

THE SWITCH UP

*For Kip, Allie and Robin, with love.
Family make the best friends.*

STRIPES PUBLISHING LIMITED
An imprint of the Little Tiger Group
1 Coda Studios, 189 Munster Road, London SW6 6AW

A paperback original
First published in Great Britain in 2019

ISBN: 978-1-78895-040-4

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

THE SWITCH UP

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Stripes

WILLA

I am an expert in parent behaviour. After watching mine for the last fourteen years, I've learned all the tricks they use to control us. And over the last six months, I think my mum and dad have tried *all* of them. (Fortunately, my expert status means I'm also *excellent* at counter-attack. I know all the best ways to exact revenge ... like my recent shopping spree. With Mum's credit card.)

The number one thing I've learned is: parents always *say* they're doing what's best for you, when really, they're doing what's best for *them*.

"I don't know why you're being so difficult about this." Mum sighed. I risked a glance across at her, and saw her 'I'm so misunderstood' look had settled firmly in place. Trick number twenty-seven – make your offspring feel sorry for you. "When I was your age I'd have *loved* to spend a summer in Italy. So romantic!"

"So remote," I countered. She wasn't getting any agreement from me this week. On anything.

Besides, I totally wasn't buying her 'Italy – land of romance' line. She was just using trick forty-two: trying to make herself feel less guilty for sending me away by pretending that she'd love the chance to go.

I knew the truth. My summer wasn't going to be like that movie Mum loved, with Audrey Hepburn. There'd be no whizzing around Rome on a Vespa or whatever.

Instead, my parents, in a shocking show of actual communication and co-operation with each other, had agreed to ship me off to some random relative. I'll admit, I'd been too busy sulking to really listen to the details, but I'd definitely heard enough to be sure of the following:

1. The aunt lived on a farm.
2. The farm was in the middle of nowhere, Italy.
3. Italy wasn't London, where I was *supposed* to be spending the summer.

I'd had it all planned. Mum had even agreed! Well, eventually, anyway.

We were supposed to be flying back from LA together at the beginning of August, once her guest role on this US TV show had finished filming. I'd been out there with her ever since my school broke up (at the start of July – perk of the private school Dad

insisted I went to. The long holidays *almost* made up for the awful uniform.)

She was going to hand me over to Dad, and we were going to spend summer in the city together, as an adventure. It would be my first time seeing him since he and Mum officially split up, over a month ago, and Dad disappeared to London to appear in some theatre show while he was on sabbatical from the TV soap he stars in, *Heatherside*. We'd even arranged for me to attend a course at a London theatre, which was a *huge* deal. I'd been nagging them to let me follow them both into the business, ever since I turned eleven, three whole years ago. But they both said that show business was no place for their child.

I'd hoped, when they agreed to me taking the course, that they were *finally* accepting that I wasn't a child any more. How wrong could I be?

I'd heard about the course from one of my dad's co-stars on *Heatherside*. Apparently, it was *the* course to do if you were serious about getting into TV acting – especially since they always got a casting agent to come along to the final showcase. And since Mum and Dad insisted on me going to a boring private school instead of stage school, it was my best shot at getting into the industry. So I'd found the website,

registered myself using my own email, got Mum to sign the parental consent form and sent it in.

But then the show Dad had a part in down in London got picked as a last-minute replacement for some cancelled act at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and Mum's US TV series guest role got extended into a regular part with longer filming hours, and suddenly everything changed. London was totally off the cards – even though my parents *knew* how much I wanted to do my theatre course.

Clearly, Dad had other priorities now, besides his only daughter. He didn't want me in Edinburgh with him – said he would be too busy to look after me. And Mum's new role was more important to her than anything *I* wanted.

Even so, staying with Mum might have been OK. I mean, summer in California isn't exactly a punishment, right? But it turned out I wouldn't be in LA. Nor would I be with Dad in Edinburgh. And I certainly wouldn't be in London attending the theatre course. Instead, I was being sent to Italy, to stay with the random aunt.

Honestly, it was enough to make me Google 'how to divorce your parents'. (Which I had done. Several times. LA was clearly rubbing off on me.)

Even if I'd had to give up my plans for London, I'd had opportunities in LA – enough that the summer might not have been a total bust in terms of kick-starting my acting career. The TV show Mum worked on had a day off from filming, and all the young stars and crew had been heading to the beach. They'd even invited me to join them – my first real chance at networking.

But was I on the beach? No. I was in a car with the air conditioning turned up way too high, pulling up at Los Angeles airport, ready for my flight to nowhere.

“So I'm going to leave you with the UM person from the airline, OK?” Mum said, obviously trying to sound like the kind of mother who cared about her daughter's wellbeing. Of course, if she *actually* cared, she wouldn't be making me go to Italy. (I'd pointed that out a few times the night before and Mum said I was being overdramatic. Coming from an actress that seemed kind of hypocritical.)

“UM?” I asked.

“Willa, we've been over this! The Unaccompanied Minors person!”

Ah, now she sounded like the exasperated Mum I knew and tolerated.

“Makes me sound like one of those stupid classical

music pieces Dad pretends to like,” I muttered. If anyone else was within earshot, Dad always had classical music playing. The rest of the time it was eighties pop all the way. Just hearing Wham! made me miss him.

Mum ignored me. As usual. “The UM person will look after you until your Aunt Sofia meets you in London. Then you’ll travel together to her place in Italy.”

Aunt Sofia. A woman I’d never met and knew next to nothing about, who was probably as annoyed about the arrangement as I was. Although apparently she had foster kids staying with her, so an extra person wouldn’t make much difference. (One was about my age, but I was guessing they were the oldest. I really hoped she wasn’t going to expect me to help out with the others. I’m not good with little kids.)

Still, it wasn’t Aunt Sofia’s fault I had to go stay with her on a farm miles away from any sort of entertainment or decent shopping, in a country where I didn’t speak the language. I was sure Aunt Sofia was a perfectly lovely person.

Unlike my parents.

“Right.” Grabbing my leather jacket from the seat beside me, I opened the car door and stepped out

on to the baking hot pavement. I could feel the heat seeping through my flip-flops.

It wasn't until Mum got out, though, that I saw the photographer.

“Sarrah! Sarrah!” he called out. “Over here, Sarrah. How about a smile?”

Mum gave a polite smile for the camera, then put up her hand as a shield so he couldn't get any photos of her pulling funny faces. The number of paparazzi trying to get her photo after the news broke about Dad, a month or so ago, had taught her that trick pretty quickly.

“Have you spoken to Scott, Sarrah?” the photographer called out, and Mum and I both froze.

Scott is my dad, in case you haven't guessed.

“How did you find out about his new girlfriend?” the photographer yelled, happily sharing my family's private business with everyone taking a plane out of LA that day. But his question shook us out of our stunned state, and Mum grabbed my arm to pull me towards the back of the cab, where the driver was unloading my case from the boot.

“Did he tell you himself?” the photographer continued.

I knew the answer to that one: no. Mum found

out the same way I did. The same way most of the country did – when photos of Dad and his co-star kissing showed up in the papers.

I wasn't telling the paparazzi that, though. Rule one of being a celebrity's daughter – don't tell the press anything. And I wasn't just *a* celebrity's daughter. I was Willa Andrews, daughter of Scott and Sarra Andrews, the darlings of British TV. Or they had been, until this year.

Now I was Willa Andrews, unwanted daughter of two feuding celebs who were too busy dealing with the fallout from their own stupidity to care about me.

Not that I was bitter or anything.

“Sarra! How about a photo with your friend, then?”

Obviously a newbie, if he didn't recognize me as Mum's daughter. Mind you, that would make Mum's new LA agent, Veronica, happy. According to *her* I wasn't helping my mother's flourishing career one bit.

“Let's get inside, Willa,” Mum said through her teeth.

Taking my suitcase from the driver, I followed Mum through the automatic doors and into the terminal.

LAX was bustling, as always. Mum stopped when we were far enough away from the doors and switched back from celeb mode to mum mode. “Now, have

you got everything you need?”

“Hope so,” I said, shrugging on my jacket. I figured if I’d forgotten anything, I’d just have to buy it when I got there. On Mum’s credit card, of course. Assuming she’d unblocked it after my shopping spree last week, anyway.

Mum frowned at me, then smoothed out her expression again. I could almost hear her thinking ‘wrinkles’ as she did it.

“Do you really need to take that jacket?” she asked. “It’s worth a fortune and I don’t want you leaving it somewhere. It’ll be far too hot to wear it in Italy.”

I wrapped my arms round myself inside the leather jacket, thankful for the air conditioning that meant I wasn’t overheating. I *loved* my jacket. It was the one I’d worn for the magazine photo shoot Mum and I did right after we arrived in LA at the start of the summer. Before Veronica decided that having a teenage daughter wasn’t good for Mum’s image. Too aging, apparently, now she had this bigger role and the possibility of a part in the *next* series too.

I wasn’t sure if Veronica had shared this insight with Mum, but she’d shared it with someone in a phone call that I just happened to overhear. (OK, fine, I was listening in.) “She could make it really big over here now

she's dropped the deadweight husband. People love a survivor. The daughter's not helping, though. Too old to be passed off as cute. We'll have to come up with a strategy for that, if she wants roles as anything other than The Mother."

But that day at the magazine shoot – with us both in ripped jeans and matching leather jackets (hers was navy, mine was cherry red) – it had felt like Mum and me against the world. Against all the friends and papers talking about our family. Against Dad, and his midlife crisis.

I'd thought it could be the start of a whole new life for us.

Turns out I was wrong.

Mum sighed, again. One small win to me. I smirked.

"Come on, then. Let's get you on this flight."

My smirk disappeared. Six thousand miles' worth of wins to Mum.

ALICE

I've been called a lot of things over the last fourteen years. When I was little, my dad used to call me Starfish. Mum would use my full name whenever I was in trouble – *Alice Josephine Wright!* Not that I got into trouble often or anything, but I knew to come running when I heard it.

At school my friends had tried shortening my name all sorts of ways – Allie, Al, Liss, that sort of thing.

My teachers called me a dream pupil, top of the class, even best in school. (Apart from the PE teacher, who called me a hopeless case. She wasn't wrong.)

The counsellor I went to see after Mum died had some other names for me. An anxious child, that was the main one. Compulsive planner. Perfectionist. Afraid to disappoint. Avoids conflict.

But mostly, I was just Alice.

Today though, I'd gained a new name. One I *really* didn't like.

Unaccompanied Minor.

Even the words are rubbish.

Unaccompanied. Alone. Abandoned.

Minor. Yes, technically it just meant under eighteen. But it also meant unimportant.

Abandoned and unimportant, that was me. And stuck in the Los Angeles airport waiting for a connecting flight home.

Normally I liked airports. They were exciting – full of people beginning and ending adventures. But today I felt I'd much rather be at the beach, listening to the wind on the water and feeling the waves flow over my toes.

Before my mum died, we only used to go through airports for rare holidays abroad. But over the last four years I'd spent a lot more time in them, following my dad to wherever his latest research trip took him.

This summer he was working on his biggest project yet – helping out with marine biology research on the Great Barrier Reef. Flying out to Australia two weeks earlier, I hadn't cared about any of the other travel stories going on around me. I'd been too excited about spending time with my dad in such an amazing location.

Flying back without him was a different matter altogether.

Mandy the airline representative had met me off my

flight from Australia to Los Angeles (taking over from another woman called Fran) and was now in charge of me – and the other UMs, I supposed – until we boarded our next flight. As we walked away from the gate where I'd got off the plane, she gave me a small smile. I got the feeling that she wanted to pat me on the head like a little kid.

“Are you nervous about flying alone?” She sniffed, like she was coming down with a cold.

“Not really.” What did she think I'd been doing between Australia and LA? Fran had checked in once or twice, but mostly it was just me and the snoring businessman beside me.

Many things in the world made me anxious or nervous, but I'd found it wasn't usually the ones that other people thought I should be worried about.

“Well, our Unaccompanied Minors scheme is here to support all our young flyers,” Mandy went on, like she was reading aloud from her clipboard. “We've just got a little time before your flight to –” she checked – “London, so why don't we take a seat with some other UMs in our special lounge? Maybe you can make some new friends.” There was no enthusiasm in her voice, but that was OK. I wasn't feeling very enthusiastic about it either.

The ‘lounge’ was a tiny room near one of the gates, adjacent to one of the proper business lounges. There were three other kids there – a girl about my age watching something on a tablet and two younger boys who were probably brothers. There was a table in the middle set out with bottles of water, soft drinks and some cookies.

“Here we go!” Mandy gestured to the room like it was the Taj Mahal. I smiled dutifully. “You make yourself at home now.”

Then she sat down next to the door and pulled out her phone, jabbing the screen furiously. I guessed I was on my own again. Which, after hours of the snoring businessman, was actually kind of a relief.

I took a seat near the cookies and pulled a book out of my bag. But before I could get stuck into the story, there was an announcement over the tannoy. “Flight BA344 to London has been delayed.” I groaned.

“Hey.” The girl with the tablet pulled off her headphones – they were the big sort that go over your whole ears. “Was that the London flight?”

I nodded. “Delayed.”

“Maybe someone should go and find out more about that,” she said loudly, looking pointedly at Mandy.

Mandy didn’t notice. The girl rolled her eyes and

shifted into the seat next to me. “You as bored as I am?”

“I just got here,” I said. “But give me a minute.”

She grinned. “I’m Willa,” she said, then just stared at me. It took me a moment to realize she was waiting for me to give her my name.

“Alice.”

“Hey, are you two twins?” the elder of the two boys asked, looking up at us across the table.

Willa and I exchanged a look, assessing each other’s appearance. We both had dark hair, but her eyes were golden brown not green like mine, and she was a little taller too. Plus she definitely had a few more curves than me. I bet the boys at her school didn’t tease her like the ones at my school did me.

But we did look alike. I mean, surprisingly alike. Face shape, hair, even her smile looked a bit like mine. I couldn’t really blame the boy for asking.

Willa was less understanding.

“Obviously,” Willa said. “We’re totally twins. That’s why we arrived at different times and *just* introduced ourselves to each other.”

I hid a smile as the boy turned away, grumbling.

“So you’re going to London as well?” she asked, and I nodded. “On holiday?”

“Sort of,” I replied, wagging my head from side to side a little. “It’s complicated.”

“Tell me about it.” Willa gave an overly dramatic sigh and switched off her tablet. “I *should* be spending the summer here in LA with my mum, or in Edinburgh with my dad.”

“I was supposed to be staying with my dad in Australia for the summer, while he worked.”

“Working in Australia? That’s cool.”

I smiled. It *was* cool. It was his dream, in fact. “Yeah. He’s a Professor of Marine Biology.”

Willa’s eyes widened a little. Dad’s job title sounded a lot more impressive if you hadn’t met him.

“So what happened?” I asked. “Why are you heading to London?”

“I’m not,” Willa replied, flicking her hair over her shoulder. “London would be perfect. London was the *original* plan, before my parents messed it up. But London is just where I’m being collected by an aunt I’ve never met. Then she’s stealing me away to some farm in the middle of nowhere, Italy.”

An Italian farmhouse. My mind filled with memories of our last family holiday before Mum died – a little cottage on the Italian coast, where we hung out on the beach all day, Mum resting on a lounge.

We spent our evenings eating huge bowls of pasta on the patio outside the cottage, stars twinkling overhead and Dad telling stories about them. Mum would doze off quite often, and then Dad would carry her to bed. But still, it was perfect.

Mum had wanted to tick the last item off her bucket list while we were there – visiting some waterfall near the coast that was supposed to have magical powers – but she hadn't been well enough to go in the end.

If I ever got to visit Italy again, that was where I was going. To the waterfall Mum said could take away all of your worries.

“Is it by the sea?” I asked.

Willa gave me a look. The sort of look my friends give me when I say something weird. Usually about marine life.

“I think so, yeah,” she said. “I mean, I wasn't really listening when my mum was going on and on about how great it would be, but I think she said something about a beach. Probably a stupid rocky one you can't sunbathe on.”

“Sounds pretty great to me,” I admitted. “Although maybe that's just because it's anywhere but London.”

“Are you crazy?” Willa asked. “London is the best! It has theatres and shops and the Harry Potter Studios

and *everything*. I used to go there with my parents all the time before—” She cut herself off.

I didn’t ask ‘before what?’ I’d done the same often enough when I found myself almost talking about Mum. Whatever Willa’s *before* was, she didn’t want to talk about it. Just like I tended to tell people it was only me and Dad these days, if they asked, and not elaborate on where my mum was.

“It’s not London I don’t like,” I explained. “It’s who I have to stay with.”

“Worse than a random aunt?” Willa asked, eyebrows raised.

“Much. A random woman my dad used to work with who I’ve never met, know nothing about and who he hadn’t even *mentioned* until he needed to get rid of me for the rest of the summer.” And that wasn’t even the worst part. The worst part was how he’d told me about her.

Willa looked taken aback at my sudden outburst. “Whoa. I guess I’m not the only one with rubbish parents right now. Why does he need to get rid of you?”

I instantly felt guilty for ranting about my dad. He’d worked so hard to keep things stable and happy for me since Mum was gone, and it wasn’t like he could say, ‘Actually, no, I don’t want to do my job

any more but could you keep paying me please while I just hang out on the beach with my daughter?’

“It’s not really his fault. He’s got to go on some research vessel out on the reef for, like, three weeks or something stupid. And I wasn’t allowed to go with him.”

“Did you tell him how annoyed you were?” Willa asked.

“Not ... exactly.” By which I meant no, not at all. In fact, I’d actually told him it was totally fine and I completely understood.

Except it wasn’t.

“Right,” Willa said, with the sort of look that meant she didn’t understand *me*. I was used to seeing that one. “So why the random woman? Was there literally no one else he could ask?”

“Usually, yes. But apparently everyone was away on holiday this time.” We had a whole network of people who were happy to have me stay a night or two.

But this time he’d chosen *Mabel*.

Willa’s eyes widened. She’d obviously been following the same train of thought as I had when Dad told me. “Oh! D’you reckon this woman’s his new girlfriend?”

Bingo. And *that* was the number one reason I didn’t

want to spend my summer with her.

“I know she is,” I replied. “Because I asked him.”

He’d looked embarrassed at the question and started stuttering in a way that was nothing like my laid-back, articulate father.

Mabel and I ... we’re old friends. And now we’re seeing if maybe, well, we think we might, actually, um, be something more.

So she’s your girlfriend? I’d asked. It had to have been going on for a while, yet I’d heard absolutely no mention of her until now.

That was the part that hurt.

I didn’t want to tell you until we were sure it was going somewhere. We’d planned to talk to you after the Australia trip, he’d said sheepishly. Introduce you properly, let you spend time together before... Well, anyway.

He’d cut himself off, but I knew what that ‘before’ had meant. It meant ‘before we get married’. Because I knew my dad better than anyone now Mum was gone. He’d been making noises about me needing more ‘womanly influences’ (as he put it) for months now. (Mostly I thought he was just terrified of having to give me the Talk on his own. You know, about periods and boys and stuff. Except Mum had already done that, before she died.)

Anyway. If he was sending me to stay with Mabel, she wasn't just a girlfriend. She was a prospective new mother.

And I *really* didn't need one of those, whatever Dad thought.

"Wow." Willa studied me, and somehow I was sure she read every one of my concerns in my face. And even weirder, it felt like she *understood*. "I'm guessing you're not keen on getting a new step-mum, huh? I know I wouldn't be."

"What's so bad about the random Italian aunt then?" I said, changing the subject.

Wriggling a little in her seat, Willa rolled her eyes dramatically, then leaned forwards. "Trust me. If you want *my* sob story, we need pastries first. Come on."