

# CHANGELING

## THE LOST

*A Storytelling Game of Beautiful Madness*

Sample file



# What Alec Bourbon Said

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They called the guy Alec Bourbon because he loved to drink, but aside from that, he had a strange way about him. It made some people nervous and it made some people laugh, but Alec never left anyone around him untouched. Whenever he and the regulars who hung around his shithole local heard that Van Morrison song on the jukebox, "Jackie Wilson Said," Alec would change that line to "Alec Bourbon Said," and then he'd follow it up with any bit of doggerel that came to mind and howl it to the bar at top volume. Even weirder was that people played along — if he said, "Alec Bourbon said thumb your nose," every (other) rummy and souse in the joint would thumb his nose and laugh like it was the greatest joke in the world. They'd pound the heavy oak tables in that old bar, and for a brief moment, the air wasn't so heavy with stale smoke or the smell of losers.

The bar was named after some almost-forgotten church, a haunted ruin where witches danced as the drunken protagonist stumbled home in an old poem. This wasn't a place where ironic hipsters or slumming socialites went to drink beer from cans. This was a place where men who had witnessed hard lives went to die slowly, poisoning themselves along the way. It was always winter inside, the end of something, cold and melancholy but for the few brief moments when something comic happened. Even then, though, that mirth was momentary, like the time Old Dom slipped in a pool of spilled beer and fell on his face, shoving his glasses into his baggy eyes. The whole place guffawed at Dom's goggled peepers! The surgery left him entirely blind in one eye and mostly blind in the other, though. Old Dom owed Alec \$20. Alec Bourbon liked it cold and dark inside the bar.

Our man had a face like the bole of a tree and hands like a tree's gnarled roots. His hair, when he didn't wear that greasy New York Jets cap, looked like a crow's nest of thatch and twigs. Even Alec's disposition could grow as dark as the wooden surfaces of the bar on occasion, especially when women were involved. They hated him, and he hated them. Butch, behind the bar, said that Alec Bourbon had been married years ago, but that she was a beer woman, so he eventually had to kill her. Alec said Butch had a shit sense of humor, to shut the fuck up and that puns were the lowest form of language. Butch told Alec to pay his tab and that was the only time in 37 years that Alec didn't offer a returning remark. It was Alec's bar anyway, even if he didn't own it or work there. He was there more than anyone else.

So it was that the mumblesome old regulars who shared Alec's bar were surprised one night when in walked a pretty young woman looking at least a

century Alec's junior and asked for him. She wore a bright green dress. Her eyes were wide and dewy, her legs long and strong, and more than a few coarse words passed among those hoary men when she arrived.

"Alec's in the shitter," Butch said.

"I will wait," she replied. Not "I'll wait," but "I will wait." And so she waited.

When Alec returned from the bathroom, he carried his glass with him. "Thirsty work!" he called to no one in particular, and all those no ones in particular laughed, just like they always did, before returning to their own drinks. This time, though, they kept their eyes on him.

He walked back to his bar and sat on his high, wooden stool. The woman, her hands clasped before her, approached him. "You are Alec Bourbon."

He replied by looking at her, eye-to-eye, and downing his drink in a long gulp.

"I am Anne —"

"I know who you are, rabbit," he cut her off, "and if you want what you want, you have to have a drink with me."

"I do not drink," she protested. Short, quiet laughs and vague comments about femininity floated through the air from patrons seated at the oak and mahogany recesses of the bar's tables.

"You do if you want to talk to me." This much was true. Alec rarely received guests at the bar, but when he did, they always drank with him, some more willingly than others. Several loud young men from Boston once drank with him eagerly. An enormous steelworker who came to see him drank reluctantly. "You drink with me, I do as you ask," Alec said.

"You do not know what I shall ask," the woman continued, though she took a seat next to him (even though he never stood for her or offered it to her, the cad).

"I didn't get to be the man I am today by hiding my head in the bushes!" Alec bellowed, slapping his hand on the bar with a sound like a cudgel.

The woman skittishly agreed. "I assume we drink bourbon?"

"Bully for you, honey."



After that, no one heard what they said to each other for the rest of the night. The woman left, but no one could tell you when, or how many drinks she had or her apparent mood when she left. Everyone at the bar just nodded and looked the other way. Butch swore he put the woman's only drink on Alec's tab. Butch vaguely remembered her saying something about a year and a day.



Muttering to himself, Alec rode the downtown train. "Promises, promises," he snarled at the world, or maybe to anyone who had the power to do anything about them. That was his life, promises and dreams. He imagined that in anyone else's life, a world of promises and dreams would be a beautiful thing. Not so for him. He kept promises because he had to. For the same reason, he kept so many dreams at bay.

At the second stop after the transfer line, the woman with the dewy eyes and long legs got on the train. She wore a dour gray dress and a raincoat almost the same color as the dress, only a little more blue.

Alec noticed her but paid her no mind. She saw him, but her eyes betrayed no hint of recognition.

Other people boarded the train, too: teenagers going home late from friends' houses, short-order cooks coming off the mid-shift, lawyers who put in long hours. Alec didn't know any of them. A man in a suit on a cell phone bumped his knee and said, "Sorry, old man." Alec offered a half-hearted reply, "Promises, promises." The man in the suit gave Alec a curious look that expressed a lack of comprehension, but then turned away and returned to his cell phone conversation. Alec was obviously senile. Just another nut on the train.

Alec sat in the same seat for the whole trip, his left hand wrapped around the railing like a tree branch that had grown around an intruding fence post. He kept his right hand in his pocket, except for the dozen times he brought it out to raise his flask to his lips.

At the south eight stop, the woman with the dewy eyes and long legs got off the train. Alec left the train, too. She went down the stairs and onto the street. Alec followed, 99 steps behind her, sipping from his flask. She turned left on Third, left again on Alder and then right on Sixth. Alec had gone left on Fifth, left again on Holly and then left onto Sixth.

Alec wanted her to have enough time.

When he turned onto Sixth, no one was there. It was too cold to be out long this time of year, but that was the way Alec liked it. The bourbon in his flask kept him warm, and he smoked a cigarette, clutching it between his fingers, feeling its heat through his cutoff gloves. That was probably long enough, he reasoned, and took a few steps down the block.

The brownstone he lingered in front of was lit up with cold light, only a few of the windows displaying any hint of the season's coming holidays. Presently, a couple dressed in running gear came out the front door, walking a pale-eyed Weimaraner. Alec grabbed the doorknob before the door closed and pushed his way inside. He found the foyer damnably warm.

D7. Fourth floor. Alec took the stairs.

As he came to the landing on the fourth floor, Alec checked his jacket. There, inside, he felt the length of polished flying rowan he carried with him. It had always done the trick in these circumstances. He squinted his eyes and pursed his lips, as if the thought pained him; the club always helped him fulfill his promises.

Alec Bourbon knocked on the door of D7.



The dewy-eyed woman answered, though the door was chained. She had changed from her workaday dress into a slouchy sweatshirt and jeans. Blue light emanated from the room behind her, the television spilling its content, unheeded, awaiting her return.

For a moment, the woman's face looked confused. Then a look of recognition washed over her features. "Uncle Roy?" she asked.

"That's right, my dear," Alec Bourbon replied. "I've brought your birthday present."

The woman smiled, elated. She closed the door, and Alec heard the rattle of the chain on the other side. Then she opened it again, her arms wide to embrace him. He didn't, but she didn't act snubbed.

Wretched apartment. He was doing her a favor. The TV, he saw, was tuned to the Mets game (the *Mets*, of all games!). A cat hunched over its food and water dishes in the kitchenette. Alec could hear the hum of the microwave, could smell the reek of frozen food sluggishly thawing and cooking in its heavy sauces.

"Do you want a beer, Uncle Roy?" the woman asked.

Alec gritted his bark-textured teeth. "No, dear, I've brought my own." He took out his flask and took a deep swig, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. Then he put his flask away, without bothering to offer her any.

She smiled anyway and took a bottle of diet ginger ale out of the refrigerator. Pouring herself a juice glass full of the stuff, she went over to the couch, the television grabbing her attention again. "What's this about a birthday present?" she called over her shoulder. "I don't see anything wrapped."

"You have three guesses, dearest. If you can guess what it is, I won't give it to you."

The woman took her eyes away from the TV again and looked at him. "That's a strange gift to give. You *won't* give it to me if I guess what it is?"

"That's right. Now what's your first guess?"

"That doesn't make any sense," she said, intrigued by the weird, unconventional nature of the present. She hadn't even planned on celebrating her birthday. No one at the office knew today was the day, and she was tired anyway. Maybe she and some of the girls could get together this weekend.

"Just indulge your Uncle Roy, sweetheart."

"Is it Mets tickets?" She came over to stand with him in the kitchenette, hoping to gain a clue, to see if he held something that might give away some of the surprise.

Alec Bourbon rolled his eyes. "No, it's not Mets tickets."

"Is it a CD?"

"No, it's not a CD. I wouldn't know what music to get you. All your music sounds like racket to me anyway."

She laughed as the microwave beep-beep-beeped that it was done. "Is it a collar for Robespierre?"

*Robespierre? What the hell kind of name is that for a cat?* Alec wondered. "No, it's not that. So now I have to give it to you" He sighed heavily as he drew the length of wood from inside his jacket.

She made a confused face — just as all the women always did — and he swung the club at her face with such ferocity that it burst her nose and mouth at once. A spatter of blood showered across the linoleum floor and the countertops.

The confused look remained on her face, but her eyes bulged with pain and welled with tears.

Alec Bourbon struck her again, and she fell. And then again. And again and again and again. She didn't move, slumping awkwardly against the lower cabinets, her legs splayed out at a painful angle and her sweatshirt sopping up some of the spilled blood.

Alec Bourbon locked the door, chained it and sat down on the threadbare loveseat, his head in his hands, unmoving, his tears oozing slowly like sap from a tree's severed limb. "Robespierre, clean up some of that goddamn mess in there, would you?" The cat licked its paw twice, then went into the bedroom and curled up on the hamper.

By the time the game had wound down, Alec Bourbon was drunk as a lord, but he still had work to do. He pulled himself up from the loveseat with a suppressed sob and returned to the small kitchen to clean up the remains.

The blood on the floor was gone, but the blood that soaked into the sweatshirt still stained it, a crimson blemish. The woman's body had vanished. In its place sat a rudely made corn dolly. In place of the doll's head, a severed rabbit's head had been tacked to the poppet. The rabbit's face wore a hideous rictus, and one of its eyes was clouded over. Everything smelled of wax and lacquer.

Alec Bourbon gathered these as quickly as his clumsy stupor would let him and stuffed them into a trash bag. Then he put an additional scoop of cat food in Robespierre's bowl. Taking up the bag, he climbed out of the window and clattered gracelessly down the fire escape into the alley.



"I had a promise to keep, if it's any of your business, you mop-headed young fuckface," Alec Bourbon told Butch, behind the bar. "I need a constitutional. I'll have a beer and a shot on the side."

Everyone at the bar roared. Alec drinking beer! It happened only once or twice a year, and he always made a face like an old woman birthing a live snake. He never told anybody why he ordered beer once or twice a year, so they respected that, but they teased him about it insofar as he'd let them. Old Dom said, "Don't treat him special. Pour him that same piss you pour everyone else."

They laughed and sang and somebody played "Jackie Wilson Said," whereupon Alec called out, "Alec Bourbon said, tug your tongue!" and everyone tugged their tongues and laughed some more. The bar might have been cold, but everyone's minds and blood were warm.

"Whatsinna bag?" some loutish young ratso from down the street asked Alec, seeing the trash bag at his feet as he sat at his rugged stool.

"Losing lottery tickets. You want to buy some?" Alec ribbed the kid right back.

"Naw way, old man," the kid replied.

"Good on you," Alec said.

Just then, the door opened, and a dewy-eyed woman with long, strong legs walked in. She wore a royal blue dress and a bright green wool coat to fend off the outside cold. A chill wind blew in through the open door, and everyone in the place wanted to say, "Shut that goddamn door!" but everyone also knew not to say anything.

The woman walked to the bar where Alec sat. He downed his beer and waved Butch away.



"Seeing you does my heart good, Alec Bourbon. I trust everything came off without a hitch?"

"It did indeed, Anne Timothy." Despite the woman's salubrious tone, Alec's face wore no smile.

"You have my many thanks," she said, and motioned to Butch to come back over.

Alec was surprised. None of the people not from the bar ever drank with him if they didn't have to. Even those rowdy Boston boys pleaded that they had to get back on the road. "You're going to take a drink with me?" he asked.

"Certainly, I cannot. But I know you gave your word, and a promise fulfilled is a burden eased. Even if only temporarily." Her eyes went to the bag and then to the bartender. "Mr. Bourbon will have his namesake," she called to Butch. "A token of my appreciation."

By the time Butch returned with the shot, Alec had knocked back the one that still stood before him. If he was still surprised, he didn't show it. He didn't want her to see what made him work. She knew one of his promises. He didn't want her to guess any more. "I suppose you'll want this, then." He reached down to the floor and offered her the trash bag. It still smelled faintly of wax and lacquer.

"Yes, that is part of the promise, too, I believe." She smiled. Alec shrugged.

She got up and walked out of the bar without a backward glance. The cold wind blew in again, but the door banged shut quickly.

Butch was the first to break the silence. "Shot down, Prince Charming?" Everyone else half-laughed nervously.

"Stop your braying, you gap-toothed jackass," Alec said. "Here, take this bourbon and put it above the lintel there. Don't spill a drop, and leave it there until I ask for it."

Butch furrowed his brow but complied. "Just leave it here?"

"Just leave it there," Alec Bourbon confirmed. He wasn't the only one who had made promises. Now he could hold Anne Timothy to one of hers.





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This game's for all of you out there who love those old stories that change a little bit each time a new storyteller picks them up. We love them, too. Enjoy.



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# CHANGELING

## THE LOST

### Table of Contents



PROLOGUE: 2  
WHAT  
ALEC BOURBON  
SAID



CHAPTER ONE: 18  
THE WORLD  
BEHIND THE MASK



CHAPTER THREE: 170  
SPECIAL RULES  
AND SYSTEMS



APPENDIX ONE: 286  
ENTITLEMENTS

10 INTRODUCTION



70 CHAPTER TWO:  
CHARACTER CREATION



230 CHAPTER FOUR:  
STORYTELLING



322 APPENDIX TWO:  
THE FREEHOLD OF MIAMI











he rubbed her hand. It had stopped bleeding, but it still ached. More like itched. The scratches on her legs were swelling, too, and every step made her toes slither together.

Blood was collecting in her sneakers.

She'd been calling out to him for hours. She'd been yelling his name. She'd followed him into the garden, and she was planning on really giving him the business because he knew he wasn't to be out after dark. But now here she was in a part of the woods she'd never seen before, all cut up from the thorns. She'd lost the path an hour ago, and she'd been calling out his name ever since, calling out...

...his name. What was his name?

She stopped and shook her head. His name was *there*, in her brain, and she knew it. She knew her cat's name (Penguin) and she knew her employers' names (Brian and Stella) and she knew *their* cat's name (Fusi) but what the hell was the kid's name?

She kept walking, toes still wet from blood, hand still itching from the scratch. She was walking slower now.

She was confused, having trouble catching her breath or maybe her thoughts —

— and when the face appeared, she nearly screamed.

“Go back!” The face had a head behind it and a body under it, and it looked rather familiar, kind of like the girl who'd drowned last year.

“Aren't you dead?” she asked.

The girl-thing — it didn't really look like the girl, just from a certain angle — shook its head violently. “No time! Go back! The path's behind you just a few steps!”

“But I have to find... him.”

The girl-thing shut its eyes tight, as though trying to block out pain. It was silent for a long moment. And then it said, “He's back at home already.”

She started to protest, but then found she didn't have the energy. She walked a few paces back. Found the path. Went back to the house.

Later, her employers would ask her why she left Danny — *that* was his name! — alone for so long. Why she'd gone walking through the rose bushes (because where else had those scratches come from?). But all she could think of was the girl-thing, and how sad and scared it looked, and why it had been wearing a dog's collar.

And why Danny seemed *taller* now than he had that morning, and why he didn't know his cat's name.



# INTRODUCTION

*"Be easy," answered the nix, "I will make thee richer and happier than thou has ever been before, only thou must promise to give me the young thing which has just been born in thy house."*

— "THE NIXIE OF THE MILL-POND,"  
AS RECORDED BY JACOB  
AND WILHELM GRIMM

We all grow up on fairy tales. Our first exposure to them these days is often in a somewhat light-hearted, "child-friendly" form. The good fairies bless the heroes so they can overcome their challenges, and the wicked fairies' curses ultimately come to naught. Everyone lives happily ever after.

But as we start to find the older fairy tales in their original form, things turn out differently. Blood and sex creep into the tales. People come to bad ends. These stories were told to children not to comfort them as they fell asleep, but as cautionary tales. Warnings not to stray too far from home. Not to go into the dark woods. Not to wander down the road at night. Stay at home, be good, mind your manners... or something bad will happen to you. The Good Folk might come and take you away.

**Changeling:** The Lost is a game about what happens when these old stories prove true. The Others do come and take people away, keeping them as slaves in a fairyland that's as much nightmare as dream. Severed from the mortal world, these abducted humans gradually become more and more like their captors, losing themselves in their new lives. But some of these captives remember who they are, and try to escape back to the place they were born. Changed in form and feature, scarred by their durance, some of them even make it back.

## A GAME OF BEAUTIFUL MADNESS

The protagonists of this modern fairy tale are the changelings, or as they often call themselves, the Lost. Stolen away from their human lives as children or adults, they spent what seemed like years or even centuries in Faerie, chattel to beautiful but inhuman lords and ladies. Fed on faerie food and drink, they gradually became more fae themselves, their bodies shifting slightly to reflect their

roles. Some, however, managed to escape. Holding on to their memories of home, they found their way through the winding thorns of the Hedge, the barrier between the mortal world and time-twisted Faerie.

Their return, however, was all too bittersweet. Some came back 20 years after they'd first vanished, even though it had never seemed that long to them in Faerie. Others who had reached adulthood in Arcadia found that they returned only a few hours after their abduction. And almost all found, horribly enough, that they weren't missed. The Fae had been thorough. Left in the stead of each abducted changeling was a replica, a simulacrum, a thing that looked like him or her — but wasn't. Now, with inhuman strangers living their lives and nowhere to go, the Lost must find their own way in the world that was stolen from them.

**Changeling** deals with the struggles and dreams of people who are no longer what they were, their mortal flesh interwoven with fae magic. An illusion called the Mask obscures their remade physical bodies, allowing them to pass for humans — a word that doesn't apply to them any more. The contrast between the reality of the mortal world and the unreality of Faerie colors their stories, in ways that often express as beauty, madness or both.

The beauty referred to almost goes without saying. Faerie is beautiful. It isn't kindly, or nurturing or benevolent, but it is wondrously beautiful. The same is true for its children, both those who were born of its unreal matter and those mortals who were abducted and nursed on its magic. Even a hideous Ogre may have some strangely sketched artistry to its asymmetrical features, and even a Darkling of disturbing mien may have an elegantly hypnotic grace or cold, frank sexuality. But as the Lost move among the mortal world, trying to recover their old lives or draw enough Glamour to sustain themselves, they become aware of the beautiful things that mortals often take for granted. To a



changeling, there is beauty in the grief hanging over the funeral of a good man, or in the awkward way a young girl twists her hands at a school dance. They see things nobody else does — not simply because they can, but because they try.

The madness inherent to a changeling's existence is also twofold. Part is external. Changelings too often cross paths with things of Faerie and the Hedge — strange, creeping things that should not *be*, that defy human rationality. The Others themselves can only be described as “mad,” for surely they subscribe to no mortal definition of sanity. But an equally great threat comes from within. The threshold between dream and reality, between Faerie and mortality, is easily crossed... and a changeling doesn't always know which side of the threshold she stands on.

## THEME

The prevailing theme of **Changeling** is the quest to find one's way home. For some, this may mean reclaiming the mortal lives they were stolen away from as best they can. For others, it means finding a new home among the freeholds and Courts of the Lost. Some hope to be fortunate and determined enough to achieve both, finding one foothold in the mortal world and another among their fae kin. Even the tangled skeins of intrigue and ambition that grip many a freehold trace their roots back to changelings who are determined to find their way to a place they'd be willing to call “home.” It's no simple journey, and the stories of each chronicle unfold around the challenges of this road. Who can you trust? What is your heart's desire, your ideal home? What is the price you will have to pay to achieve it?

The secondary theme of the game reflects the nature of the fae. A common hallmark to legends that feature things we think of as “fae,” in fact the characteristic that may define a supernatural entity as “fae” or not, is a certain theme of deception or dishonesty. In some stories, the fae are the ones who trick mortals, appearing to be things they aren't, substituting their own young for human children or leading wanderers astray. In others, humans are the ones who break some form of social contract with the fae, although often while unaware that the contract is in place, and are punished severely by the fae for their “disloyalty.” The themes of deception and mistrust run through many **Changeling** stories, as the Lost must hide themselves away from friends and family in order to keep from drawing their enemies' eyes. Promises and pledges are the mortar that holds fae changelings together, the only way the Lost can tell who to trust and who to avoid. Changelings are at their most powerful when they can finesse their way into some sort of advantageous position over their enemies, and most constrained when they must give their word. In that, they are very like the fae of legend, and the “faerie tales” of their lives have a hauntingly familiar refrain.

## MOOD

The mood of a **Changeling** chronicle can shift many times, reflecting the mercurial nature of the fae. The prevailing mood, however, is bittersweet. The Lost walk through an unseen world of wonder tinged with danger and deceit. The beauty of the fae is often sinister. The Hedge is alluring, and offers both succor and danger. The magic that changelings work is wondrous stuff, but has its strange catches and costs. And yet, for all the fear of the Others, the suspicion of betrayal and the hurt of necessary lies, the Lost still feel the glory of intense emotion and see the vivid colors of fae magic. Both bitterness and sweetness are essential to this world. Without bitterness, the fae are toothless things, as weak and watered-down as the Victorian fables meant to shelter children from anything that might hint that the world was less than perfect. Without sweetness, the setting is a withered and valueless place, more akin to a sulky nihilist's view of the universe than the place it actually is. For all the horror, there is also wonder. For all the beauty, there is also madness.

## BETWEEN WORLDS

The Lost have the potential to be almost anything. Their human roots are strong enough to show them the way home from Faerie, and some changelings make themselves as much a part of the mortal world upon their return as possible. For some, the possibility of reclaiming their former lives or bonding once more with their loved ones is the greatest aspiration. Others give up on their former identities and forge entirely new mortal lives for themselves in the areas where they can prosper without too much scrutiny. They may become art dealers, club owners, crime lords. And the Lost can use their fae gifts to protect those important to these new lives, making the best of their transformation.

But changelings are indubitably not what they were, and many embrace that change as best they can. They wear the marks of their captivity with pride, strengthen the power of their Wyrld and focus on their identities as citizens of Lost society. For these proud survivors, the human world is where they play at mortality and gather strength. They are most comfortable among the freeholds and Courts, and swear pacts of deepest friendship and love to their changeling kin.

Neither life is superior to the other. In order to keep an unclouded perspective between mortal solidity and dream-like fae madness, the Lost must acknowledge both sides of their nature. Motleys gather out of friendship and pledge to aid one another in rebuilding their mortal lives, just as they promise to stand beside one another and achieve standing, power and safety among the changeling courts. The hows and whys of their journeys, the lives they will forge or reforge for themselves — these are the stories that will unfold in **Changeling: The Lost**.