

The door to Sophia's bedroom was closed. I tapped softly. "Sophia," I called out gently. There was still no answer. And then I pushed open the door.

Although I had opened the door to the bedroom with dread, there was Sophia, sitting up in bed, one hand clutched her glasses. A book she had been reading, even now as I looked at it, slipped slowly to the floor. Her head was cocked to one side as if she had fallen asleep, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I tip toed over to the bed.

It was only then that I saw her eyes were wide opened with a look of horror on her face that I had only seen once before—when she had encountered Bellini in my shop.

"Sophia!" I called out and clutched her shoulder—and then—as if she had been a balloon that had suddenly lost its air, her whole body collapsed, with a "whoosh" and she tumbled off the bed.

"Sophia!" I bent over her, her eyes still fixed with horror on something across the room.

So intense was her gaze that I found myself turned fully around to follow its path—and there, standing in the doorway was a short dark man wearing a white shirt and a red bowtie.

"Ah Miss Emily, don't pay it no mind. You are a handsome-looking woman—she look like she done seen the devil himself—anyone come in sudden-like could have done the same thing."

"But I didn't... What are you talking about... it wasn't me she saw..."

"Don't touch nothing," he calmly addressed me. "Don't need no cops swarming all over SuperMama's house or Emily's Place neither look'in for something, anything to make trouble."

He walked swiftly to the bed and bowed. "Alec Le Grand at your service," he said.

Then he took out a red handkerchief from his shirt pocket, held it in his hand and put his finger against Sophia's neck.

"Sure did like to play the ponies. Came round to get her bet. She gone," he said to me. Now we gone."

And then he gently took my arm and led me to the door.

"You and me," he said, "got a date with a trotter up in Yonkers and a horse don't wait for no man, or no woman neither. Besides, my honeypot don't like to be stood up."

I suppose I was in some sort of stupor because it took me that long to realize that I was practically being carried out the door by Merissa's current sweetheart, who, it was rumored all over the neighborhood, had a way with horses, only rivaled by his ability to sweep women off their feet.

When he got to the door he wiped off the doorknob with his red handkerchief.

"Wait!" I stopped short, and looked once more at the body of poor Sophia lying now at a strange, contorted position on the floor near her bed. "I saw something!" Was it a flicker of light across the window in her bedroom? A subtle change in the atmosphere of the room—some slight movement, like the flutter of an insect—There was something alive in that room!

Alec turned to look back, as I had done, and he shivered. "Ain't nothing there," he said to me, "Cept maybe The Angel of Death, and I don't want to be meeting him."

And he swept me out of the room, through the hallway and through the front door.

"Good 'even Mam," Alec Le Grand tossed over his shoulder to SuperMama, still sitting rock still on the top step. "Ain't nobody here but us pigeons," he cooed as he slipped me down behind him. "A little bird did tell me you like GlintGold in the 4th."

SuperMama kept her eyes straight ahead, but her huge chest heaved. "That little Filly don't know what's good for her, goin' run her heart out one day for sure."

When I reached the bottom step and turned around, Alec Le Grand had vanished.



