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# SUN STROKED

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CATHRYN FOX

*Cathryn*  
**FOX**  
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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## COPYRIGHT

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Sun Stroked  
Seaside Seduction, Deep Desire, Private Pleasure  
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# SEASIDE SEDUCTION

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Seaside Seduction

Book 1



DANIELLE CARRIGAN WOULD gladly give up her fantasy of ever joining the mile-high club if the frigging plane would just make it to the ground safely. Not that she could join the club with her two best *girl*friends and one *female* pilot on board, however. She'd definitely need a man for that scandalous initiation.

But still...

Truthfully, at twenty-eight she was too young to die, plus she hadn't done enough good deeds lately to warrant an early pass through the Pearly Gates.

Danielle pinched her eyes shut as the old Cessna tumbled them around like a load of laundry. "Remind me again why we're doing this," she said to her best friend, Lauren Sampson.

"We're doing this because we all need a vacation," Lauren reminded her, patting Danielle's leg in a placating manner, which did little to pacify her under the circumstances. Dammit, she hated flying, especially in a pissant, four-seat aircraft with less horsepower than her Honda Civic. "Now relax. We're almost there," Lauren added.

With her fingernails digging into the upholstered seat, Danielle pried her eyes open and chanced a glance at Lauren. Suddenly, flying in a small commuter plane to a private island in the South Pacific didn't seem like her ideal vacation destination. What the hell had she been thinking?

Sitting poolside at a Sandals resort with a menagerie of cabana boys catering to her every sinful need. Yes. Flying to the 'O Spa' on a Cessna 172 Skyhawk with an engine the size of her old Singer sewing machine. No.

With a nod toward the cockpit, Lauren added in a hushed tone—well, as hushed as she could be and still be heard over the ungodly clatter of the engine, "And we're doing it for her."

Oh, yeah, now Danielle remembered. One last 'girls only vacation' at the luxurious singles spa—a magical spa where fantasies were known to come true—before Abby Benton got engaged. A vacation that, if they were all lucky, they'd walk away from with their deepest desires fulfilled. And maybe, just maybe, Abby would see that her deepest desire wasn't to marry Artie Drummond. Too bad everyone knew it but her.

As for Danielle, well, she just wanted to get laid. Plain and simple. Danielle glanced at the brochure in Lauren's hand and read the boldface inscription: *The 'O Spa', Oasis of Pleasure.*

She really hoped that 'O' stood for orgasm instead of oasis. Because her deepest desire was to find a man who knew how to take charge of her pleasures and give her exactly what she wanted.

A shiver of desire pulsed through her body, and the convulsions in her pussy reminded her exactly how long it had been since she'd felt a man between her legs. Then again, that shiver could have more to do with the way the plane cut through the turbulence like an injured eagle and less to do with wanting to play out her secret fetishes.

From the front seat, Abby twisted around and smiled at them both. After seeing the relaxed look on her friend's face,



Danielle gathered her bravado and, for Abby's sake, presented an outwardly calm demeanor. Danielle was, after all, the one who had convinced the girls to shut down their interior design boutique for two weeks and take off to the exclusive resort smack-dab in the middle of the Pacific. To a place where *real* planes didn't even fly.

She resisted the urge to slap her forehead. Obviously it would require her to yank her fingers off the seat, and that she wasn't about to do. From where she sat in the cockpit, Abby's face lit with euphoria as she angled her head to glance out the pilot's window. Even facing an impending fiery death, Danielle smiled as she watched her friend's blue eyes glow with excitement.

Everyone knew Abby's soon-to-be-fiancé was all wrong for her. Okay, not exactly everyone. Abby truly believed her deepest desire was to marry Artie, a man who fit right into her 'life's plan'. College, career, a husband by the time she was thirty, followed by a nice little house in suburbia. But seriously, how could Danielle, or even Lauren, just come right out and tell her they thought her boyfriend was a reserved, emotionally distant workaholic and she deserved someone who appreciated her? Someone who wasn't afraid to show his passion, despite Abby's belief that no such man existed.

With any luck during their vacation, Abby would let her hair down, get seduced by their exotic location and forget she was a good girl with a mapped-out future. Then maybe she'd indulge in a wild, no-holds-barred affair with a man who wasn't afraid to unleash his passion, and show her that Arctic Artie—as Danielle like to call him—was far from husband material.

A sudden gust of wind caused the plane to seesaw, gaining her focus. Danielle cringed and dug her fingernails in deeper. Drawing on her yoga relaxation techniques, she breathed deeply, in through the nose, out through the mouth.

Trying desperately to get her mind off the shaky landing, she took a moment to think more about the exclusive resort and the legend surrounding it. Rumor had it that the owner's private spring water held magical healing powers, and when ingested this 'magic elixir' had the ability to help you discover and fulfill your deepest, most coveted desires.

Naturally Danielle planned on supersizing her drink. And then maybe her most secret desires would finally come true and she'd find herself a man who would introduce her to a world of pleasure, pleasure that she knew existed for some women but that she had yet to experience. Lord knew the men she'd dated thought a little role-playing meant she'd pretend to be a waitress and serve them breakfast in bed while they lay there and basked in the afterglow of sex. Too bad none of them had ever given her anything to bask about.

Bemoan another failed attempt. Uh-huh. Bask in the afterglow. Uh-uh.

She glanced at the brochure again and read the small print at the bottom of the page. *Where all your desires will be fulfilled...* Although she'd heard all about the magic elixir from friends who'd vacationed at the spa, the pamphlet made no mention of it. Truthfully, Danielle didn't put much faith in the legend, but what the hell, it'd be fun to give it a whirl just in case...

The tires hit the runway and pulled her thoughts to the present. When the movement jolted her forward, she gave a silent prayer. As she fumbled the words, she mentally kicked herself, wishing she'd paid more attention in catechism class.

Shit, she really was going to go to hell.

Lauren leaned into her. "Open your eyes. We're here and we're safe."

It suddenly occurred to Danielle that they'd have to ride the old jalopy back to civilization in two weeks. Maybe she'd

rethink her deepest desire and pray for a pair of big-ass wings instead.

Nah, she really wanted a good fuck from a man who wasn't afraid of a little bondage play and could satisfy her sexually.

As the plane slowed, her stomach fell back into place. She opened her eyes, gave the cushiony seat a break from her death grip and glanced out her window. Off in the distance she could see a red turret peeking out from the treetops. Strategically located deep in the forest, the extravagant resort was mostly hidden by palm trees, foliage and lush vegetation. Higher on the hilly mountaintop she spotted a waterfall. Ahh, that had to be the Pleasure Pool, as it was called in the brochure. A natural lagoon with an emerald green pool known to promote fertility and social delights, and attract love. She took a moment to wonder what kind of pleasure—or rather mischief—they could find there.

Danielle craned her neck to look out Lauren's side of the plane and was presented with an amazing view of a coconut grove. A brilliant blue, green and yellow parrot flew by, squawking loudly as it foraged for food.

"Wow," Danielle said, her head twisting from side to side as she tried to take it all in. "It's surreal." The place was absolutely gorgeous. An oasis, really. Just like the brochure promised. Maybe the flight from hell had been worth it, after all.

"It's amazing," Lauren agreed, dark brown eyes bright with pleasure.

After the plane came to a full stop, Shana, their pilot, escorted them off. Following her friends, Danielle stepped onto the small, makeshift runway and inhaled the fresh ocean air. She stretched out her fatigued limbs and stifled a yawn. Her body relaxed as the fragrant scent from the indigenous flowers curled through her blood and soothed her ragged

nerves. Her gaze panned the vast landscape, taking in its majestic beauty and the sparkling Pacific Ocean.

Moisture beaded on her forehead as the blazing November sun beat down on them. Time to shed her winter wear.

The tropical rays immediately warmed her flesh, reminding her that with her pale complexion and fair skin she needed to play it careful and apply extra sunscreen. Either that or she'd burn to a crisp.

Turning her face to the sun to let it melt away her tension, she shrugged off her jacket and wrapped it around her waist. Gathering her long strawberry blond hair, she tied it into a ponytail as she continued to savor the view. Heck, they were a far cry from Chicago's snowy concrete jungle, that's for sure.

"Welcome to the O Spa."

The male voice came from behind her. Damn, she hadn't even heard anyone creep up on them. Danielle spun around and came face-to-face with an elderly gentleman. Dressed in an ankle-length white cotton robe tied with a red sash decorated with intricate symbols, he took a moment to look each girl in the eye. As he studied them, a smile touched his lips and his head nodded slowly, knowingly. There was an energy about him that rushed through her bloodstream and gave her a second wind.

From the description she'd been given by her friends who'd recently vacationed on the island, she presumed the man standing before them was the resort's proprietor. She took a moment to study him, surprised and delighted that the owner of the spa had come to greet them personally. Not much taller than her five foot six inches, he had an intuitive intelligence about him that made him seem larger than life. He sort of reminded her of her own grandfather, minus the white goatee and bald head. His pleasant, amicable smile immediately put her at ease.

After a round of introductions and handshakes, the owner, Mr. Malik, pressed his palms together in front of his chest and questioned in a soft voice, "I take it your flight was enjoyable?"

Not wanting to be rude, Danielle said, "Yes." Her friends nodded in agreement. Mr. Malik narrowed his eyes and cocked his head, giving her the distinct impression that he could read her every thought and knew she'd just told him a bold faced-lie. Then again, perhaps her green skin had given it away.

The look in his eyes compelled her to tell the truth. She kicked at an imaginary rock, the same way she had back in grade school when Mrs. Beeswanger caught her lying about her involvement in the locker room spray-a-thon. "Well, actually, I guess it was rather rough."

He smiled at her as though she'd just passed his test. "Then you must choose what to say, when to say it and how to say it, my child. There is no ambiguity in the truth."

*Alrighty then...*

She was pretty certain he'd just offered her words of wisdom. Maybe one day they'd make sense. But today wasn't that day, not unless he cared to elaborate.

Mr. Malik turned around and stepped onto a stone walkway. "Come this way." Another day it was, then, Danielle mused. They grabbed their luggage from the plane and followed him along the path leading to the resort. Abby stepped up beside her.

"I have to hand it to you, Danielle. I was a little skeptical when you suggested this singles resort in the middle of nowhere, but now that we're here..." Abby glanced around, her short honey blond hair catching the sun's rays. Danielle followed her gaze, her eyes coming to rest on a beautiful pond full of brightly colored fish. "Honestly, after having to fill out

all those personal forms, I wasn't sure what to expect," Abby added.

Danielle leaned in and whispered, "Yeah, I felt like I was retaking my SATs except this time instead of calculating the time it would take for train A to meet train B, I had to say what color panties I'd be wearing for the journey."

Abby grinned, her blue eyes glistening. "It wasn't that bad. Close, but not quite..." Her voice fell off when Mr. Malik turned to face them. He removed three key cards from his pocket.

"Ladies, your cabanas are right through this pathway, each overlooking the ocean, as you requested. Please take your time to look around and familiarize yourself with the facility. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to send for me. I am here to ensure you have a fun-filled vacation." His voice was low, almost hypnotic. After a moment of silence, he pressed his palms together, a movement Danielle guessed was habitual for him, and added, "I would like to invite you all to be my personal guests for dinner."

Danielle smiled, wondering whether he'd offer them the island's so-called magic elixir while they indulged in the local cuisine. They all accepted their keys and agreed to meet Mr. Malik at the restaurant at seven p.m. sharp. Just enough time for her to take a short nap and shower. As they separated and made their way to their private cabanas to unpack and relax, it occurred to Danielle as she walked the tree-fringed footpath that she'd yet to see another person on the property. She knew the resort was elite and expensive, but heck, she sure hoped there were other guests—of the male persuasion, to be precise.

A short while later, Danielle found herself all alone, standing inside her gorgeous, spacious cabana. She spun around, cataloging the contents of her room, her designer's eye taking in the earthy colors, the wicker furniture and the

beachy décor. Aromatherapy candles and plant oils were placed throughout the room. Fortunately, through her numerous design courses, Danielle was educated in the benefits of fragrances and the way they affected the body, mind and soul. She inhaled the scent of the eucalyptus and peppermint candle, letting the fresh aroma rejuvenate her body. Feeling revived and invigorated, she glanced out her window, taking pleasure in her own personal view of the pristine white sand and warm Pacific waters.

*Paradise...*

A tingle rushed down her spine and she felt giddy with the anticipation of things to come. With this perfect seaside location, she could forgo clothes and venture out after dark for a decadent moonlit dip.

As another parrot flew by her window, something warm and wonderful whipped through her body. It occurred to her just how powerful, how magical, this exclusive vacation island felt. With its private beach coves, gentle lapping waves, warm pools, and exotic cabanas it was the perfect seaside escape. She'd have to remember to thank her friends for turning her on to the place, a place where inhibitions would be shed under the starry nights.

After years of failed relationships and bedroom disappointments, Danielle knew she deserved a vacation where she could just let go. A vacation where anything could happen and fantasies were known to come true.

Unlike Abby, she was never really the good girl, and never liked to keep a guy around for too long. Why would she? Why keep a guy around only to have him bolt once he was sexually satisfied, with no regard for her pleasure? Truthfully, she was hurt by how many times she'd found herself alone.

Danielle certainly wasn't here looking for love. She was merely looking for a once-in-a-lifetime fantasy—a wild, scandalous affair that would fulfill her secret desires. Then she'd

return to Chicago, to men who knew nothing about her wants and needs.

As her gaze scanned the beach vista a second time, delight bubbled up inside her, but it wasn't the view that brought on the wave of joy, it was the tall, shirtless, hard-bodied male walking along the shoreline that set her pulse racing, not to mention her libido.

Dayum, he was yummy!

Beginning with his mussed, windblown black hair, her eyes traveled down his long torso toward his finely toned body parts and came to rest on his knee-length swimsuit. Even from a distance she could see his hard pecs, hard abs, and even harder leg muscles. For a brief moment she wondered what they'd feel like wrapped around her.

Arms folded, she leaned against her doorjamb, her body registering every delicious inch of the stranger who piqued her interest. And by the looks of things, he had a lot of inches to keep her interest piqued.

His bronzed skin glistened with perspiration as he made his way down toward the water. She noted that his walk seemed rather rigid, stiff. He favored his right leg as if it caused him great pain to move.

When Mr. Hardbody reached the water's edge he stopped and spread his feet to shoulder width. He crossed his hands behind his back, palms facing out. Since Danielle's uncle was a military man, she'd recognize that at-ease stance anywhere.

She watched him a while longer, studying his body language. It occurred to her that he looked like he should be addressing the troops, not staring out over a sunlit ocean. But, hey, even soldiers needed vacations, too, right?

Lucky for her.

Without warning he turned around. As though he felt her eyes on him, his gaze strayed toward her cabana, toward her. When their eyes met and locked, she faltered backwards,



jolted by the ribbons of need rushing through her veins. Heat bombarded her body and her skin moistened right down to the tips of her toes, but she knew it had nothing to do with the tropical sun.

What was it about him that made her thighs tingle even as he stood thirty feet away? As lust exploded inside her, her thoughts careened off track. Her lascivious mind took her in an erotic direction.

She closed her eyes, imagining what it would be like if she offered herself to a trained soldier, a guy who seemed worlds away from the men in her social circle. Judging by his commanding presence, his disciplined body language and his piercing gaze, she'd hazard a guess that he'd be more than capable, and more than willing, to play out all her secret fetishes with her. Warmth flooded her pussy and dampened her panties as she visualized herself bound to his bed, restrained and subdued while he disciplined her body in the most delicious, most scandalous ways.

Truthfully, it amazed her that one captivating look from a stranger had her hormones squawking louder than the native wildlife.

Danielle drew in air, determined to make every moment of this vacation count. She decided to forgo a nap, slip into her bikini and head out to meet the locals, or rather, that tall, brooding, mysterious man lingering at the water's edge. When she opened her eyes again, he was gone. Gone! Vanished. AWOL. MIA.

She blinked and glanced up and down the beach for Mr. Hardbody, but dammit, he was nowhere to be found. She suddenly wondered whether she'd imagined him. Had this magical island caused her salacious mind to conjure up the perfect fantasy man for her?

Either way, she needed a swim to cool herself down before her body spontaneously combusted. She peeled off her

clothes, pulled on her new itchy-bitsy peach bikini, and strolled lazily to the shore, squishing the warm white sand between her toes along the way. She spent a few moments walking the beach line, absorbing the sun's warmth. Stopping to stare out over the ocean, she gave a little heavenly sigh and noted that even though she'd been out on the beach for only a few minutes, her pale skin had already begun to burn.

She planted her hands on her hips, and her gaze skimmed the aquamarine water as she tested the temperature with the tip of her big toe. It was actually warm, far different from the cool lake waters she was used to. With these tepid temperatures, there was no need to psych herself up to jump in.

Feeling adventurous and bold, Danielle rushed forward and waded out until she was submerged up to her neck. The water felt glorious against her scorching skin and was so crystal clear, she could see right down to the tips of her toes.

At the same time, she saw something swim by those toes. Holy hell, what was that? That same something brushed against her leg. Oh, damn. Her pulse skyrocketed. She opened her mouth to scream, but no words formed. Arms and legs flailing, she began to tread water. What had she been thinking, venturing into unknown waters by herself? Lord only knew what kind of deadly sea creatures swam in the Pacific Ocean. Heck, she might be a streetwise city girl, but that certainly wasn't helping her in this situation. She was completely out of her element here. She should have at least invited Abby to join her since her friend had spent her college days teaching water aerobics at their local health club.

She decided to change tactics and stilled her movements. Steeling herself, she scanned the ocean floor for whatever was down there, waiting for it to pounce. After a good thirty seconds, her racing heart began to slow.

Maybe it had swum away.

Taking her by surprise, that same *something* brushed against her thigh and slipped between her open legs.

“Jesus,” she cried out as she lost her footing. “What the fu—” Her words came out garbled, drowned in a mouthful of water as she sank to the sandy bottom. Body now completely submerged, she opened her eyes and came face to face with a snake.

A. Great. Big. Frigging. Snake. An anaconda, really.

And if there was one thing she hated more than flying... Sputtering and gasping for air, she tried to regain her footing as the reptile swam closer.

Something tugged her arm. A moment later she found herself upright, staring into the most gorgeous pair of baby blues she'd ever had the pleasure of setting eyes on.

“I've got you.”

Oh, God. It was him. Mr. Hardbody. In the flesh.

“I—” She suddenly remembered the anaconda. Her gaze flew to the water as she practically crawled into his arms. “We need to get out of here before we're bitten.”

“They rarely bite.”

“Rarely' being the operative word here,” she said, snuggling against him while her body quivered all over. Strong arms slipped around her waist and lifted her clear out of the water.

“Better?” His face was expressionless and she couldn't tell whether he was amused or annoyed with her.

“I will be once we get the hell out of the ocean.”

With long, strides he carried her to the shore, except he didn't stop there. With an air of command about him, he took control of the situation and continued right on up the beach toward her cabana.

“It was an anaconda,” she whispered, eyes blinking away the salty water. “It had to be at least ten feet long.”

“It was a banded sea snake.”

“Did you see it?”

“I saw it.”

“It was so big.”

“It was two feet, tops.”

“I don’t know about that,” she blurted out. “It swam between my thighs, and I think I’d know the difference between two feet and ten feet between my legs.”

Mr. Hardbody cleared his throat and said, “I would think so.” When she heard the inflection in his tone, she tipped her head to look into his eyes.

*Real smooth, Danielle. Real smooth.*

Just then she began coughing, the last of the water leaving her lungs. When his forward motion stopped, she angled her head to see him. Protective blue eyes looked down at her with genuine concern.

“Are you okay?” His rich, sensual baritone aroused all her senses and did the most amazing things to her nerve endings.

Was this guy for real? She resisted the urge to pinch herself to see if she was dreaming. Instead, she pinched him. Right on the nipple. It hardened.

*Okeydokey then...*

“I’m okay,” she squeaked out, pressing against him, loving how good it felt to be in his arms and thinking about how much better this gorgeous hunk of man would feel between her legs.

His striated muscles bunched and his brow furrowed as he glanced down at his reddening nipple, but he didn’t question her action. He just shifted her in his arms and trekked onward. Danielle’s body continued to quiver, but for entirely different reasons now.

As she melted into him, her flesh soaked in his warmth. She inhaled his fresh scent. He smelled like sun, sand, ocean...*and man.*

She took that moment to peruse the Greek god who had

appeared out of nowhere and come to her rescue. His short hair was damp and slicked back, his face was tanned, cleanly shaven. Water clung to his dark lashes and dripped from his even darker hair. Danielle moistened her already wet lips and bit back a moan of pleasure as she continued her leisurely inspection.

His hand slid closer to her ass, repositioning her in his oh-so-capable arms. As his fingers neared the swell of her backside, heat prowled through her.

Packaged against his rock-hard body as she was, it was easy to tell he kept himself fit and finely tuned. She had to admit that she liked a man who took good care of himself.

His brow was furrowed and his gorgeous lips were compressed, set in a grim line. Did the man ever smile? She guessed him to be in his late twenties or early thirties, which was far too young to be jaded.

Although she took him for a well-disciplined military man, she sensed a darker side to him. Underneath that cool exterior, he seemed restless, troubled somehow. Before she could stop it, a strange gurgle crawled out of her throat and she burped.

“Sure you’re okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, just waterlogged.” Nothing a little mouth-to-mouth couldn’t fix, she mused.

With his lips positioned close to her ear, he said, “I could call for the doctor.”

She had a better idea, maybe they could *play* doctor. “No, I’m fine, really.”

Alpha that he was, he continued to take charge of the situation and carried her through the door of her cabana. He glanced around and then deposited her in a wicker chair. Strange how she felt absurdly safe in his arms. Back in Chicago she wouldn’t dream of letting a stranger into her place, no matter how much he resembled a Greek god. But

there was something about this man. Something trustworthy and fiercely protective that put her at ease.

As he inched back, his gaze left her face and skated over her barely clad body. She watched his nostrils flare as his eyes roamed over her mouth, neck, and chest, and lower. Her nipples swelled under his probing gaze. Dayum...the guy was blatantly checking her out.

“You’re burnt.” Or not.

She threw her arms up in the air and told him, “I was cursed with strawberry blond hair and delicate skin.”

His jaw muscle twitched. “Not cursed.”

Danielle wasn’t sure whether he meant it as a compliment or not but decided to take it as one just the same. She held her hand out, realizing she didn’t even know her rescuer’s name. “I’m Danielle Carrigan. It’s nice to meet you, Mr...” She caught herself before she added “Hardbody.”

He squared his broad shoulders, nodded his head in acknowledgment and met her handshake. “Ethan Sharpe.”

Oh, he of so few words.

She motioned for him to sit. He didn’t.

Once again his eyes narrowed on her skin and she could feel her flesh tighten and tingle although she wasn’t sure if it was from his gaze or the impending sun blisters.

“You need after-burn lotion.” Before she could tell him that she hadn’t brought any, he disappeared into her bathroom and came out with a bottle of green aloe vera gel. Now, how did he know that was there?

He flipped open the cap. “A bottle in every cabana,” he said as though reading her mind. She reached for the bottle, but he ignored her. Clearly used to taking charge, he leaned forward, poured a generous amount onto the front of her arms and rubbed it in with the utmost care. She let out a sigh as he tended to every inch of her exposed skin.

Oh how she loved his attention to detail.

The cool gel felt heavenly against her heated flesh, but not nearly as heavenly as his calloused hands felt. As he rubbed she noticed that his palms were rough around the edges, just like him. Unrefined. Rugged. Bold.

*Scrumptious.*

She shivered under his invasive touch, enjoying his take charge attitude. As he worked the gel in, ripples of sensual pleasure danced over her skin and brought on a quiver. She wondered if he felt her body's reactions. She bit back a heated moan as desire twisted her insides.

As she reveled in the feel of his hands on her, her head fell forward. She worked to keep her passion-rattled brain focused on conversation before she ripped off his swimming trunks and forced him to have sex with her. Wild, crazy, earth-shattering monkey sex, that is.

Her gaze roamed to his hard abs and lower, lingering at the juncture between his legs.

Wait...was that what she thought it was? Her pulse raced with pleasure. Okay, so maybe she wouldn't have to *force* him, exactly.

He walked behind her, moving with confidence and self assurance. She had to admit, there was nothing sexier than a guy who knew how to take charge.

When his hands touched her back, her body started to tremble almost uncontrollably. Every nerve ending came alive. He began rubbing the gel onto the backs of her shoulders, slowly, methodically. As his thumbs made small circles, her mind took her on an erotic adventure, imagining him stroking another sensitive body part in just such a seductive manner.

As her hair began to dry, it fell into her eyes. Danielle blew a wispy bang off her forehead and shook her head to uncloud it of its delicious meanderings. She cleared her throat, curious about her mysterious rescuer, curious to know

what brought him to the exotic island.

“So, tell me, Ethan, what brings you here?” Her voice came out raspy, edgy.

His sweet-scented breath whispered across her neck and made her quake. “My job.” Once her back was sufficiently coated, he circled her again, coming to rest in front of her, giving her a perfect, unobstructed view of his crotch. *Nice...*

After a good hard look, she glanced upward.

“Military?” she asked. She knew the spa catered to singles looking for escapism from the everyday, as well as those seeking pleasure.

She wondered which one had brought him here.

Surprise registered on his face, and then he nodded. He snapped the bottle closed. “That should keep the blisters at bay.”

With her mind still contemplating that delicious bulge in his swim trunks, she blurted out, “You sure know a lot about burns.”

“I’ve spent a lot of time in the desert.”

She examined his bronzed skin, wondering whether his tan had come from his time on the island or his time on active duty. “Have you been here long?”

His gaze shifted, camouflaging his emotions. “Long enough.” It occurred to her how little he seemed to like talking about himself.

She clicked her lips. “You’re a real talker, aren’t you? I guess you’re a man of action and not words.” Exactly the kind of guy she was looking for.

That brought a smile to his face. “Guess so,” he murmured.

She rolled her aloe-vera-covered shoulders. “Then again, I guess I make up for both of us.”

“Guess so,” he said again, amusement pulling at the



corners of his mouth. His gorgeous blue eyes narrowed. "What brings you here?"

"My friends and I needed a little vacation."

He cocked his head and glanced around her cabana. "Friends?"

"Lauren and Abby. They have their own cabanas," she added. "We're here for a girls only vacation where all your deepest desires are fulfilled, just like the brochure promised."

He made a noise low in his throat. "And I suppose you've heard about the magic elixir."

She nodded. "Have you tried it?"

"No."

She leaned forward. "Is it true? Does it work?"

Skepticism flashed in his expression. "Some would think so."

"Don't you want to know for sure?"

A storm brewed in his eyes and he gave a quick side-to-side shake of his head. Once again he turned the conversation away from himself and back to her. "So, tell me, what desires are you looking to have fulfilled?" He took a moment to peruse her, his dark gaze caressing her barely clad body with pleasure. "You look like a girl who has everything she's ever wanted."

She moistened her parched lips and shifted restlessly in her chair. If only she had the nerve to tell him the truth. "Not everything," she murmured. When she glanced up at him, she noted that his gaze was locked on her mouth. His tongue snaked out and made a slow pass over his bottom lip. The hungry look in his eyes sent a plethora of sensations rippling through her.

She swallowed. *Dayum...*

Something in her gut told her this take-charge soldier, this skilled warrior, a man who would serve and protect to the

bitter end, could give her everything she needed, everything she craved.

Probing for information, she asked, "I'm sure you must have secret desires you'd like to have fulfilled."

Naturally, he redirected the conversation.

"Where are you from?"

"Chicago. You?"

She took in the tension in his posture. "All over. What do you do in Chicago, Danielle?"

"I'm an interior designer. My friends and I own our own shop."

One brow rose. "Impressive." He toyed with the bottle of after-burn lotion, tossing it between his hands. Wow, he had big, fabulous hands.

*The better to spank her with.*

Her body shivered with longing when she thought about how he could take matters into those large, capable hands. She wondered whether he worked with them. "What do you do in the military?"

His eyes darkened, and after a moment he said, "Commander, weapons expert."

Danielle sensed a "*but*" at the end of that sentence. She paused, giving him a moment to elaborate. He didn't.

In need of a cold drink, she climbed from the chair, but Ethan was standing so close she bumped into him. Her hard nipples scraped across his chest. Ethan's body stiffened, his head lowered and she heard him draw a quick breath. When smoldering blue eyes latched onto hers, sexual energy arced between them. Lust started at her core and traveled onward and outward until coherent speech was nearly impossible.

She saw need, desire and turbulence in his eyes, but before either of them could act on it he stepped back and said, "My fault. I should be going. I have an appointment."

Danielle reined in her lust. "I guess I should be getting

ready anyway. I have to unpack and get showered before dinner. Mr. Malik invited my friends and me to eat with him this evening. Maybe I'll catch up with you later."

And maybe he could tie her up and fuck her silly, too.

Ethan's mood changed so fast, it caught her off guard. His jaw clenched. Anger sparked in his blue eyes. "I was invited to join him as well, but I hadn't planned on attending." When she gave him a questioning glance, he continued. "You see, Malik and I don't always see eye to eye." He raised his hand above his head. "And believe me, I've had it up to here with all his cryptic words." Danielle heard the edge of bitterness in his tone. "So help me, if he says one more thing..." His voice trailed off.

Geez, provoke the guy and you couldn't shut him up. Who knew?

Ethan moved toward the door, and she could tell he was trying not to favor his right leg. "I know, but I truly believe he means well," Danielle said. "And since you're the first person I met since I arrived, I'd love it if you came." The truth was, she liked being around him and wasn't quite ready for him to walk away. She knew she'd only just met him, but never had a man aroused her so quickly, or had her mind spinning with such wild, erotic scenarios. There was an undeniable spark between them that she'd love to explore further.

When he gave her a noncommittal shrug, she tried to lighten the mood. "Plus I want to make it up to you for rescuing me. You're my hero." She suddenly had a lightbulb moment, a very seductive, very scandalous lightbulb moment. "Hey, I wonder what the island customs are. Maybe I owe you my life now that you saved mine. Maybe I'll have to be your servant."

That caught his attention. Standing in the doorway, he spun back around to face her, his blue eyes brimming with

intrigue. Sculpted muscles bunched as he pushed his hair back. In a low, controlled voice he said, "Servant, huh?"

Excited at the prospect, she felt heat coil in her belly. "Yeah, and maybe I'd have to call you 'master,'" she rushed out, shocking herself with her boldness.

His palms flattened on either side of the doorjamb, giving her an erotic view of his gorgeous, naked chest. His eyebrows shot up. "You think?"

She nodded and continued to play, knowing she'd never before had the courage to speak her fantasies to any man. There really was something magical about this island that brought out the vixen in her. "And if I was naughty you'd have to—"

"Discipline you." He cocked his head, the challenging look in his eyes daring her to deny that she wanted him to do just that.

Danielle gulped. Her blood pressure soared. Primal need bombarded her body. Oh. Good. God. He was so very good at reading her.

Deep in her gut she just knew her man of action and few words would have no problem disciplining her. Her gaze moved to his large hands, hands that were more than capable of giving her a good spanking if she needed it.

And dammit, she was pretty sure she needed it.

**S**HOULDERS SQUARED AND body stiff from pain, Ethan circled Danielle's cabana having promised her that he'd think about joining her at the owner's table for dinner. He lied. He had no intentions of dining with Malik and conceded only because he had to get out of her quarters. Fast.

Once he was certain he was completely out of sight, he drew a sharp breath and collapsed against the exterior wall. Grimacing, he shifted his full body weight to his left foot. Fuck, even after all this time, his right leg still hurt like a son of a bitch.

He knew if he'd stayed inside her cabana for one more second, his goddamned leg would have given out on him and he'd have ended up flat out on her floor.

*Some hero he was.*

Carrying her up the beach had taken its toll on him—in more ways than one—and he needed to take the edge off fast. Nothing short of painkillers would help at this point. With pain blurring his thoughts, he glanced around, strategizing his next move, calculating the quickest route back to his cabana.

His head began throbbing, his joints ached already. Ethan drew on every ounce of strength he possessed, pushed off the cabana wall and started down the walkway. As he cut through the footpath, his mind revisited their playful conversation, recalling her suggestive words, and relishing the way her soft body had felt cushioned in his arms, her heat curling around him, arousing his primal needs.

He growled low in his throat, but this growl was from sexual frustration, not pain. His cock hardened inside his swim trunks, and his blood flowed hot and heavy through his veins, a reminder that it had been a hell of a long time since he'd held a woman next to him, since he'd smelled her enticing feminine scent.

From her gorgeous curvy body to her strawberry blond hair and sexy, playful demeanor, Danielle was the epitome of sweet perfection. Her angelic yet seductive voice had quickly pulled him under into a current of need and desire.

He'd never met a more exquisite woman, really. Her creamy, flawless skin and fascinating green eyes had mesmerized him. And that lush ass. Jesus, the woman had an ass that erotic dreams were made of. He'd like nothing better than to take a bite and gobble her up like the big bad wolf. Hunger clawed at his insides, urging him to turn back around, go inside and do just that.

There was no denying the attraction between them. He saw it in her eyes, felt the way her gaze devoured him with sexual need. She in turn aroused him to the point of distraction, making him temporarily forget he wasn't the strong, commanding officer he used to be.

Ethan took a moment to indulge his wayward thoughts, imagining what it would be like to explore the sparks between them, to taste those gorgeous plump lips of hers while he sank into her damp heat and lost himself in her body for the remainder of the evening. Moisture collected on his

flesh and his cock grew another inch. Christ, he'd only just met her, but it had been a long time since he'd wanted to fuck anyone the way he wanted to fuck her.

He was intelligent enough to know that her naughty, suggestive words insinuated that she too wanted to indulge in a few sex games with him. He also felt the way she trembled beneath his touch, and the way her hard nipples pressed against his chest, enticing him to strip her bare and have his wicked way with her.

A year ago he'd have jumped at the chance. He'd have gone all night long, giving her exactly what she wanted. And he was pretty sure he knew what she wanted. He saw the fire in her eyes when she glanced at his hands, and when he mentioned *discipline*, her entire body quaked with raw hunger.

Damn, that excited him.

Sure, when she first mentioned a little role-playing, the idea intrigued him, but then reality hit him harder than a predawn sneak attack.

Who was he kidding? He couldn't give her what she desired even if he wanted to. No doubt his fucked-up leg would fail on him and he'd end up making a total ass of himself. Either that or she'd take one look at his scarred, mangled thigh and retreat. The last thing he wanted was to see pity in her eyes. He'd had enough of that. His stomach lurched just thinking about it.

Drawing a centering breath, Ethan banked his desires and trekked forward, working to get the sexy vixen out of his head. Because a bold, feisty woman like Danielle needed a real man, a whole man, a man in control of himself and in control of his world. A man who could give her what she needed, all night long.

What she didn't need was a shot-up soldier who could barely tie his own shoes, for Christ's sake. Frowning intently, he felt a burst of anger rush through him and worked to

control it. He moved forward, each painful step reminding him he'd never be that man again. As he stepped into the clearing, he spotted Malik sitting on the steps of his temple, deep in meditation, the scent of incense filling the air.

Ethan moved quietly, careful not to disturb him. The reasons for his actions were twofold: one, he had great respect for this man's or any man's need for privacy, and two, he wanted to make it to his cabana undetected, knowing that any exchange between them would be less than pleasant.

"Hello, my child." Ethan bit back a curse.

He stilled, balancing himself on both legs despite the pain. Malik rose and moved toward him. Dressed in his meditation robe, he folded his hands in front of his chest and nodded. His warm, amicable smile did little to soothe Ethan's ragged nerves or his aching muscles.

"I haven't seen you in days, Ethan."

Annoyance palpable, Ethan indulged him for a moment. He jerked his chin to the right, toward the ocean. "Been busy." He'd been swimming in the Pacific, attempting to strengthen his leg, but didn't bother to elaborate.

"Is your therapy going well?" Malik asked.

Ethan scowled. He was sick and tired of their therapy. He wanted to go back to civilization, back to...

Ah, hell, now that his career in the military was over, all he had to look forward to was early retirement. He scoffed and shook his head. Retirement at thirty. That was a first. Ethan had spent the first eighteen years of his life dreaming about serving his government and the last twelve years living that dream, only to be written off. Those fucking insurgents might as well have taken his life when they shot up his leg. Ethan fisted his hands, his anger exploding inside him like shrapnel.

Malik held his hands out in front of him, palming an imaginary bubble around Ethan. He gave a slow side-to-side



shake of his head. “You still hold so much anger, Ethan. You need to release your destructive emotions.”

Ethan clenched his jaw until the muscles ached. “I’m not angry,” he shot back. Okay, so maybe he was angry. Who could blame him? His goddamned government had sent him to this island in the middle of Buttfuck nowhere to *heal*.

In other words, they wrote him off.

He knew the military mantra when he signed on—if he wasn’t deployable, he wasn’t employable. So what the fuck was he supposed to do with his life now? He’d grown up in a military family, and even though he’d been disgruntled lately, disgusted and completely fed up with all the bureaucratic bullshit that went along with the job, it was his way of life. It was all he knew.

“Why don’t you sign my damn release papers and let me get back to civilization?”

“Ahh, but you’re not ready.”

“I’ve been here for two months. I’ve tried all your therapeutic methods. There isn’t anything else you can do for me. All I want is to be left alone to heal on my own.” Ethan cursed under his breath, hating that this medicine man had the ability to hold him, along with a dozen or so other injured comrades, until he felt they were healed, inside and out.

Malik stroked his goatee. “There is one more thing I can do for you.”

Ethan straightened to his full six foot three. “Like I told you, I don’t believe in magic water from your private spring.”

Malik bowed his head slowly. “Very well, then, but I planned on serving it at dinner this evening, and it just might be what you need to facilitate your progress.”

When Malik turned to leave, Ethan blew a resigned breath, compartmentalizing his emotions. “Look, if I drink it, can I go home?”

Ethan’s strongest desire was to feel in control again, of his

life and everything around him. And that was never going to happen. Magic elixir or not, nothing would ever give him full use of his leg, and without the use of his leg, he'd never feel in control. And he needed his control. He thrived on it. He was shaped by it.

Malik turned back to face him, and in a soft but commanding voice he said, "Your destiny is in your hands, Ethan."

After a good show of exasperation, Ethan drew a breath and let it out slowly. "Just tell me, if I drink it, can I go home?"

"It's in your hands, Ethan," he repeated. With that, he walked away and returned to his temple, to his meditation position.

Jesus, if he kept talking in riddles, the only thing that was going to be in Ethan's hands was Malik's neck.