

Finding Home

by

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ONE

PHOEBE'S PACE HASTENED as she approached her truck parked in the lee of the building near the big trash compactor. She'd had to find a spot away from prying eyes because she couldn't trust Maydean and Willie-Boy to behave without her standing over them. Like now, she noted, discovering Willie-Boy hanging out the window.

“Did you get work?” he asked.

“Not yet,” Phoebe said, brushing off the fact that the interviewer had insulted her down to muscle and bone. “I didn’t want that old job nohow. Dern it, Maydean. I told you not to mess with that mirror, didn’t I?”

Twelve-year-old Maydean flounced. It took her whole body to do it. “How much money we got left, Phoebe? I’m hungry.”

Phoebe didn’t want to think

about money. Or buying food. Or where they were going to sleep that night. She reached up, adjusting the mirror. “We’ll eat when I get hungry.”

“You never get hungry! And you’re never going to get no job, either. You’re too skinny. I told you! If you want to work in the city you got to have a figure. I told you! Stuff toilet paper in your bra. There ain’t nobody going to hire a flat-chested string bean like you. Not to work

in an office, they ain't. And you oughta dye your hair. Folks take one look at that fire-engine red and they know right off you got a temper. Know right off you're skinny and mean. You ain't never going to find us a place, Phoebe. I know you ain't. Ma should never have trusted you to do it. We'll probably never see Ma and Pa and Erlene the rest of our lives."

For an instant Phoebe closed her eyes against the bright glare

of the sun. Pride and anger warred within her. In her heart she wanted to be as good and kind thinking as the all-forgiving Lord meant her to be, but right this minute she felt awfully like grabbing a handful of Maydean's hair. "I wish I had your cold heart, Maydean. Then I wouldn't be worryin' about what to do, where our next meal is comin' from or where we're gonna sleep tonight. Anyhow, it ain't in the chest. It's in the backbone.

Hair color don't make no never mind. Now shut up. You're makin' me mad. Hike up and look out over that trash bin. I got to back out." Phoebe focused on her sister with an expression so fierce Maydean grudged a skittering glance over her shoulder.

"Nothin's comin'."

But there was, and Phoebe backed right into it. A pickup, newer than her own, but not much newer. Still, she felt her

mouth going uncommonly dry.

“We’re goin’ to jail now, ain’t we?” cried Willie-Boy. He scrambled to his knees to look out the cracked back window. “Lor, Phoebe,” he whispered. “There’s a giant gettin’ outen that truck.”

Phoebe watched the man emerge. Labeling him giant wasn’t far wrong. Tall and broad-shouldered, he had a waist tapering into well-cut jeans filled out so she could tell he had

never missed a meal. She left off watching him disentangle his legs to focus on his face. He was putting on a frown.

The eyes were dark, deep set and thick lashed. Sparking eyes, Phoebe thought. Most likely he used them to advantage on women. The idea made her feel an odd fluttering in her stomach. Had she been able to snag a man like him back home, why her whole family would still be together.

The rest of the man's face was filled out with a good straight nose and kissing lips. All over his head was curly black hair, tidily cut. Went to the barbershop every month most likely. Curls like that couldn't be kept aright if left to grow wild. She ought to know. It'd been months since she'd had her own curls parlor cut, and now they slipped band and pin and pomade with fierce regularity.

The man was looking at her.

Phoebe saw the kissing lips turning down at the corners and the good straight nose beginning to narrow like he was smelling dead fish. Edgewise she caught a glimpse of Maydean patting her hair and puckering her lips, one hand on the door handle. Phoebe grabbed her.

“Stay put,” she ordered. “You too, Willie-Boy. I’ll see how much damage he done.” Adjusting her cotton skirt and brushing trailing wisps of red

hair back from her face, Phoebe stepped out of the truck. “How ‘do,” she said, polite like. She tracked all of him in a close-up glance before she gave her attention to their locked bumpers. “Looks like you hit me a fair blow, don’t it?”

His gaze darted over her, taking in the narrow, heart-shaped face, the shoulders, true and squared, slender legs below the flowered skirt, the once-white sneakers, laces knotted

twice over where they'd broken. His eyes lifted back to her face where wisps of red hair—hundreds of them—were all astray. Phoebe watched the frown spread out all over his face. He hadn't answered her and she was not equipped to meet silence. She spoke again.

“I said—”

“I know what you said. It's the other way round. You ought to look where you're going.”

Phoebe tried not to pay

attention to his voice. It was deep, good sounding and smooth. “I was looking,” she said resolutely. “I didn’t see you.”

“I came out of that parking space.” He waved his hand in an easterly direction. It was a big hand, finely shaped and callused. The calluses impressed Phoebe. A woman couldn’t go much wrong latching onto a man with calluses. It took steady work to thicken skin like

that.

Phoebe decided to be friendly, generous of spirit. She was proud of her teeth. They were white and even with no gaps. She gave him her best smile. “I can’t tell which dent I did you or you did me. We can call it even, I reckon.”

“Even?” He eyed her with suspicion. “Are you telling me you don’t have any insurance or money to make good on the damage you did my truck?”

All sorts of dreadful apprehensions began to rise in Phoebe. Still, she was reluctant to give up being friendly. "I'm not sayin' any such thing. I don't discuss personal things like that with strangers."

He muttered something beneath his breath. "I didn't catch that," Phoebe said, hanging on to her smile.

"You probably don't have a driver's license either. You old enough to drive?"

Offended, Phoebe bristled. Her smile faded. “Way old enough.”

“How old?”

“Twenty-six.”

Disbelief made his eyes go cloudy. “I’m going to call the cops.”

“Twenty-five. Almost. I swear. That’s what it says on my license.” The truth was that she was twenty-four, looking to be twenty-five and an old maid. She wanted to skip being twenty-

five. She decided against any further friendliness. “Scuse me a minute.” She sidled up to the cab where Willie-Boy and Maydean were arguing for gawking space. “Count to ten, Maydean, then you two start wailing.”

Wearing her most serious expression she rejoined the man. He was scowling at the locked bumpers. “If you stood on yours,” she suggested, “big as you are, I could drive my

truck right off it.”

“One of us is bound to lose a bumper.”

The caterwauling began. He looked up startled. “What in hell —”

“When you run into us, they hit their heads on the windshield. Like I said, you hit us a fair blow.”

His whole body went rigid as a block of granite. “I didn’t run into you, lady. You backed into me.”

“My sister and little brother

said you run into us. They were watchin’.”

“And that’s what you’d tell the cops,” he replied, sarcasm flowing.

“Well, not me, mister. I didn’t see you and that’s a fact. But Maydean did, certain.” Phoebe aimed an anxious look toward the noise. “We better figure somethin’ out quick. I might have to take those kids to the hospital.”

He growled an epithet.

Ladylike, Phoebe pretended not to hear. Her eyes stayed glued to his face. He was making a decision, she could see it in his expression.

“A fender bender’s not worth the trouble,” he said. “I’ll stand on the bumper, you see if you can pull your heap off.”

Moving quicker than a sprite, Phoebe got back in her truck. “Y’all can quit your snivelin’ now.”

“I can’t,” whimpered Willie-

Boy. “Maydean pinched me.”

Phoebe hung her head out the window. “Hey, mister, you set?”

“I’m set.” He gave a tentative bounce on the bumpers. “You go slow. Easy and slow. I don’t want to end up with a broken leg.”

Phoebe put the truck in forward gear while he rocked the bumpers. The vehicles parted with a screech. Her flesh crawled. It sounded worse than chalk gone awry on a

blackboard. She got out and went to the rear of her truck again.

“Afraid your bumper came clean off,” said the man.

“That’s okay,” said Phoebe. “I can weld it back once I get the chance. Just toss it in the back yonder, will you? On top of our suitcases and such.”

Effortlessly, he picked up the torn and bent metal. Phoebe noticed his face didn’t even go red with the strain. When he had

the bumper chest level, his dark eyes held hers a heartbeat. Then he tossed the bumper into the bed of his own truck.

“Hey! Hey, mister, you can’t do that. That’s my bumper.”

“Sure it is. And when you get the money to pay for the damage you did mine, you can have it back.”

Phoebe’s wide eyes narrowed to slits. “That’s a mean trick, mister. I’ve got to have that bumper. It’s got my tag on it. I

can't go drivin' around Alabama with no tag. Troopers would stop me, sure."

He brushed his callused hands together. "I'll take good care of it for you. You just come out to G. G. Morgan's junkyard when you get the money. It's on the other side of the bayou. Ask anybody to point the way."

Phoebe's heart sank. "C'mon, mister, can't we talk this over?"

"I'm done with talking, I'm late for an appointment." He stepped

into his cab, slamming the door then leaned out over his elbow. “You’re real slick, little lady, but you’ll have to go some to out slick G. G. Morgan.”

“I got seven dollars,” Phoebe called with a failing heart. “You can have it.”

G. G. Morgan lifted an eyebrow and laughed. “Come up with seventy and we’ll do business.”

Riding fury, hands balled into fists and propped on her hips,

Phoebe watched G. G. Morgan maneuver out of the parking lot into light midmorning traffic. Watched her bumper and tag disappear. Her shoulders sagged, and for once her brain couldn't grab hold of any ideas. She felt tired. The worrying and the driving and the hope she'd been harboring—all of it hit her at once.

“You look fretted,” Willie-Boy said when she slid onto the seat beside him.

“I got things to fret about, don't I?”

“We ain't goin' to sleep in the back of the truck again tonight, are we?” asked Maydean, puckering her lips into a peevish moue, which she thought most attractive. “I'm gettin' tired of that. I still got wrinkles in my skin from last night.”

“You got wrinkles in your brain, Maydean. Be quiet and let me think.”

“How're we gonna get our

bumper back?" Willie-Boy wanted to know.

"I'm studyin' on it," Phoebe said, forcing up the determination not to let things get her down. That was Pa's problem. He let things carry him into a sulk so as nothing got done. Phoebe fought the feeling, afraid it was a family failing. She wasn't sure, but she thought that was what had happened to Erlene. Erlene had been fine until she went into a sulk with a

fever. When the fever went, Erlene's grown-up mind had gone with it.

"What we'll do..." she said, shaking loose old thoughts, "is, we'll just go out to G. G. Morgan's junkyard and get the bumper when he ain't lookin'."

Willie-Boy's eyes grew wide. "Ain't that stealin'? Ma said—"

"Stealin' is when you take something that don't belong to you. That bumper is ours."

"You shoulda let me handle it,"

said Maydean. “I have sultry eyes. Everybody in Cottontown says so. G. G. Morgan woulda looked into my eyes and I coulda made him give us our bumper. And, speaking of my eyes, Phoebe, first chance you get, buy me some mascara.”

Phoebe bit down on her tongue to keep from screaming. “Maydean, when you bat your lashes all you look is cross-eyed. Besides, G. G. Morgan didn’t strike me as the swoonin’

type. Now get out and watch traffic so I can back out. That is, if you can see anything besides pants with your sultry eyes.”

Maydean sniffed. ‘You’re just jealous cause my lashes are longer’n yours and I poke out more in front.’”

“Stand behind the truck, Maydean. Then I won’t have to worry ‘bout feedin’ you.”

“What pokes out?” asked Willie-Boy.

“Never you mind,” Phoebe

chastised, grinding the gears and backing safely away from the trash compactor. "We've got to find a telephone," she said when Maydean flounced back into the truck. "Y'all keep an eye out."

Willie-Boy jumped excitedly. "We gonna call somebody? We gonna call Ma?"

"No. I got to get an address on that junkyard."

"Lor, ain't you smart," Willie-Boy said with flattering awe.

“I’m goin’ to be as smart as you when I grow up.”

Phoebe drove a quarter mile and found herself outside the small town. The road was narrow, lined on one side by ditches carved out of red clay and on the other by oak trees thick of trunk and gnarled landward by wind that swept in from the bay. “Goin’ the wrong way,” she said, whipping around in a U-turn. It wasn’t lost on Phoebe that lately her whole life

was filled with U-turns, leading her from nowhere back to nowhere. Well, she meant to change all that. Somehow.

“There’s a cop followin’ us,” said Maydean.

Phoebe’s gaze flew to the rearview mirror in time to see the red ball start flashing. “If it ain’t one thing, it’s ten,” she moaned. She pulled onto the verge and shut the motor off, waiting.

“Howdy,” said the trooper.

“Mornin’,” replied Phoebe.

“Mind if I see your license?”

“No sir, don’t mind at all.” She dug around in her change purse and handed it out the window.

“Nice day, ain’t it?”

“Cottontown. You’re a long way from home, aren’t you, miss? Cottontown’s north. What brings you to Bayou La Batre?” He ran the words together so that to Phoebe it sounded like Byabatrie.

“We’re visitin’,” she said,

keeping to a vague truth.

“I see. It appears you’re missing a license plate, though.”

“It’s on the bumper,” Phoebe informed him.

“Is that right? Appears you’re missing a bumper, too.”

“Yessir. It fell off. This is an old truck. Bolts rusted. Darn thing just fell flat off.”

The trooper thumbed her driver’s license and stared into the truck. Phoebe tried to figure out what he was thinking. She

knew they looked bedraggled and poor, which they were. But they were clean; she had seen to that at the rest stop earlier that morning. No doubt the trooper guessed that even if he gave her a ticket, she wouldn't have the money to pay it.

“Who're you visiting in Bayou La Batre?” he asked.

“What?”

“You said you were visiting. Who? Relatives?”

“Oh.” Phoebe's thoughts flew.

“Cousins. We’re visitin’ a cousin.”

“This cousin have a name?”

Name? Name! Phoebe didn’t know a soul in— “Morgan, G. G. Morgan.”

The trooper’s eyes narrowed. “Gage Morgan?”

Phoebe’s heart did cartwheels. “That’s him. Unless—how many G. G. Morgans you got in Bayou La Batre?”

“Only one I know of is Gage. Never knew he had any cousins

anywhere. Leastwise he never mentioned it and we went through school together.”

“We’re cousins three times removed, maybe more,” said Phoebe. “But, ain’t that something!” she gushed. “You and Gage bein’ schoolmates all those years. Why...that makes you and me almost family friends.” She pointed to her sister. “That there is Maydean and this is Willie-Boy, G. G. Morgan’s least cousin. Truth is,

we just ain't had time to visit afore now." Maydean's puckering lips fell open. Willie-Boy's, too. Phoebe crooked her elbow, jamming it under his chin to keep his mouth shut lest he contradict her.

"Gage has our bumper and tag in the back of his truck. He's waitin' on us, out to the junkyard so we can weld it back on." It was something, Phoebe thought, how a body could take a tidbit of truth and bracket it with lies and

make it sound so good. Noting the trooper was swallowing it all, she gave her whole face up to a grand smile.

“Why didn’t you say so in the first place? Tell you what. I’ll follow you over to Gage’s, else going back through town you get stopped again, no tag and all.” He returned her driver’s license.

Phoebe protested hardily. “Oh, we wouldn’t want to put you out none.” In her mind’s eye she could see G. G. Morgan

disputing all that she'd told the trooper. It wasn't a comforting thought.

"It's no trouble. The yard's barely a block out of my patrol area. Besides, it's part of my job to help folks."

"Then maybe it'd be better if you led the way."

The trooper squinted, suspicion flaring. "Why?"

"We just got into town this mornin'," Phoebe said. "We ain't been to the junkyard yet. When

the bumper fell off, Gage came and got it. We were followin' him, but I got lost 'cause of Willie-Boy here, a-squirring something awful on account of a full bladder..." She trailed off and closed her mouth. Casting her eyes down she held all the air in her lungs and pressed to make her face go red; mention of body functions and such never did have the effect of making her blush. She canted a furtive look at the officer. Her

demure look and her flaming face were having the desired effect.

“Right,” he said. “But, you stay close now.”

Phoebe was torn between holding her breath and smiling at him. Need of air won. “Yessir.” She pulled out behind the cruiser, sighing relief when the twirling red light went dark.

“We’re in trouble sure,” announced Maydean. “All them lies you told, Phoebe. That cop’s

gonna know soon's we get to the junkyard.”

“You go to hell if you tell lies, Ma said,” piped Willie-Boy, gazing at Phoebe as if she would go up in flames any minute, or at least get hit by flying brimstone.

“We didn't get a ticket, did we?” Phoebe said, justifying her actions. “We're bein' led right to where our bumper and tag is, ain't we? Besides, everybody's brothers in the eyes of the Lord.

Says so right in the Bible. If you have brothers, stands to reason, don't it, you got aunts and uncles and cousins?"

Maydean giggled. "Maybe us and G. G. Morgan are kissin' cousins."

Phoebe threw her sister a sharp glance. "You keep talkin' that way, Maydean, I'll slap you. And get your hair off the top of your head like that. You look like a worn-out tart."

The twelve-year-old sniffed.

“You oughta see what yours looks like. Red hairs are crawling outa that knot atop your head so fast, they look like they’re running from a cootie convention.”

“I had cooties once, didn’t I, Phoebe? Ma shaved my head and rubbed it down with kerosene. Burned somethin’ fierce, I recall.”

“Hush talkin’ about lice, Willie-Boy. Help me keep that cruiser in view.” Phoebe shot another

glance at Maydean. If she'd had her druthers, she'd 've taken Erlene on this trip instead of Maydean, even if she did have to point Erlene in every direction she meant for her to go. Maydean was ripening too fast. Phoebe briefly thought about ways to hold back nature. But thinking on Maydean was just using up energy better spent elsewhere at the moment.

“We’re goin’ over the drawbridge again!” whooped

Willie-Boy.

“Look it the sailors on those boats,” cooed Maydean. Suddenly she thrust half her body out of the truck, threw up her hands and waved.

Phoebe grabbed Maydean’s blouse and yanked her back. “Another stunt like that and I’ll put you on a bus back to Ma!”

Maydean smirked. “You ain’t got the money for no bus ticket.”

“I’ll find the money,” said Phoebe, her grinding tone so

filled with resolution that Maydean appeared to believe her.

Driving past the building where she'd been refused work, Phoebe kept her eyes straight ahead. Another three blocks and the patrol car slowed, turning onto a sandy road that was little more than a well-used path, rutted and grooved by far heavier vehicles. In some places the road went right up to the bayou's edge, in others it

zigzagged around boat yards and barge fitters and commercial net shops. Green and black nets sagged like larger-than-life spider webs from booms jutting thirty feet into the salty air. Far back on the landward side were seafood houses where signs advertised that crabs were boiled and picked, shrimp was packed, oysters were shucked.

Phoebe eyed the seafood packagers with interest; the

possibility that she might find work in one of them filled her with hope. Mayhap losing her bumper wasn't such a bad thing after all. She never would've thought to drive down such an unpromising-looking back road.

"The cop's a turnin' in," Willie-Boy said excitedly. "Phoebe," he gasped.

"Look it! Look it all that good stuff. I see a bicycle. It ain't got no wheels, but you could put some on it. Then I'd have me a

bike. I allus wanted a bike.”

“I can’t study a bike right now. I’m lookin’ for G. G. Morgan or his truck.” Phoebe set the brake, but didn’t shut off the motor. She gazed at the acres and acres of wrecked cars, boat ribs, tires and shapeless metal. “Piled up on good ground,” she muttered. “Why a man could clean all that trash off and plant a fair good crop of cotton or corn, or peanuts and make something of himself. Why, even

me and Ma could make a go, had we land—” She caught herself prattling and clamped her lips closed. She had no call to talk like that—or dream, either. Not while she was square on property that belonged to a man as unlikely to share it as G. G. Morgan. Do first what first needs doin’, she told herself. Get rid of the police.

Maydean opened her door. Willie-Boy scrambled over her and leaped from the truck. “Get

back here,” Phoebe demanded. “Maydean, you let him out on purpose!”

“He said he had to go to the bathroom.”

“My foot! His nose is twitchin’ to explore worse’n a blue tick hound. Get after him. In this heat he’s liable to come down with an attack of asthma, and I ain’t got the time to fool with—”

“He don’t like me pryin’ when he’s takin’ a leak.”

The officer ambled her way.

“Looks like Gage hasn’t got here yet,” he said.

“No doubt he missed us behind him and doubled back. Sure as anything he did. He warned me to keep close. We sure are bein’ a peck of trouble. But now Gage will be mad enough to throw us out on our ear,” she said, in case he appeared suddenly and did just that.

The radio in the patrol car began to crackle. The officer

excused himself. "You'll be okay now you're here," he said upon his return. "I've got to work an accident. You tell Gage I said hello."

"That'll be the first thing I tell him," agreed Phoebe. If she ever saw him again, which she hoped she didn't. "You be careful, you hear," she called to the trooper. "And, thanks." She forced herself to sit still until the cruiser was out of sight. Then she had to spend a precious ten

minutes locating her siblings.

Maydean had found herself an old car with a mirror intact. Willie-Boy was sitting behind the wheel pretending he was a race car driver. They were frittering away time—carefree, without a thought in their heads as to how they were going to get decently sheltered and raised. No, they left that suffering to her. But the kids weren't visible unless someone was to peer directly into the old car so Phoebe

decided they'd be out of harm's way for the few minutes she needed to scout the junkyard.

She began looking for a place to park. A shady place and one that was not directly in view of anyone driving through the old gate. There was no sense alerting the junkyard's owner that they were anywhere close by. At least not right off. If she found that there was no hope of reclaiming her bumper without Gage Morgan's interference,

surprise made negotiating easier. And one way or another, Phoebe meant to be one whale of a surprise to G. G. Morgan. Most probably he wasn't a man used to having folks camp on his doorstep until they got what they wanted. With all that was at stake, Phoebe figured she could out camp and outsmart a truculent army of Huns. Gage Morgan was about to learn just how stalwart a Hawley could be.



Phoebe aimed THE TRUCK toward the rear of the yard. It looked to her as if G. G. Morgan lived smack-dab in the middle of his junk. Only the area around the weathered house was clear of rubble. Clear of saleable rubble that was, for the untended oasis was overgrown with chickweed, cat's ears and beggar's ticks. Shading the whole of it was a gnarled old tallow tree.

She eyed the house and unkempt yard behind the ragged wooden fence with strong disapproval. It was a sin the way some folks let things go down like that. Even the tallow tree looked dusty and beaten. Some folks, Phoebe thought, were just downright unappreciative of what the good Lord bestowed on them.

Unbidden, envy and resentment swelled within Phoebe. Why, if she had a

house like that...if she had a square yard for flowers and vegetables...if she had land...she could send for Ma and Pa and Erlene, get them out from under her brother Joey and his new wife, Vinnie. What with only a four-room house, Vinnie didn't like the crowded conditions. She wore a permanent frown to prove it. Atop all that Vinnie was mean to Erlene. It wasn't Erlene's fault that she was loose-minded.

The truck hit a deep rut. Phoebe let go the wishful thinking and put her mind back on her present predicament. She needed to hide the truck and find a vantage point from which to spy on G. G. Morgan. The instant he left his truck untended she meant to retrieve her bumper and be gone.

She found a number of sheds and lean-tos, one of which was tilting precariously beyond the bulwark that held back a twisting

saltwater estuary. Beyond the estuary, on the other side was the bayou that fed into the great expanse of the bay.

Phoebe's gaze went to the bay and farther, to the horizon. She had never seen the ocean. She had lived all her life in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains where cotton and corn fields backed up to thick evergreen forests made dark and mysterious by creeping kudzu vines that could encroach

on a garden or climb a sixty-foot pine—and do it overnight, some old-timers swore. Not a speck of kudzu hereabouts, Phoebe noted. That'd make Ma happy.

She backed the truck between two of the sheds, wedging in as far as she dared. Getting out of the driver's seat, she wiped the sweat beads from her nose and forehead with a quick duck of her head in the crook of her bent arm. The wind blew, cooling her more. She sniffed, inhaling the

rich smell of warm earth and salt marsh. The air was sweet and delicious. Honeysuckle blooming somewhere or blackberries mayhap. The idea of blackberries boiled up with sugar and dumplings made her mouth water.

As she retraced her path on foot, she noted a coop, disused, the gate hanging. Lor! But she could see hens nesting, eggs gathered. Tomatoes and turnips sprouting where weeds grew.

That one man owned so much—and did so little with it—was beyond comprehension. It was unholy.

“What’re you doing out there?”

Phoebe froze. Her eyes darted, looking for the source of the voice. There came a squeak of unoiled hinges. She looked to the back of the house and saw a child standing just inside the screened door. Phoebe approached the back porch. She didn’t know why, but she never

expected the junkyard owner to have relations. More specifically she didn't expect a wife or child. A stab of disappointment caused the image of sparking eyes and callused hands to flit through her mind. She should've suspected it, most hardworking men had already been spoken for.

“I'm lookin' for G. G. Morgan,” she said to the girl.

“He's not here.”

The child, Phoebe could tell as

she got closer, was about nine. She had an abundance of brown hair that needed brushing and a dirt-streaked, sunburned face that needed scrubbing. Altogether the girl looked as unkempt as the yard. Phoebe couldn't countenance a straight-minded woman letting yard and house and child lag so. Even Erlene, as cloudy-minded as she was, could do better.

“Is your ma here, then?” she asked.

The eyes, thick-lashed as G. G. Morgan's, became apprehensive. "No. She's gone."

"Where to?"

"Heaven."

"Oh." That explained it. Child, yard and house didn't have a woman's touch. Logic carried Phoebe to the thought that neither did the man. Disappointment fled. Opportunity raised its head and looked Phoebe square in the face. Stepping onto the porch,

she chased away logic before it had a chance to gel. The kitchen was visible through the screen. Dirty dishes were on the table, piled on the sink. Dust, so old it had lost its color, lay on every surface from windowsill to chair backs. Hungering for things she didn't have, Phoebe itched to take up scrub brush and mop, just to have the feel of the familiar in her hands.

The child was staring at her, Phoebe plumbed her mind for

what to do or say. “Is G. G. Morgan your pa?”

The girl nodded. “You’re not supposed to be in the backyard. You want something you have to pay for it around front.”

“I was just on my way.” She couldn’t keep from asking, “Who tends to you when your pa ain’t here?”

The child’s eyes shifted, the brooding stare becoming an angry glower. “I take care of myself. I don’t need nobody.

Mind your own business.”

Phoebe bristled. “You need boxin’ on the ears to teach you manners. It ain’t polite to talk to your elders that way.”

“You’re not my elder. You look like a rag picker.”

Phoebe gathered all five feet of herself into one proud and stiff frame. “That’s what I done all my working life until the mills shut down. When I see your pa, first thing I’m gonna tell him is that your tongue needs a set-to

with Octagon soap.” She spun off the porch and went to locate Maydean and Willie-Boy. For certain she didn’t want them connecting with G. G. Morgan’s girl. Maydean and Willie-Boy were ornery enough without learning new ways to go about it.

Maydean was still at the mirror, trying out different ways to pucker lips and flutter lashes. “Where’s Willie-Boy?” Phoebe asked.

“Droolin’ over that bike.”

“He ain’t. Maydean, I told you to watch your brother. Get outta there and help me look. No tellin’ what pile of junk he’s hidin’ behind or climbin’ about.”

“It’s too hot to go huntin’ him up. I’m thirsty.”

“Dead people don’t thirst, Maydean. And that’s what you’re gonna be if you don’t crawl outta that wreck and help me find Willie-Boy. I don’t want us in sight when Gage Morgan

trots back here. I aim to slip our bumper and ride out like lightnin’.”

“A mule walkin’ backwards can go faster than our old truck. He’ll catch us.”

“It won’t do him any good. I aim to tape our license tag to the inside back window. If he catches up to us, we’ll just roll our windows up and outwait him. One thing I figure Gage Morgan don’t have is patience.”

She called out for her brother,

but met only silence.

“He’s prob’ly playin’ hide ‘n’ seek,” suggested Maydean.

“If he is, he’ll have to seek a new hide when I get done with him.”

Phoebe’s own patience was wearing thin. She didn’t like Willie-Boy being out of her sight. The junkyard was rife with paths going every which way around heaps of old tires, wrecked cars and boats. All of which must look adventurous to a five-year-

old with the urge to explore.

To Phoebe every pile of rubble held danger. Willie-Boy could be suffocating under a mountain of old tires, lying broken beneath a slide of metal, dead in high weeds, snakebit. With a queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach, she sent Maydean one way; she went another.

She couldn't help thinking that it had all been too easy. Outside of G. G. Morgan setting his

sights on her bumper, being led straight here by the police when he could've just as easily given her a ticket, finding a good place to hide the truck... Things just don't go easy for people and even if it did, something's bound to come and spoil it.

“Knew it!” she muttered when she found Willie-Boy draped over the prow of an old wooden boat on the bank of the estuary. He was suffering an attack of asthma and gasping for air.

“It...come...on me...sudden,” he rasped.

Phoebe's spirit sagged. She was running out of money, hadn't found a job, hadn't found a house and she had two kids in hand to feed. One of whom had now gone and got sick. If the Lord is watching over me, where's my share of help? she wondered, feeling a stab of pity for herself. But she felt sorrier for Willie-Boy. Asthma was a beast, a hungry beast, and it

sapped his strength, took away his good times, kept him sitting up at night, kept him housed when he'd rather be playing, seeing to little-boy junkets and adventures. The attacks scared him. He always thought he was going to die.

“I’m going to pick you up, Willie-Boy,” she crooned. He hardly weighed more than a tubful of wet washing. “There’s a nice shady porch out back of that house yonder. Soon’s we

get out outta this hot old sun, you'll be fine.”

Maydean's path had led her back to the old car. Anxious to practice puckering again no doubt, Phoebe thought. Willie-Boy's gasping was getting worse. She yelled at Maydean. “Don't you even think once of climbin' back in that wreck, Maydean Hawley! Get round here where I parked the truck and get the inhaler. Willie-Boy's havin' an attack.”

Phoebe put Willie-Boy on the back porch, propping him against one of the supports. The terrible sucking sounds he made trying to draw in oxygen made her wince. His face was red and sweat was pouring off him. Hesitantly, the girl came out of the house and stood beside Phoebe. Interest had replaced her sullen expression.

“What’re you doing? What’s wrong with him? You’re not supposed to be back here.”

“I need a bowl of ice and a rag,” Phoebe told her. “A clean rag,” she added recalling the state of the kitchen.

“My daddy won’t like—”

Phoebe glared at the child. “You get me a bowl of ice and a clean rag. What your daddy might not like is my brother dyin’ right here on his back porch. Quick now,” she said more gently when the child’s eyes flared with fear. Maydean brought the inhaler. Phoebe

shoved it in Willie-Boy's mouth. It took him a half dozen good gasps to get the medication into his throat and down into his lungs. The terrible sucking sounds abated.

“What's your name?” Phoebe asked when the girl returned bearing ice cubes and a rag, gray and musty smelling.

“Dorie Morgan.”

“Well, you done good, Dorie Morgan.” Phoebe began to wipe Willie-Boy down with rag-

wrapped ice. When he began to take interest in his surroundings, when she saw his gaze go curiously to the girl, she handed him the rag and told him to keep at it himself.

“I almost died, didn't I Phoebe?”

“You didn't even come close. But when I whollop you for running and scampering in the sun like that, you're gonna wisht you hadda died.”

“What the hell's going on

here?” G. G. Morgan came out the screened door letting it slam behind him.

Phoebe's heart sank. All her advantage lost. She stood tall and glowered at him, sloe-eyed.

“You said to meet you here to get my bumper back. I'm here.”

The junkyard owner looked at his daughter, at Maydean, at Willie-Boy before settling once again on Phoebe. “You turned up seventy dollars that quick?”

“Ain't turned up nothin' but

here.”

“This is private property. When you get the money, come to the front. That shed by the gate.”

“Can’t,” said Phoebe, latching onto a blameworthy reason to give her some leverage. “When you hit us that lick this morning the excitement made Willie-Boy come down with a spell of asthma. After we got here, like you told us to, invited us practically, he knocked himself

out on a piece of your junk. He can't be moved unless it's to a hospital. Reckon you want to pay the hospital bill?"

"Pay! Lady, I'm not paying for a damn thing. Your careless driving caused that wreck. And there's a sign on the gate that I'm not responsible for accidents."

"A sign don't mean nothing except that you know your property ain't safe. Willie-Boy's the proof of that I reckon.

Anyhow, it's your word against mine. More so the word of a Hawley is as good as you can get since the beginning of America. You want to call it even and give me back my bumper, we'll just be on our way."

Gage was aware that he didn't know a lot about handling women or children. It seemed to him that the caustic-tongued redhead didn't fit either category. She was too old to be

a child and too rail-thin to be called a woman. What he did know was the bottom line. He spoke it, "Seventy dollars or no bumper."

"Ain't got seventy dollars--yet."

Phoebe watched his mouth get thin-lipped. The thinner it got, the deeper became the frown between his eyes. The frown didn't hurt his looks any. But now wasn't the time to study on the man's looks. Still, her

eyes strayed to the laundry-made creases in his shirt, his tanned, muscled arms, the balled fists propped at his belt line. She had the notion that a virtuous woman never stared at a man below the waist, so she dragged her eyes back to his face.

“You’ll have to leave,” said Gage. “When you get the money to repair my truck, you can have your bumper.”

Phoebe heard him, glared at

him and thrust her chin out. She knew the set of her jaw didn't make her look her best. Ma always said a body could set a dime on her chin when Phoebe's dander was up. Well, her dander was up. She could feel bile racing through her veins. When a woman got mad, a woman could get anything she wanted—if she just had the gumption to stay mad and not let up.

Phoebe believed she had so

much gumption it threatened to spurt out her ears.

“You got a phone I can borrow? I want to call an ambulance for Willie-Boy, seein’ as how I ain’t got no bumper or tag, I can’t drive him there myself. Seein’ as how you ain’t got the heart to let him recover afore you run us off. I imagine the folks at the hospital will want to know how he come to be so bad off. Don’t think I won’t tell them. How you run into us, how

you wasn't concerned about nothin' but your old truck and gettin' money outta poor folks."

Maydean started to cry. "I want to get outta here, Phoebe. We're gonna be in big trouble. We could go to jail. Welfare will get us and separate us. You know what Ma said—"

"Go sit in the truck until you can get your wits about you, M a y d e a n . This minute!" Maydean shuffled a few backward steps, refusing to

budge farther.

“You’re trying to lay a scam on me,” said Gage Morgan. “It’s not going to happen. People like you are always sniffing around for a hand-out. You came to the wrong place this time.”

Phoebe skewered him with her see-all look, pondering the quality of G. G. Morgan, trusting to her backwoods instinct. Stubborn and tight-fisted, she figured. One thing she knew about a tight-fisted man: he

craved an image of being generous in spirit while keeping his purse strings double-knotted. The mill owner back home had been exactly the same way, oozing nice words to Ma's face, when behind her back he was asking the sheriff to evict them. That picture recalled, Phoebe carried on, all acting fury and spewing Hawley history.

“Hawleys don't accept charity. Never have, not once, not since Cuthbert Hawley indentured

himself to James Oglethorpe to Georgia and worked seven *hard* years for a bed rug, a fellin' axe, a bag of oatmeal, three shirts an' a fiddle. We always give fair value for anything we get. So you can just take back what you said about us grovelin' for a handout. It appears to me that you're so used to sellin' junk you think you can grab what belongs to other folks and sell it back. You think—”

“I'm going to throw up,” said

Willie-Boy.

Phoebe let up on G. G. Morgan. She tucked her skirt between her legs and knelt down beside her brother, holding his head over the side of the porch. Skittering a glance at the junkyard owner over her shoulder she watched his face go pale. It was something, she thought, how a man could bear up under a show of blood and fair faint at the sound of a dab of gagging. One thing she knew

certain. She was riled and aimed to perch right here until Willie-Boy got better and she got her bumper back.

“If you’re not up to paying the hospital for Willie-Boy, I reckon I can nurse him like I always done. That is, if you got a quiet place I can lay him down.” She wiped Willie-Boy’s mouth, then picked him up. His head lolled weakly against her shoulder, his legs draped over her arm, twitching. Expressions were

fleeing across Gage Morgan's face. Phoebe could see him deciding about a sure thing—in favor of his purse.

“How long will it take him to recover?”

Phoebe thought: Until I find a job and make seventy dollars. “An hour, maybe two.”

Scowling, G. G. Morgan opened the screened door and waved her through. Sharp-eyed, Phoebe took in the kitchen, the wide central hall beyond and the

doors leading to hidden sanctuaries and all good things in life—she hoped. “Where can I put him?”

Gage pointed. Phoebe went. It was a cramped and musty little room with spider webs draped and barely hanging on in the corners. It had a dresser and a double bed with the mattress rolled up exposing old iron springs. The dust was terrible, not at all good for Willie-Boy. The room's only

redeeming feature was the butter-yellow sunshine shining through the window. Phoebe called to Maydean.

“Lay out that mattress.”

“You reckon it has bedbugs?”

Phoebe shot a look behind her but Gage Morgan was gone, in his place stood his daughter. “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, Maydean.” She lay Willie-Boy down on the bare ticking, stretching out his legs. To Dorie she said, “You want to

show me where you keep a bucket and soap? And a sheet?”

“What’re you going to do?”

“Clean this room. If I don’t, Willie-Boy won’t get well.”

“This was my mama’s room.”

Phoebe’s pale brows shot up.

“Your pa’s, too?”

“No, just my mama’s. She didn’t like my daddy.”

“Marriage can be a terrible trial if you ain’t married to the right person,” Phoebe allowed.

“Mama liked me, though.”

“You miss her, don’t you? It’s a sad thing when a mother is taken up and leaves young’uns behind.” She followed Dorie into the kitchen. The child pointed out the pantry.

“If Mama had taken me with her that day, she wouldn’t’ve drowned. I can swim real good. I could’ve saved her.”

“I’ll just bet you could’ve.”

Phoebe didn’t know where all this was leading. That the girl was troubled was plain. Later

she could worry on the child. Just now, getting settled was the main thing. She looked up at the ceiling. Lor, but having a roof above one's head was a precious thing.

From somewhere at the other end of the rambling old house, Gage Morgan called for his daughter. Before the child went to answer his summons, Phoebe saw the way Dorie's face tightened. A hornet's nest, that's what she'd stepped into,

Phoebe thought. Digging around in the pantry for the things she needed, she amended the thought. Dern dirty hornet's nest! She put her hand around the mop handle and sighed happily.

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STANDING AT THE FOOT of the bed Phoebe turned slowly and admired her work. The small room gleamed clean and cheerful. Not even a vagrant dust mote hung in the air for the

sun to illuminate. Maydean was polishing the mirror on the dresser with yellowed newspaper and vinegar. What with Maydean's love affair with her mirror image, Phoebe figured that'd keep the twelve-year-old content and out of harm's way for an hour or two. What was pressing down on Phoebe now was hunger.

She could feel the pangs, stabbing and fixing to get noisy.

"I feel good now, Phoebe,"

said Willie-Boy from the bed. He was lying on a clean pink sheet and propped up on a pillow they'd discovered in the closet. "I can get up now."

Phoebe was thinking hard. Everything she had in mind—survival, for today anyway—depended upon Willie-Boy being ill. And staying that way. Looking at the five-year-old, she struggled with her conscience. She had to decide between two-hundred-fifty years of inbred



Hawley scruples and one hour of dire need. Need won out. She sat on the bed and touched Willie-Boy's forehead. "You're not better yet, Willie-Boy. I can see it in your eyes."

"You can?"

"Sure I can. You know anybody with better eyesight than me?" She put her face right up to Willie-Boy's. "I can look into your eyes and see everything that's going on inside you."

He squeezed his eyes closed. “Don’t look inside me, Phoebe. I got secrets. You’re not supposed to know secrets.”

“I have to look inside you so I know when you’re well. But when I’m looking you can put your hand over your heart. That way I won’t come upon anything you got to hide.”

“You’re sure?” Childish skepticism layered each word.

“Course I’m sure. You put your hand over your heart and it

makes a dark shadow in there. You know how hard it is to see into shadows.”

“Lemme get up, Phoebe. I feel okay. My chest don’t hurt none.”

“That’s because it’s numb. When the feelin’ comes back I reckon I’ll have to sit up with you all night.”

“Here?”

“Right here in this room. Would you like that?”

“I like layin’ on a mattress. It’s softer than the back of the truck.

But what about Mister Morgan?"

"I'll handle him," Phoebe said, wondering how. One thing was certain. Every word spoken to the man had to count. She suspected Gage Morgan had a fair amount of sense. Her idea was to not let him catch on that she knew it. With a word of caution to Maydean not to leave the room, she went to find the man who was her reluctant host.

The hall was wide, high and dim, the windows at each end

so fogged with grime little light found its way inside. Of the six doors along its length one was slightly open. Phoebe peeked in. The bathroom. It needed a good scrub down. Another door was gaping. Dorie lay upon an unmade bed, coloring. Phoebe stood on the threshold.

“Where’s your pa?”

Scowling, the girl looked up. “Out to the shed.”

“What shed?”

“The welding shed. He fixes

boat motors and propellers.”

“Where is it?”

Dorie raised up and pointed out a window hung with once-white curtains gone gray and limp. “It’s on the other side of the junkyard, facing the canal.” Her eyes stayed hard on Phoebe for a few seconds then returned to the coloring book.

Phoebe ignored the child’s dismissal. “How long’s your ma been in heaven?”

The narrow face went dark.

“Since last summer.”

“Who does the cooking and cleaning for you and your pa?”

“Daddy does it.”

Thinking on the state of the kitchen, Phoebe thought: *No he don't*. Ideas raced so rampant in her head she was out the back door and across the junkyard before she had any good speaking words fixed solidly in her brain.

