

MORE THAN PARADISE

by
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CHAPTER ONE

The babe in the pink dress was making eye contact. She had designs, no question. Ash Evans knew every cue in the book, from the slow, sensual application of lipstick to the legs crossed then uncrossed. The exaggerated pout and the occasional head toss to extend a succulent throat. The hand absently caressing the skin where her neckline plunged. Hair tampering. Tip of the tongue teasing. Finally the hot come-hither look that said, *Buy me a drink*.

It took slightly less than three seconds for Ash to signal the barman and order a repeat of whatever girlie cocktail the hottie was sculling. Although this was an upscale club, she didn't wait for one of the sleek staff to carry the *okay, I'm tempted* offering to the table fifteen feet away. Instead she negotiated her way through a smorgasbord of exposed flesh and set the napkin and brimming martini glass in front of the seductive blonde.

Femmes liked to hunt in pairs, Ash had learned that long ago. This one was on the prowl with spare bait, a fetching Rita Hayworth look-alike, complete with chestnut waves to her shoulders and a slinky retro cocktail dress. Normally Ash would have bought her a drink, too, but she seemed intent on nursing the one she had, the designated driver maybe. All the same, Ash offered to flag down a cocktail waiter right after she'd introduced herself.

The brunette, who had *Trust Fund Baby* stamped on her head and said her name was "Carla spelled Karlah," proceeded to ruin her fifties-goddess impersonation by declaring, "No, it's cool. I'm doing lunch with the folks tomorrow, so, like, seriously...two drinks and I'm totally on notice. I mean, you have *no* idea. Rehab. Both of them."

Her companion added, “Omigod, your mom can smell last week’s cosmos at, like, a thousand paces.” The galpals giggled and the blonde extended her hand daintily to Ash, announcing, “I’m Dani Bush. No relation.”

“Well, that’s encouraging.”

“Sit,” Dani commanded, like Ash was a hunky version of a Chihuahua.

Ash deposited her sipping whiskey and recruited a chair from a neighboring table. As she got comfortable, both women surveyed her with blatant sexual interest. Apparently she could take her pick. This, she had to admit, was a relief. She’d been Stateside for seventy-two hours, a record for the usual lag time between hitting the tarmac and getting laid. She’d been busy and the wait had made her even hornier than her vacation norm. No wonder. She hadn’t so much as smelled a woman she’d want to fuck in three months.

“You’re not from ’round here, are you?” Karlah asked.

Ash checked her out thoroughly. For reasons that baffled her, she often missed the chance to score with an attractive brunette if there was a platinum blonde within fifty feet. But Karlah was very attractive indeed. Her features were more even than Dani’s and she had cheekbones. Everything had been fixed, Ash guessed. The nose, the smile, the chin, and although she was probably under thirty, her serene brow suggested she was already well acquainted with that shit women got injected into their faces.

Not that Ash had any complaints. Every time she returned to civilization she was thankful for well-maintained eye candy. To answer Karlah’s conversation starter, she said, “I live overseas.”

“London, right?” Dani guessed.

“Wrong.”

Dani tilted her head and flicked a shimmering strand away from her cheek. “Hmm. The accent. You’re American but you haven’t lived here for, like, years.”

Ash nodded. “You have a good ear.”

And excellent breasts. Dani was more successful at starving herself than Karlah, but the breasts made up for the bony shoulders, and amazingly they looked like the real thing. Ash was happy about that. Lately she’d encountered more and more of those weirdly round fakes perching like grapefruit on women’s chests. They were never the

same and she got nervous handling them, knowing a bag of evil lay just below the surface.

Dani took another stab at the accent. "Australia?"

"Close. Papua New Guinea. I spend a lot of time with the Aussie expats working over there. Maybe the accent has rubbed off."

"I like it," Karlah noted. "It's hot."

"Totally," Dani agreed, cruising Ash some more. "Papua New Guinea..." She frowned, evidently searching some rarely explored recess of her mind. "Oh, shut up! They've only got, like...headhunters there, don't they?"

"A few. In the highlands. No one goes up there unless they're stupid."

Both women squealed.

"No way! Cannibals?" Karlah confirmed with breathless horror.

Dani planted a small hand where her cleavage intersected. "Omigod, can you imagine?"

"Cannibalism is almost unknown now," Ash said curtly.

She needed to change the conversation. Already, she could feel the beginnings of irritation. Westerners who knew nothing about the region or its complex tribal cultures usually flaunted their ignorance by repeating the most titillating stereotypes. No doubt Dani and Karlah pictured a real-life version of that asinine television show *Survivor*.

Ash didn't kid herself that New Guinea would be transforming itself into a contemporary society any time soon. But as far as cannibalism went, the practice had all but disappeared. The Asmat in West Papua were the most dangerous of the cannibals. In their culture anyone who had never taken a head in battle went to his grave feeling like a sad failure who had betrayed the spirits of his ancestors.

The tribe was rumored to have killed and eaten Michael Rockefeller, the son and heir of Nelson Rockefeller. Back in the sixties, he'd been studying Asmat culture and was in their territory with another anthropologist when their canoe capsized. He vanished, and the ensuing search-and-rescue operation was the biggest the country ever saw.

The official conclusion was that he had drowned and been eaten by crocodiles. Ash had heard a very different tale from an old Asmat guide she hired occasionally. He said a white man had been killed in Otsjanep long ago, in revenge for the murder of the village leaders by the Dutch. Many years later another white man visited and paid an

impressive bounty for three prized skulls. They were the skulls of the only white people ever killed and eaten by the tribe. Ash had always wondered if Michael Rockefeller's was among them.

The rumor had spread and these days tour companies brought thrill-seeking clients into the region and paid the local tribesmen to display their skull collections. Some day, Ash figured a party of Westerners would insult or double-cross their hosts and end up on the dinner table. The Asmat hadn't forgotten their old ways, they had simply found new ones that paid better.

They were not the only cannibals in the area. Ash was certain human flesh was still eaten upstream of Asmat territory by a couple of tribes in the Jayawijaya Mountains. There were some who had still never seen a white person. A few weeks before she'd caught the plane back to modernity, she had been drinking with a Californian tour guide in a pub in Bougainville. The guy had been making a buck hauling groups of flea-brained tourists on rafting trips in the high country, as only a card-carrying lunatic with a death wish would. He and his party got themselves ambushed one day when a group of tribesmen cut down some trees to slow their passage through a neck of water. At first the guide thought the noisy locals just wanted to sell souvenirs to the tourists. Then they started firing arrows.

He'd quit his job after that narrow escape and seemed astonished that his passengers were happily snapping photos the whole time while he was fighting to keep their asses out of the fire, so to speak. Ash felt like saying, *Wake up, pal*. In her experience, most tourists thought everything was part of a show staged expressly for their entertainment. That's why they made such great targets in a place like PNG. They had no idea how to keep a low profile or why they needed to. Wasn't the world one big fun park for the dumb, happy, and privileged?

Those rafters had been dead lucky that the average New Guinea tribesman was a lousy shot and still hadn't progressed far enough from the Stone Age to put feathers on his arrows. That was one reason the Indonesians had been able to annihilate them so successfully since they took over West Papua. So far about thirty percent of the indigenous population had vanished to make way for the likes of Freeport-McMoRan and their "vital projects." Where would the world be without another gold mine?

Ash steered her mind determinedly away from that track. She was here to kick back and have a good time, not guilt-trip herself

into another drunken stupor, thinking about things she had no control over.

“What are you doing over there, anyway?” Dani asked.

“I’m a consultant in local affairs for foreign business interests.”

It sounded better than *I’m a mercenary soldier turned hired gun and chopper pilot, services for sale to the highest bidder. No questions asked. Specialties—drug lords trying to muscle rivals, mining executives scoping out new places to plunder, military goon squads hired by said mining executives as “security,” plus the usual scumbags who show up in Port Moresby looking for a place to hide.* PNG was one of the world’s primo destinations if you were on the run from the law. Or anything else.

“Cool,” both women said.

“So you’re here on vacation?” Dani sipped her cocktail and took a moment to slowly, temptingly lick the excess off her lips.

Ash registered the come-on with a throb between her legs. Automatically she cast a glance around the bar, sizing up the alternatives just in case Dani and Karlah turned out to be nothing but bored housewives taking a walk on the wild side by flirting with a lesbian. The odds of scoring with such women were only slightly better than fifty percent and not worth her time. She was pretty sure Dani was looking for action, but she had been wrong before.

A mature, lushly attractive redhead a few tables away offered up a smile. A brittle blonde at the bar made eye contact. She always got lucky here, Ash reflected. She had no idea why the place was a hang-out for upscale lesbians looking for no-strings sex, but she counted on it whenever she was in Boston. Ash acknowledged each of the women with a warm, flattering sidelong glance. She’d be back here tomorrow, looking for company again. Maybe one of them would show up on the off chance.

Returning her attention to Dani, she said, “I’m in town for family reasons. But that’s not going to take up *all* of my time.”

How long would the dance continue? Ash hoped no one would have to tell her life story. A friend was always a complication, too, maybe more so tonight since both women seemed interested. Ash would happily settle for either. Her mind latched on to that idea and expanded on it. Picturing both her companions naked, she reached for her whiskey and felt her shirt slide across her tightening nipples. She could go there, she reflected—two babes and her horny self. No problem.

She lowered her gaze to the amber-red liquid in her glass and reminded herself that girl-on-girl threesome action only happened in porn movies when actresses got paid, and it was schmucks like her whose money paid them. She had quite a collection of so-called lesbian porn back in Madang. Occasionally, when she left a DVD in the player by accident, she would come home and find her houseboy and cook watching it in bemusement. None of the PNG locals had ever heard of a lesbian, let alone seen two women getting it on in the sack, while wearing white stilettos the whole time, too, of course.

A hand connected possessively with her arm and Dani informed her, “We’re going home soon. Want to come?”

Ash repeated the invitation in her mind and figured she should nail down exactly what was on offer. Women were sometimes just being nice and had visions of serving late-night coffee and talking about politics. Tonight she wasn’t in the mood to be disappointed, so she got right to the point.

“Only if you’re going to get naked with me.”

She said it mildly enough that it could sound like she was kidding. That way things didn’t have to get awkward if Dani had something other than bare skin in mind. But the baby blue eyes flirting with Ash got smoky and Dani lowered her hand from Ash’s arm to her thigh.

“Sure,” she answered the question. “Want to watch?” Her fingers beat a rapid path upward.

For the sake of public decorum Ash arrested their progress just short of her crotch and smothered the groan of desire that tightened her throat. It had been way too long. “That would be a yes.”

Dani and Karlah exchanged knowing looks. Karlah didn’t seem pissed in any way that her friend was scoring and she wasn’t. Ash felt mildly irked by that. Didn’t Karlah find her hot? This adolescent reaction amused her. She wasn’t used to getting the brush-off in any form and it made her want the unimpressed woman.

“Let’s get out of here.” Dani eagerly flagged down their cocktail waiter, who returned a few minutes later with a couple of fur coats and handed the check to Ash.

Once the Amex slip was signed and the women had on their status-symbol pelts, Dani started fumbling around in her oversized purse for the valet pass. While this was going on, Ash was surprised to feel a hand on her butt.

“I hope you have lots of energy,” Karlah murmured hotly in her ear. “We’re both, like...needy.”

Ash’s pulse accelerated. It hadn’t occurred to her that they might all be on the same page in the fantasy department. Now that she thought about it, she could see why these two were hunting together.

“You won’t be disappointed,” she said.

Karlah appraised her thoroughly. “That’s quite a promise.”

“I don’t make any I can’t keep.”

“Well, you just got *very* lucky, Ashley Evans,” she pronounced and wrapped an arm around Dani’s waist.

Both babes offered greedy little smiles.