

## **CHAPTER 8**

The doorbell rang.

They both looked toward the front door.

Fanny turned to Tiffany. "Did you invite somebody else to this emergency?"

"No."

Suddenly, the attic began rattling with the wild shuffling of feet, as if an insane child were running back and forth across the rafters, jumping and stomping.

The doorbell rang again.

From the attic came a strange, moaning sound.

Although Fanny and Tiffany were already up and en route to the door, they both paused, looked up at the attic, and continued on.

Fanny opened the front door, but used her body to block the threshold. Tiffany peaked over Fanny's shoulder.

On the front porch was an odd-looking man, no taller than five foot eleven. He wore a pair of black-rimmed glasses that were twenty years askew of even the current alternative fashion. His nose was humorously

long and pointed. Combed, his black disheveled hair might have edged the tops of his ears. His forehead and pate were bare, except for a thin layer of hair that his hand had combed to the right. His skin had a strange innocence, as if it evidenced a peculiar strain of jaundice, or had never been exposed to direct sunlight. His pants, shoes, and shirt were casually nondescript. Around his waist he wore an ancient belt, with a built-in nylon pouch.

“Good morning, ladies. My name is Comet. I’m a messenger.” He reached toward his nylon pouch. “And I have a delivery here for...”

“More divorce papers,” Tiffany predicted.

“Look,” Fanny flicked the word at Comet, “we’ve got an emergency going on in here.”

“Well,” Tiffany corrected, “not a real emergency.”

Fanny glared at Comet. “What do you want?”

A neurosis positioned Comet’s very animated fingers at chest level, as if they were trying to help him talk his way out of a beating. “Emergency?” he repeated. “Oh...I...I...can’t be involved in emergencies of any kind. If I even see blood—holograms, videos, it doesn’t matter—I have to adjust the color controls.”

“Just what exactly is it you want?”

Comet cleared his throat. “It’s...uh...it’s just that a man wanted me to deliver...”

"A man?" Fanny repeated. "What man?"

"I'm...I'm sorry, but I'm not at liberty to reveal that."

"A man commissioned you to deliver something to this house?"

"Yes."

Tiffany tapped Fanny on the shoulder. "This *has* to be from Bob." She turned toward Comet. "What is it? A pipe bomb? Dirty laundry? A gift certificate to the psychiatrist?"

"Oh, no," Comet stuttered. "Quite...uh...quite the contrary."

"Look, if you've got good news in there," Fanny pointed to the pouch, "then you've got the wrong address. Around here, the only surprises we get from men are when they act like human beings. If you're here to serve more divorce papers, don't bother holding your hand out for a tip when you're through."

"Madam? Are you...uh...are you the lady of the house?" Comet asked. Fanny opened her mouth to answer, but Comet continued. "Because I'm supposed to deliver this message to the lady of the house. And although you're charming and attractive and don't approve of tipping, I was led to believe that the lady of the house was much," he paused, "older."

From deep within the house came a muffled scream.

Comet, Tiffany, and Fanny looked toward the top of the stairs.

From the vantage of the front doorway, they watched the attic door swing downward like a broken drawbridge. The pull-down stairs unfolded

forward and out, smashing against the second-floor hallway like a dropped ladder. Then, an animated blur pounded down the attic stairs, long-jumped forward and out onto the second-floor catwalk, unsquatted, ran down the hallway, right-angled, and began stampeding down the stairs that led to the front porch.

Before Fanny and Tiffany had had a chance to turn toward each other and question the commotion, an eighty-year-old whirlwind had shoved both of them clear of the threshold and had pounced—with arms and legs all aimed horizontally—in the general direction of Comet's open mouth and resistant hands. Auntie Elizabeth's chest collided flat against Comet's, her spread legs cinching around his waist, her open arms bear-hugging his entire head into her cleavage with the strength of a machine gone insane.

Open-mouthed, Fanny and Tiffany watched as Comet blindly stumbled backwards off the porch and down the front steps, leaving his hands with nothing to do but helplessly flail the atmosphere, while Auntie Elizabeth's legs tightened around his waist.

The momentum of her pounce continued propelling Comet backwards—his face clogged with the crushing confrontation of her chest, his legs stumbling in reverse across the front yard—until he tripped and fell flat on his back, leaving a cushioned Auntie Elizabeth straddling his rib cage and fighting to pin his arms to the ground like a professional wrestler.

Then, Auntie Elizabeth lowered her face until it was only a few inches away from Comet's. As Fanny and Tiffany arrived, and stooped to pry the old woman off Comet, Auntie Elizabeth's eyes widened with excitement, and her eyebrows wiggled up and down mischievously. Then, she closed her eyes, opened her mouth wide, in anticipation of a tongue-tangling kiss, and aimed her lips directly toward Comet's. Unfortunately, she opened her mouth so wide that out onto Comet's face fell Auntie Elizabeth's complete set of false teeth.

"Auntie Elizabeth!" Tiffany scolded, as if her aunt had spit the teeth in Comet's face on purpose.

Fanny erupted with laughter.

Comet screamed and shook his head, slinging the false teeth off his face and into the grass.

Each woman yanked against one of Auntie Elizabeth's arms, trying to pull her up off Comet, but the old woman snapped her arms free, fell completely horizontal on top of Comet, and began gumming his face with absurdly romantic lip-action.

"Auntie Elizabeth!" Tiffany yelled louder. Tugged harder. "Get off that man!"

Underneath Auntie Elizabeth's lips, Comet's mouth moaned and mumbled something that sounded like a plea for help.

Eventually, Tiffany and Fanny disengaged enough of Auntie Elizabeth's body that Comet successfully rolled out from under her. He stood up and tried to brush the ground-in grass stains off his pants.

Tiffany and Fanny did their best to hold Auntie Elizabeth back.

"We're really sorry, mister," Tiffany apologized. "It's just that my aunt..."

Fanny explained. "She's a schizophrenic kamikaze."

Comet's face fluctuated with a variety of emotional responses, from surprise to fear. "What a strange...", he began. "How much I have to learn."

The response turned Fanny and Tiffany toward each other with confused curiosity.

In the distance, like an electronic animal, a police siren whined.

Comet's face snapped toward the sound as if it were his death sentence. "Here," he said. His hands scrambled to remove a sealed envelope from his nylon pouch. Then, as if he were holding food out toward an animal who might bite him, Comet eased the envelope toward Auntie Elizabeth.

Fanny intercepted the envelope with her free hand. "Who's this from?"

Panic sent Comet's eyes in a variety of directions while he said, "I'm...uh...I'm not allowed to say, madam."

Fanny also looked around.

Down the street, in front of a neighboring house, three young boys stood as motionless as statues, hypnotized by the action taking place in Auntie Elizabeth's front yard.

Among so many potential dangers, Comet seemed unsure where to look or what to do next. Proximity turned his eyes toward the crazy woman.

Fanny looked at Auntie Elizabeth, too. Not much had changed since the first and only time she'd seen Auntie Elizabeth. The eighty years of facial wrinkles and age spots were still there. Along with the hair that had gone gray and wiry and had been pulled back into a tight bun at the back of her head. Appearances suggested that the old woman was fragile and weak. Her ancient muscles offered no explanation for her speed. Her shrunken, stooping body felt like nothing more than brittle bones and loose skin, her present struggling reminiscent of an anxious kite, rattling in the hands of its owner, before its imminent release into a chaotic, overhead wind.

But Fanny's eyes had never had to deal with Auntie Elizabeth's insane smile.

Not up this close, anyway.

Fanny turned back toward Comet.

His eyes were frozen on the insane smile of Auntie Elizabeth, as well.

As if to assure him that the crazy woman wouldn't harm him, Fanny tightened her hold on her Auntie Elizabeth's left wrist; Tiffany took a tighter hold on her aunt's right arm.

Auntie Elizabeth leaned toward Tiffany's ear and whispered.

Tiffany relayed the words to Comet. "Auntie Elizabeth says you remind her of a man she used to know. She wants to know if what's in this envelope is from you."

Auntie Elizabeth leaned toward Tiffany's ear again for a few additional words.

Tiffany translated reluctantly. "You love-machine."

Fanny laughed.

Comet's eyes fluttered with fear. "Just read what's in there," he nodded at the envelope in Fanny's hand, "and do what it says."

Slowly, he began backing away from them.

Auntie Elizabeth nodded frantically at the envelope, then began moaning wildly and trying to break free.

But the two women held her tightly and focused on calming her down.

Auntie Elizabeth lurched toward Tiffany's ear.

Tiffany listened, the force of her aunt's whisperings aggressive and wild. Tiffany turned to Fanny. "She says she's too nervous. She wants you to open the envelope for her and read what's inside."

Fanny released Auntie Elizabeth's left arm, but Tiffany held on.

All three women followed the motion of Fanny's fingers as she tore open the envelope. She extracted a piece of paper and a ring that appeared to be

made from a meteorite. Her eyes scanned the paper for context. "It's some kind of poem, or something."

"What?" Tiffany asked.

"Yeah," Fanny read further. "It's some kind of love poem."

Auntie Elizabeth jumped up and down with excitement.

Fanny turned to again ask Comet who the poem was from, but he was nowhere to be found. "Where'd that messenger boy go?"

"I don't know," Tiffany said, looking around. "I don't see him. Anywhere."

After her eyes verified Comet's absence, Auntie Elizabeth moaned.

Fanny handed Auntie Elizabeth the ring. The old woman snatched it and screwed it onto her wedding-ring finger.

"Well," Fanny sighed, "who could blame him. If an eighty-year-old woman pounced on me, pinned me to the ground, spit her false teeth on me, and then tried to gum my face to death, I think I'd run away, too."

Auntie Elizabeth nodded at the envelope, danced-in-place, moaned.

"You'd better read it quick," Tiffany said, struggling to hold her aunt still.

"Wait. There's some kind of geographical coordinates written here at the bottom of the page," Fanny said. "Astro-navigational numbers, or something."

"Just read it," Tiffany gritted her teeth against her aunt's wildness.

Fanny read aloud:

*Although our eyes have never shared long gleams,  
Although our flesh has yet to boast of touch—  
My hopes, of late, have so outdone my dreams  
That nothing in my mind could mean as much.  
You—Beauty's favorite, nature's perfection—  
You took my secret minutes, and made them rare,  
Yet held me back with imagined rejection,  
And so, kept my words from taking this dare:  
Please, love, meet me at eight o'clock tonight;  
Use the coordinates listed below,  
And bring your heart through woods and weeds to heights  
Above concerns that other lovers know.  
There, in darkness, our lips must rendezvous,  
Entwining hopes and fears and me and you.*

All three women raised their heads, stared romantically out in the nothingness straight ahead, and sighed.

In unison.