

Switcheroo



Cheyenne Blue



Chapter 1

The Diner Dash

“TABLE FOURTEEN’S EGGS ARE POACHED hard.” Louella slapped two plates down on the counter. “They want soft, and their breakfasts redone.”

Hayley poked one of the offending eggs with a finger. It wobbled. “Yeah, nah.” She shrugged. “Sure, if they say so.” She slid the two perfectly good breakfasts into the trash, scooted the egg carton along the counter, and cracked four eggs into the pan of simmering water. “Tell them five minutes.”

She whirled from the stove to the grill, turned the sizzling bacon with one hand, and reached for two fresh plates with her other hand.

“Blueberry pancakes with cream and ice cream.” The other server, Abe, put a ticket on the hook, snatched the coffeepot from the stand and returned to the floor.

Hayley hummed an acknowledgement to his departing back and poured pancake batter over the hot griddle. A couple of minutes later, she slid two perfect golden pancakes onto a plate and scattered extra blueberries over the top. Cream and ice cream. Decadent choice for breakfast. She mentally applauded the unknown diner’s choice and added an extra swirl of whipped cream in solidarity.

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Table fourteen's eggs were ready—hopefully this time to their satisfaction—and she plated them with bacon, hash browns, and breakfast links.

Louella flashed her a smile. “The customers are clowns, but you're a sweetheart,” she said out the side of her mouth as she scooped the plate from the hatch. “You've probably saved my tip.”

“No problem,” Hayley said. “I like how you talk. When I get my own food truck, you've got a job.”

Louella waggled her eyebrows and hustled back to her customers.

By nine, the breakfast crowd had eased enough that Hayley could pour herself a coffee. A quick glance at the leftover ingredients, then she made a heap of corned beef hash for Louella, Abe, and herself. The dishwasher, Alejandro, refused the offer. “Gotta run, dude. Second job is howling my name.”

Hayley slapped some bacon and two eggs over hard on a roll and wrapped it in foil for him to take. She left Louella and Abe's breakfast in the warmer for them to have on a break, and poured herself a second mug of thick, dark coffee. She smothered her breakfast with hot sauce and took it and the coffee to the back storeroom, where a tiny table pushed up against bags of flour and potatoes. She took the least wobbly chair of the two and sat to eat.

For a moment, she slumped in the chair, blowing her sweaty bangs from her forehead. Another day at Jeb's Diner, another dollar, more happy customers. And payday had rolled around again—the best day of the week. Pity it coincided with rent day and buying her monthly MetroCard.

Someone had left the latest edition of *New York Mondays* on the table, so she pulled it over to read as she ate. She flicked through the magazine hunting for the gig guide for Thursday—her evening off. If her best friend Mad also wasn't working, maybe they could head out to see a band. If she wasn't so beat from her two jobs that once again, she'd crawl into her bed and pull the covers over her head to block out the noise of the plumbing, and sleep.

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The cover feature caught her eye. *Whoa, what's this?* She flattened out the magazine.

ESCAPE YOUR LIFE!

Who among us hasn't wondered how much better life could be somewhere else? Somewhere far away from New York City, geographically, mentally, and emotionally? A different way of life with a new job, living arrangements, and an unfamiliar daily routine.

If you're thinking this could be you, read on.

She put down her fork, breakfast forgotten. Maybe it was an advert for working on a cruise ship, an Antarctic base, or simply yet another exhortation to join the military. The first two would never want her—an unqualified short-order cook and evening bartender—and the military wasn't her thing.

New York Mondays is offering the opportunity to live the dream. Two people will switch lives for a year, working and living in each other's places, making their salary, and gaining new friends. Best of all, we will fully cover your usual expenses for the year so you can breathe easily while you're away.

If successful, you could be living the dream beside a Californian beach, farm the plains in Nebraska, or somewhere totally different.

If you're between 18 and 40, adventurous, and can change your life, e-mail us at lifeswap@newyorkmondays.com and let us know why you're the right fit.

Hayley let out a long breath. That would be peachy. Her lips twitched. But they would never pick her, with her two minimum-wage jobs, shitty apartment, and crushing student debt. No doubt they

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wanted people with exciting or high-powered careers—medics, air traffic controllers, cave divers, or even nannies to the rich and famous. Those cave divers probably lived in a mansion with no mortgage, not an overpriced studio apartment. *Dream on, Hayley.* She picked up her fork and resumed eating her breakfast.

Abe stuck his head around the storeroom door. “Order up, Hayley.”

She swallowed a large mouthful of hash and stood, picking up her plate. “On it.” She glanced at the table where *New York Mondays* lay open to the page about the life swap. A piece of potato made a spreading grease mark over the headline, but she could still read it: *Escape Your Life!*

Why the hell not? Hayley picked up the magazine, rolled it up, and stuck it in her back pocket.

Maybe she’d apply. Most likely not. But hey, she could dream.

Chapter 2

The Application

Date: *15 October*

From: *Hayley Reed <hayley_94_reed@gofersmail.com>*

To: *New York Mondays magazine <lifeswap@newyorkmondays.com>*

Subject: *Life Swap Application*

Hi there *New York Mondays*,

My name is Hayley Reed, and I think I'm the perfect person for your Life Swap for a Year competition. Let me tell you why.

First the boring basics. I'm a twenty-nine-year-old native New Yorker, a white, bisexual, cisgender woman. I've had it tough. Not on-the-streets tough, but nothing has been handed to me. Not yet. But I'm not complaining. Life's what you make it, and I hope you'll read on and consider handing me the life swap.

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I've been in foster care since I was eleven. My father is who knows where. I'm sure if I ever become famous, he'll come crawling out the woodwork bleating about how he's missed me, but until then, yeah, no father.

My mother was killed by a runaway horse. I know that sounds more Oregon Trail than New York, but it's fact. Search "carriage horse fatality Central Park" on the internet. That was my mom. I still miss her every day.

So, me in foster care. My foster parents were fine and kind to me (apart from the whole going-to-church thing), but once you turn eighteen in foster care, you're out. Well, I could have stayed, my foster parents could have kept me, but by then things were getting a little salty. Strict church goers + bisexual teen is not a match made in heaven—at least not in their church.

I went to Brooklyn College and did a four-year liberal arts degree. Yeah, I know. Not the brightest choice for someone alone in the world. Why didn't I do something more practical? I didn't want a huge college debt, and I thought liberal arts would get me that degree and make me employable.

You can stop laughing anytime you want.

Fast forward to now. I still owe about \$23,000 of my college debt, and I'm working two jobs to pay it off quicker. I worked through college as a cook and bartender, and found I liked the work, and I'm good at it. So when I didn't land a cushy office job using my degree (and I searched. And searched some more.) I stayed doing those jobs.

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I start at 6:00 a.m. as a short-order breakfast cook at Jeb's Diner and work until noon. That's a ton of eggs and pancakes. Most times, I go home and sleep for a couple of hours. Then at four, I go to my second job as a bartender at Working Overtime, which serves the after-office crowd. I get home around eleven and have about five hours of sleep before I start all over again. Every day is Groundhog Day.

Home? It's a studio apartment in the Throgs Neck area of The Bronx. It's tiny, basic, and cheap, but it suits me. The landlord doesn't like to do repairs, though. Do any of them?

So, your life swap sounds appealing. You say you're going to match very diverse people. So, if you pick me, I'm guessing I'll end up in some small town in Nebraska or nowhere, living on a farm with Maw and Paw. That could be cool—I've barely been outside of the five boroughs, let alone New York State. Hey, if I win, can you make it Colorado? I've always wanted to see the Rockies.

More about me: I try to eat well (lots of plants), and my chief interest is CrossFit. So I'm certainly tough enough for whatever you can throw at me. My friends think I'm a good person. I remember birthdays and knit them toques for Christmas—those Canadian wool hats with the flaps that keep your ears warm. They say I'm happy and positive for a New Yorker, and anyone who works two jobs is definitely hard-working.

I admit my major motivation is money. Having my living expenses in the city taken care of for a year, including my college debt repayments, and getting to keep any money

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I earn in the tiny mountain town in the sticks would be amazing. Maybe at the end of the year, I'll have enough money for my dream: I want to open a food truck. Not just any food truck, but one that serves a community with the best darn vegetarian food. Or maybe I'll get a formal qualification and get me a better job, one where I have more say over what I do.

But it's more than money. Any place you send me won't be my city, and while I love the city and her boroughs—I love her people, the hustle and bustle of the crowds, and how I can get a Cuban sandwich from the bodega at 3:00 a.m.—there's got to be more to life than cooking pancakes and listening to millennials complain about their bosses.

I'm sure you stopped reading this a few paragraphs ago. You're doubtless going to pick millennials who crafted finely worded e-mails that read like applications to intern at the White House. But in case you want someone different, someone with fire who will give it a real go, I'm the one.

I've attached your completed pre-screening questionnaire. There's a Colorado mountain town calling my name.

Optimistically yours,
Hayley Reed

Chapter 3

Not-So-Dream Destination

“TELL ME SLOWLY WHY YOU WON.” Mad sat on Hayley’s bed and crossed her legs. “Rush-hour-traffic slow. I’m not sure it’s processing.”

Hayley’s mouth twitched into a smile. “I honestly don’t know. My entry was very rambling, and I admitted I was doing it for the money.”

“And where are they sending you for the year?”

“They haven’t told me yet. I’m guessing a small town somewhere.”

“So someone is going to live here and work your two jobs?” Mad raised her eyebrows. “Dead ass! If they take your shifts at Working Overtime, I’ll get to meet them. Do you know who they are?”

“No idea.” Hayley drew up her knees and rested her chin on them. “But there’s more. We swap lives—but also best friends. So their best friend will take me under their wing and ease me into life in—wherever it is, and my best friend will do the same for them. So...” She widened her eyes and stared meaningfully at Mad.

Mad’s face creased into a puzzled frown.

Hayley sighed. “Madonna Mary Maria Lopez. Who is my best friend?”

The frown wiped from Mad’s forehead. “Me... Oh! So I must show some country girl around the neighbourhood. That could be fun.”

“Glad you think so. You get paid, too. Not much, apparently, but something.”

“Word. Something’s good. I’ll do it.”

“Great. I’ve got to sign a contract before they tell me where I’m going, and part of it is that I have your agreement to be the best friend.”

“Have you got the contract yet?”

Hayley handed over her cell phone. “Read it.” She pulled her cardigan tighter around her body. It was never exactly cold in her studio, but it wasn’t ever warm enough, either. Except in summer when it was the other way around.

Mad took the phone and scrolled. “Uh huh, uh huh, really? Yeah, nah!”

“Yeah, nah, what?” Hayley thought back over the contract. A couple of clauses might provoke that reaction. The one about not renegeing once the destination was revealed. Or the agreement to do any legal job within the winner’s capabilities.

“If you don’t last the year, they can make you pay back a proportion of all the expenses they paid on your behalf.”

“I’ll do it. I must, Mad.” Hayley gripped her thumbs. Since she’d gotten the e-mail saying she’d won, the competition had claimed all her head space. It had camped out, rent free, teasing her with what-ifs, and oh-my-God-that-would-be-awesomes, as well as a couple of hell-nos. But mainly the good. This was more than a financial bonus; this was adventure.

“It’s like reality TV but on paper,” Mad said. “They’re not going to send you somewhere for an easy ride. They’ll want you to struggle and suffer.”

“Maybe not,” Hayley argued. “After all, the idea is to match opposites. I could have a cushy life for a year.”

“There are worse jobs than yours. There are certainly worse places than The Bronx. You told them you’re bisexual—what if you’re sent somewhere homophobic where they’ll try to beat the gay out of you?”

SWITCHEROO

Unease trickled through Hayley's blood. "They can't put me in danger."

"Didn't you read the disclaimer about not being responsible for your wellbeing?" Mad shuffled closer so she could put her hand on Hayley's knee. "I'm trying not to be defeatist here—I hope you get that cute mountain town where you'll work three hours a day and spend the rest of the time skiing—I just want you to be okay."

"We'll set up a safe word. If I ever call and use it, you can rescue me from the cult."

Mad didn't laugh. "We will. And I will. I love you, bestie, and I'm going to miss you. No innocent rancher girl can take your place." She tilted her head, her dark eyes serious. "You're going to sign, aren't you? Despite the wellbeing clause."

"Yeah. This could be the financial leg up I need. One year in West Bumbafuck, Montana or wherever, and then I'll come home to New York—and I won't have to set up again or look for somewhere affordable to live. I just hope whoever stays in my studio looks after it."

"I'll check on them. If I'm the best friend, then that will be part of my job." Mad frowned. "We're assuming it's a woman you're swapping with, but what if it's a dude? Maybe you'll have to work on high-rise construction in Alaska."

"Women do that, too," Hayley said. "But no. That's not within my capabilities any more than cardiac surgeon would be. You need qualifications. So that means I'll be waitressing or some other service industry job. No employer would take on a rookie in place of an experienced person."

"Maybe." Mad pushed back her black hair. "But where would be the fun in that? Where's the drama?"

Hayley held out her hand for her phone. "You could be right, but I'm going all the same." She took her phone, scrolled to the end of the contract, and signed her name with a finger. "Done! I'm going."

"Good luck. And make sure you call. If you're going someplace gorgeous to live in a mansion, I am so coming to visit."

Hayley's phone pinged with an e-mail, and she glanced at it. "It's from *New York Mondays*. Probably just acknowledging my return of the contract." She opened the e-mail. "Oh!" Anticipation thumped in her chest. "It's a long e-mail. Like real long, and it starts, *Now that you've signed the Contract and Non-Disclosure Agreement, we can reveal more about the assignment so that you can prepare.*" She met Mad's eyes. "Oh my God, this is it! West Bumfuck here I come!"

"Read it." Mad swung closer on the bed. "I must be exempt from that non-disclosure if I'm to be the best friend."

Hayley sucked her lower lip. Nerves buzzed and tumbled in her stomach. It was one thing to enter the competition on the assumption she wouldn't win. A total mind-flip to learn she'd won, but still not quite real. But she had won. *How unreal was that?* And now she had to fulfill her side of the bargain. It wasn't all a one-sided money fountain. She'd barely left New York in her entire life. And now she was going to...where? Second thoughts filled her head like Manhattan smog.

"C'mon," Mad said impatiently. "I need to start planning my luxury vacation to Malibu or Aspen."

The screen had gone blank while she twitched with nerves. Hayley took a deep breath and activated the cell again.

"*We are aware you have preconceived ideas about what is involved in this life swap,*" she read, "*but what would be the fun in giving you what you expect?*"

"Uh-oh," Mad murmured. "It's a religious compound in a deep, dark state where you'll have to pray away the gay."

Surely that couldn't be true. Hayley's fingers trembled, and she nearly dropped the phone.

"We have arranged your flights for six weeks' time to allow you time to assemble the required documentation. We will assist all we can with the process. However, if your visa is denied, we will consider the contract void and an alternate winner selected."

SWITCHEROO

“Visa? Who needs a fucking visa to go to Colorado?” Mad screwed her head around, trying to see over Hayley’s shoulder. “Maybe you need security clearance because you’re going to be shut in a top-secret basement at Cheyenne Mountain for a year.”

Those same questions—and more—raced through Hayley’s mind. Visa? Was she going overseas? Surely not, as there’d been nothing about having a valid passport in the pre-screening questions. She shook her head to dislodge the tumult of thoughts and read on.

“You will spend the next year as a jillaroo on an outback cattle station in Queensland, Australia.”

The cell dropped from suddenly nerveless fingers and bounced on the bed. “Australia!”

“Australia!” Mad’s eyes widened. “You lucky bitch! That’s lit—a dream destination. Koala bears, kangaroos, all that blue, blue sea, and sunshine. Beaches for miles!”

Something colder than the chill stealing under the door wrapped around Hayley’s chest. *Australia. What the fuck?* And, from the sound of it, an Australia that was a million miles from Mad’s vision of blue water and white sand. The outback. The little knowledge she had of that consisted of flat land, red sand, *Mad Max*, and things that would kill you. And what was a jillaroo anyway? It didn’t sound like any bartender job she knew.

Mad’s fingers flew over her cell phone. “A station is a ranch, and a jillaroo is a sort of trainee ranch hand. Unless you’re a guy, in which case you’re a jackaroo.” She looked up. “You’d think they’d come up with one term for all genders. Jallaroo? Jickaroo?” She sniggered. “You’ll have to ride a horse and castrate bulls.”

The chill in her chest was now an iceberg. How was she ever going to cope with that?

“Read on.” Mad nudged her.

Hayley lifted the phone again.

CHEYENNE BLUE

“You are going to Ghost Gum Station which is one hundred and eighty miles southwest of the city of Mount Isa. The owners, Gillian and Malcolm Thwaites, work their 630,000-acre station with their family and sixteen full-time staff. They will provide accommodation and all meals, as well as the award wage for a trainee jillaroo of \$812.60 Australian dollars per week, less tax.”

Oh! The chill loosened its grip a little. She didn't know what an Australian dollar was worth, but surely she should be able to save most of that.

“Mount Isa isn't much of a city.” Mad's fingers flashed over her phone. “Population around twenty thousand. That's barely a town!”

“We will send your flight details once your visa is confirmed. Please reply to this e-mail immediately to advise if you hold a valid US passport so we can arrange your visa. If not, you will need to apply for an urgent passport to allow time for Australian visa processing.”

Hayley put down the phone. “This is unbelievable. Australia!” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “What happened to the cute mountain town?” She scrolled down the e-mail. “There's lists of clothes and things to bring, and things I have to do before departure, both here and for the trip. How am I supposed to work two jobs and do all of this?”

“Stop sleeping,” Mad said. “This is awesome. Think of the experience! Think of the people—maybe you'll fall in love with a cowboy built like a Mack truck and never return. Or another jillaroo with the strongest, leanest thighs to clasp around your head.”

“Whoa, I'm good. This is surreal enough without thinking ahead to that. I'm freaking out enough as it is at the thought of living in the outback. There's no way I'll end up staying, even if I could.”

SWITCHEROO

Mad nodded. “This city does that to you. We complain about living here, but we love it. Dead ass. I couldn’t live anywhere else either. That doesn’t mean I won’t try to visit you though.”

Hayley slung an arm over Mad’s shoulders. “I’m counting on it.”

Adventure. Well, it looked like she’d got that all right. A tingle of anticipation stole up her spine. She’d embrace this opportunity. It would be a year to remember.

After all, how bad could it be?

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

SWITCHEROO

BY CHEYENNE BLUE

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