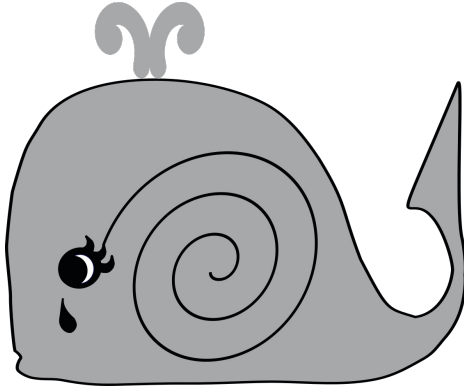


EXCERPT - NOT FOR SALE

Down in the BELLY
OF the whALE



KelLEY Kay BowLeS



Aionios Books, LLC
Carlsbad, California

Copyright © 2017 by Kelley Kay Bowles.

*You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the sea,
and the flood enveloped me;
All your breakers and your billows
passed over me.*

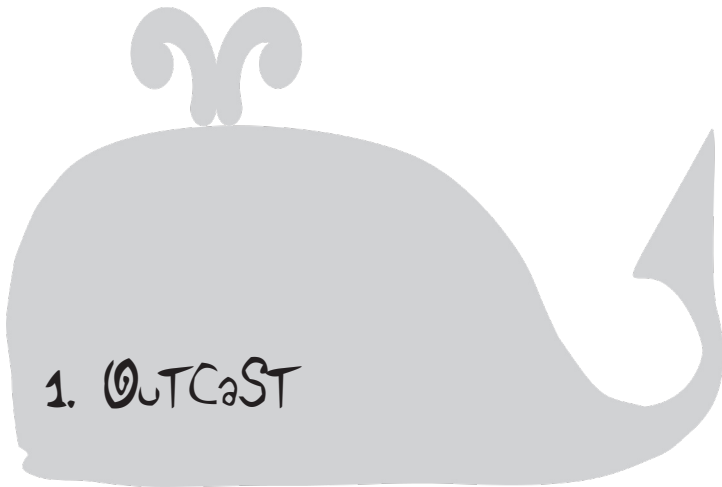
—Jonah 2:4
New American Bible (Revised Edition)



CHAPTERS

1.	Outcast	1
2.	Anxiety	9
3.	Angst	17
4.	Daydream	23
5.	Trickery	27
6.	Ceaseless	33
7.	Blur	37
8.	Dissection	43
9.	Hives	49
10.	Flummoxed	55
11.	Outsider	63
12.	Abuse	67
13.	Test	75
14.	Voluminous	81
15.	Rescue	87
16.	Outcry	91
17.	Fear	99
18.	Changeling	107
19.	Prognosis	115
20.	Overwhelmed	121
21.	Limbo	129
22.	Patience	135
23.	Influence	143
24.	Premature	149
25.	Introduction	155
26.	Apprehension	165
27.	Usefulness	175
28.	Trepidation	181
29.	Success	191
30.	Relief	197
31.	Purpose	207





outcast /out kast/ n. 1. A person who has been rejected by society or a social group.



My latest theory is that I must be a changeling.

I've read myths about changelings in various books and encyclopedias. They have one basic thing in common: a changeling is a creature switched with a child at birth, because someone wants the child more than the creature. I think I am the creature, and I feel sorry for the kid who got switched, because these parents aren't too bad, usually.

Oh, and did I mention the creatures doing the switching are trolls?

The changeling child at first looks like the human it substitutes, but gradually grows worse in appearance and behavior: ugly, malformed, ill tempered, given to screaming and biting.

My baby pictures are pretty cute, all toothless smiles and fat rolls, but right now as a sophomore, I have a zit the size of Cleveland right in the middle of my chin, my chest is less than spectacular, and growing my kinky brown hair long does little



to affect its behavior, which means it always looks like mini tornadoes have set up camp in my follicles.

I hate over half of my teachers. I have no siblings and only one real friend.

Since society in general frowns upon screaming and biting, I kinda only do that alone and to a pillow. So I totally agree with the changeling definition.



“Mizzes Harper Southwood! Ciao, bella! And how are ah-we thees morning? Ah-rrravishing, I can see. May I have ah-thees dance?” And he grabs my arm to start twirling me around the kitchen like a rag doll. My feet trip across the hardwood as I try to follow his rhythm.

This is my Uncle Peter, who is the only person in my family to whom I could maybe be genetically linked. We call him Uncle Pasta, because he is short but still skinny and linguini lanky, if a short person can be such a thing. He also has tornado hair, which he keeps short enough for it to be called kinky.

Plus he has this trick he loves to pull out at holiday dinners: He shoves a piece of spaghetti up his nose and pulls it out of his mouth. Then he kind of yanks both ends back and forth—al dente spaghetti, I’m sure, because otherwise it would break.

What does “al dente” mean in its original language, do you suppose? Something about how chewy and gross it is on your dentals, maybe. I’ll have to look it up. Anyway, he likes to talk in this pseudo-Italian accent, which is another reason for the nickname.

He lives in our basement, which is the reason he flounces into the kitchen, scaring the bejesus out of me, at the ungodly hour of timetogotoschool.

“Did I mention I have a date tonight?” he says, opening a

kitchen cabinet to pull out a cereal bowl. “An ab-so-lootlee scrumptious man named ah-Charles. I theenk he rrrreally likes me, too.”

“Oh, I’m sure he does, Uncle Pasta,” says I. “You, also, are ravishing. Whatever are you going to wear?”

Uncle Pasta and I aren’t genetically linked in the matter of sexual orientation. At least, I don’t think we are, judging by the way my stomach takes a nosedive every time I hear the name Larson McCready, or God forbid I see him and he sees me with the zit and the hair and the increasingly troll-like features.

Uncle Pasta sounds like a big outlandish goofball when he sneaks up on me and flings me around, with the accent and the al dente tricks and all, but he’s really sweet and mellow and kind of insecure, inside.

“I’m sure he really likes you, Uncle Peter. You’re one of the loveliest people I know.”

He kisses my cheek. “No, you are the loveliest person, Little Miss Lovely. I think I’m going to wear jeans and a button-up shirt. Nice but casual, you know?”

I kiss his cheek. “It’s going to be great. You’ll be awesome, I know.”

Uncle Pasta sneezes, and my nose starts to twitch.

“Oh, be careful, though. I think you’re catching a cold.”

He looks at me. “I hope you’re wrong this time. I’m off to drown in a quart of orange juice, just in case.” He drops the cereal bowl on the counter to open the fridge.

Changeling stories don’t say that changelings have any special powers, except that they are wiser than human children. Which is cool. It’s something to hang on to when my hair explodes out of the ponytail or my dad’s acting a little douchey. But I think my troll family might have had a strange quirk, a sense of some sort. When people around me are getting sick, my nose itches, or I start sneezing, or my body reacts in some bizarre way.

It’s not a gift or a power in my opinion, because it doesn’t



do anything for anybody. I can warn people to dive into the orange juice, I guess, but aren't you supposed to drink that stuff a lot anyway? Some help I am. I have this recurring fantasy where I can actually SEE the germ or the bacterium or whatever, with my intensive X-ray vision, and then I spray some sort of supernatural mojo out my nose that transforms the offending germ into a super vitamin that makes you healthier.

It's a nice dream, but so is cascading hair or Larson McCready on speed dial, always answering his cell and dying to take me out on the town.

Uncle Pasta heads to the fridge with fingertips squeezing at his lymph nodes. I feel helpless, like always, but I guess all I can do right now is go to school.



The street's deserted this morning, which is unusual. Normally there are these four elderly people, three women and a man, who traipse the sidewalk in a single-file line. They move their arms in sync: a slow-motion march where their elbows move from their waists up toward the sky and back at about negative ten miles per hour. I think they're doing some sort of strange tai chi for old people—I'll have to look it up.

I'm glad for the solitude: the half-mile walk to my high school gives me time to consider the best way to avoid troll-ish mishaps and embarrassing situations. Plus I need to rehearse what to say to my friend Cora Perkins. She's been acting really weird lately, and she makes the backs of my knees itch. Don't ask me why. We've been friends for the past year and she's never been sick, and besides, my knees? Whatever.

I spot her on a bench in the middle of the courtyard. Cora has this really cool hair that is the complete opposite of mine: blonde and long and falls straight like a sheet, but today

it's tied in a weird knot at the base of her skull and looks dirty. She's wearing jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, even though school has only been on for a week, and it's been about ninety-five degrees every day since it started. "Hey, you," I say. "Are you OK?"

Cora snorts and rolls her eyes. "Define 'OK.' I'm not sick, if that's what you mean, crazy changeling woman." She gives me a faint grin, which makes her look a little better, but still not her normal self.

Cora knows all about my suspicions of trollhood and the dry-mouth disease I am afflicted with around Larson, and she's a wicked good listener and caring friend. She still tells me nearly nothing about herself, though. I know her mom is dead and her dad is militaristic even though he's a plumber. Mostly she dodges questions about the way she feels and what's happening in her life, switching the subject over to me or telling these really dumb jokes.

"I'm fine," she says. "Hey, knock knock."

I sigh in frustration and my knee twitches, an invisible doctor tapping with a plexor. "Who's there?"

"Nobody."

"Nobody who?"

She's silent.

It takes me a second. "Oh, har har."

She smiles, a real one now, and I am once again surprised that someone as pretty and nice as she is wants to hang out with me, the troll. Her eyes are green and shaped like almonds, and guys watch her when she walks by, and you can tell they talk about her when she's gone.

The Preps AND the Jocks AND the Dramatics are always angling for Cora to join their respective groups, but she says she'd rather not hang out with kids who could have been lobotomized extras in a teenage movie, and besides, she wants to be around people who will help keep her brain functioning. That's



me, I guess, maybe because I'm always looking everything up.

"Did you do the paper for Carstead?" I ask.

Cora flings her hands skyward. "Awright, tell me this. How do we find symbolism in a poem that has . . . count 'em . . . sixteen words in it? And then write a one-thousand-word essay on the previously read sixteen-word poem?"

"I take it that's a no?"

"Oh no, I wrote it. I said something about the red wheelbarrow representing our firefighters, and it's glazed with water to put out the fire that is burning the white chickens that represent the Twin Towers on 9/11. I think it's so much baloney I can hardly stand it. But you know Carstead has such a jones for even an ah-TEM-pted analysis, I figured . . ."

I shrug. "Yep. At least she's not one of those who says you can only do it her way to get the *A*." I finger the zipper on my backpack, thinking about the essay. "I said something about how they are all such mundane items: rain, wheelbarrow, chickens, but so much depends on them because without the everyday stuff you can't appreciate something extraordinary."

She looks at me. "Harper, that's profound. No wonder you're like, Carstead's love child." She pats my back like I'm a puppy and I push her hand away because here come three basketball players—one of whom is Larson McCready.

Oh, no. I bet he would never say "one of whom," and I can feel some ponytail hair sticking out in ways the universe never intended hair to go.

One of the guys, Mike, says, "Hey Cora. Great shirt. It would look better on my floor, though."

Cora looks at him like a cow just flew out of his nose. "Hey, Mike. I think you would look better with your face under my boot, but hey look—I'm wearing flip-flops. Must be your lucky day."



The other guys crack up and shove Mike down the walk, calling sayonara to Cora. Only to Cora.

Larson is bringing up the rear of the group. My nails dig into my palms in the effort to raise my hand for a wave, but nothing happens and his head's down and doesn't even swing my way. My fingertips slide up to cover the zit, but it doesn't matter—he's already gone.

Cora looks at me. "So when are you going to talk to him, chickadee?"

I move my hands down to my neck and can feel the heat blossoming there. "I don't know. Maybe when these hives stop spontaneously appearing whenever he comes within ten or twenty feet."

She leans over to pull at the neckline of my T-shirt. "Oh, yeah. Wow. I thought you only got hives when you were confronted with an authority figure."

I stand at the sound of the bell and we head for our first hour classes, which are unfortunately different. "Yes, that, and when I'm so mad I feel like my eyeballs will pop, oh, and don't forget the crying. The nervousness and the fear and the anger bring on the hives and the uncontrollable welling of tears, which is why I'm such an impressive specimen, don't you think?"

We walk together for as long as possible. Cora flings an arm around my shoulders. "You betcha," she grins. "I am totally and completely impressed."

"You know it."

END OF EXCERPT

On sale: May 2018

Copyright © 2017 by Kelley Kay Bowles.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelley Kay Bowles is the pen name for the YA fiction of Kelley Bowles Gusich. Kelley taught high school English and Drama for twenty years in Colorado and California, but a 1994 MS diagnosis has (circuitously) brought her, finally, to the life of writer and mother, both occupations she adores, and both of which were dreamed of clear back at stories surrounding her Barbie and Ken. Her debut novel, cozy mystery *Death by Diploma* (pen name Kelley Kaye), was released by Red Adept Publishing February 2016, and is first in the *Chalkboard Outlines*® series.

Kelley has two wonderful and funny sons and an amazing husband who cooks for her. She lives in Southern California.

To learn more about Kelley, visit her website and blog at www.kelleykaybowles.com.



For more information, please visit
<http://AioniosBooks.com>
or email Publisher@AioniosBooks.com