me as I block him for the rest of the evening. It was this possessiveness that stopped me from getting into a relationship with him back in college. My first mistake was sleeping with him a few times to blow off steam. Once I started branching off from my modest way of dressing into more alternatives and expanding my horizons, his colors began showing. I was slowly becoming my person, not the docile little girl he needed to protect. My second was not telling him to fuck off sooner and letting him guilt trip me for so long. Tonight was the first time I told him off like that. My body was still slightly shaking at the confrontation. I tucked my phone into my back pocket before returning to the fair entrance.

I wasn’t too worried about him coming here to find me. He lived maybe forty-five minutes away on a good traffic day and would be too scared to enter the haunt to track me down. Worst is he’ll wait at the exit, and I’ll let out my built-up anxiety with one swift kick to his balls. Sounds like a

good evening to me. I thought about my joke to Mark about being chased by a scary stranger. I shivered and blamed the slight breeze tickling my neck and legs.

There was less of a line and more of a small crowd of people funneling into the entrance. I made my way through them, trying not to bump into anyone. I was on the shorter side, so if I ran into anyone big, I would go down. My shoe catches on a slight dip in the dirt path, and I stumble into two guys in front of me.

"I'm so sorry!" I squeak while stumbling back, right into a hard body behind me.

One of the guys I bumped into turns and drags his eyes over my body. He makes eye contact with me, a lustful smirk spreading across my body. His friend also turns and does the same. Except his eyes went further up, and the heated look he gave me quickly gave way to fear.

"You alright, baby girl?" The oblivious guy asks. He takes one step towards me when his friend puts a death grip on his arm. "Dude, what the fuck-"

Finally, the guy looks at whoever is behind me, and his face gives way to fear.

"H-hey man, our bad," they mumbled before skittering off into the crowd.

I quickly whipped around and looked up. And up. And up some more at the man I had bumped into. I barely came up to his collarbone. I swallowed a little as I took a step back to give my neck some relief, and my heart stuttered.

The stranger's face was obscured by a black fox mask that covered half his face; the other half had a black fabric mask. It was difficult to tell in this lighting. He wore a hoodie with the hood currently drawn up to just behind his fox mask ears. My eyes flicked down to take in the black tank he wore under it, the distressed black jeans with boots laced up to his calf, and the black latex gloves on his hand. The only thing human about him was the exposed neck and chest from the dip in the shirt he wore. My instincts told me to run. My body stayed.

"Are you okay, little bird?"

My heart stuttered again. The fox's voice was mellifluous, honey with the husk of thick smoke. I could only nod as I savored the taste of his words in my ears.

"Are you sure?" He tilted his head in a curious gesture, and the movement made him all the more terrifying. The voice that wrapped my ears in a pleasant comfort was at odds with the dark visage he dressed in. My stomach twisted pleasantly.

"Y-yeah, completely fine, sorry," I said quickly.

The masked stranger seemed to be staring at me, but I couldn't see their eyes through the fox's eyes. This mask didn't go down enough to create a mouth. It felt like I was talking to a spirit. Or a demon.

“Sorry if I frightened you,” he said after a long moment.

Something within me bristled. Maybe I was still heated from my talk with Mark; that made me so defensive. Or perhaps it was because I wouldn't let this devilish masked man think I was scared of him.

“You're not that scary,” I said, stepping back and crossing my arms over my chest.

He let out a low laugh that made my insides clench tightly.

“Is that so?” he said quietly.

Something was telling me to leave this conversation right now. But I was anything but stubborn. This masked fox had piqued my interest despite the voice in the back of my head telling me to leave. Tonight felt like a night of pushing the limits of the decayed leftover rules I had grown up in.

“Yep,” I shrugged up at him, “you think you're the first ridiculously tall man to stand over me? I may be small, but I got a fucking hell of a bite.”

“Oh,” he sounded like he was holding back a laugh, “that I might like to see.”

Only if you bite me first, I wanted to say. Okay, that's enough interacting with a stranger in the middle of nowhere by myself. Part of me wanted to stay with him. An extreme part of me wanted to.

“Well, anyway. I gotta get going,” I pointed my thumbs to the entrance, “Um, see you around, I guess,” I gave a stiff wave while walking away.

“Heh, see you, little bird.”

The honeyed but dark tone of his voice sent another shiver through me. I didn't dare look back. I could feel him staring even after stepping through the entrance and towards the shadow maze. I wanted to look. Fuck, I really wanted to look back at him. But something in me stirred. Something that...made me giddy about feeling watched. Not knowing where he was. The fox could strike me down at any moment, and I hugged myself at the shiver that ran through me.

Let's see what fun the night will bring.