

A young woman recovering from surgery helps solve a mystery.

Caught Holding the Bag

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/2015.html?s=pdf>

Chapter 1

What she later called her "Great Adventure" started in early September for Patti Jo Lewis when she woke up in the hospital with an ileostomy and a bad case of denial. The anesthesia was slow to let go of her, so her brain was muffled enough to allow the denial to take shape. She imagined an accident of some kind, that she had saved the life of a child, but was injured herself. Her mind conjured up this fantasy and found it endurable only because the truth seemed less acceptable to her growing awareness of what had really happened.

By late in the day, the sleepiness receded and a cloak of pain, obscured by the drugs, surrounded her. She tried not to look at herself, tried not to think about what Dr. Regan had done to her; except that when she tried not to think of it, it became all she thought about.

That evening, a nurse named Amanda came in to help her. She moved the hospital gown aside, and Patti sighed, reality taking hold. She said, "It's there, isn't it?"

"What's there, dear?" Amanda said absently.

Patti thought, Is there anything else? If you woke up from surgery with a pouch on your body, you would not ask what is there. But she wasn't ready to put it into words just yet.

"Never mind," she said finally. A sob bubbled up inside her and escaped as a moan.

"What's wrong, dear? Did I hurt you?" Patti shook her head. Tears were beginning to obscure her vision, but she watched as Amanda removed the ostomy pouch, leaving the wafer on her skin. She caught a glimpse of the bright red stoma, and for a moment wondered if she was going to be sick. Fortunately, she thought sarcastically, she hadn't been allowed to eat yet.

"It looks great," Amanda said, repositioning the pouch.

"Not the word I would use," Patti said, half under her breath.

The nurse smiled. "It's a lot to get used to, isn't it? But you will. Dr. Regan

does good work. You're looking pale. Are you okay?"

"I've felt better." She managed a weak smile.

Amanda touched her cheek, as if she were a little girl. Patti didn't mind. Right about then she wanted to be treated like a little girl. "Ain't that the truth," Amanda said. "Would you like your hair brushed before visitors' hours? It's gorgeous, you know. Here, let me help you." She shifted the pillows behind her and reached for the brush on the nightstand. "We'll wash your hair tomorrow. You'll feel a lot better by then." She sat sidesaddle on the bed next to Patti and brushed her hair in long slow strokes. "If my hair was this thick and black, I'd give up being a liquid blonde forever. I'd never look back."

Patti yawned, and Amanda set the brush down. "Listen, I'll come back in a while to check your vitals. You get some more rest now."

"That I can handle," Patti said, falling back against the pillow. She looked out her window, but all she saw was a patch of blue sky next to a corner of the hospital parking garage. She closed her eyes, but sleep didn't come. Instead a new roommate was wheeled in. Her name was Kate, and she was 87 years old. Patti knew her age because the woman said it four times during the time it took to get her settled into her bed.

A male nurse, talking to an apparent trainee, described the woman's rare condition, which caused her skin to peel off in strips if they weren't careful, so they could not use tape on her bandages. Patti still felt too sorry for herself to be grossed out by the description, as if it were being discussed on a television program instead of about a real person next to her.

What little compassion Patti felt for Kate evaporated through the night, as the old woman developed the habit of calling out for what she wanted instead of pressing her call button. "Tylenol!" she'd cry out five or six times, or "Ginger Ale," as if the nurses were huddled outside the door, waiting to be called. If Patti pressed her own call button and explained that her roommate needed something, by the time the nurse came in, Kate usually was asleep again, so the nurse would leave. Minutes later, Kate would wake up and the cycle started up all over.

Finally the next morning, before official visiting hours, Kate's husband Cal appeared. He pulled a chair up to his wife's bed and spoke to her in a soft voice. She seemed to stop needing things, and Patti fell asleep. Her dreams were a patchwork of confused images. The only part of the dream she remembered upon awakening found her sitting in her apartment, the IV still in her arm. The lines of the IV ran across the living room, and into the kitchen, stretching out like the oxygen tubes her great Aunt Roberta had required

Caught Holding the Bag

during the last years of her life. When Patti woke up, the image still fresh in her mind, she reached for the television controller. "That's it," she announced aloud, "No more sleep today."

Dr. Regan stopped by at noon and brushed aside her concern and dread. No, he hadn't thought it would come down to emergency surgery, but her body had decided things, and it would prove to be a relief for her after the years of illness, a time to heal. It could possibly be reversed down the road, though he couldn't make any promises. She should concentrate on mending and enjoying good health for a while. Good health, she thought, with this thing hanging off me?

Patti's father and brother visited her that afternoon, separately, as they weren't speaking to each other. Usually one of her familial duties was arranging her schedule so that the two of them didn't run into each other through her. They were on their own now, however. She figured she had her own problems.

They appeared before her, exhibiting the same awkward body language men often carry into hospitals, uncomfortable with illness. Dad came first, twisting his Red Sox cap as if squeezing it dry, searching the expressions of the nurses as they worked, as if he could pick up from them how Patti was really doing. Patti drifted in and out of sleep, so she was surprised when she looked up to find her brother now sitting at her side.

"How did you do that?" she asked him. He stared at her blankly. The way Tom slowly wrung his hands reminded her of Dad and the twisted baseball cap. Then Tom's partner Kelton swept into the room. She loved Kelton like he was another brother; he was as upbeat as Tom was sometimes morose. They balanced each other, she often told them. He kissed Patti's cheek and sat down. Their love seems so natural, so superior to what Dad and Mom had before Mom ran off: how could Dad disapprove? How could he let it split the family? But with Kelton present, Patti couldn't dwell on that.

"So," Kelton said once he sat down, "are you going to show us the piece of surgical pop art that saved your life?"

Of course, she wasn't about to display her pouch and scar like a proud war wound, but he made her smile for the first time since she woke up after the surgery. It was a good visit.

On Patti's third day after surgery, the W.O.C.N. stopped by to see her. She had stopped by right after the surgery, she understood, but she didn't remember it. The floor nurses had told her more than once to expect her again. Patti's question was, "What's a WOCN?"

The answer, Wound Ostomy Continence Nurse, hadn't been much help to

her except that word, ostomy, was there. "She can answer all your questions," one nurse told her, and Amanda said, "She will train you to take care of yourself."

"But I thought maybe you nurses could adopt me and I could stay here." Though she was kidding, the fantasy of others taking care of "that" was appealing to her.

Amanda laughed. "Sure, but once your insurance maxes out, this is a pretty expensive hotel. Besides, as far as insurance goes, as soon as something shows up in the pouch, you have to leave us. Carole will fix you up. She's a miracle worker."

"She'll have to be," Patti assured her. She began to imagine this WOCN in the flowing robes of a magician, strolling in and throwing the contents of a drawstring bag over her, magic dust that would transform her into...what? Her imagination, which her father claimed was even stronger than when she was a teenager, didn't take her that far. "You're twenty-two years old," he had said to her once, after she luxuriously imagined a problem-free idyllic life. "Sometimes you have to face reality."

Patti reached a hand down now, sliding it over the smooth plastic of the pouch. "Welcome to reality," she said to herself, "pull up a chair and stay a while."

Carole Stevens, the WOCN, didn't carry a magician's black drawstring bag, but she plopped a wicker basket down at the foot of the bed. There was a purple ribbon around the handle, and supplies and reading material jutting from it. Her hair was short, two shades darker than black, every strand in place. She oozed confidence as she swept around the hospital bed.

Carole shook hands with her. Her voice was soft and her green eyes kind as she asked Patti about herself. She seemed to know most of it already, but she gave Patti a chance to tell her tale of woe. When Carole took up the subject of the ileostomy and post-surgical care, however, she became more lively, her voice exuding confidence in Patti's ability to take care of herself. She helped her change the ostomy appliance, just for practice, she pointed out, as it could have gone several more days without changing. And she only helped; for the first time, Patti did most of the work herself. Patti's breath caught when she saw the stoma, but this time tears didn't flood her eyes.

Carole showed her how to remove the appliance to best avoid pulling on the skin, and how to prepare the area for the fresh wafer and pouch. She told her how to know when it needs changing, and she gave her a sheet of hints and tips for situations that might arise. When Patti was put back together again, Carole went through the contents of the basket: the extra boxes of

Caught Holding the Bag

ostomy equipment, the tape, powder, lotion, adhesive remover and other "battle gear," as she referred to it. She left her with a magazine, brochures, and a handbook, along with a promise to stop by again before she was released. Carole paused in the doorway.

"I hear you haven't been sleeping well," she said.

"What, is it in my chart?" Patti asked. Carole laughed.

"I have my spies here."

"It's just as well I can't sleep, considering what my dreams are like." She described her dream of her household movements being restricted by IV lines. Carole smiled.

"Well, that's original. But I guess you don't have to be Freud to figure it out. You are obviously concerned about being able to continue your normal life after you get home."

"Silly of me, I suppose."

"Not silly at all, Patti. It's about as natural a worry as you could have, under the circumstances. And that reminds me, if you are willing, you are going to be visited by a free spirit."

Something about the way she said it reminded Patti of Dickens and *The Christmas Carol*, "You will be haunted by three spirits."

"Who?" she asked.

"You'll like her, I think," Carole said. "A visit by someone who has had the same surgery you have had. It will be good for you. You can see for yourself that people do thrive after this surgery. What do you think? You have to give permission."

"I guess it will be okay."

Carole smiled. "You don't sound sure. With today's privacy laws, I need you to be sure, maybe even in writing."

Patti wasn't sure what she thought of it, but she said, "It may do me good. I'll sign a paper if you want. Thank you." Carole waved and left.

"Something else to look forward to," Patti muttered, but she was intrigued all the same. By day three of captivity, she was looking forward to a little excitement. But she had no idea how much excitement was headed her way because of her next visitor.

Chapter 2

The free spirit breezed in just after the supper tray was cleared away. Her name was Lorraine Simoneau, she announced in a loud voice. She was a big woman, big as in tall, full-bodied, but muscular. Somewhere in her late thirties, Patti guessed, though she wasn't sure. As Lorraine strode over to shake hands, Patti took in her tight jeans and dazzling white sweater in a glance and thought, Does this mean I will still be able to wear jeans? Then she got swept up in Lorraine's personality, which proved to be just as strong as her voice and her handshake grip.

"How are you doing, lass? They taking care of you here?" Patti wondered if the thundering voice was turning heads way down at the nursing station.

"I'm fine, they're real good to me," she replied.

Lorraine noticed the basket, still on the bed. "I see Carole has been in to see you," she boomed.

"Yes. She's great."

"Isn't she though? She has saved my butt more than once. Some hospitals still don't have ET nurses, never mind WOCNs. They send patients home with just the clothes on their backs. So tell me, are you married? Carole didn't say."

Patti blushed for no particular reason. "No."

"No? Engaged? Serious about anyone? Just tell me to mind my own business if you want. Otherwise, I'll keep asking."

"No, that's all right. I don't mind. I'm not serious about anyone right now." She watched as Lorraine sat in the lone chair near the bed. It was too small, and she smiled at the sight.

Lorraine noticed the smile. "Isn't this ridiculous? They must think tall people don't need to sit down." She set her pocketbook down by her right leg. "Patti, would you believe me if I told you that your social life will be every bit as good after this surgery as it was before? Or even better if you were sick before. Were you very sick? IBD, wasn't it?"

Patti nodded. "That's what they said, finally. It took years and a really bad outbreak for them to figure it out, it seemed. I think it was an ER doctor who first suggested it."

Caught Holding the Bag

"Cramps, diarrhea..." Lorraine began.

Patti took up the list. "Yeah. And weight loss, no appetite sometimes. Finally blood in the stool. I was sure it was cancer but they never found it. And there were times when it wasn't so bad, when it felt like the meds were helping. My friends thought I had an eating disorder. It was horrible."

Patti noticed Lorraine smiling at her. "What?"

Lorraine shook her head. "Nothing. But did you notice you said it was horrible? Not is, but was?"

Tears seemed to spring up out of nowhere again. She fought them off. "Is it going to be better then, Lorraine?"

"Lots better, girl. You wouldn't believe me, so I'm not telling you how much better." A short silence developed. "Do you want to ask me anything, Patti? Anything at all?"

Patti shrugged. She knew Lorraine wanted questions about her recovery, but she was curious about the woman. "Are you married, Lorraine?"

"Not any more. I was up until last year. A real hunk, football coach, great buns."

Patti smiled. "What happened?"

"We were unlucky, I guess."

"Unlucky?"

"Well, sort of. It all started on Super Bowl Sunday a couple of years ago. A dozen of his nearest and dearest friends helped him decimate my house while I was gone. Seems they wanted to play some football during half-time, but they were too lazy to go outside, or else they didn't want to miss a single beer commercial. I came home and they took off. They scattered like dry leaves. "

In a strong wind, Patti thought, contemplating the men faced with an angry Lorraine. "He was sleeping in the easy chair," Lorraine continued. "The place was wrecked. It was all downhill after that. A downhill plunge to the divorce."

Patti thought for a moment. "Okay, but I don't see where that was bad luck. You mean that you came home before he had a chance to clean up?"

"No, he wouldn't have thought of that. The bad luck was that while he slept, he started his loud open-mouth snoring, and just when I had picked up his dirty, rolled up socks that they used as a football."

"You didn't!"

"I did. If I'd thought about it, I wouldn't have, but I was livid, and it looked like a perfect fit. He never woke up so quick, let me tell you."

Patti laughed, then gripped her stomach. "Ow."

"Only hurts when you laugh, right? I remember that."

Peter McGinn

"I guess I haven't laughed much since the surgery."

"I don't wonder," Lorraine said. "You haven't had much to laugh about, have you? But you'll soon get back into the habit."

"Not too soon, I hope. Ouch."

Lorraine's face clouded up for a moment.

"What's wrong, Lorraine?"

Lorraine shook her head vigorously. "Nothing. I've got myself thinking about Josh with that story. He wants to talk to me. He hasn't handled the divorce well at all," she added.

"How so?"

"This isn't the time for that story, I think."

"No really," Patti persisted. "I want to know."

"Well, at first he pretended that I just needed a little freedom. He told our friends I would be back in the fold any minute. Then he got angry, impatient. When was I going to come to my senses? Then he claimed he accepted that I wasn't coming back, and he started dating every woman he could. I figured once he got through that stage, he would work through to real acceptance. But over the past few months he has gotten morose, morbid almost. He keeps hinting at some trouble he's in."

"What kind of trouble?"

Lorraine shrugged. "He doesn't say, only that it's big enough to sweep him away. Those were his words last week." Lorraine stood up quickly and walked the few steps to the window. "I'm sorry, Patti."

"For what?"

Lorraine was shaking her head again. "I'm standing here telling you my problems. I've broken rule number one; this visit is supposed to be about you. I guess I'm more worried about him than I realized."

Patti reached for the control to raise the head of the bed. Over its hum she said, "You don't have to apologize, Lorraine. I need the distraction so I don't dwell on my own morose thoughts."

"It's sweet of you to say so," Lorraine said, "but it's still a no-no for an official ostomy visitor."

"Is that what you are?"

"Yes. I went through training and everything. Want to see my official certification card?"

Patti wasn't sure if Lorraine was serious or not, but she played along. "Sure, I'd love to."

Her visitor pulled a wallet from her purse, and extracted a yellow business card from it. She passed the card to Patti. "Now aren't you impressed?"

Caught Holding the Bag

"Very," Patti answered, passing it back. "Do you have a secret handshake, too?"

"Yes, but you'll have to wait for those stitches to heal before you try it."

Patti smiled, playing with the ribbon on the basket with her toes. She blushed when she saw Lorraine watching her. "Lorraine?"

"Yes?"

"Are you dating again?"

"God help me, yes, I weaken occasionally. Are you worried about that?"

Patti half shrugged. "A little."

"Don't. Think of it this way: if a guy likes you- I'm sorry, are guys your preference?" Patti nodded, and Lorraine went on. "If a guy likes you but he loses interest because of how your internal plumbing is hooked up, which could have saved your life, by the way, how shallow does that make him?"

"I guess so."

"Darn tootin'. Think of it as an early warning device, a jerk detector. It could save you weeks or months of trying to wean out the pinheads from the good ones."

Patti smiled. "Wow. Every woman should have one."

"That's the spirit." A slow smile spread across Lorraine's face. "You're afraid I'm going to talk about sex now, aren't you, Patti?"

Patti twirled a lock of hair around a forefinger and pressed the finger to her lips. "Petrified."

Lorraine threw her head back and laughed, a startling sound. Patti looked towards the door self-consciously, half expecting a nurse to check out the sound.

"Well, maybe next time we will, if there is a next time."

"I'd like that," Patti blurted out. "Seeing you again, I mean, not talking about sex."

Lorraine laughed again. Patti began to realize how good it might be to have a dynamo like this woman on her side. Lorraine stood up. "Thank you, sweetie. I feel the same way. You've got potential, and we all have to look out for each other, after all. A woman visited me after my surgery, and was a big help, so I figure I can give back a little of it. Would you like me to stop by here again before you go home?"

"Yes, please."

"You got it. And after you get out, I'll take you to the next ostomy chapter meeting, if you're interested. We have an interesting bunch, and you'll be with people who know what you're going through."

"I'd like that. Carole suggested it while she was here."

Peter McGinn

"Great. She's supposed to. Here, while I'm thinking of it, write your address and phone number on this." Lorraine passed a small spiral pad and a pen over to Patti.

Patti wrote her name and phone number down, and handed them back. Lorraine said her goodbyes, blowing Patti a kiss as she left the room. Patti couldn't say exactly why, but she felt her life had taken a small turn for the better with this visit.

A nurse came in right after Lorraine left, a nurse Patti hadn't seen yet. "She isn't the comforting type, is she? Not that I'm being critical, mind you."

"Of course not," Patti said. She pondered Lorraine's visit. It wasn't about sympathy or pity. She realized that it hadn't occurred to her after the first impression of the jeans that Lorraine even had an ileostomy, like she did. Maybe this surgery wasn't the end of the world for her.

After Lorraine left the hospital, she sat in her car in the parking lot for a few minutes and took notes while the visit was fresh in her mind. She sometimes used them to compare notes with Carole afterwards. When she made mistakes, she liked to know about them and correct them for the next time. And as she had said to Patti, dragging her own sordid personal problems into the conversation had been a big mistake. Patti had been sweet about it, but that didn't alter the fact that she had gone off course.

A part of her was still connected to Josh, despite the divorce. Sixteen years of marriage did that to you. Sometimes she felt she had taken the easy way out, leaving him after his drinking got worse. He had never hit her, of course, and he still functioned fairly well in his sports-oriented world, where drinking was both honorable and expected. Lorraine's grandmother had put up with drinking all through her 41 years of marriage, and Lorraine had always sworn she wouldn't let it happen to her. "It is part and parcel of marriage," her grandmother had told her once. "It won't be for me," Lorraine had shot back with all the wisdom a teenager can muster.

She still worried about him, and not just because of the drinking. He kept making references to this calamity overtaking him, hinting the only solution to his problems might rest in the top drawer of his bureau. Of course, the German World War II knife his father had given him rested in that top drawer. Josh had stopped her in the hallway that very afternoon, anxious to talk to her. She begged off, saying she had to visit someone in the hospital; surely this could wait. "He said, "Lorraine, I'm a freight train heading over a cliff. I would think if you don't want to help me, you'd at least want to stand and watch."

Caught Holding the Bag

Lorraine had rolled her eyes and rushed on to her visit with Patti. Now she wondered, though, was he being melodramatic, or could he really be in deep trouble? Should she call him? On an impulse, she dug into her purse for her cell phone and punched in his number, their old number. While it rang, she rolled her window down a few inches to let some air in.

"Yeah, hello?"

"Oh, God," Lorraine said. She could tell even with the brief greeting, Josh was drunk, or at least well on the way.

"Who is it?"

"Josh, it's me."

"You say that like it's supposed to mean something to me."

"Have you been drinking? Don't you have a practice to run?"

"Here's your chance to do me a favor and get my ass fired out of that thankless job and ruin my life some more."

"You're doing that just fine on your own, Josh." This was going nowhere. She gave it one last try. "Josh, you wanted to tell me something important this afternoon. I regret I had to run. Do you want to tell me now?"

"You have some time to spare now, do you? Your concern touches me. Forget it. You can read about it in the goddamn paper like everyone else." He hung up on her, with gusto, by the sound of it.

Lorraine turned off her phone and dropped it back into the purse, muttering, "That was a great idea." She started the engine and, shifting into reverse, decided she would talk to some of the assistant football coaches. Maybe she could find out what was brewing in Josh's life. It can't be that bad, she thought, I would have heard something. She wished she could be sure.

That same afternoon, Tom, Patti's brother, stopped by her room again. She had just taken her first walk around the ward without her IV. He kissed her forehead and sat down.

"Okay, Sis, this is okay, but it has been several days. Don't you think you should be getting over it and going home?"

Patti smiled. "Thanks for the sympathy."

He shrugged. "Hey, sometimes tough love is what is needed." He looked out her window. The hospital employee parking garage loomed. "Well, you're paying way too much for that view. How are you feeling?"

"Better than I look."

"What a relief. You look like hell. I'm kidding," he added, standing by her side. "You look much better. You were out of it last time I was here."

She reached out and squeezed his hand. "Yeah, it's a shame they only

waste morphine on you when you can't fully appreciate it. Yesterday is a blur to me now. I'm pretty sure both you and Dad were here, but beyond that, I couldn't say. You didn't run into him here in the hospital, did you?"

"Hell, no. I arrived with a plan. First Kelton and I checked the parking lot for Dad's truck. We found it, so we knew he was up here with you. I posted myself in the cafeteria near a window facing the parking lot, and Kelton stood out in the hall keeping an eye out. Kelton came in after twenty minutes or so and said he had spotted Dad leaving. So I hustled my bustle up here to see you while Kelton stood guard to make sure Dad didn't come back up."

"Hustled your bustle?"

"It's an expression. All so I could come up here and visit my Pitti-Patti."

"Don't use that name. How many times do I have to tell you?" Tom had saddled her with that nickname when she was a toddler.

"You're still my baby sister."

"Am I? I don't think so, and I can prove it. Exhibit A: I'm 22 years old, only a year younger than you are, in case you need reminding. Exhibit B: My father and my older brother are acting like 10-year-olds, and expect me to step in and settle their differences."

"I'm not acting like a ten-year old."

"Yes, you are."

"Am not!"

Patti smiled. "Hiding in the cafeteria and playing spy with Kelton is not typical adult behavior."

"Okay, I never said I was typical." He stared at a minor commotion in the hallway outside her room. He glanced back at Patti. "So what did Dad say about me?"

She laughed, until the pain cut it off. "Ow. Don't do that." That question was a running joke between them, since their father refused to even mention Tom's name nowadays.

Tom reached for the television remote. She grabbed it out of his hand. "Nice try, pal. We're going to have a conversation here. I'm not recuperated enough to listen to you make fun of TV shows. My stitches aren't nearly secure enough yet."

He crossed his arms. "Okay, we'll talk instead. Has the doctor told you if the surgery can be reversed someday, or changed to one of those continental surgeries?"

She laughed again, grabbing her abdomen. "I told you not to do that. You know it's called continent surgery. No, it's too soon and I shouldn't get my hopes up."

Caught Holding the Bag

"I'm sorry, Patti."

"It may be fine, Tom. After I heal, I should feel better than I have in years. I must confess, I felt plenty sorry for myself before, but I'm better now. I met an interesting lady today, a real whirlwind, and she had the same kind of surgery I just had."

"You're kind of a whirlwind yourself. Will you be seeing her again?"

"Yes. And I have a feeling my life will be more interesting because of it."

"Interesting? Is that what you're looking for? I would think Kelton, dear old Dad, and I have made it interesting enough already."

"That's getting old, Tom. You have to move over, there's a new game in town."

A young woman recovering from surgery helps solve a mystery.

Caught Holding the Bag

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/2015.html?s=pdf>