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WHAT DIDN'T SUCK, Phoebe decided, was to come home after a viciously bad day and find two dozen stargazer lilies waiting for her. Essie had arranged them into quite a show in Cousin Bess's big Waterford vase, culling out a trio from the field for Phoebe's bedroom.

"You can have the whole lot up in your room, of course, but I thought—"

"No, this is fine. This is lovely." Phoebe leaned over for a sniff of them where they stood elegant and splashy on the piecrust table in the family parlor. "We can all enjoy them here."

"I didn't read the note." Essie handed it over. "And I have to admit, it was a bitter war of conscience and curiosity. Even though I know who sent them."

"I suppose he did. Well." Phoebe tapped the little envelope on her palm.

"Oh, for God's sake, Phoebe, read it!" Ava stood behind Carly, rubbing the girl's shoulders. "We're dying here. I considered wrestling your mama to the ground for that note."

Phoebe supposed when a man sent flowers to a house with four females, he sent them to all. She opened the envelope, and read.

“See you Saturday. Duncan.”

“That’s it?” Disappointment dragged through Ava’s voice. “Not much of a poet, is he?”

“I’d say he’s letting the flowers speak for themselves,” Essie corrected. “That’s poetical enough.”

“Mama, is he your boyfriend?”

“He’s just someone I’m going to have dinner with tomorrow,” Phoebe told Carly.

“Cause Sherrilynn’s big sister has a boyfriend, and he makes her cry all the time. She lays across the bed in her room and cries *all* the time, Sherrilynn says.”

“And I bet Sherrilynn’s big sister enjoys every minute of it.” Phoebe reached down to cup Carly’s face. “I’m not much of a crier myself.”

“You cried when you called Roy last time.”

A mother could never hide tears from a child, and a mother who thought she could was delusional. “Not so very much. I’m going to go up and change. I heard a rumor it’s pizza night around here.”

“And DVD and popcorn night!”

“I heard that, too. I want to go take off my work, and put on my play.”

Upstairs, Phoebe sat on the side of the bed. Could a mother ever really protect her child from her mistakes, or the ripples from them that spread all through a life?

Weren’t they in this house now because of a single event from more than twenty years before? Weren’t they all who they were, with their lives tangled together under this roof, because of that steamy summer night when she was twelve? Decisions she made, actions she took, even words she spoke would affect her daughter forever. Just as her mother’s had affected her.

Mama had done her best, Phoebe thought. But trusting a man with herself, with her children, had changed the course of their world.

And she remembered it all, every movement, every moment, as if it were yesterday.

The room was a box of heat, stained with the grease of his sweat. He'd begun to swig whiskey straight from the bottle of Wild Turkey Mama kept up high in the kitchen cupboard, so the stench of whiskey added another smear to the trapped air.

Phoebe hoped he'd drink enough to pass out before he used the .45 clutched in his free hand that he'd taken to waving around like a mean little boy with a pointy stick.

Put your eye out, you're not careful.

He'd already fired off a few rounds, but just to kill lamps or bric-a-brac and put holes in the walls. He'd held it to Mama's head, too, screaming and cursing as he'd dragged her across the floor by her long red hair.

But he hadn't shot Mama, not yet, or made good on his threats to put a bullet in Phoebe's little brother Carter, or Phoebe herself.

But he could, he could, and he made sure they knew he would if *they gave him any goddamn lip*. So fear lived in the box, too, a terrible, helpless fear that hung in the trapped air like blackflies.

Though all the shades were drawn or the curtains pulled tight over the windows, she knew the police were outside. He talked to them on the phone, Reuben did. She wished she knew what they were saying to him because he mostly calmed down afterward.

If she knew, for sure, what they said to calm him, maybe she could say it, too, in the in-between times he got tired of talking to them and hung up the phone and before he stirred himself up hot again and they had to try to cool him off, one more time.

He called the person on the other end of the phone Dave, as if they were friends, and once he'd gone on a long ramble about fishing.

Now, he'd gone back to pacing and drinking and cursing. The terrible in-between time. Phoebe no longer flinched when he swung the barrel of the gun toward the sofa where she and Carter huddled.

She was too tired to flinch.

He'd broken in just after supper, when the sun had still been up. It had been down a long time now. So long, she thought maybe it would be coming up again before long.

Reuben had shot the pretty little clock with the mother-of-pearl face that had been a wedding present to Mama and Daddy, where it sat on the dropleaf table, so Phoebe couldn't be sure how many hours had passed since its death at five minutes past seven.

Mama loved that clock. Phoebe knew that's why Reuben had killed it, because Mama set such store by that sweet little clock.

When the phone rang again, he slammed the bottle on the little table and snatched it up.

"Dave, you son of a bitch, I said I want the electric turned back *on*. Don't you fucking tell me you're working on it."

He waved the gun, and Phoebe heard Carter suck in his breath. She rubbed a hand over the point of his knee to keep him still, to keep him quiet.

As much store as Mama set by the little clock, she set a lot more by Carter. Reuben knew that, too. So hurting Carter was bound to be somewhere on Reuben's list of things to do.

"Don't you fucking tell me we're going to work this out. You're not in here sweating like a goddamn pig, using goddamn oil lamps. You get the air back on in here, and right quick, and the lights, or I'm going to hurt one of these kids. Essie, get your skinny, worthless ass over here and tell him I mean what I say. *Now!*"

Phoebe watched as her mother pushed out of the chair he'd ordered her to sit in. Her face looked haggard in the lamplight, her eyes stunned as a trapped rabbit. When she was close enough to take the phone, he hooked an arm around her throat, pressed the barrel of the gun to her temple.

Beside Phoebe, Carter braced to leap. Phoebe gripped his hand, hard, shook her head, to keep him on the couch. "Don't." She barely breathed the word. "He'll hurt her if you try."

"Tell him I mean what I say!"

Essie kept her eyes straight ahead. "He means what he says."

"Tell him what I'm doing now."

Tears slid down her cheeks, bumping into the dried blood from the cut his fist had ripped there earlier. "He's holding a gun to my head. My children are sitting together on the sofa. They're frightened. Please, do what he wants."

"You should've done what I wanted, Essie." He closed his hand over her breast, squeezed. "You should've kept doing what I wanted, then none of this would be happening. I told you you'd be sorry, didn't I?"

"Yes, Reuben, you told me."

"You hear that, Dave? It's her fault. Whatever happens in here, it's her fault. I was to put a bullet in her useless brain right now, it's her own damn fault."

"Mr. Reuben?" Phoebe heard her own voice, calm as a spring morning. It felt like it came from someone else, someone whose heart wasn't punching like fists into her throat. But Reuben's hard eyes tracked over and latched onto her.

"I ask you to talk, little bitch?"

"No, sir. I just thought maybe you were getting hungry. Maybe you want me to make you a sandwich. We've got some nice ham."

Phoebe didn't—couldn't—allow herself to look at her mother. She felt her mama's fear rising like a flood, and if she looked at it head-on she might drown in it.

"You figure if you fix me a sandwich, I won't shoot your whore of a mother in the head?"

"I don't know. But we got some nice ham, and some potato salad." She wasn't going to cry, Phoebe realized. It surprised her there weren't any tears pushing against that hammering heart. But there was fury in there, bubbling with the nerves in her belly. "I made the potato salad myself. It's good."

"Go on then, take that lamp with you. Don't think I can't see you in there. You try anything stupid, I'm going to shoot your baby brother in the balls."

"Yes, sir." She rose, lifted the little oil lamp. "Mr. Reuben? Can I use the bathroom first, please? I really have to go."

"Jesus Christ. Cross your legs and hold it."

"I've been holding it, Mr. Reuben. If I could just use the bathroom, real quick, I'd make you a nice plate of food." She cast her eyes down. "I could leave the door open. Please?"

"You better piss fast. I don't like how long you take, I'll start breaking your mama's fingers."

"I'll be fast." She hurried toward the bathroom right off the living room.

She put the lamp on the back of the toilet, then, yanking down her pants, prayed that nerves and simple embarrassment wouldn't clamp her bladder shut. She shot a quick glance at the window over the tub. Too small, she knew, for her to wiggle out of. Carter could probably make it. If she could convince Reuben to let Carter use the bathroom, she'd tell Carter to try to get out.

She hopped up, flushing with one hand, reaching up to ease open the medicine cabinet with the other. "Yes, sir!" she called back when Reuben shouted at her to hurry the hell up.

She grabbed the little bottle of her mother's Valium from the top shelf, stuffed it into her pocket.

When Phoebe came out, Reuben shoved her mother so that Essie went sprawling toward the sofa. "You there, Dave? I'm going to have me a little bite to eat. If the electric isn't on by the time I finish, I'm going to play eenie meenie miny mo and kill one of these kids. You go make that sandwich, Phoebe. And don't be stingy with the potato salad."

It was a shotgun house, and small with it. Phoebe made sure she stayed in his line of sight as she took the ham and the salad out of the refrigerator.

She could hear him talking to Dave, and struggled to keep her hands steady while she got out a plate and a saucer. A million dollars? Now he wanted a million dollars and a Cadillac, along with a free pass over the state line. Stupid as he was mean, Phoebe decided. Using the big blue bowl of potato salad as cover, she dumped pills on the saucer. Using her mother's pestle, she crushed them as best she could. She dumped a generous scoop of potato salad on the pills, mixed them together.

She slathered mustard on two pieces of bread, slapped some ham and slices of American cheese between them. Maybe if she could get a knife out of the drawer, maybe—

"What's taking so fucking long?"

Phoebe's head jerked up. He'd put down the phone—she hadn't been paying close enough attention—and with the gun jammed under Carter's chin, was halfway to the kitchen doorway.

"I'm sorry. I just have to get you a fork for the potato salad."

Palming the pill bottle, she turned, yanked open the flatware drawer. She let the bottle drop in as she reached down for a fork. "You want some lemonade, Mr. Reuben? Mama made it fresh just—"

"Get that food out here, girl, and quick."

She snatched up the plate. It was easy to let the fear show, to let it mask everything else. Seeing the gun under Carter's jaw overwhelmed even her rage. Her hands shook so the plate bobbed up and down. When he smiled, she understood their fear was part of what he wanted. Giving it to him cost her nothing.

"Put that plate by the phone there, and go sit your skinny ass down on the sofa."

She did exactly as she was told, but before Phoebe could sit, Reuben lifted his leg to give Carter a solid boot on the ass that sent the boy pitching forward. Essie leaped up, stopping only when Phoebe blocked her way, shot her a fierce look.

Phoebe walked over to pull Carter up herself. "Hush, Carter! Mr. Reuben doesn't want to hear all that crying while he's trying to eat."

"Got some sense." With a nod, Reuben sat, laid the gun across his lap. He picked up the fork with one hand, the phone with the other. "Don't know where you came by it with that worthless whore who raised you. Where's that electric, Dave?" he said into the phone, and took a forkful of potato salad.

While Carter sniffled in their mother's arms, Phoebe watched Reuben eat. Had she put enough pills in? Enough to make him pass out? The liquor he washed down the food with would help, wouldn't it?

Maybe it would kill him. She'd read about things like that, pills and liquor. Maybe the son of a bitch would just die.

She leaned down, whispered into Carter's ear. Her brother shook his head, so she pinched him, hard. "You do just what I say, or I'll slap you stupid."

"Shut the hell up over there! Did I tell you to talk?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Reuben. I was just telling him not to cry. He's gotta pee, too. Can he just go use the bathroom, Mr. Reuben? I'm sorry, Mr. Reuben, but it'll be an awful mess if he wets his pants. It'll only take him a minute."

"Christ's sake! G'wan, then."

Phoebe closed her hand over Carter's, squeezed viciously. "Go on, Carter. Do what you're told."

Knuckling his eyes, Carter pushed off the sofa and dragged his heels into the bathroom.

"Mr. Reuben?"

Mama hissed at her to stay quiet, but Phoebe ignored her. Carter could get out. If Reuben didn't think about him for a few minutes, Carter could get out.

"Do you think if I asked that man to turn on the electric, he would? It's so hot. Maybe if I asked him, if I told him we're all so hot, he'd turn it on?"

"Hear that, Dave?" Reuben kicked back in his chair and grinned. His glassy eyes drooped. "Got a kid wants to negotiate with you. Sure, what the fuck. Come on over here."

When Phoebe stood in front of him, Reuben passed her the phone. And pressed the gun to her belly. "Tell him what I'm doing first."

Sweat snaked a slow, fat line down her back. Why didn't the pills *work*? Had Carter wriggled out the window?

"Mister? He's got the gun at my stomach, and I'm awful scared. We're so hot. No, we're not hurt, but we're so hot it's going to make us *sick*. If we could just have the air-conditioning back on, maybe we could *sleep*, 'cept we're so scared I guess we'd need a bunch of sleeping pills or something. Please, mister, would you please turn on the electricity?"

"And, sir?" She gripped the phone tighter when Reuben reached for it. When he shrugged, leaned back, the wave of relief was like giddiness. "Could you please give him the money and the car he wants? He's been real nice to us since I gave him the potato salad I made myself. He even let me go to the bathroom first. We're all just so tired we might just pass out any minute, you know?"

Reuben held out a hand for the phone, then gave her a nasty little poke with the gun to move her back. "Hear that, Dave? This girl here, she wants the electric back on. Wants me to have the money and that Caddy. Hell no, I didn't let them get anything to eat, and I won't till that electric's back on. Fact, I'm gonna go eenie meenie right now and . . . Where's that boy? Where is that little shit?"

"Mr. Reuben, he's right . . ." Phoebe shot out her arm as if to point

and knocked over the bottle of Wild Turkey. "Oh, I'm sorry! I'm sorry. I'll clean it right up. I'll—"

She went down, pain searing over her face as the back of his hand slammed against her cheek. "Stupid bitch!" He lurched up, staggered. Phoebe looked straight into the barrel of the gun.

Like the wrath of God, Essie leaped off the couch and onto his back.

He bucked; she bit. Her nails scraped like razors down his face as they both screamed, both cursed. Phoebe scrambled back in a crab walk, barely avoiding a bullet as Reuben went down to his knees under Essie's assault.

"Help us! Help us now!" Phoebe shouted until her lungs burned. She grabbed the bottle, prepared to whale him, but Reuben went down, flat on his face. Weeping, screaming, Essie continued to pound him with her fists, even when the door burst open. Even when men rushed in with guns.

"Don't shoot us. Don't shoot us." Weeping, Phoebe crawled to her mother.

Things slowed down to a dream, it seemed like. And in the dream people walked her through water where voices echoed and the lights hurt her eyes. Once, she fell asleep, and did dream. But the dream was so scary she pushed herself awake again.

Mama had to have X-rays of her face to make sure her cheekbone wasn't broken, and stitches to close the gash. Phoebe sat in the little room in the hospital. She didn't want to lie down, didn't want to sleep again and fall back into the dream where the gun exploded, and the bullet—like a live thing—hunted her down and killed her.

Carter slept curled up in a ball on the narrow bed. His fists were clenched, and off and on his body twitched like a horse's did when flies landed on it.

Doctors and nurses and police came in and out, and asked questions. When they did, she wanted them to go away. When they went away, she wished they'd come back so she wasn't alone.

But there'd been water to drink, to wash the grit that had coated her throat. And then icy Coca-Cola, straight from the bottle.

She wanted her mother. She wanted Mama so bad it hurt worse than Reuben's hand across her face.

When a man came in with a big McDonald's takeout bag, the smell of burgers and fries had her stomach jittering with sudden and acute hunger.

He smiled at her, glanced at Carter, then came over to sit beside Phoebe on the bed. "Thought you might be hungry. Don't know about you, but I'd rather skip the hospital food. I'm Dave."

She knew she stared, knew it was rude. But she'd expected Dave to be old—older anyway. He looked barely older than the high school boys Phoebe liked to sigh over in secret. His hair was a light brown with a lot of curl to it, his eyes shades lighter and blue. He wore a dark blue shirt, open at the collar. And he smelled just a little sweaty.

He held out his hand, but when Phoebe offered hers, he didn't shake it. He held it, firm, just the way his eyes held hers. "I'm really happy to meet you, Phoebe. Really happy to see you."

"I'm glad to meet you, too."

Then she did what she hadn't done in all the hours inside the hot little house, in all the time she'd waited while her brother slept.

She cried.

Dave sat, held her hand. He didn't say a thing. At one point he got up, dug up a box of tissues and put them in her lap. When her tears slowed, he pulled the Quarter Pounders and fries out of the bag.

"My mama," Phoebe began.

"She's going to be fine. I checked on her, and I asked if I could have a little time with you before they took you and your brother to her, or brought her to you. Looks like he could use some sleep anyway."

"I guess."

"I know you were scared, but you were smart, too, and you were brave."

"I wasn't brave. I was mad." She picked up the burger, bit in. Her stomach clenched as if deciding whether or not it would accept the food. Then it relaxed again. "Carter was brave for climbing out the window."

"He said you told him to, that you said you'd slap him stupid if he didn't do it."

She flushed a little because she was forbidden to hit her brother. Even though there were occasions she judged he'd earned it enough for her to break the rule.

"I guess I did."

"Why?"

"Reuben would've hurt him. He'd've hurt him bad before he hurt me, or even Mama again. Because he's the baby, and Reuben knows Mama loves him more than anything."

"You'd already put the pills in the food before you told Carter to climb out the window."

"I should've put more in. I wasn't sure how many. You knew what I was trying to tell you, right away." She picked up a fry. "I felt better when I was talking to you."

"It was smart of you to find a way to tell me you put something in his food. It bought me just a little more time."

"How come you didn't turn the electric back on? He got so mad about that."

"Well, you know how you talked him into letting you go to the bathroom before you fixed his food? It's kind of like that. You try to get something back, like an exchange. Fact was, I was about to when we spotted Carter climbing out the window. I wanted to keep Reuben talking—or let you talk—while we got Carter to safety and figured out the new situation. Did you knock over the bottle to distract him, so he'd be mad at you and forget about Carter?"

"I figured he'd hit me, but I didn't know he'd get that mad. I think he'd have shot me if Mama hadn't jumped on him. I should've given him more pills, is what. Then it wouldn't have taken so long for him to pass out. Mama wouldn't've had the pills if it wasn't for him. That's irony." She smiled a little when Dave laughed. "I learned about irony in English class. She got the pills because he made her so upset and nervous. He pretended to be nice when he met her, when they started going out. But he started picking on her, and us, and pushing his weight around. He slapped her once, right across the face."

"She had a restraining order on him."

Phoebe nodded. "She told him she wouldn't see him anymore and to go away. But he kept coming around, or going to her work. Following

her in his car. I think more than that, but she wouldn't tell me. He came to the house one night, too, drunk, and she called the police. They made him go away, but that's all they did."

"I'm sorry we didn't do more."

"They told her she could get that restraining order, so she did. I don't see how it helped her any."

"No. I'm sorry about that, too. It seems to me, Phoebe, your mother did everything right, everything she could do to protect herself and her family."

Phoebe stared down at the paper napkin balled in her fist. "Why didn't he just go away when she said she didn't want him?"

"I don't know."

It wasn't the answer she wanted, Phoebe decided. Worse, it was kin to a lie. She hated when grown-ups lied because they didn't think you could understand.

Phoebe ate more fries and shook her head. "Maybe you don't know exactly, but you sort of do. You just think I won't understand 'cause I'm only twelve—almost twelve. But I understand lots of things."

He studied her another moment, as if he could read something on her face like the words in a book. "Okay, I do sort of know, or I have an opinion. I think he's mean, he's a bully, and he didn't like the idea of anyone telling him what to do, or what he could have, especially a woman like your mother. So he tried to scare her and intimidate her, and he got madder and madder because it wasn't working the way he wanted. I think he wanted to hurt her, to show her he was the boss, and it got out of hand, even for him."

Phoebe ate another fry. "I think he's a son of a bitch."

"Yeah, that, too. Now he's going to be a son of a bitch in jail, for a long time."

She thought about this as she sucked on the Coke he'd brought her. "On TV, they usually shoot the bad guy. The SWAT team shoots him."

"I like it better when nobody gets shot. What you did in there? It helped it work out so nobody died. Dying's a short end, Phoebe. I know you're tired, and you want to see your mother." He stood, then pulled a card out of his pocket. "I want you to know you can call me anytime."

You need to talk about all this again, or ask questions, or you need help with anything, you just call me.”

She took the card and read: Detective David McVee. “Carter, too? And Mama?”

“Absolutely. Anything, Phoebe, anytime.”

“Okay, thanks. Thanks for the burger and fries.”

“My pleasure, that’s a fact.” This time when he offered his hand, he shook hers. “You take care of yourself, and your family.”

“I will.”

When he left, Phoebe put his card in her pocket. She rolled up the takeout bag to help keep the food Dave had brought for Carter warm, shoved the trash in the waste bin.

She crossed to the window to look out. The sun had come up. She didn’t know when dawn had broken or how long it had been light. But she knew the dark hours were over.

When the door opened and her mother stood there, her arms open wide, Phoebe all but flew into them.

“Mama, Mama, Mama.”

“My sweet girl. My baby girl.”

“Your face. Mama—”

“It’s all right. I’m all right.”

How could it be all right with that line of stitches running down her mother’s lovely cheek, marring her soft, soft skin? When her sparkling blue eyes were dull and the bruising crawled out around them?

But Essie put her hands on Phoebe’s shoulders. “It’s nothing. We’re safe, we’re all safe. That’s everything. Oh God, Phoebe, I’m so sorry.”

“Not you. Not you.” Tears spilled again as Essie brushed kisses over the bruise on Phoebe’s jaw. “Mama, it wasn’t your fault. Dave even said so.”

“I let Reuben into our lives. I opened the door to him. That much, at least, is my fault.” She stepped away to walk over, to lean over Carter and rest her cheek on his head. “God, God, if anything had happened to you, to either of you, I don’t know what I’d do. You got him out,” she murmured. “You got Carter out of the house. It’s more than I did.”

“No, Mama—”

"I'll never look at you quite the same way again, Phoebe." Essie straightened. "I'll always look at you and see my little girl, my own baby girl, but now, every time I look at you, I'll see a hero."

"You beat him down to the floor," Phoebe reminded her. "I guess you're a hero, too."

"Maybe at the end of it. Well, I hate to wake him up, but I don't want to stay in this hospital anymore."

"Can we go home now?"

Essie brushed a hand over Carter's hair, faced her daughter again. "We're never going back there. I never want to go inside that place again. I'm sorry. I'd never feel safe."

"But where can we go?"

"We're going to stay with Cousin Bess. I called her, and she said we're to come."

"To the big house?" The idea of it had Phoebe's eyes opening wide. "But you and Cousin Bess don't hardly speak. You don't even like her."

"This morning, she's my favorite person in the world, save you and Carter. And we're going to be grateful to her, Phoebe, for opening her home to us when we need it."

"She didn't open it to us when Daddy died, or when—"

"Now she is." Essie snapped out the words. "And we're grateful to her. It's what we have to do."

"For now?"

"It's what we have to do," Essie repeated.

They rode to Cousin Bess's in a police car while Carter wolfed down the cold burger and fries, gulped down the Coke. They circled the park with the fountain sparkling in the air. The grand old house was rosy brick and soft white trim; it was lush with green lawn and tended flowers and draping trees.

It was a world away from the tiny shotgun house where Phoebe had lived for more than eight of her twelve years.

She noted her mother's back was poker straight as they climbed up the stone steps to the front door, so she stiffened hers as well.

Mama rang the bell like company would, rather than family. The

woman who answered the door was young and bright and beautiful. She made Phoebe think of a movie star with her golden fall of hair and slender build.

There was sympathy on her face as she held out her hands to Essie. "Mrs. MacNamara, I'm Ava Vestry, Ms. MacNamara's personal assistant. Come in, come in. Your rooms are all ready for you. You must be exhausted, so I'll take you right up. Or if you'd rather have some breakfast, or some tea?"

"They don't need anyone fussing over them."

Cousin Bess made the announcement from the curve of the grand stairs. She stood, dressed in a crow-black dress, her thin face pinched with disapproval. Her hair was as gray as a Brillo pad with odd wings of black at either temple.

Now, as always, the first glimpse of her father's cousin made Phoebe think of the mean Almira Gulch, come to stuff Toto in her basket.

Wicked old witch.

"Thank you for taking us in, Cousin Bess," Mama said in the same quiet voice she'd used when Reuben had a gun to her head.

"Doesn't surprise me you got yourself into a mess. The three of you are to wash, thoroughly, before you sit at my table or lie on my sheets."

"I'll see to it, Ms. MacNamara." Ava turned her beautiful, compassionate smile onto Phoebe, then Carter. "Maybe the children are hungry. Maybe after their bath, I could ask the cook to make pancakes or—"

Apparently the idea of more food after the horrors of the night, the burger, the fries, the ride in a police car, was too much for Carter's stomach. It tossed up the Quarter Pounder right there on Cousin Bess's antique Aubusson carpet.

Mortified, exhausted, Phoebe just closed her eyes. Maybe she hadn't been shot and killed, but she was sure her life was over.

Mama had tended Cousin Bess's house for twenty years now, scrubbing, polishing, arranging. She'd served that demanding old woman until the day she died.

Through those two decades, the house had become Essie's world—not just her home, or even her sanctuary. Her entire world. And what

was outside it, her fears. It had been nearly a decade since Essie had gone beyond its terraces, its courtyard.

Reuben's death in prison hadn't broken those locks for her, Phoebe thought as she rose to put her gun in the lockbox on the top shelf of her closet. The bitter end to Cousin Bess's bitter life hadn't thrown the doors open for her.

In fact, it seemed to Phoebe those events had simply added more and stronger locks.

If Cousin Bess had done the right thing, the kind thing and—fat chance—passed the house to her mother instead of shackling Phoebe to it, would things have been different? Better? Would her mother be able to walk out of the house, stroll over to the park, pop in and visit a neighbor?

They'd never know.

Where would she herself be now if not for that night? Would she have married Roy? Would she have found a way to keep her marriage together, to give her daughter the father she deserved?

She'd never know that either.

So they'd have the lilies in the parlor, order pizza, and settle in together for a Friday night at home.

And Phoebe would go out to dinner Saturday—just this once. There was too much in her life already that needed tending without adding a man to it.

She'd cried when she spoke to Roy last, yes, she had. But those tears had mostly been anger. She'd shed most of the sorrow and disappointment long before, when Carly had been only a baby.

Too much that needed tending, Phoebe thought again as she changed.

She glanced at the blush pink lilies in the cobalt-blue vase on her dresser. Flowers were lovely. But blooms faded and died.