

S E V E N T E E N

Now what? A moment ago in such bliss. Angels caressing me in a dream. Ruptured from their world by a merciless buzzer. This damned well better be important.

On the other side of my front door is a young woman in her early twenties, thereabouts.

“Can I help you?”

“You’re Egon Norwood. We met.”

“Okay.”

“Can I come in?”

I feel as if I haven’t quite awakened. She has remarkable skin. Like semi-sweet chocolate. Her creamy eye shadow and cherry lips smile at me with a delectable familiarity.

“I forgot your name. Sorry.”

“Andrea. Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

I open the door wider. She reminds me of one of my carvings. But alive. More beautiful. She returns my curious stare as if I’m the one who should be asking permission to enter.

“What is it you want?” I ask.

Her alluring composure scatters and reshapes quickly like leaves on a tree ruffled by a light breeze. She gives me a playful smile. “You advertised. So here I am, ready to go to work.”

She brushes past me. My instinct is to grab her. But I let her go, puzzled by the piece of information she seems to possess that I lack. I follow after her up the stairs, eye level to her bottom that sways to the rhythm of drums beating in my head.

I catch up to her on the landing and find her inspecting my mess. An eclectic array of books, artwork, coffee mugs left unattended, a coat I have been meaning to hang up, a hat tossed on a table.

“I wasn’t expecting you.”

“I can see that.” She has a wonderful laugh, like an Alice who has stumbled into a rabbit hole.

With an impish agility, she maneuvers through my living room, then turns suddenly in her yellow dress which spins outward with a show of legs, as if she’s modeling for a magazine. I have to admit it, she is an enticing sight. The morning glow enshrines her body.

“You’re quite lovely,” I say.

“I know.” Her interest shifts to a large photograph on the wall. I decide to accept her arrival regardless of reason.

She distorts her face and laughs. “What am I looking at?”

“The head of a honeybee. It was photographed with a scanning electron microscope.”

She tilts her head and studies me as if I’m the one with spiky body hair, compound eyes, and fuzzy antennae. She turns back to regard the other two enlarged heads in this triptych.

“I give up,” she says.

“The one in the middle is an ant. That one’s a wasp.”

“Portraits of your family?”

We exchange smiles. She has a sense of humor, which is good. A warmth about her too. Sounding like a tour guide, I say, “Insects are probably the most successful inhabitants on our planet. Unlike us, they’re incredibly resilient. Almost indestructible as a species.”

“Are you their spokesman?”

“They don’t need me. They’ll be the ones surviving a nuclear holocaust, not us.”

She considers this, mutely, as if viewing me in a new light, then travels on. With the resiliency of an insect, she has already brushed the negativity aside and turns to give me a cheerful smile, continuing to move about. She stops at the large terrarium and pouts.

“Why is it empty?”

“I built it for Faye.”

She frowns, waiting for more information.

“My sister. For her boa constrictor. When she visited. Not that she comes anymore.”

“Did she die?”

“We’re estranged. She’s calling it a trial separation.”

I catch her surveying the floor in case I’m not being truthful and the snake is lying in wait, waiting to strangle her.

“You never got another one?”

“Snake? No, I can’t stand them. That’s Faye’s fetish.”

She appears relieved. She plops her body with a playful bounce onto my sofa. I remain standing as her arm extends to point at the chaotic assortment of masks and heads all over the walls.

“You have unusual tastes,” she says.

“So I’ve been told.”

Andrea’s finger moves like a needle on a compass, magnetically drawn to a colorfully foolish mask. The pink papier-mache head of a man mounted on the wall like a wild animal. “A recent hunt?”

“Man’s killing himself. Why not make it a sport?”

Amused, she widens her eyes. She brushes my sarcasm aside with a carefree resilience and rises off the sofa to approach a new head, this one hanging from the ceiling by a string. A miniature face, black and shriveled. “What *is* this?”

“It’s real.”

Her hand retracts but she doesn’t scream. She gives me a shitty look, admonishing me for not warning her.

I shrug. “I didn’t do it. In case you were wondering.”

“Hum. Should I be afraid of you?”

“Headhunters from darkest Africa. One of your ancestors?”

Her composure impresses me. She gives me a waggish smile and darts her eyes at me as she walks away. “I don’t shrink heads. I boil them in oil.”

I laugh. I follow her as she walks into the den. Surrounding us

are clocks ticking, out of time, to different beats, hands pointing to four o'clock, two-thirty-five, half past six. A few have stopped. One strikes and gongs twice. She notices this discrepancy.

“How do you know what time it is?”

“I don't. It's timeless art.”

Andrea crosses her arms and surveys the wall over the fireplace. She avoids stating the obvious, that I like to collect things. Masks, specifically.

“Where did you get these?”

“From all over. Do you like them?”

“I'm not sure. I think so.”

“The one in front of you is from the Congo. An initiation mask. It was used in ceremonies to solidify the bonds between the living and the dead. The antelope mask was worn during hunting dances and to honor totem ancestors.”

She is again magnetically drawn to the centerpiece, to a mask predominately white with black incised lines curving outward from heavy-lidded eyes, with a slit for a mouth. I too am pulled in, awed by its presence.

I tell her, “That one belonged to a secret society. A tribe called Haluba. The mask was used for transmitting messages to and from the spiritual world.”

She studies me. Her hand rises to trace lines on my face.

My hand comes up to touch hers, which stays, like a butterfly, pulsing, before fluttering away.

She lingers nearby. “Is this something you believe in?”

“I like to keep an open mind. You?”

She doesn't answer. She is curious about me. I too am curious about her. Who is she? As she wanders back into my living room, I say, “The modern world mocks primitive cultures. It prides itself on the suppression of natural instincts. I find that ludicrous. Given the way we behave.”

Her eyes take in the masks again. “All are from Africa?”

“No. From around the world. The one over there, which looks like a monkey, it came from here. Indian tribe. The carnival mask, that grinning one, is from Mexico. Some from Japan, Greece. But the majority come from Africa. Congo, Nigeria, Cameroon.”

“Are they valuable?”

“To me they are. For what they represent.”

Her eyes question me again.

“They symbolize our hopes and fears. By wearing these masks, a shaman would capture the vital forces of departed spirits and gods. His act of self-sacrifice enhanced his powers and healed the tribe.”

“Is that your secret?”

Andrea has nestled herself onto my sofa. She has kicked off her shoes and has tucked her legs under her dress. She reminds me of a cat, more sphinx-like, full of riddles.

“How do you mean?”

“With your magic. Have they enhanced your powers?”

It’s a clue to how I know her. She picks up a small sculpture in the shape of a ball off my table. A man carved from wood, hugging himself in prayer, or sorrow.

“Wow,” she says and sets him back down.

Her hand moves toward the sight of gold among the cluster of wood carvings. In her palm the antique cross seems brighter, the tiny filigree more pronounced, more beautiful. She handles it reverently, gently, before returning it to its upright position on its stand. Her eyes look up at me.

“Are you religious?”

“It’s the human condition. To believe in something. So, yes.”

“It’s pretty.”

“It was my grandmother’s.”

“She died?”

“Yeah. She was a beautiful soul.”

“You must miss her?”

The porcelain face of a doll’s head shatters against red bricks and I flinch.

“Are you okay?”

Her remark takes a moment to reach me. “What? No, I’m fine. Would you like a drink or something?”

“It’s morning. But sure. What do you have?”

“A pretty good cabernet sauvignon. Also coffee, or tea.”

“I’ll take the breakfast of champions. The wine.”

From the kitchen, I hear the hardwood floor creak. I realize she has risen and is walking again.

“Do you mind if I look around?”

“No, help yourself.”

Her unexpected appearance and incessant curiosity trigger my suspicions, but I let it go. While unscrewing the cork, it slides inside the bottle. Wine splashes on my white shirt. The spatters remind me of blood stains. Using a steak knife, I poke through the neck to hold down the cork. I pour, filling two crystal goblets. I taste the wine to make sure it hasn’t gone bad. It’s good, but the girl is gone when I return to the living room.

Holding the goblets I peer about. I begin to think the worst of her. I scan the room to see if anything is missing. My artistic clutter is still in place. I walk into the hallway and take a sip of the wine.

“Hello?”

“Up here!”

I ascend the stairs. At the top of the landing, I see her yellow dress on the floor. I walk into my bedroom. The bathroom door is open. A matching yellow bra and panties lay on my bed. Her purse is set on my dresser.

I hear the sound of running water. Holding the glasses of wine, I find Andrea standing naked in my bathtub. Hot water is circling her ankles, steam rising to fill the air around her. She beckons me

with a crooked finger.

I hand her the goblet of wine. She brings it to her lips and lets the liquid overflow from the corners of her mouth as she drinks. She smiles, wipes her lips, then rubs the spilled wine over her nipples.

Rather unexpected. But I enjoy the show and sip my wine.

Her eyes react to something she doesn't like. "Why do you have a knife?"

"Oh, I used it to push down the cork. I forgot I was holding it." I toss the knife onto the counter.

She seems relieved and swallows more wine.

"I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't."

She's lying. Maybe not. Living dangerously might be her thing, also getting naked, exposing herself to strangers. My eyes admire her body.

"This must happen to you a lot," she says.

"Actually, no. You'd be surprised."

"Aren't you going to get undressed? Let me wash you."

I set my wine glass by the sink. I first remove my wine-stained shirt, then unzip my pants, step from my boots, socks, then jeans. Andrea cradles her goblet in both hands as she sips wine. Her eyes peer over the rim and focus on my erection as I remove my boxers. She hands me her glass. I set it next to mine. I step into the bathtub. Before I have a chance to kiss her, she goes to her knees. She grabs the soap and begins to wash me, starting with my feet, soaping them, rising to my ankles, then both legs.

She looks up at me. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Disappear."

"When?"

"On stage. Dying. And don't tell me it's just magic."

"Okay," I tell her with a smile. "I won't."

She has worked her way up to my genitals and is giving the area a thorough scrubbing. “It has something to do with those masks. Their power. Am I right? You can tell me.”

“I might. If you tell me why you’re doing this.”

“I posted the video.”

“Video?”

“For your online audition.”

“That was you?”

“Me. I filmed you guys performing in the park and submitted it. I knew you’d get a callback.”

“They tracked Garrett down. But ...”

“Why? I want to be a Rebel Artist too.”

“I’d say you are.”

“Really? You’re getting soft. Are you mad at me?”

“On the contrary.” Her enthusiasm to please me gets my libido to rise again and momentarily quell my suspicions about this woman and her motives. She scoops bath water, cupped in her palms, and washes the soap off my skin with devotion.

“Thank you. I think.”

She looks up with a smile. “Stop thinking. I want you to win.” She blows warm air on me. “If you make it to the finals, you said the last act will be spectacular. Can you give me a hint? I won’t tell.”

I look down at her expectant gaze, looking up. “You’re actually inspiring me with ideas.”

“Am I?”

“You’re very good.”

“I’m worth every penny. Five hundred dollars worth.”

She laughs. “I’m kidding. I’m not a whore. I came to learn what you do. Will you let me be your apprentice?”

“What other tricks do you know?”

“Close your eyes. I’ll show you.”

“You’re not going to make me vanish, are you?”



“Umm, I could ... if I wanted.”

Andrea takes me on a warm vigorous back-and-forth tunnel-of-love ride through dark waters with her mouth. I close my eyes and gradually disappear.