



PALM ISLAND



PHIL LEWIS

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PHIL LEWIS

I started writing short stories when I was about ten. Yes....they were about robots and space ships. I loved the plots, twists and turns, enjoying the writing and then the reading of them.

I have always been creative, earning my living as an illustrator and designer – but always continued writing as a hobby.

Now I am retired, I can look back on my extensive collection of novels, plays and short stories and try to do something with them – hence my website (<http://www.phil-lewis.net/publications>) to which I will be adding anything worth reading over the course of the next few years.

If you like my work, please email me to tell me so (publications@phil-lewis.net). If you didn't – I'm sorry. No refunds.

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Take care.

Phil Lewis

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PART 1 – ARRIVALS

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Bernie Naylor had no idea where he was in the world. He could not begin to guess what direction they had taken after leaving New York. He was on a non-stop flight, that had already taken six hours. He did not like secrets - at all.

Although used to demanding the finer things in life, it was the first time he had ever been in a 767 that was completely first class. He craned his neck and looked down the plush aircraft interior. There seemed to be only two cabins. The seating configuration in their section was two plus two, with a large gap in-between the paired seats. The main decor colour was cream, with dark green contrasting trim. The cabin crew uniforms were of the same colour scheme, as was every other detail of the aircraft's accoutrements.

Bernie toyed with the cream napkin with the dark green edging. He ran his finger over the single dark green palm tree motif, embroidered into one corner. This aircraft was way beyond First Class. He gently placed the napkin on the silver tray in front of him and had time to sigh once, before the ever-vigilant hostess gently removed the tray.

The time had passed pleasantly enough for himself and his wife, Nina. They were the only passengers in the front section of the two hundred and fifty-seater aircraft. The crew of six looked after them splendidly, but there's only so much attention two people needed when sitting on an aircraft. Bernie was getting bored.

He sat and fidgeted until Nina moved two rows away from him, giving him one of her subtle grimaces of annoyance. He was not a nervous flyer, he just was not happy being kept in the dark. Where were they and where were they going? He'd asked every member of the crew and they didn't appear to know the exact location of their final destination either. Bernie hoped the pilot knew.

Bernie mooched around the cabin and finally sat down again to watch a video of his choice. He hated being out of control. He flicked through the world newspapers and discarded them on the floor. The next time he looked down they'd gone.

He would not admit it to Nina, but he was definitely having second thoughts about this trip. Nina had seemed surprisingly eager to consider leaving behind the luxuriously comprehensive lifestyle they'd both spent so long building up. Since his enforced retirement, their social life had taken off like a rocket. He rarely admitted it to anyone, but at times he quite enjoyed the extravagant side of their social scene. He stared down at his orange juice and sneered at it. He should be playing a gentle round of golf right now, with Senator Thomas.

He glanced across at Nina and watched her sipping champagne and reading her book. Should he express his doubts to her now? He turned to look out the window to find it was still opaque. This made him even more anxious. He hated secrecy. Where was the need? This was not a good beginning. The sales pitch at the end of this had better be good.

As the Naylor's stepped out of the aircraft, the warmth and humidity of the air hit them like a friendly, velvet glove. Nina wrinkled up her nose at the initial smell, but soon she was smiling. They stood at the top of the steps, looking around, Bernie trying to see what international airport they had arrived in. He was disconcerted to see it was not an airport at all.

The aircraft was standing on a concrete stand that seemed to stretch around the aircraft for miles, surrounded by a dense ring of trees and shrubs in the far distance. Through the single gap in the trees, Bernie could see the strip of the runway disappearing into the hazy distance. There was a tree line, or it could be the edge of a jungle? Outside of the protected hardstand was nothing but a very large, open landing strip! Wherever they were, it was nice and warm. Sub-tropical, he thought. He breathed in the humid air deeply. He felt it wash away the stale, dry air from the confined space of the aircraft cabin. Disagreeable as he was to the nature of the flight, he loved that welcoming air.

There was one small building, directly in front of them. It was very new looking and a cream awning ran from the entrance to the base of the steps of the aircraft. Behind the building were some storage tanks, partly hidden by the ring of palm trees. Further behind sprawled another, larger building, which Bernie strained to see details of before Nina moved forward. She was obviously much less puzzled about where they were and less anxious than he was. He followed her, craning his neck to see anything to give him a further clue to the nationality of the airport.

Palm trees waved back at him and the sky was a cloudless blue. There were a few birds singing and a gentle warm breeze, but other than that - comparative silence. Bernie found it eerie. He also found that Nina had disappeared into the terminal building - assuming that's what it was. He moved forward and was aware of the crew respectfully following him down the steps. With a cheery wave farewell they moved towards the other building, leaving him briefly alone on the tarmac.

As he entered the smaller building, he felt the coolness of the air-conditioning and somehow felt cheated. If you come to a warm climate, you should feel the warmth! Nina was talking to someone up ahead and by the time he caught up with her she was already seated in a small car, with a smartly dressed woman standing by the car door. The woman was in her early thirties and was patiently waiting for Bernie. Their courier was dressed in a light cream suit, which showed off her dark coloured skin. She wore a white blouse and dark green belt. Her shoes were shiny white leather. She stood upright and totally in control of herself.

"Mr. Naylor, you are very welcome. My name is Dana Barnes. I am General Manager of Palm Island. I'm here to show you around and answer any questions you may have. Please take a seat and we'll get you to the ship."

By now Bernie was becoming confused and certainly getting disorientated. The car made a silent, smooth exit through a curtained doorway of the airport building. Barnes drove swiftly down a straight concrete road passing the larger building on the left, that was partially hidden from the aircraft steps. It was a single storey structure with many windows. It looked very like a motel, thought Bernie.

"Where the hell is this place?" Bernie asked.

Dana Barnes smiled, showing the most perfect set of teeth Nina had ever seen. She was instantly envious. "This is our mainland base. Storage tanks for refuelling the aircraft over there. Staff quarters to the left. You've already visited our Terminal building." She turned around and flashed her perfect teeth at her passengers, before saying, "I trust you've had a pleasant journey so far?"

"Sure," said Bernie. They drove through a gap in the lush circle of vegetation and out into open ground. The Naylor's attention was suddenly diverted, as just ahead was moored the next surprise section of their journey.

Bernie became even more nonplussed at the size of the ship. It looked like a cross-channel ferry, although the prow looked more like a luxury ocean going liner. There were two passenger decks and above those seemed to be a huge forward sweeping bridge. Behind the bridge was an array of smaller structures designed to be functional, he was sure, but certainly looked like pieces of modern decorative art. One of these shapes could be the funnel, he thought.

The name on the side was in green, 'Palm Two'. There was a palm tree logo interwoven with the words. The craft was obviously very new and, he was to discover later, purpose built. As they drew near to the gangway, Nina craned her neck to look up at the huge vessel. "Even the boat is cream and green, for Christ's sake," Bernie thought. "Somebody likes cream and green," Bernie added to himself.

Dana Barnes stepped out from the car and held out her hand, for Nina to gracefully exit the vehicle. Bernie climbed out in time to see two other cream and green cars pass by, taking their luggage to a large hatchway in the side of the ship. Even as he watched, they started loading the cases into the hull of the ferry.

"If you'd be so kind as to follow me this way, please...." Barnes said, as she started to walk up the covered gangplank.

The two hour trip to the Island was spent pleasantly exploring the upper deck, which Barnes informed them was 'reserved for them as privileged passengers'. She had respectfully wished them Bon Voyage and said she would leave them to their privacy and privileges. Barnes had quietly retreated to another part of the ship.

Nina thought the interior of the ship was particularly luxurious. The carpets were deep-pile. The ceiling was a swirl of designer con tours and light fixings. The short stairways separating the three decks swept round the whole room. It would have been easy to finish everything in glittering chrome, but every item as smooth cream, rich white, or the dark green.

Fresh flowers adorned every available spare nook and cranny. Their smell permeated the air like no other perfume. The walls were decorated with original paintings, all fitting with the charm of the first class passenger lounge.

Where bulkheads had to be visible, the designer had disguised them with flaring, graceful lines. Sweeping one part of the room, dramatically into another. Individual tables seemed to be part of the floor and the comfortable reclining chairs blended in so well, it was hard to tell where the chair started and the carpet began.

The lighting was discrete and difficult to define. It looked light, without being too stark. Nestled into one of the more sweeping curves of the room, was sculptured a large cocktail bar. Behind it stood an eager staff member. Nina walked forward to see what range of drinks they offered.

Throughout the smooth journey there was always at least two staff members within sight - should the Naylor want for anything. The staff were all dressed the same and all extremely polite, courteous and efficient. Bernie had to admire this organisation. It was consistently first class, in every detail. Somebody desperately wanted to separate money from his wallet. Let them try, he thought and smiled out into the ocean.

He stood at the deck rail and felt the wind through his thinning hair. He brushed it forward, but the wind had its own mind about hairstyle. The sea had a gentle swell, but that didn't bother him. To his right shone the sun, hot and welcome, turning the sky into pastel shades. He closed his eyes and felt his skin tingle with the warmth. He'd been too long in New York. He breathed in the salted air as he slowly began to enjoy the change of scenery.

Far in the distance, the horizon was interrupted only by a small smudge of land. Their final destination was in sight. Bernie leaned on the rail and waited for the moment when all his questions would be answered.

Nina had visited the open bar and helped herself to several large drinks. She sat in one of many comfortable recliners. There was a small TV set in the front of each recliner. She flicked through the numerous worldwide channels and eventually switched off. Too much choice! She sat looking out of the

forward view deck, with a large Napoleon Brandy in her hand and realised she'd not stopped smiling for hours.

From the ship, the Island looked beautiful. As they entered the harbour, they saw two hills dominating the view. At their bases, a scrape of sand separated them from the deepest blue ocean Bernie had ever seen. Despite his confusion over the location, he was calmed by the sight.

Nina squinted into the hills and saw the abundance of palm trees and lush undergrowth. Very occasionally, a spot of white wall could be seen amongst the greenery. They must be the villas. She wondered which one would be theirs for their stay.

The harbour appeared to be almost nestling in the centre of the Island. Just before the ferry manoeuvred around the arms of the breakwater, Nina could see the beaches either side, looking like some forgotten tropical Island. Palm trees dipped into the slowly lapping sea. The sand was incredibly white and smooth looking. She felt like jumping over the side and swimming to the shore, washing up on the beach to lie and bathe forever.

Bernie watched the ship berth with incredible precision and waited for what was expected from them next. He turned to see Barnes by his side.

"To the cars, Mr. Naylor, if you please. The last part of your journey, and probably the most pleasant. If you would both be so kind as to follow me."

By the time they had reached the bottom of the awning covered gangplank, Bernie could see a series of small cars lined up waiting on the pier. They were ushered to the front vehicle and he noticed that their luggage was already in the second and third cars, which had two smiling drivers waiting to follow them.

Barnes graciously ushered the Naylor's into the rear seat and closed the door. Inside the air was cool and scented. The glass-covered vehicle allowed complete vision, unlike the plane, thought Bernie. Barnes slid into the driver's seat and with smooth, silent acceleration the convoy headed down the pier and on to the Island proper.

Barnes spoke quietly and with an almost accentless voice, as she gave them a brief guided tour. "If you're not too fatigued, I'll take you via the long route, just to give you a good first impression of the Island."

"Sure," said Nina with a smile.

"We've landed on the northern side of the Island, at our main harbour. We'll turn right here and follow the Perimeter Road, which goes all around the Island. There are no speed restrictions here, although the cars are governed to forty miles an hour. Island time is set to Greenwich Meantime and does not allow for Summertime clock changes. We're in an equitable part of the world, where it's mostly sunny all the year round. English is the national language of the Island, by the way. Straight ahead, is the Reception Centre. Everything you want to order, or organise, can be handled for you there. There's a business secretarial service available. A computer games room for adults and a separate one for children, with arcade games, etcetera. Also a television room, showing TV programmes beamed in by satellite from all over the world. Individual headsets may be used for personal sound reception. All mail is collected and held in a dedicated area for each villa. The Centre is staffed twenty-four hours a day. Just ask for anything you need."

The Centre was a large double storied white building, with full glass frontage overlooking the harbour. The huge palm trees and ornamental bushes covered most of the building, almost hiding it from the road, shading it from the direct sunlight. As they turned on to the Perimeter Road, they could see it was a three-lane highway, lined with palm trees and the roadside edge was paved with ochre coloured stone pathways.

In front of them rose a large hill. "This is High Hill and behind us at the other end of the Island is Low Hill. At the top of High Hill you can just see a round, white building. That's our Communications Station, or Tower as we call it. That's where we receive and transmit all communications. Telephones, faxes, Internet, TV stations, the works. It also houses our radar, and the mast for our own Island radio station."

They drove around the base of the Hill and saw at close hand the neatness and abundance of the foliage. "Is all this vegetation natural to the Island?" asked Nina.

"Pretty well, Mrs. Naylor. We've tried to maintain the natural balance of the Island, but have added some additional species, that are known to harmonise with the indigenous varieties. And more....attractive to our residents." The car moved silently onward, creating a feeling of detachment for the passengers, from the naturally beautiful environment.

"We're now on the north-east side of the Island. On the left here, buried into the hill is our service area. We've a power station with on-line and backup generators. We've our own water purification plants, two types, one for drinking water and the other for everything else. The Island converts sea water and purifies it for use in swimming pools, showers sinks, etc. Drinking water is provided by a dedicated plant that additionally filters water, that we import from the USA. Beneath all that structure is our sewage system. The sewage is treated before being diluted and sent five miles out to sea. Downstream of the Island, of course."

"Of course," echoed Bernie.

They could see a large glass door set into the hillside and had to imagine the size and scale of the internal workings of the station. Bernie said, "I'd like a look in there sometime."

"It would be my pleasure, Mr. Naylor. On our right here, is our Boat Yard. Here we maintain and repair all the boats on the Island. Except, of course our ferries. They're serviced on the mainland."

The road at this point was a good twenty feet above sea level. The yard was mostly covered by wooden slatted roofing, so only a glimpse of the variety of boats could be seen gently moving at their moorings. Bernie could just see a small jetty, pushing its way further out to sea. It looked very tidy for a boat yard, thought Nina.

"Exactly where IS the mainland, Mrs. Barnes?" asked Bernie.

"That's about one hundred miles due west of the Island, sir. The next road on the left leads up to the top of High Hill and also to some of the hillside villas situated to the south of the hill." The car accelerated up to its maximum speed as it cruised around the curve of the hill.

Bernie leaned forward and said, "I mean WHERE IS the mainland, what country are we in?"

Barnes turned her head slightly and smiled as he said, "This, Mr. Naylor, IS a country. You're now in an independent nation. You can keep your own nationality, American, yes?" Naylor nodded. "But this piece of land is totally independent from the rest of the world. Consequently, it really doesn't matter where you are in the world." Barnes turned her head to the front again, to concentrate on the driving. "We'll shortly be coming to the main entertainment hub of the Island. If you'd like to sit back and get comfortable. There are refreshments in front of you, please help yourselves."

Bernie sat back, thinking why there was too much avoidance of his questions. He watched as Nina leaned forward and pulled down the flap in front of them. A small bar was revealed with a variety of packaged foods and non-alcoholic drinks. Nina began to pour two glasses of mineral water and open a packet of interesting looking snacks.

Bernie took the time to look at the car itself. It had a glass roof that came to shoulder level. There were four doors, all of which looked lightweight, but felt robust. The upholstery was a very smooth cream coloured material that was designed to reduce the effects of the heat and humidity and felt comfortable to the touch. It was a very accommodating seating position, with ample room for at least three in the back and the same again in the front.

Barnes seemed to be driving with only two pedals, stop and go. There were minimal instruments in front of the driver. Bernie leaned forward as saw what looked like a lighting section, a few dials to show speed and battery power. Apart from that, there was only a telephone.

Bernie said, "I see you've a phone there. What range does that have?"

"We have our own telephone system on the Island. Each building has its own number and each car has a handset. You may call anyone on the Island directly, or call reception and they will give you a line to anywhere in the world."

"Useful," said Nina.

"We don't have the technology to support individual cell phones. This part of the world is not blessed with the infrastructure. Nor would we want calls being made that can be located."

"So I can still call Dorothy whenever I like."

"Only if you pay for it yourself," Bernie said with half a smile.

"No charge for phone calls, Mr. Naylor. There's no charge for anything on the Island. I hope you were asked not to bring money, or credit cards?" Bernie nodded. "Well, that doesn't just apply to your first visit. It applies to everyone. Everything is free. Here we are."

The car slowed as the heavy vegetation gradually gave way to a few very tastefully designed buildings. To the left was a large single story building with a pool that was half in and half out of its sidewall. It was the largest swimming pool Nina had ever seen. Her mouth stayed open as they passed slowly by the pink glass walled building.

"To the right, is the Leisure Lagoon."

Over the low buildings lining the beach, Bernie could see two protective arms sweeping away out to sea. While within the lagoon, were two jetties. On the nearest jetty were a number of speedboats of various sizes, some sailing boats and jet skis. The further jetty contained half a dozen sea-going yachts. Gin Palaces, as Nina called them. In the lagoon, and out into the shimmering blue sea, the Naylor could see the occasional boat, or windsurfer, enjoying the calm sea and light breeze.

"The buildings in the lagoon contain restrooms, restaurants and a few shops. The boats in the lagoon are for anyone's use, although the larger vessels need a small crew. The Island will supply the crews, who'll take you wherever you want to go. The large building we just passed on the left, is the Leisure Complex, which has all the necessities for entertainment, like sport courts, a cinema complex and all recreational and entertainment facilities. In addition, it has a comprehensive book, DVD and video library. The other building, opposite, contains a small, but complete hospital. Some shops, our storage warehouse and our own Radio Station. And there, ahead and to the left, is Low Hill."

The car accelerated as Nina craned her neck to try and take in the complex behind her. The lush vegetation quickly filled in the view again, as it once again seemed to hide all the man-made edifices. In the brief opportunity to look at it, she'd noticed how few people there were around. "How many people on the Island, Mrs. Barnes?" She asked.

"It can vary tremendously, Mrs. Naylor. There can be up to around three hundred Island staff in at any one day. Most of them work shifts, so there may be a hundred or so active on the Island at any time. There are fifty villas, with anything from two to ten people per home. Then there are occasional visiting guests of the homeowners. Some people live on the Island all year round, some just for a week or two. It really does vary."

The road curved to the left and another long low building came into view. "What's that?" Said Bernie.

"That's our airport. A slightly fancy name, because we only have one helicopter here as a rule. You can see the Helipad from here as we pass by. The next road on the left is called East Road. It runs from the east of the Island to the centre. It's very straight and quite wide, being over five miles long."

As they passed the turnoff, the Naylor's looked down the straight road and saw the High Hill in the distance. "The next turning leads to your villa."

The car slowed and turned left into Low Hill Road South. The smaller road was lined with low shrubs, all beautifully in bloom with several varieties of Bougainvillea dominating the colour effect. Within a few yards, a driveway became visible and the car pulled in and slid to a gentle stop. Two cars were just leaving, after delivering the Naylor's luggage from the ship.

It was a two-storey building, painted a gentle cream. Its graceful lines blended into the bushes and trees. The twin column entranceway looked expansive and very impressive. They walked into the reception hall and turned to look back out through the huge glass, double doors.

Bernie turned and looked up the curving stairway, a massive chandelier hung above him. He looked at the neat, smiling Barnes, who was obviously still impressed by the building and the view.

Barns spoke, "All villas are very similar, containing six double bedrooms, three bathrooms, lounge, dining room, two additional reception rooms, two studies, patio, lanai and full sized swimming pool. All heating, air-conditioning and maintenance is standard. The residents have nothing to worry about except enjoying the lifestyle. All homes have four-car garages with separate recharging units. Each has large ground areas between them, and any gardening activity may be designed and developed, as the owner requires. There's large TVs in many rooms, all connected by satellite to the rest of the world. Each villa has a Jacuzzi, hot tub, sauna and a steam room. Also, of course, permanent connection to the Internet."

Nina sighed as she looked down the lower slope of Lower Hill and out to the gently moving blue ocean. "I could live here, Bernie," she said quietly.

Bernie walked to the front doors and looked across to the airport, nearly a mile away and walked back through the room to the rear of the house. Up the slopes of Low Hill, palm trees swayed and the breeze smelt great. He felt warm, safe and welcome.

"So could I," he said, even quieter.

Further round the Island, two more people were arriving at their new home.

Lisa Smith threw her holdall on to the bed and smiled. This was posh! The bedroom had a huge double bed and en-suite bathroom. It was all new looking, spacious and very classy in its decor. This was as good as any first class hotel, she thought. She went to the window and tried to open the curtains. It took her a few minutes to find the button and then they glided silently back. The tropical sun streamed into the room and she looked out over the harbour. The ferry looked so huge for just a few passengers. The sea glistened back at her and the beach looked especially inviting.

The trip had been extremely exciting for her, but the excitement had really started after she had responded to the job advert, nearly six months earlier. The simple message had attracted her attention, although gave very little detail away. Her only reservation had been the tour of duty it called for. Six weeks on, two weeks off and a month annual holiday. It had not said where she would be working. She still did not know where. She'd travelled on a huge aircraft that had the windows whitened out, so she could not see anything. It was a magic trip, with first class service all the way. Despite the length of time in the air, she'd not really wanted to get off.

She'd enjoyed the sea trip too and was amazed to discover everything on the ship was also supplied by her employers. After all the champagne she'd drunk on the plane, she decided to stick to soft drinks. Though the temptation was still there. The ship had been almost empty of passengers during the two-hour crossing and she'd roamed around exploring on her own.

Lisa sat on the bed and tried to absorb the details of the room. Until today she was leading what she would describe as a 'compact lifestyle'. She owned a small London flat, with a tiny kitchen. Whenever she wished to put something down, she had to move something first, to make room. Everything had to have a place and be put back into it. The fridge/freezer was very small, so she shopped on a daily basis. She needed only a small shopping bag to hold everything.

Her wardrobe was small and her variety of clothes was therefore minimal. This was particularly difficult for someone who worked in the clothing industry. She consequently became very creative in making her clothes always look fresh and different. She found herself being a great contributor to charities and jumble sales with her used clothing.

She watched the occasional car driving along the road in front of her window and reflected that although she could drive, she had no car, because there was now place to park it.

Lisa began to unpack her few things from the tightly packed holdall. She'd become very precise and neat in everything she did. Because of this, her new accommodation appeared huge in her eyes. She loved it.

She wanted to phone home, but so far had not had the chance. She turned and picked up the small compact receiver by her bed. Before she could dial there was a soft tone and a gentle voice offered to help.

Lisa said, "I've just arrived and need to call home. May I have a line please?"

There was a moment of waiting, when Lisa thought they might say no. The voice came back, "Please hang up and dial your number, Miss Smith."

Lisa was surprised, "How did you know my name?"

The operator's voice adopted a smile as she said, "Everything's computerised, and I have your room number because you called me. Enjoy your stay with us, Lisa."

"Wait, please. How much will the call cost?" Lisa knew how much hotels loaded the call charges.

"There's no charge, Lisa. Everything is provided for you on the Island." There was a soft purr and the line was dead.

Slowly, Lisa dialled her mother's number. There was an almost imperceptible pause before the phone was ringing at the other end. Her mother answered, "Hello?" Lisa found herself crying with happiness.

On another floor of the Staff Quarters, Don Howard was unpacking his meagre luggage too. They'd said bring the minimal that you need, so he had. He did not intend to stay very long anyway. He was sure something was desperately wrong with the whole set-up. It all appeared too good to be true.

From the limousine picking him up from home, to the first class accommodation, he knew no job could be this good. He was dubious about shift work and the length of time away from home, but the salary of £10,000 above his current earnings had persuaded him to give it a try. At least for a week or two.

As a person who had worked in and around boat yards all his life, Don had never received much salary, or the opportunity to travel. Now here he was, somewhere in the world, God knows where! He'd see how it went. He'd give it a fair try.

Don looked around his suite of rooms. Everything looked brand new. There was a sitting room area with a huge TV set which he casually flicked on, using the remote handset. There was a small kitchen, that appeared fully equipped and stocked. He enjoyed cooking and would try a few new ideas out while here. It already seemed ages ago that he was preparing food for his housemates.

He shared a huge house with three other men. On first impression, this new accommodation was slightly smaller than he was used to. At least his new home was neat and clean, at the moment.

He picked up the TV handset again and started flicking through the channels. He moved to the second bathroom and noticed the size of the Jacuzzi. He whistled and realised how corny he sounded. He grinned at himself in the mirror. He smiled at his close cropped hair and tanned face. Don walked back into the lounge. His channel hoping was up to ninety-two.

He stepped out on to the veranda and looked out across a rolling, lush, gardened landscape. Over a mile away he could see the edge of the Island and the sea. He could see the curving barriers of what looked like another harbour. There was some boat activity out to sea. This reminded him of his business and his thoughts slipped back to the simple briefing he received in Bristol.

His induction to the Island had also seemed very brief, although welcoming. After stepping off the ship he'd been escorted, along with half a dozen other people, to a small security room. Here they had x-rayed his luggage and body searched him. He'd been welcomed with a knowing grin by a smartly dressed staff member and told to follow another identically dressed member of the Island staff. All new recruits had been shown to this huge two-storey building and he had been personally taken to his suite of rooms. There just had to be some mistake!

He began to get ready to shower as he looked at the TV. Channel two hundred and three!

In Villa One, James Byron sat and stared out over the familiar scene. He looked down on to Leisure Lagoon from his home, part way up the East side of High Hill and watched the gentle activity below.

It was the busy season, with children on holiday from school and most of the residents home for their vacation. James smiled and returned to his reading. He reached across for the iced tea Maria had left for him over an hour ago. It had become warm out here on the veranda. He did not mind. He rarely complained these days.

He scratched his bare legs below the oversize pink shorts. He looked at his expanding waistline. His 'new weight' as his wife called it. He would have to start exercising soon. His winding down period was putting the pounds on!

The location of his villa up the side of High Hill, caught the best of what little air was moving. It stirred the pages in his hand. It ruffled his hair. It began to make him drowsy. He flicked through the file and studied the photographs carefully. The man was very thin and wiry. The file said five-six, but he looked smaller compared to his wife, who was a good deal more ample yet only five-five.

He became aware of a movement of air beside him and the faint trace of a familiar perfume. A hand gently rested on his shoulder and a light kiss brushed his cheek. "Enjoy the swim, darling?" He said to his wife, Celia.

She shrugged the coverall off and stretched out on to the lounge in the sun. "It's getting busy."

"Just the time of year, I suppose," James said.

"Are those the new people?" She asked casually.

"Yes. Bernard and Nina Naylor. American. He's a businessman, built a large commercial empire out of military equipment. Sad thing is, his health has suffered. Two major heart surgeries and the doctors have ordered complete rest."

"Then Palm Island is just what he needs."

"Indeed. His wife's all for the 'getaway from it all' concept, but I believe he still has reservations."

"I assume they fit the standard criteria?"

James smiled. "Oh yes. We haven't been able to get an accurate estimate yet, but his income is in the region of \$30 million a year. His psychiatric profiles are not alarming at all, but they don't show a willingness to be part of a team, either. She'll fit in very well and it seems that what she says, goes."

"Much like ourselves, dear," Celia said with a smile. She stretched her tanned body out with a sigh. James looked at her long legs and remembered when he'd first met her. She should have been a model. At least that was what she'd told him. He'd tried to pull strings to get her a modelling job, but the problem was, she had a body shape that was 'out of fashion' at that time. Time had passed, they'd married and had children. His business became too big to handle and so he brought in the right people to do the job. Gradually he let go the reins of his empire. He looked at the photo of Bernard Naylor and muttered to himself, "So must you, old man. So must you."

"Full investigation on them, I suppose?" Said Celia.

"Might as well. It's the last villa and we close up shop. Must get it right. They check out all round, so far. No excessive political drives, no religious bias, no serious criminal activity. Certainly no financial problems. No kids, either."

"The perfect couple."

"I hope so. I really do. The sooner we finally consolidate all the residents, the happier I will be to finally let go."

"Don't worry. You've done all you can. It's out of your hands already, dear. There's nothing to go wrong, is there?"

Celia stood up and moved to James. "It's all been well planned and executed by you, my dearest. Don't do yourself down on this. Get the last villa occupied and we can settle down for life. Nothing need change. Don't try and fix it, if it ain't broke."

She picked up the file and looked at the photographs. She closed it and threw it on to the table. "Organise a lunch party here for them, tomorrow. Let's have a look at them ourselves, eh?"

"Okay," he said as she kissed him lightly on the lips and moved into the house to change. James finished the iced tea and stood up. Far out to sea he could just make out a yacht returning to the lagoon. He glanced up at the Communications Station and hoped they were on the ball in the tower, making sure it was one of the Island's boats.

He shrugged and knew it was not his problem anymore. He had done his bit. The Island was as safe and perfect as he could make it. From now on it was down to everyone else to keep it that way.

Lisa followed the signs that led to the staff food halls on the ground floor. As there were several small and medium sized restaurants to choose from, she had to make a decision. She chose the Bistro and was surprised to see separate tables, white linen cloths and waiter service.

She sat at a table set for two and waited to see what she was expected to do next. She read the printed menu and was delighted at the choice. At a quick guess she calculated that lunch would cost her at least £30 in London. A very charming young man moved towards her and politely took her order. He checked her pass and left, saying her order would not be very long.

Lisa took the time to look around at the people in the restaurant. They comprised of all nationalities, shapes and ages. The diners seemed to be mainly gathered in small groups, talking and smiling. The restaurant definitely had a buzz of excitement, or was that just her own feelings colouring her perspective?

She watched a young man enter the room and thought he looked familiar. He was quite tall, in his late twenties and fairly good looking. She quickly realised that he'd also been on the ship that brought her. He was part of the small party that had been through the welcome committee for the Island. He noticed her looking at him, smiled and walked over. "May I join you?"

Lisa nodded and said, "We nearly met at the X-ray machine. I'm Lisa." They briefly shook hands.

"Don. You're new too, eh?"

"Yes. Amazing place isn't it?"

"Yep. I still haven't come to terms with the standards they've set. I hope I can come up to their expectations of me."

"Me too. I've got a training session this afternoon and getting more nervous by the minute. Well, it's an introductory meeting. I think they call it. I've just had this manual delivered. It's supposed to cover it all." She pulled a green A4 bound book from her large bag.

"Me too. I've skimmed most of it, but it goes into other people's job details as well, that won't concern me. Fascinating stuff though."

He took a sip of water and looked over the top of the glass. Lisa was quite petite, Latin looking with jet-black hair and dark eyes. She was certainly attractive with a bubbly, open personality that was reflected in her smile. Don found her voice alluring and sexy. The type that made him listen to telesales calls.

He replaced his glass on the table and said, "What do you do? I mean what're you here to do?" The waiter arrived and placed a bottle of champagne on the table and alongside it, Lisa's first course.

"Compliments of the Island, Miss Smith. And what would you like to eat, Mr. Howard?" Don quickly flicked through the menu and ordered a light salad. "Welcome to the Island to you both. We hope you'll enjoy working with us here." The waiter left smoothly, as Don started to pour the wine.

Lisa smiled and said, "Well, what a welcome. How do they know who we.....? Anyway, cheers. You were saying.....?"

"I'm going to be working in the Boat Yard. Servicing, maintaining and commissioning the yachts. A little crewing too, so I'm told. And you? What're you going to be doing?"

"I've been employed to manage a ladies clothing shop. I thought it was only going to be one. Now I find out it's three!"

"Well, cheers to the both of us, let it be as good in the future as it appears to be right now." Their glasses chinked and both resisted the desire to laugh out loud.

After lunch, they walked around the building, familiarising themselves with the layout and amenities of the staff complex. The champagne had mellowed their nervousness and soon they were talking easily, as they explored the delights of their new home. The upper floor seemed to be predominately living quarters, while the ground floor offered the main daily facilities of reception, restaurants and common rooms. There was a comprehensive gymnasium and sports complex in the sub-level of the building. There was also a cinema and huge pub underground, where hundreds of similarly dressed staff members seemed have settled in to relax.

They sat by the pool for a while, soaking up the sun. Lisa said, "I don't suppose my work schedules will allow me much time in the sun. Still, I get one day off a week and a long lunch. I'll just have to make the most of it."

Don sighed and said, "I may see too much of the sun. Some of my work will on the deck of a boat, some below decks. How about, on your day off I take you out for a sail, when I do a test run. Would you like that?"

"That would be terrific. And in return, I canget you a ladies dress that will fit you perfectly." They laughed together easily, as their first free afternoon wore on.

At four o'clock they parted to go to their respective first briefings and agreed to meet later for a swim. Both had to get uniforms from the Quarters clothing shop and so they agreed on 6 o'clock to meet. As they parted, Don kissed Lisa gently on the cheek and said, "I'm so glad we met. This is going to be great. See you later."

With a hesitant wave from Lisa he had gone. She touched her cheek where he had kissed her. This was all too good to be true.

Bernie stared at the small woman in front of him and then at Nina seated in the huge stuffed chair. "What do we want to eat for dinner?" He repeated slowly. His eyes pleaded to Nina for help.

Nina stood and moved to the woman, "Janet, you said you're our cook, right?" Janet nodded. "And you want to prepare us a meal for this evening, if we want to eat in, yes?" Another nod. "Well that would be very nice. Please surprise us. Neither of us like red meat, so anything else will be fine. Thank you."

Janet smiled, curtsied and left the room. "What's your problem, Bernie?"

"I don't know, I just didn't expect....well servants I suppose."

"We have four at home already, don't we?"

"Of course, but somehow having strangers foisted on to us it took me by surprise, that's all. I suppose I expected to eat out all the time. Didn't you?"

"I don't know what I expected, sweetheart, but I know it's been pretty impressive so far."

A soft chime sounded. Both turned to see the inner door open and another smartly dressed house servant entering. "Good day sir, madam. My name is Tina and I will be your housekeeper for the duration of your stay. I've unpacked your luggage and put the items away. Cook has prepared a buffet lunch for you on the veranda, whenever you are ready. May I get you a drink of anything?"

Nina smiled broadly and said, "Thank you, Tina. We'll take luncheon now and I'll have a Bloody Mary. My husband will have a large mineral water. No ice, it'd be to much a shock to his system."

Tina nodded slightly and said, "After luncheon I'll show you the house and the vehicles and perhaps you might like to begin to explore the Island?" The Naylor's looked at each other. Bernie could see by the look on Nina's face that Tina's suggestion was exactly what they'd be doing after lunch.

Two hours later, the Naylor's were sitting by the main swimming pool at the Leisure Complex. A large brandy nestled in Nina's hand and an orange juice in Bernie's. He felt very relaxed as he sat underneath a large umbrella, watching people diving and swimming in the huge pool.

Janet had earlier shown them the four-car garage and how to start and stop the electric vehicle. One aspect of the design made Bernie's eyebrows rise. All the cars were fitted with an all-round sensing device that slowed the car before any impact. This made it almost impossible to have an accident. He was very impressed at the use of this technology. The cars needed to be parked so that their broad bumpers touched the recharging bumpers, they appeared to be everywhere on the Island. All cars were apparently equipped with refreshment centres and detailed maps of the Island. In addition to the personal cars, Janet had explained, there were also another sizes of electric cars. These were used as baggage carriers and maintenance vehicles.

The drive down from the villa was the reverse of the way in and the Naylor's found it very pleasant indeed. There was hardly any traffic on the roads. This made handling the smooth cruising car a pleasure.

"I need a dip," said Nina, standing.

"But you haven't any costume, towels, or anything!"

"I'll go shopping, across the road."

Within ten minutes, Nina was swimming in the pool, having made her purchases without spending any money. Bernie was impressed at that idea. He thought a few weeks of Nina and Palm Island Inc. would go out of business. He watched as she stroked her way powerfully up and down, almost losing sight of her because the pool was so long.

He watched her swim and talk to the other pool users. He observed people wander around in a relaxed, friendly and happy manner. Either he was dreaming, or this place was Paradise. He sipped his orange juice and regretted his medical ban on alcohol. Surely one would not hurt. He waved to a passing waiter who quickly brought him a large iced whisky.

Bernie sat in the warm air, feeling the effects of the drink seep through him. He'd started the day very suspicious and uncommitted. Now, watching Nina happy in the pool, he was slowly changing his mind.

It could all depend on what deal he could arrange and with whom he would be dealing. He was still unsure why everything was such a secret. Then he began to realise that perhaps a place like this was worth being kept a secret!

The water was cool and refreshing. There were many other Island staff swimming and relaxing in and around the pool. It was so large, that they seemed almost lost in the water. There was rarely a chance of colliding with another swimmer. Don floated near the edge and tried to let his mind absorb his meeting with the Boat Yard Manager, Graham Dann. The job seemed ideal. The shifts were sensible too. Start at eight-thirty in the morning and finish by six in the afternoon. A two-hour lunch break and every Sunday off.

The only snag he could see, would come if he was required to crew on any day. Then he could be out early, back late, or even out for a few days. Still, that would make a change too. He turned over and swam several lengths, re-running his duties through his mind, evaluating what was expected of him.

A few moments later a splashing sound made him look round. Lisa was swimming up to him with a huge grin on her face. "How did it go?" She asked breathlessly.

He smiled back, "Very well. And you?"

"Excellent!"

They casually swam a few lengths together, just talking. They were luxuriating in their new freedom and the anticipation of a brand new lifestyle.

After a superb dinner at their own table for two, Lisa and Don found themselves exhausted. With reluctance they both admitted, they said their good nights and parted for their respective rooms.

Lisa lay on he bed watching the stars out to sea. All was silent, as sleep slowly overtook her. As Don had kissed her gently on the lips to say goodnight, he had said, "Tomorrow's going to be a very special day for us both."

LASTING IMPRESSIONS

The sun lost its glare as it slid towards the sea's horizon. The sky rapidly changed with a myriad of different colours. Those watching from the shore looked in amazement at the free entertainment Mother Nature provided. It was an idyllic end to another perfect day on Palm Island.

The view from the top of High Hill was breathtaking, but the two on-duty officers were not watching. They'd seen it all before and had passed the stage of wonderment. Tom Reynolds turned the last page of his book and threw it on to the side table.

"Crap ending."

He stood and stretched, giving the sinking sun a brief disinterested glance. He began to pace the large circular room. Half of the curved walls contained a desk with a series of video screens set into the smooth white surface. The rest of the desk contained banks of instruments and lights. One large panel contained several rows of switches. The rest of the room contained a few comfortable chairs and a few small desks.

Transparent toughened glass formed the whole wall of the Communications Station. This was the best view of the Island, yet rarely looked through with any sense of appreciation. Tom paced the room twice before sitting down and looking at the clock again.

"Five more hours, Dave. God! This is a boring job."

Dave Wallace looked up from his electronics magazine and smiled, "You always say that."

"And I always mean it. It really must be the most boring job on the Island." He was interrupted by a soft, but persistent tone. Tom stood up and switched off the automatic thirty-minute alarm. He ran his eyes over the control console and checked that there was nothing out of the ordinary.

The rotating image on the short-range radar screen showed that the waters for over three miles out were clear of sea traffic. The concentric circles marked off the distance from the tower centre in kilometres. Within these range marks the ocean was clear, except for the small amount of Island traffic around the lagoon. Each of the craft was highlighted by its onboard beacon. There were no adverse weather fronts coming in on the long range radar. He tapped his fingers lightly on the screen. "I wish something would happen, just to relieve the boredom."

Dave folded his magazine and put it in his briefcase. He stood, stretched and looked out of the windows across the Island. Darkness was falling rapidly. The strings of roadside lights were beginning to come on, triggered by light sensors. Some of the cars were using lights already, their progress looking very slow from this height. "You need a hobby, Tom."

Tom turned and stared at Dave for a few moments. "A hobby? Why?"

"I think this job's boring too, but at least I have other interests and can allow my mind to indulge in my hobbies."

"You're on about electronics again, aren't you?"

"Well, I'm only using that as a...."

"I've enough technical stimulation from running these things, thank you." He waved a hand at the console.

Dave moved towards Tom and said, "That's what I mean. You're dealing with familiar technology. That can get boring. Use your knowledge and create something different. Design and build new equipment."

"Not interested."

"Well, that's what keeps my interest alive. I like to fiddle and build. Anything that comes to mind. The mags give me some ideas. But it's an interest. Stops me being bored, anyway."

"So what are you building now?"

Dave turned away and looked out of the window again. The horizon was very dark now and the lights across the Island were all on. The villa lights were twinkling from behind the clusters of bushes and trees. The centre of the Island was brightly lit around the Leisure Complex. Out to sea there were a few returning lights, bobbing their way home to the safe lagoon.

"Well?" Persisted Tom.

"If I tell you, I don't want it to go any further."

"Any further?" A new voice said.

Dave spun round quickly and almost gasped. He forced a smile and said, "Ray, didn't hear you come up the stairs."

Ray Quade, Chief of the Island's security smiled and waved at Dave. "Don't worry. I'm not trying to catch you out. What don't you want to go any further, Dave?"

Ray sat heavily into a chair and idly picked up Tom's book and flicked through the pages.

"Nothing, really. You're early, aren't you?"

Ray looked at the clock on the wall and said, "Nearly seven. I've a few things to do this evening, thought I'd get a early start. I want to get to bed reasonably early. Everything all right here?"

"No problems," Tom said easily and turned to check the screens one more time.

Ray turned to the back of the book and started to read the jacket cover. "Is this any good?"

Dave said, "Tom thinks its crap."

"I said the ending's crap. The rest of the book's rubbish."

Ray threw the book back on the table and heaved his large frame from the chair. "All right then. I'm off. The codeword for tomorrow is 'Scarlet', as in O'Hara."

"Thanks Chief," smiled Dave.

Ray Quade smiled and waved a departing hand as he walked through the door and down the steps. Dave watched him through the window as he got into a car and drove down Hill Road East, towards the harbour.

Dave seemed to relax a little and sat down.

“What’s the matter?” Asked Tom.

“Nothing.”

Tom stood over him and said, “Something’s up. What were you about to say? Something you didn’t want him to hear?”

“Sort of. Well, as I was saying I’m tinkering around with bits and pieces. In the workshop, you know what I mean.”

“Not entirely, no.”

“Well, I took the spare Thermal Condenser and had a look at it, that’s all.”

“I see. So you have taken company property, worth about.....oh I don’t know, say three thousand pounds. And you decided to just take it apart!”

“Well, when I say apart, I mean redesign it.”

“What!”

Dave stood and quickly moved away from Tom. “I think we can improve the performance. I was going to boost its power and try it out in situ. See how it went.”

Tom shook his head and said, “So you may have screwed up a few grand’s worth of equipment. Then, you want to experiment further, with a few million’s worth of equipment. Including, an orbiting satellite, and jeopardise that?”

“I really don’t think it will get damaged.....”

“No! You don’t think. Have you booked the spare out of stock?” Dave nodded. “What reason did you log?”

Dave shrugged, “I just put 'existing condenser faulty' and 'replacement needed'. I can change the log to read 'part serviced', later.”

“I don’t know any of this, all right?”

Dave nodded, “Sure. Sorry I mentioned it.”

“Just put it back together, as it was, and get it back into the stores.”

“I don’t see what you’re worried about.”

“I may complain about this job, but it pays well. I don’t want to screw it up and I don’t want to lose it. Okay?”

“Okay!”

Tom buttoned his shirt, adjusted his tie and walked out the room saying, "I going for a walk. Keep an eye on things."

"Okay."

Dave stood up and watched Tom slowly walking around the tower. He shook his head and wondered what was so upsetting for Tom. He thought of the biscuit tin sized condenser sitting on his workbench in the workshop, two floors underground. He decided to wait for the appropriate moment to excuse himself to tinker a little more with the circuits. He was sure he could improve the piece of kit. Then the management would thank him. Tom was unduly worried.

It was completely dark by the time Ray pulled into Low Hill Road South and up to the front doors of Villa Fifty. He could see several lights on and rang the doorbell once. Tina opened the door and smiled. "Mr. Quade. Nice to see you."

"Ray smiled back and said, "Is Mr. or Mrs. Naylor available?" Tina nodded and opened the door for him to go through.

Nina was very pleased to have a visitor. She'd spoken to many people on the Island already during her first day, but this was their first official 'guest'. Ray accepted a small whisky and gratefully eased his bulk into a very comfortable chair.

"This is just a courtesy call, really. See how you're settling in. Anything you need. That sort of thing."

"We're fine, thank you," Nina beamed. "We're loving every minute of it. Aren't we, Bernie?"

Bernie turned back from looking out of the window and said, "Yeah. I'd like to ask you some questions, if I may, Mr. Quade."

"Yes of course. That's why I'm here. Fire away."

Bernie moved forward and said, "Where the fuck are we?"

"Bernie!" Nina scolded.

"It's all right, Mrs. Naylor. It's a standard question, though not always phrased quite so directly. You're on Palm Island, Mr. Naylor. That's really all you'll ever need to know."

"But that's just the point. I DO need to know where it is on the map. What country is out there?" Bernie pointed dramatically through the picture window at the open sea.

"Well," Ray said, turning in his chair and pointing behind him. "The mainland of the nearest country is eighty miles. That way, West."

"What's the name of that country?"

"We've no need to know, given that this Island is an independent country in its own right. We enjoy minimal contact with the mainland. We just own a strip of land, so we can fly in the aircraft, refuel and dock the ships."

"You're not going to tell me are you?"

"I can't, I'm afraid."

"Can't! Won't, you mean."

"I'm afraid 'can't' is the correct term. I don't know either." Quade didn't have any guilty feelings about lying to Naylor. Ray was a firm believer that the fewer people who knew where the Island was, the better.

Nina stood and offered to refill Ray's empty glass. "Leave it alone, Bernie. Our Mr. Quade is just a hired-hand, aren't you, honey?"

"Yes I am. No more to drink, thank you. I still have some work to finish."

Nina smiled and took the glass anyway and refilled it from the fully stocked bar at the far end of the wide lounge area. She looked in the mirror as she loaded the glass with ice. Quade was a very large man. He must be over six foot four and weighed at least two-hundred fifty pounds. He didn't exactly look very fit, but his body seemed to comprise mostly muscle. She guessed his age at about forty. He was dressed in the standard Island uniform of cream trousers, white shirt and shoes. The dark green tie was neatly knotted around his thick neck and the clothes looked fresh, even though it was near the end of the day.

She continued to watch him in the glass as he talked quietly to Bernie. Nina wondered just what was Quade's role in the Island scheme of things. Time to find out. She placed the drink in Ray's hand and sat down, sipping at her brandy goblet with a delicate, birdlike movement.

"So, you're responsible for the whole Island's security?" Nina asked. Ray nodded. "You're kept very busy then?"

He shook his head and smiled, "Not really. There's very little to worry about here. There'll be no burglaries, no mugging, and no violence. Nothing for you to concern yourselves about."

"You're sure about this? People will be people!"

Ray nodded, "Indeed, but we screen the staff very well before they're ever allowed on to the Island. They're searched and x-rayed coming on and going off. All sea-going boats and the helicopter will only leave if all passengers have passed a security check. The staff are provided with everything they need for their tour, including clothing, food, accommodation, entertainment and recreation. There are minimal personal belongings to steal. Everything's free, where's the need for any crime?"

"So what do you have to do then?" questioned Nina, looking directly into his blue-grey eyes.

He stared directly back at her and said, "I make sure that we have no unregistered visitors. We have to be sure that no boats land on the Island without permission. We have sophisticated radar and alert observers, constantly on the lookout for any intruders. I'm also responsible for the communications and making sure that nothing is monitored by outside sources. Outgoing phone calls and faxes do not contain any traceable numbers. They're unlinked to the satellite and downlinked to a facility in Paris where they're processed as a normal international call. We've our own dedicated geostationary satellite that we bounce telephones and TV stations through. You can make a private call to anywhere in the world without it being recorded, or eavesdropped. We also have a radar system that alerts us to any traffic within fifty miles of the Island. The whole of the Island is computerised. All of our equipment has monitored stock levels, which are updated by automatic ordering of replacements. All very secure and efficient, I can assure you. Nothing for our guests to worry about."

Nina smiled and said, "I can see a lot of careful thought and planning has gone into this resort, Mr. Quade."

"It was felt necessary," Quade smiled back.

Bernie stood up and moved to the panoramic window, which overlooked the South of the Island. He gazed at the ribbon of lights as the Perimeter Road swung from left to right and the road lights disappeared behind the banks of palm trees. "Never had any crime, eh?"

Ray shook his head, "None. I've been here for nearly four years. Never had a crime reported. Sure, occasionally the staff have a little tiff or two. Nothing the residents ever get to hear about. You can be assured of your safety here, Mr. Naylor. You can leave your door unlocked at any time of the day or night. There's probably no safer place to be."

"They thought that about Alcatraz at one time, didn't they?"

"Different concept all together. With Alcatraz, everyone had to be kept in. The only threat here is the same threat you'll get anywhere in the tropics and sub tropics, extreme weather. All the buildings are hurricane proof. We're all very safe here, I assure you."

"Very reassuring, but what about my jewellery? I did bring some nice pieces, in case we were invited to dinner, or something. Are they safe here?"

Ray stood slowly saying, "I trust you were advised not to bring anything of personal value with you?" Nina nodded. "Well, the Island can't take full responsibility for your valuables and personal belongings, however...." He walked to the bar and deftly slid aside a decorative panel. Behind the panel was a rectangular hole in the solid looking bar.

"A safe?" Bernie said leaning closer.

"One of the best currently available. You decide your personal combination of ten numbers and tap them into this panel on the back wall of the safe." Bernie squinted into the open mouth of the safe and nodded. "Then you slide the door into place and turn the dial. The safe is then secure. To open, simply tap in the same numbers on the panel here, press the open button once, and your door will slide open to the touch. Only you will know the combination. Only you can get into the safe."

Bernie grinned at Nina, "Get your jewels, sweetheart, and put 'em in there now."

Ray said, "We'd still advise you not to bring much with you. Most residents don't bother with too much ceremony here. When they do, they wear the fakes. Residents normally do without fancy clothes and jewellery. They mostly wear casual clothes. They grow to appreciate the comfort and live without the social trappings. They enjoy the everyday activities of shopping, walking, going to the cinema. Most of these things are difficult for them to do easily anywhere else in the world. Our residents are seeking a more basic, but still enriched lifestyle. They can't find that in the normal world. If you have money, somebody else wants it. Fact of life. Business people, ordinary public, everyone. Even if you decide to opt out from the rat race on the mainland, or anywhere in the world, there'll always be a problem of privacy and security. You have to leave your house sometime! Here, no one expects anything from you, not even a tip. You can come on to the Island without a penny. This is unique in itself and a great attraction for most of our residents. The Island is probably the only place on the planet that can offer this."

"I see," Nina smiled, draining her glass and moving to refill it.

"What's the social scene like? We've a very active one in New York."

Quade shrugged, "It's what you want to make it. Residents will mix with the people of their choice. Naturally, there's some division and cliques will form with dinner parties, etc. But overall, everyone is

encouraged to mix, generally with special events, parties, film showings, theatre, and the like to help the overall bonding process. For instance, twice a year, the Island staff arrange boat flotillas which go out to sea as a major champagne picnic outing.”

“Party, party party!” Nina said, with a little more enthusiasm.

Ray smiled and continued with his promotion. ” We also cater for art and the performing arts, with troupes and exhibitions flown in several times a year, for the benefit of the residents. The shows and exhibitions are kept to a minimum, for obvious reasons. This is a high point of security concern and consequently the Island’s location has to be kept a secret from the performers and exhibitors. These shows normally take place in the cinema complex.

For the more individual entertainment we have the Library. This has an up-to-date, comprehensive selection of books, talking books, videos, DVDs and CDs. There are beautiful walks around the Island and up the hills. There’s natural wildlife to observe, which is monitored by our gamekeepers and restocked as necessary. You have your own in-home entertainment centre, with worldwide television and movie channels. The Internet, of course.

However, there are no school facilities on the Island. We really can’t provide quality education, so we choose to provide none at all. Any owners with children school them in other parts of the world. Parents fly out and stay in their main homes for the short holidays and fly their children in for the longer stays.

You should be short of nothing on Palm Island. Everything is provided for you. You need no money, jewellery, fine clothes, or personal possessions. We recommend you leave them all at home.”

“Anything else ‘not allowed’ on the Island?” asked Nina.

“A few items only. No guns, no drugs. No transistor radios without earphones. They apply to all of the Island’s population, not just the staff.” Ray looked at his watch. “You must excuse me, but I must get on with my rounds.”

Nina moved to Ray and smiled, “Thank you very much for the visit. It was very thoughtful of you.” They shook hands. Nina felt the firm grip and wondered just how strong this man was.

“My pleasure. If you have any questions, or doubts of any kind you think I could help you with, please call me. Reception will patch you through, wherever I am.”

“Thank you, Mr. Quade,” Bernie said from the window.

Ray smiled, “Please call me Ray. Oh.....a couple of other things. I’ve tentatively booked you both on the helicopter tour of the Island. Ten o’clock tomorrow morning? If you’d be interested?”

“Great!” Bernie said. “I’ll look forward to that.” He looked at Nina, who was smiling pleasantly. “Although Nina hates ‘copters. You won’t get her on one.”

“That’s a pity, but not a problem. I’ll send a car for you at nine forty-five then?”

“Great.”

Nina smiled a little more sincerely as she said, “And the other thing? You said a couple of things?”

“Yes, I’ve been asked to invite you to a welcome lunch tomorrow, if that’s agreeable to you both?”

Nina smiled broadly, "That would be wonderful."

"Leave the jewels out, dear," grinned Bernie. "Where and when would you like us?"

"Shall we say midday, at Villa One? That's the first home on Upper Hill View. I'll send a car at eleven forty-five. Your hosts will be Celia and James Byron."

"I'll look forward to that. Won't we, Bernie?"

Bernie grinned at her and said to Quade, "Sure will. Villa One? Does that number have any relevance? Is that the most important villa on the Island, being number one an' all?"

Ray smiled, "Well, all the villas are identical. We don't want to create a keeping up with the Jones' scenario if we can help it. However, the Byron's do have status on the Island because they have been here the longest. Hence, Villa One."

"Really?" mused Nina.

"They also own the Island. And everything on it," Quade said, as he closed the door gently behind him.

Ray pulled off his tie and threw it on the bed. He emptied his trouser pockets and laid his handheld computer on the table. He then removed all his work clothes and added them to the pile, while he slipped into a dark green, lightweight dressing gown. Finally, he bundled the whole pile of clothing into the laundry chute.

Below ground, the clothing would be collected and laundered throughout the night in the massive underground automated laundry facility. Each person's clothing was electronically tagged and would be returned by the following day. As the company insisted on uniforms always looking neat and clean, they backed their demands with the facility to provide as many changes of clothes as necessary.

Ray attached the computer to the wall socket and turned on the wall mounted computer screen. He downloaded all the day's collected notes and information from his handheld. He sat at his desk and went through the following day's details. He quietly sipped at his mug of tea until it became too cold to drink.

He tapped away quietly for an hour, checking staff requirements and matching this with available resources. Although this was a logistics operation for the Island Managers, Ray always double-checked the arrangements. Although he fully trusted Dana Barnes, he never wanted to be caught out. He felt it unprofessional not to know what was going on, and vital to the security of the Island that he knew everyone on it and where they were supposed to be on shift.

By 23.30, he'd finished for the day. He downloaded the following day's information into his handheld and copied the files across to the Deputy Security Chief, Mike Wicks. Mike would upload his computer in a few minutes when he came on standby duty.

Ray tapped a three-digit number into his remote handset and waited for the soft purr to be answered. He walked to the window and looked out over the Island. "Hello, Mike. All set?"

Ray sat by the window looking into the clear night sky. The lights from the Island never allowed the full beauty of the stars to emerge, but the view was good enough. It was a ritual of his to sit alone, looking at the stars before going to bed.

He found his favourite star and wished it goodnight. He'd named it Janet. Because it was also bright, beautiful and so terribly far away.

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