

The search for a possible gene that might hold a cure for all disease and eliminate aging.

THE SACRED GENE

by Ray LaVay

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The Sacred Gene



Ray LaVay

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CHAPTER 1

Morning is the best part of the day, Beth thought. She yawned and swung her legs down from the bed. The coffee smelled great as she walked into the kitchen, stopping briefly to look out the new picture window. Glancing up just a little she could see the bridge and the cars passing over. Fog was hanging under the bridge and it looked like the cars were driving on a cloud. *Only in San Francisco*, she thought moving on towards the kitchen. Pouring herself some coffee, she looked down to the Embarcadero. Not many people yet; it is too early, but a perfect time for jogging.

Coffee in hand she turned on the TV and switched it to CNN, watching for a while. There was nothing new today. Steve, her sometimes boy friend, was out of the country, and she was free as a bird this weekend. After watching a little bit of the doom and gloom report, she changed and headed down to the Embarcadero. From her house to the Embarcadero was only a hundred yards, just a short walk. Hers was an old house, dating back to the turn of the century when the railroads ran up and down the now six lane Embarcadero. Most people were familiar with the North Beach area of San Francisco from the sixties era. Then beatniks and flower children roamed the area in their funny dress and flower cars.

The piers were still there but are now more of a tourist attraction, rather than trade centers. Stretching exercises were not necessary by the time she got to the bottom of the hill. Beth headed south towards the bridge, stopping only for the traffic lights, then down past the ferry building and the trade center, under the Oakland Bay Bridge and back north towards pier 23. Living in the famous North Beach Area, Beth only frequented the coffee shop next to pier 23 when she was running. Most of the time tourists crowded in, making it difficult unless it was early in the morning. Slowing down to a walk, she could see the old rust bucket at pier 24.

She walked around still looking at the old ship and watching the seals that were playing in and out of the water near the anchor chain. What a scene most tourists never get to see a sight like this.

Coffee in hand, she sat down close to the water's edge looking at them. What a stress-proof life, nothing to do all day but swim, eat, and play. The coffee was hot and black, mixed with the clean salt air it tasted that much better. Mother always drank coffee; father was not a coffee person, strictly tea. *Most Chinese are tea drinkers except for me*, she thought.

Lost in thought, she did not hear the blue van as it stopped next to the curb. Two men got out of the van and walked over to where Beth was sitting.

“Dr. Chen,” the larger of the men hollered. There was no response from Beth. He yelled again just as she turned around. Beth did not recognize them. However the van had a Rankin Industries logo on it. *Guess they are from the lab*, she reflected. Waving them in, she wondered what they wanted with her on a Saturday. The larger of the men walked to the table where she was sitting.

“Dr. Chen, we are from security at Rankin Industries. The main office has been trying to reach you all morning.”

“Gentlemen, this is my weekend off. Is there a problem at the lab?”

“No, Doctor, but you are needed there ASAP. We can give you a ride if you would like.”

Beth looked at this pair; some of the goons they’ve hired to guard the place since 9/11.

“I’ll have to go back home, shower and change. Would you mind waiting?”

The large man shook his head in agreement. Walking back to the house, Beth wondered what the problem was. The research on the gene therapy project was on time and under budget. Tom knew how hard she had been working, and darn it, she needed this time off.

Climbing the stairs, she looked back. The men were in front already. The house had been converted into apartments--her Aunt Becky on the second floor, the deli on the ground floor, and she was on the third. The fourth floor was her workout room and storage area. Aunt Becky and her uncle had purchased the house for her with the insurance money from her parents’ death. From a distance it wasn’t much to look at, but it was home, and paid for.

Beth showered and dressed hurriedly. She called the lab but there was no answer. What could be wrong, sending security after me? Closing the door behind her, she heard Aunt Becky coming up the stairs. Turning to face her, she apologized for not having the time to visit today. Unfortunately, she had been called into work.

* * * *

Onto the street and into the back of the van, they were off to the lab. *It’s almost one*, Beth thought. It must be very important to call her in this afternoon. They crossed the bridge going into Oakland, then turned south on I-880. The road was peaceful today, which was all right with Beth.

The smaller of the men had yet to say a word, which puzzled Beth. Perhaps he was a mute and couldn’t speak. *Oh well*. Traffic was light for a

Saturday. They should make good time. During the regular work-week it would take about an hour to get from her house to the lab. Good driving days were few and far between around the bay area.

Exiting off, they went east onto Industrial Boulevard. Beth could see the huge Rankin building and complex from the overpass. Usually it was packed with cars and people milling about. On weekends however, there was only security personnel scattered about and a small skeleton crew of lab techs working on samples shipped in by the various hospitals around the country.

Razor wire was now strung all along the new six-foot fence with electric gates and the addition of the new guard shacks that dotted the landscape. *Sure looks like a prison instead of a plant now. Alcatraz is more eye-appealing*, Beth thought as the van entered the Rankin compound.

The blue van stopped in front of the main building. The short man got out and opened the door for her.

"Thank you," Beth said.

"My pleasure, Dr. Chen," he said as he bowed in the Chinese fashion.

He opened the door to the main building and escorted her up the elevator to the offices of Walter Rankin. Beth had met Rankin once before when she first started work in the Life Sciences Department. Of course, that was after first completing two punishing years at grad school.

"You do have a name, sir," she remarked.

"Of course, Doctor. Charles will be fine."

Walking in silence again down the hall with no doors, they stopped at what appeared to be the end. Charles swiped his ID card in a slot and the wall became a door. It slid quietly to the left. Charles motioned Beth to enter as he stepped back. Then the door closed after her.

Something out of a James Bond novel, she thought. The room was huge with a door at the opposite end. Furniture was scattered around in neat patterns, resembling many furniture showrooms she had seen. There was no office furniture visible. "Quite a relaxed atmosphere," she murmured to herself.

Walking around for what seemed an eternity, Beth studied all the art on the walls. There was also a large pictographic history of Rankin Industries. Suddenly, the door opened and a man stepped into the room with his hand extended.

"Dr. Chen, this is a great pleasure meeting you at last. The name is Arthur Trent, Mr. Rankin's personal assistant."

His appearance startled Beth at first. He was tall, maybe six foot two, graying blond hair, quite muscular. Definitely not American she reflected

perhaps he was English. *And his smile, just so counterfeit*, she thought to herself.

“Please do sit over here. Mr. Rankin is delayed, but will be here presently. May I offer you a cold drink? No...no that is wrong, it is coffee, black.”

“Yes, Arthur, that will be fine.”

Beth continued looking at the photo array of Rankin Industries, her eyes coming to a rest on one in particular. This was a photo of her parents with a man she didn't remember. It was taken at their old house in Oakland. Who was this man? She could not place him. Of course there were a lot of people in her life she didn't remember, like her uncle Sal. Aunty Becky still talks about him as though he were still with us. Aunt Sophie however never talks about Burt, and he is still alive.

This man did resemble someone, she just couldn't remember who. Perhaps someone they had worked with at the lab. So long ago--a lot of memories get lost in the brain. Beth really had not thought a lot about her parents today. After seeing this photo it brought back all the memories she had tried so hard to forget; the funerals for her parents, moving in with her Aunt Becky and her uncle. It had been such a miserable time in her life. Father was a religious immigrant from China. Mother however was born and raised in San Francisco. Even though she was Jewish, they were truly an unlikely pair. Aunt Becky had told her the many stories about their meeting and courtship.

The met at Berkley, fell in love, and married despite the objections of Mother's family. Grandmother just did not like Father. He was poor and Chinese, but they loved each other.

Beth came along when her mother was finishing medical school. Father had no family in the USA that she knew of. Both parents were killed in a bomb blast while they were on holiday in the Middle East. Aunt Becky said it was the Palestinians who had killed them.

That was twenty-two years ago, when she was just ten. Who was this man in the picture? Not any friend or relative that she could remember.

* * * *

“Breathtaking isn't she, Arthur? She looks so much like her mother.”

“Quite a bit taller, don't you think, Mr. Rankin? Sir, look at the black hair, and those jade eyes.”

“And don't forget those long tan legs, Arthur.”

“Yes, sir, you are correct. She is exquisite.”

“Why, Arthur! I didn’t think females were your thing.”

“Beauty and brains I always admire, despite the sex.”

“She keeps staring at that picture. She can’t place me.”

“She will when the two of you meet. You were not part of the funeral, sir. Her only recollection would be from the time she started working here.”

“Arthur, the camera does not do her justice. Come on, let’s get this over with. Are the notes and files ready?”

“Yes, sir, they are, sir, a moment please. I know it’s not my place to interfere with your decision making, but this project is so important. Providing we can isolate and harness that gene, if it really exists I can only imagine the wealth and power that it would reap. Assuming of course, it performs as we anticipate.”

Rankin eyed his assistant carefully with his perfectly fit three piece suit. Not even a wrinkle he mused, normally Arthur’s’ instincts were right on target for a not so brilliant scientist. It was uncanny how this unusual man could dissect situations. He turned to face Arthur ready to put him in his place but decided not too. He did need the loyalty right now.

“Trent you have a great ability to grasp situations and problems but this is different. Not only do we have to isolate this phantom gene but we have to find out what turns it on and if it really descended from...well you can readily see our position.”

“Of course sir, you are the grand thinker. I defer to your judgment. Now if I may sir, let’s get this show on the road, what.”

Arthur opened the door for his boss motioning for him to enter first oddly with a sly expression on his face as if to say *‘I shall have my day’*.

* * * *

Beth heard the door close and turned to see Arthur and a tall older man walking towards her. He was rather tall with thinning grayish hair and a horrible white pallor for a face. His shoulders were stooped perhaps from holding the immense girth that bounced when he walked. The odd thing was the eyes; they were set back in the sockets with large black hue beneath. She had seen this many times in the autopsy room. My, I do hope he is still alive she giggled to herself.

“Dr. Chen, I believe you know Mr. Rankin.”

“Yes, it’s a pleasure to see you again, sir.

“May I offer you a cold drink Beth? No...no that is wrong, it is coffee, black.”

“I haven’t seen you since I came to work here some years ago.”

Beth sat down in her chair, eyes still trans-fixed on Rankin.

"Dr. Chen, is something wrong?" Rankin asked her.

Beth's muscles began to tighten and an eerie feeling came over her as she continued to stare at Rankin.

"It's you!" she blurted out.

"Pardon me," Rankin replied, turning his head to stare at her.

"The picture...it's you with my parents!"

"Why yes, that was taken in Oakland at your old house. You would have been seven or eight years old at the time."

"Mr. Rankin, I didn't realize that you were so close to my parents."

Rankin looked at Arthur out of the corner of his eye as if to say, *you were right*.

"Gentlemen," Beth spoke up, "it was just, well, seeing the picture with my parents and Mr. Rankin at the house. I hadn't thought about that house for quite a while."

"We didn't mean to cause you upset today, perhaps another time would be better," Rankin suggested.

"No, sir, I will recover shortly."

"Dr. Chen, I should have prepared you properly. Perhaps another day would be better."

Her composure returning, she turned to face the two of them.

"Gentlemen, I must apologize for that outburst. I was very young at the time when we lived there. Seeing Mr. Rankin in the picture just brought back some memories that had been misplaced."

This was not the whole truth. Beth just couldn't remember all, better to keep quiet right now.

"Your coffee, Dr. Chen, it is black."

"Yes, Arthur, that will be fine."

"Arthur that will be all till Anna arrives. Dr. Chen and I will reminisce till she gets here."

Rankin half smiled and looked at Beth. Arthur turned and walked back out the door, still smiling. *The lamb to the slaughter*, he thought to himself. *She's such a pretty lamb at that.*

"Now, Dr. Chen, let's see if we can catch up a bit. May I call you Beth?"

"Of course, Mr. Rankin, this is your corporation."

"Your parents and I met at Berkley just before your father graduated. The business was very young; we were making and importing vitamins, struggling along."

“Excuse me, Arthur,” Rankin called into the next room. “Would you check and see where Anna and Tom are. I want to get on with this.”

“Certainly sir; right now.”

Arthur walked into Rankin’s office just as the door opened. Anna hurried in; she was rushing as usual.

“Is she here yet?” she asked, referring to Beth.

“Yes, in there with Walter, discussing the past.”

“Is that wise? Allowing him to talk so much, especially with Chen?”

“He is the boss, remember, Anna.”

Sometimes, Anna thought to herself, if it weren’t for me nothing would get done around here.

“Arthur, have you called Tom yet? He should be here by now.”

“Tom will be here presently, no need for concern, Anna.”

“Any calls I should know about?”

“Greg is the only one. I am going down to the lab and get Tom. You best call Greg. Then get in there before Walter gets anxious.”

* * * *

Arthur took the elevator down to the lower level, where Tom Willoughby’s office was located. He couldn’t help but be amused. Anna thought she was irreplaceable. She was efficient, had been with Rankin for many years, and did know most of the secrets, especially where the skeletons were. The old girl was holding her age well, with only a hint of white in her hair. She was getting a little thick in some places. However, she still had that sexy look, especially when she walked. Oh well. Rankin liked and trusted her, even with his wife.

“Arthur... Arthur Trent, Tom hollered.

Lost in thought he did not hear Tom the first time.

“Lost are you, Arthur?”

“No, Tom, just thinking. My hearing was on strike there for a minute. How is Millie today?”

“Same as always, holding her own. Is Chen here yet?”

“She’s up in the office with Walter and Anna.”

“Arthur, do you think this is a wise move, allowing Chen to do this research?”

“Why, Tom, you are not jealous, are you?”

Tom glared at Arthur. “You know how long I have been here, and chief of research.”

“Now, Tom, don’t get uppity. It is not our decision.”

“Come on, let’s stop and see Millie on the way up. You know he will want an update. After all, it’s only been two hours since the last one.”

Walking into the sterile cold room, Tom stopped to check the monitors. *No change*, he thought to himself, *she is holding her own*. He shook his head as he made notes on the chart. The stroke was a bad one. *Hundred percent life support, but she is still with us*. He waved at the nurse as they walked out the door.

“This is good, let’s go upstairs, Arthur.”

* * * *

“Tom, Arthur, come sit down and join us,” Rankin spoke as they walked into the room.

“We had just about given up on the two of you. Beth, the work that you are doing here has great promise and is very important. There is however a new project we want you to look into. Head the project up; it shouldn’t take that much time, and then you can return to your current project.”

Did he say head the project up? Beth thought to herself.

“Mr. Rankin, I’m very close on the current project. The mutant gene has been isolated. We were just looking for a delivery vehicle now for the healthy gene to be implanted.”

“Yes, we understand that but your grad work on Mitochondrial DNA was ahead of its time. Now we want you to apply that principal to this project.”

“Gentlemen, a lot of that work was possibility thinking, theories.”

“Tom has thoroughly reviewed your work and we believe that it has merit. It’s settled then; Monday you will work with Tom on this project.”

“Yes sir, that will be fine,” Beth was elated.

“Tom, you will keep Anna updated, and Beth, if you need anything contact Arthur or Anna.

“Gentlemen and ladies that concludes my portion of this meeting. I have a lot of work to do, please excuse me.”

Rankin stood up to shake hands with Beth again, turned and walked back to his office.

“Beth, about seven a.m. on Monday then,” Tom said.

“Yes sir, will see you then. Tom, may I keep Herb and two of my other assistants?”

“You heard Mr. Rankin. Whatever you need. Some of the case files have been placed in your office with a possible itinerary. Review them over the weekend and be ready to start Monday.”

“Yes Tom, I’ll be ready.”

“Arthur, please show Dr. Chen out, and Beth... security will return you home when you’re ready.”

Beth took the elevator down and walked across the yard to her office in the Life Sciences Lab. Two disks were on her desk, and the message light was blinking on the phone. Beth punched the voice mail button. One call was Steve, ‘working hard over here and it is hot, miss you, and will be home next Friday’. *That was sweet*, Beth thought, not necessary but sweet. *Over here, what does he mean? “Over here” is not Mexico.*

* * * *

Anna and Arthur were still in the top floor offices discussing Greg’s call from the NSA.

“He is concerned about the situation over there, Anna.”

“No, his only concern is protecting the investment he authorized. Steve is over there; have you talked to him?”

Arthur thought about Steve for a minute. He was Anna’s handpicked researcher, not bad looking if you like that sort. Kind of thin and olive skinned with dark brown hair. There is something about him though that bothers me. Oh well, Walter is sold on him.

“Not yet, perhaps tonight. Security has all the monitoring in place for the good Doctor.”

“Arthur, is that really necessary?”

“Necessary? Perhaps not; but that is why I’ve been here so long,” replied Arthur. Diligence to detail, which is what keeps us in our comfortable positions remember.”

“Yes, that’s correct and knowing also where all the *skeletons* are buried, *both dead and alive.*”

“Very well, Anna. See you tomorrow for brunch at Walter’s.”

“Do try being on time, Arthur. You know how irritated he gets when you’re late.”

* * * *

Beth walked into her office in the Life Sciences Building located on the first floor. She checked her email; one from Steve, two from Herb. *They can wait till Monday.* She called security, told them she was ready, and went to the front door to wait. Charles pulled the blue van up just as she got to the front door. The sun was beginning to set all ready. *Sure lost track of time today. What a positively marvelous day this has been*, she reflected. Never had she thought she would find out so much about her parents. Rankin was

full of information, maybe too much. Contemplating her promotion and the job ahead, she did not hear Charles.

“See what, Charles?”

“That orange shooting star.”

“No, I didn’t see it.”

Driving back across the bridge, the lights of the city seemed unusually beautiful. In fact, the whole world seemed at peace tonight. Perhaps it was just her feeling of happiness and well being that made everything right.

“We are here, Doctor, we are home.”

“Thanks, Charles. See you around the complex.”

He waved and she turned to go up the back steps to the apartment.

* * * *

She heard her named being called as she climbed the stairs. It was Aunt Becky.

“Aunt Becky, let me put my stuff away and I’ll be right down to talk to you.”

Beth quickly put her case and the disks down on the kitchen table, ran to the restroom, then down the stairs to Aunt Becky’s.

“Come on in, Beth, the door is not locked.”

How does she do that? Beth could never figure out how her Aunt did this, she could not possibly have heard her. Beth would ask, someday, not today.

“So tell me little bit. What was such a big deal today?”

“A promotion and my own project! Can you believe it?”

Beth continued talking and Becky listened intently, then the word Rankin came out and Becky started to fidget. Becky Goldman was not an old lady in years. She had been around the block a time or two. Walter Rankin did not inspire trust in her or anyone else that really knew him. Becky had raised Beth from the time her parents were killed and in the process had also buried her husband. Rankin was a sore subject from twenty years ago. Perhaps he felt guilty being that close to Beth.

Tough and gentle she had been with Beth. Rankin on the other hand was bad news. Had it not been for his greed, her sister would still be alive. Beth had never heard the truth, and now definitely was not the time. Sooner or later the truth would come out. She would have to pick the time and place or lose all credibility with her niece.

“Aunt Becky, Aunt Becky?”

“Yes Beth, just lost in thought. Now tell me all about today.”

Becky listened as Beth rambled on about her day.

"There was so much I never knew about my parents and their work," Beth went on.

"To be honest with you, Rankin is someone I never really cared for. True, he did take care of us after the accident happened."

"Did you say accident?" replied Beth. "I thought they were blown up on a bus in Israel. That's murder plain and simple."

"Child, sometimes it is easier to refer to it as an accident."

Beth shook her head in agreement. She really didn't understand and it was too late to go on about it tonight.

"It's late, Aunt Becky. I think I will call it a day."

"See you for breakfast then?"

Perhaps, depends on what time in the morning I get up, Beth thought to herself. She walked into her place just as the machine answered the phone. Steve was calling again. Not tonight, Steve, she thought, it has been an emotional day. Much sleep was needed right now. Tomorrow would be a better day for talking. She lay there and tried to go to sleep, but the words from Rankin about her parents just wouldn't leave. A workout was what she needed to get rid of the stress, it always freed up her mind.

Beth walked up the stairs to the unused fourth floor. She had converted this into her workout and storage room. Mostly storage now, all the files and mementos from the house in Oakland were here, even her dad's old computer. Beth had never figured out how to use it, what an antique, but it was dad's. Boxes of her parents' stuff were stacked everywhere. She had promised herself to go through them someday. Someday never did arrive though. It was too painful, even twenty years later. Up here surrounded by her parents' belongings she could almost feel their presence. It was so comforting to be able to hear her mother fussing at dad on the tapes from the old answering machine. Just like going back in time, but that was impossible. "I guess the pain of losing them will never wear off," she reflected. Sitting down in her dad's old chair she propped her feet up on the footstool. Opening up a twenty-five year old National Geographic, she started to read but went sound asleep.

* * * *

Beth ached all over; dad's chair was not the place to sleep. Even after all these years she could still smell his cigars on the chair. Or was that just an illusion? She walked into the kitchen to put on some coffee, and then took a hot shower. It was Sunday; that meant brunch with her Aunts. The phone

rang just as she stepped into the shower. Had to be Steve, he had the worst timing in the world. She got out of the shower to answer the phone.

“Hi, Steve.”

“How did you know, Beth?”

“You have a knack for calling at the worst possible times.”

“Sorry about that. Its Sunday there, knew I could catch you at home.”

“Steve, what do you mean? What day is it where you are?”

“Let’s see, there is an eight-hour time difference.”

“Eight hours? I thought you were in Mexico. That’s what you told me.”

“I did go there but things happened and I ended up here.”

“Come on, Steve, where exactly is ‘here.’”

“I’m in the Middle East, taking care of business. Look, I’ll tell you all about it when I get home on Friday. Not a big deal, really, Beth.”

Confused, Beth did not know what to say. Steve had never lied to her. She would have to be patient and trust him. They made some small talk, and then said their good-byes. After hanging up Beth got in the shower again and began to think about her conversation with Steve.

Why was Steve in the Middle East? He didn’t even say where in the Middle East he was. There was no Rankin facility over there she knew of. Strange, very strange she reflected. Beth checked the clock. It was almost eleven. Already time to go downstairs for brunch and gossip with her family. She dressed and walked slowly downstairs. These Sunday brunches were all right, but she also had to work today. Eat, visit and leave. Surely they would understand she had a lot to do.

* * * *

Arthur turned off the main road into Rankin’s driveway passing the scanner. The big gate swung open for him. This was all part of the new security measures. There didn’t seem to be a need for all this security. After all, who would want to harm Walter Rankin? He was rich, powerful, and it was rumored he had the *government* in his pocket.

Arthur grinned as he drove up to the main house. That certainly was no rumor. He rounded the curve past the guesthouse and there it was.

Constructed out of native stone, it was a huge mansion – about six thousand square feet. The house sat on one hundred sixty of the most beautiful acres this side of the bay. Rankin had purchased the land thirty years ago when land was both plentiful and cheap. Millie, his wife, set out to turn it into a small, southern plantation. Right here in liberal northern

California. A marvelous feat, that she accomplished with great ease and a lot of Walter's money.

Stopping where the rest of the cars were parked, he noticed the blue sedan with the government plate. That had to be Greg Erickson from the NSA. *Wonder what he has on his mind.* Arthur went around to the side door and was met by a new, very large security person.

"They are all in the breakfast area; go on in."

He stopped to get a cup of coffee and a couple of donuts on the way in.

"Arthur, sit down over there next to Greg. I believe you know everyone else."

He sure did. There across from Greg was part of the government he was rumored to have in his pocket.

"Congressman, it's good to see you this beautiful Sunday morning."

"You too, Arthur." He spoke softly.

Arthur grinned like a Cheshire cat. He knew that the congressman disliked him because of his sexual preferences. But the congressman had much to hide also, that's why he was here. Anna was very thorough when given a job to do. Walter needed someone from the House Security Commission and Anna had found him. Yes, he belonged to them now, body and soul. Greg was here to protect his interest in the project he had just received funding for. A very, very healthy grant to be sure. Cloning was illegal in America, but not in other parts of the world. They had secretly moved the money out of the USA. Not an easy thing to do, given the current administration. *Yes, I am good at my work,* Arthur reflected.

Who would have ever thought that the Energy department would be in the business of cloning? Deception is wonderful, keeps one on his toes. Arthur did dearly love this part of the business.

* * * *

"What can you tell me about this Dr. Chen?" Greg asked Anna.

"You have read her file," Anna replied. "She works on the genetics project dedicated to cancer research."

"Steve called her last night and again this morning."

"They are friends," Anna spoke up. "Just friends now. Beth broke the affair off a couple of months ago. Steve just won't let go."

"Someone needs to have a talk with him. We don't need any more fingers in this pie than necessary."

"We will take care of it when he gets back on Friday, Congressman."

"Very well; can we eat now?"

They all laughed and Arthur signaled for the food to be brought in; he was starved.

* * * *

Beth ate very little. She made small talk with her two aunts while they ate. The clock was against her today. Hoping they would understand her leaving so soon, Beth headed back up to her apartment and laptop. She slid the disk in and began to read the first of twenty files. Down to the tenth file she got up and went to the window. This makes no sense at all, she thought. It has nothing to do with the research I've been working on for the last two years. Being a detective is definitely not part of my job description. Tom will have to make some serious changes. This is not the type of research I can or will do. There are other places I can work. Maybe I should call Steve. She turned from the window and sat down at the desk again. "Death," she muttered to herself, "they want me to research death."

CHAPTER 3

"Traffic was miserable this morning, Tom. Sorry about being late."

"One of these days, Beth, you will have to move over here. It only takes me five minutes to get to work."

"Do you want some coffee, or do I have to ask?"

"I've never been known to turn down coffee, not even yours. I spent most of yesterday going over these files, but I don't understand what we are looking for." *In fact most of those files read like a bad science fiction novel*, Beth thought as she accepted her coffee.

"Everything is not in the files, Beth. You are going to have to interview some of these people as well."

"There could potentially be thousands of people out there that would meet the same criteria."

"Walter wants you to concentrate on the twenty-five you have now. There are many more available if you need them. We get these cases submitted daily. Some more may come in, but these twenty-five now."

"Tom, here is another important question. How did we come by these records?"

"We have an interest either in the hospitals, the clinics, or perhaps the drug companies. Does it really matter?"

"If the picture were clearer it probably wouldn't. I'm going back to my office and sit down with Herb. Talk to you later on today."

Beth took the elevator to the ground floor then she walked to her lab. Herb had been Beth's assistant for the last four years. He was a brilliant microbiologist and very loyal to Beth, even though she was four years his junior. She opened the door to the lab and there was Herb sitting at his desk, glued to the computer. He stood up and bowed.

"Do I have the honor of addressing Dr. Jobeth Chen, M.D. PhD? The new head of project – what did you say the name was?"

They both laughed, he was not making fun of her but congratulating her achievement. They had been together for three years on this project and had become very close. Herb was not your typical researcher. He did have a wild sense of humor. *It fits him to a tee*, Beth thought as she stared at him. He was about her height with little hair on top and blue eyes that sparkled when he got excited.

"And a very good morning to you, sir. Do we have any coffee?"

"But of course, ma'am, especially for such a woman as the new head of... now what is the name of this project?" They both laughed again.

“Have you seen any of the data yet, Herb?”

“No, but I’m sure you will share it with me.”

“Here are the disks. Have a look at them and we will discuss the data after lunch.”

“Thank you kindly, Beth.” He accepted the disks and bowed once again.

She giggled as he returned back to his office. Opening up the laptop she hooked up the cable to the PC on her desk and began the download. There wasn’t much she could do until the download was complete. She needed to speak to Steve this morning. Beth dialed Toms’ extension; he wasn’t there so she left a message. She would need a number where she could reach Steve.

* * * *

“Anna, Beth just left me a message asking for a number for Steve. What do you want me to do?”

“She knows where he is, give it to her. We are monitoring her, Tom, don’t worry.”

* * * *

‘Download complete’ popped up on Beth’s computer as she finished her work on the mainframe. Now I can get some work done. She buzzed Herb and asked him to come to the office.

“Have you looked over those files?”

“Yes, I have, Beth. May I ask a dumb question?”

“Herb, you know there are no dumb questions, only dumb answers.”

“Where did we get all this data? Most of it is doctor–patient privilege.”

“We’ll talk about it in a minute. Come on over.”

Herb walked into Beth’s office and sat down in the chair.

“What is troubling you?” Beth asked.

“This data and exactly what is this project?”

“Actually the data came from Tom’s people. They believe there is a common thread or link between the patients in these files. This is part of the grad work I did on Mitochondrial DNA. What I want you to do is help me build a model using the data we have here for comparison study of all the chromosomes contain in any Mitochondrial DNA. I am going to have to interview some of the patients without a complete history. There may be something to it, Herb. We won’t know until the model is complete. There are five to interview right now: LA, Pittsburgh, Ocean City, NJ, and two in Dallas. I should be back on Thursday. Steve gets in on Friday.”

“Very well, Beth. I’ll start with the model. Email all the data you get on the interviews. When does your plane leave?”

“This afternoon, only a 45-minute flight to LAX. The hospital is not far from the airport; should be able to have this done by tonight, then on to Pittsburgh. Have you ever been to Pittsburgh?”

“Actually, Beth, I’ve never been out of California.”

“I guess we will find out what it is like. Call you tonight, unless you are going to be busy.”

“No, that is all right. I want to get this done ASAP, so we can get back to work. See you later, Detective Beth. By the way, is Pittsburgh part of the USA?”

She grinned all the way out to her car. Sometimes she wished that Steve could be just a little like Herb. *Guess it’s not in the cards.*

* * * *

Beth was just opening the door to her car when Charles walked up to her.

“Dr. Chen, will you be in need of a ride to the airport?”

“We thought it would be easier to drive you there. Then you could leave your car here.”

“No, Charles, I would prefer to drive my car, thank you anyway.”

“Very well, Doctor, see you when you return.”

Charles turned and walked back to the security building. Beth checked her watch; there was plenty of time to get to the airport. Tom never called her back with a number for Steve. Closing her door she headed to Tom’s office to get the number. Down the elevator at the main building, to the lower level and to the right at the bottom, Beth thought that Tom’s office was like a dungeon. Rounding the corner, she saw Tom coming out of a restricted area door.

“Tom,” she called.

Turning around he saw Beth and closed the door quickly.

“Beth, what a pleasant surprise,” he said sarcastically. “What can I do for you?”

Tom was clearly agitated. Beth thought perhaps this was not such a good idea.

“I was going to the airport when I remembered that you did not give me a number where Steve could be reached.”

“Let’s go on down to my office, the number is there.”

Beth thought some small talk might lessen the agitation, it didn’t she sighed.

“Tom, I didn’t know there were so many secret projects going on here.”

“Sorry, Beth, that’s really not a restricted room. I just don’t want anyone messing around with my pet project.”

“Can I help you with it? I didn’t realize that you were still researching. I thought you were just in administration now.”

“Have to keep my hand in it; sure don’t want to get rusty. Here is the number, Beth. I don’t mean to cut you short but the work is really piling up today.”

“That’s okay; I need to get on to the airport anyway.”

Tom is really strange, Beth thought as she walked back to her car. *Oh well, he is the boss.*

* * * *

The flight to LA was not a long one. It took Beth longer to drive to the airport than the flight would take. Boarding the plane, she remembered why she didn’t like to fly. *All these people crammed into this little space.*

Flight 1301 was uneventful, but bumpy. Really it was more trouble getting to the rental car place and out of the airport. She called the doctor’s office to confirm their appointment, and then headed towards Hollywood on the 405 Freeway. The smog was so bad it burned her eyes. How fortunate she was to live in the bay area with no smog.

The directions were right on the money. She exited on to the Santa Monica freeway then north on Western. *Not a bad trip, although it probably won’t be at five o’clock,* she thought to herself. *The plane for Pittsburgh leaves at 7:45, there should be plenty of time to get this done.*

Office of Dr. Brad Winslow

Walking in to the doctor’s office she had an uneasy feeling. Had she continued on with her residency she would be an internist today. *Sure am glad that I went on to Pharmacology and research. No patients to see, no lost sleep, or hospital rounds.* Yes, this was a definite advantage. True, the money was different. She was only making ninety thousand right now. *That will change when this project is completed.*

“May I help you,” the voice said as she walked up to the glass window.

“Yes, Dr. Chen to see Dr. Winslow. I have an appointment.”

“It will be just a few minutes, Doctor. Would you please follow me?”

The door opened and Beth followed the receptionist down to Brad Winslow's office.

His office looked like so many she had been in. He had all the diplomas and achievement plaques hanging on the walls in an orderly fashion. She sat down on the sofa to wait. Apparently he did quite well; the furnishings were not cheap.

* * * *

Brad was not what she had expected as he walked into the room. Tanned and dressed in his greens, he appeared to be in his late 50's with just a hint of white running through his hair. The mustache had just enough white in it to really make him look distinguished. *He must have been an athlete in his younger days*, she thought. *Too bad he is so much older; he might be fun.*

"Doctor Winslow, Beth Chen." She held out her hand.

"Doctor Chen. It is indeed a great pleasure to meet you."

Now this is a woman; wish I was twenty years younger, Brad thought to himself.

"Please Brad, Beth will do fine. As we discussed on the phone the sample you sent to the lab for analysis sent up a red flag to the Director. He reviewed this case and gave it to me. Now I'm here to discuss it with you. Brad, I don't work in the analysis lab right now. This is a special project."

"Look Beth, let me tell you how I feel about Rankin...never mind."

Beth looked at him closely, he was truly agitated. She would try and calm him down if it was possible.

"I don't know you from Adam. If you have problems with my being here just tell me now and I'll leave."

"Being pressured into doing something just doesn't sit well with me, Beth. Dr. Chen, may we be candid with one another?"

"Of course."

"Rankin Financial lent us the money to open this clinic."

"I didn't know that Rankin was in the finance business."

"Look them up, you will find out that they have tentacles like an octopus. They are into every aspect of the medical profession. When Tom called me about this case, we discussed the patient privilege. He told me frankly he didn't care. Now you know why you are here."

Beth was at a loss. She just worked there and had no idea what Rankin was really about.

"I, I don't know what to say, Brad. Our conversation will remain confidential of course, one doctor to another."

“Good. Now let’s discuss this case. The patient was complaining with chest pain following surgery. He suffered cardiac arrest, had been coded twice. He lapsed into a coma while in C.I.C.U, remaining there for two days. Then he came out of the coma with no apparent residual problems.

“We preformed all the necessary tests, everything normal. That’s when we sent the samples of his blood to Rankin for analysis. He did suffer a coronary; there is no doubt about that.”

Brad motioned to Beth as he was speaking “Look at his EKG and his blood gases. Now look at the same tests after coming out of the coma. And you would not believe the story he told me.”

“Let me guess, an NDE, isn’t that correct?”

“Yes, Dr. Chen, you are right.”

Brad could sense the inflection in her voice. This woman was all business. She definitely did not believe in the hereafter.

“Do you think he would talk to me? I’d be willing to stay over if he would.”

“We can call and ask. All he can do is say no.”

Brad asked his secretary to locate the patient in question while they continued talking. Not only was this a beautiful woman, but she had brains to match. He glanced down at his watch; perhaps she would join him for rounds.

“Beth I still have some patients to see and rounds tonight. Want to see how the rest of us live?”

“Been a long time Doctor. Yes, I would.”

“Good, I’ll have Mimi make you a reservation for tonight.” *Did he say Mimi? Well, this is LA.* Just then his intercom buzzed.

“Doctor, I have Bill on the phone.”

“Bill, this is Dr. Winslow. How have you been doing? That’s great to hear. Bill, the reason I called you, there is a research scientist in town that would like to discuss your condition. Bill, we know that you are fine. She just wants to ask some questions, and believe me she is easy to look at. Great, my office opens at nine in the morning. Thanks Bill, see you then.”

Mimi handed Brad a note as he was putting the phone down. He smiled at his secretary, and turned to Beth.

“Beth, Mimi set you up at the Century Plaza. A lot of movie stars hang there. Now, how about those rounds at the hospital? Ok with you?”

“That will be great. Let’s go on to the hospital.”

* * * *

“Good morning, Dr. Chen.”

“And to you, Mimi. Is the doctor in yet?”

“No. Please go on back to the office, he should be here soon. Would you like some coffee, Dr. Chen?”

“Yes please, Mimi.”

Beth reflected on last night and the rounds at the hospital. She had a very late supper with Brad. Beth knew then why she chose research. Private practice was not for her. The clock on the wall said 8:45. The patient Bill was due here at nine. Brad had best hurry. Beth had no sooner had the thought, than Brad walked in the back door.

“Good morning, Beth. Did you enjoy last night?”

“It was interesting, but private practice is not for me.”

He laughed at her.

“Thought it would remind you what we regular doctors go through. Do we need to talk anymore about Bill Taylor?”

“No, I remember the details. Any thing else we should go over again?”

“He did tell me a strange story I did not include in my report to Rankin.”

“Are you talking about the NDE?”

“Yes Beth, please keep an open mind when you hear this.”

“Do you believe him?”

“There she goes again trying to put me on the spot,” Brad mumbled. “I can’t explain what happened to him physically. Perhaps you can, Doctor.”

Just as he asked the question Mimi buzzed. “Doctor Winslow, Mr. Taylor is here.”

“Please bring him back, Mimi.”

Beth looked over the patient as Brad pointed to the spare chair in his office. There was nothing unusual about his appearance just a middle aged man with a full head of hair. Average height and weight, nothing to suggest anything special.

“Bill Taylor, this is Dr. Beth Chen. She is the scientist than has come to see you.” Beth stood up to shake hands.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Taylor.”

“Doctor, please call me Bill.”

Bill stood there for a minute eyeing this woman who had come here to discredit his story. She was formidable, that was for sure.

“Bill, please sit down over here with us,” Brad said, pointing to the small conference table.

“Dr. Chen is from the research facility as I told you on the phone. Just tell her what you told me in the hospital.”

“She won’t believe me, Dr. Winslow.”

“Mr. Taylor – excuse me, Bill. I’m not here to judge you, only for research purposes.”

“Well, Dr. Chen, it’s really quite simple. I got this pain in my chest, felt like I couldn’t breathe. Next thing I know, I’m watching them work on me. Like I was hanging from the ceiling looking down at them. I could see everyone and hear everyone in the room.”

“Then I left there and went down the hall. That’s where I heard the nurses talking about that nice man down in 241 dying. Shoot! That was me they were talking about.”

“After that I went to a real bright place. This was a place without any lights, but a light at the end. That’s hard to understand I know. It was comfortable; I remember that. But somewhere inside I knew I didn’t belong there. There were other folks there, but I was moving away from them. Then I saw this figure and it said I had to go back.”

“That is certainly interesting, Bill. You said you heard them talking while you watched?”

“Yes, that’s right, Doctor.”

“Do you remember what was said?”

“Not all of it. Mostly it was the nurses talking to the doctor. A nurse trying to get some blood; but she couldn’t get any blood. You know, stuff like that.”

“Now, about this light; was it warm or cold?”

“It wasn’t cold, I remember that. The amazing thing was, I could see through me with my clothes on.”

“What color was the person you saw?”

“Don’t know how to explain that one. It was just bright, not as bright as the light. This form, well I couldn’t tell what it was. The light around it sorta was an outline of a person. Doctor, that’s so hard to describe it’s the best I can do. One thing is for sure, I wasn’t headed for the light. I was going the other way.”

“Bill, how far did you get in school?”

“The 12th grade. I graduated from high school.”

“There may be some more questions to ask you after today. May I call you?”

“Why sure, Doc, that will be fine. Just give ole’ Bill a call.”

“How do you feel today, since you had the surgery?”

“Feel great; eat anything that doesn’t eat me first.”

Beth laughed. “That’s great, Bill.”

“Yes, ma’am, that Dr. Winslow, he is one great doctor.”

“Dr. Winslow, those are all the questions that I have for Mr. Taylor. Do you have anymore?”

“No, Dr. Chen, I sure don’t.”

“Bill thanks for taking the time to come in.”

“You’re welcome, Dr. Chen. You can call me anytime.”

After Bill had left, Beth got up and closed the door. She then sat back down and looked Brad squarely in the face.

“Do you believe him?”

“Beth, to tell you the truth I was uncertain about his story. Then I went back and examined all the data. I talked to as many people as I could, and what he told me was right on the money. Right down to the nurses at the station. There was no doubt in my mind he was clinically dead. For how long I don’t know, we didn’t record his body temperature. His lips were blue, fingers, and toes, he was not breathing.”

“This is not the first patient that it has happened to, Dr. Winslow.”

“That is correct, but this is the first one that has given me credible details that are plausible and verifiable. How else would I explain his physical condition? Complete recovery in four days, who is going to believe that.”

“Seeing is believing, Brad. That is all I can say. We didn’t discuss his religious beliefs.”

“He is one of those born again Christians. Not many of them where you live, are there, Beth?”

“How about you, what are your religious convictions?”

“Just a Doctor, with a lot of patients to see today, Beth.”

“Sorry, I forgot about the other patients. This has really helped me with my research and my education as a physician Brad.” *Keeps me from forgetting who I really am*, Beth reflected. “Sometimes we researchers forget that we are physicians first. I’ll be in touch when there are some answers for you.”

“Thanks for coming down. It has been a real pleasure. What time is your flight?”

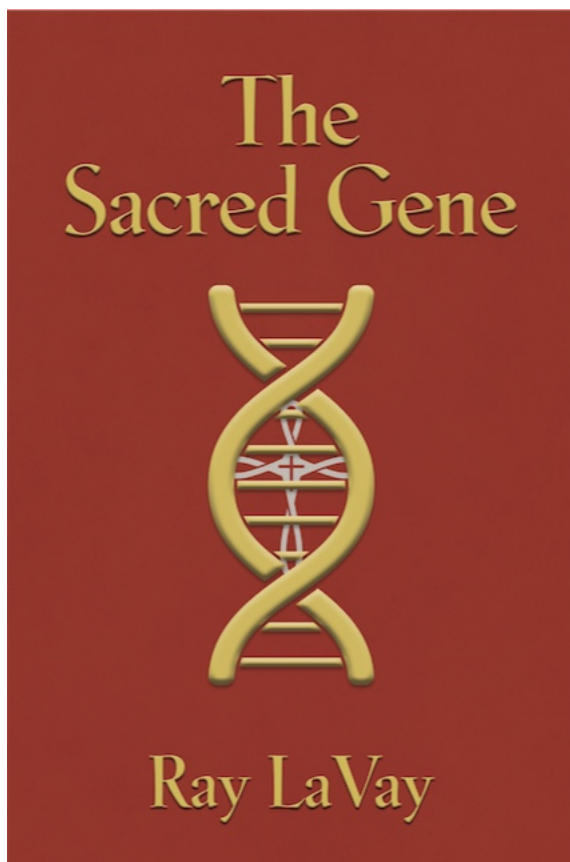
“Eleven thirty; leaves me just enough time to get to LAX.”

“Have a safe trip, Beth, and be careful.”

“That sounds rather ominous, Brad.”

“I’ve been dealing with Rankin for a lot of years and have learned to watch my step around them. This is just some good advice from one doctor to another.”

She pondered Brad's words. Somehow they had an eerie ring to them. Beth did not trust many people at Rankin. Tom was certainly was no exception. She was sure he had his own agenda. This whole trip was unsettling; she just did not know why.



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