



*Aloha,
Cowboy*

ANNIE RAINS

Lawson Phillips placed his bare feet down on the white sandy floor of Hawaii. He'd ditched the boots, but not the cowboy hat. Yeah, maybe he was slightly out of place here, but he had no doubt he was exactly where he belonged beside Julie Chandler.

"I'm still pinching myself." Julie looked up at him with those large blue eyes, the guardedness gone now. They'd worked past that as a couple. Now time to do this yoga retreat he'd surprised her with for her birthday. The alpha cowboy/Marine in him cringed. It was a knee-jerk reaction. He actually liked the poses now. They were peaceful, and the view when he practiced with Julie . . . stimulating.

As if hearing his thoughts, Julie jabbed a soft fist into his side.

"Ow! What's that for?"

"You know what." She shook her head. "I have no idea what's going through your head right now, but I'm sure it was dirty," she said, laughing, carefree beside him as they walked along the beach just outside their hotel room. The first session of their retreat began tonight. Maybe if he was lucky, he could get his hands on her before then.

"Would it be so bad if I were having dirty thoughts about you?" he asked in a low voice. Wrapping an arm around her narrow shoulders, he caught her gaze as it skirted toward him.

"Actually, I've been meaning to talk to you about . . . well, you know. That."

He lifted a brow. He knew this trip had been a stroke of genius on his part. "Is that right?" he asked in a suggestive tone.

Julie narrowed her eyes. "I'm being serious now. There's something I want to discuss."

Lawson pulled his arm back. Straightened his expression. "Okay. Let's be serious. What do you want to talk about?"

"Well, sex takes a certain amount of mental energy. It's not just physical, you know."

There was a hint of trepidation in her voice as she spoke that made Lawson's blood slow. His feet slowed on the hot sand, too. "Okay."

"And to get the full benefit of this retreat, well, I was thinking that maybe we should . . ."

She bit her lower lip and turned to look out on the vibrant blue water.

His gaze followed. The waves were high this afternoon, surfers riding their crests like cowboys in their own right. It really was a beautiful view, but nowhere near as breathtaking as Julie, in his opinion.

"We should, um . . ."

"Let me help you out. You're thinking we should have a lot more sex on this trip. To really sharpen those mental and physical skills." He was only half teasing.

"I thought you were being serious now," she asked, turning back to him.

"I am. Partly."

Julie stopped walking and faced him.

Reflexively, Lawson wrapped his arms around her waist. He couldn't stop himself from touching this woman. Not even if he wanted to.

"I'm thinking we should stop having sex," she said quickly.

Lawson froze. Then he laughed. "Now you're the jokester. Very funny. We come to a Hawaiian retreat and you want to not have sex."

Her eyebrows lifted over apologetic eyes. There wasn't a trace of amusement lighting up her expression.

"Really?" he asked, heart thudding to bottom of his stomach.

Julie shrugged. "Just for the week. This retreat is the best gift anyone has ever given me. I've always dreamed of working with world renowned yogis. . . I just don't want to be . . ."

distracted. And the whole point of us coming here is to strengthen our relationship. I think communicating without sex would be good for us.”

The sun was suddenly beating hotter on Lawson’s face as his fantasies of this whole vacation slowly slipped away.

“Lawson? Are you going to say anything?”

He blinked and returned his focus on the woman in front of him. She was the woman who’d changed everything for him. She’d turned his world inside out and right side up. He loved her, which meant he was going to agree to whatever she was asking. Of course he was. If there was ever anything she wanted that he had the power to provide, he would.

It was debatable if he had the willpower to be in the same room with her and not touch her, but he’d try.

“Okay,” he consented. Then he ran his hand down her wind-tousled, blonde silk hair. “Is it okay to touch you like this?”

“Definitely.” She beamed up at him.

He leaned in closer. “Am I allowed to kiss you?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Good.” His mouth landed on hers. He could smell the intoxicating scent of coconut suntan oil on her body. *Good grief.* This vacation was going to be a cruel form of torture.

Julie felt like she could breathe deeper here. She sat on her mat next to Lawson for their first class as a couple later that evening. Usually she was the teacher and he was the student, but she was excited for the change. A soft, calming music filled the room. She glanced around at the

other couples of various ages and stages in their relationships. They would all probably be running back to their rooms tonight to rip each other's yoga pants off.

What was I thinking asking Lawson to give up sex this week, she wondered, glancing over at him. He looked good in a pair of fitted sweats. The romantic lighting set a certain mood, and her hormones ablaze.

Get a grip. Monks gave up everything, even talking. Forever. This was just a week. A week that promised to bring her and Lawson even closer if that was possible. Lately, they'd turned to sex every chance they got. Talking was reserved for the phone and their pillows post-sex.

The yoga instructor walked in and took a seat on her folded yoga blanket at the front of the room. She was tall, thin, and appeared to be a native of the island.

"Namaste. All right everyone, let's get started. Turn your backs to your partner and lean against one another. Your spines should be tall, erecting toward the ceiling."

Erecting. Julie's mind hung on that word. Her body reacted to the bulk of Lawson's muscle pressing against her back as they got into the first pose.

"Let's start with some breathing exercises," the instructor said a moment later.

Everyone breathed in unison, in and out. In and out. The focus was supposed to be on the breath, but Julie's mind was zeroed in on Lawson. Maybe it was true, the harder you resisted something, the stronger it persisted. Like when she'd tried to give up her Dr. Pepper addiction. Just telling herself she couldn't have it made her want it more. She suddenly wanted Lawson in the worst kind of way.

"Now lift your arms to shoulder level. One partner's arm should be on top. That partner will lean back, pushing the other forward in a deep stretch. Don't go too far," she encouraged.

“Listen to your partner’s body. When their bodies start to resist, rest there. . . Don’t forget to breathe.”

Julie pushed back on Lawson, her chest open to the ceiling. Then they switched and he pushed her body forward until her nose was nearly touching the floor. She breathed in deeply, forcing away thoughts of making love to Lawson as soon as they were out of this class. She’d asked him to abstain with her for the week and he’d agreed. She’d be mortified to admit that she couldn’t do it now, without even going twenty-four hours.

No way.

An hour later, they rolled up their mats and placed them in the corner of the room. Where she should’ve been relaxed, her body felt agitated. Irritated. The same as she had that week she’d tried to give up Dr. Pepper, and failed.

“Shall we go back to our room?” Lawson asked as they exited.

She shook her head. Being in a private suite with him would only agitate her further. “There’s a hot tub outside. We could sit and look at the stars. Talk. I brought our suits in my bag.”

Lawson set his cowboy hat on his head.

She had to laugh. You could take the cowboy out of Texas, but you couldn’t take the cowboy out of him. Not even on a tropical island.

He reached for her hand to hold, bringing it up to his mouth. His lips brushed against her skin, making her belly quiver. “Whatever you want. This week is about pleasing you.” He winked. “Too bad I can’t please you the way I want to.”

Heat singed through her veins.

Yeah, thanks to her and her genius ideas, that was too bad.

One of Lawson's all-time fantasies was to make love in a hot tub.

Not happening tonight, Cowboy.

Instead, he reached for the complimentary glass of wine he'd picked up at the bar, though he'd prefer a beer, and stepped into the bubbling hot water.

Julie cozied into the crook of his arm and laid her neck back against his shoulder.

"Finding you was the best thing that ever happened to me," she said in a half whisper.

Lawson drew her closer against him. "I thought I found you. In fact, I'm sure of it. And if you'd had your way, we wouldn't be here right now."

"Glad you were persistent." She glanced over and from the corner of his eye he saw her bottom lip fold between her teeth.

"Something on your mind, sweetheart?" He knew her well enough to know her mannerisms. He'd never thought for a second that they needed to fly across the country to draw them closer.

"Nothing." She shook her head.

"Liar. What is it?"

"Just, you know, if you wanted to be persistent again, you could probably get me to agree to things."

"Things?" he asked, not sure he followed at first. Then her gaze flicked from his eyes to his lips. Blood surged to his lower half. He knew that look in her eyes. Without meaning to, a laugh rolled up from his belly. He couldn't help it. The woman changed her mind like she changed clothes. Good thing she was set on him.

Julie rolled her eyes. “Forget I said anything. I take that back. That was a moment of weakness talking.” She started to pull away from him.

He pulled her back, bringing her backside flush against his groin in the water. Her ear was positioned perfectly to his mouth. “I’m very persistent. And persuasive. I don’t want to mess up your ideas for this trip, though. I can also be patient if it means pleasing you.”

She relaxed against him, her neck falling back on his shoulder. “I want you so bad it’s actually distracting me. I won’t be able to focus or learn anything on this trip if you don’t take me upstairs right now and make love to me.”

Ah, hell yeah.

She pulled away and he let her this time. Taking his hand, she started to pull him toward the steps, but he tugged against her.

“Problem.”

She followed his gaze down to his swim shorts. BIG PROBLEM. She’d turned him on and everyone in the near vicinity was going to know it if he left this hot tub right now.

Julie grinned. “I’ll just go grab you a towel. That’s my quick fix. I’ll fix the problem the right way once we’re behind locked doors.”

His problem grew a little larger. “Yes, ma’am.”

The darkness of their hotel suite swallowed them as they peeled each other’s wet suits off.

“I could barely go a day without feeling your body on mine,” Julie said with a gasp as Lawson’s hands trailed up her sides. His mouth dipped to kiss one breast, his tongue flicking against her swollen nipple. “What does that say about me?” she asked.

“That you’re in love. It’s exactly how it should be.” He straightened and pulled her in for a knee-weakening kiss. Their naked bodies melted into one another as Lawson gently guided her to the bed behind her, never breaking away from her mouth. They kissed for what felt like forever. Then he started to trail his kisses down her neck, her shoulder, back to her breasts.

“Those yoga classes were going to get awfully uncomfortable for me,” he groaned. “And for everyone else in the class who was going to have to avoid my hard-on.”

Julie started to laugh at the mental image until tears squeezed from her eyes. “How awful! You must really love me to have agreed to no sex for the week.”

Lawson kissed her forehead. “I love you more than you’ll ever know. But I’ll keep trying to show you just how much, for as long as it takes for you to understand.”

Julie blinked down at his shadowed figure, shivering as he sank even lower on her body. “It could take a while. Maybe forever.”

“Well then, sweetheart,” he growled as he kissed her naval and went lower, “let’s just take it one night at a time.”

Namaste.