

Bar Harbor, Maine

MAY 13, 1999



*Today you're a boy catching frogs in the marsh.
Tomorrow you're an old man listening to stories
told by other old men. Life. It happens just like that.*

—CORNELIUS TRAEGAR

“I’m driving into oncoming traffic. My thinking is clear. I imagine every detail before it happens. Headlights kissing. Crash. Shatter. Metal twisting. Done. It’s quite vivid.”

Cecibel folded the bedsheets fresh from the line, just like Mrs. Peppernell liked them. The old woman’s vivid dreaming unsettled her, unsettled them both. So, too, did the new doctor drawing the recurring dream into the light. For Mrs. Peppernell, Cecibel would futz about the room, pretend to be diligently working. For her, Cecibel would do most anything.

“Done, you say? Do you die in your dream, Olivia?” Dr. Kintz’s pen paused. “Olivia?”

“I have asked you to call me Mrs. Peppernell.”

“We try to be a little less formal here.”

“Informality is for intimates. You are not my friend. You’re my shrink—”

“We don’t use that word, Olivia.”

“Mrs. Peppernell!” She slammed her knotty hand on the arm of her easy chair. “And don’t interrupt me, you impertinent boy.”

Setting the sheets into the hope chest, Cecibel tried to make eye contact and, failing that, let the lid slip just enough to make an audible click. Olivia’s gaze flicked her way. Their eyes met. Her

wrinkled cheek twitched. “If you insist upon calling me Olivia,” Mrs. Peppernell said evenly, “I shall call you Richard. Or Dick, if that is your preference.”

“Would it make you happy to call me Richard?”

“It would make me happy if you would use the title I earned with sixty-two years of marriage. And it would make me even happier if you would stop speaking in the royal ‘we.’ Now go away, Dick. I am finished being monitored for today.”

Dr. Kintz heaved a sigh. Not the first psychiatrist to do so over Mrs. Peppernell. He would learn, or he would earn every lash of her wicked tongue. Tucking his pen into his pocket, his notebook under his arm, he leaned a little closer than experience would soon warn him against. “Forgive me, Mrs. Peppernell. Feel free to call me Richard, but please don’t call me Dick. We—you and I, not the royal ‘we’—can pick up on this conversation tomorrow, if you’re up to it.”

The old woman brushed imaginary lint from her impeccable trousers. “That would be agreeable, Dr. Kintz. Good day.”

“Good day.” He bowed his head. If he glanced Cecibel’s way, she didn’t know. She turned her face to the wall before he could. Then he was gone with a soft click of the door. Poor Dr. Kintz. Only a week in the Pen and he still had no idea what he was in for. Those who left made sure not to tell. Those who stayed knew better.

“Fetch my medicine, will you, dear?”

Cecibel lifted the lid of the cedar chest again. Once a place to store hopes for the future, it held only the past now. And sheets. And marijuana. The scent of it permeated everything. Moving aside the cotton—always cotton, never polyester—quilt awaiting winter, Cecibel pulled the baggie from its folds. “You’re running a bit low.”

“I’ll have more ready soon enough.” Olivia took the baggie from Cecibel’s outstretched hand. “The last crop is all but ready. Join me?”

“No, thank you, Mrs. Peppernell.”

“Don’t be silly, child.”

“Olivia,” Cecibel amended, smiling openly. The old woman

never grimaced, never winced. *Ghoulish is as ghoulish does.* She'd said it without a trace of condescension or pity. Without apologizing afterward.

"Do you have a moment to walk me outside, dear?"

"Of course." Cecibel gave her arm. "You could do that here if you want to. No one would care."

"What am I? A barbarian? Gentle people don't smoke indoors. It's rude." Olivia leaned on her, light as breeze. The power of her wit, her words, those ice-chip blue eyes, did not extend to her physical form. Once, long ago, she'd been a driving force in literary New York, a crusader for women. Longer ago, she was what all debutantes skating the last sharp edge of Victorianism were—a wife, a mother, a homemaker. Before that, for so short a time, a gifted nurse who married a doctor and gave up her career. Longer still in the years beyond years, Olivia Peppernell née Stuart was a little girl from rural Connecticut, one with dreams of being an equestrian, a concert pianist, anything but what she became.

"How about the arbor?" Cecibel asked once they were outside. Mornings were chilly in Bar Harbor, whether June or September. "The sun hits it just right this time of day."

"Lovely."

An orderly and an old woman toddled across the green lawn, down the dirt track to the arbor overlooking the sea. Cecibel lifted the ruined side of her face to the sunshine, petitioning the gods of sunlight and warmth to undo what those of darkness had done. Deaf ears. Blind eyes. No compassion. Not for her.

"Have you heard anything more of our new resident?"

Cecibel gave her companion's arm a little squeeze. "He's supposed to arrive today. Did you know that?"

"I did, yes. But, why now? Is he ill or simply old? I thought I read something about a memoir in the making."

Cecibel laughed softly. "Bar Harbor Home for the Elderly is a lovely place—"

"The Pen is east of nowhere," Olivia corrected. "He belongs in New York. Or Paris. Or Rome. He must be losing his marbles and his handlers want it done out of sight."

“His medical records are private.” Cecibel settled Olivia into an Adirondack chair, blocked the wind while the old woman lit her joint and inhaled. The scent conjured friends forgotten, better days, coaxed a rare smile. Sitting on the footstool at Olivia’s feet, Cecibel pulled her sweater tighter. “I read about the memoir, too.”

“It’ll be ghosted.” Another long drag. “I’m certain. None of us writes once we come here.”

“That’s not true. You do. All the time.”

“I scribble. That’s all any of us do. Our best writing has been done.”

“How do you know?”

Olivia patted Cecibel’s knee. Kindly and condescending. “Did you read Switch’s book yet?”

The Sleeper and the Slumber. Raymond Switcher’s last novel, published in 1976. Switch mostly painted now, images that reached nostalgically back to a childhood in New Hampshire that never actually existed, considering he’d lived his whole life in Philadelphia. Occasionally, he penned short stories for obscure literary journals no one read.

“I did,” Cecibel said. “Well, I haven’t finished yet. It’s wonderful.”

“The *Times* got it right for a change.” Olivia nodded. “It’s truly his best. Possibly because he was wise enough to end on a high note.”

“And what about you? What is your best work?”

The old woman’s medicine, the only one she would use, had relaxed her shoulders, the set of her jaw. She slumped a little in her chair, able to now that the ever-present pain in her back was eased. “If you go by what the critics and sales figures say, my greatest work was *And the Ladies Sang*. A good book. One I’m proud of, naturally. Nineteen eighty-four was a powerful time for women, and the book spoke to several generations fighting the good fight. But if you’re asking which book rests most kindly in my heart, it’s *Green Apples for Stewart*. Barely made the best-seller list, but”—she patted her thin chest—“it still pitter-patters my shriveled old heart.”

“That was your last novel, right?”

“Second to last.” Olivia inhaled, held it, exhaled slowly. “No

one's heard of my last one. I, unwisely, didn't know enough to quit."

"What's the title?"

"Look it up in the library if you're so curious. I'm tired now, dear. I think I shall nap in the sun for a while." Olivia closed her eyes. The ocean breeze whiffled her spun-sugar hair. The perfect white, Cecibel thought, just as it had once been the perfect copper red. Book jacket photos had never done her beauty justice. Stiff. Posed. Untouchable. Unapproachable. Unlike the ones displayed in her rooms, those including old friends and lovers. Olivia in wilder times.

"I'll sit with you," Cecibel offered.

Olivia's eyes, tiny slits made by slumber and cannabidiol, found hers. An old hand reached out, into the breeze-tossed tendrils of Cecibel's hair, and fell again. "Lean out the window, Goldenhair," she whispered. "I hear you singing, singing . . ."

Her head lolled. Cecibel shrugged out of her sweater and gently covered her with it. Olivia Peppernell softly slept. Her face to the sun. Her dreams gently kept. What did she dream? Outside of twisted metal and headlights?

Such a life she'd lived. Famous. Infamous. So much glory. So much pain.

Hugging herself, Cecibel hurried back to the main building. "Mrs. Peppernell is napping in the arbor, Sal," she told her fellow orderly behind the maintenance desk. "Could you please send someone to keep an eye on her, and help her back to her room when she wakes? I have to go finish getting Mr. Carducci's room ready for him."

"Sure thing, buttercup." Sal chuffed, waving her away with his big sausage fingers. Pink nails, today. Subtle. For Sal. "Doubt she'll be waking up anytime soon. You reek, girl."

Cecibel sniffed at her hair, wrinkled her nose. "Oh. Okay, thanks. I have some perfume in my room."

"It ain't gonna help," Sal called after her as she hurried away, head down and face burning. Dodging residents, doctors, nurses, and other orderlies all the way to her room. No one would accuse

her of smoking up on the job—everyone knew about Olivia’s medicine—but it wasn’t acceptable for her to reek of marijuana either. She changed her clothes, sprayed her brush with rose perfume, and gave her hair a good brushing.

Long and golden and lovely. The only remnant of a beauty shredded and burned away nearly a dozen years before. Even that was flawed by a hairline slipped too far off her ruined face. While the rest of the staff at the Pen was required to bind their hair off their faces, she was not. A kindness to her. To everyone.

She rolled an elastic band onto her wrist and dashed out of the small space belonging to her and her alone within the grand beachside mansion now a home for the elderly. Once in Mr. Carducci’s room, she’d bind it back and work unencumbered. She could cut it, of course, to a length that would hide the worst of her scars and still be manageable. The last vestiges of vanity kept it long and always longer. Vanity she no longer had a right to.

Mr. Carducci’s suite of rooms smelled of pine cleaner and lemon wax, leather, and wood. Cecibel had worked hard to make it perfect for him. Just the right light in just the right crooks and corners for reading, sleeping, writing. Soft blankets, softer pillows, a desk in the window facing the sea, and a healthy stash of paper and pens and notebooks. Of course, he worked on a computer; all writers did these days. But there wasn’t one of them who didn’t get sentimental and dreamy at the sight of a blank page and a waiting pen.

When she was a young woman, whole and hale in her twenties, Carducci’s novels opened her dreams to places and people beyond her ken. After the accident, his words kept her company through the darkest of the dark, through the pain, through the chaos of thoughts. Cecibel hadn’t read anything of his in years—she was done dreaming and he was done writing—but for what he’d once obliviously given her, she owed him her best effort. For what he gave the world, he deserved to finish his own story in peace.

Alfonse Carducci was overdue. She’d been told to have all in ready by ten. Perhaps she’d gotten the day wrong. Or perhaps Dr. Kintz’s

enthusiasm for so auspicious a resident kept the famous man in the office once belonging to Cornelius Traegar himself, and vacated by too many in the dozen years since his death. Old writers didn't fade into that good night. Not those populating the Pen. Their wits got sharper while their bodies betrayed them, their tongues sharper still. Cecibel rarely kept up with their banter; her mind was not quick or mean enough. It was more often that later, alone in her room and trying to sleep but for dreams, she'd laugh aloud at a joke or gibe given and taken hours before.

One last swipe along the polished wood of the bookshelf, and Cecibel called her job done. Tucking the rag in her back pocket, she scanned the titles there. Mr. Carducci's books, of course. Every one. And Olivia Peppernell's. Raymond Switcher's, even those that didn't make it to the best-seller list. Many of the residents, past and present, were represented upon those shelves. Authors. Editors. Illustrators. Cover designers. It was the only necessary requirement to apply for residency in the Bar Harbor Home for the Elderly—they had to have been in publishing. Cornelius Traegar's will stipulated this one condition be kept, and it had been for more than fifty years.

Cecibel pulled a book—*Wicked Tongues*—and took it to the window. She flipped to the back cover. Alfonse Carducci, there a man in his fifties, smiled the half smile of an attractive, talented, successful man fully aware of his charms. The perfect smattering of white flecked his temples. And though the photo was in black and white, she knew his eyes were amber, like a lion's. Cecibel remembered clearly, from an interview he did with Johnny Carson, the silky-deep tone of his voice, the Italian accent never lost though he'd lived his adult life in the United States. How enamored she had been of him during his heyday, of this man in his prime in every sense of the word. Now she stood in this window of his new residence, holding her favorite of his books in her hand, and the twittering, teenage lust chased her across the years.

"Ah, good afternoon, Cecibel," Dr. Kintz called from the entrance. "I see we caught you—"

Spinning to the shelf, pulling the elastic band from her hair, she nearly tripped over her own feet. She pushed the book back into its space, smoothed the hair over her face, and hurried toward the door. A hand caught hers before she could make her getaway.

“No need to hurry off.” The voice, still silky-deep, was only slightly less robust.

Cecibel turned her face to the doorjamb. “I was just finishing up and . . . and . . . I’m sorry. Good afternoon, gentlemen.”

She didn’t rip her hand from his. Alfonse Carducci simply let her go. Their voices carried after her, Dr. Kintz’s the louder. “The residents love her, but she’s shy. She was in an accident, you see, and . . .”

Cecibel ran full pelt, oblivious to where she was going or how fast. Away. Where she didn’t have to hear the pity in Dr. Kintz’s voice. Or worse, in Alfonse Carducci’s.

“Whoa! Hey, hold on now.”

Hands gripped her arms, steadied her. Cecibel instinctively turned her face from the voice familiar enough to know doing so wasn’t entirely necessary. Finlay Pottinger had been working the Pen longer than she herself, and had as much to hide.

“You all right? Seen a ghost?”

“No. I’m fine. Thank you, Finlay.”

He let her go, bent to pick up a bouquet of flowers tied up in a bit of twine, and held them out to her. “Happy birthday.”

So close, a flicked glance was all she’d hazard. She liked Finlay too well to offer a full-on view. Taking the flowers from his hand, she brought them to her nose and inhaled. “Thank you, Finlay. How did you know?”

“Your birthday?” He chuffed. “It’s not a secret, is it?”

“No, but I’ve never celebrated it here.”

“Ain’t it time you did? Thirty-five is kind of a big year.”

“No bigger than any other.” She started away.

“Cecibel?”

And stopped.

“I thought maybe you’d like to do something, seein’s it’s your

birthday and all. Maybe go into town for a burger and fries? What do you think?"

"No, thank you, Finlay. See you." Her heart pounded so loud in her ears she could scarcely hear her own words. Or the mingled garbling that might have been his response. Or the wind. Or anything at all.

Bar Harbor, Maine

MAY 15, 1999



If at first you don't succeed, get a ghostwriter to do it for you.

—CORNELIUS TRÆGAR

“You have to open your door sooner or later, Alfie. You know better than to hope I’ll just go away.”

Money, fame, and respect bought many things. None of it, gleaned over a lifetime of achievement, would spare him Olivia Peppernell indefinitely. Two days of him hiding away in his very comfortable, well-appointed suite in the Bar Harbor Home for the Elderly seemed to be her limit.

It was nice, while it lasted. Alfonse would never have imagined himself content in his own company after a lifetime surrounded by fans, colleagues, friends, lovers. Age did strange things to a man. As did a failing body. When the mind was the only part left functioning, it had more than enough time to remember, reflect, regret. Two days, it appeared, was his limit, too.

Laboring to the door, he took deep, even breaths. He rested his hand on the knob. Shoulders as straight as he could get them, he opened the door. “Livy.” Her name gushed out of him in a breath he hoped she heard as the joy it was, and not his failing lungs. “You gorgeous creature. Come in, come in.”

Old. So old. Weren’t they all? But Alfonse saw her still, that menace with her red hair and whipcrack blue eyes, transposed over the frail frame. He recalled curves and softness and a willingness to let him explore every lovely inch. Were he not so withered himself,

he might even have entertained the notion of seeing how much of it remained.

“Sit, sit.” He gestured to a leather chair set in the sunshine streaming through his massive window. “Shall I call for tea? Coffee? Anything at all?”

“I’d ask for a bourbon but I guess that’s not in the cards for either one of us.”

“Sadly, no.”

“I’m fine. Sit, Alfie, before you topple over.”

He did as he was told. Alfonse had used up all his energy to deny her in his two days of solitude.

“So you’re finished avoiding me now, are you?” she asked.

“I have not been avoiding you, Livy. I simply needed time to acclimate to my new surroundings.”

Her gaze traveled the length and breadth of the room, came to rest on him. “This was Cornelius’s suite, you know. It’s been vacant nearly a decade. Waiting. Shall I wonder why?”

“You can wonder, but I will tell you it was in his will. This was not just his dream. It was our dream, this home where old writers go to die.”

“For fuck’s sake, Alfie. I was there, too. Or is it true you’re losing your marbles and don’t remember?”

“My marbles are all accounted for,” he said. “Cornelius was content to be here to usher in those old greats who came before us. I wasn’t.”

“He was one of those old greats.”

“And I was the protégé he took under his wing.”

“Protégé?” Olivia chuffed. “Still in denial, I see.”

“I deny nothing. Cornelius was . . . I loved him. Just not only him. As you know.” He wagged a finger at her. “Intimately.”

“And yet you didn’t come to his funeral, and have not visited me even once since I became an inmate here. That is what I wonder why, Alfie. Why it is you waited so long.”

“Inmate?” Alfonse laughed softly, the only way he could. “You are free to leave, my dear. No one demands you stay.”

“And where would I go? My children despise me. And don’t think you can sidetrack me. Why didn’t you come?”

Alfonse let his shoulders slump. It was too much effort to keep them square and talk at the same time. Memories and regret took their toll, too. “We had not seen one another in a long time, Livy. It was better for him that way. I couldn’t give him what he wanted. What he deserved. He understood that. He loved me, not what he wished I would be.”

She chuckled softly. “You still haven’t said why you didn’t come for his funeral.”

Love. Respect. Regret. Relief. “He was already gone,” he said. “What was the point? Let this go now, Livy. Please. I am here now.”

Olivia’s chin raised. He knew that combative look. So well. So dear. The spun sugar of her hair still held the gentle waves he used to lose his fingers in for hours, for days. Her face was that of an old woman, but within the lines he found her youth.

“It’s good to see you, Livy.”

“It’s good to see you, too.” Her smile melted a little of the ice in her eyes. “So what’s wrong? Why are you here?”

“I’m dying, of course,” he said. “My heart and lungs are failing slowly every day. My liver and kidneys are shot to hell. One day, something will simply stop. I’ve had DNR orders written up. It won’t be long I’m a resident here.”

“How long?”

“A month? A year? No more.”

“You never know,” Olivia said. “They didn’t give me long when I got to the Pen. It’s been almost six years now.”

“You did not abuse yourself the way I did.” Alfonse inhaled carefully. Slowly. Already he was light-headed with the exertion of speech. “A lifetime of cigarettes, bourbon, and bad choices takes its toll.”

“You lived well, Alfie. Would you change anything? Really?”

Would he? Alfonse shook his head. “No. I wouldn’t. We were the music makers, for a time, the dreamers of dreams, were we not?”

Olivia nodded. “The world is so different now.”

“As those we once took it from thought as well, I imagine.” Pain, soft and stealthy, rippled across his chest. Alfonse quelled the urge to clutch it. “Forgive me. I tire easily. I need to rest.”

“Then rest.” She patted his knee. “I’ll sit here and read.”

“You don’t have to keep an old man company.”

“No, I don’t. Which is why you should be grateful I offered. Don’t be a martyr. It’s unbecoming.”

“Vanity prohibits any argument from me.”

“As if you’d win.” She chuffed. “Shall I read aloud?”

“I’d like that.”

“What shall we read?”

“You pick. Something new. Something I’ve never read. Or written.”

Olivia moved, slowly, to the extensive bookshelves he himself had not had the energy or will to inspect. Pulling a book from the stacks, she made cooing sounds, like a mother to her child. “This one.” She handed him the book. “I’m surprised they included it in your collection.”

“This is a children’s book.”

“Only an old man would say such a thing.” Olivia’s eyes twinkled. Ah, he remembered that, too. “You mark my words, this is going to be bigger than even the greediest publicists have ever dreamed about. You’ll want to be ready when the next one releases. If you’ve not expired, we shall read that one together, too.”

To the rustle of turning pages, the whisper of her practiced voice, Alfonse Carducci closed his eyes. A boy who lived, under the staircase, in the home of his terrible relatives. A book he’d never have read but for coming here to this place he’d always known he’d die in, alongside all those others who once ruled the world.

Sunlight, warm on his face. Sweet humming. Disoriented musings involving an owl perched upon his armrest and a giant riding a motorcycle. Alfonse slipped from slumber, certain he’d died in his sleep. The proof was in the humming, and the angel reaching into the sunlight. He’d seen her before. A fleeting glimpse sometime in his past.

She was, now, warm and lovely on his arm. An unfamiliar gift. A grief to come. Always and always, his . . .

The words filled his head the way they once had; in those days words came so swiftly his pen could not keep up. Notebooks filled with scrawl and scratch he could scarcely decipher days later, but could only coax out of memory in fractured bits and jagged pieces.

“Please,” he said. “My laptop. There, on the desk.”

He shouldered higher in his chair. Olivia was gone, but the young woman who’d first been in his rooms upon his arrival in the Pen was already grabbing the laptop computer from his desk. He reached. She handed. Words already sifted out of dreaming, out of the world.

“Damn this thing!” He pounded on keys as if that would boot it up faster. “Please, write this down. Hurry. Hurry!”

The young woman yanked the band from her hair as she darted back to the desk, but not before he saw what she tried so valiantly to hide. Beauty and Beast. Jekyll and Hyde. Proof of the duality in every human soul—hers was simply worn in the open. Or not so open. She hid her face behind her hair, angled the worst of it away from him.

“Go ahead. I’m ready.”

Alfonse gave her his words, a mad jumble that didn’t sound as lovely coming from his mouth as it would have flying out of the tips of his fingers. There was enough to pull the beauty back from oblivion, later when his computer finished booting up.

“Thank you,” he said, holding out his hand for the notebook. “And forgive me. I was dreaming. I didn’t want to forget.”

“It’s an honor, sir,” she said. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Head bowed, gaze on the chair leg or her shoes or the pattern in the carpet, she was a golden cascade standing before him. Model tall, but not model thin. Voluptuous, like the bombshells of his lusty youth, when he fell as hard for the feminine curve of a hip as he did for the masculine cut of a shoulder. She’d been in his rooms quite often; he’d caught her several times lingering. Young Alfonse

would have opened his eyes, caught her hand, and seduced her into his bed. Old Alfonse had to be content imagining it.

“Tell me your name?” he asked.

“Cecibel,” she answered. “Cecibel Bringer. I’m an orderly here.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Cecibel. A lovely name, for a lovely young woman.”

A sound, something like laughter. A slight shift of her shoulders. A small exhalation of breath. “Charming. So the stories are all true.”

“I imagine most of what you may have heard about me is true,” he said. “The good and the bad.”

“A lifetime of hearing things. Some must be lies.”

“Some.” Curiosity burned. Not the desire to see her face; that, he’d already seen. Dr. Kintz’s assessment of her was all wrong. The man was sincere if not very astute. Alfonse’s ability to read body language well enough to transpose it onto a page deduced she was not quiet and shy, not potentially addled by the accident that took half her face. Not mousy and ugly and all those things a first glance would have seen. Alfonse Carducci did not put much stock in first impressions. Human beings were far more complicated. “Would you sit with me?”

“I only came in to collect your breakfast tray. I should go.”

“Of course, you have duties.” He waved his hands over his head, an old gesture once full of sarcasm and humor, now one that took his breath away. “Forgive me.”

“It’s not that.” She nearly looked up. Only nearly. “I don’t want to go all fangirl on you, and I will if I get half the chance. You probably get that a lot.”

“Fangirl.” A soft chuckle. Another moment of breath gone. “I have not heard that one before. Yes, I used to get it a lot, and I loved every moment of it. These days, I do not warrant so much attention. I’m a relic of a bygone day.”

“There are whole college courses dedicated to your work.”

“Alfonse Carducci as a subject to be studied, not a writer to be admired.”

“Do you need admiration to be proud of all you’ve accomplished?”

“That, my dear,” he said, “is what we call a loaded question. I don’t need the admiration to feel pride in my work, but do I need it in general? Yes, I do. I’m a vain man, Cecibel. A vain man who happened to have the talent to continuously feed that vanity.”

“I think you sell yourself short, sir.”

“Alfonse, please. And I can assure you there is not a being on the planet who thinks more highly of me than I do.”

A glance through lashes. Progress made. “An enormous ego is a handy shield, Mr. Carducci.”

“Slain by my own words.” Alfonse clutched his heart, part drama, part need. “Touché, my dear. Touché.”

“I’ve read everything you wrote. *Wicked Tongues* has always been my favorite.”

“Everything?” He sifted through dates and releases. “Even after *Night Wings on the Moon*?”

She nodded, her gaze again on a chair leg or shoes or carpet.

“A dark story, full of unlikable characters,” he said. “Do you believe it is true, what the critics said of it? That I betrayed my loyal readers writing so dark a tale?”

“I’ve read it more times than I can count,” she said. “I keep it on my bedside table.”

“Didn’t you say *Wicked Tongues* is your favorite?”

“Yes.” Cecibel picked up his breakfast tray. “I should get back to work.”

“If you must.” He let go a deep breath. Alfonse was tired. Always tired, but Cecibel was right; he lived for admiration. He absorbed it like sunshine, like the drugs keeping his ill-used body going. Waking to words conjured by her presence revived his body, pulled his soul back from the brink of oblivion like nothing had in far too long.

“Cecibel?”

She turned her head, fair side, hand still on the lever of his door. The round blush of her cheek, the slope of her nose, lashes so thick and long they cast shadows, waves of blond hair cascading

down the curves of her waist, her back, Cecibel was a fairy princess stepped out of an old German folktale.

“Would you visit me again?” he asked. “When duties don’t conflict?”

Her hand fell from the lever. “Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“Switch . . . um . . . Raymond Switcher has been asking after you,” she stammered. “Many of the residents have. Perhaps you’d like to have one or two of them come visit. Or your nurse can bring you down to the gathering room for a little while.”

“I’m not quite up to that just yet,” he said, and it was true. “I don’t wish to dwell in the past. Not yet, at any rate. And that is what will happen. Reminiscing about the old days when we were young and immortal. But I am lonely here. Indulge a dying old man, my dear. The company of a lovely young woman, a fangirl at that, is exactly what I require to make it through another day.”

A soft chuckle. Musical, from her. “I see the drama hasn’t been embellished either.”

“Not even slightly.”

Her pause lasted far too long. The blush of her cheek burned brighter. “All right, Mr. Carducci. After my shift. As long as you’re still up for it.”

“I will nap the rest of the day to ensure it.”

Cecibel opened the door. “Your nurse will be up soon with your lunch, but can I get you anything before I leave?”

A new heart? A fresh liver would do in a pinch. “No, thank you. I’m content as a cat in the sun right now.”



How silly it was, to be so aflutter. The man was seventy-nine, and dying. She was enamored of a reputation, of years of hero worship, of a past so grand and wild. But it felt so good. She was new, to him, even if Cecibel felt as if she’d known him all her life. As, in fact, she had. The familiarity, bred in a past long before the one that took everything from her, freed her somehow, from something she’d stopped noticing.

Infatuation offered to gather his breakfast tray when Sal groused

about schlepping all the way out to that far wing of the residence to do so. For the third day in a row. Sal thought he was playing her. Or maybe he knew. Infatuation had lingered longer today, tidying up while he slept. It stood beside his chair watching the rise and fall of his chest, even if that felt like crossing the line between fan-girl and stalker. He didn't know. And if he did, Cecibel was pretty certain Alfonse Carducci would get a kick out of it.

Gripping her copy of *Dark Wings on the Moon* tighter, she smoothed the front of her dress, the hair against the side of her face. She lifted her hand to knock, and froze. In all her years working at the Pen, she'd rarely gone into Dr. Traegar's private suite; it had already been closed up and waiting when first she was hired. Rumors varied as to why that was so, but all included Alfonse Carducci. Mentor and protégé. Lifelong friends. Lovers. In the weeks since reading of the famous author's failing health, Cecibel had been in there quite often, tidying. Preparing. Snooping. Dr. Traegar hadn't only left the suite, but all its contents, to his old friend. Inscriptions in many of the books left little to wonder concerning the nature of their relationship.

"Don't just stand there, Cecibel," she muttered. A quick knock before her nerve gave out, and she opened the door.

"You are here, at last." A diminished but still regal Alfonse Carducci sat in the same easy chair, now moved closer to the fireplace kindled to the perfect flicker. In the lines of his face, she saw the man from book jackets, on *Johnny Carson*. He was there. Oh, he was there. And Cecibel's heart fluttered all over again.

"Come, sit beside me." He gestured to the chair opposite. "I took the liberty of making tea. It's not quite the proper time for tea, but not so far off."

The second easy chair loomed. Cecibel sat on the edge of the cushion, ankles crossed. She didn't have to angle her face away; the chair had been set to do that for her. "Can I pour for you?"

"No tea for me, thank you. I'm afraid my doctors don't allow me caffeine, and I despise that herbal nonsense. I have my glass of water with lemon. And your company. I have all I require."

Cecibel set her book on the tea table, pleased that her hands

didn't tremble the way her insides did. Pouring herself a cup, she coaxed herself calm. He was just a man. An old, dying man. A resident, and she, one of his caregivers. The fangirl shit had to stop.

"Your copy has seen better days." He picked up the book from the table, turned it over in his hands. "It is like me. Battered. Dog-eared. Still intact but falling apart."

She laughed softly. "I suppose it is. Does that bother you? Your book being in less than stellar condition, I mean."

His smile spread. "A book is like a woman. She should leave your bed with her hair tangled and her clothes on backward. A book without creases is a book that has never known passion."

She stirred cream and sugar into her tea. There was fire in the old man's eyes. He'd been waiting all day for this, just as she had. "What about people who love a book so much they want to keep it pristine?"

Alfonse leaned a little closer. "Love is not passion, my dear. Love is sweet and good and righteous. Passion is wild and messy and dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"Yes, very dangerous. Passion is all impulse, and impulse is rarely rational."

Cecibel sipped. "I don't know that I buy that."

"No?"

"What about passionate love?"

"Ah!" He thrust a finger in the air. "A wonderful thing, but not what we're discussing."

"We're not?"

"No, we're discussing the difference between love and passion, not a combination of the two. Let us take this copy of *Dark Wings* for example." He hefted the book, fluttered the pages. Again. And again.

The scent of old paper made soft with wear wafted into her face. Glue long-past cracked along the spine threatened to give way completely. An oft-read book, yes, but not a well-loved one. Cecibel's heart thumped, measure for measure. Her skin prickled.

Arms. Neck. Scalp. She steadied her breathing, succeeding only in making it stunted and obviously labored.

“The critics were wrong about this book, Cecibel.” Alfonse spoke so softly. “It did not betray my fans. It fed them what they needed. Love it or hate it, people were passionate about it. You were passionate about it.” He handed her back the book, tapped the cover. “What does your copy of *Wicked Tongues* look like?”

“Not like this, I swear.”

“Because you love it. Cherish it. This one?” He shrugged. “The passion is in the creases. Why is this the book you brought for me to inscribe?”

She tried for casual. “It was on my nightstand, and only the first of many I hope to have you sign.” And held her breath.

Alfonse thumbed his lip. “It would be my honor to sign them all.”

Cecibel exhaled, slow and softly.

“Leave this with me,” he said, “Bring me the rest tomorrow. It will occupy my time until you visit me again, thinking up the perfect inscription for so lovely and indulgent a young woman.”

Leave it? Her own hands placed the book upon the tea table, her own voice said, “Of course. Thank you,” from far, far away, where another voice was screaming. Always screaming. Years and years and years.

“Let us talk of other things.” Alfonse Carducci’s hand upon her knee silenced the distant screaming. She focused on the long, straight fingers. Trimmed, pink nails. Wrinkled, yes, but the hand of a much younger man. He pulled it gently away. “Forgive me. I meant no offense.”

“Pardon?”

“My hand. Your knee. You were staring.”

“Oh, no.” Cecibel managed to laugh without smiling. “I was . . . was just thinking that you have nice hands.”

Alfonse held them out. “One of my few still-functioning body parts. A writer depends upon his hands. I have never been able to dictate more than notes. There is a magical, even sacred bond between my mind and my fingers.”

“Mrs. Peppernell has said much the same.”

“Olivia is of the old school.” He sipped his water. “I suspect most of the residents are.”

“That will probably be so for some time. Do you know everyone here?”

“Not everyone.” Another sip. “Olivia, of course. And Raymond. If one is older than sixty, which I imagine everyone here is, we’ve probably met or worked together.”

“Our youngest resident is sixty-seven. Judith Arsenault. I believe she’s Canadian.”

“Judi?” Far, far more romantic and lyrical when he said the name. “Yes, she is Canadian. A point of contention, back in our day. I didn’t know she is here. She was my editor many times. Brilliant. And so young to be locked away with the rest of us.”

“Everyone is here for a reason,” she said, and no more. Judith could tell him what she wished, or nothing at all. “And no one is locked in anywhere.”

“A figure of speech you will understand when you are as old and decrepit as I.”

“Are you fishing for compliments?”

“That depends.” His eyes twinkled when he smiled. They really did. “Are you offering any?”

Cecibel watched him carefully while they chatted, for batting eyes or labored breathing. As one of his many caregivers, she knew his medical history, his medical facts. As one of his many fans, she knew a whole lot more. Alfonse was more interested in listening to her talk than he was in talking, possibly because breathing took enough effort without adding more.

How he managed to steer the conversation away from himself and to her, Cecibel couldn’t figure out. Standing outside his suite an hour and some after she’d gone in, she pressed palms to burning cheeks. Had she chattered too inanely? Of course. She could scarcely remember anything she said, but what she did remember was about her. Coming to Bar Harbor, practically falling into the job she’d held for eight years. The patients met, loved, and lost. Her duties. What she loved. What she hated. Everything about her life

on a superficial level, and nothing whatever of life before coming to the Pen.

“Will you come back tomorrow?” he’d asked before she left. Cecibel agreed in a rush of breath, a dash for the door, and as graceless an exit as ever there had been.