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Changeling

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Chapter 1

Trey Laporte opened his eyes, wincing against the assault that the late morning sunshine lancing in through his window made against his retinas. Sitting up in his bed, he clutched his hands to his head as a mortar shell of pain exploded inside his brain. Bright stars lit up behind his eyelids, making him feel sick to the stomach. He sank back on to his pillow with a groan and stared up at the ceiling which shifted and swirled slightly under his scrutiny. Saliva filled his mouth again and he concentrated hard on not vomiting, wishing that these feelings would go away.

He realized that he had no recollection of going to bed last night. He struggled to remember; small, tight lines creasing his forehead as he tried to piece together what could have happened to cause him to wake up feeling like this. But there was nothing.

After dinner, he'd played Pro-Evolution Soccer on the X-Box with Wayne in the common room. Wayne was his usual inept self and Trey soon got bored thrashing the pants off of him. At nine o'clock, he'd called it a night. He'd gone back to his room to listen to his MP3 player. He'd walked into the room, locked it behind him and then . . . nothing.

He couldn't remember a single thing from that moment onwards. It was as if someone had hit a delete button at the precise moment he'd entered his room and erased everything from that point until now.

He lifted himself up off the pillow again. A fresh wave of nausea rolled over him causing a hiss to escape his lips. His mouth was so dry that his swollen tongue felt sticky against the roof of his palate. He needed a drink of water. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed, his eyes shut against both the sunlight and the fireworks detonated inside his skull when he moved. He was naked. This fact bothered him because he never slept naked. He fished under his pillow and pulled out his shorts. This was just too weird. Trey forced his eyes open and bent down to pull the shorts on when he saw his shoes. His favourite shoes. What the hell . . . ?

There was a sharp knock at the door.

Trey ignored the knock, and the pain, and the sickness that consumed every molecule of him. He'd saved for *weeks* to be able to afford those trainers, and now they were lying on the floor ripped apart as though someone had taken a large carving knife and slashed at them in some frenzied attack. He leaned forward to get a closer look at the mess and gasped as the rush of blood to his head caused a balloon of pain to burst behind his eyes.

'My shoes! What the -?' His voice cracked as he tried to speak and his throat felt painfully raw. The pain pulsated in waves through his oesophagus, and his hand instinctively reached up to touch the flesh around his throat. He swallowed, wincing at the pain that even this simple act caused, and stood up, desperately looking around for something to drink, and saw properly for the first time the chaos that had become his bedroom. He turned in a slow circle, his mouth hanging open in utter disbelief as he took in the destruction and disorder that was all around him.

He shivered and became aware of the cold for the first time. Looking over his shoulder, he stared at the window which was hanging at an impossible angle from the buckled metal surround. Large gouges could be seen on the frame where the white plastic had been scored away, revealing the shiny metal underneath. The window itself was intact but appeared to have been torn away from the top hinge so that it hung outwards at a drunken incline. His eyes shifted to the wall to the side of the opening where great rents had been made in the plaster, as if someone had taken a garden fork and raked it along the surface.

How could he have slept through this? How could anyone have slept through this?

The entire room had been wrecked. His possessions – he had so few good things that he kept them tidily arranged and cared for – were scattered around the place, many broken and destroyed. His heart was slamming into his chest and he felt a sudden urge to scream out in anger. He wanted to cry. He wanted to kill someone. He wanted to find whoever had done this and -

The knock on the door was repeated, louder this time, and he turned to look in its direction. His eyes fell on the key that was still in the lock on this side. He walked over and twisted the door handle, expecting to feel the door give and open. He stepped back when it

refused to budge, staring at the white glossy surface suspiciously. Reaching forward again, he took the key between his thumb and finger and slowly turned it clockwise, the lines on his forehead deepening at the sound of the bolt sliding free from the plate in the door and receding back into the body of the mechanism. He let the door open an inch or two. Turning his head, he looked over again at the window, noting that the key was still in that lock too. His heart shifted up a gear and he looked about the room again in dismay, unable to even begin to try and piece together what might have happened here. The desire to throw up came over him again.

The damage to the window looked as if it had been done from the inside . . . and yet he had been in the room asleep. *Surely he would have woken up at the sound of all of this carnage going on around him?*

Trey slowly turned around and walked back to sit on his bed. He picked up his ruined trainers, ignoring the knives of pain that stabbed at his brain and sat down on the mattress, staring down at the ripped leather and rubber jumble that had so recently been his prized possession – the best pair of shoes he had ever owned.

They look like some kind of dissected animals, he thought, and he was reminded of the frogs that they had been made to cut apart in a biology class; their tough outer skins sliced open and then peeled back to reveal the gory interiors. The laces that he'd spent so long getting just right – he'd rethread them three times so that the bars would not be twisted – were now a ruptured, shredded mess.

'Trey?' Colin Wallington's voice came into the room through the small gap in the door that Trey had created. 'Are you all right, Trey?'

The door was pushed open a little further and Trey could hear the gasp.

'Oh my God. What have you done?'

Colin Wallington stepped into the room. He was a tall, skinny man with black, slicked-back hair and greedy eyes that never stayed still. These, coupled with a thin, hooked nose, gave him an unkind, bird-like appearance that had earned him the nickname of Vulture from the children under his care. He walked into the centre of the room gawping about him in

disbelief and shaking his head. He turned to stare at Trey with a look of rage.

'What have you done here?'

'Are you mad?' Trey croaked. 'I didn't do this. Why would I do this to *my* room and *my* stuff? Look at these shoes' He held them up for a second before realizing that he was still completely naked. He pulled the quilt over his lower half and reached for the pyjamas again, pulling them on over his legs beneath the covers.

Trey noticed that Colin's whole body was shaking as he stood, rooted to the spot; some galvanizing current running through his entire body anchoring him in position. He was clenching and unclenching his left hand as he looked at the teenager.

Trey had never seen the head care worker of Apple Grove Care Home so angry in the three years that he had been there. Colin was a hurtful, spiteful man who seemed to derive some sick kind of pleasure in belittling the children in his care at Apple Grove, but as far as Trey was aware, he had never physically harmed anyone in his charge; instead he was an insidious bully who relied upon harsh and unkind words to hurt the kids he didn't like. Trey had never seen him so worked up as he was now, and was fearful that the man might actually be on the point of hitting out at him.

'Do you have any idea how much trouble and extra work you have caused me with this little stunt?' Colin asked through clenched teeth. A tic had started up above his left eyebrow causing it to twitch repetitively. 'I'll have to file a report, get someone in to fix that window and—'

He stopped and sniffed, his face con torting into a gargoyle-like caricature of disgust, the tic still merrily dancing to some unheard tune over his eye.

'What in God's name is that stench?'

He bent and picked up the tattered sweatshirt at his feet. Smelling it and deciding that this was not the source of the reek that filled the room, he dropped it and eyed Trey suspiciously. 'What have you been *doing* in here, you disgusting little turd?'

Trey could smell it now. It was an oily, metallic smell which reminded him of rotting leaves and freshly-turned earth. But there was something else lying within this odour that was

not so easy to identify. A brownish-orange smell, which although strangely familiar to him, just eluded his attempts to identify it.

He stopped. B*rownish-orange smell? What on earth was he thinking? You don't see odours, you just . . . smell them.*

But that was exactly how he envisioned this smell that permeated through the room; as a rich, gravy-like colour with slowly pulsating globes of orange moving around within it – but even *colour* wasn't the right word to describe the feeling he was trying to pin down. It was more like a *memory* of a sensation; some innate sense that he had either lost or never used before; like being blind from birth and trying to describe how you *see* the sky in your mind's eye.

Frowning, he shook his head, trying to rattle loose these strange thoughts and clear them out.

'Are you listening to me?' Colin said, pointing a shaking finger at him. 'This,' he said, staring around him again, 'is too much. Even for you. I thought that we were beyond the anger issues that you brought with you when you came here three years ago. But clearly you need to be reminded of how to behave like a human being again. I'm going to refer you for a little *holiday* in the APU. I'm sure that you remember your last stay there? I'm sure that you'll feel right back at home once you're on a ward surrounded by a whole gang of other psychopaths. Pack your stuff, you'll be leaving for the Tank today.'

The Tank was a referral centre for the adolescent psychiatric unit where Apple Grove sent kids that had gone off of the rails. Self-harmers, kids who were at risk of suicide, violent and abusive children were all sent to the APU. The unit itself wasn't so bad, but before you got there you had to go to the Tank where the approach to keeping you quiet was to fill you so full of drugs that you became one of the living dead. Trey had been sent there five months after his arrival at the home when his refusal to communicate with anyone, coupled with beating up a boy named Matthew Cotter were deemed serious enough to warrant a visit. What the care home failed to realize was that Matthew Cotter had been the cause of Trey's refusal to talk and that he had been flushing Trey's head down the toilet every day for all of those

five months until the day Trey had snapped and fought back, putting the bully in hospital with a broken nose.

'Colin, I have already told you,' Trey said with a wince. Just talking was extremely painful. 'I didn't do any of this. Why on earth would I? You can't send me to the Tank for something I didn't do. Just listen to me. I don't know how –'

'I don't want to hear it, Mr Laporte. Now pack your stuff.'

'But.'

'Pack your stuff . . . NOW.'

'*Whatever*.' Trey glared at the care worker with utter contempt. 'I've only had those shoes a week!' He kicked out at one of the trainers, lost his footing and fell back on to the mattress again, where he sat scowling down at the floor. He was feeling progressively more unwell; he ached all over as if in the early stages of a virus.

'I think I must have been drugged,' he said meekly, shaking his head at how lame that sounded. 'Someone must have slipped something in my food or drink and then managed to break in here after me and do all this.'

'Oh yes, that's right, maybe Belinda or one of the other carers dropped some Rohypnol in to your tea while you weren't looking so that they could come in here and smash the place up. Then unseen, they carried you back in here and locked the door from the inside. Perhaps they're hiding under the bed right now? Come on, Trey, credit me with some intelligence will you?'

A deep sea of resentment rose up within Trey at the injustice of this whole situation. He clenched his fists and tried to control the anger that was building up inside him. He was the one who had been wronged here. It was *his* room and possessions that had been violated and destroyed, and here he was being accused of that very act. The brown-orange smell seemed to be getting stronger, more intense, and he felt the need to bellow his fury at the world. He was vaguely aware that the smell seemed to be coming from him, and it was coupled with an uncomfortable itching feeling in the base of his spine which quickly grew into an unbearable ache.

There was another knock at the door.

‘Not now,’ shouted Colin. ‘We’re not finished in here yet. I will not tell you again, Trey. Pack your stuff.’

Trey doubled over in pain as the spasms increased in intensity. His whole body felt incredibly hot and that itching-ache had spread so that all the skin on his body had become a source of exquisite agony. His stomach rolled and he gagged. ‘Colin, I’m telling you for the last time, I . . . ungh’

‘Oh, how convenient,’ the care worker sneered. ‘We get to the point where only the truth will fit the facts and you get ill! What? Do you think that this little act will save you from being sent to the Tank? Well think again.’

The soft, hesitant knock on the door was repeated and when it opened, Wendy Traver’s head appeared around the jamb. Wendy was a young woman with a kind face and a laugh that erupted from her whenever she was nervous or embarrassed – which was often. She was by far the nicest care worker in the home, and Trey admired how she always went the extra mile for the younger children, especially those who were new to the care environment.

‘Wendy love, not right now please. Young Trey and I are trying to get to the bottom of what has happened here and he appears to have rather fortuitously come over all peculiar.’

Wendy quickly took in the mess of the small room before turning her attention back to her boss. ‘I’m sorry. It’s just that it is rather important, Colin.’

‘So is this. So if you would be so kind as to leave us alone, I’ll deal with whatever it is when I get finished in here.’

Wendy chewed her bottom lip as she considered this, the small frown on her forehead deepening. Eventually she took a breath and announced, ‘Trey’s got a visitor. There is a gentleman in reception who says that he would like to see him. He says he’s his uncle.’ Wendy smiled up at Colin apologetically, before looking over in Trey’s direction. The look on her face was difficult to decipher, but Trey thought that she looked deeply uncomfortable and more than a little scared.

Trey slowly straightened up. The waves of pain that had so quickly escalated started

to recede as he took in this announcement. He looked for a clue in Wendy's face to see if she was playing some kind of a trick on him – although it would have been completely out of character for her to do such a thing – but her features merely mirrored his own puzzled expression.

Trey had no family. He was an orphan whose only living relative, his grandmother, had died three years earlier. The authorities had tried to find any extended family after her death to ascertain if there might be someone left willing to take him in, but none could be found, so he'd ended up in care.

Trey never had visitors, and he made a point of not being around on visiting days so as not to have to witness the buzz of excitement that took over the care home when the children knew that someone from the outside world was coming to see them. Today wasn't even a visiting day.

'What should I do?' Wendy asked. 'He was very insistent and said that it was a matter of the utmost urgency.'

Colin paused for a second and looked over at the fourteen year old boy in his charge. 'Ask him to wait in the visitor lounge please Wendy, and tell him that I shall be in shortly.'

He turned back to Trey as the door clicked shut, an unpleasant sneer playing across his thin, mean lips. 'Well, well. What do you know? Some long lost relative riding in on his white horse to rescue little orphan Annie. You'd better put some proper clothes on, if you can find any in amongst this chaos. Wait in here until I find out what this is all about.' He gestured with his thumb towards the window. 'And don't think for one second that you have heard the last about this little caper,' he said.

He turned and left the room, kicking the ruined trainers out of his way as he left.