

*A Vested Interest*

*Immortality Gene*

*By John and Shelia Chapman*

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Hexham

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Our grateful thanks go to Connie Deavers, Brenda Swiger  
and our son Adam for all their help and patience.

The Earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the Earth.  
This we know.

All things are connected like the blood which unites one  
family. All things are connected.

Whatever befalls the Earth befalls the sons of the Earth.

Man did not weave the web of life: he is merely a strand in it.

Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

Words by Ted Perry, attributed to Chief Seattle



## Chapter 1

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Donna picked up the two steaming mugs of coffee, one with milk, one with Coffee-mate and sat them in coasters on her coffee table. She glanced at her watch and grinned. Richard was late, but he was often late. She was quite fond of Richard, but Gary was right. Richard had a problem with punctuality.

Sitting cross-legged on her sofa, Donna reached for the remote and switched on her smart TV. Selecting the blue icon, she started Skype and waited for Gary. Since she and Jared had parted ways, Donna had moved back into her apartment, at Shreve City Towers.

She, Richard, and Gary had formed a habit of visiting and sharing a morning cup of coffee together. Early morning for Richard and Donna turned out to be early afternoon for Gary. No matter how many times he reminded them; neither Richard nor Donna seemed to understand Gary needed something called sleep. The six hour time difference between the US and the UK always caught him out. They called him at all hours of the night.

Donna was in deep concentration, thumbing through her stack of mail. She didn't notice when Gary came online. She took a sip of her coffee and yawned.

“Wake up!” Gary shouted.

Startled, Donna jerked the hand holding her coffee mug. “That was mean!” she grumbled. “Now see what you made me do? I’ve been waiting for this letter for the last three days, and now I’ve spilt coffee all over it!”

“Sorry baby. What is it?”

Donna’s face beamed. “Probably a letter telling me I’ve got the job.”

“What job?” Gary frowned. “I thought you were coming over here.”

“Not if I get this job in New York,” she smiled.

There was a knock on her door. “Hang on a second,” she said. “That’s probably my breakfast.” She unlocked the door and narrowed her eyes. “You’re late!” she teased.

Richard grinned. “I wasn’t aware I was on the clock. You’re in a better mood today.”

Donna took the brown paper bag from him. “Yes I am. My letter came. Looks like I’m headed for the big apple.”

“Still going to let me fly you there if you get the job?”

“No, she won’t!” Gary spoke up. “She’ll chicken out like she always does.”

Richard closed the door and followed Donna to the living room. “Nobody asked for your two cents, Mr. Nosey,” Donna said as she headed for the kitchen.

“Where are you going?” Gary asked. “I don’t have all day for this. Some of us poor folks have to work for a living.”

“To get some saucers and paper towels,” she replied.

Richard sat on the sofa and grabbed his coffee mug. “Good morning, Richard,” Gary said. “Are you enjoying your time off?”

“Good *afternoon*, Gary,” Richard smirked and sipped his coffee. “I certainly am. I have something much better to look at now than your ugly face.”

Gary laughed.

Donna handed Richard his breakfast, sat next to him and picked up her coffee stained-letter. “Well, go on...” Richard prompted, “...tell us what it says.”

“Dear Dr. Rigden,” she began. “Thank you for your application in seeking a position as head of our cardiac research centre. Blah – blah – blah...” she quickly scanned through the rest. She tightened her jaw; her eyes danced with fury. “The sorry son of a bitch.”

“What’s wrong, D?”

“How *dare* he!”

Richard slid closer. “What is it pet?”

She shoved the letter at Richard.

“We were unable to obtain references from your current employer, G.W. Forrest of Forrest Enterprises, who stated that they would not release you from your current contract...” pausing briefly, Richard’s voice fell as he continued. “We are sorry to inform you, but the position... has now been filled.” He exhaled and tossed the letter on the coffee table. “Dad could probably fix this for you if you want the job that bad.”

Donna shook her head. “No, I don’t want you getting involved with Forrest.”

Richard chuckled. “Pet, I’ve been involved with G.W. Forrest forever – it seems.”

“According to my calculations, I had less than a month to go on my contract. Because Kim Gentry decided to blow up the new building - herself in the process – I have no facility to work in, no hope of having one, for who knows how long. Forrest is *still* waiting for the insurance company to complete their investigation before they’ll give him Jared’s investment money,” she paused and swallowed the lump in her throat. “Does Forrest plan on building another one? Who knows? Does he need Jared’s money to do this – no! That’s it – I’m done! I can’t take it anymore.” Donna bolted off the sofa.

“*Now*, where are you going?” Gary asked.

“To change. I’m going to see the bastard. I’ve had my resignation typed out for months. All it needs is a date and my signature,” she threw over her shoulder and turned the corner to her bedroom.

Gary and Richard shared a worried look. “If she goes in his office with her gung-ho attitude...” Gary broke off.

“I think you’d better talk to Dad. We may have to make a hasty escape.”

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Donna switched her cell phone to silent mode. She took a deep breath and opened the door. She knew this was a waste of time from the moment she stepped into the room. Forrest had done another U-turn on her. A thick, hazy cloud of cigar smoke

hovered over her head. “When did you pick up the habit again? Those things will kill you – and everybody else around you.”

“Old habits die hard, Donna. We all die, sooner or later.” He motioned her to a seat. “I’m a little disappointed in you. Despite all I’ve done for you...”

Donna held up a hand. “...All you’ve done for me?”

“I changed your work schedule, gave you fewer hours. I increased your salary. I built you a brand new, state-of-the-art research facility. While it was under construction, I gave you and Dr. Walton time off with pay. You were ill, and I gave you extra time off to recover from your appendectomy – when you really didn’t need it. How did you manage to heal so quickly, Donna, especially since you’re dying?”

Donna’s mouth dropped open. “Dying?” she gasped. “What makes you think I’m dying?”

Forrest arched an eyebrow. “My doctor took a blood sample, to see if he could figure out why you collapsed. Your white blood cell count is way above normal, Donna. You have a rare blood disease. According to his findings, you’ve got six months – a year at the most – if you’re lucky and can get a bone marrow transplant. Unfortunately, since you’re an only child...”

“...You took blood from me that day?”

“Yes, Donna. With you being a doctor and your leukaemia being far into the final stage, I figured you knew.”

“Mr. Forrest... I’m not dying. I don’t care what your doctor told you. He’s either one hell of a quack or has his wires seriously crossed. I am *not* dying, and even if I were, I didn’t come here to discuss my health.”

Forrest put his cigar in the corner of his mouth and examined his fingernails. “Then what did you come to discuss, Donna? How you applied for another job while you were still under contract with us? How you and Jared planned to cheat me out of my money for the building that Kim Gentry blew up? Or how you secretly tried to get rid of me?”



Donna was dumbfounded. She stared at Forrest as if he were crazy. She cocked her head to the side. “Mr. Forrest... how would Jared and I cheat you out of your insurance money? We had nothing to do with the construction of that building.”

Forrest sneered, pulled hard on his cigar and rested it in the crystal ashtray, exhaling directly in front of Donna. He pushed an investment contract across the desk to her. “Pick it up and read it, Donna. Pay close attention to the signature.”

Donna sighed and quickly scanned through the information. A lump formed in her throat. She blinked a few times and pushed it back to him.

“From the shocked expression on your face, I’ll take it that you didn’t know Jared had bought stock into your research and was responsible for all construction that went into the building?”

Donna slowly shook her head. “No... I didn’t.”

“Kim Gentry and Jared Thundercloud were as thick as thieves. I wouldn’t be surprised if Jared hadn’t killed Kim himself because she planned to tell you about their affair.”

Donna tightened her jaw and clenched her fist. “You’re lying! Jared didn’t murder Kim, and he wasn’t having an affair with her and he sure as hell didn’t blow up your fucking building.”

Forrest picked up his cigar, flicked the ashes with his little finger and lodged it in the corner of his mouth. “Be that as it may, things are going back the way they were, Donna.”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “You mean you’re going back to being the arrogant prick we all love?” she scoffed.

Forrest attempted to stare her down. Donna held his gaze. “That’s it! I’m through being reasonable. I’m through trying to help you. I will expect you back at work in the morning. You will do as you’re told regardless of how you may feel about your assignments.”

Donna furrowed her brow and pursed her lips. “And just what equipment do you expect me to use? Everything I’ve done since I came here is gone. I have nothing to show. You

never explained to me why you changed my research in the first place, despite the fact I sent proof that my research was more important to the world. After all the time I've devoted to this company, don't you think you at least owe me some kind of explanation?"

"I owe you nothing, Donna! I own this company. You are an employee. Are we clear?"

Donna stood. "Oh, we're clear all right!" She threw an envelope in front of Forrest and smirked. "Is that clear enough for you?"

Without opening it, Forrest picked up the envelope and sent it straight through the shredder. He rose from his chair and leaned across the desk. He narrowed his eyes to a tiny slit. "Donna, I will destroy you if you attempt to leave this company!"

Donna's eyebrows rose in disbelief. "And just how do you hope to achieve that Mr. Forrest?"

"Easy! For the duration of your contract, you and your research are the property of Forrest Enterprises!"

Donna laughed. "I guess you didn't know about my contract then. You see, it expired last month, and I don't plan on signing a new one. What a shame you overlooked this. You might have had me over a barrel. You've been buried so deep in Kim Gentry you didn't even think about renewing my contract. Oh well. I'm sure you'll find somebody out there that's willing to kiss your ass, but it won't be me."

"Money is not the only resource at my disposal Donna. If you leave this company now, you leave with nothing, and I will see you in court for breach of contract. In fact, I'm thinking of charging both you and Jared with murder and destruction of property."

Donna laughed. "You arrogant SOB! I'm leaving, and I'm leaving now. For your information, I expected you to do something like this. That's why I mailed your head of personnel copies of the letter you just shredded. You think you can take me to court? Fine – bring it on."

“Donna!” Forrest snapped. “Accidents happen all the time. It would be tragic if any of those ‘accidents’ should befall someone *else* close to you.”

“What in the hell do you mean by that?”

“I’m sure you can figure it out if you try hard enough.”

Donna leaned across the desk and stared daggers at Forrest. “I’m not scared of your money. I’m not scared of your resources, and most of all... I’m not scared of you. You’re just a wrinkly old bag of hot air Forrest.” She jerked the cigar from Forrest’s mouth and stubbed it out in his ashtray. “Furthermore, I asked you not to smoke around me. Now, I’m leaving before I say something I might regret.” Donna turned to leave.

“You’ve already said something you’re going to regret!” Forrest shouted.

She paused briefly. The only response Forrest got from Donna was a turned-up middle finger behind her back, and a slammed door.

## Chapter 2

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John Sherriff drove while Richard sat in the back seat with Donna holding her, trying to comfort her. Donna wasn't thinking clearly. She was still in shock that Jared had left her because she'd kept things from him, but, in fact, he'd kept things from her, as well. She felt sick, every time she thought about Kim and Jared together. She didn't want to believe Forrest.

Richard and John talked and discussed what they planned to do when they got back to Shreveport, but Donna had said precious little, on the two hour journey to Hornbeck. When she came to her senses, the three of them were parked in front of the two-story brick house.

Floods of memories hit Donna like a tidal wave. She swallowed hard, pushing the threatening pain back, trying to remember what Nadine, Jared's mother, had taught her about blocking things out. Donna had been doing that for years, but that was old pain. This was fresh, and despite how things looked on the surface, Donna still felt its sting.

She rested her head against Richard's shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her, resting his cheek on the top of her head. "Pet," he whispered. "Are you going to be OK?" For a few seconds, Donna's eyes glossed, and it looked as if the dam might burst; then like a light, she just shut it off.

She smiled softly and nodded. "I'm fine," she said and walked away from him.

"Donna, wait!" John said. "Stay here with Ricky, until I make sure the house is safe."

"John," she groaned. "Why wouldn't it be safe?"

"That depends on whether or not Forrest was making empty threats."

"John is quick, pet. It doesn't hurt to be safe."

"Fine – here – you'll need this," she said, handing him the front door key.

John made his way through the mass of weeds and bull nettles that had overtaken the front yard. He remembered their sting from years ago; vicious but not as unforgiving as the nettles in the UK. His alert eyes noted that some of the downstairs windows had been broken. He was careful to avoid the shards as he crossed the creaky front porch.

Donna's eyes glossed, again. "I should have come back sooner, but the memories... are too painful," she choked.

"It's remarkable how much a house can go down in – how long has it been?"

"Too long," Donna sighed.

John held the handle and lined the key up with the lock. He froze. With one hand, he cautiously drew his gun from the shoulder holster under his jacket. He turned his head, held his finger to his lips and pointed to the car. Richard took Donna's hand and started pulling her toward the open gate. "What is it?"

"We're getting in the car."

Donna's eyes widened. Her mouth went dry. The memory of her and Jared being chased flashed through her mind. Richard opened the passenger door, put her in and then got behind the wheel. The door locks snapped. He put in his Bluetooth ear bud and tapped it. "What is it John?"

John examined the cracks and imprint of what he guessed to be a pry bar. "The door has been forced open."

Richard and Donna watched him disappear into the old house.

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She held her finger to her lips and pointed. While John was in the front part of the house, they hurried down the attic stairs. Easing the back door to, they ran across the yard to the treeline and crouched behind a thick briar patch. She bit her lip as the woody talons tore into her forearm. "You're bleeding!" he winced.

She frowned. "I'm fine," she forced through her teeth, ignoring the sting as she freed her arm. "I've had far worse

than this.” She jerked her head. They cautiously crawled between the three strands of barbed wire and hopped in the waiting jeep. She reached in the glove box. Keeping an eye on the back of the house, she ripped open the packet with her teeth and wiped the scratch. “Put this over it,” she said.

Pulling a face, he covered the scratch with a Band-Aid and swallowed hard. She softly smiled. He frowned. “What?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. As soon as they’re gone, we’re leaving. We can’t do this again. It’s too risky.”

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A few minutes later, John ducked his head and stepped out from under the porch, beckoning toward the car. “It’s OK,” Richard said. “We can get out now.” He rested a palm at the small of Donna’s back and guided her back through the opened gate. “You didn’t find anything?”

“Nothing but a few mice and some black widows,” John responded.

Donna shivered and rubbed her arm. Avoiding some rotten boards, they cautiously crossed the porch. “This won’t take long,” she said as they stepped through the doorway and approached the stairs. Dust particles danced in the beam of sunlight as she touched the handrail.

Richard squinted his eyes, jerking his folded handkerchief from his shirt pocket. “Achoo!” The sound reverberated through the empty house.

“Gesundheit,” Donna softly smiled. “Dust?”

Richard furrowed his brow and nodded. “Why aren’t you sneezing?” he asked, wiping his twitching nose. “I thought you were allergic to breathing.”

Donna grinned. “My bedroom was at the end of the hall,” she said, motioning with her head as they stepped onto the top floor and approached another door. “I need to go in here first. This was my grandparent’s room.”

She opened the closet door, squealed and jumped back into Richard’s arms. “Guess we still have to work on that phobia,” he grinned.

“I can think of someone who could help with that.”

Richard glared at John. “Get rid of that thing.”

John’s eyebrows shot up. “Me?” He coaxed the brown recluse into an empty jar and closed the lid. “You know... sometimes you abuse your authority, around me.”

Donna suppressed a grin. “Afraid of spiders, John?”

“No – but I don’t keep them as pets. I’ll take this outside and wait for you in the car,” he said, examining the trapped arachnid, through the cloudy pint jar. “Ricky, we need to finish this and get back to Shreveport.”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “I’m not leaving until I’ve been to the cemetery!”

“What do you need out of the closet?” Richard asked. “Incy Wincy might have had a family.”

“The three boxes on the floor.”

“The sealed ones?”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “I don’t know which one, though. After Granny’s funeral, I started boxing things away. I was going to label them and give them to the Salvation Army, but I couldn’t finish. It was too, soon. I never came back to the house.”

Richard peeled off the silver duct tape. “This one looks as if it’s filled with clothes.” He started laying the folded clothes on the bed. “Start going through that one. I’ve already checked for pests. John is right. We need to hurry. What are you looking for?”

“Old photo albums and a tin cracker box my grandmother used to store important documents in.”

“There’s something solid in the bottom of this one.”

“I found the pictures,” Donna commented, thumbing through one of the albums. She came across some pictures of her and Gary, taken when they were children. Her eyes blurred. “I’m looking forward to seeing Gary again,” she mused.

Richard pulled out a tall metal box. “Alpine Cracers?” he prompted.

Donna glanced up. “*Saltine Crackers*,” she smiled. “That’s the one.” She thumbed through a few more pages and frowned, raising an eyebrow. “Some of the pictures are missing,” she murmured.

There was a pop in the loft. Richard started, examining the half-lit room with wary eyes. Donna grinned. “It’s just the house, Richard,” she chuckled. “Haven’t you ever heard wood popping when it cools down?”

“Houses in the UK are made of stone or brick. Apart from a creaking radiator, they don’t make noises. Are we done?”

“Bring those two boxes. If you’re afraid of spirits...” she shook her head, “... go wait in the car with John,” she chuckled.

“No, I’m fine, but I can’t shake the feeling we’re being watched.”

Donna rolled her eyes. “It’s probably just bats, Richard.”

Richard’s eyes widened. “Bats?”



## Chapter 3

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John parked in front of the main gate to Prewitt Chapel Cemetery. They visited the graves of Donna's parents and grandparents. Feeling rather helpless, they watched and listened as she said goodbye to them. Donna still hadn't decided to stay in the UK, but she didn't expect to be back in Louisiana, for a very long time.

Richard and John watched as she walked away from them and stood under a tall magnolia tree at the entrance. "She reminds me of Jared the night he left," John commented.

Richard folded his arms across his chest and watched as she mindlessly tapped a spent blossom with her toe. "Yeah," he sighed. "Strong on the surface, but soft in the centre, like she's totally lost."

"Do you think she'll change?"

"Who knows?" Richard responded. "Maybe she'll be better when we get back to the UK."

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Donna pushed away from the tree and wandered through some of the other grave sites, close to the fence. She couldn't help thinking, how much less she would hurt to lie among the dead. The final solace of the cold ground was an enticing solution. She thought about Sarabeth, Jared's daughter.

Hugging herself, Donna closed her eyes. She could almost feel the little girl's warmth in her arms. She thought about Myra, Jared's sister, and Tom and Nadine, his parents. Lastly, she thought about Jared. It hurt so badly she could barely breathe. Donna could easily have called Arizona home, but not now. She couldn't face Jared, not after what Forrest had told her. And, even if it had all been lies, Jared didn't want her anymore. He'd left her. She had to live with that fact.

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