

# **A Change of Heart**

***By I.Christie***

## **Chapter 1**

Evan looked at the papers the lawyer slid to him. The first page had a newborn's foot prints with birth statistics, the doctor's name, parents and hospital name. Was he supposed to take off his boots and socks and compare? Attached was a picture of a swaddled baby in the arms of a woman he didn't recognize. He leaned forward to look at the two pages without touching them, then leaned back in the comfortable chair, rethinking how he felt about being adopted in the sneaky method the lawyer was presenting it.

His gaze moved to the window a few inches above the lawyer's shoulder. From the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor of Beechum's Business Offices the sky was a pretty pale blue with one flat white cloud partially obscured by the other high rises in the area. Something in his peripheral vision caused him to turn his head slightly. A flock of pigeons rose in unison, flying out of sight in an arc.

"There's also an agreement," the lawyer, John Devlin continued smugly, "that your adopted family signed. It says that there will be no claims by you and the Crowley's against your biological father for any assistance or to his estate and or legal heirs."

"I don't need his help or theirs," Evan said sharply.

Devlin beamed at him as if he got the response he was looking for. A ringing cell phone distracted Devlin. He glanced at the number and flipped opened the cell, holding a finger up to Evan.

Evan stood up to regain his composure, pretending interest in the art work on the shelves as John Devlin listened to his caller. Evan couldn't tell the gender of the caller but it was an excited voice. Devlin just listened, making no sound as the speaker went on. The voice sounded hysterical to Evan's ears, rising up and down.

Evan paused at a porcelain statue without seeing it. He had thought it didn't make any difference at who his real father – sire, sperm donor – anything but parent, was. The two people he had known to be his parents he would never trade for anything in this

world. But on a level he hadn't taken into consideration, it did matter or he wouldn't be feeling so unbalanced with this anger.

How could he feel angry about not being raised in an abusive environment? Where was the hostility coming from? Maybe because the Beechums were pushing their way into his life uninvited, and it was ticking him off. That explanation resettled him.

The Beechums were a good example of what unearned privilege did to a family that acted as if they were above consequences of what they did to others whom they believed were below them. They were mean and cruel to their hired help, and to each other. The more vulnerable you were the more attacks you could expect. Who protected the Beechum's young?

Suddenly, it occurred to him that this agreement Devlin mentioned wasn't included with the birth document. He would show it if he had it. Should he ask to see it? Then he would be sucked into this Beechum game, he thought with contempt. Was his pride at not asking to see the proof going to come back and bite him? What he wanted from this meeting was to see what Beechum's lawyer wanted from him, he reminded himself.

His gaze rested on a bronze statue he knew was worth more money than he made in a year. He was mindful not to touch something that wasn't his. His mother brought him up properly. Evan rubbed his buzz cut irritably, then his bristly chin, taking comfort in the one day's growth.

"It's a Clayton Bru. Go ahead and pick it up." John snapped his cell shut and leaned back in the stuffed leather chair.

A small plaque with title and artist was sitting in front of the statue. Invited, Evan picked up the heavy bronze piece and looked at the base. Carl Bluebaker. He showed the signature to John. "Carl Bluebaker," he read aloud. "Not what the card says."

"A good copy," John said too smoothly. "I can't have the cleaning staff steal something they wouldn't be able to cash in for its true value. It would be a waste of law enforcement time."

This bronze piece was not a copy but a mistake worth more than whatever came afterwards because Clayton Bru made a mistake on the signature and did a recast of the base. Fifteen copies of the incorrect version went out before it was realized. No one that

received the mistake wanted to give up their copies. Clayton Bru was his sculpture persona and Carl Bluebaker was his writer's persona. He was known for his eccentricities, and he had a lot of them, according to the tabloids.

Evan never met John Devlin until today, nor ever had seen a picture of him. Was this really John Devlin, Evan wondered? Even more suspicious, Evan watched his host lean over to the humidior at the right corner of the desk and removed a cigar. He used his knuckle instead of fingertips to open the case. He played with the cigar, stroking it and smelling it, but he didn't light it. Evan continued looking at the rest of the art work, noting they were all expensive pieces. Something wasn't right about this meeting but that's why he was here. He was curious about why the Beechum's representative wanted to speak with him.

"So, is this all you wanted to tell me?" Evan asked.

"The old man doesn't want you to find it out later in life and nose into his business."

Evan laughed humorously. "Old man as in Hal Beechum?" Evan was surprised Beechum's own lawyer that knew every sneaky way through the legal system of getting his boss anything he wanted, would share with a stranger his undignified reference as Old Man and not the obligatory Mr. Beechum. Even his present wife called him Mr. Beechum in front of the hired help, or so the stories went. Working in a half-way house gave him all sorts of information on the doings of the rich and infamous.

"He's thinking about setting up Harland as his next in line. I'm interested in preventing future problems. The less Harland concerns himself with the real world, such as having to appear in court, the better off the Beechum fortune is."

This guy was throwing wild pitches, or was he?

"I love my mother, Linda and father, Marty. They raised me and they're my parents. Harland," he said it with such derision it got lifted eyebrows from Devlin.

"Harland is Marty and Linda's real son," Devlin interrupted, smiling in a nasty way.

"Then it shows you how people like the Beechums should never have been given any kid to raise and I'll continue thanking whatever gods I think of, that I was saved from that fate."

“Harland knows who his real parents are.”

Evan’s eyes opened wide at the flash of insight. Didn’t the position of Beechum leadership call for a blood relative to take over the reins...and good sense? That would put a crimp in Hal’s plans if he was pushing Harland. It didn’t seem plausible since a blood test would prove Harland wasn’t a Beechum. Maybe he was just jerking Harland’s chain or trying to scare someone. It would be just like Hal Beechum to cut the legs out from under anyone that treaded too close to his heels.

“Is he asking me for a blood donation?”

“No.”

“So should I get out the fire hoses and wait for Harland’s visit? Is it still matches and Molotov cocktails?”

“You know a lot about his history.”

Evan snorted. “I grew up here. Harland’s meanness was talked about by everyone in the two counties because the newspapers weren’t going to write about him. Did Beechum ever repay those families Harland burned out because he didn’t like them?”

John studied the cigar he had not lit as if it were art, which to some people a cigar was.

“I didn’t think so,” Evan said. Evan rubbed his short hair again, then catching himself slid his hands in his pockets. “Life is really full of jokes.”

“How’s that?” Devlin asked.

“The baby change occurred because I came out *looking* flawed and Mother and Father had just what Beechum wanted, a perfect looking boy. Only Hal Beechum screwed with Harland’s brain so much, he’s worthless. I’ll bet Harland hasn’t changed – poor impulse control, given to violent outbreaks of temper, threatening people he doesn’t like and destroying other people’s property -- unless he has babysitters. I’ll bet the idea of Harland taking over the Beechum fortune scares everyone.”

“That’s not your concern. Whatever...it turned out best for all,” Devlin said.

Evan looked at him strangely. It was difficult to believe this was the top Beechum lawyer that managed Hal Beechums businesses. “Not for Harland. He’s a tortured soul worse off than the other Beechum boys. The cousins are screwed up too, but not like Harland. I heard he was locked in closets by his nannies and on a few occasions Mr. Hal

Beechum left him in airports when he wasn't agreeable. Harlan did learn from a master." Evan took a deep breath re centering himself. This was annoying to keep getting upset about this business.

"I got the better deal. I don't remember a day I didn't feel loved by my parents even when I told them about my feelings of wanting a sex change. They understood." Evan stared at Devlin, daring him to refute what he was going to say next. "I was born a hermaphrodite and Beechum paid the doctor to make me a girl so I didn't have any chance of challenging his choice of an heir. I know about the Beechum's only appointing male heirs in all positions of power in the family business. If he left it to Mother and Father, they would have let me grow up with both genitalia and let me make up my mind when I was ready to."

"You don't really believe that do you?"

"Yes, even if they did have the money for the operation."

Devlin harrumphed. "This is what I've been asked to impart to you. You have no claim on Beechum's assets. The woman that was your biological mother is dead and left no will. There's nothing here for you. Leave town."

Evan laughed heartily. "I'm not leaving. We're here to run the homeless mission that's not even in Anderson."

"You won't get a job in this town."

That told Evan they obviously didn't hire someone that did good background checks. He had his own business in another name that he ran over the internet. He returned to Huntsville to support his father, Marty, and what did that have to do with anything? Why were they so paranoid? He didn't think all this effort was to stop an embarrassment to the Beechums. Who was his presence threatening?

"It's not like any of the Beechums will see me. None of them would be caught dead at a homeless mission or way station. I noticed the Beechum family and the Greubers are the only founding families that don't have members on the mission's board."

"You work there and he'll dry them out just to get rid of you."

"The reason Father is back is because Beechum Corporation had notified the mission director, who has resigned, and its affiliated bodies, that it wants the mission

closed. Not moved – closed. According to the mission’s lawyer, there is no reason given for the order and Beechum Corporation has no legal or charity interest in the mission. If this is an indication of a change of power in the Beechum Corporation there would have been more substance and less cut throat. It sounds like a crack in the family grip. Maybe the other twenty families of Anderson want the mission to remain.”

“Whatever, it’s not your business,” Devlin returned. Evan felt he scored a point but he wasn’t sure what the game was yet.

Devlin’s cell rang. He glanced at it then back at Evan, “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back. Have a look around, since you like the art work. Great stuff.”

The door closed behind him. Evan pulled out his bandanna and wiped the paper he touched, the bronze statue and anything else he thought he touched. He knew what people like Hal Beechum did to get what he wanted and what John did for Beechum. He always thought a guardian angel or some ancestor watched out for him. Whoever or whatever it was, was telling him to leave now.

It was too weird. Hardly anyone was in the office when he arrived. Why would anyone pay so much money to rent an office and not fill it with workers? Was it because it was lunch time?

There was nothing else John Devlin could tell him. Opening the door with his bandanna he left it ajar as he had found it when he arrived.

Evan passed the receptionist’s desk. It was not the same person that was there when he entered the building, and he noticed she was surprised to see him. She was picking up her phone as he stepped into the elevator. Was she calling the building security? What had he walked into?

In the elevator he peeked in his motorcycle helmet to make sure the digital camcorder was still running. He wanted his entire passage and meeting in the office to be on tape. Trouble befell people that were called into the law offices that handled Beechum business.

*So, my biological mother is dead, he thought. What a coincidence. I wonder how long she lived after my imperfect birth. I’ll look her up on the internet. Can’t hurt to find out just how much is true and how much is blow off.*

The only people he knew as his parents, Marty and Linda, were 60s revolutionaries. They moved out of their hippie phase to run homeless shelters for whatever organization would hire them. The disenfranchised and the borderline society misfits were where Evan learned to be who he was, along with learning survival skills. His youth was not a traumatic struggle with his gender identity. When his mother noticed he wasn't identifying with girls she told him that he was born a hermaphrodite but a doctor decided he would survive better as a girl. When he demanded to know why she didn't stop him, she cried, saying it was the way he was handed to her. He couldn't stop asking her to forgive him for being so harsh.

Living around those whose minds tended to wander outside the box of conventional thinking, was a life saver. It was as Joe said, when he was old enough, he could put things back. Money for his sex change came from a source his mother wouldn't reveal to him but it wasn't important. His parents gave him a party at the completion of the surgery and the people that mattered were there to celebrate his home coming. A month later, Linda was diagnosed with cancer and died too soon after.

Marty was philosophical about her death, but he lost heart to work with the homeless. Losing Linda left him without his safe harbor. The offer from another organization to rescue their shelter from mismanagement and closure gave Marty new life. Now Evan understood why.

When the elevator opened lobby level, Evan was bumped into by a distraught young man. Preoccupied with his own thoughts, Evan didn't recognize who it was until he saw the sleek black limousine parked in front of the building with Beechum painted on the door.

"My changeling," Evan murmured. *He looks different. Must be the hard life of booze and drugs.*

His motorcycle was parked on the side of the building where he didn't have to pay for parking and where the security camera didn't cover. For people with so much money and backroom dealings, there was a reason there was a blind spot in their security. As he fastened his helmet he studied the chauffer that was standing outside of the car chatting with the building security officer. It was not until he was a block away that he noticed in

his rearview mirror Harland running out onto the sidewalk looking up and down the street.

“Don't you worry, changeling, we'll meet sooner or later. Hal will see to that because he's that kind of a dickhead.”

On his motorcycle he focused on his ride, enjoying the change of air around him and the vibration of the road through his body. It was relaxing to him. When he pulled his motorcycle into the mission's garage he was smiling at the prospect of teasing his father about the Beechum's lawyer.

Marty had organized the volunteers into groups they were best able to participate in. Some could work in groups and some couldn't. As long as the guests were sober they could get a shower, clean clothes, a meal, and a bed if they had any space left. Jobs for cash were not always available but many of the vulnerable ones preferred no cash since they would be robbed and beaten for it.

“Evan,” Marty called. He beckoned him over to his desk where he wrote down the names of the guests, which usually were made up on the spot. The homeless didn't go with conventional names unless they tired of creating a new moniker. “Sister Grace called. They need some help with setting out their new vegetable garden. Can you go over now while there's still some light?” On the calendar schedule he could see Reverend Peat penciled in for the evening meal.

“Sure. I'll call and let you know if I'm going to spend the night. Grace's breakfast isn't something I want to miss.” Evan grinned. When he thought of Sister Grace it was her cooking and cut throat backgammon games that came to mind. It also meant that Marty wanted him to stay away while Reverend Peat, Father Bigot to Evan, was coming over to talk about the improvements on the mission since his father took over. The Reverend was married, had a handful of kids, and carried on a private life of rendezvous' with male prostitutes, was the story on the streets. Evan read him the moment his father introduced him as one of the men that hired him. Of the five so-called 'active' members of the mission, only Peat made regular visits to the shelter.

Evan grabbed a sandwich from the stack of tuna fish and cheese squares and went back to his bike. They were small sandwiches because one of the volunteers found it

important to cut off the crust to make croutons for the salads. In two bites it was finished and Evan was back on the road.

Sister Grace was a large African-American woman who took pride that she could out cook anyone. During the summer Edna's Grill had a cook-off once a month where anyone that thought they could out-cook Grace could give it a try. Louisiana heat was her specialty. They served home grown vegetables fresh picked from their backyard garden, and baked their own bread. She was one of the refugees from Katrina that was taken in by her cousin, Janie, an ancient woman that knew anyone just by looking at them through her cataract blind eyes.

Grace took over running Edna's Grill on the corner of 8<sup>th</sup> and Vineyard. It was Edna's Grill when Janie bought it from Chuck whose wife's father inherited it from his mother, Edna. The grill was a historical business in Huntsville.

Janie was short and Sister Grace was tall. Janie these days did the socializing and making sure everyone was happy as well as eating right, whether they had enough money or not.

"Evan, what took you so long?" Janie demanded as the door dinged when he stepped in.

"How did you know it was me? Is it my aftershave?" he asked. "I had business in Anderson. What's the hurry?"

"You're not wearing any aftershave. It's the motorcycle. Every motorcycle has its own sound. I missed you, isn't that enough?" Janie said.

He leaned over to give the petite woman a hug. He held onto her, feeling her frail body as he had his mothers during her last week of life. His hold on her tightened.

"You're thinking too much," Janie told him. She pushed away from him and patted his chest. He didn't know why she liked him. Janie latched onto him like wet on water the first day he stepped into the dinner with his father. People thought they were old friends reuniting instead of strangers just meeting. Father explained Janie and Mother were old friends and evaded any further questions. Janie chatted so readily about everything that Evan wasn't sure if she answered his questions on his mother and her.

"I'm hungry," Evan said.

“Well, you're in the right place then. But don't eat any of that hot stuff. You'll never be able to concentrate on your game,” Janie warned.

“You think she'll put something in my food that would give me the trots?” Evan said it loud enough for the regulars and Grace to hear.

“I can beat you without any tricks,” she announced loudly. “But it doesn't hurt to stack the deck in my favor.”

Evan walked to their table. The board was ready and so were the finger foods. Some of the other tables had gamers playing checkers, chess and Chutes and Ladders. Without being asked, Edna's Grill became a safe place for some of the kids in the neighborhood to congregate. Chess was for the sharks, as Grace called them. There were also crossword puzzles and books. The sheriff's deputies came by often, and not just for the food but to challenge some of the kids to chess. Sheriff Hodge taught most of the kids the game and if you were good, you played him Saturdays when Grace cooked for the grand winner. Huntsville was a mixture of middle class community that had low income residents on three sides and higher income residents on another side.

“Alright, what color?”

“You think I'm one day going to pick white?” Grace asked. She hummed a song as she sat in the same seat she always sat in. She arraigned the chips as if she knew their colors, which she had confided to him that color puts off vibrations and anyone could identify one color from another if they tried.

“Alright then, let's get this massacre going.”

“There are no massacres. I promise,” Evan said.

“You promise!” Grace whooped. “Excuse me.”

Once she finished laying out her chips, Evan placed his.

“You're going to be distracted. Look there. You messed up already.”

Evan was distracted. A limousine passed the grill. *What is a limousine doing in this part of the city?* When he was younger, he remembered that there was a definite line drawn between Anderson and the smaller cities that supported Anderson's citizens.

“That's the big man himself,” Grace told Janie. “He's going to ring that damn bell and expect that young thing to be his Veeeaagra.”

Everyone laughed.

“What big man is that?” Evan asked.

“Hell, you know. Hal Beechum himself. He went and got himself another young thing.”

“You shouldn't be talking like that in front of these kids,” Evan said and rolled the dice.

“These kids live in one and two bedroom houses and see how it's done. Nothing unnatural about it. You think they hide under their blankets?” Janie snorted.

“I'm not talking about something I don't know or want to know about. I'll stick to this game here,” Evan said.

“I do have something for you to work on in the garden,” Grace said as she took her turn.

“What's that?”

“You talked about a tiered garden. Think you can make one for me? I hate bending over for the lettuce.”

“Sure. But you'll need dirt...good dirt. Not that stuff Bill dug up out of his yard.”

“Why not? It's free.” Janie said, then wrinkled her nose. “And it stinks.”

“It has oil in it. It's from his driveway that's been dirt for a long time.”

“He didn't say it was from his driveway.”

“His son is studying landscaping and is doing up his dad's place for his final,” Greg said, as he placed a drink next to Janie's hand. “Right near...”

“I know where it is. I'm not blind you know.”

Everyone smiled.

“How's the mission doing?” Janie asked.

“Seems okay. Father still insists it's just a matter of organizing and being calm in the middle of chaos.”

“I wouldn't trust most of the volunteers there. They go through everything looking for what they like. It would be okay if it was for them, but they go and sell it at a yard sale,” Greg said.

“Everybody is short of change these days,” Grace said. “There's nothing wrong with going back to the barter system.”

“That’s not the only thing some of them are short on. They’re short on sense as well as cents,” Janie said. “Those so-called public officials want to license garage sales. It’s only good for one sale.”

“It won’t go over,” Grace said. “We’ve got our people mobilized to remind them who they should be working for. They said burglars use garage sales to get rid of their loot.”

Janie gave a hoot and the others in the patio laughed.

“What gave them that idea? Did they find some of their stolen property in a sale?” Janie asked.

“More than likely one of their children sold it for drug money,” Greg said.

“Now, now. Let’s not go throwing stones at the weak minded,” Grace said.

“Right. They lost their way because someone stole the sign posts for drug money,” Evan mocked. “We’ve been through this conversation before. Let’s play.”

## *Chapter 2*

Evan followed Grace and Janie home. Grace drove a Dodge Ram that could carry supplies and a second seat in the back that could add helpers to load and unload. It had the grill's name on the side to make sure if the IRS came by they would know the truck was business connected. Grace didn't trust the government especially the IRS after the fiasco in Louisiana where she lost her business and got no compensation because her paperwork was lost in the deluge.

Grace pulled into the driveway of Janie's two bedroom cottage in the older neighborhood of Huntsville. The cottages in the neighborhood were small but the lots were half an acre. Scattered on the property were various fruit trees and vegetable sections which Janie shared with her neighbors and the mission as well used in their restaurant.

Huntsville had been the town the wealthy from Anderson sent their mistresses, children that couldn't support themselves, and favored servants to live. Professionals bought the homes from those that couldn't afford to keep up the mortgages. Favoritism wasn't something all could retire on. Huntsville politicians bowed to those with money and refused to change the zoning for carving up the half acres but did allow future home construction to be on smaller lots. There was no HOA's, Home Owners Association, but there were CC&Rs, Covenant, Conditions and Restrictions, on defining how the property was to be used.

Evan knew the demographics because until seven years old, he spent his youth in one of the cottages, just like Janie's. Everyone knew everyone and looked out for each other as the residents grew older.

It wasn't until they were indoors that Janie surprised Evan. "So, did big Hal finally confess to his paternity?"

Evan nearly choked. "What?" Evan thought it was supposed to be a big secret.

"He's 69 years old today. That's when he was to tell you and that other about the switch."

"Why at 69? How do you know this?"

"I was the nurse for both of you. Your mother agreed to the switch if only when he turned 69 that both of you were told of the switch. You would be about 28."

“Why 69?”

“Your mother's sense of humor. She really knew Hal. He would have killed you if you stayed with him.”

“Well, I'm glad I didn't go with him.” Evan wiped a tear from the corner of his eye that materialized against his will.

“You don't seem surprised,” Grace said.

“Mother must have known she didn't have long to live because she told me about the switch. I can't believe Harland is their birth son. He doesn't look like either Mother or Father,” he said agitated. Then he took a deep breath and calmed down. “Father was nervous that I would be upset. I consider myself very lucky that it turned out the way it did. My life has been full of interesting people that have taught me a lot about being different.”

“I don't know how Beechum could have messed up a kid as bad as he did with Harland. He had two perfect biological parents.” Janie laid a hand over Evans. “Your looks take after your biological mother, Susan Allen. She was too young to have married a man like Hal. She had her own money, you know. It's probably sitting somewhere waiting for you to lay claim to it.” Janie sighed. “Thank god you don't have any of your father's stupid genes. Like you said, Harland didn't take anything from Marty or Linda. The boy doesn't even look like them.” She glanced at him suddenly then away.

He grinned. “Maybe you think they switched the babies again?” Then he frowned. “We're getting too crazy with this. Meanness seems to be run in that family,” Evan said. Then he gave a nervous laugh, remembering where his genetics came from. “Maybe it's a virus.”

“It's the lack of nurturing skills. Hal's mother didn't want to be around her children nor have any family portraits with her children. She spent most of her time entertaining her husband's business associates and traveling. They're old money and not interested in anything below their station in life. They don't see the working class as memorable only as expendable external noise. In the Beechum house the servants use the stairways and passageways behind the rooms that are for them. The cleaning staff is not to be seen. If anyone speaks of the family – they disappear. Not that I think they're killed, they just leave. That was John Devlin's job until he died.”

“John Devlin is dead?” Evan asked. “I saw a John Devlin today. Maybe it's his son?” he added doubtfully.

Janie laughed. “It couldn't be *the* John Devlin unless it was his ghost. John was never married. He was a closet ho-mo-sex-u-al. He was in love with Hal.”

“So who was it that took his place?”

“You don't think it was a ghost? You pinch him?” Janie asked.

“Janie, I'm serious,” Evan said.

“Hal Beechum's been trying out various lawyers for a year now. Hal's not going to trust anyone like he did John. And John was no Devlin.” She snorted. “His father was a Beechum, born on the other side of the blanket. John and Hal were cousins. Corky Makin, the kid you played with for a while, is a Beechum on the other side of the blanket too.”

“Janie, you're quite a local historian,” Evan mocked. He scrunched his face up remembering Corky. Actually, he remembered Corky's mother and she wasn't pretty, when you consider the type of women the Beechum boys liked to bed.

“Corky's mother must have been pretty when she was a teen because she wasn't when I knew her,” Evan said.

“Preston liked to bed the unattractive woman. He always said they would be so appreciative of his attentions; they would do anything for him in bed. She married a young boy in her class and divorced right after the birth of Corky. I think it was just to keep her reputation intact. She's got a lot of character to stay in town and get a job.”

“Do many people know Corky's a Beechum?”

“You only have to look at Corky and then Preston Beechum. If you ever get invited into their living room, big room with the covered porch, you'll see all the family that's considered legit.”

“I've never seen Preston. I heard something about him, but I thought he died in a war or something.”

Janie made a rude noise. “The only war a Beechum will be in is in a battle for the family fortune. They're the types that buy a degree or a rank but spend all their time far from toil or trouble.” She took a sip of water and was quiet for a while, thinking perhaps of things that she would take to her grave.

“He died abroad.” She said it so dryly Evan thought it was a joke. “Your biological mother was a pretty one, until the last year. She started to look ragged where no amount of covering up could hide her unhappiness. She had five miscarriages and then you came along. Hal didn't believe you were his so he had a blood test done. He played around a lot and didn't produce anything outside of you, and believe me, even if it were a girl, he would have laid claim to her. He was that desperate. You see, in order for a Beechum to become the main controlling officer of the Beechum holdings, a DNA test is done to prove his or her father is a Beechum. They aren't testing mitochondrial for matrilineal lineage, you know? They don't care who the mother is. Harland wouldn't pass any blood test but I think Hal realizes Harland isn't going to amount to anything beyond trouble. He's going to have to think of what to do with him so he doesn't lose managing the Beechum funds. Times are hard for everyone now.”

“What did she die of?” Evan asked softly.

“Car accident. Ran into a tree going faster than any sane person would around the curve.”

Evan knew of the curve. He liked riding his motorcycle around it. “Do you think it was suicide?”

“Hard to say. Those two fought whenever they saw each other and it didn't matter if they were in public. She moved out of the big house after the baby switch. She didn't want anything to do with...”

“The changeling,” Evan interjected.

“Marty and Linda left town shortly after she died. You were seven.”

“And now we're back,” Evan said softly. “Did Father know about the 69 year agreement?”

“He was there. But the job offer to run the homeless mission is legitimate.”

“Stranger things have happened. Do you think people are born evil?” Evan asked.

“Sure,” Grace said. “I've met bad people and evil people. There's a difference. With evil people, there is no interest for redemption. Bad people, they just need something or someone to turn them around.”

“I've met bad people,” Evan said. “The problem with them is their redemption is too dependent on them having constant supervision because one little temptation and

without someone there to push them past it, they'll reach out with both hands to go back to being bad.”

“It's the effort that counts,” Janie said.

“Not the end result?” Evan teased.

“How you get there is what it's all about,” Janie said.

“So, what are you asking about evil for?” Grace asked.

“My meeting in the Beechum Building today, was to receive a message that I'm to leave and don't return or else.”

“Ah. That from the changeling or Hal?”

“You like my name for him, huh?” Evan smiled. “It was from the lawyer who was posing as John Devlin, and he said it was from Hal. He didn't tell me anything about the agreement of 69 years. Mother had to have a reason to pick 69 years.”

“Don't let it distract you from this warning. You need to take it seriously.”

“I do. I'm here aren't I?”

“Well, technically, you have left their town. I take it you're staying the night again?”

“Yes. Reverend Bigot is over.”

“Ginny noticed he was sitting in his car watching your building a few nights ago.”

“Is he stalking me?”

“No. Ginny thinks its Karl. He turned 18 and is in the church choir. That boy can't hold a tune if someone drew it and handed it to him.”

“How do you know that if you don't go to that church?” Evan asked.

“I've got ears, you know,” Janie said. “Besides, I have Wednesday brunch at the Women's Mission Volunteers' meeting. It's the only time that I know of when those women in Anderson actually mingle with everyone else without putting their noses up so high they would miss the curb.”

“It's a dog gone wonder none of them have broken an ankle,” Grace said.

“That's what they have chauffeurs for,” Evan said.

“Actually, the only person that uses a chauffeur all the time is Harland. He's terrified of driving himself.”

“Have you met Harland?” Evan asked.

“No. We're not his type of people, thank you Jesus.”

“We would have to be white and stupid rich,” Grace said.

“More money than common sense,” Evan said. “I saw him going into the building I was exiting after speaking with the guy posing as John Devlin. What did John die of?”

“Heart attack. Surprised everyone I'm sure. Who would have known he had a heart,” Janie said.

“I heard Millie say that John was so scared of having heart surgery because someone he and Hal messed up would take that opportunity to do him in,” Grace said.

“Who's the one that had art all over his office?”

“John Devlin,” Janie said. “Jillie said Hal sits in John's office for hours. Who would have known Hal would be so sentimental about John. Jillie is office manager,” Janie explained. “She said it's the only place that's quite so he can get some work done. Only the cleaning crew goes in there and an inventory is taken whenever they leave.”

“For someone that doesn't go anywhere but home and here, you know an awful lot about people in Anderson,” Grace said.

Janie smiled and started to hum a song.

“How come I didn't hear any of that?” Grace asked.

“Because your business is in the back and my business is rubbing elbows with the customers.”

“The guy that talked to me was slim, white haired, about sixty, wore an expensive suit...” Evan pursed his lips thinking about what was so odd about this guy. “It's not that the clothes didn't fit, but...” He shook his head at not being able to figure out just what didn't fit. “The shoulders were a bit loose in the suit.”

“Art Conklin is the only one I can think of who would be in that office. But Art's build is like a wrestler, a fat one. He's come by a few times. I thought to give Janie grief on her business. Those Beechums like to own everything and everybody. Nothing came of the visit.” Grace glanced at Janie with a frown.

“Sounds like someone is setting up for trouble,” Janie said.

“Touch anything in the office,” Grace asked.

“I wiped it before I left. I didn't touch the door handles because the door was already opened when I arrived and when I left I used my bandana.”

“You have good instincts,” Janie said.

“When he invited me to visit at lunch I remembered who I was dealing with and did my due diligence in covering my behind,” Evan said. “I wasn't raised a fool.”

### *Chapter 3*

The two women had a set way of doing things and guests had to adjust, like early to bed and early to rise, and that was before the sun was up. Janie didn't sleep much, and would listen to the television or her books on tape.

Grace got up early because she didn't trust the crew that opened up for breakfast at the grill. Grace believed that working people depended on their coffee and breakfasts to be ready at a certain time; therefore, it was her duty to be sure they weren't disappointed.

"Breakfast will be ready in five minutes," Grace called out.

She and Janie liked to start the morning singing songs. Janie thought happy songs were the way to start the day off and finish it. They didn't limit their songs to church songs. Grace collected musicals and folk songs, keeping both women entertained and their guest. Neither had voices of angels, but they weren't hard on the ears, either.

"Good morning, Sister Grace and Mother Janie," Evan said as he walked into the small kitchen, made smaller with Grace's presence.

"You think this is some kind of convent or heavenly get-together?" snorted Janie.

Evan smiled. "Hm. By the smell of those hot cakes, I would say this is a heavenly place." He glared at Grace, "You're not going to Louisiana them are you?"

Grace always threatened him with spicing up his hotcakes to make them real hotcakes. It was now their standard morning greeting.

"You just sit down and don't tell me how to make my hotcakes."

"Do I get strawberries from your yard or store bought bananas?" Evan asked, taking the dishes Janie handed him and placing them on the table.

"I think you spoiled him, Sister Grace," Janie said.

"Don't forget to put the Louisiana spice bottle on the table," Grace said.

"So what do you have planned for today," Janie asked Evan.

"Well, I have the raised garden box outlined from yesterday. Today I'll put up the boards and then dump the dirt. I'll need you, Janie, to measure how high I need to build three of the tiers," Evan said.

Janie beamed at him. "Aren't you sweet?"

After all, it was not just tall Grace that would be using the planter box. He figured to lay different textures of stones on all four sides so Janie would know by feel what side of the planter she was on.

The phone rang.

“Go ahead and finish off the hotcakes. I think that’s Irma calling for a lift to work. Her car broke down the other day and it needs some fixin’.”

Evan finished up his breakfast and cleaned the dishes. In the backyard, he began to screw together the wooden box frames for the garden. Janie came out once for the measurements and returned to the house to straighten up her room.

Evan heard the door bell ring as he was pouring dirt in the upper boxes. Janie hollered she would get it. A few minutes later he heard Janie wail. He dropped what he was doing and raced through the house to the front room, mentally thinking of the consequences he would hear of the dirt and sawdust he trail he was leaving.

A young man was backing up from Janie’s collapsed form, looking around him frightened.

“What happen?” Evan asked the boy as he knelt next to Janie.

“I... I didn't do anything. Honest.”

“I believe you. What did you tell her?”

“Hal Beechum had a heart attack and is in the hospital. She told me to tell her if he ever went into the hospital. She didn't tell me she would go and fall down dead if I told her.”

Evan looked down at Janie's gray face. He checked his pockets for his cell and didn't find it. The house phone was too far from Janie's side. He was afraid she might do something rash like die if he left her side, even if for a few moments.

“Do you have a cell phone?” he asked the boy.

“Yeah. Course I do.”

“Can I use it?” Evan asked.

“Why? Who you going to call?”

“The fire department. She needs help.”

Janie chose that time to groan awake. “I don’t want no ambulance or to be rescued,” she mumbled. “They charge too much for their services.”

“Then I'm taking you to the emergency,” Evan said.

Janie struggled into a sitting position. “I'm fine. I just had a sugar rush is all. Help me up. We're going to the hospital and see what's going on with Hal Beechum. Jonathan, get me my purse. Go on, you know where I keep it.”

Jonathan left to go look in the dining room.

“I only have a motorcycle, Janie. I don't have money for a taxi. Do you know who we can call?”

“Do you have an extra helmet?”

Evan pictured what would happen if Janie were to get hurt on his motorcycle. The whole town would bundle him up and toss him on a bonfire.

“Jonathan, what's taking you?” Janie demanded.

“I can't find your purse,” he said.

“Well, then we'll just go. Evan's going to drive anyway. Come on. Come on. I know you can move faster than that.”

The front door was closed and locked and Janie had Evan's extra helmet on when he roared out of the driveway and around the corner to head to the hospital. He hoped they wouldn't be recognized by anyone. He would never hear the end of it. His father for one was not happy he rode a motorcycle. Taking his friend Janie for a ride would put lectures of motorcycle riding at the beginning of all their conversations.

Of all the people they passed, it had to be Grace. Grace was stopped at the Stop sign when she saw Evan and Janie on the motorcycle. Her mouth dropped open.

“I think I recognize Grace's car behind us. I'm going to stop and you can get a ride in with her,” Evan shouted at Janie.

“Don't stop! Keep going. I've never had a ride on one of these and I want to get in some time while I'm still alive. Besides, if you stop it's going to take a while to explain to Grace why we're headed to the hospital.”

“Why are we headed to the hospital?”

“Hal was taken to the hospital,” she yelled in his ear.

“So what?” Evan said.

“He hasn't been in a hospital for over twenty years. He hates them.”

So what, he wanted to say again. Instead he said, "I heard he had a heart attack a year ago."

"He has everything he needs at his house including his own personal medic. His butler was trained in Iraq as a medic. The man has money to buy everything but a long healthy life."

"Hold on, Janie," Evan warned as he banked the motorcycle into the hospital parking lot. The bounce brought a whoopee from Janie close to his ear. He was holding onto her arm that was wrapped around his waist, hoping she wouldn't fall off.

Evan assisted Janie off the bike as Grace parked her car in the handicapped spot. She stuck her placard in the window and was standing before the double doors when an ambulance came into the lot. The three stood out of the way of the emergency team, rushing someone in with a sheet and oxygen mask covering their patient. Grace gently pulled Janie over to speak with her.

"So what's the rush to the hospital and what were you doing on the back of a motorcycle? I'll expect a ride soon, Evan."

Evan looked at his motorcycle and then Grace. There was no way she was going to fit on the back of his bike. "I hope not on another rush to the hospital," Evan said. But he was ignored as Grace was focused on Janie.

"You're not looking so good. Is that why the rush?"

"Hal Beechum was taken here. I want to know what's going on," Janie said.

"Show me to the desk. I might know someone there."

Grace stared at her with her mouth open. "You despise the man. Well, maybe that's too strong. But you certainly wouldn't do any favors for him."

"This isn't a favor. I want to know what's happening. I'm sure someone remembers me."

The three went to the admittance desk.

"Hi, Janie. You coming back out of retirement? We could always use the extra help," one of the older nurses said.

"Melody, don't you ever tire of recruiting?" Janie asked.

Evan recognized Melody's face from a regular volunteer at the mission.

Another ambulance came in and the medics rushed someone past them, covered with an oxygen mask. The nurse behind the admin desk rushed to catch up with the gurney as others joined her.

“What’s all that about?” Grace asked.

“Don’t get sidetracked. We need to find out where Hal Beechum is,” Janie said. Since the one person that knew her left for the emergency they had to wait.

“Why?” Grace and Evan asked.

“To prevent someone getting killed.”

“Who?”

“Come on. Follow me,” Janie said. She plowed on down the hall, using her fingertips on the side of the wall to keep her on line and to a private elevator. The two followed her. Janie typed something into the keypad near the elevator door and the door opened. They stepped in after her, the door closed.

"Press the H," Janie said.

The elevator door closed and moved up. They arrived in a less crowded section of the hospital. Janie seemed to know exactly where she was heading. She pushed open the door marked private rooms and headed to where there was one voice screaming, which was clearly not permitted in this section, but there you have it. Beechums always acted like they were above rules that commoners had to follow.

“He doesn’t want to be kept on any life support. You are not to make any special attempts to resuscitate him,” the changeling was screaming. He was two inches from the doctor’s face. The doctor didn’t look intimidated or impressed, which made Harland’s voice go higher.

“I will sue you out of the profession if you don’t follow his wishes.”

“Like you’re looking out for his welfare, Harland,” Janie piped in. “I think not. You threatened him the last time he was sick. What happened to his private doctor?”

“Who the hell are you? Get the hospital guard to toss this...” He stopped when he caught sight of Evan. His lips curled back as if he smelled something too pungent for his taste.

Evan grinned, not taking his eyes off the young man. Seeing him this close, he saw no resemblance to Marty and Linda, causing him to doubt the swap story. That was

comforting to Evan. Would Hal do another switch? Of course he would. He would do it as many times as he could get away with.

“Mr. Beechum has stated that only certain people can visit him if he should ever be in the hospital and your name isn’t on the list. I’m asking you to leave. If you do not, I will call hospital security,” Dr. Fishman informed Harland.

“What about them?”

“Nurse Janie is on the list,” he gave a wink to her when Harland turned to glare at Evan.

“I say call security,” Grace said. “All this waiting is hurting my feet.”

Harland stomped out of the area. When the elevator closed with him on it Dr. Fishman smiled at the three of them.

“Well, Hal Beechum did it this time. He said to call you if he falls into a coma. What’s the plan?”

“Is he on the heart transplant list?”

“Yes. His last lawyer put him on it. Beechum ranted and raved about it and fired the guy but didn’t take his name off of it. His comment was don’t put him at the top of the list.”

“If you have the heart of a kind person that’s the one to give him. They say 60% of heart cells are neural cells. With 60% working on the meanness, I think the kind heart will win out,” Janie said.

“Janie, from what people say about Beechum, he needs more than a heart replacement. He has no soul,” Grace said.

“If you’re looking to change the man,” Evan said, “what you need is a near death experience *and* a change of heart.”

Dr. Fishman shook his head at the three. “I just do the body and leave the soul to those with more skill in that field. So he’s still on the heart transplant list. I’ll keep him in this coma to slow down the damage and we’ll check the heart donor list. I’ll put in an order for a saint’s heart.”

The doctor left the room.

“Why were you put on his special list?” Evan asked.

“Because he knows I have scruples and I know the right people,” Janie said. “Let’s go see who the other person is that they rushed in. It’s tough for a loved one to get sick and not have family around.”

Grace looked at her watch. “I have to check the grill business. The mission volunteers will be coming over for food and coffee. Evan, you stay with Janie and make sure she doesn’t get into trouble, and call your father to let him know you’re okay.”

“How do you know *I* won’t get into trouble?” Evan asked.

“Because you were raised by two angels and you have a good heart.”

Evan watched Grace leave.

“I can feel you twitching. What’s the matter? You want to go play in the dirt?” Janie asked.

Evan was quiet, not really knowing how to respond. “I don’t feel comfortable in a hospital.”

“Well then go on and work on the garden or catch up on some sleep. I heard you tossing and turning most of the night.”

Evan sighed. He did toss and turn most of the night, going over how he was traded and furious with himself that it was bothering him. When his mother first told him he felt such a relief that he wasn’t a Beechum because of how Harland and his cousins were to everyone not in their special clique. It wouldn’t have mattered much since they were from different cities but the rich boys liked to come to the surrounding cities and bully people knowing that if anyone complained their parents would lose their jobs.

Corky was his best bud up until Marty and Linda got another job and moved away. Corky told some weird stories about Harland, never hinting that he was a Beechum, which Evan should have figured because he knew too much and wasn’t afraid to repeat the stories. At the time he thought Corky was making up stories about rich people. It wasn’t until after being around so many homeless people that came from rich homes that he knew they were probably truthful...but it didn’t change his opinion of Harland any.

His thoughts moved to his father, Marty. He loved Marty so much that his heart felt it would burst. He wasn’t a saint. He had his moments of just taking off with a note taped on the refrigerator saying he needed space. Linda never said much of those times.

After her death, he found a box filled with Marty's notes. She saved them. When he showed the box to Marty, he broke down and after crying for a long time, he explained his failings in his responsibilities to Linda and him, but swore it wasn't another woman, it was just the stress and he needed to get away.

Evan wondered if Linda ever had a chance to get away from all her responsibilities. He couldn't remember when she wasn't cooking dinner for him or tucking him in at night after a story.

Now that he knew about Marty's absences, he remembered his return was always with someone that needed crisis counseling so that no one had a chance to ask Marty where he went.

"May you live in interesting times," Janie said.

"That's supposed to be a curse," Evan said dryly, hoping Janie didn't sense his uneasiness.

"It's all how you look at it. Go on home and fix my garden. I have friends here I want to visit. I might even be able to visit the new babies section. You go on and get my garden finished with that nice dirt."

"Dirt is what you got from Bill and soil is what I'm giving you."

"That's a good boy," Janie said as she moved toward the nurses' desk.

## *Chapter 4*

Evan spent the entire day working on the garden project. It helped to keep his mind off of worrying about Harland and Hal Beechum and Janie's connection with Beechum. During a break his worrisome thoughts caught up with him.

Janie defended Hal from Harland. Why was that bothering him? Would Marty tell him if they signed a contract with Hal that he would never ask Hal for help? Would they take it upon themselves to make a decision for him? They let Hal take away his choice of choosing what gender he felt he was.

He threw his troll into the wheelbarrow with so much force, it bounced out onto the walkway and under the hedges. Evan had to get on his hands and knees to retrieve it.

He glanced up to see a black limousine. It was driving by slowly. Evan dug into his pocket for his cell phone and clicked a few digital pictures. One of Janie's neighbors came from their backyard and stared at the car. It suddenly picked up speed and moved off.

The neighbor set up his sprinklers and disappeared behind his house. Evan looked up and down the block, seeing who was home and who wasn't. Harland's past of burning out people that he didn't like was still fresh in his mind. It was hard to believe Harland changed any. Evan blamed Hal for Harland. Should he worry about Janie stepping in front of Harland's interference with the doctor's concern for his patient?

When father said he was coming back to Huntsville, he researched all the names that were involved with the mission, then the citizens that ran the town. Small town politics were intense because there were always secrets that were shared by a few that popped out of the closet at inconvenient times.

Janie had a lot of friends, but would they be able to prevent Harland's type of nasty. Evan stepped across the street to speak with another neighbor that was standing on her porch, watching him.

Evan waved at her and pointed the way the limousine went. "Did you see that limo?" he started.

"Sure did," she said with contempt.

"I'm Evan. My father manages the mission on Eleventh Street."

The elder head bobbed. "I know Marty. I knew Linda too. Sorry about her death."

“I’m helping Janie with her garden and I couldn’t help notice that a limo passed. Does the Beechum limo pass by often?”

“Oh, that wasn’t *the* Beechum limo. There is only one of them and Mr. Harland rides around in that one,” she said mockingly. “Hal Beechum rides around in a Crown Victoria he leases from one of the family car dealerships. I’ve never seen the likes of that limo. Must be new.”

“I’m worried that Harland will do something nasty to Janie. She stood up to him in the hospital today.”

The old woman shook her head. “That’s not anything new. Hal Beechum told Harland to stay away from Janie a long time ago, before she retired. When John was still alive Hal only had to say something once. It gave Hal the idea that he was all powerful and every now and then, had to be reminded he was only a figure head of the Beechum money.” She stared hard at him for a few moments, her eyes weren’t clouded over with cataracts nor did she look as old as Janie. Evan found himself rechecking his summation of her.

“You better be watching yourself. Mr. Harland has been going around with a bodyguard lately. He’s been threatening people like he was already running things.” She smiled looking like she had a secret. “That’s not going to happen in real time.”

Evan took a deep breath and let it out.

“My names Evelyn. Evelyn Galley,” she introduced.

“Evan Crowley.”

She smiled. “This place is like a magnet.”

“Everyone seems to know a lot about Beechum business, considering how private they like to keep it. Are you a Beechum?”

Evelyn laughed. “Me and Susan Allen were best friends. Her family goes back further than the Beechums in setting up a homestead around here. They *were* a cattle family.”

“Most of the land around here was originally cattle and farms,” Evan added to show he was on the same page. Was he? If his biological mother’s name was Susan and this was her best friend, was that why his birth name was Evelyn with a middle initial E and nothing after that? Evan could feel his heart pick up a beat and his face flush.

“Why are you giving me all this information?” Evan asked.

“Hal’s 69<sup>th</sup> birthday. Every Beechum knows the rules.” She gave him a big grin. “Every Beechum you meet will be telling you a thing or two, except Harland. He’s not a Beechum. Better keep an eye on what you consider precious and reconsider what’s really important. Have a nice day.” With that she turned and reentered her house.

Evan looked back down the street where the limo disappeared and then up the street. It was a middle class integrated block. Half the neighbors were retired and half were too young to retire. He could tell which homes were burnt down and rebuilt, though they had to stick to the same type of architecture. Adding rooms was permit able. Adding on helped families who had children return broke and with families of their own.

“How long are you going to be standing there?” a voice asked.

Evan turned to see an old man sitting on his porch. He lived next door to Janie and Grace.

“I was remembering how this neighborhood used to be,” Evan said.

“My father built the first cottage over that way,” he gestured toward the mall where the first cottages were torn down for the parking needed for the mall. It was ironic that the poor that lived in the homes torn down for mall parking were for a mall that only the poor could afford to go to. No one in Anderson would be caught in the poor people’s mall...or that was the talk at the mission.

“Andersonville needed a place for their poor relatives,” he mocked.

Evan thought about what he was not saying. The wealthy families that made the small Anderson community made sure no one below their status could afford to live in their community; however, they soon found that they didn’t have hired help that stayed long since at the time there was mostly open cattle and farmland around Anderson. The farms and later the cattle land was bought out to prevent the smell from the two to overcome those in Anderson. What to do with all that land?

It had to have been an agreement of the top money people to start building homes or apartments with their rules on who could live where. Once the okay for construction was given, their control was lost. Huntsville, Quick, Belleview and Beasley were towns that not only quickly settled but formed their own government and in a round-about way, controlled Anderson. Quick was named after the construction family, and they set aside

land for a water treatment plant that the others utilized. Belleview, the dumpsite turned town, was determined to undo the toxic atmosphere Anderson suffered on it. It was a granddaughter and her husband of one of the cattle ranchers that was forced to sell their land to the Anderson arm twisters that did most of the work to turn Belleview into a model city of green living before it was the in-thing.

Anderson paid dearly for their electricity, water and services that came from the surrounding towns that they held in disdain.

“You ever put together a tiered garden?” The old man’s voice brought Evan back to the present. Lately his thoughts were wandering too much.

“Yes. One. It collapsed when the kids thought it was a mountain to climb,” Evan said.

“Yep. You have to teach the young ones otherwise how are they going to know the rules? Did you get them to help you fix it? That’s the way to teach them responsibility and consequences.”

“They were homeless kids. They weren’t in one place long enough to learn consequences. So are you related to any of the Andersonville people?”

“Hell no! My folks were skilled labor. I stayed on because the place is paid for and I have my retirement funds. Have a nice day.” He nodded to Evan and went inside his house with his newspaper.

## Chapter 5

Evan stopped off at the apartment he shared with his father to clean up. He intended to be at the mission to help serve dinner and look in on his father. This business with the Beechums was getting him nervous about Marty's welfare as well as Janie's. It occurred to him he was becoming a worry-wart. When he called Janie to check up on her, she had nothing to say about her visit to the hospital and was only interested in the progress of the garden. Grace was too busy with the dinner crowd to carry on any lengthy conversation and just wanted to know if he was coming over later. He said no. His plans were to have a private conversation with his father and knew it would be emotionally exhausting for both of them.

Beechums, he thought disgustedly. He didn't want to be part of their family and here it was, right in his face.

As he rode into the mission parking lot he noticed there was no one milling about the building or lot. That was unusual. Not wanting to panic, but feeling a sense of dread he yanked open the door to the reception area.

"Where is everyone?" he asked Becky, the one person that peered around the corner.

"A pick up at a warehouse. We needed every able bodied hand and you know how everyone wants to go, just to be there."

"What warehouse? Beechums?" he asked suspiciously.

"Hell no," she snorted. "They've been long out of that business. It's in Quick. Johnson's Five and Dime went out of business a couple of years ago and the inventory was moved into a warehouse. The family has been fighting over his bones for years. They all challenged the will."

"So Dad's over there?"

"Yep. The judge said he's going to honor the will and the mission gets first pick through the store stuff. Whatever we can carry out. Just like the saying, shop till you drop. Are you going to help setup for the dinner crowd?"

"That's why I'm here." The phone rang. "Do you want me to get the phone?"

"I'll get it. If it's one of the regulars asking for a lift, they might hang up if they hear your voice instead of mine."

“All right. I’ll start the sandwiches.” Evan headed to the kitchen. Preparing meals was a routine chore for him. He had served time on all levels of running a mission before he reached sixteen.

It was odd to be working alone but the silence was nice. Usually there wasn’t much physical space but what you imagined, because almost everyone wanted to prepare the food since they ate and prepared if the supervisor, another homeless person, didn’t say anything. He was on his second loaf when he thought to check on what was keeping the usual crowd from clamoring for something to eat in the hall.

Peering into the hall he was startled to see that it was empty. Alarmed, Evan began to feel that nervous flutter in the pit of his stomach. The atmosphere was all wrong. Cautiously, he moved through the rooms, looking for anyone.

Suddenly, he was grabbed and tossed to the ground. His head bounced on the hard floor, stunning him. His arms were twisted behind him and cuffs clicked tight, pinching his skin. He was dragged to his feet but his mind was frozen. He wasn’t sure what was happening. He heard someone shout his name but his thoughts were fuzzy. He was dragged to a patrol car and stuffed inside. He could feel something dripping over his mouth.

## ***Chapter 6***

A doctor was paged over a PA system.

“If it’s Wednesday, he’s probably playing golf,” Evan mumbled.

“No, I’m right here,” a woman’s voice above him answered. “Looks like we can let you go this afternoon if you follow my orders.”

“Will I be feeling better?” Evan asked. He squinted to see who he was speaking to.

“I don’t know.” The woman turned slightly to look at someone that just entered the room. “Hello Janie. I thought you were going home?”

“I did. Now I’m back to see if he’s going to be released.”

“Yes. If I release him to you, all he has to do is sign papers and then he’s free...provided he doesn’t drive for two days. If you have any questions, call my number. I have to take a call.”

The doctor left. Evan blinked a few times to clear the blur.

Janie and Grace appeared above him.

“Evan, do you remember what happened?” Grace asked.

“This is getting dangerous for you,” Janie said.

“I’m not going to let him run me out of town, Janie” Evan mumbled.

“Who?” a deep voice asked.

“Hello, Sherriff Hodge,” Janie said.

“Hello, Janie. Who is running you out of town?”

Sherriff Hodge looked like a giant to Evan. Lying flat on his back he felt vulnerable. Suddenly, his bed began to rise. He remembered some of the night in flashes. A sore face and a big bump on his head, which meant they wanted him to stay overnight. He was lucky his abduction was halted.

“He’s on drugs so he’s not up to be questioned for the record,” Janie said.

“Last night you said he was too drugged for talking. Now, tell me who,” Hodge said firmly.

“The Beechums,” Grace and Janie said.

“There’s a lot of Beechums, including from the other side of the blanket. So which one?” His stare at Evan made him nervous and now that he wasn’t lying flat, he realized Sheriff Hodges was a tall man.

“I don’t know who exactly,” Evan said. “Who sent those guys to rough me up?”

“I don’t rightly know. Hal Beechum was the figurehead of the family and now he’s in the hospital in a medical induced comma that everyone knows about. Harland lives on a fixed income and without Hal advancing him funds, he’s staying close to home. Do you happen to know why the Beechums would target you?”

“No,” Evan said.

“You know how they are, Sheriff. They insist on hiding an elephant under a rug and anyone that points out that there’s an elephant under the rug...”

“What elephant is that?” the sheriff asked.

“It’s a herd of elephants,” Janie said. “What difference does it make? They have no business filing a false report on someone and sending out their guns...”

“Whoa!” Sheriff Hodge said. Janie carried a lot of energy in her accusation. Hodge turned to Evan. “So, do you have something to say?”

“If I knew who sent them after me, I would find a lawyer to take them to court.”

“Not shoot them?”

“I’m not going to jail for the likes of them,” he responded angrily. “Embarrassing them would work better. When I get out of here will I get arrested again?”

“Not unless I get something official from a local judge or a valid complaint. We’re quite familiar with the residents of Anderson filling out false complaints against their hired help or mistresses.”

“If they’ve accused me of stealing something, they’ll put it among my things,” Evan said.

“They already have. However, no fingerprints were found on it, and it was in a locker that has no lock on it and could be accessed by anyone at the mission. I like more solid evidence before I arrest someone. If you have anything else to bring up, let me know.”

After the sheriff had left and they were sure he was out of hearing Janie gave a heavy sigh. “Those Beechums are so stupid they need to stop breeding...you excluded,”

Janie said. "I think Edgar is making these decisions but he really needs to stop this. His wife, Laura is out of the country and usually she keeps him from doing stupid things. She's a fourth cousin of the Beechums. Thank god they have no children."

"Are you saying he's taken over handling the Beechums' business?" Grace asked. "Even I know the man isn't qualified to give orders. He and his latest bedmate came by other day. Jenny had him order her something from the grill. She was showing off her new trophy. She's not wrapped too tightly if she thinks he's a trophy catch."

"So do want to get out of here?"

"Where's Marty?" he said.

"He's fine. He stayed at the warehouse to make sure no one sneaks in to remove things. He and Bill set up a tent and are standing guard," Janie said. "He doesn't know you're in the hospital. You know how he feels about cell phones and public pay phones. We'll stop by and see him if you want."

"No, he'll just worry it to death." Evan slid out of bed and made a careful walk to a plastic bag that was sitting on a chair.

"We brought clean clothes," Grace said. She scooped up the plastic bag and handed him a brown bag. "We don't have underwear. You'll have to go commando for a bit."

"I just want to get out of here. My face hurts like hell and my side... The doctor would have told me if I had a broken rib, wouldn't he?"

"Bruised rib. Come on. You're staying with us until Marty gets back."

"Go on out and let me dress in private," Evan said.

Evan was pulling on his pants with difficulty when the hairs at the back of his neck stood up. Looking up he found Harland staring at him with hate.

"There's nothing better than a family reunion. Don't you think?" Harland said.

"We aren't family and if you don't get away from me, I'm going to call the sheriff." Evan could have kicked himself because his voice wavered.

"What's wrong? Scared of me?" Harland taunted.

"Yeah." Evan wanted to tell him he was a psycho but decided it would be like adding fuel to fire.

"Get out of town," Harland said.

“Anderson isn’t a place I plan on visiting alone.”

“I don’t want to see you around here either.”

“I’m leaving right now,” Evan said.

“And don’t come back,” Harland said.

“I sure hope I don’t. I can skip hospital visits.”

Harland looked uncertain. Maybe it was dawning on him that Evan was mocking him.

“Go on back to L.A.”

“Or maybe to another town or city,” Evan said. He had fastened his trousers and hoped the zipper wouldn’t pull any hairs.

The plastic bag with his clothes, Grace had taken, so there wasn’t any other belongings to take. Evan gestured for Harland to leave first. Harland looked uncertain, but he did leave.

A wheelchair with Grace pushing it was wheeled up to the room. Harland had moved up the hall heading to the elevators.

“What did he want?” Grace demanded.

“He had a wish list which he shared with me,” Evan sat in the chair gratefully. He was tired from that confrontation.

“What did you tell him?”

“Most everything he wanted to hear. Do you think he’s on his way to visit Hal?”

“Not a chance. Too many people watching out for Hal. Though, how did he even get in here? Janie is going to be speaking harshly to some people.” Grace gave a push and the wheelchair began its progress down the hall. Faces that Evan knew heard Harland didn’t pay him any attention as they went down the hall. He decided that coming back to this hospital wouldn’t be a good idea. Harland had some influence here.

## ***Chapter 7***

“Janie, no one at the mission has heard from Father or Bill Wheaton. I want to take a ride out there and see if they’re alright.” Evan folded up his cell phone with a snap. It was two days since he had been in the hospital and he was only getting bits of messages from Marty.

“Wait until Grace comes back. We’ll all drive down there.” Janie was sounding tired.

“Colton will drive me.” Evan didn’t want Janie to stress herself any more. She had been visiting the hospital for long hours, according to Jules, the morning cook.

“He doesn’t have a car. You had a concussion two days ago. Wait until...”

“What’s going on? I leave for twenty minutes and you two are arguing?” Grace said. “What about?”

“I haven’t heard from Father. I want to go and see what’s happening at the warehouse,” Evan said.

“I just passed him. He and Bill are heading to your apartment. They both looked tired,” Grace said.

“Then that’s where I’m heading.” Evan let a long breath of air out.

“That your bike out there?” Grace asked.

“Yeah. I asked Johnnie to drop it off.”

“Evan! You don’t go riding a motorcycle days after a concussion, especially with someone gunning for you,” Janie said.

“It’s my only mode of transportation and I’ll be fine. No double vision, dizzy spells or headache. Just my face hurts. And if I was going to Quick, Colton would have driven and I would be on the back. He has his own helmet.”

“That’s because he crashed his own bike and only has his helmet left. You look like you had a nasty fight,” Grace said.

Evan leaned over and kissed Janie on the cheek and then Grace. “You two are the next best thing to a mother.”

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Evan could hear Marty snoring from his room. It sounded like he was exhausted. Evan felt exhausted. He pushed open the door to reassure himself Marty was okay and found himself staring at Bill stretched out on Marty's bed.

Evan closed the door and went looking through the two bedroom apartment for Marty. He wasn't in the apartment. Evan went down to the laundry room. Marty was on the floor slumped against the dryer.

"Father! Marty!" Evan pulled out his cell with trembling fingers speed dialed the fire department.

Hours later Evan was still in shock, sitting in the waiting room, waiting for something. He hadn't spoken to anyone nor noticed if anyone had approached him. His heart was breaking and there didn't seem to be an end to the pain. Marty and he had helped each other through his mother's death but now, and so soon afterward, he was facing Marty's death alone. Fresh tears and sobs came out.

Eventually, he felt arms tighten around him and pull him close.

"So touching," Harland's voice mocked. He turned and left, snickering.

"When you pass, everyone will be cheering," Nurse Marcy mumbled. "I just need you to sign this last sheet, Evan."

Grace who was holding Evan reached for it and put it on his lap. Evan signed it and let Grace guide him out of the hospital.

"I want you to stay with us for a while," Janie said. Her arm looped into Evan's.

## ***Chapter 9***

*A year later*

Evan looked up from the rows of carrots he was weeding for Janie, into the face of an old man he recognized. Behind him, at the gate stood a man dressed in a gray suit and beyond him was a silver Town Car. His attention returned to the old man the resurrected Hal Beechum with Marty's heart. His own heart hurt at that thought.

For a year he had been thinking a lot of the Chinese curse, To live in interesting times. He hadn't left Huntsville because Janie and Grace put some kind of spell on him, he decided. If he spoke at all it was few words with Janie and Grace, to be polite. He occupied himself in gardening, long motorcycle rides, games with Grace, and his internet business. Who Marty's other organs went to, he didn't care. It took a lot of soul searching and talks with Grace and Janie to get past that. The E Street Mission was closed for the construction of offices. A new mission was opened in a building once a church with a new name, the Marty and Linda Crowley Mission. He wasn't the least bit interested.

"Evan," Hal said. His voice sounded stronger than he looked.

"Mr. Beechum," Evan returned tersely.

"I wanted to..."

Evan's eyes hardened as he anticipated what he was going to say.

"...offer my condolences and a thank you. And I'd like to start over."

"Start what over?"

"I'd like to get to know you. You *are* my son."

"You're not my father." Evan choked on that. Hal had Marty's heart. He had the best part of Marty.

"I made a lot of decisions and most I don't regret. I don't regret switching babies. You turned out all right so you can't object to that."

Evan didn't hear any more of what Hal Beechum said. He bowed his head, using all his energy to control his temper. When he looked up Hal and his transportation were gone.

Evan got up and brushed his pants off. He went to close the gate.

"What was he doing here?" Janie demanded.

Evan turned toward Janie. Janie had good ears.

“Nothing.”

“You son-of-a bitch!”

Evan was already moving out of the way from a shadow he caught in his peripheral vision. The blow was glancing but the bat hurt. Evan stumbled and rolled on his back, lifting his feet to kick at his attacker. The bat hit his ankle with a crack.

Boom!

The bat attack stopped. Evan rolled onto his side and found he wasn't able to put any weight on his ankle.

“That boy is damn crazy!” Janie shouted furious. Janie's fingers touched his leg and ran down to his ankle. “What did he hit you with? Your ankle is broken.”

“A bat. Gods be damned, but it hurts,” he groaned.

“What's going on?” Grace demanded. “What's that boy doing attacking you. Is he demented?”

“Grace, we need to take Evan to emergency. His ankle is broken.”

“That crazy boy.”

Evan closed his eyes and tried to get a handle on the pain. When he worked among the homeless, sometimes sprains turned into broken bones, taking the homeless person by surprise. He or she had been walking on the leg for weeks or using a broken arm or wrist for a while until someone at the mission or shelter noticed something wasn't right. It hurt like hell, he thought. How could they ignore a broken bone?

A siren got louder and then suddenly stopped. Evan opened his eyes when the gate swung open.

“I hope the other guy looks worse than you,” the paramedic said.

“Do you have an aspirin?” Evan asked.

A uniformed deputy was taking notes. He wanted to know where the boom came from, not who attacked Evan. No one admitted to anything. Truth be told, one of the neighbors had a miniature cannon and when he saw Mr. Beechum at Janie's he got his cannon ready to let the neighborhood watch know there was trouble. Then Harland arrived up. It was time for cannon fire.

The paramedics lifted Evan on a gurney and delivered him to the hospital. By the time he was settled in a bed for overnight observation, his head ache was a dull throb like his ankle. He felt lucky the bat that glanced off his shoulder didn't break his collar bone. His face was damaged when he hit the ground.

Janie and Grace left with Janie leaving strict instructions with the staff on who could visit and who couldn't. Though most of the staff didn't know Janie, they heard stories of Head Nurse Janie Jackson.

The sleeping pills weren't strong enough to let him sleep dreamless nor to prevent him from waking often. At 2AM he finally gave up and after a visit to the toilet he found his clothes and put them on rather than get caught with the hospital gown that opened in the back. He hobbled out of his room looking for something to read. He was hoping he wouldn't be stopped by the night crew. He peered around the corner and could see the nurses were at the station writing up their shift turnover reports and getting ready for the next shift.

In the waiting room which was empty, there were vending machines but he couldn't find any change in his pockets. The only relief was his escape from the hospital bed, though for a short time. He was now feeling tired enough to sleep.

He stopped when he recognized Hal along with his chauffer in the hall. Evan was curious what he was doing here. Hal's last visit didn't end well. Hal spotted Evan and continued toward him.

"Are you coming or going?" Hal asked him.

"I couldn't sleep so I took a walk. Why are you here? It's after hours."

"I paid for most of this hospital so I have visiting privileges whenever I want. How are you feeling?"

"Like I was hit with a baseball bat."

"I heard it was Harland," Hal said.

"You read the police report," Evan said.

"I've cut Harland off. He's on his own."

"What do you want?" Evan asked impatiently.

"I want to get to know you."

"I don't want you in my life. All you bring is trouble." His voice lost strength at the word 'trouble'.

"Harland is a product of his genes. He was mean all his life. It had nothing to do with how he was raised," Hal said.

"Are you blaming Harland's meanness, on Marty and Linda?"

Hal hesitated.

"He's not their child either, is he?" Evan asked softly. He laughed and awkwardly slid onto his bed.

"You *are* my child," Hal said instead.

"I don't care about you. I don't care about the Beechums. I cared about my parents, Marty and Linda. To me, both my parents are dead physically but not here," he touched his heart and could feel tears spilling over his cheeks. His heart ached.

"When you're feeling better, we'll talk some more." Hal turned and left.

Evan closed his eyes, frustrated that he was stuck where he was until the doctor released him. Because of the ankle injury he was going to have to have surgery. The bat did more damage than a simple broken bone. Since he owned his own business he had insurance so he wasn't too worried about the cost.

"Are you sleeping?" Grace asked in disbelief.

Evan's eyes popped open. It was daylight. "No." He struggled to sit up, and grimaced as bruises and broken ankle twitched. "How long do I have to stay in here?"

"Surgery is tomorrow. You have one day recovery and then you're home with us. We're going to have to add a room at this rate," Janie said.

"Or I should just buy Mr. Oliver's house," Evan said. "He keeps saying he wants to sell."

"Too much fixing needs to be done on his place. Take a good look at it. He's never done any maintenance," Grace said.

"Then I should get a good deal."

"If you look close at the wood, you'll see its being eaten. He's got bugs in that house."

"If you don't want me living next door, say so." Evan said.

“I don’t want you to buy Mr. Oliver’s house,” Grace said. “The only thing holding it together is paint. Besides, he’s been saying he’s selling for years and never has done anything about it.”

“I’m not right in mind,” Evan said exasperated. “I don’t want to buy any house. I want to just get on my bike and ride off into the sunset.”

“You’re not getting on any bike for a while,” Janie said.

“Get that romantic idea out of your mind that you can travel from one place to another. How are you going to afford to feed yourself and your bike,” Grace asked.

“All I need is a netbook and a wireless connection to run my business.”

“I think you need to straighten this mess out with Beechums or you’re going to be running around with unfinished business,” Janie said.

“Just what mess is that?”

“Hal, for one.”

“I don’t have any business with him, Janie. He made that clear when he gave me away...when he castrated me.”

“There, you see. You need to settle that,” Janie said.

Evan glared at Janie.

Grace rolled her eyes dramatically before adding her opinion. “She does have a point there, Evan. A father castrating his new born son is sick and would mess up any boy’s mind.”

“I’ve dealt with it,” Evan said firmly. “I’ve spent enough time reading historic novels with castration running through the story line that I can be deemed a specialist in all the different scenarios that can evolve with the main characters. I’ve done my time in therapy...going through a therapist a month until I decided it was a waste of time and money to work out a problem they couldn’t even understand. I’m not a teaching tool.”

Janie rested her hand on the bed near his hand.

“Hermaphroditism, Evan, is not like having multiple personalities, where you can just say it and people find a nice neat label with social queues to hide behind. When parents are confronted with the physical reality, they have no skills for how to handle it. Medical decisions are made with or without parent written permission. Hell is paid in the future when they chose the wrong gender. It happens. Obtaining a legal sex revision on a

birth certificate isn't a smooth process nor will it erase the feeling of being wronged. You need to accept yourself as you are, then decide if you want to spend the rest of your life using up energy to dwell on the past decisions."

"I've accepted myself as I am. I don't dwell on the past. I have a problem with people that keep pushing me into Beechum business. I am not a Beechum!" he finished angrily.

"Is that all?" Grace asked.

Evan slapped his hands on the sides of the bed and regretted it. He squeezed his eyes shut but the tears leaked out anyway.

"Blazes but that hurts," he mumbled.

"Before you go ridding off into the sunset," Janie started. She slipped her hands into Evan's. "Visit your birth mother's grave and meet with the executor of her estate, Carl Greenwood. You can't turn your back on something you don't know enough about. Believe me when I say, it will come back and bite you...just like the Beechum business."

"You're going to be in a world of hurt anyway, so you might as well make the most of it," Grace said.

Evan glared at the two women suspiciously.

"Are you afraid that if you get to know who your birth mother is that your love for Linda will lessen?" Janie asked.

"Of course not! Linda is my mother."

"So..."

The three were quiet as if to let the tense energy dissipate.

"We'll have to continue with this discussion after your surgery," Janie said.

Evan took a breath to tell her that he wasn't going to change his mind when Janie held up her hand.

"Right now, I think you're making a decision without giving this much thought to other alternatives."

"All right," Evan agreed, feeling too tired to continue this emotionally exhausting conversation. He really hadn't thought much of where he would move to. He had an apartment but it was only to leave his change of clothes and little else there. The Crowley's always traveled light due to their line of work of managing homeless shelters.

His parents didn't own a vehicle but drove whatever their employer made available. It saved on insurance and car maintenance costs. When it was time to move on, they took a bus. When he was old enough to buy his motorcycle, he traveled on his bike to the new job location, looking over the place and making the living arrangements. The Crowley's were modern nomads. Whatever material possessions they had that were too large to fit in a suitcase were shared with the mission or homeless shelter they were leaving behind, making it easier to move to a new assignment.

Evan was proud of his family.

## Chapter 10

Evan leaned heavily on the cane, cursing silently from the pain that traveled up his leg and to his groin. He waited it out then moved on to the steps. He was bored and tried to take a walk around the block and only got as far as the second house before realizing he would be lucky to get back to the porch before his leg gave out.

He heard a car pull up behind him. He ignored it until he reached the top of the stairs, then turned to see who it was.

Sheriff Hodge stepped out of an unmarked sheriff's car. He walked around the car, not taking his eyes off Evan. Evan wondered what was so interesting.

"Hello, Sheriff Hodge."

"Hello, Evan. Do you have time for a conversation?"

Evan gestured at his leg that was wrapped from heel to knee. "I can't go anywhere and it's not because I haven't tried."

Janie opened the screen door. "Do you two want ice tea out here?"

"No, ma'am," Sheriff Hodge said. "I would rather not have our conversation overheard. It might be misconstrued."

"Then come-on in and you can bring the pitcher to the table," Janie said.

Sheriff Hodge did all the work since Janie insisted on settling Evan on the couch with his leg propped up.

"You're not to put weight on it. It's too soon," Janie insisted while dropping a pillow in Evan's lap. "You complain that we're over protecting you, but you keep doing things that aren't going to help in your recovery."

Evan remained silent because he lost that argument before he opened his mouth.

When everyone had settled with their ice tea, Sheriff Hodge pulled a notebook from his pocket.

"I'm here to take information about this attack on you. Before you say anything, I want to tell you why I want you to pursue taking this to legal action. Harland has been out of control since grade school. No one brought complaints against him because he had money getting him out of the consequences. Now his father is no longer interested in pulling him out of his messes and yet, he still goes on. Before his father changes his

mind, I want to put him where he belongs, away from normal society. I don't know if he'll end up in a mental institution or prison, but I want him locked up somewhere."

"Haven't you filed a complaint, yet?" Janie demanded.

"When have I had time or transportation?" Evan said. He didn't want to admit he was afraid of what Harland would do. After his run in with the police from Anderson, he didn't want to be grabbed when it didn't take much to cause a lot of pain to his ankle.

"That's why I'm here," Sheriff Hodge said. "If you're worried about those boys from Anderson, they've been muzzled by Mr. Beechum. I don't think they'll be doing anything toward you without talking to their master, first. So tell me starting with your first contact today with the Beechum's."

"Hal Beechum and a guy in a gray suit, stopped by to speak with me. It was polite. I told him I wasn't interested in getting to know him. He left. Janie came out and it was then that Harland came through the gate swinging a bat at me. His first hit was to my shoulder and I fell off balance. He swung again and busted my ankle. Then Grace came out and Harland took off."

"What can you tell me, Janie?" Sherriff Hodge asked.

"I heard Hal Beechum's voice. When I got to the backyard to see what he was doing here, I heard Harland cursing and then crack! Then Evan cried out. You can ask Grace too, because she came running out of the house behind me."

"Is Grace here now?"

"No. She's at the Grill."

"I'll stop at the Grill after here, then. Can you tell me what Harland's attack on you was about?"

"I'm only guessing, but I think Harland took issue with Mr. Beechum's wanting to get to know me."

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't ask Mr. Beechum what he meant. I said I'm not interested in getting to know the Beechums. He left."

"Word has it that you're a Beechum," Sheriff Hodge said.

"Word has it that Harland is a changeling. He was discovered under a rock, abandoned by a creature not of this planet. Sheriff, you can't believe everything you hear.

To me, Lynda and Marty Crowley are my parents. And I couldn't..." a sob took Evan by surprise. "I couldn't be prouder to be their child." Evan started to sob. Grief took him by surprise and he was upset that Sherriff Hodge witnessed his breakdown.

"Is that all you need, Sherriff?" Janie asked.

"I need Evan to sign a statement that Harland is responsible for your injuries."

"The doctor doesn't want him moving around and though he doesn't listen, going to the sheriff's station is too far with his leg as it is. It's all swollen up just from that ill-advised stroll," she said.

"I can see that. I'll bring the report to you after I have it typed up. By-the-way, the deputy that arrived with the paramedics, did he take a statement from you or anyone else?"

"I don't know. He seemed more interested in who shot off the cannon."

"You mean Mr. Reed' neighborhood watch alarm?" Sheriff Hodge's asked.

"That's the one. That's probably what scared Harland away. The neighbors that were home showed up to see what was up."

"Thank, you both. One more thing. Do you believe your lives are in danger from Harland?"

"Yes," Janie said firmly.

"Yes, Janie and Grace." Evan looked at Janie. "I need to move from here."

"Whether you leave or not, he'll burn us out."

Sheriff Hodge sighed. "I was afraid you would say that. I don't have enough staff to give you round the clock protection. That's why neighborhood watch is so important. If you have the money, hire a bodyguard. You have some influence on Mr. Beechum, tap him for the money."

Evan grinned at that, thinking of his private meeting with someone's henchman giving him a dire warning not to ask for help from Mr. Beechum.

"Thank you for following up, Sheriff Hodge," Janie said. "We'll be sure to keep an eye out for any strangers."

When he left Evan was prevented from rising from his chair by a hand on his shoulder.

"You aren't to do anything. This is where everyone that has a score to settle with Harland will do it. If Harland dies from any of this, you'll be the primary suspect."

"Well it's not like I can go anywhere," Evan said.

"No phone calls. Nothing," Janie warned. "Don't trust anyone. Money changes alliances and when it comes to Beechum politics, they're all crazy."

Evan took a deep breath. "I remember. I'll remember." He looked at Janie. "I should just leave."

"You need to finish this business. Find your roots. Go on the internet and start a search on your genealogy. You can't keep running." Janie gave him a stern look. "You have your mother's business to take care of, your birth mother. If you feel twitchy, look up her lawyer and take care of that."

"I don't suppose you know who her lawyer is?" he said exasperated.

"Colt, Benjamin and McCoy. Same as Linda and Marty's."

"It all sounds so incestuous," Evan grouched.

"There. You're feeling better already. I'm going to listen to the rest of my book. Don't get into any more trouble. I won't hear it."

From his pocket Evan pulled out his cell phone and hit his auto-dialer.

*"Colt, Benjamin, McCoy and Booker's Law Offices,"* a chipper voice answered.

Evan smiled as he imagined Jenny sitting dressed very professionally and minus her piercings which once out of the office were reattached to her ears and lip.

"Hi, Jenny. This is Evan Crowley."

*"Mr. Crowley, where can I direct your call?"*

"To the late Susan Allen Beechum's lawyer."

*"Hold on and I'll find who that is, Mr. Crowley."*

After a slight pause another voice came on the line, getting right down to business.

*"This is Arthur Colt, Jr, Mr. Crowley. My father was the original lawyer to Susan Allen and when he retired I took over his accounts. Will you be coming in to discuss her will?"*

"I won't be going anywhere for a while. I'm immobilized with an ankle injury. Do you make house calls?"

*"I have an hour slot at noon with lunch behind it today. If you supply lunch we should be able to get most of the business taken care of."*

"That was fast," Evan said.

*"It's business we would like to clear up. Unfinished business is like a half-eaten baloney sandwich that doesn't go anywhere until it's taken care of."*

"All right. My address..." he began but Arthur junior rattled it off. Of course he would know since his firm took care of Marty's meager estate and Linda's before that.

After he hung up he called the grill. "This is Evan. I've invited Arthur Colt, the lawyer over for some business at noon. Do you think you can rustle up something and have one of your messengers deliver it?" Evan laughed. "And don't forget something for my baby sitter." If he ever called for a home delivery he tipped well whoever delivered. Normally he didn't like to carry cash since the credit card receipts he used for his tax right offs, but since he was laid up, cash was an easier since no one making home deliveries carried a credit card swipe.

The food delivery came first and Giorgio and Maria delivered. It was Maria's car. They let themselves in and set up the dinner trays. Maria went to get Janie but the smell of food had her already coming out of her room.

"What's all this?" Janie asked. "I can tell it's more than enough. Are we having guests?"

At that moment a Town and Country sedan parked out front and the driver's door opened quickly. Evan pushed up to see more from the window but a twinge had him resettling.

"Change is on table there. Split it between you," Evan said to the two.

"I hope you know how much you had," Janie said.

"Two fives. I need to get some more cash before you go shopping," Evan said.

"Who drove up, before he comes knocking," Janie said.

"Arthur Colt, junior. Lawyer to Susan Allen."

"Good, boy."

A knock on their front door had two voices calling, "Come in. Doors open."

A man with graying hair pushed the door open.

"Hello, Janie. I'm glad you're here. Her will asked that you be a witness to the reading to her son. Is that your cooking I smell?" Arthur asked.

"My recipe and Sister Graces finishing touches," Janie said. "How are you doing Artie?"

"Better since we fired our last cook. You must be Evan. How do you do? I'm Arthur," he enunciated and glanced Janie's way, "Colt, Jr. Your biological mother's lawyer. Do you want to get down to business now or eat?" He took a deep breath and let it out, sighing at the aroma.

"Eat first, or all our stomachs will be growling," Janie said. "Set your business down and let's see what Sister Grace cooked up."

Evan laughed until his sides hurt as Janie got Artie to share stories of growing up in a wealthy family not stuck in Anderson. Arthur and Louise Colt were wealthy but had greater expectations of their children than other families in the area. They sent their children to schools away from Anderson and they vacationed in Europe for cultural exposure. The Colt children were expected to put in time with working with the less fortunate and before going to college on their parents dime, spend one year in a third world country. It wasn't Arthur Colt Senior that set the rules down but Louise Colt, his one and only wife. She didn't give up her career as a lawyer to raise four children but worked in her husband's law office. Louise also believed in family dinners when everyone was home and vacations were family vacations. Artie told how he had to adapt to not using toilet paper, how long it took to not get embarrassed when village women lifted their dresses and peed without leaving the group, and make sure the bottled water wasn't refilled local tap water.

"It gives me a greater appreciation when I read historical novels or even biblical texts. Schools today don't enrich school texts with comparisons of what some of the poor nations today have in common with what we call history books," Artie said.

"You would have made a great history teacher," Janie said.

"No. Not at all. Our public schools have intentionally been dumbed down. Route memory and nothing to fill in the blanks. People that pick the textbooks today have agendas based on religion and local politics, not truth or the whole truth. No thanks. I happen to like family law."

He wiped his hands and took Janie and Evan's plates to the kitchen. Returning he cleared off a space on the coffee table. He looked at Evan, "Do you mind Janie being here or do you want privacy. My suggestion, is you'll need support. There's a lot of family information that Susan Allen wanted you to know."

"Why Susan Allen and not Susan Allen Beechum?" Evan asked.

"Because when she separated from Hal she dropped his name legally. Now," he pulled out a thick pad of typed sheets, "I'll start with reading her will."

"How many pages?" Evan asked alarmed.

"I was thinking of only reading what directly affects you. The rest you can read when you're bored."

"Can I read what you have marked?" Evan's heart was beating hard, fearing to hear what a woman he didn't know had to say about him.... His own mother who had no say in the child removed from her.

"Her wishes were to have it read to you in front of Nurse Janie Jackson if still alive. I need to sign a paper that I followed her instructions."

"You probably already know what she wrote," Evan said.

"I'll fill in the blanks if any need filling," Janie said. "That's why I'm here."

"Susan Allen has left you with a comfortable inheritance that hasn't taken too bad a loss from the stock market's decline. She left you also with an estate in Europe, in the Alps, that I've been visiting regularly, thank you very much, and making sure it's taken care of. If you ski it's a perfect place to have." He looked back at the paper.

"I, Constance Elizabeth Allen, being of sound mind," he began. Evan listened as her assets that she was leaving to him were listed.

"That's your inheritance. Now, this is the note she wished Janie to be present for. My darling son, I am so ashamed of what Harold has done to you, my darling boy. I knew you were a boy in spirit from the nine months we had together. I wasn't able to even hold you after I gave birth to you and mourn your loss of dignity. You can be at some peace to know that Hal isn't your father. Roger Beechum, the coward, was the sperm donor, at Hal's request. So many secrets that aren't secrets in that family. The Beechums are an abomination to what is right and decent if you haven't already figured that out. In hindsight, Linda and Marty were blessings to you and me. I tried to help them out

whenever I could without the Beechum's interfering but they have spies everywhere. When you do hear my will and testament, my dear boy, please, please, forgive my inability to protect you. Know that in death, I am watching over you and making up for what I couldn't do in the physical. I love you with all that I am." Artie laid the paper down and handed Janie a Kleenex.

For a long time Evan sat thinking of the quagmire of lies and hurt the Beechum's were to whoever was within their reach.

"Who is Roger?" Evan asked finally.

"A cousin. Perhaps the only smart one. He left the states after it was announced Susan was pregnant with Hal's child," Janie said.

"Do you know where he is?" Evan asked Artie.

"No. I'm not privy to the Beechum business, thank God. You might want to connect with Elizabeth Martin. She was asked to do an ancestry chart for Mary Beechum."

Janie and Artie laughed.

"What's so funny?" Evan asked.

"She was eighty-four when she asked Elizabeth to do it and she didn't want anyone to know about it until it was unveiled at her wedding anniversary. She was the one and only wife to Malcom Beechum but Malcom true to Beechum form and didn't keep his precious in his pants much and had a lot of unclaimed luggage that oftentimes disappeared," Artie said.

"Mary wanted every woman the Beechum men slept with and their off-spring on the chart. She paid Elizabeth enough money for her to move away after she completed the job. I have her new name and number if you'd like."

"What happened when it was unveiled?"

Artie grinned. "I heard that she had a large copy on the wall and for each Beechum a smaller copy. The servants were asked to leave the room and there was a lot of screaming and shouting. Mary was the only one that left with a big grin and request for her chocolate mousse to be delivered in her sitting room."

"I would like her number. The Beechums aren't head hunting for her, are they?"

"No. She did her job. Harland and his parentage isn't on it, if that's what you're asking," Janie said.

"Janie, if you know so much, why isn't your life in danger?"

"I can answer that," Artie said, holding his hand up like a student, waving it.

"Oh, Artie," Janie said. "It's because."

"It's because she was the only one everyone trusted to be discreet and do no harm," Artie said. "Who else would anyone trust to be the archivist without censorship?"

"I have my juju bag and lots of people on the other side watching out for me, if you want to know the truth. With all that darkness around, the people needed someone on their side in the hospital," Janie said.

"Amen to that," Artie said. "If you have any more questions call me. If you need any funds, call me."

"Do I have enough money to pay off any debit Gracie and Janie have?"

"I don't have any debit," Janie said with indignation.

Artie smiled and left Evan to face Janie's ire.

"Don't tell me I can't spend my money on whom I please," Evan said. "How much money again, did he say I have?"

"Enough to give your accountant a headache. If you give me anything, I'll have to pay taxes. I'm doing fine," Janie said firmly.

"I'm going to find out who Roger is, my sperm donor. I feel so much better that Hal isn't my biological father. Jesus has saved me," Evan said.

"It still doesn't get rid of Hal. Being a Beechum male, you still have a running in the leadership job."

"Nope."

"So, with all them riches, are you going to move out?" Janie asked. "Because I like you hanging around. Maybe we can build another room, on your dime."

Evan laughed. "If I do build another room here, you and Gracie will have to worry about your relatives that have pestered you two for a place to stay until things get better for them, reappearing. Then what excuse will you give them?"

"Same thing. This isn't an inn and there's no room."

"Well I replaced most of your furniture so I wouldn't wake up stiff and now a room?" Evan smiled. "I could buy you a new kitchen."

"Oh, Evan. Don't tempt me like that. A new kitchen?" Janie's face lit up and Evan started to think of how to make a kitchen more user friendly for someone whose vision was nearly gone. He would get on the internet and contact an organization for the blind.

"You know, I can use the money to expand the clinic and get some updated equipment," he said aloud.

"The clinic could use a better kitchen," Janie said.

"They could use a better building."

"Now you're thinking," Janie said.

"It has to be in a place where it's accessible to bus traffic and have room for parking. It'll need to be secured from terrorists," Evan said.

"Terrorists!" Janie asked. "Where's your head going with this?"

"There are domestic terrorists that bomb free clinics if they offer any kind of birth control."

"Oh, yeah. Well, I'm going to let you plan by yourself on how you're going to spend your money back to being broke."

"Janie, I have my own business. I won't go broke."

"Just remember you have to pay taxes on whatever you inherit." Janie got up and walked back to her room where her books on tape waited for her.

## Chapter 11

Evan didn't waste any time with waiting to upgrade Janie and Grace's kitchen. After speaking with someone from the nearest blind organization he was put in touch with a contractor that designed homes for the blind.

With Janie and Grace present, they interviewed Kevin James on how he could improve on their house, especially the kitchen. Janie and Grace weren't interested in anything being improved on but the kitchen. Construction was to start in a week. It meant that while the kitchen was off limits Grace's grill work was where they would be getting their meals. Their morning ritual was to be interrupted.

It was astonishing how in a week, Evan had a lot of money in his account to pay for the work, and other projects that he thought of. Janie had him sit down and organize who he wanted to help and what was the best way. He decided to tackle the harder ones where mountains had to be moved. With the free clinic he bought land and building the administrator was already looking over but lacked backing. He added equipment to their list once the security was installed. He remembered the local animal shelter was asking for donations and purchased more land for them and added money to build more kennels and open areas for the dogs to exercise in. Air conditioning was replaced and more room for other animals and cats the shelter rescued. Evan felt like he was on a roll. It felt good to have money to give to local charities and in the name of someone long forgotten.

With his ankle in a supportive wrap Evan was climbing out of a taxi when he noticed Hal Beechum's limousine was waiting for him.

The chauffeur opened the back door and Hal slid out.

Evan waited for him, feeling relieved he wasn't his father.

"I'd like to speak with you," Hal said.

"Go ahead," Evan said.

"Why are you such a hard head," he demanded and then looked apologetically at him. "I'm sorry. Some habits are hard to change. I understand Susan wrote you a note from the grave saying I'm not your father. I disagree. We both can take a DNA test to prove it."

"Why? I told you my parents are Linda and Marty."

"But you're taking your mother's money," he pointed out.

"My biological mother that left money behind to spend. So far, she's helped out in four local charities, including the free clinic, which I hear you and your friends were trying to close down. Not very nice of you."

"I'm your biological father."

"Roger is my biological father. Whatever happened to him?"

"Can we go somewhere and talk about this?"

"Why? What is so important about who's my father?" Evan suddenly looked around him for Harland.

"Harland is jail," Hal said.

"That's not reassuring," Evan said.

"I pay a couple of people to keep an eye on him and let me know what he's up to," Hal said.

"Who is Harland? What happened to Marty and Linda's biological child?"

"He died," he said. "He died in his crib a week later. Normal for those times. It was the final straw for Susan. She packed up and left. Harland was an abandoned baby my agent located at a local church. They needed the money. For years I thought I had bought the devil."

"A changling for the changling."

"What?"

"You don't think Harland got crazy when he heard of all the baby switching?"

"None of it was illegal," Hal said.

"What do you want of me?"

"I want you to acknowledge me as your father," Hal said.

"You castrated me. That's a good reason why I shouldn't acknowledge you and I don't believe you're my father." Evan turned around, signaling he was finished.

"Take a blood test. What could it hurt?" Hal said.

"I'm not interested. I have nothing to prove and I don't really want to be connected to you. Susan, Linda and Marty are enough for me."

"Let me prove to you that you're my son, and I'll donate whatever you want to a charity, since you're into charities."

Evan turned back to face him, rebalancing on his stiff ankle. "Can you undo the harm to Harland?"

"No. Of course not. What's done is done."

"Why is it so important to you to prove you had a child? How many women have you had sex with that didn't get pregnant and how many have?"

"It's a difficult truth to admit, especially out here on the public sidewalk, that I needed a laboratory to produce a child, but that's what happened. Your mother thinks it was Roger because...he drugged her to remove an egg from her to implant my..."

"I don't want to hear that... You're nuts. Beechums are nuts."

"Roger wasn't a Beechum. His mother had a lover and Roger came from that affair. His mother had him educated away from home, probably because as he got older, there wasn't anything about him that was Beechum or like his mother. He became a scientist and after your mother was six months pregnant he left for France."

"Did Mary Beechum really post the family ancestry on a wall?"

Hal laughed, taking ten years off his face. "Yes, she did. And it's still there with updates done every five years...with the illegitimate children listed. It's in my study. It was decided that whoever the head of the Beechums is, it's his duty to keep it honest and updated. Harland isn't on it."

"I see," Evan said.

"You're welcome to come and see it. You'd be amazed at who you're related to."

"Maybe someday. I'm not your son." Evan turned and this time continued up the stairs and into the house without looking back.

When he closed the door he leaned against it tired.

"You're going to have to keep digging into your family line until you stop getting bugged out," Janie said.

"Is he my father?"

"I don't know. So much mud in the waters. It's true Roger didn't look like a Beechum and didn't look like his mother either, except the eyes. There was so much messing around on both sides that I'm sure none of them know whether they're looking at

a sibling when in town or a cousin. One can only hope there will be no marrying of anyone from any of the nearby towns."

"Oh, Janie!" Evan said. "That's why we need birth control."

"I can't see so you're going to have to tell me, what's done so far on my kitchen?"

"Well, it's torn down to the studs. They did a review of your electrical and it needs to be brought up to standards. We're going to have to move out while they update the electrical, plain and simple."

"I'm not moving unless it's into posh diggings," Janie said.

"Ah, you've softened up."

"It's the smell and worry that one night some nut is going to come in through the kitchen and kill us all."

"I'll call movers and get your house packed up and we'll find a vacant house to rent until then."

"I don't mind sharing your wealth, I just worry about the after effects when you're gone and we're back to our humble adobe," Janie said.

Evan leaned over and kissed her on her cheek. "You and Gracie are my family now. I'm going to take care of you, just don't bring too much baggage that I can't handle."

Janie laughed. "You're picking up enough of other people's baggage without us contributing. Call up your movers. Tell Gracie it's time. Just where are we moving to?"

"Well, there's the Hotel Valencia that comes with a kitchenette. It's a private hotel and has a pool in the center of ten or twelve rooms. I stayed there once. It's run by two older gents. It's about twenty minutes from the grill. Then there is the Hotel Motel on the border of Anderson and Huntsville."

"We are not staying at a hookers hotel, no matter how bored you are," Janie said.

"But it's expensive hookers. Not the kind where the towels are shop hand towels. Rough and never to be white again."

"Just tell me where we're going."

"There's a house that the real estate company rents out to important people when they're in town. They have a dozen. Kale Hutton said he has one available that has four bedrooms, a garden, gated with security around the clock, and it's ours now. I just got

back from speaking with him. I was going to discuss it with you and Gracie this evening."

"Well, I don't mind it. It will be like being on a vacation and when we get back, we'll have a real nice kitchen and electrical plugs that work."

Evan sighed happily. Everything was just flowing so good. He pulled out his cell and dialed Gracie.

"Hi, Gracie. Are you busy?...Here's Janie. She wants to talk to you," he put his cell in Janie's hand.

"Why can't you tell her?"

"Because you talk better."

"Sister Grace, we are going on a vacation...sort of," began Janie.

## Chapter 12

Three weeks later Evan stared at what was left of Janie's burned out home that was smoking as drips of blackened water made puddles. The fire department was still cleaning up. Gracie and Janie's home was destroyed and the smell of gasoline was still strong. The neighbors had called the sheriff's office to say someone was on Janie's property up to no good. By the time the deputy arrived two homes were engulfed in flames and the fire department could be heard in the distance. If a neighbor hadn't dragged Mr. Oliver from his house, he would have perished.

"Well," Mrs. Beasley said to her husband Howard, "It looks like Harland's at it again, if you ask me."

Evan couldn't remember hearing anyone including her husband refer to her as anything but Mrs. Beasley. She had a nervous twitch of pursing her lips and pressing them together and it went on unless she was focusing on doing something. Evan thought it was the side effect of pills or some nervous disorder.

"Nobody is asking you," Howard said. "That boy went down a dark path."

"How can you be certain it was Harland?" Evan asked.

Both looked at him as if he were daft and edged away as if there was something wrong with him. They made the same exact comment and replies to the next group and everyone nodded wisely, adding comments about what was wrong with Harland.

Evan's spotted Sheriff Hodge talking to the fire chief. He limped over to them to see what they had to say.

"Hello, Evan. Evan Crowley, this is Chief Miles. He says there's evidence of gasoline where the kitchen was. They're going to investigate it as a possible arson."

"Is this the work of Harland?" Evan asked.

Sheriff Hodge's looked uncomfortable. "Come on over here, I want to speak with you. I'm looking forward to reading your report, Chief."

The sheriff walked him to his patrol car. "When I heard the report that Janie's house was on fire, I put a call through right a way to the prison Harland's incarcerated in. Seems they moved him a week ago because of over-crowding. He and four others

escaped. Three have been recaptured. Harland and Matt Medina are still loose. If it was just Harland alone he would be a focused individual on just doing harm to you and Mr. Beechum, but if Matt is driving Harland, Matt likes to torment people."

"You think Harland is behind this?" Evan asked, already knowing he was.

"We have a profile of his work since he likes burning out Huntsville residents. This time he won't have Mr. Beechum to buy him an alibi."

"So Harland is back," Evan said.

"What are you going to do about Harland being loose?" Sheriff Hodge asked.

"I'm going to let Hal Beechum take care of him. He told me that he was paying two people to let him know of Harland's movements. Someone has broken the line of communication. Do you think Harland is nuts enough to attack Janie or Grace?"

"He just did. He doesn't kill, he just burns down the home of an offender and all their belongings."

"Except, everything is in storage because of the construction."

"You need to worry about yourself," Sheriff Hodge said. "You're the one he's taken to getting physical in his attacks. I'm glad you haven't gone back to motorcycle riding. You're a sitting duck on that thing."

"On a motorcycle I can go places a car or truck can't."

"You can't out run a bullet no matter how well you ride a motorcycle."

A black limousine pulled up and Hal got out before his chauffeur could open his door.

"Damit to hell!" He walked over to Evan and Hodge.

"Harland," he said.

"On the surface it looks like it. We're going to have to wait until the fire chief gets a report from the arson investigator."

"I got a call a few hours ago that Harland's missing from his cell."

"He was being transported a week ago to another prison. He and four others escaped. Do you know a Matt Medina?"

"No, should I?"

"He and Harland are still loose. Matt Medina was a small time drug dealer who is suspected of killing his rivals, though there isn't proof of this. I'm hoping Harland hasn't

brought him to my town because he's a profiteer and may see Huntsville as a place to set up shop."

"Why would he do that? He can't make much money on the working class," Hal said.

"Harland knows every drug dealer and party goer in Anderson that has lots of mommy and daddy's money to spend, as well as uncles and aunts that can add to his trade. Matt can make a killing here if he decides to start eliminating the competition."

"That's your worry," Hal said. His gaze turned to the fire truck that was pulling away.

"Let me know if you hear of anything and you watch your back," Sheriff Hodge said, including both Hal and Evan in his gaze.

"I'll see that her house is rebuilt," Hal said.

"Why?" Evan said, doggedly trying to keep Hal out of his life and his friends.

"I've known Janie Jackson a lot longer than you," he said roughly and then added. "I created this monster. I may not be able to undo all the harm I've done, but I can help with some of the consequences of my bad judgment."

"Hal, you surprise me. What happened to the ruthless business tycoon that ran over obstacles to his plans with a cement roller?"

"Maybe all those stories of near death experiences are true about how much they change people."

Evan studied him and could hear in his mind another explanation. A donor's heart changing the recipient. Cells have memories and when an organ is transplanted, two memories are shared and it does change the recipient.

In Hal's eyes he saw that he knew that too.

"When are you coming over to see the ancestry map in my study? Why don't you bring your friend, the tall kid with the goatee?"

"Neil? He's my assistant, my apprentice. He doesn't need to be dragged into Beechum business. I'll see if I have some time and call your secretary." Evan had no intention of doing so, but he wasn't as repulsed by the idea as he had been a few years ago. Maybe he was just tired.

"Are you going to get a bodyguard? I can pay for it. I highly recommend it," Hal said.

"I'll think about it. If he's into paying people back, if I were you, you should be making sure your own house is safe. He's familiar with your place and has a serious bone to pick with you."

"The moment I heard he wasn't in his cell, I hired a bounty hunter to find him. Now that I know he's been gone for a week, I'm going to recheck my connections in the prison."

"A bounty hunter?"

"Jeff Mason. He served in Iraq and did some training with the FBI but dropped out due to an injury. He works with Klein's Bail Bonds until he figures out what he wants to do with his life."

Evan nodded and studied the faces of his neighbors and found one he didn't recognize. "I bet that guy in the back of Mr. Oliver is Matt, the drug dealer."

When Hal and Evan looked at him he turned and disappeared among the neighbors. A few minutes later a car drove off.

"So, we have two criminals to worry about," Evan said.

"We know their faces and we know they're in town. It's not if anymore. That's something to work with. Tell Janie I'll make good on that promise."

After Hal left Evan dialed Grace's number.

"How much do you like the place we're staying at?"

*"Word has it that Harland burned us out,"* Grace said.

"It looks like it. Mr. Oliver lost his place too."

*"His place was a fire hazard. All it would take is one spark and poof. Anyone else get hurt?"*

"No. Just two houses burned down. Hal stopped by and said he owes Janie a new house. Janie should start looking at the available house plans the city planning allows and pick out the biggest."

*"No way. Three bedrooms with three baths is as big as we'll go. We aren't tempting fates with our relatives trying to move in. How long do you think something like that will take to build?"*

"I don't know. Now, I'm glad there was a hold up with the kitchen countertops and cabinets."

*"God is good to us. I have to get back to the grill. I'll tell Janie. Right now she's showing Nickie how to play backgammon."*

Evan hung up and went to speak with the fire inspector that was still collecting evidence and taking pictures. He wanted to know how long until they could clear the space so work on Janie's new house could commence. Three bedrooms and three baths. He smiled thinking that if he was still around, he would get his own bathroom and sleep on a real bed instead of a sofa. After staying at the furnished house for visiting CEOs and such, they were all spoiled with the newness of everything. They even had maid service, which Janie was amazed that she didn't know the woman's family. Janie knew a lot of people.

Evan was about to call another taxi when Sheriff Hodge returned.

"Mr. Crowley, I would like a word with you."

"I was about to call a taxi. Can you give me a lift to the grill?"

"I can. Hop in."

"What did you want to speak to me about?" Evan asked after he settled in the patrol car.

"Hal. I overheard him invite you to his place."

"He has."

"I want you to take him up on it tonight or tomorrow at the latest."

"Why?"

"The drug enforcement team would like you to take one of their agents along as a friend. He did say bring a friend, right?"

"We saw Matt in the crowd," Evan mentioned.

"Hal called it in to someone he knows and it quickly got to me. Recapturing Matt will put him in Federal custody and into a more secure prison."

"Just how dangerous is Matt?"

"Killing is easy for him."

"And Harland is probably at that tipping point too. Are Janie and Grace safe?"

"As safe as anyone else. You and Hal are the actual targets."

"So why not put us together," Evan said, mockingly. "I get it. The sooner the better. I'll call Hal and let him know tonight I would like to look at his family chart and I'll bring a friend along that is keen on ancestry charts. Tell the agent he needs to brush up on it. He does have his own car?"

"You can pick him up. I'll let everyone know it's a go. Thanks Evan."

The sheriff dropped Evan at the grill. It was crowded with people that heard about Janie's house. Before going in he called Hal. It dawned on him that he had been calling Hal, Hal and not Mr. Beechum. He would not be calling him dad anytime soon. It was hard not to forget that he had Marty's heart.

Finished with his call he stepped into the mad house and found it impossible to get close to either woman. He waved when Grace looked and then backed out. He had an hour to get ready. He called a taxi to drop him off at their temporary house. Leaning back his eyes drooped closed. He was tired. When he felt the car slow down he opened his eyes and looked around. It was dark and they were in a warehouse district. This was nowhere near where he was supposed to be dropped off.

With fear based adrenalin, Evan pushed open the door and jumped out, protecting his ankle. His cane dropped a few feet from him. The taxi stopped and as Evan rolled to his good leg he pulled his cane to him. Matt with a gun was running to him. Evan ran as best as he could, gunshot blasts whizzing by him. What were the chances of someone holding a semiautomatic gangster style hitting a moving target?

The neighborhood was familiar to Evan. It was where the mission van stopped to deliver food to the homeless that didn't want to come to the mission or it was too far for them to make it in a day and be back here where they staked out their night spot.

Evan paused behind a building, trying to locate his cell. His hands were shaking so much he wasn't able to remember any numbers. Frustrated he dropped the cell phone back into his pocket and listened for anyone. He could see dark shapes in the darkness where the homeless had abandoned their sleeping spots when they first heard the gunshots.

A hand grabbed his elbow and pulled him into a space between the water tower and building. "Be very quiet," a voice said. "They'll find us here so we have to keep moving."

*They!*

Evan let the homeless man guide him through a maze of alleys and under gas and water tanks.

"How many are here?"

"You mean looking for you, Evan?"

Evan squinted in the dark to get a better view. It was Bill.

"What are you doing back on the street?" Evan asked upset.

"We can talk about that later. Right now, there's two. Harland and Matt something. Matt has an agreement with Harland. He helps Harland settle some scores and he'll introduce Matt to the drug boss of Anderson."

"Sheriff Hodge was right. Only, Matt kills anyone that gets in his way."

"You got that right. Two days ago Harland and Matt met a messenger of the Boss Man right under the Drug Sign on the Butler warehouse and shot him. Matt told the driver to take the body back to Boss Man and he better make a better deal."

"Why are you here if it's so dangerous?" Evan asked. "You're going to be in the middle of a drug war."

"Lily won't leave. This is her only home. You know how she is. She'll visit the mission once a month to fill up her backpack of food and hide in her place the rest of the time."

"Does the mission give her that much food?"

"No. I bring her food to tide her over. I can't leave her. Marty taught us not to abandon our friends."

"I didn't know you two were friends," Evan said.

"Well, she don't know it, but we are."

"You are a good friend."

"I'm going to leave you now. I need to go and see how she's doing. If they get too close to her place she goes nuts."

"I'll go with you," Evan said.

"No. You stay here. Harland wants you dead. You help too many people alive than if you were dead. Harland may kill you but Matt will kill anyone around here just because."

"Then why are you going out there?" Evan whispered frantically.

"Because I don't want Lily to die alone. They already know we're here. They'll come looking for us first, to get you to give yourself up, then they'll kill us all. For your father's sake, don't let them get you."

Evan was frightened. He was frightened of not going with Bill and at the same time frightened if he followed him. Evan pulled his cell phone out and tried to dial again.

*Linda and Marty, please help us. Please.*

He fumbled with his cell and finally remembered the password. After today he wasn't going to have a password on his cell. He called Hal thinking he could move mountains better than anyone else. It went into his voicemail where he left a message then called Grace and left a message on her voicemail.

He needed to do something that wouldn't get them all killed. His gaze fell on the gas tank and decided that would be something Matt and or Harland would blow up. That's when he saw Lily being dragged limply to the gas tank. She was dumped and then Bill's body was dumped.

"I know you're out there, freak!" Harland's voice taunted. "I'm going to kill your precious family and everyone that's precious to you." He fired a shot, pointing the gun at Lily. Her body didn't move.

"That's the first one. I missed."

Evan turned away, already knowing it was going to be a sadistic game. He was going to move to another hiding spot when he spotted Matt. Another shot had him jumping, and then moving closer to the side of the building.

Harland's ears would be ringing now with the loud bangs. He remembered going to a firing range with a police friend of Marty's who wanted him to respect fire arms. It scared the hell out of him and he remembered the burn he had on his arm from the flying spent shell casing. Though he wore earplugs it was loud.

Matt had something more than a pistol. Evan didn't know what it was called but it fired like a machine gun. Another gun shot and Harland was squealing. Evan shut Harland out and concentrated on staying out of sight of Matt. There had to be a way he could get help. His focus moved to Harland who continued to squeal.

Matt climbed the gas tank to get an aerial view of the warehouse district. However, he wouldn't be able to see over the warehouse where Harland was, Evan thought. Matt found that out and climbed back down. He ran in a zigzag pattern to where Harland was still screaming.

Evan hesitated to follow. It could be a trap. Instead, Evan left the warehouse area and hobbled around the outskirts, looking for another way to see where Bill and Lily were.

"Get down," whispered Sheriff Hodge. Evan was pulled down into a gully. There were a lot of people in the gully and not smelling too nice. Street people.

"We had a deputy keeping an eye out for their return."

"What about Bill and Lily?" Evan asked.

"Our people got them out. Lily stabbed Harland in the foot then she let Bill hurry her out of harm's way. The drug enforcement gang are doing their thing and capturing those two."

They all heard one shot, then shots from an automatic amid other shots and then silence.

For twenty minutes they waited.

"We can go in now. They have Harland and Matt in custody." Sheriff Hodge stood up and climbed the gully.

Evan, like the others in the gully weren't ready to give up their safe place. Lights around the warehouses came on, lighting up the area. Evan could see Bill with a smaller figure. He was wrapping a blanket around her. Evan climbed out of the gully and hobbled toward Bill.

A shot rang out and Evan found himself knocked breathless flat on his face.

*Shit. Not again.*

## Chapter 13

Evan watched as a body was moved onto a gurney and slid into the back of an ambulance. Dispassionately he watched it all the way to the hospital and into the operating room. When the body was rolled into another room where machines took over most of the life support, he moved down the hospital hall with no particular destination in mind.

The hospital was crowded. He brushed by one person who was shouting at doctors who were working on a patient that wasn't responding to the defibrillator. Glancing at the face of the unresponsive patient he was startled to see it looked just like the person that was yelling at the hospital staff. He didn't want to be saved.

Evan drifted and found himself surrounded by people he knew. Susan Allen and Linda were talking to him but he couldn't hear them. Why couldn't he? If he were dead, shouldn't he be able to hear the dead?

Marty was there and he was shaking his head. He put his arm around Evan and walked him away from the others. Evan felt himself drift away from Marty and he tried to return but Marty was shooing him away. Didn't he belong with the good people?

Evan tried to call Marty and his throat constricted and he coughed. That hurt so bad he cried out with real tears trickling down his face. He felt so heavy and dejected that he couldn't be with his family.

"Hold on there, Evan. Let me help," Grace said.

"Let the nurse, Grace. You don't want to hurt your back," Janie said. "I don't want both of you injured. Who's going to do the laundry?"

Someone helped him to drink cool water from a straw.

"What happened," he whispered.

"You're back in the hospital," Janie said. "You've been in the hospital more than a healthy man should be."

"Amen to that," Grace said.

"I..." he took a painful breath.

"You lost half a lung. If you had any plans on running a marathon, you can remove it from your bucket list," Janie said.

"Or playing a trumpet," Grace added.

"Okay." He swallowed and took another breath. "How come I can't see?"

"Because you haven't opened your eyes yet," Grace said.

He opened his eyes and stared at Grace for a few moments then blinked his eyes.

"What's that you have around you? Is there something wrong with my eyes?"

"Nothing rest won't help. Other than missing half a lung and hitting your head pretty hard on the concrete, it looks like you fared better than Harland."

"What happened to Harland?" Evan gulped because at the mention of Harland, there he was standing behind Grace.

"He's dead. The other convict with him let loose on his machine gun and cut Harland in half. Matt was his name. A sniper finished him off."

"You're looking pale. Now that we know you're okay, we're going to see how Laura is. She gave birth to twins."

"Laura?" Evan asked.

"Laura Sanders. Her husbands in the Army, stationed in Germany," Janie said. Evan shuddered.

"What's wrong?" Janie asked. "Grace press the nurse's call button."

"Nothing's wrong," Evan said.

"I got my finger on your pulse and it's beating like a race horse," Janie said.

"I'm fine, fine."

He forced his thoughts onto calmer things. "How is Hal?" he asked to distract Janie.

"I've been meaning to ask you about this Hal thing. From Mr. Beechum to Hal? I don't think anyone calls Mr. Beechum Hal."

"You do."

Janie was silent for a few minutes. "I don't remember doing that. I must have been out of my mind."

"Mr. Beechum is fine. He's been taking good care of Marty's heart." Grace sounded pleased.

"What do you mean?"

"He's been giving to charities, like the Marty and Linda Mission, the Free Clinic, the Unwed Mother's Home..."

"Unwed Mother's Home?" Evan interrupted, "I never knew there was one."

"There isn't. I was just pulling your leg. We'll leave you now that you're wide awake."

Janie tapped his wrist. "You think nice thoughts. By the way, your assistant has been looking worried about your business. You might want to speak with him."

"Right." Evan's gaze went back to Harland who hadn't moved from where he first appeared.

The two women left.

"Go away," Evan whispered to Harland's ghost. And surprisingly, it left. Evan closed his eyes contemplating on what he remembered.

A light tapping on the door had him looking toward the door.

"Hi," he said.

"I'm Minister Harry," he grinned at Evan. "I heard you died on the table."

Evan panicked for a minute.

"But you made it back to the living," Harry said quickly.

"Oh, that's a relief. I was going to wonder why I would hang around here if I was dead."

"Do you mind?" he pointed to a chair next to Evan's bed.

"No, not at all."

"You're wondering why I'm here."

"I am."

"I'm here to help you adjust to what you brought back with you. A gift. Susan Allen sent me."

Evan tried to sit up and cried out in pain. The monitors attached to him started to sound alarms. Evan passed out.

Later Evan woke up to darkness but the noise from the monitoring equipment and the light in the hall told him he was in a hospital and alive.

A head next to his bed moved. A light came on. Janie's hand felt along his arm until she got to his wrist. "You feeling better?" she asked.

"Yeah. I think I need to have less visitors," Evan said.

"You've only had Grace and me, unless you count the nurses. Are you saying you don't want us to visit?"

"No, no. I don't mind you and Grace. It's that minister that came after you two left."

"Minister's aren't up here unless someone is dying and requested a visit or you belong to a congregation."

"You and Grace's songs are church enough for me. He said his name was Minister Harry and he came to talk to me." Evan stopped there.

"I've heard of Minister Harry. He visits people that have near death experiences," Janie said. "What did he have to say?"

"Have you met him?"

Janie laughed. "Not me. I've never been on the door step of death. I live a lot more cautiously."

"Who is this minister?"

"An angel, some say."

"He's not real?"

Janie laughed again. "Depends on what you call real. Some people will tell you that leprechauns, fairies and nature spirits are real and they can see them as clear as they can see you and me."

"When you mentioned Laura I...I saw a casket draped in a flag."

"What did Minister Harry say?"

"Susan Allan asked him to help me with my gift."

"Between Hal Beechum and you, life is getting more interesting," Janie said.

"Why Hal Beechum?"

"Do you know who shot you?"

"I was shot? No. Who and why?"

"One of the Beechums hired someone to assassinate you. Hal Beechum is trying to get you recognized as his legitimate son so you can take over the head of the family

fortune. To make Beechum politics interesting is that he's been making changes in his own business affairs, taking after what you've been doing with Susan's money. The family thinks your influence on Hal Beechum is contagious and they for a variety of reasons wanted to get rid of you."

"Who would it go to if Hal dies?"

"Roger Beechum. Not the Roger that disappeared."

"Roger Beechum," he said slowly. "He travels a lot." He was quiet as he tried to process what Susan was trying to show him.

"I can see why I need someone like Minister Harry. Have you had any decent sleep?" Evan asked, realizing that Janie was putting in too much hospital time.

"Well I needed to speak with you so I waited."

"What's wrong?" Alarming thoughts popped into his head.

"Stop thinking for a moment," Janie said. Her fingers on his wrist tapped to distract him.

"Okay. You're right. I'm not keeping to the think positive regime you put me on."

"Hal Beechum has made an offer to me. He donated a laser machine that does cataract surgery to the hospital."

"At your age? Isn't that dangerous?"

Janie patted him on the wrist. "Everything is dangerous at my age. Just how old do you think I am?"

"Late sixties early seventies."

"Mid sixties. I'm not that old."

"Are you taking him up on it?"

"Yep. Normally it doesn't require overnight hospital stay. There's a specialist that is flying in to teach the staff how to use it. Mr. Beechum has also paid for a dozen of us that don't have insurance to pay for the procedure to have it."

"Wow. All this happened overnight?"

"Do you know how long you've been in here?"

"No."

"Long enough that the house is nearly finished. You were unconscious when the doctor made the rounds so you missed his bringing you up to speed. They had to induce a

coma because of the swelling of your head, and they weren't able to save your collapsed lung that the bullet messed up. You were a mess."

"How many bedrooms?"

"We settled for two with two bathrooms. All ready we're getting phone calls that this kid and that have no place to stay and can they come up until they get back on their feet. We've both been through that so many times. We're already taking care of neighborhood kids. We need one place where we have peace. If they want to visit they can stay in a hotel with their own money. You know they asked for us to pay for their air fare up here. Where are we going to come up with the money for five and her kids aren't trained proper." Janie huffed and then quieted down. "There are some family members that are beyond my skills and patience to help. When Grace had nowhere to go, that was because family closed their doors. Now that Grace is back on her feet they want her to help them. It isn't right."

"Why is it getting you upset?" Evan asked. "You're doing more than what most people do for their community. You've always served others, as a nurse, volunteer at the mission and free clinic. You watch over any kid that comes to the grill after school instead of going to their empty homes. They get their homework done, learn how to play board games, and hey, no television after school."

"Grace doesn't feel guilty," Janie said.

"Because she knows what they're really like," Evan said.

"We do have a den that has a very comfortable fold out bed for overnights, but I think you liked that nice modern house we were staying at too much to be sleeping on our couch."

"I do like it."

"So our business is all caught up," Janie said.

"When is your surgery?"

"Tomorrow. You woke up at a good time."

"So I can hold your hand when you wake up."

"If the doctor says you can get up, you need to start therapy. In case you haven't noticed, you haven't been walking for weeks."

Evan sighed. He was spending too much time in hospitals and physical therapy.

## Chapter 14

Evan watched Janie and Grace laughing at Sheriff Hodge's joke. Janie looked a different person since she had her cataracts removed. The party was a house warming for Janie and Grace. Hal Beechum was sitting with Angela Jones, his new girlfriend that wasn't Beechum approved. Angela was a grandmother that had legally adopted her five grandchildren. Two were from her son and three from her daughter. Her son was a drug addict and so was his wife. Her daughter died in Iraq and her husband didn't want the children. He had moved on with another wife and started a new family.

Evan could see the ghosts of the family members moving around enjoying the pleasant atmosphere. Angela was a practicing witch and had blessed the new house. The landscape in the front was nice but in the backyard, where the tiered garden that Evan had built was now a patio with a spa. The vegetable garden and fruit trees were further out. Mr. Oliver sold his land and took the insurance money for the house and moved back to Oregon where his sister lived. Evan bought the property and was still thinking about how many rooms he wanted in his house.

Ghosts.

Minister Harry and he spent a lot of time talking about what he was seeing. He was still mum about it to most people but he could feel that sooner or later he was going to have to say something about what he was seeing. There were a lot of people that passed over that had unspoken things that had to be said to those they left behind.

He smiled when Hal leaned over to hear what one of Angela's kids said. He laughed as Marty would. Beside him was Marty's ghost, winking at him.

All it took was a change of heart.

*The End*