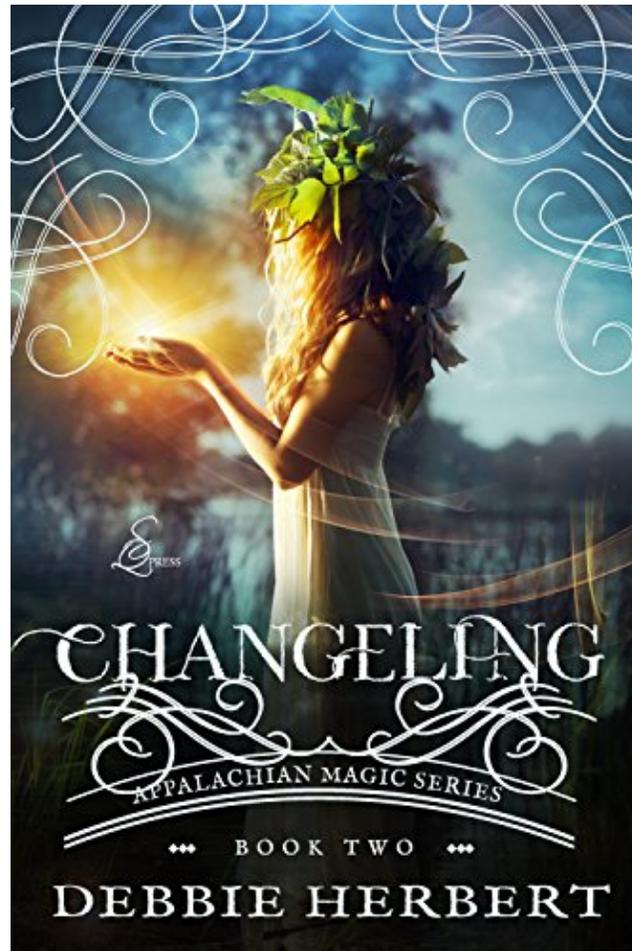


Changeling
by Debbie Herbert

Chapter One



Another spell gone kaput. *Damn.*

A thin curl of smoke wafted to the left from the candle's weak flame, an omen of defeat. The same sign as last week when she tried to concoct a love potion with a lock of Tanner's hair. If her family's Book of Shadows were any lamer it would have a picture of freaking Tinker Bell on the front. She should have been studying tonight instead of casting worthless spells. Freshman year at college was harder than she'd anticipated.

Skye blew out the sputtering pink candle. No matter how hard she tried, they never worked. Maybe asking for Tanner to come over immediately and declare his hidden and undying love was too much of a stretch for even the all-powerful divine.

Bet Callie could do it.

Skye whipped out her cell phone, but stopped mid-dial. Callie would say it was wrong to request a specific person's love because it violated their free will to choose for themselves. *Only do a spell to open yourself to love and for the right person to come along.* Same thing Skye told customers at *The Green Fairy* trying to get their boyfriends back.

As if there could be anyone for her but Tanner.

What she really needed was courage. She should tell Tanner how she felt. It *was* possible he was blind to her feelings even after all these years.

The crunch of gravel in the driveway and the rumble of a car engine startled her and Skye opened the curtain. Tanner's old Dodge Charger pulled up.

Unbelievable – her spell actually worked this time. Maybe she had some witchy-talent after all.

Tanner sprang out of the car, waved, then bounded up the steps laden with paper bags in both arms. His easy smile twisted her insides like it had since grade school.

She would do it. Tonight. Just get it over with. She'd mooned over him all during those miserable, outcast high school years when she'd been branded as the weird, Goth girl. College was supposed to be different. Her chance to escape labels and dare try new things.

Skye opened the door and Tanner stopped short, one fisted hand raised to knock. "Eager to see me?" His deep voice filled the silence, his tone was always teasing, always seemed to hold a secret laughter and confident charisma.

Skye's breath caught for a moment. He looked sexy as hell with his dancing eyes and wind-swept hair. Her spell was answered; maybe her dreams would be too. If Callie were here, she would tell Skye to believe and all would work out.

"Michael asked me to drop this by." Tanner held up the bags. "He noticed your fridge was looking pretty low last time you cooked for us."

"Oh, right. Thanks." She led him to the kitchen and put up the groceries, hyper aware of his masculine presence. "What's Michael doing tonight?" Her brother and Tanner were almost always together.

Tanner wouldn't quite meet her eye. "He's busy. Where do you want me to put this bottle of Diet Coke?"

Everything clicked. Michael's dad, *their* dad, was in town on a visit. A visit that didn't include his daughter. It hurt, but it was no surprise. He'd left home not long after she was born and they were strangers. Michael had been two years old at the time. Time enough to, in pop psychology-speak, 'bond'. Dear ole Dad must have slipped Michael some money and her brother was sweet enough to share.

"Just put it on the counter," she said dully. Here she was trying to build her confidence to talk to Tanner and rejection slapped her in the face.

"Mind if I have one?" Without waiting for an answer, he filled a glass with ice and poured a drink.

Don't let your father's neglect keep you from talking to Tanner.

Skye gathered her courage. "Tanner, can we talk?"

"Okay." He pulled a chair up to the kitchen table and she sat across from him. "Shoot."

She stared in his eyes; they always sparkled as if he was secretly amused by everybody and everything. In the ensuing silence, Skye heard the hum of the fridge, the drone of the TV from downstairs, and music blaring from several houses down.

"Spit it out." Tanner hated stillness.

"How long have we known each other?"

"Fifth grade. Michael was the first friend I made when I moved to Piedmont. You were the second."

Skye saw her opening. "Is that how you still think of me – as Michael's little sister . . . a friend?"

"Of course."

Her heart contracted into a hard little bundle of hurt. He certainly wasn't keeping her in suspense; there had been no hesitation in his answer. He shifted his eyes to the floor. Not a good sign. But she might as well keep going. Her heart pounded and her palms sweated.

"What if I wanted more?" The words were quiet, but in the silence, the inner thrumming of Skye's racing pulse roared in her ears.

Tanner's mouth dropped open. He gulped. A couple of seconds ticked by. Major awkward. Oh goddesses, what had she been thinking? She'd ruined everything. Any chance or hope of . . .

“You’re joking, right?” He leaned across the table and cuffed her shoulder, very friend-like. “C’mon Skye, we’re buds. Always have been.” Tanner’s laugh sounded forced, his smile nervous.

Skye jumped up. “Right. Forget I said anything. I’m in a weird mood tonight, must be the full moon. Tell Michael thanks for the groceries.” She walked out of the claustrophobic kitchen quickly, eyes burning and face flaming. She would not cry.

She would *not* cry.

He followed her out and then paused to answer his cell phone. She heard his voice, low and hurried, “Hey, call you back in a few minutes.”

Probably some girl. It was always some other girl, never her. At least now she knew.

Skye sat on the couch and faced the TV as if she hadn’t gone and made a complete and total fool of herself. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tanner standing in the hallway, running his hands through his dark hair and shuffling his feet. Why the hell hadn’t she kept her mouth shut?

“Gotta go.” He held up the cell phone and waved it. “Some of us guys are getting together for a party.”

Skye took a deep breath and faced him with a fake smile. “Sure, see ya later.” She jerked her head back to the TV screen. She would not cry.

Skye was so intent on not crying she didn’t hear Tanner cross the room, and suddenly his breath was in her hair, his lips kissed the top of her head. The warm breath sent an electrifying tingle from her scalp to her toes. Skye dug her hands in the chair’s arms to keep from flinging herself on Tanner. This was nothing but a pity kiss.

The heat from Tanner’s body withdrew and he left without another word. Her body chilled from the loss of contact. The door shut. Alone, Skye let the tears flow. That kiss said what Tanner couldn’t, or wouldn’t, say to her face. She tried to convince herself that in knowledge was power and healing.

It didn’t work.

Skye touched the blackened, scorched wicks of the so-called magic candles. The dripping wax, still warm, mocked her failure with the botched love spell. Stay busy, that was the plan to get through this night. Resolutely, she put up the rest of the groceries Tanner brought, pulling out milk, butter, then a Mason jar of jam. Skye held the jar in her hand and paused.

The smooth, cool feel of the glass tingled and she drew a finger over its etched design of grapes and vines. The light and dark swirls of orange marmalade blurred into congealed sunshine and the glass warmed in her palms.

It was like holding magic again. At seven, she'd had her first experience with the possibility of something beyond the here-and-now of the physical world.

She'd captured a firefly one evening and put it in a Mason jar before going to bed. She'd awakened hours later and found the jar aglow with pinpoints of spinning light. Squeaking noises from it grew in volume to gibberish words and she'd pulled the cover over her head, terrified of what might happen next. At some point, she'd fallen asleep and the next morning the jar was empty. No dead fireflies inside, only a hairline crack running from the base to the lid.

There had been magic in that room, she was certain. Her first glimpse of the world beyond.

Skye set down the jam jar on the kitchen counter and sighed. Too bad there had been no magic for her tonight with Tanner.

Kheelan stood outside in the moon shadows, alone. Always alone.

There was nothing to be gained from watching the soft orange glow emanating from the girl's apartment, yet he was drawn to it all the same. He imagined the glimmer as a muted reflection of moonlight on her mass of red hair with its intriguing streaks of purple framing her face. His fingers curled into fists, blocking the frustrated itch to feel his hands stroking that silky hair. He guessed how it would feel— soft, warm, like a safe harbor in the gathering maelstrom of Fae energy.

The blood moon of October cast shimmering beams, tingeing the treetops with crimson. By Halloween, it would reach fullness, and the balance of good and evil in the Fae kingdom would be in peril just as the veil between the human and spirit worlds would be at its thinnest. An in-between, middling time. A dangerous time.

But Kheelan was used to being in two worlds at once, yet belonging to neither.

What was wrong with him? You'd think he'd never seen a beautiful girl. Besides, even the prettiest human couldn't compare to the charm and enchantment of any run-of-the-mill fairy. And he should know. The *daoine-sith* Fae Kingdom rewarded him with a fairy lover whenever he completed an especially dangerous mission — like they were giving an obedient dog a bone.

Kheelan smoldered at the humiliation. His skin burned from it, his mouth scorched from the angry words he must never say aloud. They had stolen him from his human family, a family of which he had no memories. He'd no doubt been sleeping unaware the night those cradle robbers came and forced him into a lifetime of servitude and danger.

He got nothing in return. No love, no acceptance, and no hope of a future. Indeed, they despised him.

Changeling. How he hated the word, been taunted with it, as if it was some kind of deformity on his part. A mere changeling, worthy of nothing more than scorn and tolerated for what he could do in their selfish, petty wars or their unending, menial labors. He summoned his enormous will and pushed the bitter thoughts away. Deep in his mind was a place no one else could enter, a private refuge he refused to let them destroy. A soul some might call it. His and his alone.

The sound of music vibrated from the girl's apartment. It was dramatic, haunting even. He liked it, appreciated that it was worlds different from the incessant Celtic flute, or even worse, the brain-splintering bagpipe music his captors so adored. Kheelan closed his eyes and let the melody wash over his senses.

When the music stopped, he looked up to the window and saw the light extinguished. He yearned for the light, the music, and most of all for the unknown human girl curled up in bed, unknowing and uncaring of the forces swirling around her. No, not her specifically, he corrected himself. Merely what she represented—normalcy. She probably had a family who thought she could do no wrong, who were proud of her every accomplishment, a daddy's girl, princess-type. They had nothing in common. The human was a suspect, one of many he must investigate in this college town.

Somebody was murdering the pixies. His job was to find out who and why and bring them to the Fae's royal Seelie Court. Should he fail . . . well, even the good Fae of the Seelie Court had their ways of punishing, and if a member of the Unseelie Court discovered a changeling meddling in their affairs, it could mean an even worse fate. As a human changeling, his purpose was to mingle with his fellow mortals, searching for information to assist the good Fae in their unceasing war with the bad, Unseelie Fae. Too bad they never entrusted him with any special powers in his work – probably afraid he would use magic to escape his bondage.

Time to leave. He would come back tomorrow night. Samhain, the witch's Halloween, drew nearer, each year more sinister than the one before. His instructions from the Seelie Court Fae, his owners, were to find the culprit before Samhain. Or else. That left a mere two weeks. Kheelan wrapped the deep maroon duster tightly around his lithe body and disappeared into the night to join the unsuspecting, blissfully ignorant, human mass.

"The Moon. Five of Swords. Seven of Cups," Glenna announced in voice laden with doom.

Skye bit her lower lip, smothering a laugh as Glenna surveyed the tarot cards. At Glenna's expression of defeat, she tried to encourage her coworker. "Oh, come on. It can't be all bad."

Claribel, the storeowner, winked at Skye from across the store.

Same old Glenda, same old Claribel. Skye's pride still smarted from last night's rejection, but the routine of classes and her job helped keep her mind off the hurt.

"Course it's bad, always is," said Glenna, not comforted in the least. "The Moon card means that things are not what they appear. The Five of Swords reveals I am being deceived and the Seven of Cups represents illusions and confusion."

Skye squirted more glass cleaner on the display counter. "Don't go jumping all over your boyfriend tonight with false accusations."

"Who says it has anything to do with Mickey?" Glenna scowled and swiped up the offending cards. "It could be anybody. Trust no one." She wrapped the deck in a purple silk cloth and put it back in its wooden case beneath the cash register.

Gloomy Glenna, bet she's a real blast on a date. Skye moved on to the crystal displays, her favorite spot in The Green Fairy shop. The color and textures of the crystals never failed to enchant her.

"You could look at that tarot spread another way." Claribel toted a stack of books to the front counter, breathing hard from the minor exertion. She dropped the books on the counter with a grunt and pushed wisps of curls away from her eyes. "The Moon represents your considerable psychic abilities, the Five of Swords can mean victory and the Seven of Cups may be warning you to listen to your emotions instead of your intellect."

Glenna tossed her mane of long, black hair. "No way."

Skye couldn't stop a snort of amusement. 'Glenna' and 'intellect' didn't go together in the same sentence. Glenna glared her way, eyes as gray and turbulent as a November storm. Actually, it was more like a half-glare since her severe side part and long bangs kept her left eye permanently obscured.

"Now girls, let's all get along." Claribel smiled cheerily at them. She patted her lopsided bun, which was held in place by pastel fairy wands used as hair barrettes. Gray tendrils escaped increasingly as the day went on. By closing time, half her hair would be up, half down. Everything about Claribel was a bit askew, from her smudged glitter eyeliner and tangled charm necklaces to her twisted peasant blouse tucked into a long purple skirt, now smudged with dust.

The messiness drove Skye nuts, but Claribel grew on you after a while. In the few weeks she'd worked at the metaphysical shop, her employer had taken an almost maternal interest in her. She brought in homemade brownies, worried over Skye's unreliable old Mustang, and encouraged her to take some jewelry design classes next semester. *She's more motherly than my own Mom.* Skye shook off the disquieting thought, determined not to go there.

“You’ve got some hanging threads by one of your shirt buttons,” she told Claribel. When the older woman started to pull at one, Skye stopped her. “Let me fix it for you.” She found a pair of scissors to snip the thread and approached her boss.

Claribel’s eyes widened and she took a step backward.

“What’s wrong?” Skye waved the scissors in the air. “You know I’m not going to hurt you with these.”

“Of course not.” Claribel shuddered. “It’s just that I’m ... allergic to certain metals. Make sure it doesn’t touch my skin.”

“Sure thing.” Skye cut the dangling thread and held it up triumphantly. “All done. You’re still intact.”

Claribel backed away. “Very good. Guess it’s time for me to set out the daily treats for the Wee Ones.”

Strange. But Skye was used to Claribel’s little eccentricities.

Her boss brought out several ceramic thimbles from under the counter and squeezed a smidgeon of honey in each. Glenna and Skye watched the nightly ritual in mutual amusement, one of the few times in which they enjoyed a camaraderie.

Out came the M&Ms, the pastel-colored ones. The shop’s freezer held bags of the special candy colors that were only available during Easter season. Claribel arranged the thimbles and candy in a circle. Her last step in the ritual was to sprinkle pink and purple fairy dust, a. k. a. dime store glitter, in the middle of the arrangement since, as Claribel liked to say, ‘the fairies favor the light and the bright.’

“When we come in tomorrow, the entire set-up will look exactly the same as it does right now.” Glenna droned this observation nightly.

“Oh, but the fairies only take the *essence* of the food, remember?” Claribel was undeterred in her fairy enthusiasms. Her belief seemed unshakeable.

“Have you ever seen a real fairy?” Glenna asked.

Skye frowned at Glenna. Unbelievable that someone so unrelentingly negative found a boyfriend. There must truly be someone for everyone.

Claribel broke the tension. “Skye, you were right, business is slow today because of the football game. Let’s take this opportunity to do some real deep-cleaning.”

Glenna moaned. "Tell the brownies to do the work. Aren't they supposed to be house fairies that clean homes when the family's asleep?"

"You can't command the fairies to do your chores," Claribel explained. "Either they grant you a boon or not, their choice."

Skye rubbed her hands. She'd been itching for an opportunity to do this since she started working here. "I'll take the storeroom," she volunteered. She grabbed a broom and dustpan and headed to the back before anyone could stop her.

Alone downstairs, Skye took out her radio and tuned in to the game. Bama was up 21-7 on Tennessee. Yes! She pumped a fist in the air. Would Tanner get a chance to play tonight? Probably not. As a freshman, he'd warmed the bench all season, to his great disappointment. Being an all-star receiver in small-town Piedmont meant nothing here in Tuscaloosa. Small-town heroes all over the state were just more wannabes with this powerhouse SEC team. Her brother, Michael, had caught a lucky break; he'd played half a game last week when a starting lineman and the second string were both injured.

Last night's pain returned. Resolutely, Skye pushed away the memory. She pulled her waist-length red hair into a ponytail and sized up the job. The room was dark and damp, with only a single window high up on the back wall that was grated with black, iron burglar bars, and coated with a nasty gray film from years of neglect. A one-inch thick grime had settled on nearly every object and trash was strewn everywhere. Boxes of crystals and bottles of essential oils lay next to unalphabetized books. She scowled; clearly there was no system in place.

She set to work sweeping the floor first, so as not to trip on some fallen object. The only thing in the world she enjoyed more than making crystal jewelry was getting things in order. Better make that her third favorite thing. Hanging out with Tanner was the best, even if he just thought of her as Michael's little sister.

The radio broadcast was good company and she listened for Tanner's name, hoping he would get a chance to play. She pictured him sitting on the sideline, helmet in hand, waiting to be called in. He'd be decked out in his pads and uniform, sweaty from a pregame workout, and his dark hair would be slightly damp and curling on the ends.

She slipped into a favorite daydream where he rose from the bench and scanned the bleachers for her in the crowd. They made eye contact and then Tanner would throw down his helmet and run up the aisle where she waited, realizing he was madly in love . . .

What the heck was this crap laying on the floor? She scowled at the huge, dried-up insect carcasses in the dustpan and threw them in a wastebasket. Major icky. The room looked like it had never been swept. A perfect breeding ground for mice. She swept up another dustpan load and checked to see if there were any mouse droppings. Whew, none. That was a relief at least.

She started tossing the mess, but looked again at the oversized carcasses wondering what kind of insects had died down here. They were fairly large, about three or four inches, and had wings.

A faint green glow sputtered for an instant in the dustpan. Skye stared harder. The glow had vanished, but the remaining dust had iridescent sparkles that glittered in the faint light. The room was eerily silent, the radio off. Now that was weird. A cold draft chilled her back and she glanced over her shoulder, uneasy and jumpy.

It struck her that she was totally alone in the basement and probably no one upstairs would even hear her if she screamed.

Get real. The batteries were shot in that old radio and had finally died. These insects were probably . . . dragonflies.

At first glance, yes, but closer examination showed a larger body, almost human-like. No, it had to be dragonflies. Odd for October, but there was no telling the last time the storeroom had been cleaned, if ever. For sure, it hadn't been in the few weeks she'd been working here.

And she had imagined the green glow. Really, it was probably like a floater or something in her eyes. She'd think of something else and stay busy. Claribel would be so surprised when she came downstairs and saw how much cleaner it was.

Skye smiled, remembering her strange job interview with Claribel. Her woman's first question had been to ask her astrological sign.

Pisces.

Then Skye had to write out her full name, 'Skye Violet Watters', on a blank sheet of paper so Claribel could analyze her penmanship and do a numerological reading. She only asked one question, but it was a doozie. "Are you a witch?"

Skye had stumbled on the answer. "I guess . . . technically . . . I would have to say yes. I mean, my mom is one."

"Technically?" Claribel raised an eyebrow and her lips twitched in amusement.

"I'm not a very good one," she'd admitted. "I was raised in The Craft but I've never done a spell that went the way it was supposed to."

"The goddesses have a mind of their own and usually it all works out for the best," Claribel said, seemingly unconcerned with the confessed failure.

What a wonderful contrast to her mother's icy disapproval. Skye had rushed in to redeem herself. "But I absolutely love crystals. I design jewelry based on a person's energy and needs."

Skye pulled out the design sketchbook she'd brought with her, and Claribel flipped through the pages, nodding in satisfaction. "You have a great talent."

She'd noticed Claribel's unusual thumb ring: it looked like a moon or planet orb set atop a band of titanium. Tiny obsidian circles formed craters and random chips of moonstone cast tiny flecks of light on the dark metal.

Claribel never looked up from the sketchbook, but said, "The ring – it was a gift from my late husband."

"It's very unique." Skye wasn't sure if she liked it or not. A bit large and gaudy for her taste. Maybe it was the kind of piece that grew on you because it was given by a loved one.

She jumped when the sketchbook slammed shut. "You're hired," Claribel said. "The fairies like you."

"Uhm . . . great." Fairies? Well, a job was a job. And working at The Green Fairy would be a training ground for learning more about matching crystals to customer needs. Not to mention she needed the money.

Skye looked around the dingy basement and sighed. The job would be perfect if it wasn't for Glenna. But she could put up with her black moodiness.

An odd humming noise caught Skye's attention. She stilled and listened. The sounds were like the faint droning of insects, possibly bees. She walked further in the back, trying to find the source. The humming volume increased and drew closer, buzzing near her ears. Mosquitoes? But summer was over, even in the Deep South. She didn't see anything, but it was darker here further in the back.

She sniffed and the aroma seemed linked to some childhood memory . . . but at the edge of her awareness, like trying to recall a dream. The more you tried to remember, the further it receded into some gray nether-region.

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