

Changeling, Book 2

Part 2

Then:

Paul pulled his battered pickup into the parking lot of the Tim Horton's and parked it next to his friend's Harley Davidson. He ambled inside to find Jeff already picking up his coffee and sandwich. His buddy nodded and headed back outside.

Coffee in one hand, and brown paper bags with a sandwich and a doughnut in the other, Paul exited the busy restaurant to find Jeff seated at the picnic tables set out near the grass between the parking lot and the highway. This was a common spot for Harley riders to gather in Spruce Grove, but today the only bike in evidence was Jeff's, and only a couple guys at the other table having a leisurely smoke.

Paul and Jeff ate their sandwiches in companionable silence, lingering over their coffee.

Finally Paul broke the silence with what he knew was on Jeff's mind. "No sign of her, yet?"

"No."

They sat in silence for a while longer until Jeff slammed a hand down on the table next to his crumbled doughnut. "It's been over a year Megan's been missing, and the cops are still saying she must have run away. Just because she's done that before doesn't mean she did this time."

Paul nodded. He had heard this rant many times from his friend over the past year. Jeff's sister Megan, twenty years old and pretty, with enough troubled history to allow authorities to be dismissive, had vanished without a trace from the small town a couple hours drive from Edmonton where they had both grown up.

"I've talked to everyone in town, and no one gave her a ride anywhere, no one recalls seeing her wandering around." Frustration laced his tone. Jeff shook his head and ate a bit of doughnut, though he didn't seem to taste it.

"I know, I've talked to the people I know, too." Paul said slowly, reluctant to let his friend hash

things over yet again, and keep driving himself crazy. But he had done some looking on his own, and wanted to at least let Jeff know where not to look. “And some people in Edmonton who are familiar with places she might go, there. They haven't seen her, or even heard anything about her.”

Jeff nodded and tried to take a drink from his empty coffee cup. He set it down again, looking at it like it had betrayed him. Then he flung it violently in the direction of the garbage can just outside the door of the restaurant. The cup bounced off the side and rolled forlornly through the parking lot.

The two men sat in silence for awhile.

Finally Jeff sighed. “I was thinking about taking a road trip down to Calgary, show Megan's picture around, see if anyone's seen her. Want to come along?”

Paul frowned. “You think she got that far?”

“It's been a year, she could have gotten nearly anywhere.” Jeff gave half a shrug and didn't meet Paul's eyes. Unspoken was the thought that she was most likely in a shallow grave somewhere.

“Sure, I'm up for a road trip. When?”

“How's your tomorrow?”

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Paul pulled his truck in beside Jeff's bike and ambled in to Mike's pub. The Spruce Grove bar and grill served one of the best burgers in the area, so they often met here for a beer and a burger. There was something in Jeff's voice when he suggested they meet here, today, though. Jeff had been down in the last few days since coming back from Calgary with not even a hint, not even a hint of a hint of Megan's whereabouts, but he hadn't sounded down when he called, and that note in Jeff's voice had Paul a bit on edge.

It was midafternoon and most of the lunch rush had finished and gone. Besides Jeff, there were only a couple guys in dress shirts, the top buttons undone, lingering over drinks.

Paul sat down at Jeff's table and poured himself a beer from the pitcher on the table. The glass in his buddy's hand looked like there was maybe a sip or two gone; he seemed more intent on doodling patterns in the condensation forming on the glass than drinking the beer inside it.

They sat in silence for several minutes. The waitress came by and Paul ordered a burger and commiserated with her over the Edmonton Eskimo's loss of the football game the night before, to their rivals from Saskatchewan.

“We're meeting someone here.” Jeff said softly after the waitress had left.

“Who?”

“A guy called me. Said he had information about Megan. He wanted to meet me, tell me face to

face.”

Paul nodded. So he was here as a double check for his friend, to make sure he didn't miss anything in his eagerness to find his sister. And to watch his back, in case this supposed informant was trying to pull something.

“What does this guy look like? Did he say how we'd know him?” Paul asked.

Jeff shook his head. “He said he'd know me.” The two men looked at each other in unspoken agreement that this was a little strange. Suspicious, even. But after a year of searching with no results of any kind, Paul knew that his buddy was getting desperate.

The two of them sat in silence for a while longer, drinking their beer. Paul's burger arrived, but he found he wasn't so hungry anymore. He slowly ate the fries while they waited, drenching each one in ketchup before eating it. Jeff didn't laugh at him for his enthusiasm for the condiment, like he usually did.

Paul was about halfway through his fries when the man in the suit came in. His black suit had a style and fit that said that it was expensive, and likely had a European designer's tag on the inside. His hair was perfectly cut and perfectly styled. It was a look uncommon for Alberta, and especially for a place like Spruce Grove.

He paused only a moment at the door to scan the pub, then came directly and confidently to the table where Paul and Jeff were sitting. He pulled out one of the polished wooden chairs and sat down as if it were a throne. The look he gave them had more amusement than condescension, though, which didn't make Paul like him more, but made him want to punch the man's face in a little less.

“Mr. Patterson, I presume?” The man said, his voice low and pitched to carry no further than the table. “And your friend is...?”

When Paul only looked at him warily and didn't answer, Jeff shifted a little nervously and said “Nyquist. This is my friend Paul Nyquist. You didn't give me a name when you called. Who are you, and how do you know about my sister?”

“You can call me Vyncis. And I know about your sister because I know the ones who took her.”

“You do?!” Jeff nearly lunged out of his seat at Vyncis and Paul caught his arm, easing him back down again. Whether the lunge was to kill Vyncis, literally squeeze the information out of him or hug him, Paul wasn't sure, except that none of those actions would improve this conversation.

Whatever Jeff's purpose, Vyncis was utterly unperturbed by it, and merely sat smiling. He casually crossed his legs, with an air of making himself comfortable for a long conversation.

“What do you know about your family history, Mr. Patterson?” Vyncis asked after Jeff had settled back down into his seat.

“What? What do you mean, my family history? What does that have to do with my sister's disappearance?”

“A great deal, actually. Humor me for a moment, and I will make it clear. What do you know, Mr. Patterson?”

Jeff made an impatient gesture. “My father's from Germany, immigrated when he was a teenager. My mother grew up a ways south of here. Lacombe county.”

“And what of your Aunt Ellen, your mother's sister?”

“What about her? She was killed before I was born, a farming accident.”

Vyncis laughed. The note of condescension in it made Jeff's hand clench in his lap and Paul shifted his feet underneath himself to be ready to leap if his buddy did, though he wasn't entirely sure whether he would be trying to stop Jeff or help him.

“Is that what they told you? Ellen didn't get cut up by a threshing machine, or whatever the story was. She disappeared. Not a trace. The rumor was that she had gotten pregnant and run off, but that was just a convenient explanation, the better for being salacious. Now what about your great-uncle Thomas, your grandmother's brother?”

“I suppose you're going to tell me that he disappeared too. Vanished without a trace, just like Aunt Ellen. And my sister.”

“Very good Mr. Patterson, perhaps you're not as stupid as you look. The rumor with him was that he had run off with a local girl who disappeared about the same time. The timing of the disappearance was a coincidence, though. She had run away to New York to become an actress, but ended up dead in an alley and buried as a Jane Doe. A sad story, really, but not relevant to this discussion.”

“So how do you know all this?”

“I'm much older than I look. And my people have been keeping tabs on your family for quite some time.”

“Your people? What the fuck are you talking about? Quit jerking me around, tell me about who took my sister or I'll walk, right now.”

“My people, Mr. Patterson, are what you would call Fairies. Or what Mr. Nyquist and his people would call spirits. You know what I'm talking about, don't you, Mr. Nyquist?”

Paul sat very still, remembering stories his grandfather had told. His brother Trevor had always paid much more attention than he did, had been fascinated with them, even. Paul had found girls and playing pool in the back room of the local bar to be much more interesting, and eventually his grandfather stopped telling him those stories, and Trevor got more and more attention and training.

That attention his brother got and he didn't made him angry, but by then to go back to the training would mean working under Trevor's teaching as well as his grandfather's, and he couldn't stomach that.

Jeff had turned to him, eyes full of surprise and accusation. "Paul, do you know anything about this?"

"Just stories. Old stories, that don't make much sense. They say that there are spirits, all around us, all the time. Many taking human form and interacting with humans, as if they were human. Some of the spirits were predatory, took people. Sometimes they got a liking for a particular family, took members every generation. Such a family was seen as cursed, it often died out."

Vyncis smiled. It wasn't a very pleasant smile. And did his mouth seem wider and his teeth more pointed than they were before?

Jeff shook his head. "No, no. It can't...No. Fairies? If you wanted the reward money, you should have come up with something at least a little bit believable." He pushed his chair out and stood, grabbing up his motorcycle jacket.

"What if I could show you, Mr. Patterson? Convince you that I was telling you the truth? Open your eyes to how things really are?" Vyncis had remained seated, smiling confidently.

When Jeff looked at him, Paul could see that his buddy wasn't even close to convinced. Believing Vyncis would require a complete re-ordering of everything he knew and believed about the world. But he was also desperate. If everything conventional had failed to turn up a trace of his sister, why not try the unconventional? Paul gave a slight shrug. What did they have to lose?

Vyncis saw the look. "You can take your friend along with you, if you wish."

Reluctantly, Jeff nodded. "All right then. Convince me."