

THE  
SWITCH

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# CHAPTER ONE

Henry Carter's father, Tom, came into his bedroom just before ten in the morning and cleared his throat, waking Henry from a dream he was having about his neighbor, Caroline Olof, of all people, which was strange because he had never had a dream about her before. In the dream she was bossing him around like usual.

"Didn't mean to wake you," Tom said, which wasn't true.

"That's okay," Henry said, which wasn't true either.

"I'm going to the zoo and thought you might want to come with me."

Henry had been to the zoo a thousand times. This wasn't a *hey, you want to go visit the zoo* kind of invitation. His dad was the zoo director. He went to the zoo almost every day and sometimes brought the zoo home with him. Right now, there were two bobcat cubs upstairs in the living room. Their mother had stepped into a steel leg-hold trap up on Mount Hood and had died. They named the cubs Robert and Catherine, Bob and Cat for short. Two weeks earlier, there was a baby chimp living with them because its mom had refused to nurse it. Henry's mom, Marie, rejected the chimp too, saying she was sick of it tearing the house apart. "The chimp's as bad as Henry was when he was a baby!" she complained, which was a little insulting, but probably true. Henry's dad had moved the chimp back to the zoo.

“I have a birthday present for you up at the zoo,” his father continued. “It arrived yesterday after I left work.”

Henry had turned thirteen the day before. He had gotten a lot of presents, but his favorite thing was sitting on his bedside table. A sleek, beautiful smartphone that had kept him up half the night.

“You and Mom gave me the phone.”

“We did . . . well, mostly I did. Your mom wasn’t thrilled with the idea, as you know.”

Henry knew. She had made that crystal clear. Henry’s mother, Marie Carter, formerly Marie Ludd, had a bad case of screen phobia. The only computer they had was his father’s laptop, which Henry was not allowed to use, and his father’s cell phone, which Henry had never touched. He had a tablet for school, but it was blocked from doing anything that was fun. The weird thing about his mom’s phobia was that before Henry was born, she was the CEO of a billion-dollar international software company.

In addition to the smartphone, they had given him a leather pocket journal and fountain pen. “Quid pro quo,” his mother told him. “I want you to write two pages a day in the journal or I’m taking the phone away.” His dad would never check the journal, but his mom would . . . every day.

The journal was sitting next to the smartphone. His father picked it up and leafed through the pages.

Henry guessed he was wrong about him checking it.

“I’ll write more in it today,” Henry said. He had only managed to scribble a paragraph the night before. “I just woke up. In fact, I think I’ll skip the zoo so I can do the rest of my pages.”

Tom laughed. "You better do it before you go upstairs. If your mom checks, your phone is history."

Henry swung out of bed and grabbed his pants. "It's Saturday. Aside from my present, what else is going on up at the zoo?"

"The rumor is there's going to be an animal rights protest. Don't know if it'll happen, but I need to be there if it goes sideways."

"What are the chances of it going sideways?"

"Slim to none. You don't have to go with me. I'll bring your present home. I think you'll like it."

That's when Henry smelled Tuna Day. He had forgotten all about it because of his birthday. Tuna Day was an annual event on the farm. Once a year a couple of his uncles drove to the coast to buy a pickup-load of tuna from a commercial fishing boat and brought it back to the farm. The tuna was gutted, baked, and canned by his mom and aunts, stinking up their little valley and irritating their neighbors for miles. Tuna Day had been going on for over fifty years, long before they had neighbors close by. This was another reason to tag along to the zoo with his father. But for some reason Henry still didn't want to go.

Henry wanted to be alone.

All his aunts and uncles had shown up to his birthday celebration, along with their kids. After a big dose of Ludds, the only way to decompress was to hide out for several hours. Henry suspected that his dad felt the same way and that's why he went to the zoo so often, and why he was going to the zoo today. He was more comfortable around animals than he was around people.

"I think I'll stick around here if you don't mind," Henry said.

“Up to you, but it’ll be difficult not to get nabbed for tuna duty. They’re canning up a storm.”

“Hard not to notice.”

His father said that he’d see Henry later and left him sitting on the edge of the bed.

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Henry’s bedroom was in the daylight basement of their ranch-style house. There was a slider leading to a patio made of large pavers his mom and dad had put in themselves, with a little help from Henry. There was another bedroom downstairs for guests, a bathroom, a small library, and a large recreation room with a second kitchen reeking of tuna at the moment. The recreation room would have been a media room if they’d had a television. Instead, it had a rowing machine, an elliptical machine, a treadmill, and a ton of free weights, all of which they rarely used. The room also had a pool table that doubled as a ping-pong table. The cue ball had a large divot out of it, making long pool shots very challenging, to say nothing about the felt being ripped in several places. The damage was caused by the gangs of little Ludds who roamed from house to house like a troop of young baboons.

Upstairs were two more bedrooms: his parents’ bedroom and another bedroom that doubled as an office for Marie and a nursery for visiting zoo animals when Tom didn’t have a keeper to take care of them.

It wasn’t a fancy house but was comfortable and lively with exotic animals and Ludds running around.

As Henry sat on his bed, he could hear people stomping

around upstairs, which was pretty typical every Saturday, even without tuna. His mom had an open-door policy. Only strangers knocked. Everyone else just walked in. You never knew who was going to show up and hang around for hours, days, or even weeks.

Henry pulled on a T-shirt and a ratty pair of sneakers. He was hungry, but knew better than to go upstairs for something to eat. He would be nabbed for tuna duty for sure. He stepped out onto the patio and looked around. The coast was clear.