



*Reluctant Press*

# Island Paradise

Audrey Taylor



*ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIAN DUKEHART*

**A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL**

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## *Reluctant Press TG Publishers*

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# ISLAND PARADISE

By Audrey Taylor

## Chapter 1: A Job Offer

*'What's she looking at?'* I could feel her eyes boring into me. I was sprawled out on the bench facing the long pier and the rippling bay waters, my feet balanced precariously over the guard rail. Through my squinted eyes I could see she was an older woman, dressed severely in a full length dress that looked like it came straight from the eighteen nineties. She'd been standing there several minutes appearing to gaze out over the water, but I could sense she was sizing me up.

Let me take a moment to introduce myself. Allen Ludlow's my name and I've been in this rat infested town almost two weeks searching desperately for a job, without much luck. Besides doing dishes at Charlies for two nights, I've run up against a brick wall. My unusual talents just aren't in demand here. Being 5'5" and weighing in at just under 145, the muscle jobs did not customarily come my way.

And I'm really in good shape.

I run five miles every morning weather permitting and I'm real good with my hands and have a good head for figures. Most of my jobs have been indoor, like stocking shelves or taking inventory, or waiting tables and counter work. I also have a talent with a sewing machine, a skill I picked up from Mom as a kid. I don't mind telling you I've put my talents to good use at some of the sweat shops I managed to find along the way.

I was presently working up the energy to hustle some cash for breakfast before I hit the road in search of more fruitful horizons. I'd certainly seen enough of this town. The loud grumbling noises coming from my stomach brought a smile to my face as I lazed in the late morning sun.

A woman's voice suddenly interceded my thoughts.

"Pardon me. Might I have a word with you, young man?"

It was my spying lady who had approached even closer.

"Sure ma'am," I blinked up at her. "I've no pressing engagements at the moment," noting the disapproval come instantly to her face.

She walked around in front of me.

“I was wondering if you might be interested in some employment. If so, you're welcome to join me for lunch so I may offer a proposition to you.” *And I can see if you're suited for us*, she thought to herself.

Unbeknownst to me, one of the guys had pointed me out to her, having heard about my sewing talents which I had bragged about over a couple of beers one evening at Charlies.

*Lunch, did I hear correctly?* My mouth was already watering, much as I'm sure Pavlov's dogs must have done in a similar situation.

“How did you guess, Ma'am?” I started rising, glad my need to beg had been put off. “Things have been a bit slow lately.” I naturally took on her accent and style, an ability I'd developed during my travels. “I'd be happy to join you for lunch to hear your proposal. Lead the way.” I hoped my smile was pleasant.

“Good,” her face remained stern, “why don't we try that restaurant across the street,” indicating one of the finer eating establishments in town. I hadn't been able to get past the front door last week when checking for a job. “You'll have to wash up thoroughly in the men's room before they seat us,” she informed me, walking slightly ahead, trying to distance herself even as she was speaking to me.

*Strange. Was I that scruffy looking? Yes siree.*

The mirror in the men's room showed layers of grime that I had become accustomed to living with lately. It took some serious scrubbing to find my bristly skin. After combing my long hair back into reasonable shape, and washing my teeth vigorously with my finger, I felt almost presentable.

*'The job possibility sounded far fetched, but at least I'd get a meal out of it'*, my mind contemplated, happy my face didn't grow hair quickly and glad she had selected me. *I wonder why,* my curiosity grew as I stepped from the men's room.

She had already arranged for a table in a private alcove, most likely to hide me from prying eyes I would imagine.

“My name is Mrs. Locke.” She was barely seated and was already arranging the cloth napkin on her lap. I copied her. “That's with an 'e' at the end, not the one for cell doors.”

She could have passed for a prison guard, her expression was so deathly serious and the slight hint of a smile was the only way I knew she had just made a joke. Reminded me of something from my past, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. “Would you introduce yourself and tell me how you came to be seated or should I say sprawled out on that park bench by the water.”

I was preparing an answer when the waitress descended on us with menus and my noisy stomach totally sidetracked me.

She glanced quickly at it and gave an order for soup and salad for the two of us. She asked if I cared for a beer or something stronger.

“I'd love a Bloody Mary, thank you. Would a cheeseburger be asking too much?” I inquired, trying not to be too pushy, yet knowing a salad wasn't about to solve my hunger pangs.

“We'll see how you do with your salad first,” I almost felt like a child, “now, you were saying,” she returned to the subject at hand.

“I'm Allen Ludlow. From way up north, a small town called Cootsville, just outside of Raleigh. I've been traveling down the coast since June, earning my keep along the way, searching for something that really interests me. Something that I could make a steady living from, but so far nothing much has turned up.” I watched her head nod in acknowledgment, “I've met a whole lot of nice folks along the way and aside from going a little hungry occasionally I've got no real complaints.”

The drinks were delivered and I quickly took a sip, savoring the taste as I rolled it around in my mouth before swallowing. It had been over two weeks since I'd tasted any liquor.

She sipped her wine slowly, “What type of jobs have you had?” she inquired.

“Well, mostly I've washed dishes and cleared tables. Nothing to write home about. What's this proposition of yours?”

“Not yet, Allen. First I need to know more about your background. Tell me about your parents. Any brothers, sisters?”

“Well, both my parents are dead,” I took a deep sigh as I thought of them. “Mom died almost two years ago.”

“Oh, I'm sorry to hear that,” her sympathy was apparent.

“We all said it was from heartache, since my dad had been chasing after a young girl the year before. He got his just desserts though. Ran his car right off the highway into a telephone pole. Drunk as a toad, they said.

“I wasn't really that unhappy, though. He used to tear into us whenever he was drunk and that seemed like almost all the time. As I grew up I became his primary target. He was always shouting that I was Mom's kid, saying I was absolutely a no good waste of a boy.”

I took a deep slug of my drink and noticed it was already empty. Mrs. Locke immediately caught the waitress's eye for a refill. I could get to like this civil war lady, prison guard or not. *Why did I have this strange feeling I had dealt with prison guards like her before?*

“That's too bad. All too often, father's will take their troubles out on the ones closest to them.” Strong generality that was certainly true in my case.

“It was very difficult on Mom,” I was remembering. “She got her lumps too. Had plenty of scars to show for being married to him. After he died, she never really understood, was always searching for what went wrong, crying herself to sleep many nights. My room was right down the hall from hers. I had to pull the pillow over my head to drown out her whimpering.”

*Why was I telling her about this?*

The soup came and we ate in silence except for her showing me how to hold my spoon properly, which only amused me. The clam chowder was delicious. There just

wasn't enough of it, so I reached for a roll, put it on my side dish as Mrs. Locke had done, buttering it quickly and opening my mouth wide for a big bite.

“Slow down,” she admonished, “take smaller bites or else you'll have difficulty chewing.” That's a new one. “You didn't mention any brothers or sisters,” she prodded me once more.

“That's right. I did have an older brother who died when he was two years old. Drowned in the lake near our house. My mother always blamed herself for his death. She took the guilt all the way to the grave with her.” I took another sip from my glass, and then explained the incident as Mom had shared it with me so many times.

“Somehow she'd lost track of him for a moment, in one of her arguments with dad, and Paulie, that was his name, must of slipped into the water without making a sound. We lived right on this lake. They searched for hours, before the police finally found him hidden by some underbrush. I hadn't been born yet. They never had any more kids after me,” I related, feeling a kind of fuzziness to these earlier memories. I did have some vague recollections of some kind of dormitory with a lot of boys around and strict teachers with rulers in their hands, but I didn't say anything about it. I wasn't sure if it was just a part of my imagination or what.

“I am certain that you've had your share of tragedies. Tell me how you've managed since your mother's death.”

“Well,” I took another long lip from my glass, “I stayed with Aunt Lucy for a while until we both couldn't stand it any longer and she threw me out. I found an old barn on the other side of town that nobody was using and stayed there until I graduated high school. My aunt and me never did get along very well. You see she was my father's half—sister and was quite happy to be rid of me. She was always complaining about why her sister had not taken me in like she did. Said she really had no obligation to me at all, and I didn't really understand what she meant by all that. It made me feel real bad and I was happy I didn't have to hear that anymore when I moved out.

“She never even showed up for my graduation. She was just an old maid who'd probably never been kissed by a guy in her whole life.”

Mrs. Locke butted in, “Do you keep in touch?”

“Not really. I sent a card several months back, but never heard back and even if she did write, it would probably have a tough time catching up with me. I'm always on the move.”

“What kind of work did she do?”

“She was the town librarian. I didn't really hate her. She meant well when Mom died. It's just that she was so prim and proper and I was used to leaving everything around and it drove her crazy. I've gotten a lot better since I'm on my own.”

Mrs. Locke looked at my backpack and smiled at my perspective.

“Tell me about high school, how you did. And about your friends.”

“There's not much to tell. About the only time I was happy is when I wasn't in school. I got my diploma. I wasn't into any sports, although I love to run. I do at least five miles every morning.” I was proud, knowing I really felt good when I was running.

“That's good, I'm sure.”

I could tell she didn't really understand.

“What did you study at school? Anything particular interests?” she continued to dig.

“I liked to read and did pretty good in English. I also got an 'A' in economics. I helped mom around the house a lot so I had a head start with the cooking and stuff.”

“Home economics?” A bit of smugness showing, reminding of the attitudes I had to deal with in school.

“Yeah, all that sewing and home care stuff.”

She looked more closely at me.

“I also liked music and almost joined the chorus once.” I felt a little embarrassed talking about this.

She certainly knew how to get into the touchy subjects.

Mrs. Locke interceded when I hesitated, “You know Allen, lots of men do things around the house. They usually make the best cooks and there's absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. My own father was a real whiz on a sewing machine. His skills as a seamstress were superb.”

Something wasn't right with that statement but I wanted to sound impressed, “that's great,” I was almost tempted to blurt out about my own talents in that area.

Memories flooded my head, about helping Mom mend the socks and underwear and the holes in my pants, how I easily learned to utilize the sewing machine, never realizing until much later that it was considered woman's work by most folks. *How was I going to explain that to Mrs. Locke?*

“Have you ever done any sewing or knitting yourself?”

*Was this woman some kind of a mind reader?*

My cheeks must be glowing red. I reached for my glass and noticed it was empty again, and was thankful when the waitress remedied that a moment later.

I wasn't feeling much pain by this point and was hardly aware of my venturing into a delicate subject I had meant to avoid entirely.

“I'm actually pretty good with a sewing machine. Mom taught me when I was much younger and I actually won a class project with a sweater I knitted all on my own.” I don't know why I felt so talkative, looking at her intent eyes as she sat there studying me with some interest. “Haven't done much of that in some time, but I've definitely gotten into some pretty complicated sewing jobs this past year.” I hesitated again, not really sure how far she wanted me to go.

“That's impressive. I had a funny feeling you might be just the person I was looking for underneath that scruffy exterior,” Mrs. Locke assured me. “Your mother must have been a caring woman to spend all that time teaching you how to sew and knit. It's too bad she was saddled with a man who didn't appreciate her. That's the case all too often. Still you're fortunate to have been exposed to some of the finer things in life.”

I took another swallow of my Bloody Mary feeling the memory of Mom tugging at my heart. *Yes, she'd been real special.*

“Allen, let me take a moment to tell you about our needs. We're scheduled to return to the island later today and I was hoping you might make a decision before we leave so you could join us immediately. We have an opening for a specialist to oversee our laundry facility.”

*A specialist, I thought. Not bad.*

“Angela, who held the job previously had a sudden illness in the family and had to leave last week quite unexpectedly. She most likely won't be returning any time soon and has left quite a large void by her sudden departure. I can't tell you how much her skills are already missed. We were totally unprepared for such an event.” It was hard to miss the disapproval in her voice. She was definitely the kind of person who detested sudden departures from the norm that might cause any unnecessary upheavals in her otherwise orderly way of life.

“The job will entail supervising the full cleaning facility which includes managing three young ladies in their day to day functions within the facility. You will also be expected to accomplish whatever mending is needed on the entire island. That's for over one hundred people.”

*Wow, no small group!*

“You'll also be expected to design and produce whatever new clothes we require. And, of course, you'll have to replace any uniforms that wear out.” That didn't really sound too worrisome. “That includes the care of Ms. Stevens personal wardrobe as well as my own. It's quite a prestigious position. You'll find your girls will handle the day to day washing and ironing functions which will leave you with the mending and design work. It might surprise you, but you're the first person I've been able to locate in the past two days that has even a semblance of the background needed for the job. I guess we'll overlook the fact that you're a man.”

*No competition, I thought to myself, failing to give any significance to her last comment. All I had to do was make sure I didn't ruin it.*

“Unfortunately you'll have to acquaint yourself with the job on your own. There's really no one on the island that has the slightest experience with designing and dress-making. Just the mending is already driving the volunteers crazy. It's backing up rather quickly. It's amazing how everyone has gotten this new appreciation for the job Angela was doing all along. We hope you can eventually train some of the ladies with the mending so we can avoid such a disaster from happening again. We've had to delay all new uniforms for the time being.”

It certainly sounded like they were struggling. I was also struggling to hold my glass level, watching how it teetered up and back before I set it carefully on the table, noting that the waitress was already refilling it. My broad smile unknowingly announced I was no longer feeling any pain, and I returned my attention once more to Mrs. Locke.

“You'll find Ms. Stevens is a most caring employer.” Isn't that nice I smiled to myself. “I'm sure it will prove a highly rewarding experience. Everyone is treated like fam-



ily, as long as their responsibilities are taken care of properly. Slackers are hardly tolerated very long. We have no room for the likes of them, you can be sure.”

I smiled at her stern look, wondering what it took to be called a slacker. The cool taste of my drink was quite refreshing, causing me a little difficulty with staying focused on all she was saying. It seemed I was actually facing a permanent position, and couldn't spot any competition in sight, although my sight was becoming a little uncertain.

“You'll earn a good wage, and since we're on an island, it will automatically be deposited in your name in a bank account on the mainland.” Mrs. Locke stopped a moment to sip her own drink.

*Did I hear her correctly? An island.* It certainly sounded like there were plenty of eligible females about, and now that my hunger for food had been somewhat satisfied, the drinks seemed to have released some other hungers. She kept mentioning ladies a lot. *It had been a long time since I'd been with a woman, thinking immediately of Lily, that luscious blonde waitress from Scarboro who I'd had a thing with last month. Or was that two months ago? It certainly seemed way back when.*

I was well beyond horniness. Even Mrs. Locke was starting to look good, her generous bosom staring at me from her pleated white blouse as I observed the gentle motion of her breathing. Sucking on her erect nipples might prove quite intriguing, I thought, lifting my glass to finish the remains even as I watched her breast lift as her arm lifted too to get the waitress's attention.

I smiled broadly as my glass was refilled. There was no end to her generosity.

“Have you any questions, Allen? If not, perhaps you would like to see the contract. I'm hoping you'll make a decision before we depart the restaurant.”

*Wow. She was in a rush.* I unfolded the four page contract and found the beginning, but it blurred out every time I tried to focus. I played at studying it, figuring it must be okay, since this lady seemed so puritanical. No way I could ever imagine her trying to put something over on some unsuspecting victim. Certainly nothing dishonest. Had I only known the half of it, I would most likely have cringed in my seat. She offered me her pen and a reassuring smile, pointing to where my signature was required. My relief at finding a job was almost tangible and before she could change her mind my John Hancock was sprawled in the appropriate place.

I hadn't the slightest idea that I had just committed myself to a year's stint and stood to lose much of my initial earnings if I left before then.

Her smile seemed wicked as she studied my signature.

“You've made a smart decision,” making me feel rather clever. “The beginning of a fine career,” she predicted, raising my hopes even more.

Maybe I had finally located the opportunity I had been seeking for so long. I grinned back at her, feeling absolutely no pain, and felt her assisting me to an upright position so we could leave. She did offer me a copy of the contract which she put away for me in my inside breast pocket. I hadn't noticed her paying the check or that she held my arm tightly to keep me balanced as we approached the front door. When the fresh air

hit me I almost collapsed on the spot. It's a good thing she was fairly large and there was a cab waiting right at curbside. Her free hand opened the door and I fell across the back seat before she moved in next to me and helped straighten me out.

We arrived at the yacht shortly where a couple of dockhands helped get me aboard. I was only vaguely aware they were women as they laid me comfortably in a bunk before leaving me to sleep it off.

While I slept one of Mrs. Locke's assistants was retrieving my things and settling my account with that old bag of a landlady. There wasn't very much, only some toilet articles and a bunch of dirty clothes. The landlady was pleased to see me gone, accepting, "his mother's taken ill," without a murmur, more than happy to accept the week's rent I owed.

The yacht left as soon as the assistant was back aboard and I hardly stirred a muscle as we headed for Paradise Island. However the heavy rocking motion soon had me leaning over the railing emptying my recent lunch into the growling wake. I felt awful, realizing we were at sea and this trip wasn't ending any time soon. For a moment I had no idea where I was and then it slowly began to dawn on me. I'd signed something for Mrs. Locke in the restaurant and we were probably headed to some island she had mentioned.

Exactly what it was I would be doing here, I couldn't readily recall, but I was getting darned impatient with this rocking boat. I recalled something about a career, but for the life of me I couldn't remember any of the details.

Returning to the cabin I tried relaxing, doing everything I could to forget about my delicate stomach. I hadn't noticed that the boat was totally 'manned' by women. Finally the rocking motion lulled me back into a troubled sleep.

## Chapter 2: Welcome To My Island

I was awakened by the persistent shaking of my shoulder. My eyes opened begrudgingly to see Mrs. Locke's smiling face.

“Rise and shine darling. We're arrived. It's time to see your new home.”

I shook my head slowly trying to clear the cobwebs, while I gingerly lowered my feet to the floor. The Bloody Marys had taken some toll. My head felt like a brick was rattling around inside and I rose cautiously to follow Mrs. Locke up on deck.

We were docked at a long pier alongside several other smaller boats. Some women were carrying luggage and bags to a waiting minibus, loading them into the rear compartment. I thought I saw my own bag just before the door was closed.

The sun was setting in the western sky. Shadows had started creeping over the area making me aware that quite a bit of time had passed since our luncheon. This island was a real trip from the mainland.

Mrs. Locke's derriere climbing over the side was quite a sight, it's full swaying motion almost hypnotic as it led the way to the bus as I followed the others onto the bus, taking the offered hand of a lovely girl who I sat beside. I was very much aware of her presence as it slowly started to dawn on me that I was the only man present. My eyes traveled over each of my female companions trying to grasp some understanding of the situation.

*Well, how do you like that? Where were all the men? Did they have an uprising and leave the island?*

During the bumpy ride over the winding country road, I also noticed only women in the fields, either picking fruits and vegetables or operating the farm equipment. I even saw some ladies on horseback, herding cattle into a corral, right next to a large red barn, which looked fairly modern, not unlike many of the ones I'd seen since leaving home.

A few more bumpy miles with my head in hands trying to keep some equilibrium and we took a sharp turn to the left. My neighbor's hand helped me maintain my seat as my aching head had left me vulnerable.

“Thanks,” I smiled through my agony. A cute brunette, her short cropped hair quite suited to the humid weather, and my imagination soared in spite of my pain, feeling my instant reaction in my pants. My stomach was starting to settle down, even with all the bumps, allowing me to appraise my fellow passengers with more diligence. The wispy blonde across from me was doing her own appraisal of yours truly as I took in her full figure, her strong thighs quite evident beneath her abbreviated skirt. At her side was a slightly older version of my neighboring brunette.

The stylist here certainly had a limited number of styles to choose from. They all seemed short and functional. Nobody wore makeup, yet they all showed a natural glow to their faces, probably from being outdoors so much of the day. They needed no aids to generate this natural radiance that surrounded each of them.

My attention shifted as the bus came to a full stop in front of a large hacienda. Off to the side were a number of smaller dwellings, but nothing matched the sheer exuberance of the three story dwelling in front of us.

Climbing down carefully, still unsure of my wobbly legs and sensitive head, I was grateful for the helping hand of Mrs. Locke. She directed me right up the front steps and in through the main entrance while the rest of my traveling companions dispersed in other directions. *Nuts, I was just getting to know them.*

My suitcase had somehow found it's way into the foyer, seeming to materialize out of thin air. I didn't remember packing it.

The long inner hallway was sparsely decorated with floor plants and intermittent pictures on the walls, a variety of staid women on horseback I noticed as we proceeded towards the back of the house. Still not a man in sight, including the pictures.

Mrs. Locke stopped before a large door, gently knocking and proceeding inside to the inquiring 'yes?' from within.

I followed behind, positioning myself to the side and slightly to the rear of Mrs. Locke as she approached a large desk on the right, where a rather wizened old lady was seated, gazing up at our approach.

She wore an elegant gown, very much like Mrs. Locke's. I could see a lot of satin and lace and that her upper body was completely encased right up to her neck. Certainly form fitting as it clearly outlined her generous bodice and led to a severely nipped in waist. Her hair was pulled back away from her face into a carefully coiffured bun which sat so regally on her head. She could have been Mrs. Locke's older sister. She confirmed my feelings that the boat had somehow found it's way through a time warp, mysteriously returning to a period in the late nineteenth century.

"Ms. Stevens, I've got some excellent news," I watched Ms. Stevens face soften at her words, "I've been fortunate in locating a replacement for Angela. We all know what a big void she's left but I'm sure," she turned towards me, "Ms. Ludlow, given sufficient time to acclimate to our society will be more than adequate. Her unusual talents certainly fits our need."

I smiled at Ms. Stevens not really understanding the significance of the 'Ms.' and 'her' referrals Mrs. Locke accorded me. Perhaps I should have trusted my senses more and not written it off to poor hearing.

"That's good news," Ms. Steven's raspy voice was a little hard to comprehend, "but her appearance surely needs some attention. We can't have her upsetting the others," she gave Mrs. Locke a knowing glance. "Put her in with Celia. That should solve the problem."

*Was I hearing right? They continued to refer to me as her or were they talking about someone else.* I shook my head trying to clear the wooziness, tuning them out temporarily. The details would take care of themselves, and I rejoiced in the fact that I had stepped into a job opening that obviously required my sewing skills. Mom popped into my head and I thanked her one more time for being so patient with me and caring enough to share all her knowledge and experience.

I couldn't help noticing the stately paintings on the walls as I gazed around the room. Yet more portraits of women, one sitting regally on a horse, another standing by a fence in a red and black riding outfit and yet another elegant woman standing next to a large oak, smiling and wearing similar riding clothes. They seemed such a determined lot, hardly any femininity peeking through, the family resemblance all too apparent. They all shared strong jawbones and slightly ridged noses and strikingly blue eyes. In fact when I looked again at Ms. Stevens I could see the strong resemblance to the woman on the horse. She'd been a lot younger then.

“Why don't you get our new friend settled in. I'm sure we'll see more of you,” Ms. Stevens smiled in my direction. “I hope you'll find your stay with us a rewarding experience,” her genuine tone lifted my spirits, “but I do want to caution you to abide all of Mrs. Locke's wishes during your trial period. Good luck,” her eyes had already drifted towards the open book on her desk.

“Thank you Ma'am.” I had been dismissed and followed Mrs. Locke from the room. *'Trial period?'* was ringing in my ears. Mrs. Locke told me to take my bag and I followed her out the front door and down a dirt path at the side of the house. I stayed close as she weaved past some of the dwellings before entering a small cabin which looked like it came from Abe Lincoln's days.

Nobody was home as she showed me around. The bedroom contained two twin beds on either side and I assumed the bare mattress would be mine. She explained that few people had individual quarters (so much for any privacy), although sharing a room with a woman certainly had promising possibilities.

“You'll meet Celia later. Why don't you take advantage of this free time to unpack and get yourself settled in. I need to run some errands. I'll pick you up shortly and we'll see if we can't pay a visit to the laundry and get you introduced to the group you'll be heading up.”

My mind hardly grasped the idea of what she meant by group.

As soon as she was out the door, I flopped on the bed and was asleep inside of five minutes. Obviously I wasn't over the effects of the liquor yet.

### Chapter 3: My Introduction to Alice

The hand that shook me wasn't too gentle and I had difficulty getting my eyes unglued, momentarily disoriented as I tried to take in my surroundings.

“Hi there,” a pleasant voice came through the fog. “You'd better get up soon or you'll miss dinner.”

Finally my lids were fully open and my vision filled with these two big brown eyes peering down at me. The complexion was deep brown and was obviously not Mrs. Locke.

“Hi,” was all I could muster from my parched lips, slowly moving my legs towards the side of the bed.

She had moved to the other side of the room and I noted she was somewhat heavier than most of the women I had seen here.

I sat there like in a trance, watching as she lifted her dress up over her head and then reached behind her to loosen the snaps of her bra.

When she turned towards me and said, “I'm Celia,” I found it difficult to catch my breath, as her prominent breasts came into full view as the bra dangled loosely from her right hand. “I understand you're taking Angela's place. We can sure use your help.” She had retrieved a clean bra and was already positioning her breasts into its cups before reaching around to snap it shut.

“I think you'd better get changed for dinner. Ms. Stevens will have a fit if you show up like that.” As she was speaking she was gathering some things together while I sat there gaining full consciousness.

I slowly undid my shirt buttons and removed it even while I continued to study her partially clad body, marveling at her total disregard for the presence of a stranger and a man at that. She handed me the stuff and told me to go into the bathroom and wash up before putting them on.

“Make sure you try everything,” she prompted.

Still a bit dazed I followed her suggestion. I soon found myself staring in the mirror at my bleak face, searching for some understanding of what I was doing here. Finally I splashed some cold water over it, hoping to revive myself quickly. *I had to rejoin the real world.*

Celia delivered a towel just as I started searching for one, saying I could use it until I picked up my own gear later. I mumbled my thanks, drying myself quickly before I turned my attention to the pile of things she had provided.

There was a flowery blouse, a bra which I assumed she had included by mistake, a large pair of cotton panties and a green pair of shorts with several buttons on the side.

“So, what's the hold up?” she asked as she dropped off a pair of opened toed sandals.

“You expect me to wear these?” I asked, lifting the bra in astonishment.

“Of course, sweetheart,” her smile was unnerving and I noticed she wore a similar blouse to the one she wanted me to wear.

“Listen Hon, there are only women on this island,” she started explaining. “If you expect to survive without being attacked twenty times a day you'd better make a concerted effort at hiding your masculinity. Besides, if you distract the women unnecessarily, Ms. Stevens will get crazy. She will certainly expect her personal seamstress to set an example of feminine grace for the others. These might not fit that well, but should serve the purpose for this evening. I'm sure you'll get to pick out some suitable things when you pick up your uniforms tomorrow. Come on, we have to get moving. Being late for dinner isn't worth the hassle.”

“You're not kidding?” I squeaked lamely. The grumblings in my stomach started up and I realized hunger for the second time that day, feeling somewhat subdued at where my last meal had landed me.

“About what?”

“Well, first, I happen to be a man and I can't see what's so wrong with that. Secondly, I never agreed to dress like a female when I accepted this job. Besides, this whole thing is completely absurd,” my words made her cringe.

“You'll have to take that up with Mrs. Locke. You did sign the contract, which I know for a fact has a dress code which must be strictly adhered while you are on this island. In case you didn't read it carefully, it says, 'each individual is expected to maintain a proper feminine image at all times. Failure to comply may lead to immediate dismissal.’”

*Ah, the small print I hadn't really studied very closely in the restaurant.*

“I know for a fact, that no one on the island wears masculine clothes, so it's these or going naked. And I guarantee you, if you go naked you won't survive for a day. I think there may be several others like you, but I haven't the foggiest notion who they are any more. You'll find it a lot easier just going with the program, than fighting it every step of the way. And a whole lot less stressful,” she left me in the bathroom after slapping her hands together. “So let's get going.”

I hesitantly stepped into the cotton panties, getting goosebumps when I thought of where they had been previously. With hunger starting to distract me, my belly forced me to acquiesce at least for the immediate future. It felt kind of kinky wearing a woman's intimate undergarment, especially a woman whom I hardly knew. They were definitely too large, but the elasticized waistband kept them up as I reached for the shorts to cover them. They too were large, yet with the side buttons closed the waist pulled in fairly snugly. It was loose in the crotch and almost seemed like an ordinary pair of shorts. As I reached for the blouse, Celia reentered the bathroom.

“Whoa, darling, the bra first. Did you miss my demonstration earlier?”

*Certainly not*, I thought to myself gazing at her bulging blouse with fond remembrance.

“But I don't have the same need,” I voiced instead, feeling a hint of red come to my cheeks as I thought of how her breasts had rested in the bra cups she was now insisting I cover my chest with.

“You're certainly less endowed, that's true,” her smirk didn't please me. “That just means we'll have to be creative so you can fool everyone, now won't we? I have some fairly authentic looking pads you can use. With your rather masculine attitude, remaining flat—chested would be a dead giveaway.”

I held out my arms feeling kind of lethargic and too weary to offer any further argument.

She ran the straps over my outstretched arms and over my shoulders before joining the clasps in the rear. The pads filling the cups seemed enormous, yet filled out the naturally large size quite snugly. When each cup laid smoothly, it left me with these two enormous mountains that could easily rival Madonna.

When I accepted the blouse sleeves over my shoulders, I was momentarily stumped by the reverse position of the front buttons and had fun trying to close them over my new bumps. Finally they were all closed and Celia suggested I push the ends of the blouse beneath the waistband of the shorts, which I did.

I stared at my image in the mirror with wide—eyed horror. Meanwhile Celia was calmly gathering my long hair into a pony tail before tying it off with a pink ribbon. Staring at the two protrusions in the flowery blouse I was terrified of another living soul seeing me this way.

“That's enough for now. Here, put your sandals on and let's get moving.”

I leaned over to attach the sandal's straps very much aware of having to look down over my new endowments. I meekly followed along behind her as she left the cabin, engrossed in my overwhelming feeling of exposure. I felt like I might jump out of my skin at any moment.

We passed several people she knew (all women, which still managed to surprise me), smiling at them when she introduced me as Alice, the new replacement for Angela.

No one seemed to take any notice of my appearance, usually greeting me with friendly 'good lucks', as I continued to feel terribly exposed in my new costume. They accepted me without a single question or look. Was everyone blind?

By the time we reached the dining room I was actually starting to relax, taking a seat alongside Celia at a long table, where a group of women were already heartily engrossed with dinner.

“Hi Mandy,” Celia glanced at the blonde next to her, “thanks for saving me a spot. Meet Alice, my new roomie. She's taking Angela's spot.”

“Glad to meet you,” Mandy reached her hand over.

“Likewise,” I shook her hand loosely and replied in a soft whisper, wanting to hide my deep voice and preserve this disguise a while longer.



She looked momentarily at my hand and I sensed her questioning the calluses and roughness as she studied my fingers before releasing them with an odd smile. She definitely suspected something.

The waitress came to take our order, her conservative white and gray uniform barely hiding her unfettered breasts which bounced around rather appealingly. I had already noticed that many of the ladies didn't seem to bother with bras. Wearing Celia's, I was definitely in the minority.

From the two choices we both decided on the chicken and the waitress left with our order.

She had the same brown complexion as Celia, and I could see others around the room with similar features. Probably from some local native tribe. I later learned that many women were from the Ankiloli tribe, a native people that had inhabited this area for many generations before the Europeans arrived. They had a distinctive accent which was hard to miss and treated Celia with highest respect. No wonder I had trouble arguing with her suggestions. Her intense demeanor seemed to affect everyone that way.

As time went by, my anxieties slowly receded and I started feeling a strange kinship with the surrounding ladies. Except for having to adjust the bra straps that kept slipping off my shoulders I grew more comfortable with my new protrubances, accepting that I needed to lean over further to see my food on the plate. My hunger fully absorbed me and drew my full attention.

Whenever I hesitated for a breath I couldn't help but notice the flowery reflections of my blouse that accommodated the twin bumps underneath. I kept glancing around at the other women to see if anyone else was noticing me and repeatedly had to catch myself from staring at their own naturally sloping appendages. They looked so appealing in their rather plain attire, making me wonder what might be expected of me in this area. The present designs seemed so functional and certainly worked.

The noise level was pretty high and I contented myself with listening to the conversations going on around me, happy to remain as unobtrusive as possible. I was still struggling with a solution to my predicament and hoped for information I could use to extricate myself from this ludicrous situation.

We were obviously on an island, so I would definitely need a boat to return to the mainland. Maybe if I just talked to Mrs. Locke and explained how all this dressing up stuff wasn't my bag, maybe she'd just leave me off where she found me, no harm done.

Somehow I didn't think it would be that easy, but it was certainly worth a try. There was no way I would continue dressing this way for one second longer than was necessary.

With dinner over, we almost bumped into Mrs. Locke as we were leaving the dining room.

"Oh, there you are Alice. I came by earlier but you were sound asleep. We'll have to get to the laundry in the morning. That's a lovely blouse. You look quite nice in it," my

cheeks were getting warm. "Come with me," she already had my arm. "I'll give you a little tour of our community." Looking at Celia, "I'll drop her off later, darling."

"Goodnight, Mrs. Locke. Have fun, Alice," Celia headed back to our cabin, while Mrs. Locke steered me in another direction.

"These clothes will do until we get you properly fitted out tomorrow after breakfast. Did Celia explain the necessity for them?"

"She did say something about there being only women on the island, but I still don't understand what's wrong with my own clothes? You never said anything about having to wear ladies things. I really don't like it. I know I put you out and all but I'd really appreciate being returned to mainland as soon as possible. Even though I could really use the job, I never bargained for this."

She hesitated a moment, pulling my arm so I turned towards her, "You did sign the contract, Alice, not even 8 hours ago and already you're talking about backing out on your word and leaving us high and dry (*She's already locked in this 'Alice' shit*). Just because we ask you to present a more feminine image so the women around here will be more comfortable with you. Such a big deal over some clothes," just then I noticed my two bumps and smiled at her casualness about my new curves.

"You don't know this but many of our islanders are apprehensive of men for good reason. Many have been mistreated or beaten by men in the past, or they simply have this fear of how the stronger male will frequently utilize his strength to force his will on them. Most have lost their interest in the male side of the species. We certainly don't want you disturbing the delicate balance around here (*What balance is that?*)"

"I was hoping you'd be more understanding," she had started walking again and held my arm more gently. Was she trying to intimidate me with her own considerable strength? "It will be difficult finding a skilled seamstress on such short notice. You seem quite ideal for us, other than your being a man. Why make it such a big deal? It certainly offers you an excellent opportunity to exhibit your talents, and I don't remember seeing anyone else vying for your employment. It's only your outward appearance and I can't see what that will affect in the long run."

*'No affect . . .'* I felt the brassiere strap slipping yet again, reaching to lift it to my shoulder even as I felt the evening chill bringing goosebumps to my bare legs. . . , *'in the long run'*.

How did she know what kind of affect it would have on me? There was no pain except to my psyche, and it sure made me feel ridiculous and uncomfortable in front of the others. To save everyone else's discomfort I had to endure these ridiculous clothes.

She was making yet another point, "You haven't even seen what the job entails and whether it will interest you or not. You, yourself said you wanted a good opportunity for the future. Is it too much to ask you to put aside your male ego for a week and see what the job entails? I'm confident if you give it a chance you'll find yourself well suited to the task and your aversion to these clothes will simply disappear. One week, that's all I ask. I would think you owe it to yourself to explore the unusual opportunity that exists here for you."

One week, of parading around like this to find out what the job fully entailed. It didn't sound like she was asking that much.

We were headed down another path and I could see the moon reflecting off the waters in the distance. One week like this and it would give me a chance to check out all the female flesh around here. Especially some of the beauties I spied in the dining room earlier. I did sign that stupid contract, although I didn't really think it would ever come to a courtroom. I couldn't see a judge telling me I had to assume a female persona because of a contract I signed while under the influence of a whole bunch of Bloody Marys.

"I promise," we had stopped again and she was looking at me intently, "that if you give it a sincere try for a week and you still wish to return to the mainland, I'll deliver you myself without another word. But I need you to promise to make a genuine effort to acclimate yourself during the week. No play—acting. It's got to be a legitimate try."

I felt my resistance melting as I looked into her eyes. "Okay?"

I took a deep breath and nodded my consent, against my better judgment. Better to finish this whole episode quietly with no hassle and maybe get some kind of recommendation when I leave. And I wouldn't have to worry about fulfilling the contract, just in case it was enforceable, since she was committing to letting me off the hook after a week. It certainly wouldn't kill me, my smile was forced as she turned and walked away, expecting me to follow along behind her.

It took about 45 minutes to show me the immediate facility. She mentioned the many outlying fields and a few processing sheds and operations not in the immediate area. She loaded me with so much information I felt overwhelmed and simply had to tune her out, figuring I didn't really have to know it all with my departure scheduled for only a week from now.

I was impressed with how they grew a wide assortment of grains and fruits, which made the island fairly self—sufficient as far as nourishment. Besides an assortment of vegetables, they also grew cotton and raised cattle and sheep making me realize that most of the workers were probably tied into field duties. There was several large building used for processing and canning some of the food products and an entirely separate area for treating the wool and cotton fibers.

She went on to explain how my area utilized some of these processed materials for the clothing needs of the island.

I was really impressed by the enormity and complexity of the whole operation. And everything seemed so well organized. Each process provided maximum utility, including the power station by the small waterfall which obviously provided the electrical requirements for the island.

I was floored by the extent of many varied operations going on at the same time. Nothing went to waste as Mrs. Locke was keen to pass on to me. Even residue oils were used in homemade cosmetics and left over fabrics became towels and rags and so on.

Along the way she talked about my trial period being three months, totally oblivious to 'my being gone by the end of the week' comment made early on.