

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 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 was skeptical as they had 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 fertility hormone shots and three rounds of artificial insemination before traveling to South Africa to buy some 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 then ex-husband, Gene’s husband’s brother, Tim. Gene felt bad for the boys. Rick and Jim were now in middle school and were 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. This 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 couple 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 going to go 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 a nebbly-nose in 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 for the

automotive industry and was frequently out of town, on site at manufacturing plants all over the East Coast, Mid-West, and Korea. 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 long 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 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 and 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 chose 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 pillowed 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 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 had been 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 be crouched without her seeing from the door, or be tucked beneath, but she wasn’t going to risk exploring by herself. Robin was due home 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 pretty hard on him. He always 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 had 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 you 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 house 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 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 the two women standing before her over. 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 the 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 is 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 her 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 an opening to access below the porch and the 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.