

Chapter 1: Norma

I cry every time, and this is no different. The tears start leaking out the sides of my eyes before I'm fully conscious, trickling down towards my ears. Once again, my first feeling is awe as my hands lift from the bed to touch my face without me needing to bring my head up from the pillow to meet them. That first moment of wiping the tears with the tips of fingers instead of my knuckles overwhelms again. A sob escapes and I feel Anna's hand on my shoulder, soft and reassuring.

"It's okay, Norma," she says. "Everything went well on both ends. Take your time to get used to it." I hiccup and nod, allowing myself the time to come into the body slowly, giving my soul a chance to catch up with a wonder that never gets old, no matter how often I do this.

When I'm ready, I open my eyes and look around the recovery room, reveling in the luxury of calming periwinkle walls hung with tasteful paintings of forest scenes. It's gently dim in the room with dotted islands of brighter light away from my comfortable deluxe hospital bed. The almost inaudible ambient music adds to the feeling of being cocooned, warm and safe.

A stretch comes over me and as my limbs extend, I feel the power of the body, the smooth ease of movement. I prepare to get up, mentally going over the steps involved in moving to a sitting position, but his body's muscle memory takes over and I'm on the edge of the bed before I realize what's happening. The ebbing tears turn to laughter, and I burst out in giggles.

“It’s a good one, isn’t it?” Anna says with a smile in her voice. She stands next to the bed, her hand on my shoulder prepared to help if I need it. We both know I won’t, not in this body.

“Oh, is it ever,” I hiccup again, bouncing to my feet with hardly a wobble. I flex my toes into the deep carpet, reveling in the sensation of pain-free movement. I can’t wait to get going, to live life like this.

“Where are his clothes?” I ask. Anna hands me a neatly folded pile, checking one last time that I can get dressed on my own before going back to her paperwork.

Dressing is a revelation, too. I realize silk boxer shorts are not an affectation of the rich, but actually feel incredible as the cool material wisps up his — no, *my* — legs, perfectly cradling the unfamiliar bulk between my legs. Not trusting my ability to balance quite yet, I sit down to slide on soft Cashmere socks and tuck my feet into the impeccably tailored linen pants. I stand, again without a wobble, and pull up the slacks with a long-forgotten ease. Getting the light sweater over my head is also effortless and when I run my hands through his... *my* hair, the expert cut falls into slightly tousled waves. A small almost-curl escapes, flopping against my brow as if trained to do so.

I’ve never worn clothes that fit this well, like they were made just for this body, and I have to see the final result. I take a step, follow with another, careful to not ask too much too soon, but the body takes over and in no time, I’m standing in front of the floor-length mirror mounted on the washroom door.

“He is even more beautiful in person,” I breathe. Anna laughs and comes to stand beside me. Together, we look at the tall slim man with dark hair above hooded cobalt eyes who looks back at us. I laugh again and his head falls back a little, mouth opening to reveal a set of perfect white, but not blinding, teeth.

“Hello, Mr. Jack Jordan,” I greet the famous thriller author in the mirror. I can almost see myself overlaid on him, short and dumpy with mousy shoulder-length hair and tired eyes that are as grey as the rest of me. The shadow fades and all that’s left is this vibrant man who is now me. I am him.

“Wow,” Anna says. “The effect is pretty intense in person. I’ve only seen him on video.” I put my arm around her and squeeze her shoulder. It feels good to touch, to show my affection in a way I can’t. *Couldn’t*, a small inner voice corrects. *You can now*.

“Is that a blush, Anna?”

“I can’t help it,” she exclaims. “I know it’s you in there, but it’s completely automatic. My heart just flipped. How does he do that?” Her brown cheeks have a rosy glow.

“I’ve no idea, but I do know that this will be fun.” I laugh again as Anna visibly struggles to compose herself. She is rescued by the routine of the final assessment.

“I know you’ve done this before a million times...” She gestures to the chair next to her desk and picks up the blood pressure cuff.

“Well, maybe not a million, but a lot.” While she focuses on taking my vitals, the faces of other bodies I’ve temporarily inhabited flash through my mind, young men and women

destined to be doctors. With them, I'd traded bodies for a week in the Switch procedure invented by WAM (the Walk A Mile Institute) to train medical residents so they'd better understand their patients in the future and give them better care.

This time, though, it's different. This time, it's permanent.

I shift in my chair, then swallow down the guilt. The man whose body I now inhabit has paid a lot of money for a lark, research for a book, he said. The new version of WAM took his money and more fees from other rich people who wanted an adventure vacation in the bodies of trapeze artists, Everest climbers, or jockeys. There's no use for me anymore. This is meant to be my last Switch, one last hurrah before I sink back into poverty and anonymity.

It's the last, alright, but I've swapped out their plan for one of my own.

Anna's voice brings me out of my memories. "I've been meaning to ask," she says, gathering up the final form. "Where are you going this time?"

"New Delhi. I've wanted to go for ages and since WAM now has a branch there, I can. This guy said in an interview that he has a stomach of steel, so I want to try really hot food." It's not the first time I've indulged my love of travel while hosted in someone else's body, but it's the first time I'll be lying to WAM.

"Uh-oh, that sounds dangerous," Anna laughs.

"I don't remember the last time I had anything spicy. I can't wait!" In my mind, I say goodbye to my own delicate stomach, wrecked by decades of medication.

"Be careful what you wish for." Anna singsongs, adding, "Bring lots of Imodium."

“Already packed,” I shoot back. The teasing exchange replaces the guilt with bubbling joy.

“Okay, let’s wrap this up so you can get out of here. Repeat after me: I will contact WAM New Delhi by 9 AM local time every day.”

“I will contact WAM New Delhi by 9 AM local time every day.” The lie slips off my tongue without strain. Anna places a tick in a box on the form.

“I will not tinker, maim, or remove the monitoring implant or in other ways render it inoperable,” I repeat her words while planning to do just that.

“Standard reminder, hon,” Anna says while placing another tick on the form. “As you know the implant monitors your mental and emotional health and syncs it to our systems. Should you get in trouble physically or emotionally or do anything to harm the implant, it will put you into stasis. When the signal is received at WAM, they will send the recovery team for the body to address any issues.”

“Has this ever happened to anyone?” I ask this every time. As usual, Anna frowns and says it’s confidential, adding that the implant is foolproof. I nod my intent to obey the rules but the voice in my head says *let’s test that shall we?*

“I will return to WAM New York 24 hours before Switchback,” Anna moves on to the last item.

I intone what I’ve come to think of as the magic words that will release me. I’m itching to go.

Anna hands me the form for the final step and as required, I read aloud the statement confirming that I am participating in the Switch in good faith. *I was, until WAM didn't*, whispers my inner voice. As I sign, an echo of muscle memory from his many book signings makes an extra flourish. I take one last look at my signature, remind myself to practice his to make this work.

"And you're done," Anna sets up a high-five and my arm moves above my head, palm hitting hers. You'd think a slap that loud would hurt, but it doesn't. Not in this body.

"Chloe can call a driver for you if you'd like?" she says while adding the forms to my account.

"No, I'm fine. I've already made plans."

I stand up, marvel again at the lack of effort and pain. I move around the desk to hug Anna goodbye, giving her an extra squeeze as both a thank you and an apology. She's been good to me, as close to a friend as she can while remaining professional, and I hope the fallout from this will land where it should and not on her. I let her go, watching the blush creep up her face again and we both laugh.

"Taking the back stairs?" Anna's smiling face looks up at me. I bend down to pick up my bag, hiding my suddenly shiny eyes. I'm going to miss her.

"You know it!" I force cheer back into my voice and with a final wave, walk into the hallway and turn right towards the stairs. I pass the procedure room where he's just waking up in my body and hear retching. My pain hits people differently. Some people cry. He's a barfer.

I walk quickly down the hall, the sounds of my old life and his new one fading behind me. Once in the stairwell, I let loose my usual *whoop!* It echoes back and forth as I take the first step down and then the next, careful while I gain the rhythm of my new body. By the time I've made it down the five flights to ground level, I'm flying, consumed by the joy of every part of my body working as it should.

I'm barely winded as I exit in the side alleyway and stop for a moment, digging a baseball cap out of my bag and put it on, tucked low on my forehead. Jack is famous enough to be recognizable to many of his readers, but if I duck my head a little, the shadow cast by the rim will obscure my face.

I lope towards the street where the cab is waiting. My hand reaches out to open the rear door and I throw in my bag before getting in the backseat. Every movement has a careless ease, taking a fraction of the time it would in my own body and there's zero pain. I try to hide the giggles that fizz in my chest. This man is many things, but rarely silly. I can't blow my cover, not now, not ever, but it's a small price to pay for freedom.

"Where to, sir?" The cabbie asks without looking at me in the rearview mirror. I'm just another fare in his busy day.

"Airport, JFK." As he pulls into traffic, I touch the back of my neck where the implant is, imagining the data about this body travelling toward the WAM cloud.

I look at the streets of New York through the window, a river of cabs and trucks on the street, and on the sidewalks, flowing throngs of well-dressed office workers fueled by ambition and desire for success. The streets are clean and unobstructed in this upscale area, panhandling

and those who rely on it eliminated from Uptown. We drive past expensive stores and sidewalk patios where beautiful people eat lunch on this sunny autumn day.

As we near the highway, the carefully curated look of expensive New York begins to change. People on the sidewalks and buses look more tired, less polished, and the billboards start.

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The ghost of a small, twisted smile flits across my face. That life is not my problem anymore. I'm rich now, one of the elites. I don't have to worry ever again.

The airport shows me just how different this life will be. I get my own Travel Facilitator who removes every pebble from my path through the airport and onto a first-class seat in record time.

The plane accelerates down the runway and with a powerful lift, we're in the air. I accept a mimosa from the flight attendant and leaning back into the wide, plush seat, I take a sip of liquid sunshine and settle into my new life.

The flight is long. I have plenty of time to disappear.