

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*

Soco
Awakening
VONNA
HARPER

ELLORA'S CAVE *Quickies*®

Soco Awakening

Vonna Harper

Ranger Bogg has returned to Soco Island off the western tip of southern Florida because his first trip stirred something inside him he doesn't understand. At the same time, Charli Marsh is at Soco to assess the small resort for her brother, who's contemplating buying it.

One look and Ranger needs Charli. A single touch and Charli invites the dark, mysterious man to her bed. The small tropical island shelters the lovers throughout a night of frenzied sex, but come morning, Ranger feels compelled to return to the wilderness – taking Charli with him.

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Soco Awakening

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Author Note

Soco Awakening is the product of its author's imagination. Anything attributed to the Calusa Indians, including Soco Island, should be considered fictional.

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Chapter One

Legs spread for balance, Ranger Boggs guided the rented flats boat to the large, well-maintained dock. As the craft nudged the edge, he leaped onto the dock. Ignoring the other visitors milling about, he snugged the boat to a cleat via a practiced knot.

Face to the wind, he looked out at the Intracoastal Waterway, which offered sea, sky and birds. Shutting his mind and ears to the others who'd come to the island, he imagined that it belonged to him and he was alone. The rest of the day was his to spend as he wished, perhaps fishing, maybe exploring, keyed into the restlessness that had brought him to this dot of land west of Florida's southern tip.

"Damn it, Cleve, we've got to hurry if we're going to beat the crowd to the restaurant."

Fingers clenched, Ranger acknowledged that no matter how much he needed to give his imagination free rein, he couldn't wish away the several hundred people debarking from the tri-level vessel that had docked a few minutes before he arrived. It was late winter and thus time for those who could escape the cold states to swell Florida's population. Many stayed in the cities but others, like him, had decided to check out Soco Island.

He'd been here before some six months ago, but then his hunt for a man who didn't want to be found had distracted him from the salt-scented breeze and birds, the crushed shells marking the footpaths to the restaurant and adjacent lounge, inn and secluded cabins. He'd had to leave before he'd learned about the wildlife preserve on the far side.

"Do you think I can get a steak?" an elderly sounding man asked. "Hell, I bet there's nothing but seafood."

"Don't make a fuss if there's no beef, all right," a woman responded. "Just this once go with the flow."

Uninterested in the man's reply, Ranger headed for shore. If he'd been thinking, he would have at least waited until after the midday crowd had climbed back on the various crafts, leaving Soco as he'd found it earlier — quiet.

Watching the line marching from the dock to the restaurant, he clamped a hand over his belly. He'd get around to filling it, just not when it meant sitting elbow to elbow with strangers.

Strangers who didn't belong on *his* turf.

Although he couldn't see the preserve from here, he trusted instinct, or something, to take him in that direction. One thing about tracking down humans for a living, he'd learned to trust his inner voices.

In no more than two minutes, he acknowledged the welcome change in the air. It no longer smelled of perfume, deodorant, soap or sweat. Instead, the sea prevailed. Pausing, he filled his lungs. The breeze captured his too-long hair, whipping a black strand across his eyes. His sense of freedom growing, he pushed the hairs out of the way.

As he did, one of those inner voices spoke to him.

Someone is watching you.

Alert, he again faced the restaurant at the top of a rise created by an ancient shell mound. Groups milled around the expansive porch that was part of the restaurant. Others sat at the outside tables while white-shirted waiters catered to them. From what he could tell, no one was looking at him.

Yes she is.

Even as he again set his sights on his destination, he didn't question that he'd caught a woman's attention. Female interest wasn't new to him, one of the side effects of keeping his body at its physical peak.

But he hadn't come to Soco to find a willing bed partner. This trip needed to be about him. Finding answers to questions he didn't yet understand.

* * * * *

Clamping her hands to her thighs, Charli Marsh thwarted the wind's attempt to tangle her skirt around her. Moments ago she'd been chiding herself for wearing the flimsy fabric, but that was before a man's stride sent need-waves through her. No longer did she give a damn about the business that had brought her here. There was only a singular male body shielded by a hug-his-muscles pale T-shirt and dark shorts trying to mate with thighs that had no business ever being behind a desk.

His too-distant physique wasn't the whole package. There was also the matter of where he was going, which was away from everyone else. Instead of surging lemming-like toward Soco's main draw—its well-known restaurant and bar, he was heading toward the wilderness.

Envy infused her. In the twenty-six hours she'd been here, she hadn't had a moment to explore what Soco had to offer beyond its man-made structures. She had yet to truly listen to and smell the island, to experience its bones so to speak.

Okay, until this moment she hadn't made taking the grand tour her priority, but with the hunky stranger challenging her to share the sights with him—

It didn't matter. Like the majority of people here, he'd be gone by nightfall. He'd join the exodus back to civilization, roads, cars, TV, bright lights and entertainment. Soco made for an interesting way to spend a day. It wasn't a place for an extended stay, not with no street lights or locking doors on the few cabins and the sounds of night creatures scraping nerves.

That was it all right, Charli acknowledged as she sat at one of only two unoccupied deck tables and turned her attention back to her list of the repairs the inn needed. Watching the man walk had scraped her nerves.

Made her hungry.

* * * * *

The approaching night changed Soco. People still invaded it, but a handful compared to earlier. From where Ranger stood near the bar, only muted voices reached him. Even the music was quiet, as if whoever was in charge understood that it was time for the island to speak.

The wildlife refuge had unsettled him. It shouldn't be like that, damn it. If anyone was accustomed to being in new places, he was. He'd hiked Northwest forests, nearly died of dehydration in an Arizona desert, wound through crowded streets and claustrophobic subways. A little Florida flora and fauna shouldn't cause the hairs on the back of his neck to stand out, but it had happened. No matter how much he wanted to deny it, the whole time he'd been in the preserve, he'd half believed the wilderness was welcoming him. Had been waiting for him. Most unnerving had been his sense of oneness with it.

Unable to shake Soco's initial impact on him, he'd done some research following his first visit. Among other things, he'd learned that this part of Florida had once been home to the Calusa Indians, now considered extinct. One of their villages had been called Soco, and the island was named after it. Maybe some of the tribe's ghosts had taken up residence in the preserve and were stalking him.

Right!

Fists clenching and unclenching, he worked to shake himself free of the riot of vegetation that now existed only in his mind. The sunset drifted over him, quieting him a little. The sun had given up on the day and had left behind vast splashes of reds, oranges and yellow. Oblivious to the spectacular setting, several seagulls rode unseen wind currents. Envy tugged at him. He'd love to be a bird, free and effortlessly —

"Spectacular, isn't it?"

The question, coming soft and slow from a feminine throat turned him in that direction. The woman was relatively tall, maybe five foot nine with wide shoulders, bare arms and a slim body draped in a pale yellow dress that rippled with the breeze. To his way of thinking, her hair was too short, reddish with blond highlights he was

pretty sure didn't come naturally. Not that he gave a damn why she'd spent so much time and money getting her hair to look like that. Although she was looking at him, she'd positioned herself so her face was to the wind. Maybe the breeze made her feel alive—and inclined to speak to a stranger.

He acknowledged the sunset with a nod. "It is. Makes me wish I had a camera."

"I have one. Damn, I left it in my cabin."

Two things occurred to him, one that she felt no hesitancy about telling him where she was staying, and that if he was reading her words right, she was alone.

"Most of the color will be gone by the time you get it," he observed. He'd been leaning on the splintery wooden railing, and although she'd risk snagging her dress, he indicated she could join him if she wanted. Giving him a nod of her own, she stepped toward him as if she weighed nothing. He glanced at her sandals and was relieved to see she hadn't painted her toenails.

She didn't have to stand so close that the hairs on his arm hummed with her presence, but he was glad she had. If she was coming onto him, he was open.

"It's better this time of day," she went on. "Less hectic. That's what I noticed last night, the island settling down. It's almost as if the sea is taking over."

They stood side by side with their hands on the railing looking out at a gentle slope of land and beyond that water that went on forever and might drop off the edge of the earth. The sky slowly turned from brilliant to gray. From inside the bar came laughter.

"I like the way you put it," he came up with when he ached to clutch this stranger to him and press his body against hers. "The sea taking over. You said you were here last night. Vacation?"

"I wish." She sounded wistful. "Business."

"Here?"

"Yeah." Her sun-warmed shoulder brushed his. "The resort's for sale. My brother's considering buying it."

Say something. Don't let her know you're getting a hard-on. "And he wants you to—"

"I have expertise in such things." She spoke without looking at him. "Just call me his front man."

"You're no man."

The moment the words were out, he knew they were all wrong. And all right. Nothing ventured, no possibility of a roll in the sack.

"I think I saw you earlier today," she said, and he felt her breath on the side of his neck. "I did if you took off for the preserve instead of fighting the crowd."

He turned toward her, noting a small nose and long lashes. And hell, full breasts. "That was you?"

"What? With all the people there you couldn't possibly have seen—"

"I sensed."

Silence expanded between them. Staying alive and healthy called for honing his survival instincts. He told no one, not even his clients, about the animal instinct that keyed him into his surroundings. Why then had he told this woman what he had?

"My name's Charli," she said, "spelled with only an i. My parents' sense of humor. What's yours?"

"Ranger," he told her despite his arsenal of identities. "I never asked why my folks named me that." *Hell, they probably don't know.*

"I like it." She extended long, slender, ring-less fingers toward him. "Good to meet you."

He held on longer than convention called for, feeling Florida's humidity on her skin and her pulse snaking into his veins. "Are you staying the night?" he asked.

"Yes. What about you?"

"Yes," he said even though he hadn't thought that far ahead.

Chapter Two

The heat had little to do with how she was feeling. Charli couldn't lie to herself and say it did.

Okay, so southern Florida's warmth and humidity pressed around her, but it was mitigated by the soft wind. Most times lethargy dragged at her whenever she came to a humid climate, forcing her to struggle to keep going like the Energizer Bunny her employers likened her to.

Not tonight. After feeling half with the program all day, suddenly she was alive with a capital A. Her skin seemed to have thinned so every sensation reached her nerves, veins and muscles. Despite the absence of lightning, errant electrical charges slid over the back of her neck before racing down her spine. Once there—oh hell, once there, the electricity gathered between her legs.

Turned on. Simple as that.

"Have you had dinner?" Ranger asked in what her nerves perceived as a sexy growl.

"No. What about you?"

"I haven't eaten since breakfast. One look at the lunch crowd and I bailed."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not." He'd regained his own space after the shoulder bump, but now he leaned toward her again. "I needed to do what I did. The vegetation out there is—spectacular."

"You sound as if you aren't sure."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him close his. Just like that, he went to a place she couldn't access.

"What is it?" she pressed. "You didn't come across a poisonous snake did you?"

“Hardly.” He chuckled. “As long as a person stays on the trail, they can probably see whatever’s in there in time to react.”

“Then what? Too dark and spooky for your taste?”

“Not that. I’ve done a lot of traveling in my life,” he said. “Nothing’s ever affected me like this preserve.”

Much as she wanted to join him in his private search, she knew she couldn’t. Maybe if she confessed how disconnected she’d felt from her apartment the last time she’d been there —

“I want to learn more about Soco,” he said. “I did some online research, not that there was much.”

She told him that the owners were here and might be able to answer his questions.

“Hopefully I can talk to them, just not before I fill my belly.” Moving like some well-honed athlete, he faced her. “If you have no objections, and are alone, we could have dinner together.”

What about after? “I’m alone,” she told him when she hadn’t telegraphed any form of vulnerability to a man in years. Maybe it was the sunset, maybe the life-scented breeze, maybe her heated pussy. Whatever the reasons, she wanted Ranger to know she’d love to be laid by him tonight.

Bending his left arm, he offered it to her. She slid hers through his. Although she kept her weight at the low end of normal for her height, because of her height, she seldom felt small in a man’s presence. Ranger changed that.

Not speaking, they lock stepped the length of the deck. He opened the large, wooden restaurant door and she slipped through it, still holding onto his arm. Once inside, it took a moment for her eyes to become accustomed to the increased darkness. When she’d first seen the restaurant, she’d intended to advise her brother to change the lighting so diners could see the nautical wall decorations. She was no longer so sure bright lights fit here. Tonight, hopefully, would be tinged with magic and sex. The setting should complete the image.

Because the restaurant was full, they were directed into the lounge and to a small table next to the wall opposite the bar. She ordered red wine, he a beer. Fingers caressing the glass stem, she met Ranger's eyes—what she could see of them anyway. She'd already noted how dark they were, nearly black like his hair. Their knees kept brushing under the table and yet she made no attempt to retain her personal space.

She'd had a handful of one-night stands in the course of a career as advance woman for an exclusive travel service. A job that required her to travel all over the world meant a lot of nights alone. As a result, getting her itches scratched called for a certain amount of calculation on her part. After all, she wasn't about to jeopardize her career or taint the service's reputation. The men she slept with needed to be as discreet as she did. She'd always checked them out before shedding her clothes.

Tonight was different.

Hot.

Alive.

"So," she said, whispering really, "where are you staying? The accommodations are limited."

He kept his eyes on her and his fingers inches from hers. "I rented a flats boat to get to the island. I can—"

"Flats?"

"Designed for moving in shallow water where there's limited wave action."

"Doesn't sound very comfortable."

"For fishing, yes, sleeping not so much."

"I wouldn't want you to wake up with a stiff back."

"I've experienced worse."

Ah, a mystery man. Yet if she could trust her instinct, which she badly wanted to, he wouldn't make her regret anything that happened tonight. She was a modern

woman in every way. No matter that there wasn't a steady man in her life, years ago she'd been fitted with an IUD. She even carried rubbers in an inner purse pocket.

"I'm being comped one of the cabins out by the beach. It's musty smelling and bare bones."

He held her gaze. "What size bed?"

She delayed her reply while sipping on her wine. Fire slid down her throat and into her head. Now she knew why she'd worn the sleeveless sundress—because she could be out of it in a second.

"You don't want me asking?" His knuckles touched hers, then were gone, leaving her needing more.

"No. It's not that." Releasing her glass, she spread her fingers over his. His roughness contrasted with her lotion-smoothed skin, and she felt like screaming. "I just needed a minute to think."

"I understand. And I'm still waiting for your answer."

Of course he was. The rest of tonight hinged on what she said next. "It's a queen. And the cabin's well-separated from the others."

"And there's just you staying there?"

"Yes."

* * * * *

Charli drank two glasses of wine before her dinner of blackened redfish arrived. Ranger asked for a third beer to go with his sea trout. By then she'd given him the short course about her career and that she'd come to Soco to give her brother her assessment of the pros and cons of buying the resort. When she mentioned spending time in Spain, Canada, Mexico, Germany and Australia, he let her know he'd been to those countries as well. He'd said nothing about what had taken him there.

She hadn't asked because he'd tell her when and if it became her business. Besides, seeing him as a stranger added to...what? Her anticipation? The possibility of hot, hard, incredible sex with an international smuggler?

The possibility that he might have something to do with the drug trade momentarily chilled her, but her nerves—or maybe her pussy—said that couldn't be. He was too appreciative of his surroundings to be involved with criminal elements. Just the same, he was deliberately holding back.

No matter. With her belly now full and her head light from the wine, she only wanted to get to her feet and lead the way to her cabin.

Putting down his beer, Ranger stood. Having him loom over her wasn't disconcerting so much as a challenge. He didn't say anything.

Throat refusing to swallow, she joined him. All around them others hunched over small tables, eating, drinking or both. Although she couldn't make out their features, she guessed that most sported new tans or sunburns because Soco was all about outdoors activities, mostly fishing. The majority would spend the night on their own crafts, which were moored on the dock. Tomorrow she might care what their sleeping arrangements were like, but not tonight.

Ranger's cocked head spoke for him. This call was hers.

Feeling weightless, she led the way around the tables and from there to the still-full restaurant. One thing she could tell her brother, the moneymaking potential was here.

Small white lights had been strung over the railing around the deck, which gave the area an almost magical and certainly romantic quality. To her right, a couple stood looking out at the moonlit surf with their arms around each other.

Before she could step off the deck, Ranger trailed his fingers along the small of her back. Heat dove through her, and she looked at his shadowed form.

"That's true silver." Wrapping his arm around her waist, he indicated the surf. "Nothing man does with color comes close to nature's design."

She, who'd written enough travel brochure copy to become a pro at it, couldn't have put it any better, although maybe the man saying the words made all the difference. She'd yet to see him in full light but had decided his dark coloring came from more than the sun. He might be Hispanic or Italian, but she preferred to believe he had Native American blood. How exciting to think that his roots came from this part of the country.

"It's more than just the moon glinting off the waves," she observed. "There's also the sound of water whispering over the beach and dock, the breeze."

"And knowing the day's coming to an end."

Was he hinting at her favorite albeit only occasional nighttime activity or waxing philosophical about the sense of peace and quiet that came with putting a workday behind? Not giving herself time to question her action, she placed her arm around Ranger's waist. Hip pressed against hip. She sensed him breathing, half believed she could hear his heart.

Insane. One-night stand. A taste of romance that wouldn't survive tomorrow morning when they stepped back into their separate worlds.

Go for broke.

"Ready?" he whispered.

Home was a thousand miles away. She'd return to a stack of overdue work on her desk and endless meetings. Her brother would text and email and leave cell messages until she gave him a complete assessment. She needed a haircut and to make a dentist appointment.

None of that mattered tonight with the moon turning her surroundings exquisite and this warm male body sending primal messages to hers.

"Ready."

* * * * *

The cabin Charli was staying in left no doubt that the wood had been subjected to dampness and humidity for many years. Maybe that was why, despite his humming body and aching cock, Ranger stopped when they were still in the small, screened-in porch with its plastic lawn chairs.

"I fed enough mosquitoes and no-see-ums when I was out there today," he said. "Knowing they can't get through the screens is comforting." Although there were no lights here, and he could barely make out Charli's form, he nodded in the direction of the preserve. If he hadn't met her, would he be fighting the impulse to return? Only a fool would walk into the wilderness without so much as a flashlight and yet it seemed to be waiting for him, perhaps ready to give up more of its secrets.

"You didn't have any bug spray?"

"I hate the smell and feel of that stuff."

"Ditto. So self-sacrifice was the lesser of two evils?"

"I didn't give getting bitten a thought until it was too late. Besides it was worth it. Whoever decided to leave that part of the island as nature intended did a spectacular job."

"Thanks for the heads-up because after listening to you, I know my time here won't be complete unless I check out that part of the island."

She'd sat in one of the chairs and was looking at the world beyond the screen, her profile indistinct, mystical even. The whole time he'd been in the wilderness, he'd been grateful for the solitude. Granted, he'd run into a handful people and had muttered the expected "hello" but most of the time it had been him and questions banking inside him.

Come morning, would he ask Charli if she wanted him to accompany her as she walked along the narrow crushed seashell trail with vegetation crawling over the edges? Would he want to share that perfect place with her?

"I have condoms on me," he said.

"So do I. And an IUD."

"Good." After that his mind emptied out, prompting him to stand over her with his hands gripping the chair arms and his legs straddling hers. Surely her knee-length skirt had crept up when she sat down, but there was no way of knowing how far without checking.

Checking? More like feeling her up. Fairly trembling with anticipation—something he hadn't done since his teen years—he shifted his weight so his left arm supported his upper body and freed his right. He started easy, fingers light on her knee. She sighed, a small, lingering sound.

"I just shaved my legs." Her voice sounded unsteady. "Good timing, right?"

"Maybe you looked in a crystal ball and saw this was going to happen." Sensing she was ready for more, he slid his hand between her legs. Her knees were bony, the flesh over her thighs like satin. God had never factored much in his life, and he'd concluded that Mother Nature had fashioned women's bodies the way she had to drive men out of their minds.

Not that his mind had led him here.

"I'm not a whore," she whispered and spread her legs a little. "I need you to believe that."

"I do."

"Do you?" She ran sleek fingers over his forearm. "I'm acting like one."

"If you are, what does that make me?"

Perhaps his question was more than she could handle. Maybe pressing his palm against her inner thigh and increasing the space between her knees was responsible for her silence. Her grip on his arm increased, strong nails digging into him. He liked rough sex, not all the time, but if the woman was so inclined, he'd never turned her down. At least two had praised what they called his savage nature. He took it as a compliment and later pondered where it had come from.

His attention locked on her outline, he straightened. With both hands now free, he spread them over her thighs, pushing the skirt upward as he did. Another sigh, deeper than the first, slid out of her. She needed no encouragement to open her legs even more and stopped only when his legs prevented her from going further.

Soon he'd slip his legs between hers, but for now he was content to see what she'd do on her own. His senses had always been keen; he swore he could smell a woman's arousal from the other side of a room. Even before he reached the halfway place on Charli's inner thighs, he caught her pussy's scent. As it poured into him, he concentrated on giving her what she'd brought him here to accomplish. Done right, his reward would be worth the effort.

"Good muscle tone," he told her with his palms and fingertips firm on the sleekest of flesh so if she was ticklish, she'd continue to feel only pleasure. "That come from flying all over the world?"

"Looking good's part of the job."

"Company image?"

"Something like that."

No matter how ready he was to dive into her, he couldn't keep his mind off her nails digging into his arm. Hoping not to break the mood, he started to pull it away.

"What?" she asked.

"A little too much enthusiasm." He rotated his arm.

"What? Oh, sorry."

Relief followed by brisk strokes over the indentations she'd created centered him. These moments were about priming her for sex and bringing her to the place where he already stood.

Sighing again, she slid toward him with her legs wide and the scrap of cloth he just touched the only thing between him and pay dirt.

Even as he again trailed a finger over her panty's crotch, he chided himself for thinking of her that way. She wasn't just another lay. Okay, so he'd just started trying to make sense of who and what she was, but he wouldn't let tonight be cheap. He wouldn't!

Damn! What made a woman's inner thighs so soft? Was there some secret cream known only to members of that sex and applied for the sole purpose of driving men crazy? That was how women were going to take over the world.

Wondering if he'd stumbled onto something earth-shattering, he closed his eyes. With his sense of touch calling the shots, he concentrated on slowly, lightly claiming every inch of flesh between her knees and pussy. By turn she twitched and jerked, her breath out of sync and fingers around his wrists. She wasn't trying to stop him. Instead she was trying to rush his journey.

"Your legs," she muttered. "They're in the way."

"No they aren't, not yet anyway."

"What's this about? You're trying to bring out the whore in me?"

"No whore," he told her and stopped all movement. "But horny as hell, right?"

She bore down on his wrists until she cut off the circulation there. "I hate being teased."

"It's called foreplay."

"The hell it is."

"The hell it isn't."

On the tail of another curse, she straightened, letting go of him as she did. Before he could guess what she had in mind, she pressed the heel of her right hand against his cock. Just like that, she had his full attention.

"What do you call this?" Sounding pissed and amused all at once, she cupped that same hand around his cock. "Tease or foreplay?"

"Dangerous."

"Right. That too."

She wasn't going to hurt him. If she did, he'd be out of commission and she'd have to find satisfaction some other way, not that he doubted she was capable of doing just that. The instinct that made men risk everything to protect that part of their anatomy no longer ruled him. Amused, he slid his fingers around the scrap of cloth standing between him and his ultimate goal. Gripping the crotch fabric, he pulled it toward him.

"What's this?" he asked. "A standoff?"

Chapter Three

This part of Florida didn't know the meaning of the word winter. Or cold. By her reckoning, Charli figured it was around nine p.m. and although things had cooled down a bit, being outside had just now become comfortable.

Or should she say sitting?

Ranger's engorged cock impressed her. How it compared to others she'd danced on didn't matter.

He could, if he was so inclined, back away and break free. In contrast, she was at a disadvantage with him looming over her and promising-threatening to yank off her panties.

"It's a standoff," she said, "only if we want it that way."

"Which I don't. You let go first."

Laughing, she lightly twisted. "I don't think so. The way I look at it, I have the advantage."

"For now."

He let the words hang. Wondering what this dark and intriguing stranger had in mind, she studied his form. She should have reached inside the cabin and flipped the switch for the outside light so she could actually see him. But would it make a difference?

She was still trying to answer her question when he released her panties, grabbed her arms and hauled her to her feet. Surprise loosened her hold on him. Not knowing what she was supposed to do next, she settled her arms by her sides. "There's no place to lie down out here," he said. "Unless you want to do it standing up."

"I, ah, haven't given the details much thought."

"You want me to attend to the details?"

What she wanted was not to talk, or if anything was said for it to be about what tab A felt like inside slot A. She might have told him that if he hadn't taken that moment to spin her so they were side by side with his arm around her shoulder. Sliding her arm around his waist, she leaned into him. Her skirt was hung up on her hips while her panties were heading south.

He took a step toward the cabin door. She matched her pace to his. "It sticks," she informed him. "There's so much swollen wood that —"

Finishing her explanation didn't make much sense now that the door that had given her trouble gaped open, and Ranger was waiting for her to lead the way in. Portable air conditioning had been added to the cabins, but the one in hers was threatening to give up the ghost. Instead of putting up with the loud rattling, she'd opted for opening all windows before taking off this morning. At least it wasn't stifling in here and the musty smell was barely noticeable.

Her body hummed and her nerves were attuned to Ranger's every move. Although he'd let go of her so she could precede him through the narrow opening, she sensed him behind her, so close it was almost as if he were touching her.

He placed his hands on her shoulders. "Where's the light?"

"I don't want it on."

"All right. Bedroom?"

"I guess."

"You aren't sure?"

"I didn't make the bed."

"You think that'll matter?"

I don't know what matters to you, she wanted to tell him. But if she did, she'd have to explain to both of them why she cared when this was a one-night stand.

That's what she wanted, wasn't it?

No.

Startled by the answer, she went in search of a reason. There was something about him, a grounding she'd never experienced. Although he was as much a stranger to Soco as she was, it was as if he belonged here. Even with his reaction to the preserve, she believed he'd make his peace with it if he gave it time.

Her head pulsed, prompting her to lean back against him. He looped his arm around her shoulders and slid forward until their bodies pressed into each other. His cock demanded attention. With each second, breath and heartbeat, she became more aware of him.

"Been a long time, hasn't it?" he whispered with his mouth near her ear.

She shivered. "Yes. What about you?"

"Same for me."

What had he been doing since the last time he'd had sex and who had he fucked? She envisioned herself taking her nails to that other woman when she'd never considered herself the jealous type.

"Don't think about it," he told her with his lips now touching her ear. She knew he'd read her mind.

Another shiver briefly distracted her. "Are you trying to drive me crazy?"

He answered by running the tip of his tongue along the back of her ear.

"No fair!" She heaved herself forward only to have his grip stop her. "Do you have any idea how sensitive—"

"You're giving me a fair idea."

Needing something to do, she pressed her palms against her hips. Her core responded. "And that makes you feel pretty sure of yourself, doesn't it?"

"Not yet."

Sliding his free hand around her waist, he put an end to the half inch of distance between them. Sighing, she rejected any thought of trying to get free.

"I want to know more about you," he went on. His breath riffled through her hair. "So many things."

This is a one-night stand, isn't it? "I don't cheat on my taxes if that's what you're thinking," was the only thing she could come up with.

"I pay mine. I just don't come clean about exactly what I do."

He wasn't ready to say more about his career; she had no doubt of that. Was his job a solitary one, something only a lone wolf would want to do? Maybe that's why he hadn't had sex in a month.

"Secrets," she whispered. She reached behind her. Her hands spread over his hips.

"Damn woman! You're getting to me."

"Which was my intention." Later, hopefully, she'd bring up secrets again, but not now. Not with need coating the air. "Ranger."

"What?"

"Bedroom."

The way they walked single file into the room, a casual observer might conclude that Ranger and she had gone in there to change the linens. The truth was she'd led the way to give herself time to turn on the overhead fan and tamp down her flames. Unfortunately, she'd failed with her second task.

Or maybe she should consider herself fortunate she admitted as, not waiting for him, she unfastened the tie around her waist and lifted the dress over her head. Humid but tolerable air caressed her newly exposed skin. If anything, it was darker in here than in the living room because vegetation grew around the windows to block out most of the nearly full moon's light.

After finding the bed, she worked her way around it to a wicker nightstand and turned on the light. No more than fifty watts cast a yellowish glow.

"Interesting decor," Ranger said. "Early second hand?"

He was still standing by the door. She wondered if his career had taught him caution.

"That's the conclusion I came to," she told him, even though she couldn't care less about the room's furnishings. One thing mattered. The sheets had still smelled fresh when she left them this morning.

"I want to see you strip."

His request was civilized enough, just the same, she sensed the determination behind it. This man was accustomed to having women do what he wanted. And why wouldn't he? After all, resisting was the last thing on what remained of her mind.

Her dress was already on the vinyl floor. Only her sandals, bra and the pink panties with its sagging crotch remained. Looking at him, she knew she didn't have it in her to drag things out. Leaning over, she unfastened her sandals. She tried kicking them at him, but one nearly hit the slowly rotating overhead fan. The other skidded maybe two feet.

"Sorry," she said, trying not to laugh, trying to keep her hands off her pussy. "Technique needs a little work."

He folded his arms over his chest. Despite the yellow light, she was again struck by how black his hair was. His equally dark eyes remained locked on her. *Keep going*, his stare said.

When the time came to write her memoir, she'd begin with tonight. Hell, maybe she wouldn't get past it.

Because her half-on panties were uncomfortable, she took hold of the elastic and drew it down over her hips. The nylon curled upon itself, all except for the crotch part. If he moved, it wasn't enough for her to notice. His shorts did nothing to disguise his erection, and his mouth was slightly parted. Despite those hints, his stillness spoke of a man experienced in self-control. Slipping a hand between her legs, she acknowledged the wetness there. Despite the danger, she pressed her forefinger against her clit. Damn the fabric!

"Don't."

His order couldn't have made more of an impact if he'd yelled, but this was her body, her need. Not dropping her gaze from him, she rubbed.

"Don't. Tonight that belongs to me, all of you does."

Always before she'd tell any man who said that to get his head out of his ass; she was no well-paid or otherwise hooker. But this was now. A small, secluded room on a remote island. Him.

Not trusting her balance, she pushed her panties down to her ankles and stepped out of them. They remained an inch from her toes as she reached behind her for her bra's fastening. Her legs were together, thighs touching, sex hidden. Mostly. Wet heat gliding over her flesh.

This turned-on when he hadn't touched her since they came in here?

He was stone, unmoving male life. Studying his chest, non-belly and the hardness between his legs, she pulled the bra away from her heavy breasts and tossed it in his direction. The fan stirred air over her nipples, making them harden even more.

What was she supposed to do with her hands? Oh, she knew where she wanted her fingers to go, but he'd forbidden her to touch herself there again, and tonight she'd do what Ranger wanted.

Maybe she always would.

Dismissing the thought for the sex-fueled one it was, she wrapped her arms around her waist. Good. Make him stare at her breasts. They might not be A+ quality, but they weren't bad.

"Your turn." Her throat felt dry. Maybe to make up for it, a trickle of sex juice slid out of her. "I want to watch you strip."

"Not yet. Get on the bed first."

Oh hell yes. Why not. Careful not to aim her ass directly at him, she crawled onto the sagging mattress. That done, she positioned herself so she had a clear view of the man still standing in the doorway. Damn, oh damn, but she needed him!

“Your turn,” she repeated.

Maintaining the necessary physicality for his job was a distinct advantage when it came to sex. Agility and strength turned women on. He dug pussy as much as the next man. Hell, back when he was in high school, he’d thought of sex 23/7 with only an hour off for deepest sleep. Though he still loved sex as much as when he’d first figured out what a vagina was good for, he’d learned to put a lid on things. He could do surveillance for hours and nights at a time if need be. By the same token, he could stare at a woman until she was ready to explode.

Charli was. The way she’d sat back on her haunches and was fingering her pussy lips made that abundantly clear.

Double hell, it should be his hands on her sex. Smelling her. Tasting her. Losing his sanity in her.

This moment wasn’t for questioning why she was the right woman at the right time in his life and in the right location. All he knew was that from the instant he’d stepped onto the island, he’d become more than he’d ever been.

More alive.

Needing validation of that aliveness.

With her.

He reached for his shorts’ fastening, then stopped and dug in a back pocket. Extracting a foil wrapper, he gripped it between his teeth.

“Now there’s a unique twist on a strip,” she said. “Sexy and responsible all at the same time. Only one downside, you can’t talk.”

Except for his mother, women had always been more vocal than he. The female responsible for him being alive—and darn little else—was a mostly silent creature. Years ago he'd given up trying to get anything out of her.

Bothered by the unwanted thought, he returned his attention to getting rid of his clothes. Instead of immediately giving his cock an escape route through an opened zipper, he first pulled his T-shirt out of his waistband and drew it over his head, careful not to dislodge the condom as he did. He dropped the shirt on top of her clothes.

"Oh shit," she breathed. "I've hit the jackpot." Abandoning her self-pleasuring, she inched to the edge of the bed and extended her hand. "Come here. Please. Oh shit, I want to touch—everything."

Once a job had taken him to a male strip joint. He'd watched excited and half-drunk women ogling the performers and come away feeling vaguely embarrassed for everyone. Charli had had a couple of glasses of wine, but for what he could tell, eating had dulled the alcohol's effect. She was looking at him sober and clearheaded. Wanting the real him.

At least as much as he could give her.

Walking toward her, stepping out of his sandals as he did, he wondered if she'd sensed the empty places in him. Then she reached out and ran hot fingers over his ribs, and he became a horny man in the presence of an equally horny woman. He somehow held steady while she familiarized herself with his chest and shoulders. If not for the distraction of her free and full breasts and her take-me scent, he couldn't have done it.

She was sitting on her haunches again and her knees were apart in invitation.

"Finish what you started, please," she whispered. "Much as I want to get rid of those clothes of yours, I need to watch you do it even more."

Her voice was changing, becoming less confident and more primal. He was there with her.

Fortunately, he'd unbuttoned his shorts to ease his shirt's removal. Otherwise, he wasn't sure his numb fingers would be up to the task. Gripping the zipper tab took too damn much concentration, but he needed to do this for her. For both of them.

Even before he'd pulled the zipper all the way down, his cock filled the space he'd created. His practical briefs scraped his hellishly sensitive tip, and he bit down on the foil to keep silent.

Her hands went to her breasts, and she did what he wanted to be doing while he tugged both shorts and briefs down his hips and along his thighs.

Freedom! He stepped out of the unwanted clothing.

"Oh shit."

Done with being silent, he indicated he wanted her to take the condom from him. She hesitated with her fingers on her nipples, then did as he'd *commanded*. The protection now lay on the bed beside her.

The overhead fan lifted the hair on the top of her head. Looking at him from under her thick lashes, she extended a manicured nail toward his cock. His body froze when she touched him, then threatened to melt. He tried to dig his toes into the hard flooring while clenching his fingers to keep from—what? Did he want her to leave his unpredictable trigger alone or cup both hands around it?

Hell, he needed both things.

"I could give you head." She sounded as if her throat was raw. "But that wouldn't do enough for me."

"I know."

She ran her tongue over her fingers and then spread the moisture on his tip. His nails dug into his palms.

"I'm wondering something," she went on. "Do you think it's possible for us to come at the same time?"

"That's your goal?"

"If it matters to you. Maybe it doesn't."

Although her fingers remained on his cock, he somehow concentrated on what she was saying. One thing he was certain of. She was no longer a confident and competent businesswoman.

Good.

"I'd like that to happen," he told her, his gaze sliding to his erection.

"Really? Most men, most I've known anyway, don't give a damn about anything except themselves once they're actually fucking."

"I'm not them. I'm me."

The way she nodded, he concluded she understood that he wanted just the two of them in the bedroom. "I'm sorry," she muttered. Releasing his cock, she placed both hands on her thighs. "Poor choice of words."

"It's all right. Now it's my turn to call the shots," he told her to keep himself from driving her onto her back and diving between her legs. "Hands at the back of your head, fingers laced together."

"What for?"

"Because I'm going to touch you. Get you ready."

Her fingers were slick from her juices, making it impossible for Charli to keep them interlaced, and she wasn't sure how long the strength in her arms would last. Just the same, anticipation made her smile. Damn but that was a fine cock, and if there was anything wrong with the male body attached to it, she had yet to find it. Imagining said cock powering into her made her press her thighs together.

"No, no." Ranger waved a warning finger at her. "From now on, whatever pleasure you receive comes from me."

"The hell! That's not fair."

"Neither is life."

Who cared about life beyond this place and moment? Despite the cost, she spread her legs. One touch to her pussy, if that's what he intended, and Ranger would know she was more than primed. Maybe she should remind him about the condom.

Then he leaned into her space, and she forgot everything except him. The bed had been placed on a wooden platform, making it easy for him to run his hand between her legs. His fingers lightly grazed her hot and drenched sex lips only to leave her alone and on fire an instant later.

"Damn you."

"You don't want to be handled like this?"

Her arms burned, and her awareness of her thrust-forward breasts increased. "You know the answer to that."

"I have a fair idea, but I won't have the full picture until I've completed my examination."

She could hate this man! What right did he have to draw out her agony? Before she could tell him that, if that had been her intention, he touched her sex again. An inhuman gasp spilled out of her.

"Good." He brushed her labia again. "At least you didn't swear this time."

Oh hot damn! His fingers remained on her, one pressing against her clit while his chest kissed her hard nipples.

Her fingers gripped the hair at the back of her head, pain warring with the exquisite pleasure between her legs. Unable to handle anything touching her nipples, she started to lean away from him only to lose her balance.

"Careful." He gripped her shoulders. "You're going to wind up on your back all right, not just yet."

His right hand, wet and warm from her juices, nearly distracted her from what he'd just said. "My back? What if that's not the way I want it?"

Letting go of her shoulders, he swiped his hand over her left cheek. "Round two, you get to call the shots. Round one is my call."

To hell with the modern woman who stepped out the door every morning! What Ranger had just promised sounded like heaven.

And danger.

When he again slid his hand between her legs, she sucked in her belly and vowed to prove that she was his equal. If he could put up with a cock that looked on the verge of exploding, she could handle a little touch on—

"Oh shit!"

Who was laughing? Didn't matter. Only rough, wet fingers slipping past her labia did. His palm pressed against her mons while his other hand, which was still on her shoulder, locked her within his sensual embrace. He was so close she couldn't make out his features, could only feel and experience. Her head drifting to the side, she shut her eyes. Foreplay, maybe, but if he wasn't careful, she'd climax. Maybe she should tell him, maybe.

Wonderful!

Ranger knew what he was doing all right. He understood that changing from featherlight strokes to firm pressure and then something in between locked her within pleasure. She lost awareness of other parts of her body and cared only about the mind-blowing sensation in her core. Every time he dipped a finger into her, she settled down on her haunches in an attempt to increase the invasion. When he withdrew, she rose as high as she could, her thigh muscles trembling while silently begging him to come after her again.

"I can smell you." His breath settled into the hair on the top of her head.

"I—can't help it."

"I love it and the way you're shaking."

Before she could fasten her thoughts on what he'd just told her, he ran his tongue along her temple while pushing a finger as far as he could into her. Although she opened her eyes, she couldn't see anything.

Pleasure rushed through her to swamp her mind and shake her confidence.

I don't know what's happening. Please, help me understand. But she didn't dare tell him those things if she had any hope of retaining a shred of self-control. Perhaps he understood how scant the space between sanity and insanity was when he pulled out a little. Terrified he meant to leave her, she clenched her sex muscles while clamping her thighs around him.

"Don't you dare!" she fairly screamed. "If you think I like being teased —"

"Easy, easy. You're all right."

How soft his voice, how compassionate his tone. Heat burned her eyes, causing her to blink several times. He wasn't leaving her. What had made her think he would? "I know."

"Do you?"

Unable to keep her muscles contracted, she slowly relaxed them. To her relief, his finger remained where she needed it.

"What was it?" he asked in the same caring tone. "Something freaked you?"

"Not that." *I didn't want to lose you.* "I just, hell, that's enough foreplay."

Chuckling, he kissed the tip of her nose. "Isn't it the man who's supposed to have the hair trigger?"

The distraction of his lips on her nose only lasted a moment, yet in that time he slipped his forefinger into her to join the middle one already there. Her tissues stretched, happily accepting the increased invasion.

"Tell me something," he said. "Did my mentioning your smell bother you?"

He'd let go of her shoulder, but because that hand was now spread over her lower back, she was still not at risk of falling backward. Although she could have let him support her, she rocked forward until his body again flattened her breasts.

"Sex isn't neat and clean," she muttered, "so, no, I haven't taken offense."

"Good. Now I'd appreciate getting your reaction to this."

She'd known he intended to further excite her before the upward pressure on her pussy began. Instead of rising up in response, she sagged until the back of her thighs touched her heels. The side of her head rested on his chest, and her arms fell to her sides. Relief burned through her shoulders then died an unnoticed death.

His fingers withdrew maybe an inch only to again reach for her womb. Once more he started to slip out followed by a seeking of her core that curled her toes.

Her head filled with heat. Electricity touched her everywhere, and her breasts throbbed. Her outer thighs burned because she was scratching herself there. The contrast with the loosening, leaving sensation in her pussy sent a delighted cry into her throat. She again closed her cunt muscles around him.

"Say something," he whispered. "Tell me what you're feeling."

"There aren't any..."

"It's good?" Pulling free, he swiped his hand from the back of her pussy to the front. "All good or things you wish I would or wouldn't do?"

She saw nothing beyond a male form highlighted by the light's yellowish cast. "Perfect."

Wet fingers took hold of a sex lip and drew down. "Then you want this to go on forever?"

"No!" Shaken by her outcry, she wrapped her arms around him and held on with all her strength.

Chapter Four

Ranger straddled her, but he'd positioned her so her head hung over the side of the bed and she couldn't see him. Blood pooled in her forehead. Waiting for him, she replayed the last few moments.

After hugging her back with his sex-drenched right hand plastered to her buttocks, he'd stepped away. Her vision had cleared enough so she could watch as he picked up the condom and put it on. Next time she'd do the honors. Next time when, hopefully, she'd be the one in control.

"On your back," he'd commanded. "Sideways on the bed."

She'd wordlessly started to comply when he grabbed her ankles and positioned them over the side opposite her head. The mattress was so soft that she nearly rolled onto him when he climbed on beside her. Unable to stop from shaking, she hadn't resisted when he stretched her arms out from her body.

"You're trembling." His ass settled on her thighs, and his hands cupped her breasts.

"Just happy to see you."

"Ditto, ma'am." He gave her breasts a shake she felt throughout her. "And mighty glad to have proof of your willingness to engage in this mutually advantageous activity."

When he thumbed her nipples, she slipped between anticipation and laughter. *Thanks for lightening the mood*, she nearly told him.

Releasing her breasts, he stretched out over her. His cock slipped between her thighs. She lifted her head.

"Brought a welcoming present, did you?" she asked and let her head hang again.

“Why yes, that’s exactly what it is.” He reinforced his point by pushing his cock against her core. “If you have enough of an appetite for —”

“I do! Damn it, I do.”

He whispered something she didn’t catch. Before she could decide whether to ask him to repeat himself, he sat back up. Wanting to meet him thrust for thrust, she forced her buttocks off the bed, but the strain made her tremble even more.

“Not going to work this way, is it?” he said. “On to plan B.”

Just like that, he slid off the bed, grabbing her knees and pulling her toward him so he was between her legs with his fingers inching from her knees to her thighs.

With her head no longer dangling, she was content to let the mattress support it as she concentrated on the form above her. No way could she deny that she was shamelessly displayed. His forcing her legs far apart triggered a memory of her first gynecological examination—except that there was nothing clinical or detached about the feel of his fingers on the join between pelvis and legs.

Do it, just do it!

Another lighthearted comment from him might have released the tension gripping her, yet the instant his cock head touched her entrance, she became content. Ready. Willing.

She tried to grasp his hands only to give up as he slid them under her buttocks and lifted. Giving herself entirely to his leadership, she cradled her breasts. Her awareness locked on her sex.

There was nothing tentative about Ranger’s invasion, no slow entrance. He took her hard, his length plowing into her so she slid away from him. Determined to remain in place, she let go of her breasts and dug her fingers into the sheet.

Grunting, he pulled one hand out from under her ass and pressed his palm against her groin.

Lost! Pressure all around. A man’s sex claiming hers.

“Remember what you said about wanting to come together.”

His voice was sandpaper rough and laced with fire. It swirled around her, touched her skin, slipped beneath the surface. That, plus his rapid-fire thrusts rendered her mute.

“I want this mutual thing to matter,” he continued, grunting with each word. “But, hell, it doesn’t. Not now.”

It’s all right. Think of yourself, climb your mountain. Jump off it.

Captured by a wispy image of Ranger standing at the edge of a cliff with his arms outstretched and joy transforming his features, she went in search of her own peak. Her shoulders burned and her fingers threatened to cramp, but damned if she’d let go of the sheet! They were locked together and united in sex. Heat far different from that in her arms swept over her pussy. Head back and lungs heaving, she struggled to give as good as she was getting, but it was so damn hard.

His hand left her mons and moved toward her sex, but his cock was in the way, right? He couldn’t—

Oh shit!

Glory, ecstasy coming from the fingers now on her clit.

“Oh god! God damn!”

He came at her, one, two, three and then countless thrusts hammering her inflamed channel. A whirlpool caught her and sent her spinning. Her nails clawed at cotton; she clamped her legs against his.

Came.

The bottom sheet had worked loose, but Ranger couldn’t pull himself together enough to do anything about it. Charli and he were still naked with the top sheet covering them from the waist down and the fan holding humidity at bay.

She was asleep, as motionless as possible and still be among the living. He figured he’d come some five or six seconds after she had, which as far as he was concerned was

close enough to qualify as mutual. Not trusting his legs to hold him up, he'd pulled off the condom and slid onto the bed next to her. They hadn't said much, mostly the equivalent of "job well done" followed by both drifting off.

Because there was no clock in the room, he didn't know what time it was, somewhere in the middle of the night. Accustomed to spending his so-called sleeping hours subconsciously on alert, he made no effort to go in search of oblivion. He didn't even envy her.

Her. His latest conquest.

Even as he tried out the concept, he knew it wouldn't hold because Charli was different in ways he didn't comprehend but needed to.

She was smart and sexy, sexually adventurous and responsible, easy to talk to and not hesitant about showing off her brains and sexual appetite. Those things appealed to him, and yet she wasn't the only woman he'd slept who'd had such attributes.

Why are you making this impact on me? Is it deliberate? Maybe it's coming from me.

The thought stopped him. Pulled him inward.

Since coming to Soco Island that first time, he'd been more aware of himself, more in need of something to fill the inner spaces with.

No, it was more than that. There was the sense that Soco itself was responsible for the changes. Stifling a sigh, he turned onto his back, placed his hands under his head and studied what little he could see of the fan. He'd turned off the lamp, but some of the moon's glow slipped in through the window. Maybe if he studied the fan long enough, its movement would lull him back to sleep.

No it wouldn't.

This *aliveness* had slipped over him the moment Soco came into view today, and yet he'd kept a lid on the sensation until he'd stepped into the preserve. That's when he stopped thinking of himself as a modern man.

He became something new and old at the same time, almost as if he'd walked out of the present and into – what?

The past? Why, when history had never held any appeal for him?

"You're awake," Charli whispered.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to –"

"It's all right. Is something wrong?"

"I don't know," he heard himself admit. "Just some stuff I'm trying to figure out."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Her fingers rested on his belly. When his cock twitched, he thanked it for the distraction he wanted.

"Right now –" Taking hold of her wrist, he drew her hand to his growing erection, "I'm more interested in something other than talking."

She slid warm, soft fingers over his length. "But later." It wasn't a question.

"Maybe."

"I wish you wouldn't say that," she whispered and sat up.

After positioning herself on her hands and knees, she leaned down and licked his chest. Shivering, he grabbed her hair only to release it when she crawled on top of him with her ass on his thighs and his cock against her belly.

"I don't want morning to come." She started to stroke him with warm, gentle fingers.

Blood rushed into his cock. "I bet you say this to all your lays."

Cupping him in both hands, she held on as he grew. "No, I don't."

Why? he needed to know, but she'd already stripped the word from him and when, minutes later, she placed his condom-covered cock inside her, he felt the same way.

Morning be damned.

Sex with this woman – everything.

* * * * *

"I don't know which I prefer," Charli said, "sunset or sunrise. Each has its own magic."

"There doesn't need to be an either or, does there?"

They were sitting on the deck chairs inside the screened porch watching morning slip over their small section of the world. Too worn out from sex to go in search of breakfast, they'd gotten as far as a joint shower followed by getting dressed. Ranger wore the same clothes he'd had on yesterday while she'd been able to put on a fresh outfit.

He'd positioned their chairs so they could hold hands. His warmth spread all the way up her arm and over her breasts, making concentrating difficult.

There was one thing she could focus on.

"What brought you back to Soco?" she asked, not looking at him because, maybe, he'd find it easier to answer this way.

"I'm not sure," he said after a moment. "I had this sense I had unfinished business here."

"Something to do with your career?"

"No."

"Then—I'm sorry, I feel as if I'm interrogating you. Ranger, is that part of your job, interrogating people? You're some kind of cop?"

"No."

Just when she feared he'd let her go, he squeezed her hand, and she knew she'd been right to go in search of answers. Sensing his gaze on her, she turned toward him. The birthing light painted his eyes in a pink glow and yet his dark eyes remained.

"I don't tell many people what I do. It's better that way."

"Safer?" she asked.

"Most of the time there's nothing dangerous about what I do. But the potential's there. I never forget that. Besides..."

"Besides what?"

"My clients want to maintain low profiles. I do the same."

Suddenly there wasn't enough air in her lungs. "Are you a hit man? A hired gun?"

"No."

Thank god. "Then—"

"You deserve the truth," he said. Just like that, her lungs filled. "I want you to know."

"I appreciate that."

He slid his fingers between hers. "My growing up included firsthand experience in dropping out of sight. My parents got themselves in one tight spot after another. They could pack up and move in a few hours, usually after dark. I thought all people were like that, no roots or ties."

His explanation wasn't enough. She needed to know so much more about him, but it had to be on his terms and on his time.

"Once I struck off on my own, I realized I'd learned some valuable skills. One of my first bosses wanted to find an employee who'd disappeared with the company payroll. I tracked him down and recovered most of the money."

"Law enforcement—"

"The people I work for don't want to involve cops. For them, finding someone is a private, personal matter."

"Oh," she managed. "So if I—how would I find out about your service? You aren't in the yellow pages. Are you online?"

"I can be reached online but only by someone who knows how to find me. Word of mouth keeps me employed."

"Is that why you're single?" The instant the question was out of her mouth, she wondered if she'd made a mistake. "Because of the security?"

"I have to consider how much I want to involve a woman in my life, but I haven't backed away from relationships because of that."

"And you're probably like me," she offered. "So intent on your career that other things get pushed aside."

"And because I don't have anything except that career, at least I didn't before coming here."

She was still trying grasp what he'd just revealed when he stood up. "Come with me."

* * * * *

"Orchids." Charli pointed with her free hand. "I never expected to see these here. What's that, Spanish moss?"

Although Ranger looked in the direction she'd indicated, part of his attention remained on her. When he'd told her he wanted them to greet the morning in the preserve, he thought she might decline in favor of breakfast or her agenda for the day. Instead, she'd all but raced him to it. Now she stood with her shoulder against his, her warmth distracting him from the day's growing heat.

"Yes, hanging from a Royal palm. From its size, I'm thinking the palm is hundreds of years old. You're more likely to find moss on a cypress. What impresses me is that palms, cypress, pines, even mangroves all grow here."

"What are you, a horticulturist?"

"Far from it." He turned his gaze on her. "After I came to the island the first time, I researched. Yesterday I found everything I hoped I would."

"Why was that important?"

Although he wanted to answer, he needed a little time to frame his response. He filled that time by indicating they should start walking again. Even before they reached

the next turn on the path, he recalled there was a pond off to the left and nearly hidden by vegetation. Several frogs croaked.

She squeezed his hand. "I love that sound. I suppose they're in there." She indicated the pond.

Head cocked, he concentrated on the *erp-erp-erp*. "Those are green tree frogs so if we want to see them, we need to look there."

Stepping in front of him, she grasped his other hand and brought both to her throat. "You can tell what kind of frog it is by the sound? Another of your mysterious skills?"

She'd just touched on what, in part, had mesmerized him during his solitary journey here. Not only had he been able to differentiate between the various croaks, he'd known where to look for a great blue heron nest. He'd also spotted an otter sliding into water, several box turtles, a yellow-and-black snail, a golden orb spider, a corn snake, raccoon prints, and most exciting, a pair of sandhill cranes. The library and Internet had taught him about the life cycles of those living organisms. What research hadn't been able to do was guide his legs, eyes and ears. That talent had come from within.

"I don't know how to explain it." His heartbeat increased, only part of it due to her presence. "If there's such a thing as reincarnation, I must have once lived here."

"On the island?"

Grateful for her serious question, he shrugged. "Maybe not. There isn't a lot to the place. But in this part of the state and in the wilderness."

Stopped by his declaration, he wrapped his arms around her. If not for the insects and other creatures that called the ground home, he would have asked her to join him on it. They'd fuck oblivious to sand, grass, and ferns.

"What about when you were growing up?" she asked. "Maybe your folks lived —"

"No. Charli, my old man slipped in and out of my life all the time I was growing up. I spent a little more time with my mother, but she often left me with relatives, friends, even strangers."

"Oh no. I'm so sorry."

"Sorry? I wish I'd known more about my parents."

"Are they dead?"

"I don't know."

"Oh god." Pushing back, she stared up at him. "How could they do that to you? To not give you any sense of belonging —"

"I can't do anything about that. One thing I did learn from a cousin of my old man's I was with for awhile — I have Native American blood in me."

"I know."

"What?"

"All right, I wasn't positive." She gave him a quick smile he felt all the way through him. "But those beautiful dark eyes of yours and that black hair — the moment that thought came to me it felt right."

In the short time they'd been talking, the frogs had all but fallen silent. They wouldn't raise their voices again until nightfall. Charli had to report back to her brother while no fewer than three people wanted to engage his services.

"I don't want to leave," she whispered.

Wondering if she'd read his mind, he did what he'd been wanting to almost from when she'd first spoken to him, he kissed her. Her lips were like old whiskey, offering escape.

"Neither do I," he said.

"You're serious? You aren't just saying that so we'll have sex again?"

"I want sex, but that isn't why I said what I did."

He hadn't known the meaning of fear for years—at least he'd refused to acknowledge the emotion. But Charli had gotten into his blood and that unnerved him. At the same time, if he let her remain there, it would feel as right as standing in the preserve did.

"What would you do if you stayed?" she asked. "Let's say my brother decides to buy the resort, which I'm going to recommend, and I decide to stay here to oversee the work it needs, how handy are you with a hammer?"

She wasn't just throwing words at him; he read the truth in her eyes.

"Not enough. What about the preserve? What plans do you have for it?"

Growing up, he'd seen need in the mirror so he recognized the emotion in her. "That's a question I should be asking you," she said.

Fantasy time. Crazy moments when he didn't guard what came out of his mouth.

"This part of Florida was once home to the Calusa Indians," he said. "Before the Spanish came, they were the predominant tribe. Their culture flourished until they were forced off the land. That culture and heritage died along with them, but some of it can be restored here."

"Turn this into a monument to the Calusa you mean?"

"Yeah." He was vaguely aware that she was holding onto his wrists and her gaze hadn't left him. "Much of what made them unique has been lost, but at least visitors could see the environment the tribe lived in, the respect they had for nature."

"You can do it. I know you can."

His fear died before her confidence in him, and when he again pulled her against his chest, her tears dampened his shirt. He kissed the top of her head, then widened his stance and drew her into the space he'd created. His cock came to life and her hard nipples ground into him.

"We'd better get back to the cabin," he told her. "Otherwise I'm going to take you here where the frogs will see."

Laughing, she kissed the hollow of his throat. "Ranger?"

"What?" he asked even though he already knew what she was going to say.

"The Calusa aren't extinct. Their blood still runs in your veins."

"You believe —"

"With all my heart."

"I needed to hear that."

"Because?"

"I've come to the same conclusion."

About the Author

“Of course I’ve time-traveled to the ancient Everglades, infiltrated bondage strongholds, done wilderness search and rescue, and spent a night trapped in a workout gym with Mr. Universe. How can I possibly write about something I haven’t experienced?”

Although I love telling readers that, the truth is much more mundane. In my “day” jobs, I’ve been a commercial pilot, brain surgeon, worked as a white-water river guide, bee keeper, snake charmer and garbage collector.

And if you buy all that, let me pitch the bridge I have listed on eBay.

Vonna welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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