



CHAPTER 1

THE OFFER

I sat in the shade of the palm tree and ran my fingers through the white sand. A tiny fishing boat was bobbing on the sea and a large rocket was flying overhead.

This was my planet. This was Paradise. And I hated it.

I was meant to be at school. But we had restaurant lessons followed by hotel studies, and I couldn't bring myself to go. They only ever taught us stuff like that on Paradise.

‘Malana! Malana!’ Mum was calling me from our house, five houses along the beach. I shrunk down so she wouldn’t see me.

My new magazine was a good one. It showed huge skyscrapers made of metal and glass. It was aimed at people who design buildings for a living on New Prospect, the largest planet in our system.

Why couldn’t I have been born there? I could become a lawyer or a businesswoman or a dentist or anything. But if you’re born on this planet your only hope is to work in tourism.

They brought a maid from one of the big hotels into school once. She said that if we worked hard and passed our exams we could be just like her one day.

Cleaning up after rich people who don’t even see you as human? It doesn’t sound like a dream job to me.

Soon after the maid's visit, I began to stay off school and go through the bins of the big hotels instead, searching for magazines left by tourists.

I'd taken the one about buildings from the recycling basket of the Grand Imperial. It had an article about a curved white spaceport with mirrored windows. I imagined passing through there every day, zipping around different planets in rockets, all paid for by a big company.

A shadow fell across my magazine and I looked up to see Mum. She was wearing her smart red dress. I wondered if there was a family party I'd forgotten about.

'Didn't you hear me call?' she asked.

'Sorry,' I said, 'I was reading an article.'

She snatched the magazine out of my hands and tossed it onto the sand.

'A man has come round to see you,' she said.
'You'd better hurry.'

My heart sank. I'd been ducking out of lessons for weeks, and now they'd finally sent someone round to check. I needed to think of an illness to fake. Maybe he'd get scared and run away.

I forced myself up and trudged past the blue and white houses that lined the seafront. Pink shells and green seaweed marked the point where the tide had reached.

'Quick!' said Mum. 'Mr Kawenga has already been waiting for ten minutes. I don't know what he must think of us.'

I climbed the wooden steps to our porch and shook the sand from my bare feet. I could hear the fan whirring in our living room. Mum must have been nervous about the school officer. She only ever used the fan on special occasions.

I stepped into the living room. It was much cooler than usual, but our visitor still looked far too hot. His thick black hair was matted down on

his forehead and there were dark patches around his armpits.

Surprisingly, Dad was there too. I had no idea the road-sweeping company had given him the day off. He was lucky to get two of those in a month.

Like Mum, he was looking much smarter than usual. He was wearing his black trousers and his white shirt. He was sitting forward on the sofa, rather than slouching back with a newspaper as usual.

Mum placed herself next to him and clasped his hand.

‘Mr Kawenga is from The Switch Corporation,’ said Dad, as though this would mean something to me.

I sat down on the wooden chair by the door.

‘I understand you’ve been missing a lot of school,’ said Mr Kawenga.

‘I’ve not been well,’ I said. I cupped my hand over my mouth and let out a pathetic cough. ‘But I’m feeling better now. I should be back in tomorrow.’

Mr Kawenga lifted his hand to silence me, giving me a glimpse of his growing sweat patch.

‘Don’t worry, Malana,’ he said, ‘you’re not in trouble. Quite the opposite, in fact. At The Switch Corporation, we know that not everyone from this planet is suited to the tourist industry. That’s why we’ve set up a programme to take the brightest and best youngsters to New Prospect for the summer for vital work experience.’

It took a moment for this to sink in. The sweaty man wasn’t here to punish me — he was offering me the chance to escape my pathetic planet and visit New Prospect. What was the catch?

‘Let me guess,’ I said. ‘You’re offering me vital work experience cleaning toilets?’

Mr Kawenga shook his head. ‘Not at all. Last year our scheme placed young people from

Paradise as town planners, accountants, even TV presenters.’

Dad leaned forward. ‘It’s a wonderful programme,’ he said. ‘Mr Kawenga has told us all about it.’

‘We’re so proud you’ve been chosen,’ said Mum. ‘I always knew you could do something like this.’

Now I was really suspicious. Every time I’d asked Mum and Dad if I could go to New Prospect, they’d refused. They’d said we’d never be able to afford the rocket fare, and that there was no point in going anyway as I’d never get a job there.

‘How can we afford this?’ I asked.

‘The Switch Corporation pays for everything,’ said Dad.

‘They only choose the very best,’ said Mum. ‘And they cover all the costs.’

Mr Kawenga lifted a battered briefcase onto his knees and flipped it open. He fished out a wad of paper that was stapled at the top left corner and flicked through to the last page.

‘We just need you to sign the paperwork,’ he said. ‘Put your signature on the line underneath mine.’

Mum carried the contract over and handed me a pen. I wondered again why she was so keen.

I placed the nib of the pen on the contract. Everyone was staring at me.

No, I wasn’t going to rush this. I needed to know exactly what I was letting myself in for.

I put the pen on the floor and settled back on the chair. Mr Kawenga took a tissue out of his pocket and wiped a trickle of sweat from his forehead.

I turned to the front of the document. It was called ‘Agreement between Malana Kawai of Paradise and The Switch Corporation of New Prospect’.

I scanned the text. I'd always been the best at reading in my class, but I couldn't make any sense of it. It was written in a way that made it impossible to understand.

'Mr Kawenga is a very busy man,' said Dad.
'You mustn't hold him up.'

On the third page I spotted some numbers. It turned out my parents would receive 50,000 credits if I took part in the scheme. No wonder they were so eager for me to sign. It might not have been much on New Prospect, but on this planet it was enough to buy a house.

Then on the fifth page, I spotted it. The important thing they'd all been holding back.

The contract read, 'The Switch Corporation holds no responsibility for any complications caused by the body swap.'

'Body swap?' I shouted.

I dropped the document as if it was poisonous. So this was what they were really offering. They weren't going to take me to New Prospect in a rocket; they were going to transfer my mind into someone else's body, and at the same time transfer their mind into mine.

And there was no way I was ever going to agree to that.