

**THIRD PLACE
HIGH SCHOOL
9TH & 10TH GRADES**

**SWITCHED
◀by Erin Baughn▶**

I screamed.

I cried.

I thrashed around violently.

My lungs were begging for air, for relief of the pain.

Strong hands gripped my wrists. My shoulders. My waist.

Most of the nervous people walking down the hallway averted their disgusted looks. One girl had the courage to look into my pleading eyes. She looked familiar, but I couldn't tell, since the tears blurred my vision. I fell silent for a moment, willing her to help me.

The girl didn't move. They continued carrying me down the corridor.

They calmly walked, moving me into a room with a steel door, locks upon locks on the outside.

The three men opened the door and deposited me on a crinkly, uncomfortable bed. They sprinted out, and shut the door. I could hear the clicks of the locks imprisoning me in the room.

I let out one final scream and I rested my head back on the bed. I gasped for air, and tears streamed from my eyes.

I knew I'd lost the battle. There was no point left in struggling anymore.

I looked around the room, taking in my surroundings. I was in a square, white room. It was too bright because all the white was reflecting the shining lights. Completely blinding.

There was a young woman sitting in a chair in the corner opposite my bed. She was dressed in bright white scrubs; her hair bleached white, even though she couldn't be a day over thirty. Her skin was extremely pale.

The only color in the room came from some sort of sphere-like machine that spun, colors pulsing slowly. It reminded me of a giant rainbow lollipop, with a short fat handle.

I gasped, realizing at once what it was.

It was where I was going to die.

The woman gave me a smile, noticing that I had realized at once the machine. "Blank Fifty-two-thirty? Female, seventeen years of age?" asked the woman in a monotone that sent shivers down my spine. She seemed to refuse to make eye contact with me.

I nodded, not looking at her, nor anything in particular, not bothering to respond with the generic reply we were supposed to use when asked our full names by an elder. I glanced up at her, and she seemed to be waiting for it, her expression demanding respect.

I glared at her, willing my face to tell her that I will not succumb to our society's idea of respect.

I chuckled and rolled my eyes and her head darted up from the clipboard that she had begun to scribble on.

"Don't you have to go through procedure and tell me everything that's going to happen, including who's going to kill me?" I asked sarcastically.

She looked taken aback. "Where," her mouth hung open, "did you hear that?"

I knew it was true, and giggled. "Runaways have their own scary stories to tell at night. So, you have to tell me. Go ahead. I'm not scared."

"First, I have to tell you the name of the memories and conscious that will be taking over your own. His name was—is Dandy Eighty-nine-ten. Male, twenty years of age," she took a breath to continue speaking, and I immediately cut in.

"Male? You can't put a boy in me! I refuse! I'd rather you'd kill me."

"I'm sorry, it's not your choice to make," she sighed, reverting back to the original monotone voice. "It's what he had chosen in the event of an accident."

"Are you saying that he chose me to be his body?" I scowled, hugging my knees.

"Of course not. That's completely random. First available body. Male or female, any race," she waited for me to say something, and when I kept silent, she continued. "He was in an accident. Quite terrible, actually. We couldn't revive him, but we managed to keep him alive just long enough to extract what's needed for the switch."

"Why do I need to know this?" I asked.

"Because you'll be put in a dream-like state for the rest of your body's life while he lives out a normal life. At the beginning of the dreams, what usually happens is that you'll be living out Dandy's accident," she saw the terrified look plastered to my face, and tried to assure me with an evil grin. "Don't worry. It'll be painless."

I didn't say anything, but continued hugging my legs and rocking back and forth, trying to will the tear that was forming in my eye away.

"If you don't have anything else to say, we need to start the process."

I sighed, giving up all hope. I was moments away from dying.

"I'm going to inject this into your arm. It's specially made to put your body to sleep just long enough for the procedure to take place, and at the same time, it will sedate your mind for the rest of your natural life." I began shaking, and she stuck the thing in my arm.

"We have about a minute before the sedation begins to work, so, until then, can you please grab hold of my arm and walk with me over to the machine?" I felt the coldness of whatever she had injected into me running up my arm, and, even though I wanted to say no, I did as I was told.

We walked across the room, and I stumbled over my feet, feeling light headed. "Please sit in here," she told me, and gestured to the multi-colored machine that now had a human-sized opening in front of me. I clumsily got in.

I poked my head out shakily to speak, "Please don't hurt them," I told her, and everything went black.

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I didn't know how long I had been asleep. But one thing that I did know was that I wasn't supposed to wake up. Ever.

I opened my eyes, and I was still in the machine. It was pulsing so many colors; ones I didn't even know existed. It was hypnotic, and my trance was interrupted by a countdown voice. I nearly moved, but then realized there was a hazy window where the woman could faintly see me through the colors.

"Starting in ten seconds. All operators and observers please stand back at least four meters," an electronic voice rung through quietly, obviously meant to be heard from outside.

I saw her fuzzy form step back behind a desk that I hadn't noticed before.

Suddenly, it seemed, some sort of foam padding had created a thin layer between the hard plastic or glass or something, and me.

A pulsing, colored gas filled the chamber, exactly the same color as what the machine used to be. I held my breath. It twisted around, flopping me in all different directions, and though it was nearly impossible, I tried to stay as limp and still as possible. I let my breath go after I began to get dangerously light-headed, and immediately got a scorching headache.

After what felt like several painful years, it stopped, leaving my head feeling cloudy and compressed.

Almost instantly, a giant wave hit me, filled with memories, thoughts, faces, and stories. They all belonged to that boy, Dandy. My eyes darted around in a panic. The lady was looking in the window again and the door to the machine slowly rose after the padding went away, and I shut my eyes.

"Dandy?" she called hesitantly. I pretended to be asleep for just another moment, to get my thoughts together, and to decide what to do.

After a moment, I got up shakily, and scooted myself out of that terrifying thing.

"Dandy?" she asked again in a sweet voice that I hadn't guessed she could be capable of.

I nearly fell flat on my face as I tripped and heard something in my head. A boy's voice. 'That's my name,' it whispered.

After pulling myself up, I replied, "Yes?" I said in the closest tone of voice to Dandy's that I could muster. I knew that the body kept the same voice pitch, but whatever they put into bodies changes the tone to cocky or shy or whatever tone you had.

She sighed, grinning, "Good. Everything had gone according to plan," she led me, or rather, Dandy, to a comfy chair. "Do you remember what happened to you?"

I began to run through his memories, but his voice interrupted me in my head, and I repeated the words after him. "I... it's too embarrassing. I can't say. An accident at school."

"You were on file to switch into a body, if your original failed. We switched you into a seventeen-year-old female. Her name was Blank. She was a runaway, and lived in the wild for five years before authorities were able to catch her. Runaways are said to be some of the hardest to switch into, but we've found that most everyone has had a smooth transfer thus far."

I nodded.

"You'll be living in the facilities for the next three months as you get used to your body and heal mentally from your accident," she told me.

"What about my family and friends?" I questioned, knowing from looking briefly through his memories that he had many of those.

"Sadly, you won't be able to see any of them while you're here," she sighed, as if she knew what he'd be going through.

"Erm," I spoke without thinking. "Did you happen to be switched into a new body as well? If you don't mind me asking." I shrugged and my mind raced, wondering why I had asked in the first place.

The woman nodded, "A runaway shot me. With one of those terrible weapons from the year that they used to call 2000. The same one whose body I'm in."

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, even though I wasn't. Not in the slightest.

She quickly brushed her tear away and continued to speak. "I will show you to your room, which you will share with a newly switched girl until the end of your visit here," she stood up. "Your roommate will be waiting for your arrival." She tapped on a keypad, filled with numbers and a few odd symbols I didn't recognize. A buzzer went off a moment later, and after several familiar clangs at the door, it swung open.

We walked down the hall, and into an apartment-like room.

There was a girl sitting on one of two large beds in a bedroom portion of the apartment. I recognized her instantly.

She was the girl I had spent my entire runaway life with, my best friend. Ruela. She had disappeared just a day before I was captured.

"I'm Dottie," she extended a hand, and Dandy gasped.

"That's my girlfriend, act natural," he warned me.

"Dot?" I asked.

She looked at me confusedly for a moment, and then smiled.

"Dandy? Is that you? Did they put you in a girl's body?" she groaned after pecking me on the cheek. "Why'd they do that?"

"I don't know. I was wondering that myself," I said just a word behind Dandy's thoughts.

The woman laughed left the room after peeking her head around the doorway, "Dinner is at seven. Someone will come by to escort the two of you."

She closed the door behind her.

Dottie went rigid after a moment of looking me up and down. "Blank?"

"Ruela?" I gasped quietly after choosing to ignore the fact that she could be faking it.

She hugged me, and I began crying, "It didn't work on you either?"

"How did they capture you?" I asked.

"I was collecting berries in the forest, like I told you I was, and... something knocked me out, and then I was in the white room," Ruela shuddered. "How did you?"

"I was in sort of a panic that you hadn't come back to camp. I was looking for you. Somehow, I accidentally stumbled into a police base on the outskirts of this city. Did you know that I was the most wanted runaway for the past three years?" I grinned proudly after silently recalling the terrifying moment that had only been hours ago.

"Idiot. You should have forgotten about me, and protected yourself."

I shook my head, and she rolled her eyes.

"Anyhow," she paused somewhat awkwardly. "Do you have Dandy in your head? Like, talking to you?"

I nodded and looked to her, "What about you?"

"Yeah, Dottie's so annoying. She never shuts up. It's not chilly in the slightest," she groaned, I giggled. Somehow, it felt like we were back in the forest, laughing at the fire.

"Dandy doesn't say much," I willed him to talk.

'I've been in your head for ten minutes. I don't think that gives me time to say much while you're catching up with an old friend,' said Dandy's voice, and I jumped just a little less than I had the first time.

"He's talking, isn't he?" laughed Ruela. "You'll get used to that."

"It's just weird, having someone other than myself in my head."

"I know how you feel."

"Can I lie down for a minute?" I asked her after a moment of silence. It wasn't not awkward because we were never really been talkative people, so we filled our presences with silence so often. "I'm just really tired. "

She nodded, and I lay down on the other bed.

'Dandy?' I thought, trying for the first time to actually speak with him.

'Yes?'

'I'm sorry. Do you hate me for not completely going away?' I didn't know why I was apologizing, and he didn't seem to know either, but it seemed legitimate.

'No.'

I groaned inwardly at him. What was with those monosyllabic answers? 'Are you sure? I'd understand if you did.'

'Are you trying to make me hate you? I'm trying to figure out how to get out of your head.'

'So I'm just someone you're stuck with? What a great way to try and make friends with the *only person* that can talk to you.'

'Right, so, of course I should make friends with someone if they think I'm an annoying voice in their head.'

'I never said that! We have yet to establish if either of the two of us are annoying yet.'

It seemed like he was about to talk, and I felt a hint of humor, but then it disappeared after just a moment.

'Can we be friends?' asked Dandy, and it felt sincere.

'If you help us get out of this,' I sighed. 'Now let me sleep.' I rolled over to emphasize the point, though it didn't really help, since he was technically the same person as me now. I then fell quickly asleep after a moment of running through the day's horrible happenings in my head.

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I woke up groggily, and for a few moments, I had forgotten my surroundings and circumstance.

I jumped up, scared, but when I saw Ruela, I realized that there was nothing to fear. She was sitting on the bed next to me, watching me, almost studiously.

"What are you doing?" I questioned, rubbing my eyes and stretching.

"You looked so peaceful," she looked away, laughing.

"Really?" I tsked at her. This was no time to be laughing. We had to find a way to get Dandy and Dottie out of our heads.

'What?!' Dandy's voice was harsh. 'You're going to just get rid of us? I thought we had a deal!'

'A deal that you would help us get out of this mess,' I told him, and Ruela looked at me confusedly. "I'm talking to Dandy. He's being quite talkative recently," I explained.

"Really? Hope he doesn't stay that way," then she went silent, probably to have another argument with Dottie.

'What's going to happen to me? I won't be able to survive outside of your body!' he continued as soon as Ruela was quiet.

'We'll figure something out. I'm not that horrible of a person. I wouldn't kill you.'

'How do I know? You could be one of those horrible killing monsters that people tell stories about.'

'Trust me. Go through my memories I'm anything but that. I won't hurt you.'

We were both silent as he shuffled through my memories. We both knew it wasn't needed.

"Ruela, I'm going to clean up for dinner. Where's the washroom?"

She pointed me down the hall, and I saw hundreds of buttons and knobs, so I tried for what seemed the simplest. I ended up being dripped on with mildly lukewarm water at a drizzle that I couldn't figure out how to turn off for a good fifteen minutes.

I sighed and rinsed myself off in that water, and found a set of grey pants and a shirt, waiting for me on the floor. They were exactly like what Ruela had been wearing.

I quickly dried off and slipped into the clothes. I noted that they were a perfect fit. I wondered how they got the size exactly right, but didn't dwell on the thought.

I towed off my damp hair and walked back out to where Ruela waited, her eyes full of fear. I had never seen Ruela look that way. Ever. She always seemed so confident and sure of herself.

"Ruela?" I asked, looking at her shaking figure.

"Ruela? Who's Ruela? I'm Dottie!" her eyes darted around the room, behind me, as if there were people there.

I spun around, and there was the woman who had switched me, along with the four men who had carried me in.

"Blank, darling, you've been a terribly bad girl," the woman smiled and revealed her too-white teeth.

"Blank? Wasn't that the girl who's body I have now?" I asked stupidly, hoping she'd pass it as a little mistake.

"Stop playing dumb. We have that whole conversation on record. Don't you know that security pings us when our new switchees are being bad?"

I sighed and collapsed on my bed. "What are you going to do now? Kill me and Dandy?"

The woman laughed, "Kill Dandy? That's a horrible thought, child, wherever did you come up with that?" she rolled her eyes. "No. We're going to re-do the switch. And make sure that it's done right this time. On both of you."

The men moved forward and two grabbed me, and the two others grabbed Ruela. "I'm sorry, Ruela," I sighed and let them take us away.

'I'm sorry,' echoed Dandy's voice in my head.

'Not your fault.'

'I'd help you, but it doesn't look like there will be much of anything I will be able to do.'

I didn't say anything back.

This time, I didn't bother to struggle.

They brought me into a different room than earlier. It was shiny and metallic. It was filled with surgical tools, tables, chairs, and in the corner, a switching machine. They never did tell me what it was called.

They roughly threw me into a chair that was connected to the floor and made of some sort of cold metal. They locked my wrists to the arms of the chair, and the same with my legs, so I couldn't move. I shivered, and looked next to me, and they were doing the same to Ruela, just a meter or two away.

In between us was a tray filled with assorted knives that I hoped they wouldn't use on us.

The woman walked in casually, whistling to herself. "What are you so happy about?" I snapped.

'Control yourself. They might hurt you,' Dandy warned.

"Oh, just having a fun day today at work," she giggled girlishly and I glared at her.

'Please hurt her when I'm gone,' I begged Dandy.

'You bet,' it sounded like he nearly laughed.

"You have to tell us what you're going to do to us, don't you?" I asked.

"Maybe we're not going by standard procedure today."

"Dandy will get on your ass about it. He'll call the authorities. You'll lose your job, and they'll probably do something to you," I smirked.

'What? Who said I was going to do that?' he asked in a panic.

'I'm bluffing, you idiot.'

"You wouldn't dare," the woman hissed, standing in front of me with her hands on her hips.

'I wish I could talk to her,' Dandy sighed, and continued, 'I've been looking through your memories. You would dare. You'd probably do just about anything to get out of here.'

'Shut up,' I told him, 'this is serious. We don't know what's going to happen.'

All of a sudden, I felt a sharp jab in my arm.

"Ow! What wassat?" I exclaimed before immediately feeling light-headed. "Wha- arr?" I managed to get out before I lost my concentration.

"We're operating," the woman had begun to pull on a pair of rubber gloves as two men in light blue scrubs marched in with masks on.

My head started to bob against the hard metal on the back of the chair as the shapes in the room began to blend together.

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It was like one of those dreams where everything is black, but you can hear people talking, people who sound so familiar, you can taste it, but you can't place it.

"We'll be doing it first on the smart mouthed, red-haired girl," I wondered if I liked this person or not, because it reminded me of a bad memory.

I decided it was best not to think too much and just listen. It was so much easier, and didn't hurt my head.

"You'll want to disable her connection to motors and thoughts, but not his. Surely they taught you this at your fancy medical school, no?" the same voice was getting whiny and impatient. "Make sure she's completely asleep. We don't want her to—" The voice was cut off, and then there was nothingness.

