

PATENT LEATHER GENE

2020 Lenten Season Novella
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*dedicated to the abused and slandered
and written in spite of those who abuse and lie about them*

CHAPTER 1

Roses & Dog Shit

Gene Marie held her robe tight about her throat as she cautiously opened the front door. She knew she heard someone, or something, knocking loud and distinct; three solid taps, evenly spaced at exactly 9:11 AM. It had become kind of like a routine - *almost* every morning the same routine, three taps at exactly 9:11. The first time it happened she thought it was part of a dream. She had been laying in bed half awake, half asleep, waiting for her cramps to subside. The sound had startled her and she had sat up too quickly. Her uterus expelled a hot fast stream of menstrual fluid and she had gotten nauseated. As she changed the sheets she made a note to get a rubber or plastic backed liner for the mattress. Forty was not shaping up to be what her ex-sister in law had gushed about twelve years earlier at her birthday celebration. Topsy and rosy cheeked, Melanie blew out her candles and then went on and on about how turning forty was so liberating, finally respected in her career and on her way to great things, “glass ceilings be damned” she had said as she raised her glass in a toast. Gene had been skeptical as they raised their glasses of champagne with the birthday girl. As she rolled the bloody sheets up and shoved them in the washing machine that morning she was certain Melanie was full of shit. Four years after that toast, Melanie lost her job, had gone through four rounds of hormone treatment and three rounds of artificial insemination before traveling to South Africa to buy some poor farm-woman’s eggs to have implanted in her uterus. Two years after that she had a set of one and a half year old twins that looked nothing like her but were the spit and image of her by-then ex-husband, Gene’s husband’s brother, Tim. Gene felt bad for the boys. Rick and Jim were now in middle school and having trouble.

The bath robe felt soft and comforting in Gene’s fist as she scanned her front stoop. This was the first time she had actually “answered” the knock. It had been happening like this now for the past six weeks. After the first three mornings she had called the local PD, but they had said it was probably just some delinquent neighborhood kids being jerks and to call them back if they actually did anything. After two weeks she called again. That time the dispatch officer was condescending and asked her if she was taking any meds or if she had a therapist to talk to. Gene was offended and told the officer so. The officer asked if she needed to be picked up and

taken somewhere where they could help her. Gene hung up the phone and ordered a home surveillance camera to install at the door. A few weeks ago it arrived in an unmarked box, signature required. Gene installed it immediately and for two days was relieved of the malicious knocking. She thought everything was back to normal but was wrong.

On the third day the camera went offline at 9 AM. She was alerted via message on her phone. Again, it was the first day of her cycle and she was laying in bed half awake, half asleep waiting for her cramps to subside. Her phone chimed and she picked it up to see the alert: "Your camera is offline." Frustrated, she pulled up the user site and tried to turn the camera back on, assuming there was some connection issue with the camera company's website. But it was no use. The camera wouldn't come back online. Then she heard it, three knocks at the door. Just like before. A wave of panic started to rise up in her throat. She was sitting up in bed and blood was oozing out as she doubled over with a fresh attack of cramping. After a few minutes the cramps subsided and the phone chimed again in alert: "Your camera is back online." Holding the phone in her left hand and grasping her abdomen with her right hand, crouched over, Gene had crept to the bathroom to clean herself up. The bathroom had one window and it happened to look out over the front door but the awning to the front porch that skirted the entire length of the front of the modest house obscured the door itself. She couldn't see if someone was still at the door. When she glanced down either side of the street she saw no one except Gertrude, the old widow who was friends with Gene's mother in law, four houses down on the other side of the street watering her roses. Gertrude didn't even own a cell phone or computer that Gene knew of but maybe she had seen someone or something. The last time she had visited Gertrude with her mother in law, Joan, she had laughed to herself at the olive green rotary style phone mounted to the kitchen wall. Gene decided to drop by Gertrude's later that day when she was feeling better and ask if she had seen anyone while she was out that morning. Gertrude was the big gossip of the neighborhood, so if someone out of the ordinary was out on the street she would be sure to have noticed. But Gene had to be careful about how she approached Gertrude because she would most certainly report anything Gene said to Joan.

Joan and Gene did not get along. It was generous to say they tolerated one another. It was more accurate to say Gene tolerated Joan, but Joan did everything in her power to drive Gene crazy, up to and including telling anyone who would listen that Gene *was* crazy. It had been a thorn in the side of Gene and Robin's relationship since the day Robin introduced Gene to Joan

twenty two years earlier. Robin worked for a company that fabricated mechanical parts mostly for the automotive industry and was frequently out of town, on site at manufacturing plants all over the East Coast, Mid-West, and Asia. Gene didn't mind him traveling so long as he made it home safely. The time apart allowed Gene the time and space for her painting and sculpture. Robin enjoyed seeing different places and his role in building the machines that made the World move. Joan liked to tell people that her son travelled so much to get away from "his crazy wife", when in actuality Robin had been traveling for work before he and Gene had ever met. Joan and Gertrude met at a widow support group at the local Senior Center when Robin's father passed away unexpectedly from cancer a couple months before Robin and Gene were married. Joan also liked to tell people that Gene was the cause of Frank's cancer, even though he had worked as a quality control engineer for a titanium mining company for the majority of his adult life. Joan was bitter about the loss of her husband and went out of her way to make miserable anyone who was still lucky enough to have their spouse. Robin was either oblivious or willfully ignorant of Joan's meddling and abuses. When the couple argued it was usually about Joan and her antics, not Robin's traveling.

Later that day when Gene knocked on Gertrude's door she had chosen her words carefully. She knocked rapidly and hard. Gertrude called from deep within the house, "Just a minute! I'm in the kitchen!" When she opened the door the smell of burned toast, cat urine and musty laundry hit Gene in the face. Gertrude smiled revealing sparkling white dentures.

"Why, Genie! What a pleasant surprise. I'll have to let Joan know you stopped by to check on this old widow."

Gene hadn't been amused but didn't offer any inkling of her annoyance. "Hi Gert. How are you today? Do you have a couple minutes to visit?" Gene had inquired politely.

"Certainly, Sweetie. Come in. Come in!" Gertrude stepped aside holding the door open for Gene to enter her front sitting room. "Sit! Sit!" Gertrude motioned toward a threadbare tufted couch covered with quilts and a pilled acrylic afghan. There were at least five cats laying on chairs and a tattered cat climbing structure staring apathetically at the two women. A vase of fresh cut roses was on a scratched up Queen Anne table in the front window. The drapes were open but the sheers were closed. Both looked discolored and dusty and in need of a trip to the cleaners. Gene perched gently on the edge of the couch. On the coffee table in front of her was a wrinkled Readers Digest, a basket with an in progress crochet project, and a half empty bottle of Raspberry Lemonade Crystal Light. Gertrude chuckled and headed back toward the kitchen.

"I was just going to pour a cup of tea." She called over her shoulder. "Would you care for one?" "No, thank you." Gene had replied. "I can't stay long." And that was true. She needed to make it to the post office before they closed to send a birthday gift to her best friend. Gertrude sniffed in predictable disgust. "Suit yourself." She replied. While Gert was clanking around in the kitchen Gene gingerly picked up the bottle of Crystal Light and gave it a quick sniff. It smelled strongly of alcohol. She wasn't surprised, just curious. She sat the bottle down just in time for Gertrude to come back into the room carefully balancing a porcelain cup on a saucer. She was a little drunk. Gene was relieved. Maybe she wouldn't remember she had stopped by and wouldn't report to Joan. She still chose her words carefully. Gertrude sat the cup and saucer on the coffee table next to the sauced up Crystal Light and eased herself into the corner of the couch. "So, what can I do for you, Genie, Dear? Is Robby out of town again?"

Robin was out of town at the time but Gene didn't give Gertrude any more information than was necessary. "Robin is at work today, but that's not why I'm here to see you. I saw you out this morning watering your roses. They are quite lovely this year." Gene had nodded toward the vase on the table in the window.

"Oh my! Yes! They are. Thank you for noticing. I've been quite pleased with the flowers this season. I just hope we don't get another swarm of Japanese Beetles this year. Those bag traps ruin the whole aesthetic of my garden."

Gene knew how proud Gertrude was of her flowers. She and Robin jokingly called her "Mr. Wilson" after the character in that old time TV show, Dennis the Menace.

"Are you here to ask me for some flowers for your table, Sweetie?" Gertrude took a sip of her tea which Gene was pretty sure she could smell a waft of liquor coming off of as well.

"No, no, Gert, but thank you for the kind offer."

"Oh, I wasn't offering."

Gene hadn't thought Gertrude was offering her flowers. Gene was just being polite.

"Gert, when you were out watering your roses this morning, did you notice anything strange on the street?" Gene had hesitantly inquired.

"Why what on earth do you mean by strange, Dearie? Strange like little green men snooping about or strange like someone let their dog shit in the middle of my Will Scarlets?"

This is why Gene needed to be careful. Joan and Gertrude were always looking for anything to smear Gene with to prove to others that she was crazy and unworthy of Robin's spousal companionship or *anything* that Gene was trying to accomplish.

“No. Not feces or little green men...but maybe someone you didn’t recognize walking their dog or riding a bike or...”

“Knocking on doors?” Gertrude finished Gene’s sentence for her.

Gene laughed slightly. “Yes. Knocking on doors.”

Gertrude smacked the tea cup down on the saucer clanging it sharply. Gene started, expecting the cup to have cracked, but it was stronger than it had appeared. It wasn’t porcelain after all. It was Corelle Ware, a smart choice for a sneaky old drunk. “No. I saw no such thing. Excuse me. I need to ask you to leave. I just remembered something.” Gertrude got up awkwardly grabbing the front of her house dress in a bundle in her fist, and opened the front door. Gene got up and moved toward her.

“I’m sorry to have bothered you. If you see anything...”

“I most certainly don’t see much of anything. I’m old and my eyes aren’t great. I can’t even make out your front door from my yard, let alone know if anyone is knocking at your door.” And with that Gertrude had pushed Gene out the door and slammed it behind her. Gene had been left standing dumbfounded looking at the closed door. She heard Gertrude bumping around in the house closing the drapes and muttering under her breath. This made Gene very suspicious and want to speak with Joan about this odd interaction, but not until Robin got back from Seoul.

Now, standing at her front door in her robe, Gene was angry. The street appeared empty but she wasn’t going to go check over the corners of the front porch alone. The floor of the porch was raised three and half feet off the ground, had a beautiful old pine railing and a crawl space underneath that was accessible from the side. It was certainly high enough that someone could crouch without her seeing from the door, or be tucked beneath, but she wasn’t going to risk exploring by herself. Robin was due to land late that afternoon, but it was going to be difficult to have the conversation she needed to have with him for at least 24 hours. He had been in Seoul for three weeks over-seeing the completion of an important order headed to Nissan. She knew from their nightly check-ins that the trip had been stressful and the jet lag from travel to Asia was always pretty hard on him. He scheduled his travel to arrive home on Friday so he would have a full weekend off when he got home to recover before going back into the office. The camera she ordered (that was now rendered useless) had arrived the day before Robin left for Korea and he had been irritated that Gene had gotten it. He, like the cops, thought Gene was either making things up or exaggerating. Gene had been so irritated with him that she didn’t kiss him back

before he had left for the airport. He didn't call when he had landed in Seoul. He texted instead. Between the argument with Robin and the mystery knocker, Gene had been so upset that she hadn't even worked on the newest piece in her newest series for almost a week, and when she had picked her brush back up she ruined a week's worth of work in only a few minutes. Disgusted, she had sat in front of her easel and cried for an hour before applying gesso over the entire surface and starting over. The piece now sat on the easel complete, but not what she had intended. The pallet of the original had used some rare pigments that she couldn't get anymore. The finished piece was moving and well crafted, but not anything as exquisite as the original had been shaping into and she was aware that she was holding it against Robin.

Just as she was about to turn and go back into her house, motion at Gertrude's house caught her eye. It was subtle, and had the sun been shining lower in the sky she most certainly wouldn't have been able to see it, but she distinctly saw the drapes in Gertrude's front window swing closed, as if she had been watching and afraid Gene had seen her. Gene breathed heavily out through her nose and pursed her lips before saying so anyone near by could clearly hear, "Look, whoever you are knocking on my door, I don't know what you want or what you think I have, but when I catch you, you better have a gun or I'm going to kill you." Then she turned on her heel and slammed the door behind her. As she turned the lock she heard someone or something shuffle and thud around outside and run down the narrow space between her house and the next door neighbor's driveway. She hurried to the side window in the dining room but was too late. All she saw of her mystery knocker was the bottom of a booted foot as they hung a left behind her neighbor's house. It wasn't much, but at least her mind was put slightly at ease. It was, in fact, a real person knocking on her door and not a ghost or figment of her imagination, like Robin and the cops had insinuated. She pulled her cell phone out of the pocket in her robe just as it chimed the alert: "Your camera is back on line." Gene let out a small frustrated scream and shoved the camera back in her pocket just as it began to ring. It was Joan. Gene took a deep breath and answered.

"Hello?"

"Genie! It's Mom."

"Hello Joan. What can I do for you?"

"Genie, I've told you a hundred times. Call me Mom."

"That's OK, Joan. I have a mother already, and I've told you just as often that my name is Gene, not Genie."

“Genie, you know that’s just silly.”

Gene did not have patience for Joan’s rudeness and cut her short.

“Look Joan, what do you want? I don’t have time for your insults and abuse. I have things to do.”

“Insults and abuse? Me? Did Robin give you the name of the psychiatrist I suggested? I really think you need some help with your issues. I’ve been nothing but loving and generous with you.”

“Joan, Robin gave me no such thing and if you keep insisting on this lie that I am in some way unstable I am going to get a restraining order. I’ve had quite enough and this has gone too far for too long.”

“Genie, Sweetie, we all just want what’s best for you. Now don’t you think it would be best for everyone if you would just admit that you aren’t well, see a doctor, and get some medication to help? Mrs. Donovan just called and told me you were out on your front porch in your bathrobe talking to yourself!”

“Gertrude? That half blind old drunk?”

“Genie! Don’t talk about her that way. She’s nearly twice your age and a widow! She thinks of you as family.”

“Well, I’m not her family, and she certainly isn’t mine. So you can tell that drunk old bag to mind her own business. And you do the same. Now is there something you actually want because...”

Joan interrupted Gene.

“Now Genie, if you don’t calm down I’m going to call my friend Sid at the County and have him send someone up to do a mental health check on you. Is Robin home?”

“Joan, the last time you sent Sid out here he told you not to call him anymore. That’s tax money you’re wasting every time you do that. You know it’s Friday and Robin’s at work. Try his cell.”

“I did. I’ve been trying to call him for two weeks but he doesn’t pick up and hasn’t returned my calls. You haven’t done anything to him have you?”

“Now Joan, that is simply insulting. I have done nothing to your son. Evidently Robin doesn’t want to talk to you, and you know what? Neither do I.” And with that Gene hung up the phone and turned it off. Within moments the land-line began to ring. Gene glanced at the caller ID. It was Joan. She let it go to voicemail and stomped up the stairs to get showered and dressed.

Pulling a t-shirt over her head, Gene decided to make a trip to the Art supply store to pick up some pigment and a couple fresh wood boards. The howl of the blow drier whipped the locks of her hair around her face. Looking at herself in the mirror she considered the small changes in her appearance she had begun noticing over the past year. The skin on her neck wasn’t yet

slack like her mother's but it also wasn't quite as firm as it once had been. There were more white hairs evident in her part and her smile lines were slightly deeper than she remembered. It was all natural and fascinated Gene. What she found upsetting was how other people and companies seemed to think she *should* be upset about it. The ads sprinkled in her online news feed had recently shifted from vacations, shoes, and baby supplies to life insurance, weight loss, and wrinkle creams. None of them interested her, but the change had intrigued and annoyed her. All advertising annoyed her. She didn't need or want anyone telling her what she should buy. She knew what she needed and unless it was on her list she wasn't interested in hearing about what anyone was selling, particularly if they were using tactics meant to make her feel bad about herself to do so. Pressing her lipgloss to her lips she spread the gooey pink stuff with the wand and pressed her lips together. Done. She grabbed her purse, bounced down the stairs and turned the knob of the front door. Swinging the door open she was hit with a very strong aroma of dog feces. It was a good thing she looked before she stepped out across the threshold because just outside the door was a large pile of what looked to be multiple canine bowl movements. Gene slammed the door and dug her cell phone out of her purse. This time she dialed 9-1-1, not the non-emergency number like she had before. A strange message came on before the phone began to ring. It said, "OK. I'll try to connect your call." There was a brief pause and the line began to ring. It rang three times before what sounded like an adolescent girl answered.

"9-1-1, this is Christy. What is your emergency?"

Gene took a breath and replied, "I've had someone knocking on my door almost every morning at the same time for over a month and today they left a large pile of dog feces at my front door." It sounded ridiculous as she said it, but she knew this wasn't just some bored child's prank. She suspected Joan and Gertrude might have something to do with it.

"A pile of dog feces? Do you have a dog, ma'am?"

"What? No. I don't."

"Ma'am, are you sure this is an emergency?"

"Yes. It's more than the poop."

"Ma'am, what is your name and address?"

"It's Gene Marie Randall. The address is 179 Larkspur North."

"Thank you. An officer will be dispatched to your location. Please don't leave."

"OK. Thank you."

"You're welcome." and the dispatcher hung up the phone.

Gene slung her purse over the back of a chair and wandered into the kitchen to pour herself a glass of iced tea and sat down on the couch. Sipping the tea she rolled around in her mind the things she wanted to discuss with Robin and wondered just what Joan had left in the voicemail. Half an hour later a cop car pulled into her driveway and a plain car parked on the street in front of the house. A female officer and a woman in plain clothes stomped up the stairs and knocked on the door standing to either side of the disgusting pile now collecting flies. The officer was the one who knocked. Gene sat the empty glass on an end table and hoisted herself up. As she opened the door a rush of flies flew in. Gene looked over the two women standing before her. The officer introduced herself.

"I'm officer Stone. You called about some dog feces?" The woman in plain clothes said nothing. Gene was suspicious of them both immediately.

"Yes and no. I've had someone knocking at my door almost every morning at 9:11 AM for the past six weeks. I've called before and have been treated like I'm crazy. I was told to call back when they did something and now they have." Gene's words came out more annoyed sounding than she had intended.

"Ma'am, I don't need any attitude from you."

Gene was on the defensive now.

"Attitude? There is no attitude here. I'm frustrated because I'm being harassed in a way that feels a lot like stalking and I'm being treated like I'm the crazy one. It's not just the dog poop here that's the problem."

"Ma'am, we got a call that you were in your yard this morning in your bathrobe talking to yourself. Are you OK? Do you need help?"

Gene took a deep breath. She was ready to hit this idiot cop.

"That was probably my drunk neighbor Gertrude Donovan down the street there." Gene pointed to Gertrude's house. She could see Gertrude peeking through the drapes watching what was going on. Gertrude saw Gene pointing at her house and dropped the drapes closed. The cop and other woman were looking in the direction of Gertrude's house and turned back toward Gene. Gene continued, "Gert is a friend of my mother in law's. The two of them have been plotting against me for years for God only knows why. I wasn't in my yard in my bathrobe. I opened the front door to see who was knocking at the door."

Officer Stone was now looking up at the camera mounted above Gene's door.

"Ma'am, can't you just look at your camera and see who was at your door?"

Gene let out an exasperated sigh. “No. That’s the other part of the problem. Whoever is doing this is somehow disabling the camera as well. They disable it at 9AM and then it comes back on shortly after they knock. I can show you. This morning is the first time I’ve ever tried answering the door. I stepped out to look down the street to see if I could see anyone leaving and when I didn’t I spoke out loud in case they were hiding near by warning them that when I caught them I would hurt them. You see over there?” Gene motioned toward the edge of the porch. Officer Stone and the other woman looked in the direction she was pointing. “See, right over the edge there is access to below the porch and a small crawl space under the house. When I went back in the house I heard them come out of there and run down the side of the house. By the time I got to the back window all I saw was the bottom of their foot as they ran around the back of Clarke’s house there. Then I took a shower and got dressed and when I went to run some errands found the pile of shit. Then I dialed 9-1-1. Now here you are.”

Officer Stone asked to see the camera footage and Gene obliged her. It confirmed everything and nothing Gene had said. The camera had footage missing between 9 and 9:22 AM. Before 9 there was no poop, then the footage picked back up at 9:22 there was the pile of poop. Other than that, there was no one on the camera until the Officer and other woman arrived. Officer Stone whispered something to the other woman who nodded then turned back to Gene.

“Can you show us this crawl space entrance?”

“Of course.” Gene replied and the three women walked down the stairs and over to the side of the porch.

It was obvious someone had been under the porch. The piece of wooden trellis that covered the access point was pushed aside and broken. The dirt was trampled and there were foot prints in the soft dirt on the side of the house up to the Clarke’s driveway. Officer Stone made some notes and whispered something else to the other woman. Gene was becoming impatient.

“Look, I’m not imagining this. Who are you anyway?” Gene directed her question to the woman in plain clothes. The woman looked at her with slight surprise.

“My name’s Cindy. I’m with the County’s mental health services.”

Now Gene was really angry and directed her words back to Officer Stone.

“Does every cop have a mental health services person with them these days?”

“No Gene. They don’t.”

“You may address me as Mrs. Randall.”

“Gene, I’m only here to help.” Cindy offered.

"I told you to address me as Mrs. Randall. I'm not sure what type of help you think you need to offer me here. I need a *real* police report. Someone is harassing me. That's why I got the camera in the first place."

Officer Stone nodded at Cindy who stepped back then spoke into her walkie, "It's affirmative. We are investigating vandalism and possible attempted home invasion." Then she turned to Gene again. "We are going to speak with your neighbor to see if they saw anyone."

Gene was still suspicious of these two women. "I'm pretty sure they are both at work by that time. Dawn is a nurse at a skilled nursing facility and Steve works for waste management. They both leave before 6. But you can knock and see. I'll come with you." Gene closed her front door and followed the other two women to the Clarke's front step. She was right. No one was home. The three women returned to Gene's front porch. Officer Stone handed her a business card with a number written on the back.

"This is my card. I'm giving you an incident number. If anything else happens call us and let us know, and use this incident number."

"OK. Thank you." Gene took the business card. Officer Stone and Cindy got in their cars and left. Gene looked down at Gertrude's house and saw her peeking through the drapes. Gene decided to leave the pile of shit on the porch for Robin to deal with when he got home and went back in the house to cry.

CHAPTER 2

Korean Eye Job

Robin lumbered down the side aisle of the plane looking for his seat. He had paid extra for one of the side seats with a window. He always did this when he traveled to Asia. It was worth the extra expense to only have one person next to him and be able to lean against the side of the plane and sleep. He hadn't thought of it the first time he visited the Asian Continent and had taken the cheapest seat available; one in the middle of the middle section of the plane. The man to his left had pulled out a fifth of Jack from his coat pocket just after take off, downed it and passed out burping and breathing sour liquor stink in Robin's face the entire fourteen hours to LAX. The woman to his right had tossed and turned back and forth leaning her head on his arm and had the worst gas. Robin had looked on with envy at a early twenty something kid with giant earphones and a pillow blissfully dreaming with his head against a closed window to the far right. Then, when Robin finally got up to use the restroom, the guy on the end of his row had spilled his coffee on Robin's brand new Docksidors. After that he made sure he was either against the window, or, if his director approved it, First Class.

Robin spotted his seat ahead of him and was immediately annoyed. An old woman with what sounded like a smokers cough was in his seat with a big quilted carry-on in the seat next to her. The carry-on looked over-sized to Robin. He took a slow deep breath as he approached the woman who was pretending to be asleep already. Robin cleared his throat.

"Ahem. Um...Ma'am?" Robin started. The woman didn't open her eyes but coughed a phlegmy hack without covering her mouth. A group of Korean people situating themselves in the center section next to him looked over in what appeared to be fear and dug frantically through their bags producing medical masks and placing them over their faces. Robin pulled his ticket from the pocket on the inside of his blazer and shook it as he attempted to rouse the woman again.

"Ma'am." He said loud and firm. "Ma'am, excuse me, you are in my seat."

The woman made a show of being startled awake and confused.

"Oh my. Oh my! What's this? What's going on? What do you want?" She looked up at Robin. Robin didn't smile. His expression remained flat as he leaned slightly forward offering his ticket to her bagged eyes.

"Madame, you are in my seat. Please check your ticket and find your seat."

The woman's face turned angry.

“Oh, just take this one. I’m already situated and my hip!” She pushed her bag to the floor in front of her shoving it under the seat and grabbed at her left hip in an overly exaggerated fashion. Robin wasn’t having it. He recognized this type of behavior from his own mother. Give his mother forty years of cigarettes and tanning salon appointments and you’d have the awful woman in his seat.

“I most certainly will not. I paid extra for that seat and I’m going to sit in it.” Robin replied.

“You’d make an old woman move just because you paid extra? Shame on you. If I knew your mother...” Robin interrupted her before she could finish the inane sentence.

“I don’t care if you do know my mother. I’m getting a flight attendant.” Robin said, but he didn’t need to because a strong youngish Korean woman with a smart hair cut, perfectly painted lips and tailored uniform was already almost there.

“What is the problem here?” She addressed the old woman.

“This rude man wants my seat!” The woman lied. Robin could feel the vein over his right temple starting to throb. He presented the flight attendant with his ticket. She took it from his hand.

“Excuse me, but this seat is mine. I paid extra for this seat and she needs to move to hers.”

Robin calmly explained. The flight attendant looked at the ticket and at Robin and at the seat number on the overhead and finally at the old woman.

“Ma’am, please produce your ticket.” She said professionally in perfect English. The old woman gasped and brought her hand to her throat in an overly dramatic gesture.

“I thought you Asians were respectful of elders! I’m not even sure where I put my ticket!” She exclaimed as she began to riffle through the awful garish quilted monstrosity of a bag. She began removing items from the bag and placing them on the seat beside her. Robin was amazed. The flight attendant was beginning to look angry and passengers were backing up in the aisle muttering about the spectacle unfolding. Robin could feel sweat starting to run down his back and bead on his lip. The flight attendant spoke next.

“We...Asians respect hard work and honesty. Place your items back in your bag and come with me.” The flight attendant started to motion to two other attendants at either end of the plane who were now starting to move people to either side to make way for Robin’s attendant and the old woman to move. Panic registered on the old woman’s face as she realized her power play had failed miserably. She stammered as she stuffed used tissues, a crossword puzzle book, and a pack of Benson and Hedges back into her bag.

“Wait. I know where my ticket is!” She grabbed at her back pants pocket and produced the ticket. The flight attendant’s eyes got wide as she pressed her lips together and flared her nostrils at the old woman in silent reprimand snatching the ticket from her shaking hand.

“Ma’am! Your seat is in the center section on the other side of the plane. What made you think you could sit in this seat? If you move quickly and quietly I will not summon the authorities.” The flight attendant handed the woman her ticket and stood over her with her hands on her hips as the old woman whimpered and scrambled, gathering her things. Robin moved back, as did the attendant, as the woman moved awkwardly out of the seat and down the aisle. Some of the other passengers clapped as the flight attendant followed the woman down the aisle directing her around the back of the plane and up the other side to her seat where she sat sheepishly while surrounding passengers stared and whispered to each other. Robin placed his carry on in the over head and pushed his brief case under the seat in front of him. The other passengers that had been stuck in the aisle found their seats and settled in. After a few minutes the flight attendant reappeared.

“Sir, I apologize for the inconvenience. Can I offer you a pillow or blanket?” She inquired.

“A pillow would be wonderful.” Robin exhaled heavily in relief. The flight attendant nodded and walked a few rows back returning with a plastic wrapped pillow and a small package with ear plugs and handed them to him.

“Thank you.” Robin said bowing his head slightly in respect as he took both items gratefully. The flight attendant smiled a small kind of smile and walked away.

Robin sat the pillow and earplugs on the seat next to him and took out his phone to text Gene. ‘Hey Babe. Just got on the plane. Tell you about it when I get home. See you in about 25 hrs. Can’t wait. Love you.’

He hit send, turned the phone off and stuffed it in his blazer pocket. The sweat that had started to run down his back now felt cold and slightly sticky against the pressure of the seat. He stuffed the plugs in his ears, unwrapped the pillow and stuck the plastic in the pocket on the back of the seat in front of him. Situating the pillow between his ear and the closed window he closed his eyes and waited for take off. He didn’t even notice when a tiny waif of a person slipped into the seat next to him until the plane finally jostled back and forward taxiing for take off.

Robin opened his eyes and sat up. The pillow slid down between his shoulder and the wall of the plane. A woman in the seat next to him looked at him unembarrassed and smiled revealing

slightly crooked front teeth behind full, heart shaped lips. Robin smiled slightly and nodded noticing the young woman's eyes. He couldn't know for sure without asking rude questions, but it looked as if she had probably had her eyes done. It was a common cosmetic procedure Korean women went through that he had learned about on his first trip to the Country. The company liaison who had met him at the airport had mentioned it casually in the car ride from the airport to the hotel. He had joked about how he had gotten a package deal for his wife and two daughters. He had laughed as he explained they would be going out for dinner because his wife didn't want anyone coming to the house while they were all recovering. Jun laughed calling his "three puffy eyed girls" his "three blind mice". Robin had been taken aback by not only the procedure, whose aim was to make Asian eyes appear more Western, but also by the flippant way Jun discussed the matter. Gene would never consider such a procedure. Such things to her were a vanity not worth the expense. And even if she did, Robin would never discuss such an intimacy with a stranger. When he told Gene about it when he got home, she had been fascinated by the cultural difference as well as impressed that Jun knew enough about Western nursery rhymes to make the "three blind mice" joke. Robin had felt a little embarrassed that he hadn't noticed that. It was something he admired and sometimes envied about Gene, her ability to notice details like that about people and culture. Sometimes he wished she could go on business trips or to meetings with him to notice such nuances. On more than one occasion she had been able to sort out misunderstandings between Robin or his American colleagues and colleagues or clients from over seas because of her innate cultural sensitivity. He was looking forward to being home and running a couple interactions past her. All this was running through his mind as the plane taxied and the woman next to him was looking at him. Robin spaced out a little and continued to stare at her without seeing her. He was shaken out of it when the nose of the plane picked up off the ground and the young woman giggled softly. Robin blinked his eyes and nodded in apology as he turned back toward the window and pillow.

"It's OK." the woman said.

"What?" Robin looked back at her confused. He wasn't embarrassed.

"It's OK. Lots of men like to look at me." She explained. Robin was a little offended. He hadn't actually been looking at her but through her. He replied curtly.

"I'm sure they do, but I wasn't really looking at you. I'm just tired."

"Oh. OK. I see you have a ring. Don't worry. I won't tell her." She giggled. Robin didn't know which was going to be more annoying, the old woman or this stupid woman-child. He smiled a

sarcastic smile with half his mouth and turned back to his pillow. The young woman reached out with a thin, barely there hand and touched his shoulder.

"I'm going to America to be rich and famous. Maybe you like to know me?" She leaned forward and whispered at him. Now Robin was offended. He was pretty sure this was a sexual proposition. He had experienced this in a rough neighborhood in Seoul when he had gotten lost one time, but it surprised him to encounter it on the plane. He sat up straight and alert and looked directly at the young woman. He saw she was *very* young now. The make up, silk blouse and knock-off pumps made her appear grown-up at first glance, but take those things away and she might be one of Ricky and Jimmy's classmates. He was now both insulted by and concerned for this young person next to him. While thinking of what he wanted to say to, or ask, this girl he looked over her shoulder to see where the flight attendant was and caught sight of the old woman. She was staring directly at him attentively watching the interaction. Robin narrowed his eyes at her as he began to put together the situation. The old woman slowly shook her head back and forth in a "No" expression at him. Robin sat back but kept his face slightly turned toward the girl as he spoke softly but firmly.

"Look. I can see you are young." He began.

"I'm twenty one. More than old enough!" She said.

"I don't believe that for a minute, but even if you are, I'm not interested. If you need help we can call the flight attendant. Are you traveling alone?" Robin asked.

"I'm twenty one!" The girl repeated. "I'm more than old enough. I'm going to Hollywood. Going to be rich and famous. It's none of your business who I travel with. Never mind. Go to sleep fatty. I only like strong handsome man. Not like you."

Robin let out a small exasperated breath and furrowed his brow at her. While it was true he didn't have six pack abs, he also wasn't anything near fat; just soft and middle aged, certainly stronger than most of the guys he worked with, even the younger ones. He played racquetball once or twice a week at the club when he was home. Gene took a yoga class at the same time as his play slot. He played with Cory, the yoga instructor, Tracey's husband. They'd been playing together for five years now. He started to open his mouth to say something in reply but decided it wasn't worth the trouble this little girl could start for him. Instead he turned his face back toward the pillow and closed his eyes. He probably wasn't going to sleep though. Now he was worried about the wallet and phone in his pocket. She was probably an adept thief as well. If anything else strange happened before the plane landed he would alert the flight attendant.

The girl got up to use the bathroom three times in the duration of the flight. In between she seemed to drift in and out of consciousness. The last time she returned from the restroom she was sniffing and Robin thought he saw a faint powdery trace around her nose and cheek, but she used the back of her hand to wipe her face and it was gone. He couldn't be sure he saw anything. He did notice she became quite alert, however, and fidgety. But he reasoned with himself that she might just be excited for her trip to America. He too had been a little fidgety nearing the flight's descent his first time visiting Korea, and he was a grown man. Still... something about the whole interaction didn't seem right. He had spent most of the flight so far with his eyes closed pretending to sleep, but the whole time his senses were on edge waiting for something to happen. It was awful.

The flight attendant came around again with the beverage cart. This time Robin sat up and accepted a cup of burnt tasting coffee. The girl had one as well. As the flight attendant handed the steaming cup to Robin she asked, "Is everything alright, sir?" Robin was surprised. Did he look that uncomfortable or had the flight attendant seen something too? They locked eyes for a moment and then he gave a half smile looking at the girl who was blowing on her cup of coffee and shrugged slightly. The flight attendant's eyes widened and nodded ever so slightly, as if Robin's gesture confirmed something for her. Then she pushed the cart to the front of the aisle without serving the last few rows. She picked up the a phone receiver from the nearest attendant's station and spoke quietly in Korean to someone on the other end then returned to finish the beverage service. Robin sipped his coffee and opened the window for the first time the entire flight. He could just make out the shores of Hawai'i on the horizon. The girl lurched across Robin's lap excitedly almost spilling both her and his coffee all over him as she squealed, "Is that America?!"

Now Robin was sure that she was either high or just a child. No grown woman with her senses about her that he knew behaved that way.

"Yes." He replied matter-of-factly while pushing her out of his lap. "That's Hawai'i."

"Hawai'i!" the girl squealed with delight. Just then the pilot came over the loud speaker announcing that they were 20 minutes ahead of schedule and had approximately five and a half hours left in the flight. The girl slumped back into her seat with a pout.

"It's so long." she complained. Robin pretended he hadn't heard her and decided to finish the flight watching in-flight TV. He pulled his brief case out from under the seat and fished out his in-flight head set and plugged it in. The girl produced an emery board and filed her nails.

After an almost unwatchable Wayans brothers movie, an hour of ESPN and a couple reruns of crappy sit-coms, the TV shut off and the pilot came back on the loud speaker. The girl had been asleep and the sudden blast of the pilot's voice startled her awake. She grabbed both armrests to steady herself and inadvertently touched Robin's wedding ring. He pulled his hand away in recoil and she giggled. The pilot announced they were about to begin their descent to LAX. He made some additional announcement about connecting flights, the weather and the local time before he asked everyone to return their tray tables and seats to their original upright position and thanked everyone for flying Korean Air. The flight attendant came around one last time to pick up any trash. She nodded furtively to Robin as he handed her an empty cup and the plastic wrappers from his pillow and ear plugs.

As they taxied the runway Robin turned his phone on and texted Gene. 'Just landed at LAX. 45 min layover until the connecting flight to San Jose. See you in a few hours. Love you.' He waited for her to text back her usual, 'Can't wait. Love you too!' but it never came. He was a little worried. The girl next to him took out a phone and read a text she received, but did not reply or send a text out. Instead, she looked over her shoulder in the direction of the old woman who had her nose buried in her phone attentively. As the plane stopped and the door was opened everyone stood up in triumph. The girl pulled a smallish purse out from under the seat and pressed herself into the aisle of eager passengers. Robin slung the strap of his brief case over his shoulder and squeezed into the aisle to get his carry on. The girl was already at the door of the plane. It was as if she has squeezed between everyone with her tiny size. Robin looked back but didn't see the old woman anywhere as he filed off the plane with everyone else. His eyes were happily adjusting to all the signs in the terminal in English...and then he saw it.

Passing the duty-free and heading toward customs he saw the girl and the old woman. The old woman had made it past the customs agent already and was on the other side digging through that horrid bag. Ahead of him three police officers and two men in dress slacks and shirts carrying fire arms were approaching the girl from three different angles. An officer in uniform approached her first. The girl stopped and attempted to run to a near by ladies room but the two men in dress slacks cut her off and stopped her. She crumpled to the floor and began to sob. Robin saw the flight attendant speaking with another woman in some type of law enforcement uniform at a desk, and the old woman looking on with deer in the head light eyes. Then he saw

the old woman turn and disappear into the crowd. A group of people gathered around the girl and the officers to watch the drama unfold. Robin tucked his crumpled ticket from the flight into his back pants pocket, decided he wasn't interested and just wanted to get to his terminal and maybe grab a sandwich. He was pretty sure there was a deli counter style place in the terminal he was headed to. He was hungry since he pretended to sleep through the meal service on the flight. That stuff was usually the worst anyway.

Robin hated LAX. Once he made it through customs he had to exit the building and either run like hell, or grab a quick shuttle to another building where the terminal for his flight to San Jose was located. He was lucky this time and a shuttle was just arriving as he stepped out and onto the sidewalk. As he stepped up onto the shuttle he felt someone bump into him from behind. He turned around to see the old woman from the earlier flight. She muttered something at him that he didn't quite catch but sounded something like, 'hope you're happy with yourself'. He looked at her with disgust saying, "Excuse me?"

The woman smiled sarcastically and answered, " Pardon me. Watch your step." Robin shook his head and turned to situate himself with his bags on the shuttle. He sat near the front and the old woman sat in the back. He purposely didn't look at her though he could feel her staring a hole in his face the entire short ride across the airport campus. Somehow she got off the shuttle ahead of Robin. As he exited the vehicle he saw her getting into a shiny new white Mercedes with two very well dressed men. One was behind the wheel, the other was putting her bag in the trunk of the car. As she sat in the front passenger seat Robin could see the old woman and the driver having an animated conversation. As Robin passed the car to enter the other terminal the driver turned his head sharply and looked at him. He was wearing sunglasses so Robin couldn't see his eyes, but he knew he was looking at him. The old woman was too, while still talking to the driver. The driver's face followed Robin, nodding a "Yes" gesture" as he slipped in the door of the building out of the old woman and driver's view. Robin thought to himself, 'Crazy LA trash.' and headed for the sandwich stand. He had twenty minutes until his flight to San Jose boarded and he was starving.

A woman was announcing his boarding group as Robin approached the gate, roast beef sandwich and sparkling water in hand. As he got to the ticket attendant he shoved his hand in his back pocket mistakingly looking for his old ticket instead of the fresh new ticket in his interior blazer pocket. For a second he panicked when he found no ticket. Then he remembered the

fresh ticket was in his blazer and promptly presented it to the attendant who looked at him impatiently. Her face was pulled so tight you could almost see her teeth through the skin above her lip. She was trying to look twenty but her hands told a different story. She was at least fifty, if not older. Robin smiled plaintively at her and sauntered on his way. This flight wasn't quite full and the plane was much smaller, two seats on the left and three seats on the right, one aisle and one restroom. Robin found his seat and stowed his bags. Tucking his used ticket in his back pocket, as was his custom to keep used and unused tickets separate and unconfused, it struck him that the other ticket was missing. Did the old woman take it? What on Earth would she want his old ticket for? He shrugged the thought off as he sat down unwrapped his sandwich and stuffed the first bite in his face. The ticket probably just fell out when she bumped into him. It didn't matter anyway. He had no reason to think he'd ever see her again. It was going to be a great story to tell at the office, and he was almost home. He had an hour and a half to San Jose, then four and a half hours to Detroit. After that it was just about an hour's drive to Troy, as long as rush hour traffic wasn't too heavy. It wasn't usually heavy this time of year and he only had carry on this time so he didn't need to wait at the baggage claim. He might even beat the 4:30 rush and make it home faster than expected.

Taxiing at San Jose he pulled out his phone to check if Gene had texted him back yet. She hadn't. He considered calling, but he wasn't sure where the gate for the DET flight was and he only had 20 minutes between flights. Walking toward the flight monitors he took the last slug of the sparkling water and tossed the bottle in the recycling. He was relieved to see his gate was just a few yards away and headed in that direction just in time to board. A young Filipino man was the ticket attendant and smiled at him. Robin nodded and boarded the full flight. What appeared to be a girls water polo team was already on the plane and singing some silly team song. Travel was never a dull moment. He found his seat and shoved the ear plugs from the Korean flight in his ears and nodded off. Once the flight was in the air the girls settled down and talked quietly or watched in-flight TV. Robin didn't open his eyes until the flight touched down in Detroit. The man seated next to him was about the same age and probably in a similar business. Glancing at him he was nearly a mirror image of Robin: mid forties, blazer, no wrinkle slacks, oxford, sensible shoes, leather briefcase with shoulder strap and black carry on. He glanced back at Robin and nodded in telepathic agreement. Silently the two men slid off the plane and to their long-term parked vehicles.

Robin tossed his bag in the back of the Grand Cherokee and hopped in the drivers seat. The vehicle had been parked in the sun and he could smell the warm sweet lingering scent of Gene's perfume. Before pulling out of the lot Robin checked his phone once again to see if Gene had replied. She hadn't. He was worried. He also saw for the umpteenth time the nearly twenty calls from his mother over the past two weeks and three un-listened-to messages. He decided to listen to the messages before attempting to call Gene. He suspected Gene's non-response and his mother's plethora of communication were probably related. Robin hated his mother, but he was careful not to let on to Gene this was the case. He knew if Gene knew he hated his mother more than she did that Gene would complain to him twice as much out of interpreted camaraderie and he wasn't interested in that either. Gene gained satisfaction and felt better after a Joan-inspired rant, while such expressions just made him hate himself. He tried to explain it to her once a couple of years ago after a debacle at his fortieth birthday celebration. Joan had been in rare form. She and her toady, Gertrude Donovan, got smashed and taunted Gene that she better use her eggs before they all scrambled. Robin called a cab and made the women leave immediately. Once they were gone Telly and Sonia, Robin and Gene's best couple friends, had felt awkward and left the restaurant. Gene had cried inconsolably in public. They hadn't been back to Ernie's since and it had been their favorite date night spot until that point. Still, given all of Gene's sensitivity and empathy for everyone and everything else, he couldn't understand why he had to explain this to her about himself. To her credit, after he told her that night that talking about his mom made him feel bad about himself, Gene had cut way back on how much she complained about Joan. But it had come at a cost. She also stopped sharing a lot of other stuff he used to enjoy talking about too, like her work and what she did while he was away on travel. Their conversations over the past couple years had become increasingly one sided with him doing most of the talking. Gene rarely offered much about herself anymore and this latest thing with the camera was ridiculous to him. Why she was letting some neighborhood kids get the best of her was beyond him. So they knocked on the door? So what? Just because the phone rings doesn't mean you have to answer it. Right? Why was this any different? He punched the passcode in for his voicemail and listened to the first message.

"Robby, Honey, it's Momma. Call me back please."

Robin deleted the message. He knew his mother was up to something when she called herself "Momma". Then he listened to the second message.

“Robby, Sweetie, it’s Momma. I really need to talk to you. I’m so worried about Genie. Mrs. Donovan keeps calling me telling me she’s running around the yard in her bathrobe talking to herself. You should get her to see Dr. Shelton, you know the wonderful psychiatrist who runs that widow support group I went to? His number is 248-375-2121. I already called him. He’s accepting patients. He’s expecting your call. Now, call me. I need to know you are OK. Love you, Sweetie. Bye.”

Robin saved this one as he shook his head in disbelief. There is no way he believed that Gene was out in the yard in her robe talking to herself. Nor were they going to call any psychiatrist. Why his mother and her friend were so cruel to Gene he didn’t understand. He knew how much Gene hated being called Genie...especially by his mother. “OK Joan.” Robin said out loud. “What’s this last one.” and he heard the third message.

“Robby! It’s me! Momma! Call me immediately! Mrs. Donovan said there are police and medics at your house with Genie! I told you that poor girl wasn’t right. You never should have married her. She made your father so sick. She’s going to do the same to you, and herself! Please call me and let me know she hasn’t hurt you! Love you, Sweetie. Call me! Bye.”

Now Robin was alarmed. Was Gene hurt? Was that why she wasn’t returning his text? He found himself wishing he had installed the camera viewing app to his phone before he had left instead of poo-pooing Gene. He saved the last message from his mother and then dialed Gene’s cell phone. It rang three times before she picked up. He could tell she had been crying.

“Hello.” Gene answered flatly.

“Babe it’s me. I just got in my car and am getting ready to head to the house. What’s going on? What’s wrong? Are you OK?” He knew better than to mention his mother.

“I’m fine. I’ll tell you about it when you get here. You’ll see. Just come home.” Gene sounded defeated and small, not the Gene Robin knew and loved. He was scared, and the fact that he felt scared, scared him even more.

“OK Sweetheart. I’m on my way. Do you want me to pick anything up for dinner?” He offered.

“I don’t care. What ever you want. I’m not hungry. Maybe a bottle of wine or something harder... maybe vodka.”

Now Robin knew it was serious. Gene only drank vodka when they went out and could get fancy cocktails.

“It’s OK, Love. I’ll be there soon. Love you.” He cooed.

“I love you too. Bye.” And Gene hung up before Robin could say bye back to her.

CHAPTER 3

Old Dykes Pointing Fingers

The mid after noon sun fell through the sliding glass door in Joan's kitchen as she sat at the table opening her mail. She lit a cigarette and let it balance between her lips while she picked at her cuticle, grabbed a loose emery board and filed a jagged edge off the thumb nail she was using to slice open envelopes. There was at least two weeks of mail splayed across the table top. The smoke curled around her face and burned her eyes making it hard to see. Joan smoked intermittently throughout her life; mostly when she was worried, or more accurately, when she was making worry in her son's life. Robin didn't know about his mother's periodic habit. She had made a big show of quitting when Frank died and as far as Robin knew she hadn't had another "cancer stick" since. It was a soap box she regularly climbed on when they were together in public and saw someone smoking. She'd say something like, "Look at that selfish fool, killing themselves and everyone around them. Don't they know we all need to breath?" Robin would agree and praise her for having had the good sense and will power to quit. Joan would soak up Robin's praise like a sponge. Sitting alone in her home now, she coughed and the lit cigarette fell from her lips into a pile of opened junk mail sitting in front of her. As she coughed the fluffy pile of torn envelopes and credit card offers began to smolder a bit. She grabbed her glass and tossed the remaining contents on the small fire, forgetting just how strong Bacardi 151 is. The tiny smolder that could have been put out with the palm of her hand shot up in flames and started a much larger problem. Joan jumped up from the table in a panic then saw the extinguisher Robin had mounted to the wall next to the gas stove for her. Joan pulled the lever and drenched the entire table with white foam. She dropped the extinguisher and fell forward, hands on her knees panting, adrenaline shooting through her body.

As she stood up catching her breath, she saw the half empty bottle of Bacardi on the counter and grabbed it. She removed the top and took a long swig straight from the bottle, then lit a fresh Virginia Slim. The kitchen was a mess. In addition to the fresh mess on the table, there was a pile of dishes overflowing from the sink and bags of garbage stacked against the center island that needed to be taken out. Her housekeeper, Doris, had quit six weeks earlier. Joan told Gertrude it was because Doris' mother was ill in the Philippines and she was going back to care for her, but that was a lie and Gertrude knew it. Gertrude ran into Doris at the market one day

and Doris had told her why she quit. She said she quit because Joan was mean drunk. She said Joan had insisted she only had a drink when there was something to celebrate and Doris had told her something about her whole life being one big party then and walked out the front door leaving her key in the bowl on the side table. Gertrude had laughed. Joan didn't know this and neither Gertrude or Doris had any intention of telling her. Robin didn't know Doris had quit. The last time he visited his mother he had taken out the trash, wiped down the kitchen and put dishes in the dishwasher. Joan had told Robin Doris was on vacation. He hadn't asked any more questions after that and now she couldn't get a hold of him. She just knew that bitch wife of his had something to do with it. She had probably poisoned him or something. It would be just like one of *her kind* to do that. She had to get that girl out of their life some how. She just knew if it weren't for Gene that Robin would be there taking care of *her*, Joan. It was driving her mad.

Joan opened the pantry to get a big trash bag to clean up the mess on the table. She had to get that taken care of as soon as possible in case Robin happened to stop by. She couldn't let him see that. He'd have too many questions. She opened the door, stepped in the closet and tugged the pulley to turn on the ceiling light. The bulb flashed and popped. "Damn it anyway!" Joan barked, cigarette in hand. She absentmindedly ashed on the floor. Under the sink she found the flashlight Robin had left last time he had unclogged the sink for her. Back in the pantry she scanned the shelves for the trash bags, not the kitchen size, but the thick black liners she used for the big can in the garage. The beam of light hit the case of Bacardi. She opened the flap and counted how many bottles she had left. When she heard the company was no longer going to make the 151 she had purchased three cases of twenty four bottles. The first case she gave away as Christmas gifts. A couple bottles she let them pour at the bar at Frank's funeral and Robin's wedding. She was now down to how many bottles? She ran her finger over the tops of the remaining bottles...one...two...three...four...five...six...seven...eight...nine...plus the open bottle on the counter. She was going to have start being more careful with the stuff. No more sharing. She didn't have much left and she didn't think she was going to be able to find any more. On the shelf above the box of Bacardi she found the box of thick trash liners. She grabbed the box with her cigarette hand, turned off the flash light and returned it to its place under the sink. Her cigarette was down to the filter. She sucked in one last puff off it and dropped it into the sink of dirty dishes. It made a small hiss as it hit some old coffee in the bottom of a three day old coffee cup.

Standing next to the table she spread open a bag holding one point against the table with her hip and the other with her right hand. Then with her left arm she swept the entire contents of the table into the bag. The arm of her pink oxford was smeared with half dissolved ink from glossy mailers that hadn't burned but were still saturated in the fire-stop foam, greasy ash, and some salsa from a paper plate she had forgotten was on the table as well. She slipped the blouse off and shoved it in the bag as well. The table was smeared looking and needed wiped, but, in all, things weren't that bad. There was just one small spot directly under where the blaze had flared that looked burned, and it really was a *very* small spot. A placemat would cover it easily and if Robin saw it she'd tell him it was from the bottom of a hot pot or some such thing. Not a big deal. She knew there had been a couple bills in the mail that she hadn't opened yet, but nothing was over due. What ever they were they would send her a first notice once they came up over due. She always paid her bills. Being late on one or two this one time wasn't going to hurt anything. Besides, if it did she would just call and play the helpless old widow card. It always worked. People were so easily persuaded once she let them know how hard her life was, being a widow and having such a sick daughter in law causing strife. Joan slipped her feet into an old pair of Frank's sandal slides she still kept by his chair and took the bag of burnt evidence out to the dumpster in the parking lot behind her condo. Ed Corbit was out letting his dog take a crap. For some reason he kept asking Joan out on a date. She had told him no five times already, but he just kept asking. She tried to tip toe but was a little tipsy from the 151 and Frank's sandals were far too big on her feet. She stumbled and yelped when she hit her head on the corner of the painted concrete wall masking the dumpster from overt view. Ed noticed her and started in her direction, dragging the pooping pooch along by his leash.

Joan tossed the bag into the dumpster then slipped off the sandals and headed back towards the condo as fast as she could but she wasn't fast enough. Ed cut her off just in front of her back patio. She could see the sliding glass door into her kitchen just over his shoulder. Ed was standing in front of her with a big goody grin. His mutt-dog was cowering at his feet with it's tail between it's legs. Joan hated the animal and the dog wasn't fond of her either.

"Hey there Joanie-girl!" Ed said.

"My name is Joan, or Mrs. Randall, Ed." Joan replied.

"Why, Widow Randall, how are you today, ma'am?" Ed mocked with a chuckle.

"Ed, I'm not in the mood, please let me by."

“You shall not pass!” Ed chided mimicking the Gandalf character from that stupid movie Robin and Gene forced Joan to go see with them that one Christmas.

“I mean it Ed. I’m not in the mood.” Joan shifted her weight to one side and placed her fist on her hip, cocking her head the other direction trying to look serious and tough. In her other hand she had her late husband’s shoes.

“Oh, Joanie, you are too much. So what’s a guy gotta do to snag a dinner date with a hot ticket like you? I have a buy-one-get-one dinner coupon for Sero’s I clipped out of the bulletin this past Sunday burnin’ a hole in my pocket. Whadaya say? You and me? Tomorrow night?” Ed looked so hopeful.

“I say blow it out your ass, Ed. I’m not interested. Why don’t you ask Eleanor down the block there? She’s been after you since your wife left ya ten years ago.” This was mean and Joan knew it. Eleanor was developmentally disabled and sweet on any man with a dog. She hoped Ed would finally get the message. Ed just laughed.

“Oh, Joanie. You’re just too much. That’s what I like about you. You got spirit, girl! Well, if not tomorrow maybe some other time.” He looked down at his poor pooch who now had the leash wrapped three times around his ankles. “Come on Dillon. Let’s go home and find your Milk Bones.” Ed stepped out of the loop around his ankles and tugged on the leash making the dog follow.

“And make sure to pick up your dog’s shit you old fart!” Joan called after him. Ed just laughed and stepped over a turd. Joan rushed across her patio and through the sliding door.

Once back in her kitchen she scanned the room deciding what needed to be done next. On the handle of the oven she grabbed a stained tea towel that said in faded letters: ‘Anything Goes at Grandma’s House’. It had been a gift from the twins a few years ago. She dampened it under the faucet and wiped the remaining grime and residue off the table top. Then she rinsed and wrung it out and tossed it down the stairs to the basement where her laundry room was located. The rag landed on a pile of laundry that had been accumulating for the past six weeks. She would have to do a load soon or go buy some new underwear and towels at Target. Maybe Gert would want to make a trip. She always needed litter and Fancy Feast for her beasts. Plus that would give her a reason to swing by Robin’s house and see for herself what was going on over there. It was only 2PM. He would be home from work around 6 if he was in the office. The last message she had left Robby had been that morning after Gert had called to tell her about the cop and medic and Gene in her bathrobe. So far things were going as planned and no one was

any the wiser. Robin had even confided in her like he used to! The last time he stopped by he mentioned something about Gene putting up a camera and how he didn't feel comfortable with it on the house. He said he felt like Gene was being, what was the word he had used? Unreasonable? Unrealistic? Un-something. Whatever it was he had said, it had been music to Joan's ears.

Stomping up the stairs to get her purse and a fresh blouse to put over her sleeveless t-shirt, Joan caught sight of herself in the mirror. Ugh. Her hair was a mess and her eye make up was smeared from the smoke in her eyes. She decided to take a quick shower and freshen up entirely. She didn't want Gert or Robin or Gene smelling cigarettes on her, especially since she had read Gene the riot act this past New Year's Eve when she caught her having a puff with one of her scum-bag college friends. She just knew those two were sleeping together behind Robin's back. She had said something to Robin a few days later but he had told her mind her business, that Jeremy was just a friend and besides he was gay. Joan told Gert she thought her poor boy was under some spell, that Gene and her type were all witches and that Jeremy was "far to macho looking to be a gay". Gert had nodded in agreement. Joan decided to ring Gert and let her know she was on her way over. The phone only rang once.

"Hello?" Gertrude answered.

"Gert. It's me. Joan."

"Oh hi Joan. I was just going to call you. Are you going to book club tomorrow?"

Joan had forgotten about book club. The book was right there on her night stand but she hadn't read the chapter for this week. Maybe she'd do that tonight or tomorrow morning.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe. I haven't read the chapter yet. But hey, I wanted to ask you something."

"What's that?" Gertrude asked as if she had been expecting an inquiry.

"You need litter or Fancy Feast? I was gonna head over to Target to pick up a couple things."

"As a matter of fact I do need some litter." Gertrude said conspiratorially. "And maybe you can check in on that boy of yours?"

"Exactly!" Joan proclaimed. "I just need to jump in the shower real quick. I've been cleaning up over here and need to get the stink off before I go out and anyone sees me. See you in about an hour or so."

"Sounds good. I'll be here." Gertrude replied.

"Okie-dokie. Bye."

“Bye.”

Joan cradled the receiver, stripped down and got in the shower. She scrubbed her hair twice just to be sure the cigarette smell was all gone. Once she dressed she brushed her teeth and smeared on some eye liner and mascara and a purplish lipstick Gene had given her for Christmas. She decided to put on a short sleeve t-shirt weight maxi dress because it was one of the first things in her closet plus Gertrude was usually wearing some kind of hippy dress and they could be matchy-matchy like school girls. Gertrude and Joan had hit it off immediately at Dr. Shelton's *Widows 101* group. Both had a caustic sense of humor and a mean streak. Both women enjoyed a drink when they met, but they had learned *how to drink* together. Drinking, gossiping, and meddling were their favorite things to do. Well, those things *and* book club. Joan tolerated Gertrude's cats and Gertrude tolerated Joan's sons. They were the best of friends and right now they were working really hard at “getting poor Genie the help she so desperately needs.” Or so they said.

The truth was, there was absolutely nothing wrong with Gene. Gene was a very good person. Joan was just terribly jealous of Gene. Gene had everything Joan wanted. Gene was talented, well liked by her friends and colleagues, kind, and smart. She also had a clean, tidy home that she and Robin owned, and most of all, the thing that bothered Joan, Gene had Robin. Of course, Joan had her older son, Tim, as well. But Tim had moved to Australia to be closer to Melanie's family when they had gotten married, then decided to stay there after the divorce to be close to his children. Joan and Gertrude had made a trip to visit once the year Robin turned forty, but Tim had told her to never come back. The two women had behaved horribly and hadn't even brought a gift for the twins who had, up until that point, never even met their grandmother. It irritated Joan every time Gene mentioned anything about sending something to the twins for their birthday or Christmas. Joan never bothered to send so much as a card. She was the grandma. She felt it was the twin's place to call her. They never sent her a birthday card either, she had told Robin the one time he said something.

Before walking out the door to her KIA, Joan cupped her hand in front of her face to check her breath. She wanted to make sure you couldn't smell the Bacardi or the cigarettes. She didn't think so, but just to be sure she'd go through the McDonald's drive thru at the end of the block and get a cup of coffee on her way to pick up Gertrude. Coffee covers everything. Then she remembered something. Dillon! That dog was good for one thing and one thing only. Shit. She

dug a plastic bag out of the trunk of her car and ran around back to collect Ed's dog's poop. Until recently it had annoyed Joan that Ed never picked up after his animal, but then she had found a use for the turds. Wrapping the bag inside out around her hand she collected the feces, sealed the bag and tossed it a box in her trunk. Then she looked over both shoulders to see if there was anyone watching her and hopped in the car. It was 3:15 when she pulled out of the McDonalds parking lot with her coffee. She was running a little longer than she told Gert, but Gert would wait. She always did. Besides, it was only a couple miles away and what else was Gert going to do? Nothing. That's what.

When Joan pulled into Gertrude's driveway she was careful to pull all the way to the back out of sight of Robin's house. She didn't want them to see her car and know she was around until she was ready to knock on the door. She parked the car in front of the detached garage in Gertrude's back yard. She could see the old Cadillac parked through the garage windows. It had been Felix's car. Gertrude hadn't driven in years. The last time she had tried to take it out of the garage she smashed the right headlight trying to get it out. Instead, Gertrude called a cab, or Joan drove her wherever she wanted to go. The two women had considered being roommates, but Joan couldn't stand the cats. Besides, having her own place had grown on Joan. She could do what ever she wanted without anyone knowing, like smoke, or watch Orange is the New Black and jerk-off, if she wanted.

Joan got out of the car and knocked on Gertrude's back door. Gert called from the front room, "It's open." Joan opened the door and stepped over a pile of cat litter the cats had dug out of the litter boxes just inside. She didn't know how Gertrude lived with that. Joan walked through the kitchen and dining room to the front sitting room where she found Gertrude peeking through the drapes up at Gene's house.

"What do you see?" Joan asked.

"Nothing right now. She just went out and got the mail a few minutes ago." Gertrude replied excitedly. "I don't think Robin is ignoring you. I think he's out of town. I haven't seen the car in days." Gertrude finished as she pulled her face from between the dusty drapes and turned to greet her friend and partner in crime. "Did you bring any more with you?" She asked Joan expectantly.

"Oh. Yeah. I forgot. I saw Ed and his idiot dog earlier. I have a fresh deposit in a baggie in the trunk. I'll sit it by the back door before we leave. You know that old dip-stick asked me out to

dinner again! Said he has a coupon for Sero's. Like that would sweeten the pot or something."

Joan shook her head in disbelief and Gertrude laughed.

"Are you kidding? What an old fool. What'd you say?"

"I told him to blow it out his ass and ask the retard down the street instead."

The two women cackled. Then Gertrude stepped into Joan and kissed her on the cheek. Joan looked her in the eyes and asked, "So are you ready to go?"

Gertrude took her friend's hand and rubbed the interior of her palm. Joan kissed her back. "Get your purse, you old dyke and let's go." Joan told her.

"OK. I just need to pee first."

"OK, but hurry up."

Gertrude disappeared up the stairs for a couple minutes then Joan heard the toilet flush and the sink run. Gertrude reappeared drying her hands on the front of her muumuu.

"I wish you wouldn't do that." Joan said as she looked at the two damp spots on the front of her friend's dress.

"What?" Gertrude asked.

"That!" Joan replied nodding toward Gertrude's dress with her chin. "You have two big damp spots. People are going to think you're incontinent."

"Oh, who gives a shit?! If anyone says anything to me I'll just go pee on them."

"Stop it. Now let's go." Joan picked up Gertrude's purse from a near by chair and handed it to her. The two women stepped out the back door toward the car. As Gertrude locked the door behind them Joan got the bag of dog poop out of the trunk and sat it on top of a covered bucket that was next to the steps leading up to the back door.

"Is Connor going to stop by tonight to get this?" Joan inquired without looking up at Gertrude.

"Probably not. I told him to not come by for a couple days after this morning. You should have seen it Joan! It was beautiful. She's so upset! You're a genius!"

"Yeah, well, it's only going to work if that boy Connor keeps his moth shut. How much did you give him?"

"Oh, I gave him enough."

"How much is enough?"

"Twenty five a week..."

Joan cut Gertrude off. "Twenty five a week! You think that's enough?" Joan spat as she unlocked the doors of the car and the women climbed in.

"You didn't let me finish." Gertrude protested as she buckled her seatbelt. "You never let me finish."

"OK. Sorry. Go ahead. Finish." Joan goaded.

"I am. I am. I've been giving him twenty five a week plus three of my methadone." Gertrude finished.

"But what are you taking for your back? Do you have enough to get through the week?" Joan was concerned.

"Plenty. I've just been cutting them in half and adding more vodka to my Crystal Light. Don't worry. It's worth it to see that stupid girl loose her mind up there after all she puts you through."

Joan tipped her head to the side and smiled at her good friend.

"Gert, I love you, you know. For the first time in my life I actually have someone who loves me as much as I love them." and she patted Gertrude's hand as it rested on the armrest between them.

"Oh, shut up you old dyke and drive. My cats are hungry and I know you saw the litter in the mud room when you came in."

Joan put the car in reverse and backed out of the driveway. Gertrude turned on the radio and looked for WDET. *All Things Considered* came through the speakers.

"I think that Ari Shapiro is Jewish, but I really like him." Gertrude said.

"Oh yeah? Since when do you give a shit about Jews or the news?" Joan retorted.

"Oh, you know Felix and I used to listen to NPR all the time. Public broadcasting was the only thing he ever listened to or let me listen to."

"Yeah, and that old fart also said lesbians were all going to burn in hell."

"We're not lesbians, Joan. We're bi-sexual."

"Oh, are you dating men again now?"

"Well, no."

"That's what I thought. Look, I spent my whole life being what my parents wouldn't beat me for. I'm not going to go advertising things now, but I'm also not going to pretend you don't stick your tongue down my throat from time to time or play with my tits." Joan snarled.

"I'm still attracted to men too, Joan. You can't change that."

"Oh. OK. You're right. I'm sorry. Just as long as you don't go accepting any coupon dinner offers to Sero's any time soon." Joan laughed. Gertrude reached over and touched her hand on the wheel.

"I don't even like Greeks." Gertrude joked.

“Shut up. You loved My Big Fat Greek Wedding.”

“Oh yeah. That’s right. And I like George Antonopoulos too! Oh and gyros!” Gertrude laughed so hard she began to cough. “Hey, wanna stop at the Coney after Target and have an early dinner?” she managed after recovering from the laughing-coughing fit.

“Eh...maybe for carry out. I want to be back by six and meet Robin before he even gets in the house.” Joan answered.

“Are you sure that’s wise, Joan? Maybe give them a couple minutes. I don’t think she cleaned the dog shit off her front porch yet, but the railing is in the way of my view even with binoculars.”

“What?!” Joan screamed. “She left the dog shit for my Robby to find and clean up after he’s been out of town for weeks?! That horrid little slut. I can’t wait to see her taken away. I hope they stick her in a straight jacket.”

“Joan, don’t you think you’re taking it a bit far? We’re just trying to split them up, right?” Gertrude furrowed her brow at Joan who was now looking for a parking spot.

“Do you have your cripple placard with you?” Joan asked Gertrude.

“Yeah. Wait. I’ll find it.”

Joan pulled into the first spot right in front of the store and let the car idle until Gertrude pulled the blue and white golden ticket out of her bag and hung it on the rear view mirror.

“Have you told Robin about us yet?” She asked Joan as the placard swung back and forth gently.

Joan pressed the parking break and removed the keys from the ignition and turned toward Gertrude. “No. My love life is none of his goddamn business. He tries to control me enough as it is. Unless he’s going to leave that stupid cheating good for nothing tramp and let me move in like his father wanted I’m not telling him anything.” Joan pouted. Gertrude pursed her lips before she replied.

“Why don’t you just move in with me? I have plenty of room and the cats never go in the other bed rooms. You can have two rooms all to yourself, and a bathroom, totally cat free. Plus you wouldn’t have to deal with Ed or his dog anymore and think of all the gas money you’d save.” Tears were welling up in Gertrude’s eyes.

Joan was getting mad now. Keys in hand she pointed her index finger at Gertrude and shook it gently as she spoke. “We’ve been through this, Gert. Do you really want to put Felix’s stuff in storage? Those rooms with all that stuff still smell like him on hot days. I don’t want to be in the middle of that. Besides you wouldn’t like living with me. It would ruin all the mystery.”

Gertrude had never even been inside *Joan's* condo. A couple times she had waited in the car while Joan ran in to get something, but Joan always had a good excuse why she shouldn't come in. She was beginning to think she was hiding something. Gertrude balled her fist and pointed her finger right back at Joan.

"You know that's not true. You're just scared to tell everyone you're gay. You're a coward!" Joan gasped.

"Was I coward that time I let you kiss me in the movie theater?! Was I a coward that time we held hands at the mall?" Joan was livid.

A tear escaped from Gertrude's eye. "Now you know we were the only ones at that matinee and holding hands doesn't count. We're old. For all anyone knew we were helping each other from falling over. Besides, I used to hold my sister's hand all the time when we were kids." Gertrude was now crying.

"Kids and grown women are two different things. Now stop crying you old bat or I'm going to cry too." And with that Joan burst into tears and threw her arms around her friend, and no one walking by even noticed.

CHAPTER 4

Sometimes It Snows In April

On the front passenger seat next to him, Robin kept an eye on the bag of egg rolls, shrimp fried rice and Chinese broccoli as he slowed at intersections and took corners. A bottle of Grey Goose rolled back and forth in a bag on the floor in front of the seat. Wei's was the best Chinese place in town. Even the guys that periodically came over on business from China liked going there. Wei's grandma lived with him and made strange looking dishes with mystery ingredients and strong aromas that were evidently very authentically Chinese, more so than the broccoli beef or sweet and sour pork. Wei had a three bedroom apartment above the restaurant and his grandma kept a greenhouse garden in a small backyard area. The first time Robin and Gene had dinner at Wei's a table of Chinese speaking guests who appeared to be celebrating something were seated next to them. Robin had made a face when Wei brought out a steaming platter of something smelly and placed it in the center of the rowdy table. The Chinese guests dug into the platter with gusto. Wei had caught Robin's grimace and laughed then came over to take their order.

Taking out a pen and tablet, Wei had asked immediately with a totally straight face nodding toward the now almost empty plate, "You want one of that?" Robin had been embarrassed and blushed to his ears. Gene stifled a laugh and Wei laughed loudly grabbing his belly until Robin laughed too. Then he introduced himself as the owner and politely explained how the dish was a regional delicacy that his grandmother made for guests visiting from China. He told Robin not to order it. He promised he wouldn't like it. "I don't know." Gene had retorted. "Looks like it was delicious." But she wasn't serious and they stuck to their Chinese restaurant stand-by favorites: egg rolls, shrimp fried rice, and Chinese broccoli with black mushrooms in oyster sauce. Other than them and the rowdy Chinese party, the restaurant had been empty that night. When Wei brought out the food he sat down with Robin and Gene and opened a beer while they enjoyed their meal. The three got to be fast friends. Before they left Wei showed them his grandma's garden of exotic Chinese vegetables and herbs and told Robin to bring any of his business associates from China for an unexpected treat any time. He just needed to call in the morning and let him know what Province they were visiting from so his grandma could customize their meal. The first time he hosted guys from China he took Wei up on his very generous offer. It had made the difference in the week of meetings and helped Robin sign a very lucrative production

contract for exhaust systems for a group of smelting plants in Guizhou. Robin and Gene had been regulars ever since and Wei's grandma was always sending Gene home with some strange smelling tea or salve. Gene swore the stuff always worked. Robin was skeptical but gracious.

Now, the car filled with the aroma of a good dinner, Robin was acutely aware of how hungry he was. Korean food wasn't his favorite and on this trip almost everything had been super spicy. Plus, as a joke, for the first five days his business associates had only taken him to places where insects were the main course. The plant had been in a more rural area and it wasn't until they made it back to Seoul that he had been able to find something he found more palatable. There was a McDonald's next to his hotel. A Big Mac and fries had never tasted so good. He was happy to be back State-side where he could have a *regular* meal. As he turned the corner onto Larkspur he had to stop short to keep from hitting Connor, the kid from up the street. He looked like he was in a hurry and wasn't paying attention to where he was going, riding his bike down the wrong side of the road. Robin thought of Connor as a kid, but he really wasn't a "kid" anymore. He must have been at least 24 or 25 now and was still living with his widowed father five houses up the street from Robin and Gene's place. When Robin and Gene bought the house ten years earlier Connor had been the local high school's star pitcher. He had hoped to get a ride to MSU for ball, but his grades weren't even good enough to get into State's English department, and his senior year's season stats hadn't been great. It was the year his mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer and she didn't make it. Connor had almost flunked out entirely and even spent a couple months in J Building at Children's Village. Gene had taken meals over a couple times a week while Gloria was going through chemo and Robin had helped Pat get a good deal on a new handicap accessible van. Connor had just slipped through the cracks. No one had been able to really reach him after his Mom passed and Pat wouldn't make eye contact with anyone on the street anymore.

Something was up with Connor lately. Even Robin could see that. Over the past six months the once strong looking kid had become gaunt and frail looking and always had big circles under his eyes. His clothes hung on him like sagging skin, and he always seemed to have a different bike. Connor muttered something under his breath as the tires of Robin's Grand Cherokee screeched a little against the pavement. Robin threw his arm at the Chinese food to keep it from tumbling off the seat and onto the floor.

Pulling into his driveway Robin felt relieved to be home and a little apprehensive about the state in which he was going to find Gene. He had thought she sounded defeated and small on the phone earlier, but reflecting on it he wasn't so sure. Was she still angry with him? He felt bad about giving her such a hard time over the camera, but it wasn't like Gene to hold a grudge. Something else was going on and it sure as hell had something to do with his mother. That didn't take a genius to figure out. He couldn't understand why his mother was so mean to Gene, nor could he understand why Gene couldn't just let things slide off her back anymore. Things had gotten markedly worse since his 40th birthday. Gene's reaction had confused him. She wasn't a bitter woman by any stretch of the imagination, but she wasn't nearly as sweet as she had once been either. Women made no sense to him at all.

Robin put the vehicle in park, turned off the engine and got out. He opened the trunk and dug out his carry-on and brief case. He slung the brief case over his shoulder then opened the passenger door of the car and scooped up the take-out and vodka. Circling back around the trunk, he slammed it shut and pulled the wheeled carry-on along behind him with his free hand. As he mounted the stairs up to the porch he saw the pile of dog shit waiting there for him and his heart sunk. Pushing the extended handle back into the suitcase he sighed and picked it up as he lumbered to the front door taking care to step around the poop. The door was unlocked.

Gene was seated on the couch in the front sitting room with her face in her hands rubbing eyes pink and puffy from crying. Sitting the take-out and vodka on the coffee table in front of her, Robin sat his briefcase and suitcase to the side and knelt down in front of her wrapping his arms around her shoulders. She let him hold her for a moment then pushed his arms away and stood up. Robin stood up as well.

"So did you see it?" Gene asked.

"What? The poop?" Robin asked ridiculously.

"Yes. The poop. Did you see it?" she asked again.

"Well, yeah. It was kind of hard to miss. What's with the poop?" Robin asked and Gene began to cry again, but they were hot angry tears and her face became red as a beet as she shook her fists and began to spit out her words between tears at a helpless looking Robin.

"What's with the poop? What's with the POOP?!" Gene screamed then became calmer as she attempted to gather herself to continue, "Well, dear Robin, I certainly didn't take a dump on the

porch and we don't have a dog. So, it must have been left there by my mystery door knocking friend. You know, the one that everyone seems to think is a figment of my imagination or just some silly neighborhood kid. Whoever it is, they're pretty sophisticated. They've figured out how to hack into the camera and turn it off in the morning. Almost every morning while you were gone, at the same time, they turn off the camera then knock at the door then run away. And you know what?!" Gene stopped to catch her breath.

"What, Babe?" Robin looked at her apologetically. Saying anything wasn't the right thing to do because now Gene erupted.

"WHAT BABE?! I'll tell you what! I think that crazy old bat down the street and your mother are somehow behind it! I think they are trying to drive me crazy and get me locked up." Gene said forcefully. Robin was taken aback.

"Now, come on, Gene. My mother is nutty and annoying but she'd never do anything to hurt you and Gertrude is just a lonely old widow. She doesn't even drive or have a cellphone. What could they possibly do to hurt you? And why?"

Gene wanted to hit Robin but instead she grabbed the vodka off the table and turned to the kitchen to pour herself a drink. Robin picked up the take-out and followed her into the kitchen. Gene had a tall water glass out on the counter filled with three large ice cubes. She was pouring a double shot of vodka over the cubes. A can of flavored carbonated water was next to the glass already open. Gene finished pouring the soda over the vodka and took a drink before turning to meet Robin's gaze. She raised the glass from her lips toward him. "You want one?" she asked through clenched teeth.

"No. I'll grab a beer." Robin sat the food on the kitchen island between he and his wife, opened the fridge and pulled out a Goose Island Honker Ale. When he turned around Gene was leaning against the counter with half her drink gone. Her head was tipped to one side and she was considering Robin with an expression he wasn't familiar with seeing on his wife's face. It looked like contempt. He smiled nervously at her and took a swig of his beer holding it up in the air first in a ceremonial gesture of cheers. Gene took a deep breath then sat her drink on the island and began to open the bag of take-out. She looked into the bag as she spoke to Robin.

"You *really* think your mother would never do anything to hurt me?" She placed the containers on the granite and started to open them. "Are you serious? She keeps calling the lunatic police on me. She keeps telling them I'm a danger to myself and those around me." Gene took an egg roll out of one of the containers and stuffed the end in her mouth as she looked at Robin. Robin grabbed an egg roll too and pointed at his wife with it as he spoke.

"She's just worried about you is all. No one was hurt." He stuffed the egg roll in his mouth. Gene finished chewing the bite in her mouth and stared directly into Robin's eyes with a flat calm glare.

"*That* is one of the most cruel and ignorant and horrible things you have ever said to me. I most certainly was hurt. Do you realize they sent a mental health goon out here today when I called the police about the pile of vandalism on the porch? Do you realize the cops don't take me seriously? And you know why? Because *you* don't, AND your cunt of a mother and her side kick down there calls them and tells them I'm out in the front yard in my robe talking to myself. You're an asshole. Your mother most certainly is trying to hurt me." Gene aggressively took another bite of her egg roll and washed it down with the vodka-soda. Robin looked at his beer.

"Don't call my mother a cunt."

"Okay, I'll call her a Satanic witch then. Or demonically possessed."

"Gene, don't do that."

"Don't do what? No one else is standing up for me. Certainly not you. You're not even here most of the time."

"You knew when we started dating that I travelled for work."

"Shut up. I don't give a shit about the travel. I like when you travel. I can get things done. I'm not upset about the travel. It's the disrespect and total denial about what a horrible person your mother is and how she abuses me and how you do nothing about it but make excuses for her. And now there's this. I hope who ever is doing this shit kills me so all you jerks feel bad about treating me like I'm crazy instead of someone on the receiving end of criminal abuse." Gene grabbed her glass, poured in more vodka, brushed angrily past Robin and grabbed another can of carbonated water from the fridge. Before storming out of the room and up the stairs she turned to him saying, "You go clean up the shit. I've had all the shit I can handle for a while. Welcome home." Robin watched helplessly as she walked away from him. He heard a door slam upstairs.

In her studio Gene approached the piece in progress currently on her easel. The under painting was now almost all covered with background and middleground. Holding her glass to her heart she stood back and stared at the composition. This was the most dangerous time in the process, laying in the foreground. There were a couple hazy areas where figures were going to be placed. She looked over her shoulder as she heard Robin lumber up the stairs with his bag and into the bedroom down the hall. She heard the toilet flush and the shower start to run.

Turning back to the painting she sat her drink on a side table and picked up a graphite stick. With a few quick strokes she lightly outlined a simple armature of two figures, one reclining and the other standing, leaning over the reclining figure. The muted tones of the background had been the right choice. This series was a totally different choice of pallet from any of the work she had been doing for the past few years and it was a welcome break visually. Still though, looking at the piece was strange. She sometimes felt like she was working on someone else's painting in progress. There was a gentle knock on the door. Gene didn't turn around. The door opened softly and Robin entered silently waiting for his wife to turn to him. She didn't.

"Wow. That's really nice. Different, but really nice." Robin offered softly.

"Thanks." Gene didn't turn to look at him, instead she fixed her stare on the outline where the figures were emerging.

"This new series is really something. Has Morton said he'll show them?" Robin asked hopefully.

"Not exactly. He's supposed to come over Monday afternoon to look at what I've completed so far." Gene motioned to her drying rack on the far wall where four other paintings were standing separated from a stack of older work.

"Well, he's crazy if he doesn't take them. These are all some of the best work I've seen you do yet."

"Don't try to butter me up. I'm mad for good reason. Mort is no crazier than I am whether he shows the paintings or not. I'm really sick of people throwing that word around like it doesn't mean anything. Your mother is crazy. Like, for real, crazy. I think she has a serious personality disorder. Me...I'm having hot flashes and night sweats. I'm just middle-aged." Gene still hadn't turned to look at Robin. He now approached his wife and gently placed his hands on her shoulders. Her arms were wrapped around her waist. She brought her right hand to touch his left hand resting on her left shoulder. Robin took her hand and guided her around to face him.

"I'm sorry. You're right. You're not crazy. And I'm happy to be home with you." Robin kissed Gene on the forehead and turned leaving her in the room alone with her work. Gene followed, closing the door behind him before turning back to the easel and picking up her pallet and pallet knife to start mixing pigments. Two hours later the figures were done and Gene went back downstairs to find her husband in his sweats, hair still damp, nodding off to sleep on the couch with the Tigers game on the TV and a plate with the remnants of fried rice and broccoli on the coffee table in front of him.

"I finished the figures." Gene said in a bored tone.

“Wha....?” Robin shook his head slightly looking up at her smiling.

“I finished the figures. I’m not sure if the piece is done yet or not, though. I need to sleep on it.”

Robin patted the seat cushion next to him.

“Come sit with me and tell me about the cops.”

Gene let out a big breath and asked, “Is there any left?” nodding at the almost empty plate on the table.

“Yeah. Lots. It’s on the island. I got a plate out for you. It’s right in there.” Robin nodded with his chin toward the kitchen and Robin turned in that direction. “Bring me another beer when you come out.”

“OK.” Gene called over her shoulder. She re-emerged with chopsticks and a plate full of rice, broccoli and another egg roll in one hand, and two beers nestled between the fingers of her other hand. She offered the beers toward Robin who took them both and sat Gene’s on the table as she situated herself on the couch with her plate.

“So, are we winning?” She asked as she stuffed some broccoli in her mouth.

“Do the Tigers ever win?” Robin replied.

“Sometimes.” Gene laughed.

“Yeah and sometimes it snows in April...but not often. Even Connor might have a chance with the Tigers this year.” Robin laughed in return. “Now, tell me about these cops and the poop.”

Gene spoke while still chewing her broccoli and covering her mouth with her hand.

“I haven’t thought about Connor playing ball in years. That poor boy. What a shame. His mother was such a nice woman. I saw poor Pat the other day at the market buying frozen dinners. I came home and baked a cake and took it over and left it on the front step like I did with dinner when Gloria was doing chemo. I wrapped it in a brand new tea towel. He stuffed the tea towel in the mailbox today. He could have kept it.”

Robin rubbed his wife’s knee. This was just one of the million and a half reasons he loved Gene.

“Yeah. I almost ran Connor over turning down the street. That boy doesn’t look well.”

“Really? I haven’t seen him in months. I thought maybe he had finally moved out.” Gene said between bites.

“Naw. I see him almost every evening when I’m coming home. He always seems to have a different bike and man, he’s gotten real skinny. He doesn’t look good at all. Cancer can be genetic, right?”

Gene looked at her husband quizzically.

"Yeah. That's why I wanted you to get that BRCA test after your Dad passed....but I haven't seen Connor. I didn't realize he wasn't well."

"Well, you might not recognize him if you did see him. He's real skinny and the circles under his eyes are HUGE. He looks older than you or I. Older than his Dad for that matter!" Robin exclaimed.

"Huh. That's terrible. I wonder if Gertrude knows anything about it."

"Oh, I'm sure she does. She knows everyone's business, and if she doesn't somehow she finds out." Robin laughed.

"That's exactly right! And that's why I think she and your mother have something to do with this dog shit business." Between bites of dinner Gene told Robin everything that had happened down to and including Gert's Crystal Light and Robin told Gene about the flight and the old woman and girl with the crooked teeth. Then Robin played the messages from his mother for Gene. Gene grit her teeth and her face started to turn red again. Robin brushed the hair from her eye and apologized once more.

"You're right. Something isn't right. And my mother *is* crazy." Robin admitted somberly.

"She's not just crazy. She's dangerous. For crying out loud, I went to that therapist for a year to deal with that mugging. Shit, everyone who works down in Greektown would benefit from having someone to talk to that way." Gene stated matter-of-factly.

"You're right. You're right. I'll talk to her."

"What the fuck are you going to say that you haven't said already? Rob, we need to get some real distance from her. I'm starting to think we need to sell the house and move. She's down there at Gertrude's every other day and even when she's not down there, Gert watches and calls her with every little detail. I've seen her peeping through the drapes. It's like Gladys in Bewitched, only Abner's dead."

"Now that's funny. You know I'm pretty sure Gertrude doesn't like Jews." Robin laughed.

"Was Gladys' character Jewish?"

"Um, yeah. Pretty sure. Wasn't their last name Kravitz?"

"OK. Whatever. Either way, Gert is a toady turd for your Mom and I'm sick of being in her line of sight. If you die and leave *me* a widow I'm moving to the UP. With so much militia up there I'm sure people keep to themselves and don't spy around on each other." Gene was only half joking.

"If you become a UP-er you better learn how to gut a fish and dig a ditch!" Robin was still joking. Gene put her now empty plate down and slapped his upper arm.

"I'm serious Rob! I'm sick of that nosey old bitch down there. I like this house, but we could get something with more character and more land out closer to the airport. Plus it would be that much farther from your mother." Gene slapped her thigh. "Better yet! We could go buy a block or two in Detroit and build a fortress! You're mother would never come near. She hates black people, especially Detroit black people!" Gene was starting to like this idea. Robin frowned.

"Gene, that's taking it a bit far. We could never afford all the renovations and demolition we'd need to do if we bought that much property in Detroit. Besides, remember what happened to Stew? He's black and they still stole everything from him, including the fixtures he had installed in the walls *and* killed his dog, just because he was born over 8 Mile. Do you wanna need a gun just to get your mail?" There was more to the story, but Robin wasn't exaggerating about the fixtures and the dog. Guys had ripped out all the fixtures Stew had installed and shot his dog, but Stew had also moved in all flashy with the Camero and Miata in the driveway and that giant diamond stud earring. Cops said it was like rubbing the neighbors' faces in the fact they were living on mayo sandwiches during the week and Church's Chicken on Sundays. Gene turned down her bottom lip in a fake-pout. "Come on. You scared of The D?"

"The real question is are you scared of this D?" Robin laughed using both index fingers to point at his crotch. Gene giggled.

"Shut up. You were half asleep when I came down here. You and I both know you'll be sawing logs before you get your pants off. That D can wait until your brain has had at least one night's rest on Detroit time."

Robin chuckled and finished his beer. Getting up to get another he spoke over his shoulder, "Yeah, you're right. True that! You need anything in here while I'm up?"

"Just bring the bottle of vodka, a can of bubbly water and a fresh glass with cubes in it, please." Gene shouted after him.

"OK!" Robin yelled from the kitchen. Gene tucked her feet up under herself on the couch and turned towards the Tigers game. It was the bottom of the ninth. Detroit was up to bat. Bases were loaded and the score was tied. Gene squealed with D-light. Robin came back in with a beer bottle in his mouth and Gene's items in his hands. He sat the vodka, glass and can on the table and pulled the bottle from his lips.

"What's up squealer?" He asked Gene.

"Tigers might actually win one!" Gene nodded toward the screen just as there was a knock at the door.

"Are you expecting someone?" Robin asked Gene.

“Fuck off. Of course not.” Gene replied. “Go look out the peep hole first.”

Robin approached the door and squinted through the peep hole. He turned abruptly toward Gene and mouthed the words: ‘My Mom’, at Gene. Gene’s face froze then she threw her arms up in the air in mock surrender. Robin raced to her side and whispered in her ear, “I’m not going to let her in. Just let me take care of this.” Gene whispered back, “OK, but I’m going to listen and if she does anything stupid I’m getting a knife.” She was joking...but only a little. If Joan pulled anything crazy she just might dig her eyes out. “Did you get the poop?” Gene asked him. Robin turned to her and smiled a wicked looking smile. “No.” He mouthed.

Then he turned and cracked the door only enough to stuff his face through the opening. Gene could hear Joan scuffling on the porch. She turned the TV down again. Joan’s shrill voice cut through the living room.

“Robby! Sweetie! I’ve been so worried. Oh! What is this filth at your door? Did Genie have an accident?”

Gene watched the door ready to pounce on the beast just beyond.

“Mom, that’s uncalled for. I’m not even going to answer that. I’ve told you countless times, please call before coming over. I just got home from Korea and I’m tired.” Robin said flatly.

“Oh, Robby! I’m so glad you’re safe. No wonder Genie has been having so much trouble. You’ve been out of town and she can’t take care of herself! Is she OK? Did you get my message? Have you called Dr. Shelton?” Joan’s voice sounded forced and fake.

“Mother, there is nothing wrong with Gene. Yes. I’ve been out of town, and I can smell that you’ve been drinking. Are you planning on driving home? Where’s your car?” Robin was starting to get angry. Gene was pleased.

“Wait. Me? Drink? You know I don’t even know what alcohol tastes like.” Joan lied. Robin knew it was a lie. “My car’s at Mrs. Donovan’s. I will drive home when I please. But first I wish you’d let me in to see everything is OK, and what is this pile of filth on your porch?” Joan insisted.

Robin pushed Joan away from the door.

“Some neighborhood brat thought it would be funny I guess. Now, go back to Gertrude’s before you really step in it. I’ve told you. You have to call before you visit.” Robin said sternly.

“Robby! That’s just silly. Why can’t a mother visit her son whenever she wants?” Joan cried.

“Because this mother is rude and pushy and I just got home after a long trip and want to be with my wife!” Robin bellowed, pointing at his mother in the face. Joan gasped grabbing at her heart.

“Don’t play those overly dramatic games with me, Mom. Go back to Gertrude’s and finish your vodka, or whatever you two are drinking, and leave us be for the night. I’ll call you tomorrow. I’m

tired and I want to be with my wife.” Robin stepped back into the house and closed the door in Joan’s face. Joan was not happy. She continued to shout, “Robby! I’m just a worried mother! Come now! Open the door! Let me in!”

Joan stomped and huffed and pounded on the door one more time before stepping back and storming back up the street to Gertrude’s. Robin and Gene watched her slip in Gertrude’s front door then sat back down on the couch without a word just in time to see the Tigers actually win a game.

CHAPTER 5

Special Order

Sylvie slammed the door of the Mercedes behind her. Mohan got out and clicked the trunk open with the fob on his keychain. Dursik grabbed her bag and followed Sylvie as she stomped up the front stairs of house. The traffic into El Segundo was horrible and Sylvie needed a cigarette. Mohan met her at the front door with his keys and fumbled a bit trying to hurry to open it for her. Sylvie grumbled and snatched her bag out of Dursik's hands digging for her crumpled pack of Benson & Hedges. Finding the pack she pulled a slightly bent long cigarette out and stuck it between her lips then snapped her fingers at Dursik who pulled a gold zippo out of his pocket and lit it for her. Mohan didn't allow smoking in his car. It was the only rule he was able to enforce upon Sylvie, his business partner of the last 25 years.

"I don't know how you can still suck those things down like that." Mohan said to Sylvie as she walked into the atrium of the rented house.

"Yeah, well I don't know how you get all that grease in your hair." Sylvie replied walking up to the pedestal ashtray situated next to a glass side table with a retro-style phone on it on the far wall and flicked her ash. She covered her mouth with the back of her hand and coughed.

"Now, tell me again what happened to the girl. She was a huge investment." Mohan continued following Sylvie down a hallway leading to an eat-in kitchen with skylights. Sylvie sat her bag on a chair and opened the refrigerator. As she turned around she used her cigarette hand to open a bottle of Starbucks brand iced coffee and took a sip.

"I told you. That doughy looking oaf fucked the whole transaction up. I think he was a cop or something. He seemed to know what was going on from the moment he spoke to me." Sylvie took a long drag off the cigarette while Mohan considered her rolling his tongue over his teeth behind his lips. Sunlight glinted off his greased back ponytail. "I couldn't get two seats next to each other. When I booked them online it said we'd be next to each other, but then when I checked in, my seat was changed. I don't know why." Sylvie explained with annoyance.

"You didn't ask about it?" Mohan pressed.

"Fuck no. I didn't ask. I didn't want to draw any attention to myself. All I had was this bag as a carry on. That's always a red flag." Sophie explained.

"Well, where the hell is your suitcase? You were there a week. I know you took a suitcase when you left." Mohan pressed further.

“For Christ’s sake, Mo. I’m not getting younger. That thing got heavy with all the chachki samples you wanted me to bring back for the showroom. I shipped it back so I wouldn’t have to worry about carrying it or TSA assholes stealing stuff. It’s supposed to arrive tomorrow. I have a tracking number.” Sylvie put out her cigarette and lit a fresh one, also a bit bent, from her pack. “You did WHAT?!” Mohan was irate. “Do you know what those chachkis, as you put it, are?” Sylvie was starting to get frightened. She thought she was just picking up little statues for the window of the imports store Mohan ran as a front to launder the money from their real business dealings. Evidently she had been mistaken. “Ugly as sin, Mo. That’s what those things were.” Sylvie offered trying to mask her fear. Mohan slammed a balled fist on the counter. “Damn it, Sylv. You better hope they show up tomorrow and in one piece. They should have fit in your carry-on. Those things are filled with vials of a designer virus.” Mohan made eye contact with Sylvie and held it for a long uncomfortable period of time. Sylvie sucked on her cigarette and blew the smoke in Mohan’s face. She was nervous about Mohan’s temper, but she was also mad.

“Damn it, Mo. I told you I wasn’t interested in muling for you any more. You’re a real dick. You mean I was carrying bio-warfare around with me all over Korea?! Are you kidding?!” The last time Sylvie had muled for Mohan it had been balloons of coke and heroin. She shoved one up her dry old vagina and decided it was a job better left to the young and made the two girls she had purchased and was bringing back swallow the rest of them. It was a mess. The balloons burst in both girls before they could get to Tijuana and they died. She had never seen so much foamy vomit in her life. It had cost Sylvie six times as much as she had originally been quoted by the coyote for transport to get rid of the bodies. When she got back she told Mohan she wouldn’t be doing any more muling after that. She had told him he needed to find someone else. They had fought over it. He said she was the only one he trusted. She had told him to shove the crap up his own ass or find a new partner. Sylvie stared at Mohan now with a hot glare. “How many other times have you tricked me like that?” She asked him, lip twitching. Mohan let out an exasperated breath and shook his head at her.

“That’s the only time you stupid bitch. I didn’t know I was getting the stuff until two days before you left. I wouldn’t have even told you about it, except now they might not make it here at all, let alone in one piece.” Mohan lied. Sylvie had unwittingly muled for Mohan on at least three other occasions and had no idea. It gave Mohan a deep pleasure to pull the wool over on Sylvie. It was a secret little joke he had with himself.

“And that’s the problem, Mo. How am I supposed to trust you when you don’t tell me everything? I tell you everything. I show you everything. We’re in this fifty-fifty. It’s half my money too.” Sylvie smacked her palm on the kitchen table for emphasis. Dursik walked past them both and down a small flight of stairs from a landing in the back corner of the kitchen. He returned in a couple moments with two giant Rottweilers. Sylvie and Mohan were staring each other down. The dogs ran up to Sylvie sniffing her up and down. Sylvie bent down to let the dogs lick her face.

“How are Mummy’s boys? Good boys! Did you miss me?” Sylvie cooed at the dogs as they licked her face and hands and legs. Mohan turned away in disgust.

“Mom, I told you it grosses me out when you let them lick your mouth.” Mohan said looking away from Sylvie and moving toward the refrigerator.

“And I told you not to call me Mom anymore. We’re business partners. No one needs to know you came out of my womb.” Dursik laughed. Sylvie snarled at him. “Shut up you doof. And don’t you go talking about that with anyone.” Dursik stopped laughing.

“Sorry, Sylv. It’s just I don’t think anyone would believe it anyway.” He said sheepishly.

“Believe what?” Sylvie asked.

“That anyone ever wanted to stick their dick in you!” Mohan spat at her.

“Come on, Mo, that’s no way to speak to your mommy.” Dursik said to him half serious, half taunting. Mohan wasn’t amused, but Sylvie had a satisfied little smirk.

“Gotta respect your elders, Mo-mo.” Sylvie chided Mohan.

“I’m going to my room.” Mohan grabbed a beer and opened it on the lip of the counter before brushing past Dursik and heading up the stairs to the upper level of the house.

“That’s right! Go to your room...and no dinner for you either!” Sylvie yelled after him jokingly, pleased with having bested her son once again. Then she dug into her pocket and pulled out Robin’s crumpled plane ticket and handed it to Dursik. Dursik smoothed it out and looked it over.

“What’s this?” He asked her.

“Ugh. That shit head boy of mine never gives me any credit. He’s gonna be the death of me. *That’s* the doughy oaf’s plane ticket. That’s his name...right there.” Sylvie pointed to Robin’s name printed on the ticket. “Robin Randall. What a stupid sounding name. See what you can find out about this asshole. I’m pretty sure he was headed to Detroit. I heard him talking about getting back to the Detroit home office on Monday to someone on the phone while we were waiting to board in Korea. See what you can find.” Sylvie instructed Dursik in a low voice so

Mohan definitely wouldn't be able to over hear. Dursik folded the ticket and stuffed it in his wallet. Shoving the wallet back in his pocket he replied to Sylvie without looking at her.

"Yes, Ma'am. Not a problem. You want him taken care of?"

"No. Not yet at least. Just find out who he is. Find out if he's a cop or just some regular asshole."

Sylvie walked into an adjacent room and opened a set of French doors to a screened in sunporch. The dogs followed her and stood waiting to be let out into the back yard garden.

Sylvie opened the door for the dogs who ran out into the space lush under Sylvie's green thumb, happily. Dursik stood in the doorway between the kitchen and sitting room looking into the sunporch at Sylvie.

"And Dursik..." Sylvie said turning around to face him, lighting another cigarette.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Dursik, don't draw a lot of attention. Until this package arrives in one piece tomorrow and I find out what the hell Mo is doing with a stock pile of designer virus and we know who this clown is, I don't want even a mouse whispering about this. The girl cost a lot. We paid for some procedures plus she was North Korean. She was a special order."

"Got it. Don't worry, Ma'am. I got my ways."

"Yeah. That's what I'm counting on." She said expelling a long stream of smoke from her lungs.

Dursik turned and let himself out of the house. Sylvie waited to hear his Charger back out the driveway and pull down the street before she headed for the stairs to continue the conversation with Mohan. The dogs were laying under the shade of a Japanese Maple she had manicured just so.

As Sylvie mounted the top stair Mohan was coming out of the bathroom. He looked at his mother and shook his head at her.

"Don't you shake your head at me you lying sack of shit." Sylvie said to him between trying to catch her breath.

"Lying sack of shit? I didn't lie to you about anything. I just didn't tell you everything." Mohan turned to face his mother straight on.

"Same thing! It was a deception."

"Oh, yeah. And you're one to lecture me on deception?"

"Business is business, Mo. You got to be 100% with me or our business isn't going to last much longer."

“What the hell are you talking about you old fool? It was better for you to not know anything about the transaction. That way you wouldn’t be lying if you had gotten caught with them. You’re not as good a liar as you think you are, you know.” Mohan turned to go into his room. Sylvie followed standing in his doorway leaning against the jamb.

“What are you talking about? Not a good liar?”

Mohan was removing the plastic from fresh dry-cleaning and hanging it in his closet. He didn’t turn to look at his mother as he continued.

“I mean, your voice changes pitch when you’re putting on one of your street theater shows and you left pinky twitches when you’re bluffing and your lip trembles when you’re scared. By the way, why are you scared of me?” Mohan hung the last shirt in the closet and turned around to look at Sylvie who was now tapping her foot.

“Only someone who is around me all the time would know those things, Mo.” She replied coldly. Mohan tipped his head to one side and pursed his lips in impatience.

“Oh, come on, Mom. You’re lying to yourself right now. What would you have thought if you had gotten caught with those statues and they told you what was in them?”

Sylvie thought for a minute. “I would have thought Sang was a sick fuck and that you were an idiot.”

“No you wouldn’t have. You would have thought it was a plot by Koreans to undermine the US and you would have said that to the authorities. You would have passed a lie detector because you wouldn’t have been lying. You were better off not knowing. But you just couldn’t follow directions. And now we have to wait and see if the package arrives tomorrow like you say it’s supposed to. I’m almost afraid to ask. How much did it cost to ship?”

“Not as much as I thought it was going to be. Those things were heavy!”

“Seriously, Mom. How much?”

“\$600 and some change. It was supposed to take a week.”

“Jeeze, Mom! A fucking week? Did you wrap them up so they wouldn’t get damaged? Did YOU pack the box? What did you do for clothes for a week?”

“I wrapped each one in my clothes and put them in the suitcase then packed bubble wrap around it all and closed it up. I’ve shipped back my bag before. It got here just fine. And where are the vials? Are those things like those puzzle boxes your uncle Marc used to make?” Sylvie was picturing the ugly little figurines in her mind’s eye now trying to remember if there had been any seams.

“They’re mechanized. There’s a button on each of them that’s hidden and when you press it the door pops open and there’s a lead box inside. The vial is inside the lead box.”

“No wonder they’re so damn heavy. Why lead?”

“I don’t know. I guess as a joke. It’s not like that shit is radioactive or anything. It’s a virus.”

Mohan shrugged.

“Mo, that doesn’t make sense. Why are you bringing over a virus anyway? Who’s job is this?”

Sylvie was skeptical of the whole story and was beginning to suspect her stupid son had himself involved in something they were all going to regret.

“You remember Sang, right?”

“Yeah. He’s the little prick who sold me the statues.”

“Yeah, well Sang has a second cousin that evidently is a mole at the CDC or some such bullshit.” Mohan recounted.

“You mean, this is supposed to be some epidemic to be unleashed?” Sylvie was disgusted. This was beyond even her sensibilities.

“No. He said they’re trying to study it or something. I don’t know. I guess his cousin is a double agent or some shit.”

“And you think anyone would let your ass know such information?” Sylvie pressed her son who she could tell was starting to doubt himself by the tone of his voice.

“Yeah. I don’t know, and I don’t care. I just know three million dollars is a lot to pay for six little statues.” Mohan finished.

“Three million? Were you paid upfront?” Sylvie prodded.

“Hell no! I was supposed to put the statues in the locked front window case in the next couple days and label them as some Ming Dynasty rare antiques or some shit and Sang’s cousin is supposed to come in and buy them from me.” Mohan explained.

“For three million dollars? We’ve never carried anything that expensive in the shop. What’s this cousin’s name?” Sylvie interrogated.

“That’s the beauty of it! I’m not supposed to put a price on them. They are supposed to just be like a display. I don’t know the cousin’s name. I just have a couple time frames that he or she might come in and a secret code-phrase. Then they are going to haggle with me on the price... first offer like half a million for the set and I’m supposed to go real high and we finally settle on three mill.” Mohan sounded like he was trying to convince not only his mother but himself that this was a good idea.

“So you mean to tell me you don’t know this person’s name or if they are a man or a woman or even when they’re supposed to come get these things and we’re supposed to hold onto these packages of unknown sickness that could kill the both of us before we even see a dime?” Sylvie was incredulous. “And you were mad at ME about the girl?! That little twat was chump change in comparison to this shit, Mo! She cost three quarters of a million after the eye job, skin bleaching, fee to the North Koreans, and the travel expenses.”

“That reminds me. Can she identify you?” Mohan asked his mother.

“No. I don’t think so. I never contacted her directly from my phone or laptop. It was always third party who passed on the directions to her. She only saw my face at the terminal and we never actually spoke. We were supposed to be seated next to each other. I don’t know what happened.” Sylvie was nervous. It was a lie. She had texted the girl just before they got off the plane telling her to meet her at the Starbucks kiosk just past customs, but she hadn’t used the number associated with the phone. She had used her Line2 number to send the text. Hopefully that would be enough. She already had cancelled the account and removed the App from her phone *and* put in a new SIM card. The old SIM card she had cracked in half, stuffed one half between the cushions on the LAX shuttle and tossed the other half out the window on the highway on the way home.

“Well, if you say so. Either way, we both should probably lay low for the next week or so until the bag shows up and we know something.” Mohan opened a mini fridge hidden under a night stand and pulled out another beer.

“You’re getting a beer gut.” Sylvie told him.

“Yeah? You look like a leather bag and sound like a barking man.”

Sylvie just looked at her son and left the room. The dogs were barking.

Sylvie stepped up to the window to the left of her bed and looked out into the yard in the direction of the barking dogs. She could see a young Asian man pinned up against the wall. A short length of rope was dangling from the top of the wall. Sylvie pulled a fresh pack of cigarettes from a dish on her night stand and opened it pulling out one fresh straight cigarette. A book of matches sat next to the dish. She struck one and lit the cigarette screwing up her face at the taste of sulfur from the match tip. “Well, what the fuck do we have here?” She said out loud to no one. She could hear Mohan’s door open and his foot falls toward her room. The door opened and Mohan had an urgent expression on his face.

“Mom, who the fuck’s out there?”

"I don't know, but stop calling me Mom. We have company." Sylvie blew smoke out the window without looking back at her son. Mohan turned back toward his room.

"I'm getting my gun." he said. "Meet you down stairs."

Sylvie opened the top drawer of her nightstand and fished out a small pearl handled pistol. She opened the chamber to check that it was loaded. It was. She snapped the chamber shut and tucked the gun in the back of her waistband then headed down the stairs slowly.

Mohan was already in the yard with his gun drawn. Kinney and Kline were growling low, sitting to either side of a young slender Asian man with a flat expression wearing rock climbing gloves and track suit. Mohan was breathing heavily staring the man down. Sylvie approached in a patient manner stopping just next to Kline and stroking his head. She took a long drag off her cigarette and blew it in the intruder's face. He didn't even blink. Sylvie nodded at him in approval.

"So. Just who do we have here? I know you're not a guest, or a friend of my partner here." she said nodding toward Mohan. "Guests and friends knock on the front door." The man remained silent. Sylvie took another step towards him. They were about the same height, five seven, five eight, or so. Her face was only a foot away from his. She took another drag and blew it directly in his eyes. This time he blinked and shook his head a bit.

"I'm looking for my kid brother's ball." The man said flatly without any detection of an accent of any kind.

"Is that so?" Sylvie replied. "Last I checked, Phil and Buck didn't have any kids, and the house on the other side has been empty for a month." Sylvie took another drag. Phil and Buck were an old gay couple who spent more time on beaches in Mexico than they did in their house and they hated children. The house on the other side had been vacant since the last LA brat that lived there got dumped by her rap-star boyfriend and he stopped paying her bills. The closest kids old enough to be playing ball outside on the street were at least two blocks away.

"You're gonna be looking for *your* balls in a minute if you don't tell us who you are and what you're doing real fast." Mohan offered from behind his mother. The young man shifted his head slightly to look at Mohan over Sylvie's shoulder but didn't say anything. Sylvie leaned in and grabbed the young man by the crotch and squeezed. He winced.

"So, what's your story?" Sylvie sneered in his face. She knew her breath stank. She hadn't had a chance to brush her teeth yet since they had gotten back to the house. The young man wrinkled his nose at the stink of her sour old mouth.

"I'm nobody in particular." He replied. Sylvie squeezed tighter.

"Is that so. Well, if you don't start talking here in a minute you're going to be a eunuch." Sylvie offered in a sweet tone of voice.

"Max. My name's Max." he finally said. Sylvie released his crotch and stepped back taking a drag off her cigarette then stamping it out on the ground with her right toe.

"OK, Max. What are you doing here?" Sylvie licked her lips. Max looked unbothered other than a small bead of sweat starting to form along his upper lip.

"I'm not doing anything." He answered.

Mohan was annoyed. He pushed past his mother and smacked Max across the face with the side of his gun. It made a loud crack and blood trickled from Max's nose. He licked at it.

"Trust me. You don't want to hit me again." he told Mohan without emotion.

"Oh yeah? And just why doesn't he want to hit you again?" Sylvie asked. Max slowly shifted his gaze back to look Sylvie in the eye.

"Because I know what you have in there and I'm the one here to pick it up." Max waited for his words to sink in.

Sylvie smiled and addressed her son. "You hear that, Mo? He knows what we have in there."

Sylvie turned back toward Max. "Just what do we have in there?" she asked Max.

"Exactly. You have no idea what it is you have in there. You're both idiots."

Mohan smacked him again across the other side of his face with his gun, this time busting his lip. Blood trickled down Max's chin. He wiped it with the back of his hand and looked at the smear.

"I told you, you didn't want to hit me again."

Mohan just laughed. "Yeah. Why not? What are you gonna do?" he asked Max. Max smiled.

"Look, you moron, I'm not going to do anything, but my associates will." Max remained smiling.

Sylvie was starting to get nervous. Mohan was oblivious.

"And who are these associates and what do you think they can do to me?" Mohan chuckled.

"My associates are the persons to whom those ugly little statues you have belong."

Mohan stopped laughing. Sylvie took her free hand and pushed his arm down to lower his weapon. "Let's go inside." Sylvie offered and motioned to Kinney and Kline to follow her. "Max, you walk ahead of us." Sylvie instructed.

"With pleasure."

Max headed toward the open door onto the screened in porch. Once Max was on the porch Sylvie nodded to Mohan who grabbed an extension cord that was hanging on a hook on the

back of the house and used it to tie up Max. Max didn't even struggle. Mohan and Sylvie dragged Max into the kitchen where Sylvie dug through a drawer producing a fistful of zip ties. She handed them to Mohan who continued to further secure Max's hands and ankles. He sat Max on a chair. Sylvie circled them, lighting a fresh cigarette.

"Those things are going to kill you." Max said to her. She just chuffed.

"There's a better chance that I'm going to kill you first." She told him. "Now, who are these associates of yours?" But before he could say anything else, Mohan punched him in the face and knocked him out. Then he grabbed a plastic bag from under the sink and went to pull it over his head, but Sylvie stopped him. She looked at her son sadly.

"Look, you don't know what we're dealing with here. Killing him might not be the best idea." She explained to her son. Mohan looked at her with disgust.

"Old woman, I think you are going to regret not letting me just shoot him in the yard." Sylvie sighed heavily and touched her son's cheek. He recoiled.

"One of these days you'll learn." She told him.

"One of these days you're gonna find yourself in a nursing home." Mohan answered. "Where's Dursik?"

"Dursik had other business." Sylvie said.

"That dick is never around when he can be useful." Mohan complained.

"Dursik is exactly where he needs to be. Now who are these fucks you've been doing business with behind my back?" Sylvie went to a cupboard and produced a roll of duct tape. She proceeded to use the tape to gag the unconscious Max. She used the rest of the roll of tape to secure him in his chair to the island in the center of the kitchen. Mohan looked on in bewilderment having a flash-back. His father used to do that to him when he was a kid and didn't obey. Big Mo had been in prison for the past 11 years after getting caught with the gun that shot a cop and without an alibi for the night of the murder. The last time Mohan had visited his father, Big Mo had told him not to bother coming back to see him again, that he had never liked him in the first place and he was doing just fine on the inside. Mohan had responded in much the same way as he was now watching his mother secure Max.

Sylvie brushed past Mohan and started up the stairs motioning for him to follow her. Mohan turned slowly and followed like a puppy. Kinney and Kline sat watching Max.

CHAPTER 6

Dehydrated Crocodile Tears

Robin's eyes fluttered open and he found himself still on the couch with a blanket neatly tucked around him and his pillow from the bed under his head. There were three empty beer bottles on the coffee table next to a tall glass of water. He could hear Gene in the kitchen bumping around. The morning sunlight danced across the dining table just beyond the sitting room. He sat up rubbing his face, neck and head. Gene entered the room balancing a plate of scrambled eggs and toast and a cup of coffee and sat it on the table in front of him.

"Well, good morning, lumberjack." Gene smiled at her husband as he rubbed the sleep from his face with the palms of his hands.

"Why am I on the couch?" Robin looked at the empty beers. He remembered drinking them. He didn't think he was that drunk.

"After the game we watched the news and had a couple more beers and you fell asleep. I tried to wake you to get you to come up the stairs but you were dead to the World." Gene informed him pushing the plate of eggs toward him and heading back towards the kitchen to get her plate and cup to join him. Robin picked up his coffee and took a sip then picked up his plate and headed to the dining table.

"Let's eat at the table." He said to Gene through the breeze through window between the dining room and kitchen.

"OK." Gene replied sitting her plate at her seat. "You want some ketchup for your eggs?" She asked him as she turned back toward the refrigerator.

"Yeah. And do we have any OJ?" He got up to get juice glasses.

"No. But we have some cran-apple. You want that?" Gene grabbed the ketchup and the juice and made her way to the table. Robin grabbed two glasses from the cupboard and sat down next to his wife.

"Eh. Yeah. But pick up some OJ later if you go out." Robin poured himself some juice and took a sip before digging into his eggs. Gene pushed her eggs around on her plate before taking a bite.

"If I go out later I hope you'll come with me. I was thinking we could go out for dinner tonight."

Gene looked at her husband hopefully.

"OK. Man, I was tired."

“You must’ve been. I couldn’t even get you to move and you were snoring like a chainsaw. So I just brought your pillow down and covered you up.” Gene took a bite of her toast watching Robin switch his fork and knife in his hands.

“I’m still tired. And, ugh. I’m gonna have to call Joan today.” Robin sighed.

“Joan? Since when are you and your mother on a first name basis.” Gene raised her eyebrows as she spoke.

“I’ve been calling her Joan to myself for a couple years now. But after that last message and the bullshit she pulled at our door last night I think I’m gonna start calling her Joan to her face.”

Robin turned the corners of his mouth down in disapproval.

“She left a message on the landline here yesterday too. I just remembered. I haven’t listened to it yet. Shall we?” Gene offered.

“Ugh. Can I finish my breakfast first? I was enjoying it.” Robin smiled at Gene and patted her hand resting on the table between them. Gene got up and grabbed the tea towel hanging on the oven door to wipe off the dining table where she had dribbled some juice. She sat the red towel in the center of the table as she finished her eggs and Robin touched the corner of the towel.

“You said Pat brought a tea towel back yesterday?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“How do you know it was him? Did Connor bring it back?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s Pat on the camera yesterday morning. He walked by not long before the camera went out at 9AM.

“Hmm. Can I see it? Was there a knock this morning?” Robin had a look on his face like he was thinking really hard about something.

“Yeah, you can see it. I wish you’d install the app on your phone so you can see it anytime like me. And no, magically there was no knock this morning. It would have woken you up if there had been. Whoever it is probably saw you’re home.” Gene got up and grabbed her cell phone from the kitchen counter where it had been charging and brought it over to the table. She opened the camera company’s app and brought up the video from the morning before. At 8:56 AM she paused the footage and offered the phone to Robin pointing at the screen.

“See. Right there. There’s Pat stuffing the towel in the mailbox.” Gene told Robin. Robin took the phone and zoomed in on the image.

“That’s not Pat, Gene. That’s Connor.” Robin rewound and re-watched the footage three times to be sure.

“What? No. That can’t be Connor!” Gene was amazed. Robin handed the phone back to her.

“Yeah. It sure as hell is Connor. I told you. He looks real bad. He’s wearing the same thing I saw him wearing last night when I almost hit him on his bike.” Robin told Gene. Gene re-watched the footage again.

“Oh my gawd!” Gene cried. “That IS Connor. Holy mackerel. He could be his father’s twin!” Gene squinted her eyes and zoomed in on the image. “Robin! Oh my God!” Gene’s mouth hung open as she noticed something else about the image. “Robin. He’s wearing boots! The foot I saw slipping behind the Clarke’s place was wearing boots. And look!” Robin was now perched looking over Gene’s shoulder. Gene paused the footage just moments before the footage cut out at 9AM. “Look, he’s doing something on his phone just before the footage cuts out. Could he be hacking the camera from his phone? Do you think Connor could be the one that’s been doing this to me?” Gene was confused and Robin was just shaking his head.

“If he had gotten access to the program some how and had the app on his phone, who knows? I don’t know enough about it, but it’s probably possible. I don’t know. Connor never bothered us before, but who knows what’s going on with him these days. Drugs maybe? Look at him.” Robin was irritated and Gene looked scared.

“Why would Connor do something like this? What happened to that kid?” Gene was on the verge of tears. Robin kissed her cheek and took the phone from her hands sitting it on the table. “Babe, I don’t know. But I’ll go down and see if Pat’s around later.”

“I don’t know Rob. I think I just want to wait and see if it’s gonna stop now and if it doesn’t just let the cops take care of it.” Gene picked her phone back up off the table and saved the clip of Connor at the mailbox. “I’ll email this to that cop. I think there’s an email address on the business card she gave me.” Gene got up and went to find the business card secured to the refrigerator with a magnet. “Yeah. Right here. I’ll email her. Can you please take care of the poop at the door?” Gene asked Robin as she emailed the clip to Officer Stone directly from her phone.

“Yeah.” Robin fished around in a cabinet for a plastic bag to use to pick up the poop and headed for the front door. “Maybe Gertrude will see me out in my sweats and call the cops to let them know.” Robin joked. Gene headed for the stairs.

“I’m gonna jump in the shower and get dressed then look at that painting again.” She told Robin as she passed him at the front door. As he opened the door Joan was just walking up the front steps. She was wearing the same thing she had been the night before. Gene caught a glimpse of Joan and ran up the stairs and stood just around the corner at the top listening. Robin left the door open behind him so she could hear.

“Joan. I told you to call first.” Robin said flatly.

“What’s this Joan garbage, Robby? Call me Mom or nothing at all.”

“Nothing at all, you have five minutes to leave before I call the police.” Robin slipped the plastic bag over his hand and bent over to pick up the now solid pile of feces. Gene almost squealed with delight at the sound of Robin calling his mother by her first name.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Robby.” Joan protested.

“Ridiculous?” Robin began. “Ridiculous is coming home after a three week trip over seas and having to fight with my mother just to be able to spend time with my wife. I told you. There’s nothing wrong with Gene. Everything here is fine. I’ve just been traveling and I’m tired and I want to rest and spend some time with my wife and I will call you later. What are you doing here this early on a Saturday anyway? Did you stay over at Gertrude’s? You’re wearing the same thing you were wearing last night.” Robin took a deep breath and stared at his mother who’s face was crumpling before him.

“It’s none of your business where I slept and you’re wearing the same thing you were wearing last night too!” Joan said stupidly.

“That’s because it’s 10:30 in the morning and I’m in MY home and these are my pajamas.”

Robin tied a knot in the top of the bag of poop and let it dangle at his side while he considered the woman standing in front of him.

“Robby, honey, I just have been so worried about you is all.” Joan tried to will herself to cry but the tears wouldn’t come. She settled for furrowing her brow and pouting her lips as hard as she could.

“Is an old crocodile too dehydrated from a night of drinking to even force one tear?” Robin’s words cut sharply. Even Gene winced at the top of the stairs. She could only imagine the face Joan must be making. Then she remembered she could watch from the camera’s app on her phone. She tip-toed down to the bedroom and tucked her feet under her as she sat on an unmade bed and watched her husband deal with his mother. Joan looked pretty rough, like she hadn’t slept at all, and her eye makeup was smeared under her eyes. Though not a regular occurrence, it wasn’t unusual for Joan to spend the night at Gertrude’s. The way the two women were with each other Gene sometimes wondered if maybe they were a little more than friends. It *would* explain some things. But then Gene always told herself that sounded too crazy to be true and reasoned with herself that Joan just really liked being able to harass them from close proximity. Through the lens of the security camera, Gene thought Joan’s make-up looked like it was smeared from kissing. It wasn’t just her eye make-up that was smudgy. There was lipstick

smeared a bit on her cheek as well. Joan stepped a little closer to Robin and poked her son in the chest with her middle and index fingers.

“Now you listen to me, mister. I endured nineteen and a half hours of labor bringing you into this World. I’m allowed to worry about you.”

“Joan, no one is telling you you’re not allowed to worry about me. It’s just that your worry is unreasonable. There is nothing wrong in my home other than you being a pain in my ass. Other than that, Gene and I are both healthy and happy. Now take your damn drama and go home, or back over to Gertrude’s or anywhere but here right now.” Robin extended the bag of poop towards his huffing mother who looked like she was ready to explode. “And drop this in the trash can at the end of the driveway on your way out. Joan didn’t take the bag so Robin dropped it on her foot and turned in the house locking the door behind him. Gene watched on the camera as Joan kicked the bag into the front yard and stomped to her car that was parked in front of the house. Gene looked up to see Robin coming in the door. He walked past her and into the bathroom where he washed his hands and brushed his teeth. Gene put her phone on the nightstand beside her and watched him from her seat on the bed. Robin dried his hands and face with the hand towel and flopped on the bed next to Gene burying his face in her lap. Gene ran her fingers through the hair on the back of his head and trailed down the nape of his neck. He turned his face to look up at her and surprised Gene. Robin was crying.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with her. I don’t know why she can’t respect any boundary.” Robin almost whispered. Gene brushed a towel fuzz away from his eye and caressed his cheek.

“I don’t know either, but I’m glad we can finally agree that something is wrong with her.” Gene said with earnestness to Robin.

“I guess I just don’t like to think about it. I mean if there’s something wrong with her, like she’s actually sick in the head, there might be something wrong with me too.” Robin confided. Gene shook her head at him and continued to gently brush her hands over his cheeks.

“No. You’re much more like your father. You look like him and everything. You’re Mom just has a horrible personality.” Gene assured him.

“Great. So I’m like my Dad. Maybe I’ll die by the time I’m 60 and be out of everyone’s hair.” Robin turned his face and rested his cheek on Gene’s thigh. Gene bent forward and kissed her husband on the exposed cheek. She could taste his tears.

“No. I’m sure your Dad died because of something he was exposed to at work. You and I are going to get old and gray together.” But Robin didn’t look convinced. He sat up and leaned toward Gene who leaned into him as well. Her head settled on Robin’s shoulder.

“So, what are you going to say to her later?” she asked him.

“I don’t think I’m going to call her. Not after that.” Robin replied.

“It’s up to you, but you know she’s gonna just keep trying if you don’t. Hey, I wanna ask you something.” Gene said hesitantly.

“What’s that?”

“It’s about your Mom.”

“What?”

“Well...your Mom and Gertrude spend a whole lot of time together and...”

“And what?” Robin was now facing his wife. Gene turned to look at him.

“And sometimes, the way they are with each other and I don’t know...sometimes the way your Mom is *about* Gertrude...do you ever wonder?”

“Wonder what?” Robin looked confused. Gene finally spit it out.

“Do you ever wonder if they’re more than friends?”

“What? Like Lovers?” Robin asked.

“Yeah. I mean, no. I mean, sort of. I mean, they act like they’re an old married couple. Your Mom is like the husband and Gertrude is like the wife.”

Robin looked up thinking about what Gene had just said to him.

“Hm. I don’t know. I guess I never thought of my Mom that way.”

“What way? Gay?”

“No. Well, yeah...but not just gay. I’ve never really thought of my Mom as someone who would need anyone else after my Dad died. I guess I never considered she might need romance in her life.”

“Well, as un-human as she seems most of the time, your Mom is still a human being, Rob. Human beings need Love. But you’re probably right. I can’t imagine Gertrude and your Mom kissing. But who knows? Stranger things have happened.” Robin made a face like he had just smelled a bad fart.

“Yuck. I’d rather not imagine my Mom kissing anyone. It’s just too weird.” Robin laid back on Gene’s pillow. Gene got up and walked to her side of the closet and opened the door.

“Yeah. It is kinda strange thinking of your Mom being affectionate with anyone.” Gene pulled a plush tracksuit out of the closet and tossed it on the bed then went to the dresser and dug out a tank top, panties and socks and tossed them on the bed too. Just as she was about to turn on the shower the land line rang. Robin answered it.

“Yes. This is Robin Randall.” Robin paused. Gene listened.

“Yes. I was at LAX yesterday.” he paused again. “Wait. What? No. I didn’t lose my wallet. I have it right here.” Robin picked up his wallet from the dresser and started to thumb through it looking to see if anything was missing. Everything seemed to be in its place.

“Oh, no. Someone must have picked that up. I did drop a ticket somewhere between terminals. What would someone want with my used ticket? That’s strange.” Robin returned his wallet to the dresser as he listened to the person on the other end. Gene turned on the water to heat up then stood in the doorway to hear the end of the conversation. Robin looked amused as he spoke.

“Well, I hope you find who that wallet belongs to. Mine’s here and I have no idea why anyone would have hung on to my ticket. Thanks anyway.” Robin hung up the phone and looked up at Gene who was now naked except for her slippers.

“Well, hey there naked lady. That was a strange call.”

Gene smiled and shook her boobs at Robin.

“Yeah. What was it all about? Someone had your plane ticket?”

Robin got up and gave Gene’s boobs a squeeze and her bum a light spank.

“Yeah. I dropped a used ticket somewhere between terminals at LAX and someone evidently picked it up and stuffed it in their wallet then lost their wallet. That was someone from the airport calling to see if I had my wallet. I guess there was no other ID. I should have said it was mine. Maybe there was some money in it.”

“Money but no ID and *your* plane ticket? That *is* strange.” Gene said as she stepped into the hot shower. “They were calling from the airport?” She asked over the sound of the water. Robin was peeing, seat down, next to the shower. “If you have the seat down be sure to wipe off any tinkle sprinkle you leave.” Gene instructed.

“How do you know that?” He asked her.

“Because we’ve known each other a very long time now.” Gene reminded him.

“Yeah. I just assume they were calling from the airport. I don’t know. Maybe it was just some schmuck who found the lost wallet and was trying to find who it belonged to. I’ll look at the caller ID.”

“You answered without looking at the caller ID?! What if it had been your mother?” Gene ridiculed.

“Yeah, well it wasn’t. Hold on.” Robin looked at the caller ID and saw the number had come up as unknown. “It came up unknown.” He told Gene over the sound of the water.

“Well, that could have been anyone. How’d they find you?” Gene wondered.

“The ticket had my name on it. We’re listed. I’m sure all they had to do was do a Google search.” Robin reasoned. Gene turned off the water.

“Leave the water running. I’m gonna shower again. It feels good to shower in my own shower with my own soap. Besides I need to wash my mother off of me.” Robin called to Gene in the bathroom. Gene turned the shower back on and started to pat herself dry with a towel.

“Did she touch you or something?” She asked. She’d want to shower too if Joan had touched her.

“Nah.” Robin replied. “Just being in her presence was enough to make me feel soiled.”

“Soiled? That’s a good word for how she makes a person feel. Soiled.” Gene repeated the word back to herself and wrapped up in the towel just as Robin squeezed past her and stepped, naked, into the shower behind her. Gene pinched his left bum cheek and giggled.

“You’re Mom’s a piece of work, but she made a nice piece of ass.” Gene joked. Robin pretended to be offended.

“Hey! I feel violated!” he laughed as he soaped himself up into a lather.

Gene pulled on her clothes and dried her hair then stuffed her feet into her slippers and disappeared into her painting studio before Robin was done in the shower.

In the mid day sunlight the painting looked a lot different. The figures were going to need a little more work. What had seemed like enough contrast late the evening before while the paint was still fresh, now seemed much too flat to Gene. She extended her right index finger to test the texture of the paint. It was still tacky. She’d have to be careful working back into it with fresh paint. She squeezed a few colors onto her pallet then added some additional dry pigments and linseed oil. Once the dry material was totally mixed in with the wet ones she added a touch of solvent to help it dry a bit faster. Robin lightly knocked then opened the door just as Gene was finishing the last couple brush strokes.

“Ah. Not done, I see.”

“No. Things always look different in the morning.”

“What about the afternoon? It’s almost 2PM.” Robin stood at his wife’s side and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “When you’re done here how about we go out and pick up a couple groceries?” he asked. It would be nice to be out and about with her. Robin enjoyed traveling, meeting new people, and experiencing other cultures, but coming home was always his favorite part. Gene looked up at her husband as he considered her painting.

“Yeah. I’m done for now. I just need to clean out the brush and cover the paint.”

“OK. Meet you downstairs when you’re ready.” Robin gave Gene’s shoulders a little squeeze and kissed her above her ear before leaving the room and heading down the stairs. Gene cleaned her brush in solvent and set it aside to dry, then covered the unused paint with plastic wrap and dumped the used solvent in the sealed solvent and paint disposal can. Then she washed her hands, stuffed her feet into a pair of flip-flops and grabbed her purse. Peeking out the window in the bathroom she saw Robin drop the bag of poop in the empty trash can at the foot of the driveway then drag the otherwise empty cans back up to the house. When Gene came down the stairs Robin was headed to the kitchen to wash his hands.

“Gertrude is down there in her yard talking to old Pat.” Robin informed Gene.

“What? I haven’t seen Pat talk to anyone in at least three years. The last time I saw him talking to anyone on the street it was when we had that power outage when that tornado took out the junction box down on John R. Did she see you?” Gene went to the front window to look down the street. “Are you sure that’s Pat and not Connor?” She said to Robin who was looking over her shoulder out the window and drying his hands on his thighs.

“Yeah. That’s Pat alright. He’s actually a little beefier than Connor is these days.”

Gertrude was standing in her roses in one of her horrid muumuus while Pat was shaking his finger at her angrily from the sidewalk.

“Shit! I wish I were a beetle on those roses right now.” Gene said to Robin.

“Don’t cha know it! Thank God my mother seems to have gone home. Whatever is going on down there she’d only make worse, I’m sure.”

“Yeah, well, let’s get going. I don’t want to waste any more energy on this today. Let’s go.” Gene slung her purse over her shoulder and motioned to Robin to follow her to the door. Robin dropped the curtain and produced his keys from his pocket. When they got out to the car they could hear Gertrude yelling at Pat.

“I told you, I don’t know where that idiot boy of yours is. Last I saw him was two days ago when I paid him for taking my trash out and mowing the lawn.” It was obvious that Pat didn’t believe her.

“I don’t know what all he does down here for you, but just do this for me. Leave my boy alone. Something isn’t right and you’re not his mother. You aren’t even a fraction of the woman my Gloria was.” Pat’s voice was shaking with anger. Robin turned to Gene.

“Think I should go see what’s going on down there?” He asked her. Gene didn’t take her eyes off the scene in the roses.

“No. She’ll just tell your mother and then who knows what fresh hell that will unleash.” Gene reasoned then turned and got in the passenger side of the Grand Cherokee. It still faintly smelled of the take out from the night before. Robin hopped in the drivers seat. “Yeah. You’re probably right. Now, why don’t you make a quick list while we’re on our way.” Robin suggested as he backed out of the driveway and down the street away from Gertrude and Pat and the roses.

A couple blocks away Connor was on the corner with yet a different bike talking to a couple boys five or six years younger than him. Robin pulled up next to them and rolled down Gene’s window. Connor looked startled as he looked over at Gene. Gene was astonished. Robin was right. Connor looked just awful. The other two boys took off running. Robin spoke to Connor from behind Gene.

“Connor, dude, you better go home. You’re dad’s looking for you down at Gertrude’s and it looked like they were ready to duke it out down there.”

“Whatever man.” was all Connor said, but he did hop on the bike and head in the direction of his house.

“You’re right. He looks like he could drop dead at any minute. It’s gotta be drugs.” Gene said watching Connor disappear behind them in the car’s mirror.

“Who knows? Probably.” Was all Robin replied.

Gene opened her grocery list app on her phone and started to check items off. The kitchen was pretty empty. She had only gone to the market once while Robin was gone. She had mostly gone out to eat or finished odds and ends of stuff in the pantry and freezer for the past three weeks. When she wasn’t freaking out about the mystery door knocker, her new paintings had been consuming her. She really hoped Mort was going to show the new series this fall. It was what they had discussed after the last exhibition. This was the first time in years that she was including figures in her compositions. Morton had been pretty successful selling the abstracts in the bright pallet that she has been doing for the past decade. It might be hard convincing him to show the new work. It was so very different from the other works she made. Sure, there were thematic and compositional continuities, but the new work just looked so different. She liked it, but she wasn’t sure Morton and her collectors were going to feel the same way. Collectors could be so fickle.

CHAPTER 7

A Hard Woman

Dursik thought Robin sounded pretty harmless. He checked his wristwatch as he hung up the phone. The antique kept better time than his cell phone. If he were still alive, Dursik's father would have been impressed that he still had the watch in his possession after all these years. The gold and onyx time piece had been in Dursik's family for three generations now. A wrist watch that old was rare. Once, shortly after coming to the US, he had lost it when a business deal went sour, but the men who took it from him had soon regretted their terrible mistake. A few days later, Dursik had run into the guy who had actually taken it off his wrist in a card room. Dursik cut the entire hand off to retrieve his heirloom and send a message. The guy survived and wore a leather sleeve over the stump of his left wrist ever since and everyone started calling him "Lefty". Dursik gave Lefty credit for not snitching about how he lost the hand. It had taken Dursik a month to clean and recalibrate the timepiece, but Dursik was both skilled and patient and the piece now ran better than ever. His father had been a master watch maker in the old country. Dursik had learned a lot by watching and what he hadn't learned by watching he taught himself by reading and doing.

It was just after 9AM. Sylvie was going to be relieved by his findings. He didn't expect further action on this Robin Randall matter. Unless he was some super secret government agent, Robin checked out to simply be some schmo selling car parts; not a cop or fellow good-fella or anything like that. Robin Randall was just some average, middle-aged jerk living a boring mid-western life with his average wife. He *did* have a second cousin doing time for embezzlement in upstate New York, but as far as Dursik had been able to dig, Robin hadn't seen or spoken to his cousin since they were kids and besides, it had turned out Garret Randall was no career criminal. He was just some sorry-ass fuck who's wife had gotten sick with a rare disorder and needed to pay doctor bills. It was hard to even call him greedy.

Dursik dialed Sylvie's private bedroom line. It rang six times and she still didn't answer. Dursik hung up the phone, furrowed his brow and pursed his lips. Something wasn't right. He had known Sylvie and Big Mo since he had come to the States 50 years ago *and* he was Little Mo's Godfather. Sylvie was a morning bird. She had a routine. There was no good reason for her to

not answer that phone, even if she was using the toilet. She had a phone in there too. Dursik had installed it himself last year when Sylvie had her hip replaced. He brushed his teeth and ran a comb over his head and hopped in his Charger.

On the way to Sylvie's, Dursik pulled through a drive through coffee stand. He ordered a black coffee for himself and a latte for Sylvie and placed both the drinks in his console cup holders. He didn't understand why Sylvie didn't just divorce Big Mo. He wasn't getting out. She never went to see him, and as far as Dursik knew, they didn't write or call each other. Little Mo had been Sylv's business partner since before Big Mo went away and Big Mo's business was now pretty much confined to the *Inside*. Dursik heard bits and pieces from time to time about it on the street and once he had helped procure a certain item Big Mo was looking for, but other than that, Big Mo's dealings were all *Inside*. Dursik watched as Little Mo grew up and knew Big Mo had no use for the kid from the start. Big Mo was like that. He decided in the first three minutes of meeting a person whether or not he liked them and if he didn't like you there was no changing his mind. Dursik had been at the hospital when Sylvie was in labor. He had driven her because Big Mo had been in a business meeting. Big Mo arrived at the hospital just a few minutes before Little Mo popped out. Mo was in the room with Sylvie not even thirty minutes after the birth then Dursik watched him walk past the waiting room and down the hall shaking his head. Dursik had gone back to the room and poked his head in the door. He found Sylvie holding the new born crying while the nurse looked on in disbelief. When Sylvie looked up and saw Dursik standing in the door she began a fresh round of sobs and exclaimed, "He said he doesn't like him! How can he not like him?! He just came out of me!"

Dursik had gone to Sylvie's side and had been her right hand man ever since. Though you wouldn't know it to look at her now, back then Sylvie had been a real looker. Over the years Big Mo had made off color comments in Dursik's presence about Dursik's relationship with Sylvie, but in reality, to this day there had never been anything physical between Dursik and Sylvie. Little Mo had been a sweet baby and a smart little kid. Big Mo had turned him into what he was now. He had chipped at him little by little everyday and when he wasn't chipping at him he had beaten him. Little Mo was the way he was for a reason. It bothered Dursik, but he never said anything about it. He just stuck by Sylvie no matter what. She had never cheated him out of payment for any job. She had always been upfront with him. She had always trusted him and Dursik liked when people trusted him. Dursik's first name was Jaromir, but there had been

another Jaromir on the scene when he first came over, so he went by his surname and that had never changed.

Dursik didn't really remember how he had gotten into his line of work. It just happened along the way as a means of survival. Fixing watches never made him enough to live on and a man needed to eat. NAZI's or Russians had killed his mother and father. He didn't know which for sure. Only a couple folks who stayed in the old village had survived and he had never spoke to any of them personally. He had been very young and escaped Slovakia with a neighbor to Great Britain early on. He remembered his father slipping the watch off his wrist and sewing it into the inside of Dursik's coat before helping the boy put the coat on and shoving all the cash he had in the house into the neighbor's hand. It was the middle of the night and the neighbor only had enough room for the child in the automobile. Dursik's mother had kissed him and cried. He never saw them again. He was seven when he last saw his parents. He was thirty-two and already in the business when he met the Statue of Liberty. It was 1970. A friend of a friend introduced him to Sylvie and Big Mo. They were close to the same age, had people from a village that neighbored the village where Dursik had been born, and had a room for rent real cheap. Dursik had lived with Sylvie and Big Mo for a year until he was making enough for his own place. He had done jobs with Big Mo off and on early in his US career, but it wasn't until after Big Mo went to prison that he pretty much began to work exclusively for Sylvie. She was a hard woman, and they didn't make them like her anymore. He trusted her implicitly and she trusted him.

As he turned into Sylvie's driveway everything looked to be in order from the front of the house. Dursik turned off the engine and grabbed both caffeinated beverages and mounted the front steps. He could hear Sylvie barking at her son and felt a wave of relief. So, she just hadn't heard the phone ring when he called earlier! Using a crooked pinky, Dursik rang the door bell. He had a key, but he tried to be polite when Little Mo was home. Once he rang the bell the interior of the house fell silent. After a couple minutes the door opened and Little Mo was holding his gun in his right hand by his side and ushering Dursik in with his left hand urgently. "It's just Dursik." Mo called over his shoulder then closed the front door and turned back to speak directly to Dursik.

"Where the fuck have you been man?" Mo asked frantically.

“What are you talking about? It’s hardly 10 AM, and I only came over because Sylv didn’t answer the phone when I called. What’s going on?” Dursik answered.

“Well, whatever. Just get in here.” Mo turned toward the kitchen and motioned for Dursik to follow him. In the kitchen Dursik saw Sylvie in her ugly old bathrobe and slippers; cigarette in one hand and the other hand on her hip tapping her foot in front of some Asian-looking kid taped to a chair. So he had been right after all. Something was amiss. Dursik cleared his throat.

“And what do we have here?” He asked Sylvie as he handed her the drink he brought her. She took it and nodded bringing the cup to her lips to take a sip.

“Thank God for you.” she said to Dursik. “We have a bit of a mess. This is Max. He’s here for the statues.” Sylvie glared at Mo as she sipped the latte and took a drag off her cigarette.

“I thought the statues were for the shop display.” Dursik said eyeing Max - his restraints and condition. The kid’s face, neck and chest were marked with a significant amount of dried blood. His mouth was covered in duct tape that looked as though it had been applied and re-applied a few times, and it smelled like he may have wet himself. He was taped to the kitchen island the same way Big Mo used to do to Little Mo. Dursik wondered which one of them had done that to him, Sylvie or Mo.

“Yeah, well, so did he.” Sylvie nodded toward Mo who was standing by the refrigerator looking bored.

“Yeah, well the joke’s on him, isn’t it?” Mo replied blandly “Because we don’t have any fucking statues.” Max’s eyes widened at this revelation. Up to this point neither Mo or Sylvie had revealed the statues weren’t actually there. Sylvie shook her head and sighed heavily looking at her feet. She sat her latte down on the table and looked at Dursik as she spoke to her son.

“Mo-mo, get out of my sight and my house for the next 24 hours. I’m too old for this shit and you’re still not old enough.” Dursik nodded an almost imperceptible nod. He knew what she was saying. Mo began to protest.

“What the fuck?! What are you talking about? I live here. Where do you expect me to go?” Mo was whining like a spoiled child. Dursik answered him.

“We don’t care where you go. Just be gone for 24 hours.”

Mo stopped huffing immediately. Dursik almost never addressed him this way. He learned his lesson years ago when it came to Dursik. He used to think he and his mother were having an affair, but the last time he saw his father, Big Mo had explained it was more than that. He told Mo that Sylvie was and always would be Big Mo’s wife, but Dursik and Sylvie were each other’s family. Mo hadn’t ever told anyone about that part of the conversation. He didn’t know what it

meant until a couple years ago when he saw his mother cry for the first time since he was a very little boy. Sylvie, Dursik, and Mo were sitting around the table eating some take out. The news was on the TV and the three were chatting casually, enjoying the meal. When someone speaking Russian being interviewed by the news caster had begun speaking on the TV, Sylvie turned her head sharply toward the screen and paid attention. After a few minutes tears began rolling down her cheeks silently and her shoulders began to shake. Mo was confused. It was just some bullshit news story. Dursik had gotten up from his seat and knelt next to Sylvie, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. Sylvie had buried her face in his neck and wept until his shirt was wet around the neck and chest. Dursik had whispered to her in a language Mo didn't even recognize and then to Mo's surprise Sylvie had answered him in the same language and nodded her head in agreement! Dursik had smoothed the hair from around her face and brought her a clean damp rag from her private bathroom upstairs to wipe her face. Then he turned off the TV and they resumed eating as if nothing had happened. Mohan still didn't know why the Russian annexing of Crimea made his mother cry, but he understood then what his father had said to him years before about Dursik and Sylvie being family. Mohan stuffed his gun in the back of his pants and stomped up the stairs.

"Fine. Just let me grab a few things and I'll be gone." He said looking at the floor.

Sylvie sidled up to Dursik and the two sipped their coffee and stared at Max who now had eyes wide and full of fear. Once they heard Mo's car leave the driveway Sylvie spoke to Dursik, never taking her eyes off Max.

"Mo made the deal without even getting a deposit. This fuck showed up not long after you left yesterday to collect and guess what?" Sylvie gave Dursik time to reply.

"Max forgot his check book." Dursik responded.

"Yeah. Something like that. We went through his pockets this morning and found nothing."

"Who taped him to the island like that?"

"What?"

"Who taped the jerk up? You or Mohan?"

"I did. What's that matter?"

"Oh it doesn't matter. I was just curious." Dursik started to peel the tape from Max's mouth. Max began to speak.

"Hey. Look. No one said anything to me about any money. I was just here to get the statues." he tried to explain to Dursik. Dursik just smiled.

“Just coming to pick up the statues? Is that all? And then be on your merry way?” He asked Max rhetorically. Dursik put the tape back over Max’s mouth and turned to Sylvie. “Did he come through the front door?”

“Of course not.” Sylvie grabbed the piece of rope from the back garden wall where it now sat on the counter and tossed it to Dursik. “He came over the wall. Kline and Kinney stopped him.” At the sound of their names the dogs got up from their napping spot and came into the room awaiting instruction. Dursik rubbed Kline’s ears.

“That’s OK boys. You can go lay down.” he told the dogs and they obeyed. Dursik approached Sylvie and placed a hand on either shoulder stooping down slightly to look directly in her eyes as he spoke to her, “Mohan really fucked up this time, Sylv.”

Sylvie didn’t even blink. She grit her teeth before she replied, “I know. I don’t know who I want dead more, him or Max.”

Dursik chuckled. “I can take care of both if you like.”

Sylvie laughed in a mocking kind of way. “HA! I just might take you up on that. But for now we need to figure out what to do with our friend, Max, here. I still haven’t found out who his associates are or exactly what’s in those ugly little statues...and they still haven’t been delivered yet.” Sylvie looked over at Max who was sweating. Dursik stepped back from Sylvie and stood over Max.

“I’ll find out. Go upstairs and take a shower and get dressed. When you come down I’ll have the information you want.” Dursik stated with absolute certainty. Sylvie sighed with relief and pat Dursik on the shoulder and left him alone with the boy.

Sylvie turned on her shower as hot as she could then turned on her CD player. She didn’t know what it was about Kenny G, but that saxophone always relaxed her. When she came back downstairs Max was passed out with a bandaged hand, a pinky finger was in a baggie with ice on the table, and Dursik was washing his hands.

“So?” Sylvie looked at each item then settled her gaze on Dursik.

“So...our little friend here works with a bunch of people, but *this* job is North Korean. The girl, incidentally, was a spy. She was going to steal the statues from you before you left the airport. You’re probably lucky they picked her up. She wasn’t the girl Mo actually bought. She was the daughter of one of their top guys over there. They aren’t going to give a shit about Max here, but if the statues don’t show up today like they’re supposed to, there’s probably not much we can do

to keep Mo safe this time.” Dursik took out his lighter and lit the cigarette Sylvie put between her lips. Sylvie took a drag and exhaled.

“Well, that doesn’t make me happy, but this one’s entirely on Mo this time.”

“Yes it is, Sylv. Yes it is. You in the mood for some good news?”

“Good news?” Sylvie asked incredulously.

“Yeah. Good news.”

“Sure.”

“That doughy oaf? The one from the plane? Robin Randall.”

“Yeah. What’d you find?”

“He’s just some average asshole. I’ve been doing this a long time, Sylv, and if that guy has anything to do with anything he’s a fucking kingpin like we’ve never seen before.”

“Well, you can never be too sure. What’d you learn?”

“He works for some small automotive part manufacture outside of Detroit. He’s married, no kids and his mother’s a widow about fifteen years younger than you. He plays racket ball a couple times a week and has no connections to anyone anywhere except a cousin doing time in upstate New York, but even that is a nothing rap and the two haven’t seen each other since they were kids. It was just freak luck that he got your seat on the plane.”

“Yeah, well, I still might ask you to take a trip and who knows...maybe I’ll join you just to get out of here for a while. What are we gonna do with Max here?”

Dursik took Sylvie’s hand, “We’re going to wait for a couple hours and see if the package shows up, then I’m going to arrange a meeting. Mo’s probably going to have to cut his losses on this one.”

Sylvie shrugged. “I don’t care. As long as this fuck here is out of my house, I never have to see those statues again and I don’t have Korean goons breathing down my neck.”

Dursik started to lean forward to kiss Sylvie on the cheek but caught himself and pulled away just as there was a knock at the door.

“Really Sylv, you should consider putting in one of those home cameras at the door so you can see who is there without pressing your face to the peephole. One of these days you’re going to get shot in the face.” Dursik turned to go get the door.

Dursik squinted through the peephole. It was a delivery man with a beat up looking truck and over starched uniform. He had a box by his side that was big enough to contain a suitcase. Dursik smoothed his shirt and opened the door with a smile.

"I have a package for a Mrs. Sylvie Walensik." a man about Little Mo's age stated matter-of-factly. Dursik nodded.

"Yes. I'll sign." Dursik took the stylus from the delivery man's outstretched hand and signed his Mickey-Mouse-name, Jon Stanley, on the electronic screen.

"Thank you. Have a nice day." the man said as he pushed the box toward Dursik standing in the doorway. Dursik bent over and picked up the surprisingly heavy box and brought it into the foyer closing the door behind him. Sylvie came out and met him.

"Open it right here." She told Dursik handing him a utility knife. He took the knife from her and sliced down the long corner of the box and across the top. Sylvie pulled at bubble wrap and paper that had been wrapped around the suit case and Dursik laid it flat on the floor. Sylvie removed the lock and slid the zipper open throwing back the lid and gasped. The suitcase was stuffed with mud bricks and straw. Her clothes and the statues were gone.

"Well, what the fuck are we going to do now, Vortako?" Sylvie covered her face. Dursik put his arm around her shoulder.

"It's OK, Fenne. Dursik will take care of it, but I can't make promises about Mo-mo. Not this time. I'm old too and Max in there is disposable to these guys. They'll probably kill him just to cover their tracks."

"Did he tell you that?" Sylvie nodded toward the kitchen where Max was starting to stir.

"Not in so many words. It was what his eyes told me. Not his mouth. He was grateful when I told him I was only taking a finger."

Sylvie's cellphone began to ring in her robe pocket. She startled at the sound and looked at the screen. The number came up unknown.

"Answer it." Dursik instructed. She did.

"Hola?" Sylvie always answered the phone in Spanish when she didn't recognize the number or a call came in as unknown.

"Madame Walensik. We know what happened. We have the merchandise. Our man just returned your suitcase. You and your Mr. Stanley can return the boy, in whatever shape he is in, in one hour to the address you will find on a piece of yellow lined paper in the front zipper pocket. If you get him here before we find Mohan we will spare Mohan's life, but Mohan is to never do business in this town again, for you or anyone else. We don't care if a mother keeps her son, but if he is to ever be a man you would be wise to tell him to move away. Far away. I hear you can buy property real cheap in Detroit." and the man on the line hung up. Sylvie dropped the phone and stared at Dursik.

"They have the statues. They delivered the bag. They want Max back. If we get him back to them before they find Mo they're going to let him live." Sylvie spat.

"Well, that's far more compassionate than I was expecting." Dursik replied.

"They said Mo can't work here anymore. They said he should move." Sylvie added.

"Not a bad idea. He's too old to be living with his Mommy anymore anyway."

"Dursik...they knew he's my son."

"Sylvie. Everyone knows he's your son. He looks just like you. Half the town thinks he's my son as well." Dursik looked at Sylvie with pity. Sylvie shook her head to get some clarity.

"The address where we're supposed to drop him is in the front pocket of the bag. I'm showered, just not dressed. Let me throw something on while you get Max into the back of my KIA in the garage. Here's the keys. Put your car in the garage." Sylvie handed her keys to Dursik who just nodded and turned to take care of business. Sylvie ran up the stairs as fast as she could.

Dursik sauntered into the kitchen eyeing Max who was awake once again and groaning slightly looking at his bandaged hand.

"Your people just called." he told the boy. Max looked up at him with fear.

"Yeah. That's what I thought. They're meaner than me, aren't they?" Dursik questioned. Max shook his head yes fervently.

"I'm sorry, but we have to give you back and if we do so in a timely manner, Mo gets to live, so this is what's going to happen...I'm going to cut you from the island there and take you and put you in the trunk of Madame's car. I have your finger here on ice. They might be able to put it back on for you, if they let you live. You are not going to fight me, because if you do, I'm going to cut off your balls, and those can't be put back on. Do you understand?" Dursik explained without emotion. Max shook his head in agreement.

Dursik disappeared for a couple minutes into the garage where he put down an old blanket in the trunk of the KIA then he pulled out the utility knife Sylvie had handed him earlier from his back pocket and went back into the kitchen to cut the duct tape securing Max to the kitchen island. It was a good thing Max wasn't that big of a kid. He weighed about as much as the suitcase of bricks had. Dursik tossed him over his shoulder and wrinkled his face at the smell of now dried urine on the boy's pants so close to his face. He situated Max in the trunk with the baggie with his finger and closed the trunk then went to a cupboard over a workbench and

chose a set of out of state license plates and covered the front and back plates of the car just as Sylvie stepped into the garage closing the door into the house behind her.

“Good thinking. We don’t need anyone following us that easy.” Sylvie patted Dursik on the shoulder. Dursik dug in his pocket and tossed his keys at her.

“You go out and move my car in while I back this one out then let’s go. I know that address. It’s about a twenty five minute drive from here.”

Sylvie caught the keys and nodded. She always impressed Dursik. At her age she was still sharp as a tack and harder than most of the men he dealt with on a regular basis. Sylvie backed the Charger out of the driveway and waited for Dursik to pull the KIA out and idle at the curb.

Then she backed the Charger into the garage, locked it, then closed the garage with the exterior keypad before getting in the passenger seat of the KIA next to Dursik. Max was silent.

“Do you have a hand wipe or something in that bag of yours. I have piss-stink on my shoulder.” Sylvie dug through her garish quilted monstrosity of a bag and produced a package of lavender scented hand wipes. She pulled one out and handed it to Dursik who wiped his shoulder while he drove and looked at the road.

“Thanks.” he said as he handed the used wipe back to her and fumbled with the radio.

“So, are they going to meet us, do you think?” Sylvie asked.

“No.” Dursik pulled the folded paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to Sylvie. “Under the address are some instructions. The place is an old warehouse, mostly kitchenwares and *massage* workers come though there. There’s an alley in the back with a loading dock. We’re supposed to leave him on the loading dock and leave.” Dursik said.

Sylvie pulled her pearl handled pistol from her bag just enough for Dursik to see she had it.

“I’ve got your back.” she told him.

“I know.” was all Dursik replied. They road the rest of the way without speaking listening to some idiot’s pod cast talking about Martial Arts and how many injections the Kardashian family had in their asses and faces.

When they pulled into the alley Dursik looked at Sylvie. “Don’t get out of the car unless they shoot. If they hit me, and I go down, just leave me and get the hell out of there. Max is more scared of them than he is of me.”

Sylvie just nodded.

Dursik backed the vehicle up near the dock and popped the trunk. Then he got out leaving the engine running and driver door open. He took a quick glance around and saw another kid behind a dumpster watching and a guy in an overhead window. He picked up Max and laid him

on the dock then grabbed the bag with his finger and sat it on top of the boy's chest. Then he got in the car quickly and closed the door. When they were a couple miles away Dursik pulled under an overpass, removed the fake plates and tossed them down a gutter. He was using a hanky to wipe his hands as he returned to the KIA.

"I've been thinking." Sylvie began.

"Yeah. It's good someone does that from time to time." Dursik joked.

"No. I'm serious. I'm sick of LA. I'm sick of the high rent and shitty people." Sylvie was nodding her head up and down as she spoke. Dursik started the car and pulled back onto the boulevard.

"They're right. I heard you can buy a huge place in Detroit for just a few thousand dollars and I have a couple contacts there. We could all move to Detroit and set up shop there pretty easily. I wonder if they got to Mo or not." Sylvie was fishing in her bag for her cellphone. Dursik glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. She was serious.

"Are you asking me to move in with you old woman?"

Sylvie began to laugh hysterically. "Well, you old fart, I guess I am. You can have your own room. You don't have to sleep with me."

A tear welled up in the corner of Dursik's left eye but he willed his eyeball to suck it back in.

"Sylvie, after all these years, I'd be honored to live with you."

Sylvie pretended she didn't hear him while she dialed Mo's cell number. He answered.

"It's Mom, Mo-mo. Meet us at home in an hour."

"Okay." was all Mohan replied. Sylvie hung up and patted Dursik on the knee.

"I guess we all have a little packing to do."

"I don't have much." was all Dursik said.

"Well, I don't either." Sylvie answered.

CHAPTER 8

It's Kind Of A Little Business

Pat turned away from Gertrude while she was in mid sentence. He couldn't look at the woman one second longer without striking her and Pat wasn't one to hit a woman. He knew she had something to do with what was wrong with his boy. Connor still did whatever Pat asked of him, but when he was home these days he took his frozen dinners and hid in his bedroom. It had been years since Pat had tried making a home cooked meal, but until Connor had started working for Gertrude he at least used to sit at the table with his father. Pat was beside himself. Dinner with his son had been the last remnant of the normal family life he had shared with his wife and he missed it more than he realized.

"Maybe if you came out of your house now and then and interacted with the World like a normal human being your son wouldn't be so fucked up..." The sound of Gertrude's crackling old-woman voice trailed off behind Pat as he trod up the street back towards his home. As Pat reached the foot of his driveway Connor pulled up on his bike, hopped off and walked to the front door with his father in silence. Old Pat dug around in his front right pocket for the key and opened the door. Connor slid in behind him with the bike and tucked it against the wall just inside the front sitting room of the disheveled house.

"Well, it's about time you came home, boy." Pat muttered at Connor. The two men headed for the kitchen instinctively.

"You hungry?" Pat asked as he opened the freezer and pulled out two Stouffer's frozen mac and cheese dinners.

"Yeah. I could eat one of those." Connor replied and sat down at the table pulling out his cell phone scrolling through something on the screen while Pat peeled up the corners of the containers and turned the oven on to pre-heat.

"I hear you were chatting with Gert, Dad. You guys dating now?" Connor joked in an ambivalent tone.

Pat opened the oven door and snorted as he placed the two frozen meals on the shelf. He closed the oven door with a snap and turned to look at his son who was still engrossed with whatever was on the screen of his phone.

"I beg your pardon?" Pat cocked his head to one side then lurched forward smacking the phone from his son's hands. Connor was shocked. His father hadn't been physical with him since he was thirteen and had complained about his new glove not being the one he really wanted. Pat

had been between jobs at the time and money had been tight. The purchase of the glove had been a hardship and Gloria had given up coffee, her *only* extravagance, for more than three weeks to make room in the budget for her son's desire to play ball. It was the only time Pat had ever struck the boy and he had beaten the crap out of him; leaving Connor with a black eye and bruised ribs. They didn't speak for a month and Connor had never complained about his gear again. Gloria had cried herself to sleep for a week after. Pat vowed to her that he would never strike the boy again. Now, in the kitchen, frozen dinners in the oven and Gloria long dead, Pat stared his startled son down reconsidering his vow.

"Boy, I don't know what you've gotten yourself into, but in case you haven't noticed you look like you could be Mrs. Donovan's boyfriend these days. Are you sick or what?" Pat coldly asked his son. Connor was scared. Pat could take him. They both knew it.

"I...I...I'm just not all that hungry most days. I guess I miss Mom." Connor stammered and picked up his phone from the floor where it had landed. The screen was cracked. He stuffed the thing in his pocket and looked away from his father.

"Bullshit. Why do you miss her any more today than you did a year ago when you still looked like a young man? Are you sick? Do you need to see a doctor?" Pat asked again, the volume of his voice raising as the tone dropped deeper. Connor looked at his hands in his lap. He knew his father was right. He could see he didn't look good. He wasn't blind.

"I don't know, Dad. I'll try to eat more." He turned his hands over in his lap considering his boney wrists.

"And just what all do you do for that psychedelic widow down there anyway? She said something about taking out her trash and mowing her lawn. What else do you do for her and what is she paying you?" Pat pressed his son for details.

"I don't know Dad. Yeah...I mow the lawn and take out her trash and sometimes I change her cat's litter boxes or fix the screen door. That kind of shit. She doesn't have a kid of her own you know. And it's none of your business what she pays me."

"I'll decide what is and what isn't my business around here and as long as you aren't paying me any rent I want to know what she pays you and just what you're spending it on. Is that a new bike out there? It looks kind of girlie don't ya think?"

"Aw, come on Dad. She pays me like \$50 or somethin'. And the bike's not new. It's used. I traded my old one with a guy at the park the other day."

“For that?! You traded your old bike for that one? What the hell was wrong with the other one? Or the one before that? Why are you trading bikes all the time with some guy at the park and who the hell is this guy at the park? Shit doesn’t add up Connor. Shit just doesn’t add up here.” Connor got up and tried to leave the table but Pat blocked him from doing so.

“You just sit your ass back down right there. We are going to have a conversation and eat this meal together and you are going to give me some answers or there’s gonna be rent to pay. Do you understand me? My pension pays for everything you see here and it doesn’t go as far as it used to these days.”

Connor sat back down as his father had instructed him.

“Geez. Okay. Sorry.”

“Yeah, you’re sorry alright. A sorry sack of shit. Now, what’s going on with the bikes?”

Connor sighed and looked at the table in front of him as he answered Pat.

“It’s kind of a little business I have. I buy beat up old bikes from this guy, Sid, down at the park and fix ‘em up and sell em to a shop out in Royal Oak for up to three times what I get em for from Sid.”

This was mostly a lie. The truth was Sid and Connor stole the bikes, then Connor fixed anything they broke in the process of stealing them and repainted them down in Gertrude’s back yard. Then he and Sid put them in the back of Sid’s van and sold them to a shop off Main near the post office in Royal Oak and another one out near the Heidelberg Project. It was a pretty good little business they had going. They pulled in anywhere from \$300 to \$1000 every week and split it fifty-fifty. The bike Connor had to work on right now was, in fact, a girls bike. The shop in Royal Oak had specifically requested a couple girls bikes. Connor was going to airbrush a unicorn on this one. Details like that bumped up the price he could get by at least forty percent. Between the bikes and selling the pills Gert gave him for the little errands he ran for her, Connor was able to support his meth habit, pay for his phone, and buy beer. Until now Pat had never shown any interest.

The timer on the stove dinged and shook both men out of their trance. Pat grabbed an oven mitt and pulled out the steaming boxes of mac and cheese sitting them on thick paper plates before bringing them to the table. He sat one at his place and one in front of Connor who got up and grabbed a couple forks from the drying rack next to the sink. He handed one to his father as they both sat down. Pat bowed his head.

“Bless us oh, Lord and these Thy gifts which we are about to receive from Thy bounty, through Christ our Lord. Amen.” Pat recited without even thinking about it.

Connor waited until his father finished before carefully peeling open the boxed meal and taking a bite. Pat took a couple bites while watching his son lift the fork to his mouth. Connor's teeth were looking pretty bad.

"So, this Sid and this bike business...when did this start? Where's this Sid from?" Pat inquired skeptically.

"Oh, we've been working together for about a year now. I met him at the park one day when I was out looking for work." Connor lied. He never went to the park except when he was looking to score some meth. He met Sid a few years ago at a show at the Phoenix Center. He just happened to see Sid steal some chick's purse and for some reason decided to cover for him. When a bouncer went after him, Connor had nonchalantly extended his right foot and tripped the obese fuck as he ran past him after Sid. Connor then followed Sid out of the venue and onto the street and demanded a cut for his assistance. Sid had laughed as they slipped down an alley and dumped out the contents of the bag. Thirty dollars and some change, a coin for the People Mover, a gas card and a Swiss Army knife. The two guys had marveled at how she had gotten the knife past the door check.

"Lookin' for work at the park, eh?" Pat licked some noodle from his incisor. He wasn't buying it, but wasn't going to call his son out just yet. "So, how much you buy these bikes for from Sid?" Connor chewed slowly and looked at his Dad.

"It varies. Like, thirty to fifty bucks depending on what they are and how messed up they are." It was plausible given the story he told about his deal with Gert.

"Yeah? And then how much do you sell 'em to the shop for and what do they sell 'em for?" Connor was actually kind of enjoying this shop talk with his Dad. It almost felt like a normal conversation and they hadn't had one of those since before his mother died.

"Like I said before, it varies. If the bike is something special and I've done a cool paint job I've gotten as much as two hundred and fifty dollars. But usually it's seventy five to a hundred bucks. The last fancy one I did sold out of the store for almost a thousand bucks!" Connor said pleased with himself.

"A thousand bucks?! Why don't you just sell the bikes yourself. We could get your cousin Elizabeth to make you a website. You're throwing money away selling them to this shop. We could use that income around here. Maybe hire a cleaning service to get this place straightened up." Pat was flabbergasted. He had no idea his son even had these skills let alone that kind of money in his pocket. "Where you working on these bikes? Because it sure as hell ain't in my garage."

Connor felt a little nervous now at his father's unexpected support.

"Um, well, I don't really want to sell 'em myself. Then I'd have to keep inventory. The shop has clients already. Gert, I mean, Mrs. Donovan lets me use her husband's old shop in the back yard to work on 'em."

Gertrude's late husband, Felix, had liked to work on cars in his spare time. He did custom paint jobs on the side for extra cash. One day Gertrude had sent Connor out to the garage to poke around for some tools to fix a kitchen cabinet and he saw the bench and the air brush machine and asked her about it. She had told him he was welcome to use the shop after he was done doing chores and odd jobs for her. So far it had been working out well. It kept the stolen merchandise out of his house and in an unsuspected yet safe place. Gertrude hardly ever left the house except with that bitchy friend of hers, Joan. Pat and Felix had been in a bowling league together back in the day at Rochester Bowl. While they hadn't really been friends they *had* been friendly. So Pat didn't think anything of it. Connor saw the belief on his father's face and relaxed a bit, taking another bite of mac and cheese.

"Ah, well, you're probably right about that there. Having an inventory of bikes here would probably just invite thieves." Pat shoveled his last bite of mac and cheese into his face and wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist as he pushed up out of his chair. He tossed the empty container and used plate in the trash and gave his fork a quick rinse in the sink and placed it back in the drying rack. Then he turned to the fridge and opened it, bending over to look at the bottom shelf.

"So these bikes are where you been gettin' beer money then?" Pat said as he turned from the refrigerator closing the door behind him and popping the tab on a can of PBR. "Sounds like you could be buyin' something a little better than PBR, son." Pat said with some amount of approval in his voice. Connor smiled. It was the first time in a long time his father had any amount of approval for him in his voice.

"Whadya mean? You order PBR when we go to the bar." Connor laughed.

"Well yeah. I'm a cheap date. But here in the castle it would be nice to have something a little more high brow. Like maybe some Bells or something." Pat took a long swig from the can. "You want one, boy?" He asked his son holding the can up slightly.

"Yeah. Sure." Connor said.

Pat turned back around and grabbed a can from the refrigerator and tossed it across the room to Connor who simply raised his arm and grabbed it out of the air.

"See there!? You still got it my boy! Just like catching everything that Billy Swanson from Auburn Hills hit at you!"

Connor blushed. Pat belched and patted his stomach as he sat back down next to his son.

Connor cracked the beer and Pat bumped cans with him.

"To your Mother!" he announced.

"To Mom." Connor toasted in return.

Pat finished the beer and swiped up Connor's now finished plate and fork from the table while Connor took a drink of the beer.

"Next time you take a bike down to this shop I'd like to come along." Pat told his son.

Connor almost snarfed the beer he had in his mouth out his nose.

"Um, I don't think that would be a good idea, Dad."

"What? Why not? I won't say anything. I'd just like to see some of your work."

"Sid doesn't like people in his van other than me."

"That's fine. I'll follow down behind you guys. What's the shop called?"

"Seriously, Dad. It's not a good idea. The guy who buys the bikes doesn't even really like me. He just says he sells more of my bikes than anyone else's. He said if my paint jobs weren't so good he'd take me out back and knock some sense into me, or somethin' like that."

This was not a lie. Dirk, from the shop in Royal Oak, had told him that more than once and he believed him. Dirk didn't have patience for tweekers like him and Sid.

"Ah well, at least show me this bike you have out there by the door when you're done with it before you sell it." Pat requested jovially. Connor smiled.

"Sure thing, Pop." He said and finished his beverage. Connor got up and headed for the bike in the other room. Pat belched again and called after him.

"Hey! Where you off to now? You wanna watch the Tigers with me here in a bit? Maybe drink a couple more beers with your old man?" It was the first time since Connor's twenty first birthday that Pat had invited his son to drink with him, or watch a game. Connor almost said yes.

"Sorry, Pop. I have a bit of a deadline. I gotta get this thing down to Gert, I mean, Mrs. Donovan's place and get started."

"Maybe next time then, son." Pat said and shooed his boy with his hand as he walked out the door. Pat smiled to himself thinking maybe that old bat Gertrude was right. Maybe it was time he started to get out more.

Connor pushed the bike to the end of the driveway and hopped on heading to Gertrude's house. She had told him not to come around for a while, but this bike was a special order. He needed to get started. Plus, Sid had two more girl's bikes waiting in the wings for him to refinish. He hadn't helped lift those two, just this one. Shelby Township had been easy pickings last week, Sid told him. He said something about those farm folks out there not even locking their garages at night and that the first two houses he hit had exactly what they were looking for. Connor didn't care. He had been thinking about telling Sid he wasn't interested in helping him steal the bikes anymore. He just wanted to do the refurb work. He was also thinking he wanted to ask Gertrude for a raise. This last thing with the dog shit had been gross and besides, he didn't have anything against Gene and Robin. They had always been nice to him and his family and Gene made really good cake. He wasn't sure why Gertrude and her friend Joan hated Gene, but lesbians didn't make sense to him in general, unless they were young, cute, and willing to let him watch, which none he had ever known were. The one time he walked in on Gertrude and Joan kissing and groping each other he had thrown up in his mouth a little, but that might have just been because he hadn't had his fix yet. Joan had grabbed his arm hard enough to leave a bruise and told him if he told anyone what he saw she would cut his nuts off, and he believed her. Joan was mean. Gertrude was crotchety a lot of the time, but Joan was just plain mean. He didn't like her and she didn't like him. He kind of felt bad for Gert and if he hadn't seen her and Joan going at it, he might have suggested his Dad ask her out for lunch some time.

Connor pulled the bike around to Gertrude's back door and propped it against the siding and let himself in with the key she had given him a couple weeks before. The litter needed changed. There was a new bag on the floor behind the door. He bent down to start the dirty job and one of Gertrude's cats darted out of the box. Gertrude yelled from deep in the house.

"Joan, is that you?"

"No, Gert. It's me. I'm here to change the litter for you." Connor offered hopefully.

"Connor?! Your fuddy-duddy of an old man was down here earlier looking for you and giving me a hard time. Besides, I told you to not come around for a while."

Connor could hear Gertrude's footsteps and tell by the sound of her voice she was coming back to talk to him. He stood up with the litter scooper in one hand waiting for her. In a moment she was standing in front of him with one of her sauced up bottles of Crystal Light.

"I'm sorry Gert. I know what you said, but you need my help. You can't do this and God knows Joan ain't gonna do it for you." Connor smiled at Gertrude sympathetically. Gertrude softened at

his genuine affection. She knew he was right and she was grateful for the help. She and Felix had never been able to have any children and it had never really bothered her until he passed away and was reminded of his absence every time she couldn't bend over to pick something up or needed to go to the store or the grass needed cut around her precious roses. The doctor had told her before Felix had even gotten sick that she needed to have her hip replaced, but she wasn't interested in being cut up and pinned back together. What her methadone didn't take care of the vodka did and what those things didn't cover Joan or Connor did. In a strange way she realized she loved Connor. Gertrude sighed and pat the boy on the arm.

"Oh, Connor, you're right. But if Joan comes over you'll need to go. Does your Dad know you're OK? He was worried. If I had known where you were I would have told him." Gertrude turned back towards her kitchen. Connor resumed cleaning up the cat litter mess.

"Yeah. I just had lunch with him. I told him about the bikes. He knows I'm down here." he spoke loudly so she could hear him in the other room while he worked. There were a total of four litter boxes and Gertrude had at least eleven cats. A few years ago she had almost thirty, but Animal Services had been called by the next-door neighbor and they had taken all but four. Now she was back up to eleven or twelve. Connor couldn't be sure. He just knew it was a whole lot of cat shit.

"You told him about the bikes?! Damn it, now he'll be down here looking for you all the time." Gertrude said from the kitchen. Connor thought he could smell cookies or something baking.

"No he won't. Hey, are you baking something in there?" Gertrude made pretty good chocolate chip cookies and Connor liked cookies.

"I have some of those cookies you like in the oven right now. They're almost done. You can have a couple when you're done in there." Gertrude told him.

"Great! Thanks! Hey, you have more than this one bag of litter here? You know each box takes one bag."

"Yeah. I have three more bags in the sitting room. Come get them."

"I will. I'm just gonna take these out back and spray them out first."

"OK. Sounds good." Gertrude said just as the buzzer went off for the stove. Even over the pungent stink of cat pee and shit Connor's mouth watered as the smell of the cookies wafted into the utility room from the kitchen. He took the litter boxes out one by one and dumped the used litter into the trash can then laid the boxes and their lids on the cracked patio so he could spray them out with the hose. Then he went back in to sweep the loose litter from the floor while the boxes dried in the sun. He entered the kitchen and saw the cookies on the counter cooling

with one of Gertrude's cats sitting next to them looking at them. The cat knew they were hot. He shooed the giant tabby from the counter and headed to the sitting room where he found Gertrude crocheting, her sauced up Crystal Light on the table and the Tigers game on the TV. The opening pitch had just been thrown. He thought about his Dad down at their house watching the game and drinking alone too and thought it was sad they couldn't all be doing what they were all doing right now, but together, like a family. He looked from Gertrude to the screen and felt a pang of jealousy for the pitcher on the mound. It was an away game. It should be him on that mound. Gertrude saw the look on his face and felt pity for the boy. With her crochet hook she pointed at the bags of litter by the front door.

"There's the litter, Connor."

"Yeah. I see it." Connor snapped out of his sad day dream and headed for the bags. As he lifted all three up in his arms awkwardly, he looked at Gertrude again. "Hey, Gert?" he started.

"What's that, Dear?" Gertrude replied sweetly.

"Gert, are you like a total lezbo or do you still like dicks too?" He asked her surprising even himself at his boldness.

"Now what the hell kinda question is that?" Gert laughed. Connor shifted his weight and balanced the bags of litter.

"Oh I didn't mean to..." he started but Gertrude interrupted him.

"Oh, it's OK. No. I'm not a *total* lezbo. I'm bi. I just happen to love Joan."

The old woman laughed again and took a drink from her bottle. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh I don't know. I just see you up here watching the game and having a drink and my Dad's down there watching the game and drinking beer and..." Gertrude interrupted him again.

"And you thought we could all be broken together." Gertrude smiled and Connor blushed.

"Well, yeah, I guess. Something like that."

"Connor, your father wouldn't touch me with a ten foot pole. He reminded me this morning that I'm not half the woman his Gloria was and he's right. I'm not. I could never fill in for your Mom. But you can consider me like an Aunt if it makes you feel better."

It did make Connor feel better.

"Yeah? Can I call you Aunt Gert then?" Connor's mother had been an only child and his father's family lived in Alberta. While they got Christmas cards from them every year, they never saw them, not even at his mother's funeral.

"Sure, Sweetie. You can call me Aunt Gert. I think I like that." And she did. Gertrude's sister died a few years before Felix, and her kids were snobby. Alice had married into Gross Point money

and Gertrude and Felix had never been invited for holidays or anything else. The only time any of Alice's family wanted anything to do with her was when her husband Steve's brother, Jack, wanted his Bel Air redone for the Dream Cruise a year before Felix got sick. It was the last car Felix had painted and he had charged Jack twice what he would have anyone else, not because he needed or wanted the money, but to, in some small way, make up for the hurt the snubbing had caused Gertrude over the years. Gertrude loved her sister and missed her company and friendship. Felix had been like that. Gertrude had told Joan once he was a man of Principle. Joan said he was just an asshole. Joan was wrong and Gertrude understood why Joan felt that way. She was jealous. Joan was jealous of the spot Felix held in Gertrude's heart and the fact that she had actually loved him and wanted to be his wife; unlike Joan who had always only been attracted to women and hid it to appease her parents. The two women argued about this from time to time. It hurt Gertrude, but sometimes Felix had hurt her feelings too. Love was love no matter what, dick or no dick.

Connor passed by Gertrude with the bags of litter. "Thanks, Aunt Gert."

"You're welcome." she said to his back as he disappeared through the kitchen to finish changing the cat litter. "Don't forget to have a couple of those cookies when you're done. And bring me one too!"

"No problem, Aunt Gert." Connor yelled back from the utility room.

Connor brought the bottoms of the four boxes back into the small room and arranged them the way the cats were accustomed and filled them each with a bag of litter. Then he retrieved the lids and swept up the loose litter that hadn't made it into any box before he went into the kitchen and washed his hands. The tabby was back on the counter looking at the cookies.

"Aunt Gert, one of your cats is in here on the counter with the cookies!" He yelled to the front room.

"Oh, that's Sheeba. She won't touch them. She just likes to look at them for some reason.

Cookies and bread both. She sits and watches them on the counter." Gertrude explained over the sounds of the game.

Connor reached out and rubbed the cat's ears. "Good Sheeba! Make sure no one steals Aunt Gert's cookies." The cat pressed her head into his hand and purred. Connor pulled a couple paper towels from a roll next to the sink and put two cookies on either one. With two cookies in either hand he walked back into the sitting room and sat on the chair next to the couch where Gertrude was seated and placed one paper towel with cookies on the table next to her drink.

Then he took a bite of one of his cookies and looked at the TV. “Mmmm. Still warm.” He mumbled with his mouth full.

Gertrude picked up a cookie and shoved half of it in her mouth all at once. “Mmmhmm.” She agreed.

Connor slowly enjoyed his cookies for fifteen minutes or so and watched the game in silence with his Aunt Gert. When he was done he stood up.

“I’m gonna go work in the shop for a bit, Aunt Gert.”

“OK, Sweetie. Be a Dear and lock the back door on your way out, and stay as long as you like, unless Joan shows up. If she comes over, don’t let her see you, Just slip away when she’s not looking.”

“OK, Aunt Gert. And...”

“And what, Dear?” Gertrude asked softly.

“And, thank you, Aunt Gert. I love you.”

“I love you too, Sweetie.”

Connor turned quickly and did as he was told. Gertrude wept quietly after she heard the back door lock.

CHAPTER 9

It's Gonna Sell Out!

Meijer's was a zoo and Robin and Gene almost had a fender bender in the parking lot leaving the store. Two older women, one in a late 90's Cadillac and the other in a Toyota Prius, were both trying to pull into the same handicap space and nearly collided. Then, when the Cadillac backed up to avoid hitting the Prius, she almost backed into the Grand Cherokee before Robin had even turned the key in the ignition. Robin vowed to never shop at the store again, but Gene reminded him he said that almost every time they made a trip to the store together. Robin sighed as he looked at the two older women yelling at each other in his rearview mirror and was reminded of his mother. Everything seemed to make him think of his mother these days. It was starting to get on his nerves and make him avoidant of older women in general. When they were checking out he had made Gene wait in a long line just to avoid an older woman cashier at a register that opened just as they approached the check-out area. When Gene protested he pretended to not hear her.

Now back at the house, Robin brought the last bag of groceries in from the car and sat it on the kitchen counter while Gene was busy putting things away.

"Did you not want to use that check out lane because of the cashier?" Gene asked Robin without looking up, trying to fit things in the pantry. Robin was startled by her observation.

"Yeah. I'm sorry. It's just all this shit with my Mom has me seeing her everywhere I look. I can't stand old women right now." he explained. It never ceased to amaze him how Gene always seemed to know these things about him, often before he had even figured it out himself. But this time, he knew what was going on.

"Well, I can understand where you're coming from, but you do realize not all old women are like your Mom or Gertrude, right? I mean, it's not fair to write off all old women just because your Mom's nuts." Gene pressed. After all, one day she would be an old woman. Was he going to avoid her once he decided she was an 'old woman' too?

"I know. Don't get on me about it right now, OK? I just want to go lie down. I'm tired." Robin walked over to Gene and kissed her brow. Gene touched Robin's face and watched him lumber to the living room to lie down on the couch. She heard the TV flick on and an announcer say something about the Tiger's line up and stats. Gene backed up against the counter spreading her weight to either hand outstretched on either side of her against the edge of the granite

countertop and looked over the center island into the dining room. The light was cutting through the room at an obtuse angle illuminating the four chairs at the dining room table that remained empty unless they had company. She looked to her left and saw the photo from Robin's 40th birthday hanging on the fridge. Joan was seated next to Gene at the table glaring an expression of disapproval at her. The waiter had taken it just moments before the incident that caused Robin to demand his mother and Gertrude to leave. Gene's eyes welled up with tears. She cried silently as she finished putting the last few things away: a block of cheese, some mayo, orange juice, pickles, beer. Then she grabbed a tumbler from the cabinet and poured herself a finger of vodka over a couple ice cubes and topped it off with some peach flavored seltzer they had just brought home that wasn't cold yet. She took a sip and sat the drink on the center island then splashed her face with cold water and pat it dry with a fresh paper towel.

"You wanna beer?" she called to Robin in the other room.

"Yeah. Sure. That'd be great. One of those new IPA's we just got would hit the spot."

Gene opened the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle with what looked like an artichoke flying through space on the label and popped it open. She dug in a cupboard under the island and produced a large aluminum bowl and filled it with half a bag of salt and vinegar potato chips. Then she balanced the bowl on her left forearm with her drink in her left hand, and grabbed Robin's beer with her right hand and headed into the living room to join her husband.

In the living room Robin was stretched out on his side with his head propped up with both a pillow and his arm. There was a hole in the toe of his sock. Gene was always telling him to throw away such socks and let her know so she could pick up some new ones. Hell, they were just at Meijer. They could have grabbed a couple pair then if she had known. Gene sat the open beer and the bowl of chips on the table in front of her husband and settled herself with her drink in the chair next to the sofa where guests usually sat. Robin propped himself up to sitting and snatched his beer and a handful of chips from the table.

"Whatcha' drinkin'?" he asked her stuffing the chips in his mouth and taking a swig of beer.

"Vodka and seltzer." she answered flatly. Robin frowned a little. He could tell she had been crying. Her eyelashes were stuck together a little and her eyes looked pinkish.

"What's wrong, Babe?" he inquired. Gene's eyes welled up again but she held the tears back.

"Nothing. Well, nothing that has any answer or quick fix. I guess I'm just tired too." she answered as she wiped her eyes with the back of her wrist and took a sip of her drink.

"Aw come on." Robin pressed.

“Aw come on nothing. You told me not to get on you about it, so I’m not. Look, I know she’s your mother, but it’s real hard on me too, you know. Just watch the game. It’s OK. It’s not like we can solve anything by talking about it anyway. Nothing can solve your mother.” Gene tossed back her almost full drink and got up abruptly to go to the kitchen and refill her glass.

“You still interested in going out for dinner?” Robin called after her.

“Yeah. I was thinking Ram’s Horn or something like that.” Gene called back. Robin could hear the cork of the vodka pop out of the bottle.

“Well, then, you better not plan on getting ripped.” he teased.

Gene reappeared with a fresh drink and another beer for Robin as well. She sat it on the table next to his still half full bottle and grabbed a few chips. They made a satisfying crunch in her mouth.

“Yeah, you know me. Drunk and disorderly at the Ram’s Horn every Saturday night!” Gene joked back at him.

“Well, you’d probably fit right in at The Horn.” Robin laughed.

“What? Bite your tongue The drunks don’t go to the Horn until Hamlin Pub closes for the night.”

Gene smiled. Gene’s chair was facing the front window and the drapes were open. Through the smudged looking glass she saw Connor walking, hands stuffed in his pockets looking at the ground, towards his house. He stopped for a moment in front of the Randall’s house and seemed to look straight at Gene, but she knew he probably couldn’t see her because of the way the light hit the glass from outside. She thought he looked kind of sad.

“I hope it’s not Connor who has been playing the knocking game on our door.” she said to Robin just as the Tigers got a third out and the crowd cheered. It was an away game against the Cardinals.

“Me too.” Robin said. “Speaking of games, I don’t think we’re gonna pull this one off today. Two more innings but they’re up by like ten. We need a new short stop. Geez!” Robin chugged the remaining beer and picked up the fresh bottle, holding it on his knee. He pat the seat next to him on the couch. “Hey. Why don’t you come over here next to me?” he offered coyly as Gene’s cell phone rang in her purse hanging on the back of one of the dining room chairs.

“In a second.” she said as she got up to answer the phone. It was Mort. Normally she didn’t answer during games, but Mort had priority over baseball. Gene answered the phone. Robin muted the game and listened to her end of the conversation.

“Hey Mort....No. I’m not busy. Just having a drink and watching the game with Robin...Yeah. He got home on Friday...Yes. I’m glad he’s home too...Sure. That works just fine. We were gonna

go down to the Ram's Horn later. You wanna join us? We can discuss the details over dinner... Great. See you in a bit then." and she hung up the phone. As she walked back into the living room Robin was looking at her expectantly.

"Well? What was that about? Is he coming over here now?"

"Yeah. Well, in about an hour, to look at the paintings. Then he's gonna go to dinner with us."

Gene explained.

"Well, thank God we're only going to The Horn. You know the way he eats and since we invited, you know he's gonna expect me to pay." Robin said half joking half not. Mort was a portly man and the only thing he enjoyed more than a free meal was selling Art. Gene laughed.

"I'm gonna go up to the studio and arrange the paintings for him." Drink in one hand she swiped a handful of chips from the bowl before kissing Robin on the tip of his nose and disappearing up the stairs.

"OK." he said as he turned the volume back up on the game. The Cards had just scored three more runs off a missed throw from the outfield.

"Aw. Come on fellas! You got holes in your gloves or what?!" he yelled at the screen.

Upstairs Gene let out a short quiet laugh at her husband as she closed herself in her studio.

She sat her drink on a table and considered the most recent painting, complete and drying on the easel, as she crunched on the chips one by one. It was finally finished and she was pleased with it. She thought this series might be complete but wasn't 100% sure just yet. She wanted to get Mort's feedback and sleep on it for a couple nights before she made a final decision. If Mort didn't like the paintings it would kind of be a moot point. If he wasn't going to show them she would need to start a new series ASAP. But even if she needed to start a new series, if *she* decided *this* series wasn't finished she would continue to work on it for her own satisfaction. She was more excited about this work than she had been about any of her other work in quite a few years. The excitement and newness of it all was refreshing.

Gene finished her chips and wiped her hands on her backside before pulling the other completed paintings from the rack and placing them on the chair rail ledge Robin had installed for her last summer for just this purpose. She arranged them in chronological order of completion knowing that Mort would most likely move them around to see different compositions next to each other. The first time they had reviewed a finished series together she had been appalled when he started moving things around. But after the first exhibition nearly sold out hung in the order of Mort's choosing, Gene never challenged him again. Occasionally she

questioned his choices, and sometimes he used her suggested groupings, but Mort knew Art and he knew his clients, and Gene liked selling her work. Mort had been representing Gene exclusively in Michigan now for nearly eight years. She had representation at a gallery in Boca Raton and one in Chicago as well, but neither of them sold the volume that Mort sold out of his Birmingham gallery and last year he had even helped her get a piece placed at the DIA. It was her first piece in a museum and after that The Boston Museum of Fine Art had purchased two pieces and a small public museum in Northern California did an exhibition of one of her biggest collectors collection of her work. It had given her work a push which was part of what had made her decide to shift her composition recently. After talking with the curators in Boston and California she decided to allow her work to 'evolve in a new direction' as both curators had mentioned about other artists to which they had compared her work. They had both made comments about how it was gratifying for many collectors to watch and support their favorite artists' growth. She was ready to do something a little different anyway. Mort had been more skeptical. So, she was a little nervous about him finally coming over to see the new work. He had refused to come over and look at anything in progress like he normally did. He said something about not wanting to bias her process with his input.

Once Gene had all the paintings placed she stood finishing her drink looking at them. Glass now empty she headed back down the stairs for a refill. Robin was dozing on the couch, feet up on the worn arm and his mouth open. The bowl of chips was empty. Gene picked up the empty bowl and the one empty beer, his other beer was still about a quarter full, and headed to the kitchen. Just as she opened the vodka there was a loud knock at the front door. She heard Robin stir.

"I'll get it." he said sleepily.

"OK. Thanks." Gene called from the kitchen. She pulled another tumbler from the cabinet and mixed a vodka and seltzer for Mort too and headed to meet the two men in the living room. As Robin predicted, the Tigers had lost, but only by one run. They had a rally in the last inning and the Cards actually had to come back to win. When Gene entered the room Robin had turned the TV on mute and was standing in the middle of the room laughing with Mort who had a giant bandaid hanging loosely on his right cheek. Gene outstretched her arm handing him a drink as she gasped at the spectacle. Mort took the drink without question and took a sip.

"Well, what the hell happened to your face? Did Leah finally smack you one?" Gene joked. Mort's wife, Leah, was always threatening to smack the smile off his face when he made off

color jokes in her presence. Everyone knew she didn't mean it and Mort only made the jokes to get his wife's goat.

"What this?" Mort made a grand gesture with his right arm and hand pointing to the bandage.

"No. The crack in your ass. Yes. THAT." Gene laughed and held her glass up to cheers with Mort who obliged her gesture.

"No. I'd be missing half my face if Leah ever actually decided to give it to me. *This* is because I was at the doctor last week to look at the mole that was here and had to have it removed." Mort explained.

"Ah. I see." Gene replied shaking her head in understanding. Mort had a fair number of moles and had a few others removed from various spots over the years. "Was it serious this time?" Gene asked.

"Well, let's just say I'm glad it's gone. They said they got it all and I shouldn't have any more problems."

"Well, good." Gene said. "Are you ready to see these paintings or what? The one on the easel is still drying so don't touch it."

"Most definitely, my Dear. Let's go have a looky-loo." Mort began to follow Gene who was already headed for the stairs. Robin smiled.

"OK, you two. Have fun. I'm gonna finish my beer and then when you're done we can head to The Horn." he called after them as they disappeared up the stairs.

"Sounds like a plan." Mort laughed. "I'm famished!"

Robin chuckled to himself and sat back down on the couch to finish his beer and watch post game commentary.

Gene opened the door to the studio and ushered Mort in before her, then closed the door behind them. The routine went like this: Neither spoke. Mort would spend five or ten minutes looking over the work and rubbing his chin and holding his elbow. Then he would look Gene up and down with scrutiny before rearranging the order of the work. Then he would look at it again for five to thirty minutes and they would leave the room and discuss the work.

Mort stood in the middle of the room with his drink in one hand and his other hand over his mouth for a moment. Then he left the room closing the door and leaving Gene by herself, confused. Then he opened the door abruptly and burst into the studio once more stopping once again in the center of the room. Then he walked from piece to piece and inspected the images

with his face only a mere foot from the surface. When he had done this to each painting he slammed what remained of his drink and set the glass down with a thud on the table next to her pallet exclaiming, “Mozel tov!”, grabbed both of Gene’s hands and kissed the tops of her knuckles. Gene was in a state of shock. Mort had never had such a reaction to her work. He pat her on the shoulder and said, “Come. Let’s go have dinner and talk about this wonderful new work of yours, my Dear!”

Gene let out a laugh and Mort did the same as they headed back down the stairs.

Robin popped up off the couch and pulled his keys from his pocket. “I’ll drive.” he announced. “That’s OK. I’m going to follow you there because I need to get straight home after dinner. Leah made a pie and is insistent I have a piece or three before I go to bed.”

Gene was relieved. She wanted to tell Robin about Mort’s reaction before they sat down. Mort probably knew this and wanted to give them their privacy. Gene knew Leah never baked. Last time she had a party at the house she had asked Gene to bake a cake because she said the closest she got to baking was a potato pancake, and Mort always accepted when Robin offered to drive. Plus, he’d have to come back this way to go home anyway. Gene grabbed her purse from the dining room chair while Robin ushered Mort out the door. Gene was almost giddy getting in the Grand Cherokee. Robin knew something was up.

Once they were out of the driveway and Mort was in line behind them Robin couldn’t take the suspense any more.

“So! Tell me! What’s this all about!?” Robin was as excited as Gene and didn’t know why.

“Well. He looked at them for just a couple minutes with his mouth open as wide as a bagel then darted out of the room...then burst back in, then spun around and kissed both my hands after slamming his glass down and declaring ‘mozel tov!’ Then he pat me on the shoulder and wanted to go to dinner to talk about it!” Gene sounded like a teenager telling her best friend the star baseball player had asked her to prom.

“Well, that funny man!” Robin exclaimed with a chuckle. “He really is something. His wife hardly cooks let alone bake if I remember correctly. Right?”

“Yeah. I think he just knew I’d be excited to tell you.” Gene laughed with her husband.

“Well, that’s good news.” Robin let out a heavy breath.

“You’re tellin’ me!” Gene replied in a high pitch voice. “I was prepared to start a new series but still work on this one in my spare time, you know for my own gratification.”

“Oh yeah. All that spare time of yours. Were you planning on not talking to me anymore?” Robin joked. Gene smacked him on the thigh as they turned onto Hamlin and pulled into the Ram’s Horn parking lot.

“Hey, a girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do.” She laughed as he pulled into a space near the door. Mort pulled in next to them in the handicap spot and hung a blue placard on the rearview mirror.

“Where’d you get that?” Gene asked Mort pointing to the placard as they got out of their cars.

“Oh, it happens when you get older, my Dear. The doctor said I need to be careful how much I walk out in the sun. He really wants me to wear a wide brim hat, but hats have never been my style. The only time I put anything on my head is for weddings, funerals, and bar mitzvahs. I refuse to go to any more bris’. Last one I went to, the Mohel had a cold sore!” Mort laughed and rushed to the door to open it for Gene and Robin. Robin looked at Gene quizzically. He had no idea what a Mohel was. Gene mouthed the words ‘I’ll tell you later’ as they entered the diner.

The hostess at the register just inside the door looked bored even though the restaurant was busy. They were lucky, though. There was no line and one booth was open in the far corner.

“How many?” The girl of about sixteen in an old-school style waitress uniform asked.

“Uh, three.” Robin responded looking from Gene to Mort.

The girl pulled three menus from a wall mounted basket and turned away from them saying, “Follow me.” which they did.

Before she smacked the menus down on the table the girl turned to the party of three and asked, “Coffee?”

Gene looked from Robin to Mort who both shook their head in a ‘Yes’ gesture before turning to the girl shaking her head yes and saying, “Yes. Three, please.”

The girl nodded in the same bored fashion as the rest of her communication and turned to the table. She slapped the menus at the end of the booth and reached across the table turning three coffee cups at three place settings upright and removing a fourth unneeded place setting with coffee cup. Then she turned back to Gene. “Someone will be right over.”

“OK. Thank you, young lady.” Mort offered.

The three piled into the booth. Robin sat next to Gene and Mort across from her. Robin handed the laminated tri-fold menus, damp with bleachy smelling water, to Gene and Mort before opening one for himself.

“Well, I know what I’m having!” Robin announced.

“What’s that?” Mort asked placing narrow reading glasses on his face and peering down his nose at his menu.

“The chicken sub with fries. It’s a classic. And after, maybe a slice of banana cream pie.” Robin said decisively, smacking the menu shut and placing it on the table in front of him.

“Well, I’m gonna have the taco salad. That pie is all you, Rob. Anyone interested in splitting some cheese sticks with me?” Gene smiled folding her menu shut and lowering it to watch Mort agonize over all the options.

“Yeah. I’ll help you with that.” Robin told her enthusiastically.

“Me too.” Mort chimed in. “Now what do I feel like?” he said tapping the fingers of his right hand on the table. “Hmmm. I think I’ll start with a bowl of that cabbage soup. Then have the chicken fried steak with mashed potatoes and gravy. And Robin, if you’re really going to have that pie I think I will too!” Mort smiled as he folded his menu and placed it in front of him as a waitress not much older than the hostess approached the table with three glasses of water in one hand and a coffee pot in the other. Her short auburn hair was combed just so and her acrylic manicure was decorated with airbrushed dolphins and palm trees, a funny choice for Rochester Hills, Michigan, even in the summer. She sat the coffee pot on the edge of the table while she distributed the glasses of water. Then she picked up the steaming pot by the brown handle and filled the three upright mugs. Then with a placid smile she nodded at Robin and said, “I’ll be right back to take your order.”

“OK. Thank you,” Gene answered.

“Did you get a look at those nails?!” Robin excitedly whispered to Mort and Gene as the girl walked away.

“Yes. Maybe I’ll ask her who does them so I can offer them a show.” Mort goaded.

“Oh stop it you two. Leave her alone. I thought they were fun.” Gene reprimanded as the waitress approached again. She was smirking. When she reached the table she stopped and shifted her weight to her right hip and pulled a pad of order tickets and a pen out of her left pocket. Still smirking she looked at the men.

“Yeah. I know my nails are ridiculous, but it got you talking and that means a high probability of a higher tip. This is my job and I aim to please. Now what can I get for you?” she seemed pleased with herself and Gene covered her mouth to stifle a laugh as Robin and Mort both blushed with embarrassment.

"I'll have the taco salad with extra sour cream and salsa on the side, oh, and can I have an order of cheese sticks with marinara to start?" Gene ordered.

"Sure. Anything besides coffee and water?" the waitress asked.

"No."

"And for you, Sir?" the waitress looked at Mort.

"I'll start with a bowl of that delicious cabbage soup. Then the chicken fried steak with mashed potatoes and extra gravy..."

The waitress interrupted Mort. "Extra gravy is a dollar fifty. Is that OK?" she asked.

"Yes. Yes. I'm not paying tonight." Mort looked at Robin and laughed.

"On the side?" the waitress inquired.

"No. No. Put it all on there. Oh and, don't forget to come and ask about dessert later." Mort instructed.

"Not a problem." the waitress smiled and turned to Robin who was waiting his turn patiently.

"And for you, Sir?" she asked.

"I will have the chicken sub with fries." Robin replied.

"Anything else?" The waitress asked the table.

"We're probably going to want dessert." Robin told her.

"OK. The cheese sticks will be up shortly." the waitress said and turned back toward the kitchen.

Robin couldn't take the suspense any longer. He took a sip of his coffee looking at Mort who was stirring some cream into his then tapped the spoon on the rim of the thick stone wear mug.

"So! Whatcha think of Gene's new stuff, you old goat?!" he asked affectionately.

Mort looked at Robin intently as he took a calculated sip of his coffee. Then he slowly sat the mug down in front of him and arranged his place setting just so, smoothing the napkin on his lap before he looked at Gene and back to Robin.

"I fucking LOVE IT! It's gonna sell out!" Mort said a little too loud. A proper-church-looking family at an adjacent table turned abruptly to glare at them disapprovingly over their shoulders. Mort stuck his tongue out at them and laughed. Robin and Gene smiled.

CHAPTER 10

Probably Going To Take A Couple Days

Joan turned on the water in her kitchen sink and let it get as hot as it could. Then she began to methodically rinse out and scrub the accumulated pile of dishes. She muttered to herself as she let the water burn her hands. "He called me Joan? That bitch wife of his must have put it in his mind. I'll show that little snot. I'll get her ass. She's not getting away with this. Not this time." Joan's hands were covered in soap suds and she dropped her favorite coffee mug on the floor. It cracked into pieces. Now she was really angry and added this insult to her list of grievances against Gene. Shaking her hands in the air and looking at the ceiling she cried out. "God dam you, Gene! God damn you, you little whore!"

Joan opened the pantry looking for the 151. She found it where she had left it and dug around in another cupboard for a tall glass. She pressed the glass to the ice dispenser on the refrigerator door and filled it half way with crushed ice. Then she covered the ice with the rum and sat the glass on the counter while she dug around in the refrigerator for a diet Coke. There were two cans left on the bottom shelf behind a bag of soggy molded lettuce. She pulled one can and the bag of lettuce from the shelf and closed the door with her foot. Then holding the bag of rotted veggies between her index finger and thumb as far away from her as possible she dropped it in the trash, dripping rotted lettuce juice across the floor. The can of Coke had some remnants of rotted lettuce on the side. She gave the can a quick rinse under the tap in the now empty sink before she popped the tab and topped off her glass. She brought the glass to her lips and downed half of the drink in one long gulp. The ice chips pressed against her upper lip and left her old-woman mustache damp. She wiped the moisture from her lip with the back of her wrist before taking another sip and placing the glass on the counter. Now she went to the utility closet to dig out a mop and bucket. This was the first time in twenty five years that Joan had cleaned her own kitchen. Frank used to clean the house. He said he liked doing it, that it relaxed him.

After Frank died Joan had started hiring cleaning services. First there had been a young gay man named Terrance. He did a great job, but Joan couldn't stand him. Gay men got on her nerves. Then there had been Nathalie. Nathalie had been referred to her by someone other than Gertrude at the widow's support group. One day Joan caught Nathalie going through an old photo album and hit the roof, firing the young woman on the spot. Then there had been

Theresa. Theresa had worked for Molly Maids and her English wasn't great. Joan had let her go after two visits because of the language barrier. Then, one day when she and Gertrude had been out and about they stopped at Caribou Coffee for iced caramel mochas and Joan happened to see a flier on the community bulletin board for a house keeper. She pulled the flier off the board, folded it up and shoved it in her purse. When she got home later she called the number and Doris had answered. Doris had been cleaning up after Joan ever since, at least until six weeks ago when she finally quit. Joan had pretended she didn't care when Doris walked out the door, but after her car pulled away Joan had panicked and actually cried.

Now, standing in her dirty kitchen, unwrapping the new mop and unused bucket, Joan's eyes welled with tears once again. She opened a drawer in the center island and found a fresh pack of Virginia Slims. She tore off the plastic wrapper and stuck a long thin cigarette in her mouth while she rifled through the drawer again looking for a lighter or matches. Not finding either she slammed the drawer shut and scanned the kitchen. A pink lighter was on the window ledge behind the sink. Joan lit the cigarette and traded the lighter for her drink. She took a long exaggerated drag and exhaled then chugged the rest of the drink before mixing herself another. The glass was mostly ice anyway, she reasoned with herself.

As she mopped the floor she left dirty footprints. Disgusted, she stomped up the stairs and dug around in her closet until she found the flip flops she saved for wearing in the shower whenever she travelled and stuffed her swollen feet into them. The plastic thongs cut across the tops of her feet and her polish was chipped. Maybe Gertrude would want to go get mani-pedis later. Joan stomped down the stairs, flip flops making fart noises all the way.

After she finished mopping the floor she lit another cigarette and wiped down all the counters and put away random items sitting about. Then she put the pieces of her broken mug in a paper bowl and sat it on the center island before opening the door to the basement and heading down to attend to the laundry. For the past six weeks she had been buying new bras, panties and socks instead of doing the wash. Now, the rest of her wardrobe having been worn, she decided she would bite the bullet and wash her clothes. The piles all over the floor smelled. There had been a night when she and Gertrude had gotten pretty drunk and Joan had thrown up on herself on the drive home. The smell of festering vomit was making her gag so she abandoned the idea of separating the clothes and just grabbed a mound and stuffed it in the machine. She poured a

cap of detergent over the mix of clothes and towels and ran a heavy duty load on cold water. Then she trudged back up the stairs looking for her drink and cigarettes. She found them by the kitchen sink and decided to wash her hands first. The phone rang. Hardly anyone ever rang her on the land line; only Gertrude, telemarketers, and her other son, Tim. Joan stuck her cigarette between her lips and picked up her drink and headed in the direction of the phone in the TV room. She sat down on the couch and set the drink down on the side table next to the phone before picking up the receiver.

“Hello?” Joan answered.

“Hello. Is this Mrs. Randall? Mrs. Francis Randall?” a strange man’s voice inquired.

“Um, who is this?” Joan was hesitant. No one had called her Mrs. Francis Randall since the funeral.

“I’m sorry to bother you ma’am. I’m calling from LAX in LA. A bag was recovered with a wallet and an address book and your name was on the inside of the address book as emergency contact. Do you know a Robin Randall?” the strange man continued.

“Why, yes. Robin is my son. Is there a problem?” Joan asked.

“No, ma’am. No problem. We are just trying to confirm who the owner of the bag is so we can return it.” the strange man went on.

“Oh, well, it’s not my bag. But it might be my son’s. He does travel quite often and I know he just got home recently.” Joan explained, excited at the idea of being able to help her son.

“OK, ma’am. That’s all we needed to know. Thank you.” and the man hung up before Joan could say anything else. Joan looked at the receiver of the phone with bewilderment. It seemed like a strange call. She’d have to remember to ask Robin about it next time she saw him.

Joan slumped back on the couch and looked over the TV room. It was a mess. There were used tissues on the table, a stack of magazines scattered on the floor, a couple plates with bits of old food, a full ash tray, a vase of long dead roses molding, and a box with bits of styrofoam packing from the still only half assembled IKEA book shelf in the corner. Joan took a sip of her drink and puffed on her cigarette. She could hear the TV of the next-door neighbor through the wall of her condo. The unit on the other side had been vacant for the past four months after Tina had moved to Florida to live with her granddaughter and her family. Evidently Tina had been a hoarder. After she moved out the landlord had filled a trash hopper three times with debris from the tiny unit. Joan was relieved she owned her unit outright and didn’t have to answer to a

landlord. Frank's life insurance had covered it and then some. But sometimes she was a little jealous of the neighbors who rented. They didn't have to take care of any maintenance issues themselves.

Joan finished her cigarette then flicked on the TV while she started to clean up the disheveled room around her. She scrolled through the DVR until she found her favorite show, *Orange Is The New Black*, and hit play. Sometimes Joan fantasized about going to prison. From the show it looked like an old lesbian like her could find true love, or at least have a fling or two. But, then again, she'd miss Gert...good old Gert...good old stupid Gert and her too many cats and ugly muumuus. Joan really did love that woman. Joan gathered up all the magazines and stuffed them in a garbage bag. Then she dumped the dried out molding dead roses in the bag as well and took the vase into the kitchen and rinsed it out. Gertrude had cut the roses from her garden for her after they had a silly argument over salad dressing at the Coney Island one evening. Joan finished tidying the TV room then pulled out a vacuum cleaner she had never used before and fumbled with the handle. After she figured out how to work the handle and found the power switch she vacuumed the whole room including the furniture and curtains using the hand attachment. Then she flopped back on the couch sweat dripping down between her old sagging bag shaped breasts and picked up the phone to call Gert. It rang twice before Gert answered with a mouth full of something. It was approaching noon on Monday. Joan hadn't spoken to Gertrude since she had left on Saturday morning.

"Joan? Is that you?" Gertrude answered.

"Yeah, Sweets, it me. How'd you know?"

"Well, I was starting to worry when I didn't hear from you yesterday, but I figured you were just tired. I'm glad you called."

"Oh yeah? What are you stuffing your face with over there?"

"Oh, can you tell? Cookies. I baked chocolate chip."

"Figures. You and those cookies! Like you're someone's grandma or some thing."

The comment stung Gertrude. Joan could be so inconsiderate and after the interaction with Connor the other day Gertrude was feeling a little tender.

"I just like cookies is all." Gertrude responded.

"Whatever. Save a couple for me, will ya?" Joan liked Gert's cookies too. If she was honest, Gertrude had a talent for baking.

“Sure. I have a whole dozen left. I’ll put them in a tin for you.”

“OK. Hey, you wanna go get mani-pedis in a bit?” Joan offered.

“Uh, yeah. That sounds good. What time were you thinking? Did you call Stacey and make appointments?”

“No. I thought we’d just go walk-in like last time. She’s never busy on Mondays. I’ll be there in about an hour. We can go have lunch and then get our nails done. OK?”

“Sure. That sounds good. I’ll see you soon then?”

“Yes. See you soon.” Joan hung up the phone without saying bye. She sat for a moment looking at the book shelf in the corner and signed. Maybe Robin would help her with that.

Joan went back down to the laundry and swapped the load in the wash to the drier then stuffed another mound from the floor into the washer. She stepped back with her hands on her hips surveying the remaining eight mounds. This was probably going to take a couple days. Then she climbed the two flights of stairs to her bed and bath suite and looked herself over in the mirror. The jeans she had to put on that morning were a bit more snug than she would have liked, but that’s why they were in the back of her closet and why she decided to finally do her laundry. The t-shirt she was wearing cut awkwardly across her hips and drew attention to the bulge of her belly over the waistband of her jeans. She dug around in the closet until she found a calf length tunic dress and changed into that. Then she slipped her feet into a pair of open toed slides. Then she washed her face and hands, brushed her teeth and hair and freshened her make up before heading down the stairs. Her bedroom was the only room she had taken any care to keep tidy after Doris had quit, so at least she was now pretty much done cleaning up. Maybe she could convince Robin to make a visit and help her with the bathrooms and that damn book shelf. As Joan picked up her purse from the back of a chair at the dining table she rubbed her right hand over her left shoulder and chest. She must have pulled it when she was using that vacuum. She coughed slightly as she locked the front door behind her and made her way to her KIA. She was actually feeling pretty good about having cleaned her house.

The KIA was another story. It was full of all kinds of crap. Joan pulled a bag full of bags out of the trunk and decided to clean out the car as well. She stuffed empty pop bottles and paper coffee cups and candy wrappers into a bag. Then she pulled a package of hand wipes out of her purse and wiped down the dash and steering wheel. She put the bag of trash on the floor on the passenger side and pulled out of the driveway. A couple blocks outside of her neighborhood

there was a gas station with a car wash. Joan pulled in and filled her tank. While the tank filled she pushed the bag of trash into the receptacle in the center of the gas kiosk. When the tank was full she opted for a car wash as well. First she pulled the car up to a vacuum stand and vacuumed the seats and floor before pulling into the wash station. The rag curtain swished back and forth making suds across the windshield. Joan found herself feeling slightly dizzy and short of breath, but decided it was an effect of the car wash. When the light turned green Joan pulled out of the car wash and into the sunshine. The sun light glinted off the beads of water left sparkling on the hood of the car and blinded her for a second before she pulled out of the gas station and onto the road. Just before she reached the next intersection she looked in the rear view mirror and saw her face looked strange. It was like the entire left side of her face was falling off or something. Her eye and mouth were drooping in a very strange way. Joan brought her hand to touch her face and passed out falling forward on the steering wheel, plowing into the car in front of her pushing them both into the intersection where traffic coming in the other direction hit Joan on the driver side. Cars piled up. Horns honked. Joan neither saw or heard any of it. When the EMTs finally arrived Joan was already gone.

CHAPTER 11

All These Years

Gene tapped her brush on the inside rim of the jar of solvent next to her easel then pressed the bristles between the folds of a rag and placed it next to her pallet on the table. She then stepped back from the easel holding her arms across her chest, squinting her eyes and biting her bottom lip. After they had gotten home from dinner with Mort, she thought the series was complete, but she had woken up Monday morning having had a very vivid and somewhat upsetting dream and had gone directly into the studio without even brushing her teeth. That had been around 5 AM and it was now a little after 1 PM. The canvas before her contained a muted background with what looked to be a window in the middle ground. The window had a smaller window centered near the top with a woman's face that appeared to be melting. The woman resembled Joan. Gene actually liked the composition of the piece so far, but the resemblance of the woman in the image to her mother in law was bothering her.

Gene closed her eyes and focused trying to recall as much of the dream as she could. Her mind's eye became soft then it sharpened. In the dream it was as if *Gene* had been driving a car. She focused on the inside of the car and found it looked like Joan's car, except it was actually clean for once. Then she looked out the side window of the car and saw an old olive green Jaguar plow into the drivers side door. That was when she had woken up with her heart pounding in her throat and ears. Robin had already showered and was pulling a polo shirt over his head in the bathroom when she sat up clutching her chest panting. "Bad dream?" he had asked her as he exited the bathroom looking for his socks, shoes, and belt. They were sitting on a chair next to the closet door. Gene had just watched him as he sat down and pulled on his socks and loafers then stood up to put on and adjust the belt around his waist. He had then picked up his briefcase and approached her, smoothing the hair from her face before he kissed her on the tip of her nose and turned to leave the room. "Be home around six tonight." he had tossed over his shoulder as he walked out to leave for work. Gene had thrown her legs over the side of the bed and her feet almost hurt as they touched the cold floor. Robin had turned on the air conditioning some time in the middle of the night more because of the humidity than the heat. Gene pulled her robe from a hook on the wall and had charged directly into the studio and started painting.

Now, she opened her eyes to look at the fresh image once more and rolled her tongue around in her mouth noticing it tasted metallic and still felt kind of furry. She stepped back from the painting intending to head to the bathroom to brush her teeth and pee but the phone rang; the land line not her cell. Normally she would have left it go to voicemail, but instead she entered the bedroom, sat down on the edge of the bed she shared with Robin and answered the call. "Hello?" Gene asked feeling like her breath was so bad the person on the other end might be able to smell it.

"Hello. Is Mr. Robin Randall available?" a stern sounding woman asked.

"He's not available at the moment. May I ask who's calling?" Gene replied in a stern voice to match.

"Is this Mrs. Randall?" the woman softened some.

"Yes. This is. But you still haven't told me who I'm speaking to." Gene replied a little annoyed.

"Mrs. Randall, we tried to reach Mr. Randall at work but were unable. Is he by chance working from home today?"

There was some urgency in the woman's voice and something else Gene couldn't quite place.

"I'm not answering any questions until you tell me who you are and what you want." Gene said flatly. She was now starting to hope the woman on the other end of the line could smell her breath.

"Mrs. Randall, I'm sorry. This is a difficult conversation. This is Officer Donna Cordona from the Oakland County Sheriff's Department..."

Gene interrupted the woman before she could say more. "Look, whatever my mother in law has told you is a lie. She has a real problem. If this harassment continues we're going to consult our attorney." Gene said with defiance. Mort had given her his brother's card at dinner the other night, after she and Robin told him about the recent door knocking issues and the way the police had been treating Gene.

"Mrs. Randall, I don't know what you are talking about. I'm calling because there has been an accident." Officer Cordona sounded apologetic. Gene's anger was mounting.

"I'll say there's been an accident. The accident was anyone from the police department ever taking that woman seriously. I'm considering getting a restraining order and filing an official complaint with the County." Gene continued. Mort's brother specialized in cases of stalking, harassment and family law.

"No, Mrs. Randall. I don't think you understand. That is not going to be necessary. Joan Randall is dead. A little over an hour ago she had a heart attack at the wheel of her car and was in a

multiple car accident. Two others are in critical condition at Beaumont. Your mother in law's body is there as well. Is your husband home?"

Gene was stunned and stammered in response. "Uh, um, uh. Uh. Joan is dead?"

"Yes, Mrs. Randall. I'm very sorry to tell you this way. I was hoping to speak with your husband first. He was listed as next of kin in her GP's files."

Gene had a strange mix of emotions washing over her. Part of her thought this might be some prank being pulled by Joan and Gertrude.

"Are you serious? Is this a prank?" Gene wasn't sure which was worse: this being real or a prank. Part of her had been looking forward to calling Mort's brother.

"Mrs. Randall, I assure you this is no prank. Joan Randall suffered a major heart attack. She may have even been dead before the other car hit her. We're still looking into what happened to figure it out for sure. Is your husband home?"

"No. I'm sorry. He's not. He's at work. He's probably in meetings. He just returned home from some extended business travel and he usually has meetings when he comes back from being overseas." Gene offered somewhat apologetically.

"I see, well, let me give you my number and we would like both you and Mr. Randall to please come to the hospital as soon as possible to confirm her identification and answer a few minor questions."

Gene fumbled on her night stand for a pen and paper and wrote down the phone number Officer Cordona gave her then assured the officer that one or both of them would be at the hospital as soon as possible. Then Gene thanked the Officer for her time and hung up the phone. She immediately dialed Robin's direct office line. It rang twice before he picked up.

"Babe, I can't talk right now. I'm just about to head to a meeting with the VP of distribution and sales." Robin said without saying hello. The number on the caller ID told him it was Gene calling.

"I think you better excuse yourself and come home right now." Gene said with as little emotion as she could.

"Babe, I can't. If it's another knock on the door call the Clarke's and see if Steve is home and can come over to check it out. I have to get going." Robin said impatiently.

"Robin, your mother died." Gene blurted. Robin dropped the receiver on the other end. Gene could hear him fumbling trying to pick it back up. Finally he lifted the receiver back to the side of his face.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I said, your mother died. I just got a call from the County Sheriff's. She had a heart attack and was in a car accident. She's at Beaumont along with two other people in critical condition. They want us to come down as soon as possible." Gene explained in a soft and gentle voice. For a moment Robin was silent on the other end. When he finally spoke his voice was totally changed. He sounded defeated.

"OK. I'll meet you there. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Love, I've been in the studio painting all morning. I'm not even showered yet. It will probably take me thirty minutes or so to shower and throw something on before I can even think about leaving the house. I haven't even brushed my teeth yet."

"That's fine. It's going to take me a few minutes to let everyone know and ask to reschedule my meetings. I'll see you at the hospital."

"OK, Love. And Robin..."

"What's that, Babe?" Robin asked.

"I'm so sorry. I love you." Gene said.

"It's OK. She's probably much happier now. I love you too." and Robin hung up the phone without waiting to hear Gene's reply.

Gene cradled the receiver and sat still for a moment with her palms pressed on her knees and stared at the wall. Joan was dead. Just a short while ago she was ready to call an attorney and get a restraining order against the woman. Now that same woman's body was laying cold somewhere in a hospital room and two other people were injured. Gene didn't know how to feel. She tipped her head to one side looking up at the ceiling trying to give a name to what her emotion was. It felt a lot like relief, like a huge weight had been lifted from her chest. Then a pang of shame pierced her heart as she thought of her poor husband. She got up, brushed her teeth, showered and dressed quickly.

Robin was standing in the lobby of the hospital when Gene arrived. He looked lost. Gene approached him with her hands extended toward him like he were a child. He fell into her arms and let her hug him hard for a long moment before pressing away from the embrace.

"Hey there." Gene said to him. "Are you OK? Have you spoken with anyone yet?"

"No. I just got here a couple minutes ago. I was waiting for you."

"OK. Let's do this."

Gene looped her arm through Robin's and lead him to the information desk where an elderly man with leg braces and very thick glasses was seated.

"How can I help you?" He offered in a frail but kindly voice.

"My husband's mother has passed away and we were asked to meet the doctor and police here." Gene explained matter-of-factly.

"I'm so sorry for your loss." the elderly man said to Robin then continued to address Gene. "She probably came in through the ER. Let me call and find out for you. What's the name?" he asked Gene

"Randall. Joan Randall."

The elderly man's face registered surprise as he recognized the name. "You mean Frank's widow?" he inquired.

"Yes." Gene replied surprised. "Did you know her?"

"Not really. I used to work with Frank. We were in the Union together."

"I see." was all Gene replied.

The man picked up a phone and dialed some numbers and asked a few questions of some unknown person on the other end. When he was done he hung up and looked at Robin and Gene sympathetically.

"She's still in the ER. The police are there waiting to speak with you and the doctor will be in when he can. One of the other people involved in the accident just passed also. I'm not really supposed to tell you, but since I knew Frank, I'm giving you a heads up."

"Oh. OK. Thank you." Gene nodded apprehensively as she spoke. "How do we get there from here?"

The man leaned forward as far as he could in his seat and craned his neck to the right pointing down a long hallway with a liver spotted hand. "All the way down that hall there until the end then take a right. Then follow the signs. If you pass radiology you've gone too far." Then he turned again to Robin who had been silent the entire time. "And again, young man, I'm very sorry for your loss."

Robin looked the man directly in his eye and with no emotion said, "Thank you. But there's no need to be sorry." The elderly man sat back in his chair and nodded his head knowingly in understanding. Robin pulled his arm from Gene's and stuffed his hands in his pockets as he turned and started down the hall. Gene looked from the elderly man to Robin and watched her husband walk away from her for a moment before hurrying to catch up to him.

Coming from the direction they had they entered the ER, a kind of back way, they were already past check in but in sight of the triage area. A youngish black woman with perfect braids at a portable standing station just before the door to ER took their names and gave them visitor passes. Gene peeled the sticker from it's backing and pressed the tag over her heart with the palm of her right hand. Robin had done the same but had accidentally put his on upside down. It didn't matter. It was just a formality. The woman pointed toward an empty room with a very bright overhead light on inside. Gene nodded a polite thank you and followed Robin who was already half way to the room. A uniformed female police officer about the same age as Gene and Robin followed them in from a spot where she had been waiting for them to arrive. She addressed the couple who were standing next to each other silently. Gene was leaning her head on Robin's shoulder and Robin was standing with his hands still in his pockets, not blinking. "Mr. and Mrs. Randall." the officer said extending her hand toward Robin. Robin wasn't even looking at the officer and Gene intercepted the handshake with an awkward motion.

"Yes. We are the Randalls."

"Mrs. Randall. I'm officer Cordona. We spoke on the phone earlier. I'm sorry for your loss." she smiled a small brief smile at Gene as she shook her hand. The two women exchanged a moment of understanding that Gene was grateful for.

"We don't know where your mother was headed, but we do know she had just pulled out of a gas station car wash onto Dequinder and had a heart attack and caused a multiple car pile up where your mother's car was hit on the driver side door by..."

Gene interrupted her. "Was it a vintage olive green Jag?" she asked. Officer Cordona looked at her with a questioning expression.

"No. It was a brand new white Mercedes from out of State. Why did you ask that?" the officer prodded Gene, who now felt exposed and silly. She blushed as the officer and Robin both looked at her expectantly.

"No, I just had a strange dream last night about being in a car accident like that but I was hit by a vintage olive green Jag. It's nothing. A stupid coincidence. I shouldn't have asked." Gene waved her hand in dismissal of her own words in front of her face. The officer and Robin seemed satisfied with her answer.

"I don't know if she had the heart attack and caused the accident or if she had the accident and had the heart attack. Your mother had been drinking, Mr. Randall. In a strange way she's lucky to have passed. Another man involved in the accident passed away just before you arrived. If

your mother were still living she might be looking at charges of manslaughter and driving under the influence. There are witnesses. She'd most likely have gotten time."

"And she would have deserved it." Robin replied with an amount of anger on his face and in his voice that surprised Gene. "How old was the man who passed?" he asked.

"In his fifties I think. He and his family had literally just moved to the State yesterday. He and his mother were on their way to Target to pick up some things for their apartment. His mother was also injured, but she is going to be fine the doctors told me. The doctor will be in to see you soon and take you to see the body to officially confirm your mother's identity. Mr. Randall, I'm very sorry." Officer Cordona nodded slightly toward Robin and Gene holding her right hand to her chest then turned and left the couple alone once more.

Gene reached over to touch Robin on the arm but he evaded her hand and moved to the other side of the room pretending to look at the supplies on the wall over the hand wash station. Gene started to say something but caught herself and thought better just in time for Robin to spin around abruptly and say, "I hate her. I'm glad she's dead." His pupils were narrowed and he seemed to be looking past Gene who felt like a dart had just passed through her mind's eye. She softened and pressed her lips together and she nodded her head in agreement.

"I know, Love. I understand." she chose to say.

Robin turned his head slightly and looked at his wife with anger still on his face.

"I don't want you to go with me to confirm her identity. I want to do it by myself." the words stung Gene, but she didn't feel like she had any right to protest his wishes. Joan was, after all, *his* mother.

"OK." was all she replied to him then approached him slowly and stood silently next to him until a female doctor with thick long dark uncut hair pulled back in a sleek low pony tail and no make up came in to speak with them.

"My name is Dr. Ahuja. You are Mrs. Randall's family?" she asked in a professional tone of voice.

"Yes." Robin answered. "I'm her son."

"Mr. Randall, your mother was a very ill woman. Her liver was barely functioning and she appears to have had Bell's Palsy. How long had she had the Palsy? I didn't see anything about it in her medical records."

"Bell's Palsy? I don't know. I wasn't aware." Robin didn't even know what Bell's Palsy was, let alone how long his mother had had it.

“Sir, when was the last time you saw your mother?”

“Just this past Saturday. Why?”

“Was there anything strange to you about her appearance?”

“She was drunk and her make up was smeared all over her face, but other than that she looked like she always looked. Why? What’s wrong with the way she looks?”

“Well, there are a couple lacerations from the accident and her left arm was broken, but the left side of her face is drooping, from Bell’s Palsy. Was her face drooping on Saturday?”

“Drooping? Her face? What? No. Her face was fine. She was just sloppy drunk.”

“I see.” Dr. Ahuja replied. “Well, it must have come on some time between then and now, because she had it when she passed. Are you ready to see the body? This is hard for most people, sir.”

“I’ll be fine. Can my wife stay here?”

“Please come with me. Ma’am, you can wait in the waiting room just outside the door where you entered the ER. A nurse will come and get you when we are through.” Gene nodded and gathered her purse in front of herself and headed toward the waiting area while Robin and the doctor walked away in the opposite direction.

Gene looked at no one as she made her way to the waiting area. She thought she remembered seeing it just before they got their visitor passes. She also needed a restroom. Luckily she didn’t need to look far. There was a single occupancy restroom across from the waiting area. When she came out of the restroom there was one well dressed older gentleman sitting by himself with his legs crossed and a hand on either armrest beside him. He was kind of sucking on the inside of his cheek and staring at the wall in front of him. He made no indication of noticing Gene as she settled herself in a chair on the other side of the room. She noticed he had a very unusual and fancy wrist watch. It was the most interesting watch she had ever seen. Under different circumstances she would have made a comment of appreciation for the obvious work of Art and Craftsmanship, but she didn’t feel like having conversations with any strangers at the moment.

Gene sat down and looked at her white patent leather tennis shoes. They were Italian and really comfortable. Robin had briefly questioned the price but stopped when Gene reminded him how much his new briefcase had cost when there was nothing wrong with the old one. Gaze lost on

her feet, Gene's cell phone began to ring. The man now glanced slightly in Gene's direction as she answered the ringing device. It was Gertrude.

"Gene, it's Mrs. Donovan from down the street."

"Hi Gert. I knew it was you."

"Gene, have you heard from or seen Joan? She was supposed to be here a couple hours ago but never showed up. I tried calling her, but she doesn't answer and it's just not like her to be so late and not call me." Gert sounded genuinely concerned.

"Gert, I don't know what to tell you so I'll just say it. Joan is dead. We're at the hospital now."

There was a total silence on the other side then a shrieking wail like some animal was having its throat cut. Gene held the phone away from her ear then brought it back as she heard Gert on the other end breaking down into thudding sounding sobs.

"Gert, Gert. Take a deep breath. I'm sorry."

"She's she's she's dead? You're serious?" It sounded like Gert was on the verge of hyperventilating. Gene was kind of surprised.

"Gene. I loved her. We were more than friends. She didn't want anyone to know!"

Gene was stunned. She sat stock still letting the confession sink in. So she had been right all along! An ironic smile crossed Gene's lips as she spoke softly to Gertrude.

"It's OK, Gert. I already knew."

"You did?" Gert asked in a high pitch whine.

"Yeah. Well, I suspected anyway. Robin was oblivious."

Gertrude was now almost panting to catch her breath and her nose sounded stuffed up.

"Gene, can I see her?"

"I'll ask Robin, but I don't see why not. You are certainly welcome to attend the funeral. But Gert, right now I need to go. I will call you later today or tomorrow morning."

"OK, Dear. Thank you."

Gene hung up and breathed out hard as Robin came into the waiting room by himself peeling his visitor's badge off, handing it in Gene's direction.

"Here. Take this for me." he said as Gene took it from his hand.

"Is that all? Are we done? What's going on next?" Gene asked her husband.

"She's going to be cremated. It's in her and Dad's will. She's gonna be cremated and put in the vault with Dad's ashes at the mausoleum. The body will be picked up tonight and taken to Pixley's out in Rochester. Then they'll cook her and we'll be done. I already called Tim. He's not coming over for it. It's too expensive right now and he's just glad to not worry about it anymore."

Gene looked at Robin for a moment like she had never met him before.

"Gert just called." she told him.

"Oh yeah? What'd that bat want?"

"She was looking for your mom. I guess she was on her way to Gert's when it happened.

Anyway, I told her *Joan is dead* and guess what?"

"What?" Robin asked flatly.

"I was right. They were a couple."

"What?" Robin looked like he had just been slapped.

"Yeah. Gert was your mom's girlfriend, and not just a friend that was a girl. They were a romantic couple."

Robin furrowed his brow and looked off into some imagined distance.

"Whatever. Let's go home." he said as he turned away from his wife and back toward the main lobby where they had entered the hospital.

After they left the room, Dursik stood up and smoothed the wrinkles from his slacks and blazer before looking at the time on his watch and heading toward the ER. He showed the women at the station and desk his visitor's pass and found his way to Sylvie's room. She was stable, not critical as they had originally told Gene on the phone, but Mohan had been driving and hadn't been so lucky. Sylvie's clavicle was broken from her seat belt and she had a bit of a concussion from hitting her head on the passenger side window. Mohan had died of internal bleeding. They just hadn't been able to stop the bleeding. He'd been on blood thinners for the past six months after getting a check-up because of Sylvie's nagging. Dursik looked at Sylvie who didn't turn to look at him as he walked in the door. There was a news paper on the tray table next to Sylvie's bed and she was leaning back staring at the ceiling. Dursik sat down in a chair on the other side of the bed silently.

"My boy's dead." Sylvie said without looking at him or away from the spot on the ceiling.

"Yes, Sylvie. He is."

"It's just you and me now, Vortaka." Sylvie whispered.

Dursik half stood up and leaned over Sylvie kissing her softly on the forehead. "Yes, Fenne. It is. Sylvie and Dursik." Dursik sat back in the chair and crossed his legs. Sylvie rolled her head to look at him. "Was it really Robin Randall's mother in that car?" she asked him.

"Yes, Sylv. It was." He answered. Sylvie mushed her lips back and forth a couple times.

“All these years, Jaromir. All these years and it turns out the entire World is smaller than our Village was.”

Dursik stood up and leaned over Sylvie picking up the paper from the tray table on her other side. She thought she could see tears in his eyes, but maybe she was mistaken. Dursik sat back down in the chair and shook the paper open. It was the real estate section of the Detroit Free Press. A couple ads were circled.

“There really are some cheap houses in the City, Jaromir. They weren’t lying about that.” Sylvie said to him. Dursik just grunted and said, “Don’t call me Jaromir.”

Sylvie laughed a small kind of huffing laugh and coughed. “I need a cigarette. I hope I can get out of here soon.”

Back at Gertrude’s Connor was out in the shop painting the latest bike. Gertrude burst in hysterical and frightened the little-old-young-man, grabbing him, hugging him and crying.

“My Joan is dead, Connor! My Joan!”

Connor hugged Gertrude awkwardly and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“It’s going to be OK, Aunt Gert. Your nephew Connor loves you.”

Gertrude pulled away from him and smiled through her tears, touching his cheek with her right hand. Then she dug her hand into the pocket of her muumuu and produced a key offering it to Connor.

“Here. Take this. It’s the key to Cadillac. You’re gonna be driving me around from now on. The car’s still mine, but you can use it when I don’t need to go anywhere. Tomorrow I need you to take me to TJ Maxx. I’m going to need a new dress for the funeral.”

Connor took the key and put it on his keyring next to the key to Gertrude’s house.

“Sure thing, Aunt Gert. Whatever you need.”

THE END