

CHAPTER ONE

GRACE GREGGS—BEST KNOWN AS Switch, daughter of the supervillain Electrica—was quite proud of herself for sneaking out of her dorm in the middle of the night without waking up her roommates. It helped that the two girls who slept in the same dorm as her had been completely knocked out, even though they'd stayed up far later in the night than her, chatting about boys and sharing makeup tips, despite the fact that they were supposed to be studying their homework. They probably had never suspected that Switch was plotting her escape that very night, but even if they had, Switch would have gone ahead with the plan anyway, even if that meant knocking together a couple of skulls, because Switch had no desire to stay in this dumb superhero school any longer than she already had.

The Theodore Jason Academy for Young Superhumans, her twin brother, Bait (who was staying in a completely separate dorm from her), would have corrected her, if he had been here. And it's not dumb. The teachers here are going to help us avoid making the same mistakes as Mom.

Switch could not help but snort when she thought that, though she paused in the trees along the main campus path and looked around just to make sure she really was alone. She did not see anyone else out tonight—the entire campus seemed deserted—but Switch knew, from experience, that there was usually at least one security guard active at all times in this idiotic school and sometimes they even had robot assistants; those were the worst. Switch's metallic fingernail projectiles (which she called nail bullets, if only because it sounded cooler than metallic fingernail projectiles) were rarely effective against the robotic guards that sometimes stalked the campus grounds like mountain lions. They were useful against the human guards, though, because their uniforms usually weren't thick enough to catch the nail bullets themselves.

In any case, when Switch saw that she was alone tonight, she rose from her hiding place and resumed making her way to the exit, sticking to the darkest parts of the campus on the off-chance that someone else other than her might be out tonight. As a result, her movement was slower and more deliberate than she would have liked, but she had learned from experience that slow and deliberate was the best way to go about sneaking around unseen. Mom probably wouldn't have agreed, but Mom was also a powerful supervillain capable of traveling through electricity lines and frying anyone who tried to catch her, so this was one area where Switch would just have to do her own thing.

But Mom will be real happy to see me when I get her out of Ultimate Max, Switch thought, a smile creeping across her lips as she paused behind a tree, looked around briefly, and resumed her walking again. Don't know how happy she'll be when I tell her about Bait, though.

Thinking about her twin brother made Switch scowl. Bait had always been more of a goody two shoes than her, but ever since the two of them had been forced to attend this stupid school, he had gone completely off the rails. He often preached to her about how this was their chance to avoid repeating the mistakes of their Mom, how he loved Mom more than anyone but realized that she had been raising them wrongly, and how he was looking forward to becoming a superhero in his own right someday.

Switch would have punched him if he was here right now. He wasn't exactly a traitor, maybe, but she found his lack of loyalty to Mom disturbing. Didn't he realize that Mom needed their help? She'd been arrested and thrown into Ultimate Max—the best and only prison for supervillains in the country—about two months ago now and was unlikely to ever be released. Mom was normally capable of getting out of even the worst situations by herself, but this time, Mom was truly trapped, because Ultimate Max was specifically designed to hold supervillains like her. Switch had never

visited the prison herself, but she'd heard rumors that the guards all carried guns that could shoot powerless pellets, which would release a gas that could disable a superhuman's powers for a brief period of time.

It's really rich hearing Bait talk about becoming 'good,' Switch thought. *He was just as eager about committing crimes and doing what Mom told us to do when we were younger as I was, maybe even more so. He's probably just putting on an act to make everyone think he's turned over a new leaf, seen the light and all that. If Mom hadn't been arrested—*

The sound of crunching leaves almost made Switch jump. For a moment, she thought that the gig was up, that she had been spotted by one of the guards and they were coming to drag her, kicking and screaming, back to her dorm.

But when Switch turned her head in the direction from which the sound came, she saw a raccoon, of all things, standing very still in the bushes. Its big eyes stared at her, as if it had never seen a human before, though based on its size, it had to be an adult.

Switch scowled. "Scram, you stupid ring tail."

She aimed her index finger and fired one nail bullet. But the raccoon had fled even before she shot it, running away into the darkness between the Library and the Cafeteria without making a sound.

Lowering her finger, Switch shook her head. Dumb raccoons. She hated the little jerks. They were everywhere, especially at night, and had this tendency to trip up her escape attempts every time she tried to get out of here. One of her roommates, Melissa, loved raccoons and thought they were the cutest thing in the world, but Switch had decided in her mind that the next raccoon that messed up her next escape attempts would become a hat. She had no time to waste chasing this one, but maybe next time, she would.

Grumbling about stupid raccoons under her breath, Switch resumed sneaking around the campus. She passed the Administration Building, the Academy Clinic, and various other campus buildings, all of which were currently closed. She still didn't see any guards, but that was fine by her, because that meant that she might actually escape this time.

Normally, Switch would have headed for the gate, which was the primary entrance and exit for the Academy. But tonight, Switch was not going that way, because not only was the gate locked every night, but it was also always watched by the guards, perhaps more than any other place in the school. She had already tried the gate during her last few escape attempts anyway. Each time, she would be caught before she could climb over it or unlock it, and hauled back to her dorm, usually kicking and screaming.

No. Tonight, Switch was heading for a portion of the main fence surrounding the campus, a portion which had a hole in it. She had discovered the hole a few days ago, during lunchtime, when she had decided to take a walk around campus to see if she could find possible alternative escape routes. The hole in question was large enough for her to slip through, which she'd tested by actually climbing through it once. But she had returned just as quickly, because she knew that if she tried to escape during the day, the faculty would notice and send someone to catch her.

On the other hand, sneaking away during the night meant that by the time anyone realized Switch was no longer on campus, she'd be long gone. Also, even if someone woke up and realized that she was gone, finding her at night would still be harder than finding her during the day. If necessary, Switch could find somewhere out in the wilderness surrounding the school to hide until they gave up finding her, though she figured that she would not need to do that tonight.

Finally, after a few more minutes of sneaking around, Switch reached the campus fence. The fence was twice as tall as her, with sharp tipped points above it to make it harder for people to sneak in or

out. The wires which made up the fence were also done together in such a way that the gaps between them were big enough maybe for your finger, but not big enough to escape.

Except, of course, for the hole which Switch spotted, the hole which would allow her to escape. Switch was relieved to see that it was still not fixed. She had been worried that the groundskeeper might have noticed it at some point during the last few days and fixed it. Thankfully, this portion of the fence was out of the way of most of the school's traffic, which meant that even the Academy's faculty and employees were likely unaware of it. Switch had no idea who had made this hole, though. And it had to have been made, because it looked like something had torn the hole open.

It's probably just a raccoon or something, Switch thought as she made her way over to the hole. *Those little jerks will destroy anything, but for once, I'm not angry at them. Maybe I'll actually spare the next raccoon I see, instead of making it into a hat like I've been thinking about doing.*

Switch stopped in front of the hole. She knew she should have crawled through it without hesitation, but she could not help but look back over her shoulder toward the campus itself. Though the night was dark, the main campus of the Academy was lit by lights from the front porches of the buildings; not enough to make sneaking around impossible, as Switch had already proved, but certainly enough to force her to be more careful than she otherwise would have been.

Bait is still back there, Switch thought. *He's still stuck in this school just like me. I should go back and get him. Mom would be happy to see me, but she'd be even happier to see both of us together.*

But Switch shook her head and turned away. Bait wouldn't have gone with her even if she had woken him up and guaranteed him that they would see Mom again. He had already shown an unwillingness to escape this stupid school in the past. All he wanted to do was suck up to the teachers and pretend to be a good little superhero. If that meant leaving Mom to rot in jail, then that was a perfectly acceptable price to pay, according to Bait. Well, Switch thought that that was what Bait thought. She didn't know what his actual motivation was, because she was so disgusted with his desire to become a 'real' hero that she didn't spend as much time with him as she normally did.

Once I get Mom out of prison, maybe we can come back and rescue Bait together, Switch thought. *Mom always liked him more than me. Said he always reminded her of Dad, but maybe she'll like me more than him when she finds out I'm coming to save her.*

Switch frowned. She rarely thought about Dad, but mostly because she had not known him growing up; hell, she didn't even know his name. For as long as Switch could remember, it had always been just her, Bait, and Mom, always on the run from superhero organizations like the Neohero Alliance or government agencies like the Department of Superpowered and Extraterrestrial Beings. It had been a hard life—even Switch could admit that—but at least they'd been a family and had always been there for each other.

Not anymore, Switch thought, her hands balling into fists. *Mom's in jail, Bait has become soft and mushy, and Dad's still nowhere to be seen. How could things have gone to hell so quickly?*

And then, of course, there was her *other* brother, or half-brother, really: Stinger, a member of the Young Neos, the most famous young superhero team in the country. But Switch thought about him even less than she thought about Dad, because she hadn't grown up with him like she had with Bait, though she'd always been aware of him even before she went to school.

If he and his stupid friends try to stop me from freeing Mom, I'll treat him like every other self-righteous 'superhero' in the world, Switch thought with a scowl. *If he's smart, he'll stay out of my way when he hears that I escaped from the Academy. If he isn't ... well, blood may be thicker than water, but I'm pretty sure that nail bullets are thicker than both.*

But Switch shook her head again. What was she doing, standing around thinking about her family like this? She was just wasting time, time that could be better spent escaping. True, no one knew that she was here, but Mom had always taught Switch that you should never become complacent as a supervillain, because that was a good way to get caught. Switch supposed that Mom had gotten complacent herself, because that was the only way she could have been caught, but all that did was prove Mom right, as usual.

Right before Switch could climb through the hole to freedom, however, she heard a soft *thwip* sound and sticky webbing came out of nowhere and covered the hole. Switch jumped backwards on instinct and immediately raised all ten of her fingers in the way Mom had taught her, swinging her hands back and forth as she attempted to locate the web shooter, though it was too dark to see anything.

“Who’s there?” Switch demanded, turning this way and that as she attempted to find the person who had blocked off her only avenue of escape. “Show yourself or else I’ll put some nails in your eyes!”

Two more *thwips* came from the darkness and covered her hands. Switch immediately shot her nail bullets, but the webbing was so thick that they just got caught in it. She immediately began struggling to tear the webbing apart, but it had already solidified and now felt like concrete on her hands. It was times like this that she wished that Bait was here so they could trade powers. His super strength would have been very useful right now.

“That’s better,” came a familiar male voice from the darkness. “It’s not appropriate for a child your age to be shooting those ‘nail bullets,’ as you call them, at people you can’t see. Especially if those people are your own teachers.”

A flashlight suddenly turned on, causing Switch to cover her eyes with her webbed hands. Even so, Switch recognized the voice, because she heard it many times a day in the Academy and had come to dread it. She didn’t need to look to see who it was; still, she lowered her hands anyway and squinted her eyes to see her attacker.

The man holding up the flashlight was in his early thirties. He was tall and muscular, though he had a more athletic build than a bulky one. He wore a purple and green suit that always made Switch ill whenever she looked at it, a suit that covered his whole body from head to toe. On his chest was a spider-like design, while a strange, web-like cape hung from his shoulders.

But it was his eyes which Switch found herself staring at. They were a very light brown, almost yellow, and they were peering at her with their usual smugness, like a cat which had caught a mouse that thought it had managed to escape the cat.

“Arachnid,” said Switch, scowling at him. “What are you doing up so late?”

Arachnid—who was also Switch’s home room teacher—smirked. “That’s a question *I* should be asking *you*, though I don’t need to, given how this is the fifth time I’ve caught you in the act like this.”

“Sixth,” Switch said, pouting slightly. “Sixth time. I’ve tried to escape from this dumb school six times.”

Arachnid shrugged. “I stopped keeping track after the third time, to be honest. That’s also about the number of times I thought you’d give up. After all, third time is usually the charm, as they say.”

Switch’s scowl grew deeper, but she didn’t say anything. Arachnid was the main reason Switch had failed to escape from school every time. He essentially had the powers of a spider, which included shooting web and wall-crawling. He was not the most powerful teacher in the school—that honor probably belonged to the Headmaster—but he was a master at stealth and sneaking up on people, even in broad daylight. Not only that, but he also always seemed to know everything that went on in the Academy, even things he was not present to hear. Bait was convinced that Arachnid could talk to

spiders, who acted as his spies around the campus and reported everything to him, but Switch thought Arachnid was just very good at keeping informed on everything.

"How did you know I was going to try to escape through this hole?" said Switch, gesturing awkwardly with her hands at the webbed up hole. "I didn't think anyone else knew about it, otherwise it would have been fixed."

"I followed you earlier today, when you went on your little walk around campus at lunch," Arachnid replied. "When I saw the hole, I thought about telling Balloon, the grounds keeper, to fix it, but decided that I would let you continue to think that you were the only one aware of it so you could incorporate it into your clever escape plan. But I will definitely ask Balloon to fix it later today; that web covering won't last forever, after all."

Switch thought about trying to run away, but there was nowhere else to run to in here. Besides, Arachnid was fast and would probably just web up her feet and drag her back to her dorm. That was how he caught her the first time she had tried to escape and she knew he wasn't above doing it again if need be.

Arachnid held out a hand. "Now, come with me and we'll head back to your dorm."

Switch stepped backwards, even though she had already decided that she didn't want to run away from him. "Make me, you jerk."

Arachnid's eyes narrowed. "If necessary, I will."

Switch bit her lower lip. Arachnid never seemed to get angry or upset, no matter what Switch called him. Maybe it was because he was an adult and had a lot of experience dealing with sarcastic or uncooperative kids, but it still annoyed Switch. If she couldn't escape this prison, then she had hoped to at least make life miserable for her teachers, if nothing else.

But Switch was a practical girl, if nothing else, and she recalled Mom telling her that it was usually a good idea to cooperate with the police if they had you cornered. Arachnid was no policeman, but he still had authority over her and it would still be wise to cooperate with him, at least for now. Switch would just have to figure out another way to escape. Seven was her lucky number, after all.

So Switch nodded grudgingly and walked over to Arachnid. Arachnid grabbed her arm when she got within reach of him and began pulling her along behind him. His grip was as firm as ever and Switch didn't resist, allowing him to pull her along behind him at a brisk pace.

Despite that, Switch could not help but look over her shoulder at the webbed over hole in the fence. With her best chance of freedom now closed off, Switch knew it would be weeks before she got another chance at escape again.

That was when she felt something put in her pocket. She started slightly, causing Arachnid to stop and look over his shoulder at her.

"What's the matter?" said Arachnid, who now sounded impatient. "Did you step on a snake or something?"

Switch glanced down at her pocket. There *was* something in it, a piece of paper from the look of it, but she immediately looked up at Arachnid again, not wanting him to suspect that she had a note. She didn't know what the note was or who had put it there, but she wanted a chance to look it over herself before he did so he wouldn't take it away from her.

"Nothing," said Switch in her usual sarcastic tone of voice. "It was just a stick."

Arachnid shook his head, muttered something about her scaring him for no reason, and then resumed pulling her along back to the campus. As they walked, Switch once again looked over her shoulder, but this time searching for the person who had put that note in her pocket.

But Switch saw nothing at all, save for the webbed over hole in the fence, which was slowly starting to vanish in the darkness of the night.

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I hope you enjoyed this preview. If you want to find out what happens next, buy *Bait & Switch* at Amazon [HERE!](#)