

PATENT LEATHER GENE
(working title)

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 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 that 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 sudsy soap 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 the glass half way. 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 from the shelf and closed the door with her foot. Then holding the bag of rotted veggies as far away from her as possible between her index finger and thumb 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 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 cubes pressed up 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 cil 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 into piles and just grabbed a mound and stuffed it in the machine. She

poured a capful of detergent over the mix of clothes and towels and ran a heavy duty load on cold water. Then 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 flowers 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 grand daughter 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 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 herself 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 flowers in the bag as well and took the vase into the kitchen and rinsed it out. Gertrude had sent her the flowers 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 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 Sunday 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 last night, but I figured you were just tired. I'm glad you called."

"Oh yeah? What are you stuffing in your face with over there?"

"Oh, can you tell? Cookies. I baked chocolate chip yesterday."

"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 day before 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 bookcase in the corner and sighed. Maybe Robin would help her with that.

Joan went back down to the laundry and swapped the load in the wash into the drier then stuffed another mound into the washer from the floor. This was probably going to take a couple days. Then she climbed the two flights up to her bedroom 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 and headed 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 pretty much done cleaning up. Maybe she could convince Robin to make a visit and help her with the bathrooms and that damn bookcase. As Joan picked her purse up 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 station. 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. Then 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 out into the sunshine. The sun light glinted off the sparkling hood of the car and blinded her for a second before she pulled out of the gas station and out 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 and 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.