



*The
Canvas
of her
Skin*

VIVIEN DEAN

The Canvas of Her Skin
by Vivien Dean

Phaze

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A novella of erotic romance by

Vivien Dean

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It was the oranges and reds of the rising sun licking across the rippling water of San Francisco Bay that made Mark late. Out on his morning run, his footsteps faltered when the glints caught his eye, then stopped completely when he turned his head to see the long flames spreading along the water's surface. It was too beautiful to ignore. He was back at his apartment, grabbing a pad and some chinks before the vision disappeared completely, then running back out to the docks to try and catch it. The fact that the sky chose that particular day to begin true and clear was hardly his fault. That was Mark's story and he was sticking to it.

When he ran up the stairs of the art building, his supplies tucked beneath his arm, the first thing he saw was his whole reason for being there in the first place. Cynthia Barcelo paced along the top step, a lit cigarette dangling from between her slim fingers. Her cropped steel-gray hair was half-hidden by the baseball cap she wore, her well-worn pea jacket hanging too largely from her tiny frame. For a split second, he actually felt guilty for how pissed off he'd been about the whole deal, but then realized that her presence meant she hadn't trusted him to follow through with their agreement, and his irritation returned.

"Little early for you, isn't it?" he said.

"And a little late for you," she shot back. Dropping her cigarette, she ground it out with the toe of her tennis shoe, eyeing him warily as he approached. "I know what you're doing."

"You should. It's your fault I'm here."

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He kept walking past her, convinced she would never let him get the last word. It was hard not to smile when she lived up to her bulldog reputation and trotted to his side, her cheeks flushed from the brisk morning air.

"This isn't supposed to be a punishment," Cynthia said. "This is about making you better. About making your paintings better."

"My paintings are just fine."

"Fine, maybe, but not extraordinary." Her blunt appraisal took him by surprise and he stopped in his tracks to stare down at her. She lifted her squared chin in defiance. "You think because I love and worship my favorite client that that means I can't see how he can improve?" she said. "And it's not just me, Mark. Every other person who comes into my gallery and sees your work says the exact same thing. Technically flawless, but cold. Your paintings lack life."

She'd said as much when she announced she'd signed him up for the class, though then her choice of words had been much subtler. Now, hearing her lay it out on the line like this, Mark could only bristle. His art was the only thing that truly meant anything to him; it was scalding to think she'd thought this all along.

"They lack life," he said, his voice tense with barely restrained frustration, "because they're landscapes. I don't do people, Thia. You know that. I don't need to waste my time trying to capture beauty that isn't really there. Signing me up for a life studies class is both a joke and a waste of your money."

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Her dark eyes studied him, her mouth pressed into such a thin line that her lips practically disappeared. "What's so sad is that I really think you believe that," she finally said quietly. "Tell me, what is it exactly you're objecting to? The fact that I'd like to see you start making some real money off your work or that I'm making you get out there and take a risk?" She didn't wait for an answer, choosing instead to start walking again toward the building's entrance. It was now Mark's turn to trail after her like a wayward puppy.

"You have an amazing eye," Cynthia continued. "When I first found you, there was magic in your work. But now..." She glanced back at him. "You know it's not the same. What you do now, that isn't painting. Yes, your use of color still takes my breath away. But you have absolutely no idea how hard it is for me to sit back and watch you waste your potential because you're too afraid to try something that will rattle your cage a little bit."

"Considering you're making me taking this class as a requirement to continue showing at your gallery, I'd say it's pretty impossible for you to just sit back," he argued.

"You're probably right. But I'm right about this."

"I've gotten this far without any formal training. I think that says a lot."

"Yes," Thia agreed. "It says there's still a lot you can learn."

They stopped at the doors, her hand resting lightly on the handle as she lifted her gaze to his yet again. The empathy that shone there was unmistakable, crumbling the last of Mark's indignant resolve.

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"It's only a week," she said. "Not even that . Four days. Yeah, odds are you're going to hate me for the next few months for forcing your hand on this, but I wouldn't have insisted if I didn't think it would make all the difference in the world for you. It kills me that you won't let anybody else see what I do, Mark. Hiding in your landscapes isn't living. You need people. So, if I have to tie you down to a classroom for a week in order to get you to see that, that's what I'm going to do."

Something inside him shut off. She'd crossed the line from being the agent anxious for her client to improve to being the nosy friend who thought he was closing himself off to the world in the aftermath of what she'd dubbed Hurricane Amy. It didn't matter that Amy had left him over two years ago, or that he'd announced for any and all to hear that he wasn't looking for a relationship any time soon again. For Thia, the art wasn't worth it if it was created in a vacuum. She just didn't get that the art was all he had any more.

"You're taking me out to dinner on Friday night," he announced. "I plan on ordering the most expensive meal I can and then getting drunk off my ass in order to forget this damn class."

"As long as I get whatever you paint this week," she said with a smile. "It's going to be brilliant. I just know it."

Casting her one last withering glance, Mark pushed open the door and stepped inside, the scent of clay and oil assaulting his senses before he crossed the threshold. In spite of his determination to hold onto his self-righteous anger for being put into this position in the first place, it was hard not

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to relax as he hurried down the hall to the classroom. Regardless of what he was going to be painting, being surrounded by the tools of his trade always felt like coming home.

The other easels were already set up when he entered the room, forming a semi-circle around a raised platform in its center. The platform was empty, which was a good sign; though he was late, the class hadn't officially started yet. The not-so-good sign was that everybody else in the room was female. Women from the ages of twenty to seventy-five all turned their eyes toward Mark to watch as he hurried to occupy the lone empty space in the arc. Thia had been sure to stack the odds against him as high as possible.

"Mr. Douglas." There was no mistaking the warmth in the woman's voice as she came up behind him, but he refrained from looking until she was at his side. Black dreadlocks that hung down to her waist and a caftan with every color under the sun on it. This had to be the instructor. He had no idea what her name was.

"I'm a great admirer of your work," she was saying. "When I saw your name on my roster, I had to go down to admissions to find out if it was the same Mark Douglas who did 'Summer Moons.'"

"The one and only." It was said with more cheer than he felt.

"You have such a natural gift. Where did you go to school?"

He gritted his teeth. "I didn't. This will be the first art class I've taken since high school."

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Her face lit up. "Really? Your landscapes are gorgeous. I have to admit, I had no idea you were thinking of branching out."

"Neither did I," he muttered.

He deliberately kept silent as she chattered along, setting out his supplies in careful order. When it became obvious he wasn't going to respond as she wanted, he heard her sigh and start inching away.

"It looks like I'm distracting everybody with all my babbling," the instructor said. "And since Lou's already in place, I should let you get to work. I'm looking forward to seeing what you come up with, Mr. Douglas."

Mark just nodded as she walked away. All he wanted was to get this morning over with as quickly as possible, though knowing that he was going to be forced to stare at some guy named Lou for the next four hours was less than pleasant. Beer bellies and gold-toothed grins were not his idea of a good time.

He waited as long as he could, fussing with his brushes before he decided that it was pointless prolonging the inevitable. Taking a deep breath, he shifted sideways on his stool so that he could peer around his easel, already resolved that he'd just have to focus on Lou's surroundings rather than the model himself.

His eyes widened when he saw Lou.

Correction. Herself.

She was lying atop the platform, the leg closest to her audience bent to hide her sex from their scrutiny. Soft muscles curved into a full hip, dipping into a very defined

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waist before blossoming out again into the ripe mounds of her breasts. Her nipples were hard. Unexpectedly, his mouth watered when he noticed that detail, but his gaze continued to slide upward.

Past her bare shoulder. She had a tiny mole on her upper bicep.

Along the fall of her dark blonde hair. Lying down on the dais meant the gentle waves tumbled over the platform's side. He couldn't help but wonder how long it fell down her back.

His placement in the semi-circle had Mark positioned near the model's head, which meant that with her face turned outward toward the class, he was left staring directly into her eyes. They were blue, framed with thick lashes clearly bereft of make-up they didn't need anyway, but while her features remained completely placid, her eyes glowed with a playful gleam. It was almost as if she had some secret she was dying to share, and she was only waiting for the right person to ask for it so that she could spill its delightful promise.

He was instantly entranced.

The question of what was going on in her head became his newest obsession. What did she see? Did she think it was weird that there was only one guy in the class? Did she even notice that he was there or did she disappear someplace else in order to get through the ordeal?

When the instructor quietly cleared her throat behind him, Mark finally broke away from his staring, his cheeks flaming with embarrassment. God, she probably thinks I'm some leech, he thought. That I'm only interested in taking a life

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studies class so that I can ogle the nude model. It didn't matter that he was a reasonably attractive, youngish man or that he could probably get a date with little to no effort. His actions spoke louder than words, and at that exact moment in time, they shamed him.

The blank canvas stared back at him, but Mark didn't see it. All he could see was the graceful bow of the model just a few feet away, the details of her surroundings fading away to be replaced by something more fitting. Lou wasn't an art class model. She was a siren, cavorting in the sea spray, unaware that the song she used to amuse herself was causing those nearby sailors who heard her to be crashed onto the deadly rocks.

The brush was in his hand, the color sweeping in broad strokes across the canvas, before he could stop himself.

He never looked away from his work. Even when the instructor called the mid-morning break and he heard the other students stand and stretch, his movements never slowed. They were curious about him, he could tell, their murmurs rising and falling as they kept their varying distances from his easel, but not one of them dared to approach. That was likely a good thing. When Mark got into this particular mindset, interrupting him was the best way to get your head bit off.

He still wasn't done when the instructor called the end of class two hours later. While the others packed away their supplies, she came around to where he still worked, watching him discreetly from behind until they were the only two left in the room.

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"Is this how it always is for you?" she asked with a smile.
"Are you always this intense in working?"

He lied. He told her yes. In part, it was true. The smallest of things could keep him painting for hours, but this was the first time he could ever remember that thing being a person. Usually, it was a leaf on a tree, or a glimmer of light across the horizon. True beauty, he had always believed, could only be found in nature. People were too duplicitous to fall into that same category.

For some inexplicable reason, this Lou seemed to be in a category all on her own.

Though he debated the issue with the instructor for nearly half an hour, Mark was forced to leave his wet canvas in the classroom, shimmers of blue and green and ivory all fighting to take control of his attention as he hurried from the building. He couldn't just stop. He had to continue. The picture he had in his head demanded it.

So he went back down to the docks, staring out over the water as he fought to recreate the magic he'd witnessed that morning. The colors would be perfect for her, he decided. The contrast of the water flowing over her soft curves. The dawn's light deepening the hue of her hair. He sketched for hours, claiming line after line for her, and only left once the setting sun failed him.

It was no wonder that he fell asleep that night with her on his mind. And it was even less remarkable that he dreamt of her.

* * * *

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He woke up hard and horny, with the taste of saltwater in his mouth and the fleeting scent of perfume still in his nostrils. Pushing back the blankets that had twisted around his legs in his sleep, Mark rushed around his apartment, showering in record time, getting dressed even faster. He was out the door before the sun had even come fully over the horizon.

The front door of the art building was still locked, so he went around to the back and found a staff entrance to use instead. Inside was dark compared to the brilliant sunny morning, and he had to blink more than once to get his bearings. Then, it was off to the left, practically sprinting down the hall as he headed for the classroom, his footsteps echoing dully through the empty corridors.

Mark growled in frustration when he pulled at the closed door, the lock rattling inside its mooring. It wasn't that early. Was it so much to ask to be able to get some actual painting done in an art building?

The adrenaline that had been surging through his veins dissipated, leaving him with just enough strength to sag against the wall and slide down its cool surface. With his head buried in his hands, Mark tried to block out the images that still danced behind his closed eyes, the colors that breathed with their own life, the hidden luxury of the woman's body disappearing beneath the water's surface. Being in this mode was both exhilarating and maddening for him. He craved the fervor at which he could create when he got this inspired, but when his efforts to get it out of his head were thwarted, it felt like he was going crazy.

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A soft nudge at his foot made him finally look up. Dressed in baggy jeans and a translucent blouse that made her curves even more appetizing, Lou looked down at him with a bemused smile on her face.

"You're very early," she said.

Her voice was deeper than he'd imagined, though really, she hadn't spoken in his dreams and most of his thoughts of her had been obsessions with the flow of her body within the aspects of water. Still, it was musical, with the faint lilt of a Texan accent nearly forgotten shading her cadences.

When he scrambled to his feet, Mark realized just how tiny she really was. Stretched out on the dais before the class, it had been impossible to get a true feel for her height, and for some reason, his imagination had had her in Amazonian proportions. But he was six-two, and here, beyond the realm of his fantasies, she had to tilt her head back to look up at him when he stood. It was disconcerting.

"Do you talk?" she teased when he didn't say anything right away. "Or are you one of those savants who expresses everything through painting?"

"I talk," he said, and then immediately felt like a fool. This was not how he'd envisioned meeting her. "You just took me by surprise."

"That's why I nudged you first. You looked like you were in your own little world. It didn't look like a happy one."

Her gentle teasing relaxed some of the knots in his stomach, and Mark let his smile join hers. "I just want class to get started," he said. "I didn't get as much done as I wanted to yesterday."

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"You have all week," she said. "And it's not like I'm going anywhere."

"I know, but..." This was getting ridiculous. He wasn't supposed to be tongue-tied around her; it just wasn't his style. Awkwardly, he stuck his hand out, hoping that a formal introduction would put him more at ease. "Mark Douglas."

She took it, and her hand, though smaller than his, molded to his slim fingers perfectly. "Tallulah Weaver."

It suited her. Exotic and simple all in one breath. The only thing he found curious was why she'd used her full name instead of the nickname the class instructor had shared.

"Why are you here so early?" he asked.

"I didn't have anything else to do."

He glanced at his watch. There was almost an hour before class was due to start and since it was glaringly obvious that he was just going to be sitting here that entire time, it was better for him if he actually did something with it.

Like get to know the model even better.

"Have you had breakfast?" he blurted. "Because I haven't, and if you haven't either, then maybe we could get some together. While we wait. Because we need to eat. To keep our strength up."

Her lips twitched in amusement. Mark suspected that if he was in her shoes, he'd be outright laughing at the idiot standing in front of him. This was just one more reason why he was better off alone.

"Actually," she said, "I already ate. But if you went someplace where I could get a coffee, I'd be willing to tag along." Her amusement turned into a full-blown smile. "I

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could make sure you don't fall over before you get some food in your stomach. It wouldn't be good for you to pass out and then miss the class you're so excited about."

He took her up on the offer, gathering his supplies and tucking them beneath his arm as she led the way through the building. Instead of the rear exit, she took him to the front, dismissive of the locks that would prevent them from re-entering right away.

"They'll be around to open them before we get back," she said in explanation.

"You sound like you know the routine pretty well. Do you model here a lot?"

She shook her head. "Actually, this is my first time, but a friend asked for a favor. I have a hard time saying no to people."

The faint question if she was only joining him for breakfast because of that very reason darkened Mark's mood, but he forced it aside, unwilling to spoil the moment with reality. Leading her to the small café nearby, he held the door open for her when they arrived. Unbidden, his eyes strayed to the soft sway of her hips as she walked toward the counter. She was more exciting up close and personal, and if possible, sexier with her clothes on. It was as if she was completely unaware of her appeal, wearing her femininity with a casualness akin to breathing.

It had been a long time since Mark had met anyone who seemed so genuine.

True to her word, she just ordered coffee to his ham and egg bagel, loading the dark fluid with milk and sugar before

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taking it to a small table in the window. "Are you enjoying the class?" she asked as he dove into his sandwich.

He shrugged while he chewed. "I don't usually do people," he said once he'd swallowed. "But this is turning out a lot better than I'd thought it would. I guess I've been inspired."

Her cheeks pinked, and she ducked her eyes as she sipped at her steaming coffee. Mark had to resist the temptation to reach out and touch her. Sometimes, she still felt surreal to him.

"So, what am I supposed to call you?" he asked. "Lou or Tallulah?"

"Whichever one you prefer," she replied. "I pretty much answer to both. Somebody used to call me Tally once, too."

"Why did you get introduced to the class as Lou, then?"

"It's about creating art, right? Well, you have to admit, Tallulah comes with baggage. Preconceived notions. Going by Lou forces you guys to come up with your own interpretation." Her nose wrinkled up as she considered it. "It made a lot more sense when we thought of it yesterday."

It dawned on him that he still didn't really have an answer to his question. As tempting as it was to just accept her claims to call her what he wanted, Mark wanted something more than that. He'd already spent the last twenty-four hours creating fantasy; now he wanted the reality.

"What do you like to be called?" he asked, straining for nonchalance. He deliberately didn't meet her eyes, though as he took another bite of his sandwich, he couldn't help but glance up and see the surprise in her deep blue eyes.

"Tallulah," she admitted. "It's..."

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When she struggled to find the right word, he said it for her.

"Unique."

Her soft smile was the only confirmation he needed that he'd said exactly the right thing.

* * * *

The morning flew by, much more quickly than the day previous, but Tallulah was already robed and out the door before Mark could put his brush down to go talk to her. They had returned from their impromptu breakfast chatting like old friends, and he'd hoped to continue it afterward, maybe ask her if she would be interested in getting another meal where this time she actually ate something.

Her swift disappearance put a kibosh on that plan, however. When he realized he wasn't going to catch up to her, he deliberately slowed down his clean-up until it was only him and the instructor left in the room.

"I think you've found your new niche," the instructor said.

She was standing in front of his easel, her head tilted as she regarded his work from the past two days. It was still only half-done, but the waves he'd spent a good part of the morning painting now glowed where they lapped over Tallulah's bare form, making her skin glisten and pulse where she emerged from the water. Her long hair was draped over her body, hiding what the sea did not, but it was the impish gleam in her eyes that truly transfixed the viewer.

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"Yeah, well, Tallulah's made it a little easier for me." At her raised eyebrow, Mark added, "I ran into her this morning before class. We got to know each other over breakfast."

Her amused smile revealed more than any recrimination she might utter, but before she could turn away, he stepped in front of her and said, "I was hoping she and I could continue our conversation. I don't suppose you know where I can find her, do you?"

"I thought you'd ... gotten to know her?" Her teasing made him squirm in discomfort, but she didn't prolong the agony, chuckling as she shook her head. "Something tells me you'd find out on your own anyway," she said. "She works in Admissions. If you hurry, you can probably catch her before she starts her afternoon shift."

His broad grin was followed swiftly by his mad dash from the classroom, his supplies forgotten behind him. By the time he reached the building where Admissions was located, his heart was thudding inside his chest, though it wasn't necessarily the physical exertion of the run that was the cause.

He was standing at the top of the stairs, bent over at the waist to catch his breath, when he saw a pair of sandaled feet come to a stop in front of him.

"This is getting to be a habit," Tallulah said.

When Mark straightened, she was smiling at him quizzically, though there was something guarded in her eyes that hadn't been there either in the classroom or over their breakfast. God, she probably thinks I'm some kind of stalker, he thought wildly, then realized that of course she thought

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that. Here he was at her work when she'd never even told him where that was.

"I'm not crazy," he blurted.

That drew a laugh, which somehow, made it better. "I know."

"I just wanted to ask you out, and then you took off so I couldn't, and so I asked the teacher who told me where you worked..." He stopped before his babbling made him look even more like an idiot. "She can vouch for me, if you want. Tell you I'm not some psycho who goes after models. I don't even—"

"—do people. You said." Though her smile faded, her steady regard of him became softer, and when she caught her bottom lip between her teeth, Mark's breath hitched in his chest. "I don't really think that's such a great idea," she finally said.

The possibility that she would turn him down hadn't even occurred to him. "What? Why?"

"Well, there's your class—"

"I'll drop it."

"Just for a date?"

"If that's what it'll take." Now that his body was getting back under his control, he was able to look at her more evenly, keep his chin up as he tried to show her just how serious he was. "Look, I know you don't me from Adam, but I don't do this kind of thing. Ask women out, I mean."

"You're not gay, are you? Because if you're asking me out just to try and prove something to yourself..."

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His eyes had widened, his mouth ready to protest, before he realized she was kidding. "It's just that ... well, I've got my work, for one thing," Mark said. "It keeps me busy. I don't get a lot of opportunities to meet interesting women, especially ones that look as amazing as you do."

Though she flushed in embarrassment at his compliment, Tallulah didn't back away from his direct gaze. "You're only saying that because you've seen me naked," she said. "If I'd been draped in burlap with mud in my hair, I don't think you'd be as eager to take me out."

"You'd be wrong." Taking a deep breath, he dared to take a step closer. "None of that would've hidden your eyes. They told me all I need to know about you."

Her finely arched brows lifted in surprise, and a pleased smile curved her lips. "Oh, you're good at this." But before he could argue, she added, "But you don't know everything. I work until six-thirty. I'm allergic to watermelon, I don't like movies I have to read, and I'm not a big fan of wearing a lot of make-up unless someone's getting married and I have to get my picture taken. If you try to snow me, I'll know it because I can't stand poseurs." She brushed past him, heading for the front door, only stopping once her hand was on the handle.

"Oh, and I hate having to repeat myself," she said, glancing back at him. A coy gleam appeared in her eyes. "But you didn't know that, so this one's a freebie. Six-thirty."

With that, she was gone.

Mark stood there for a full minute, fathoming out what had just happened. Had she said yes? Funnily enough, he had the

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distinct feeling she was the one orchestrating this date, which actually wasn't that awful to consider. In fact, the more he thought about it, the better he liked it. Someplace deep within his belly began to warm.

He had a date.

With her.

He couldn't wipe the pleased grin from his face as he turned to head back down the stairs.

* * * *

It took him longer to get ready than he would've guessed, but by the time Mark stood in front of the lone mirror in his apartment, he was fairly happy with the result.

Casual was the name of the game; Tallulah had made that abundantly clear. Casual, however, didn't mean sloppy, so Mark had settled on his favorite jeans and a button-down shirt that Thia had given him as a Christmas present the year before. The hunter green offset his dark hair and tanned skin, while the jeans were comfortable but effectively showcased the fact that he was a runner. At least, that's what he thought. Well ... hoped.

For a moment before walking out the door, he debated taking some of his work to show her. Nothing defined him more clearly than his art, and considering how he'd already bumbled trying to talk to her, maybe he was better off letting his paintings speak for him. In the end, though, Mark decided against it. It would make it look like he was only interested in her professionally, and while he was dying to get more of

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Tallulah on canvas, he was even more eager to get to know her personally.

He wasn't going to stop and analyze that development. It was going to be tough enough telling Thia that she'd been right and he'd been wrong.

It was six-twenty when he arrived at her work, but before he could climb the front stairs of the building, his gaze was riveted by a small form sitting on the top step. She must've gotten off early, and the reason why that might be brought a smile to his lips. She'd also changed. Her jeans were gone, replaced with a long, flowing skirt that was currently billowing in the wind, exposing her calves to his inspection, and her long honey-colored hair was pulled into a loose knot on top of her head. It showcased the elegant line of her neck and made her look like one of Raphael's models. She was beautiful.

"You said six-thirty," Mark said teasingly as he closed the distance between them.

She met him halfway down the stairs, staying one above so that they could meet eye to eye. Without saying a word, Tallulah leaned in until her mouth met his, her fingers splaying across his chest in order to steady herself.

He wasn't expecting the kiss, and by the time he'd gotten over the shock of her warm mouth on his, the soft trace of her tongue across his lower lip, she was already pulling away, slipping her hand in his in order to tug him down the stairs.

"I'm starving," she said without looking back. "Let's go eat."

Their fingers stayed laced together as they walked. Neither spoke, but Mark was fairly sure that anything he'd say would

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be incoherent. His mouth still tingled from its brief contact with hers, and his cock was rock-hard where it was trapped against his thigh. He was extremely grateful he'd chosen to wear jeans that were on the loose side, or this date would've been over the instant she saw how aroused he was in her presence.

"Do you like sushi?" Tallulah asked.

She'd stopped in front of a tiny market, one he never would have noticed if he'd been on his own. Her gaze was tilted in his direction, waiting for his response, but the slight smile that curved her mouth made him want to lean over and kiss her again instead of speak. How in hell did he think he could do this without coming off looking like he was completely obsessed with her?

"It doesn't look like there's any place to eat it," he managed to say.

"We could take it down to the waterfront." Her eyes glittered with amusement. "Unless the irony of eating raw fish while watching the bay is too much for you, in which case we can get something else."

He chuckled. "No, that sounds like a great idea."

Her joking made it easier to talk while they ordered their food and then carried it the few blocks to the water's edge. There was no more overt touching, but every once in a while, Tallulah's arm would brush against his, sending a cascade of shivers along his skin. Mark tried not to focus on it, deliberately keeping his gaze focused elsewhere while they chatted. By the time they reached a comfortable spot, he was

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finally beginning to feel that he could have some control over his own body.

They sat side by side, looking over the crystalline bay as they continued the conversation over their food. He learned that she was a year younger than he and had moved to California from Texas when she'd been nine. Her parents were one of those modern-day anomalies, she said, still married and still very much in love after thirty-five years.

"It makes it a very hard act to follow," Tallulah admitted.

"How so?"

"Because I've seen how relationships should be," she explained. For the first time since they'd sat down, she shifted to look up at him. There was something sad lurking in the back of her eyes. "My parents have taught me that it's possible to find that special someone and make it work,—really work,—so it ends up coloring how I look at people."

"Always looking for that long-haul guy?"

"No, it's not even that." With a sigh, she turned sideways to face him, tucking her legs up beneath her long skirt. "It'll happen when it happens, I'm a big believer in that. But knowing what kind of love is out there ... when I meet new people, one of the first things I do is try and figure out what exactly they have to offer. Not to just me, but ... to everyone, if that makes sense. Are they a giver or a taker? Do they expect to have things handed to them or are they willing to work for what's really important? You know. That kind of thing."

"Does that mean I passed inspection?"

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The corner of her mouth lifted. "The jury's still out on you, Mr. Douglas."

"Well, at least it wasn't a snap judgment. The longer you have to deliberate, the better my odds."

When she laughed, it was like warmed honey being poured into his skin. Mark decided that it was his new favorite sound.

They didn't move from their spot, even after they'd long finished their dinner. The sun disappeared beyond the horizon, and the stars began to twinkle faintly in the velvet sky, but still, Mark and Tallulah continued to talk, sharing both the superficial and more meaningful as they forgot about the world around them. It was likely the oddest date he had ever been on, but then, she was without a doubt the most unusual woman he'd ever met. The trade-off was worth it.

"Why do you do it?" she suddenly asked out of the blue.

"Do what?"

"Paint. It's not exactly the pinnacle of job security."

He couldn't see her eyes any more. With the only source of illumination the few streetlights and the moon overhead, all Mark could detect was a faint glow in her pale face. It made it impossible to read just what she might be expecting.

"Because I don't like myself very much when I don't," he finally said. The truth was his best option. "There's this whole Jekyll and Hyde thing when I stop painting for awhile. It's really not pretty."

"And why don't you paint people?"

She was playing with the folds of her skirt, and every once in a while, the back of her fingers would flutter across his thigh. Maybe sitting in the dark was a good thing after all.

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"Because people lie. They lack the ... grace of what's out there in nature. I paint people and I just end up being disappointed with the final product."

He couldn't look at her as he made the confession. He knew how it made him sound; Thia had told him more than once just what a jerk he was when it came to things of the more personal nature. But the fluttering near his thigh became more insistent, and Mark glanced down to realize that she'd placed her hand on top of his leg.

"If I said please, would you let me see some of your work?" she asked. "I have to admit, I'm more than a little curious."

He looked at his watch. "The gallery where my stuff is exhibited is closed."

"You don't have any someplace else?"

There was no guile in her voice, and when he searched her face for ... something, he came up with nothing that didn't match exactly what she'd declared. "My apartment," he said. "Everything else I've done is there. Well, except for the one of you—"

"I already know what I look like." Just as she had in front of her work, Tallulah took his hand in hers and pulled him to his feet. "Let's go."

It all happened so quickly that Mark couldn't stop her, though frankly, that was the farthest option from his mind. They were at the station, and then on the train, and then she was leaning against his side, making up stories about the other passengers that he couldn't help but laugh at. It felt entirely too natural, like it was something they'd planned all

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along. Even when he saw his stop approach, she rose when he did without an iota of hesitation, keeping their fingers entwined as they got off the train and walked away from the platform.

He held the door open for her to enter the apartment first, grateful that inside wasn't a complete disaster. Being busy the past couple days meant he wasn't around to make a mess of things, and since he'd never even entertained the possibility that they'd somehow end up back at his place before the date was through, he hadn't felt the urge to tidy what little disorder there was. The only thing that made him cringe was the sketchpad that was propped open near the door, with the angle of Tallulah's face that he'd drawn clearly visible against the paper.

Thankfully, she completely ignored the doorway, stepping into the middle of the room and making a full circle before facing him again.

"You don't display any of them," she said, gesturing toward the bare walls.

"Not where people can see them," he countered. "Come on."

He led her through the living room and into the spare bedroom that he used as a work area, flicking on the overhead light and then standing back so that she could see the canvases that edged the room. They didn't hang; rather, he had them propped up against the wall so that he could move them around as he saw fit, take them over to Thia's when she wanted them for display there. It meant he spent a

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lot of his time in this room exactly as Tallulah was now, crouching down so that he could get a better viewpoint.

Actually, she was kneeling, ignoring most of the vistas near the doorway and going straight for a painting in the corner. Something in Mark's stomach knotted as he realized which one it was, and he began to desperately wish that he hadn't agreed to this little showing in the first place.

It was the painting he'd done immediately after Amy had left. When she'd announced that she'd been seeing one of the associates at the firm where she worked as a paralegal, Mark had been hurt but honestly thought that she was only telling him so that they could fix what was wrong with their relationship. After all, why announce the affair if it wasn't meant to be a confessional for moving on to better things?

Apparently, Amy was of the opinion that revealing it so casually was necessary to make him hurt as much as possible. She went on to tell him just how lacking Mark was in their so-called relationship, how he was more devoted to his work than he was to her, how she'd been sleeping around for over four months and he'd been too clueless to even notice anything was wrong. She'd walked out with a flounce and most of his CDs, leaving him wondering just what had happened there.

Thia talked him into getting away for a few days, saying a change of scenery would do him good, so he'd driven out to Yosemite for some camping and alone time. There was no way he could go there and not paint, but the canvas that had come back with him was unlike any of his other, more vital works.

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It was of a portion of the park that had been largely ignored by many of the tourists for years, not as navigable as the rest without clear paths to make hiking easier. Mark had gone exploring and soon found himself within a copse where the sunlight bathed the ground in gold. There were fewer trees there, as the dense undergrowth had inhibited their expansion, but one in particular had caught his eye, making him stop and commit the picture to canvas.

At some point in the distant past, someone had tried chopping the tree down, carving out a deep section along one side. They had either given up or been forced to stop before physics could take over and pull the tree down, and the tree had gone on living, new bark forming over the old gash but forever slightly bent from the attack. It didn't provide the focal point of his painting; instead, he'd placed it nearly hidden in the background, while filling the fore with those that hadn't been assaulted. But it was there, unmistakable where the trunk was blackened with time.

It was, in Mark's opinion, the most self-indulgent piece of artwork in his entire collection. His anger and frustration and hurt from Amy's betrayal had guided every stroke, haunted every color choice. He had laid his heart open and spread it across the canvas, and he had regretted it the moment he brought it home. More than once, he'd considered getting rid of the painting, and more than once, he'd talked himself out of doing so. He'd never even let Thia see it, saying that he hadn't been inspired enough while he was gone to pick up his paintbrushes. Tallulah's were the first eyes other than his own to ever look it over.

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She was doing more than looking. She was on her hands and knees in front of it, her nose just bare inches away as she looked over the fine strokes of the bushes, the dull oranges and reds peeking through the trees he'd added to the tableau. Every time she shifted, Mark jumped a little, afraid—irrational as it was—that she was going to touch it. Then she spoke.

"This is beautiful," she whispered. When she turned her head to look at him over her shoulder, her eyes were glistening. "Why are you hiding it?"

"I'm not," he said, suddenly defensive. Awkwardly, he took a step away, thrusting his hands deep into his front pockets to hide the trembling in them. This was a bad idea. He should never have thought he could share these; all it ever did was ask for disaster.

"But this is fantastic. Why would your agent make you take a life studies class when you do work like this?"

He wanted to say, Because I don't. Not any more. But he wasn't willing to admit out loud to how effectively he had deadened his heart against any more painful feelings. This canvas was the last tangible proof of what he'd felt for Amy. After he brought it home, everything had changed.

Tallulah rose to her feet. When she walked away from the painting to come and stand in front of him, it took his last shred of control not to exhale loudly in relief.

"So did it satisfy your curiosity?" he asked. He did it quickly. He didn't want to hear what she might say otherwise.

"I think it whetted it even more," she admitted. Catching her bottom lip between her teeth, she thought for a long moment before saying, "I want you to paint me."

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The request took him by surprise, shaking him from the anxiety that had wrapped around his gut about having her there. "I'm already painting you, remember?"

"No." She shook her head. "Here." Her fingers were on the buttons of her blouse, undoing them with a quick deliberation. "Now."

The filmy fabric was already falling from her shoulders before Mark could take a calming breath. "You don't have to—" The rest of it choked in his throat when she undid her nude-colored bra and tossed it to the floor with her blouse.

It wasn't seeing her topless that made his skin suddenly flare in heat. He'd seen her, two days running, in the classroom, had stamped her curves indelibly in his memory as he painted and sketched, both there and not. But she hadn't been this close before, she hadn't been this real. This wasn't the enigmatic model posing for strangers. This was Tallulah. He knew her now. That made all the difference.

"I don't think you're getting it," she was saying. She'd already kicked off her sandals, and her hands were busy pushing her skirt down past her rounded hips, taking her simple white underwear along with it. "When I say I want you to paint me, I don't mean like in class."

Now, she was completely naked, standing up straight before him, her full breasts just inches away. He wanted to look down—oh god, did he want to look down—but somewhere in the back of his mind was the faint doubt that this was all a test, that she just wanted to see if she could tempt him and that if he wanted any kind of real future with her, he'd treat her with the utmost of respect.

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But he really wanted to look.

"Tallulah..."

She wasn't listening. "You can just do it on my back, if that'll make you more comfortable," she said. Turning around, she presented the smooth expanse for his scrutiny, keeping her neck twisted so that she could watch his face.

This time, he did lower his gaze, sweeping over the butterfly bows of her shoulders, down the dainty curvature of her spine, ending at the soft swell of her bottom that was almost pressing into his crotch. In his pockets, his hands balled into fists to keep from touching her, but his mouth was watering at the delicate scent that emanated from her skin.

"I don't ... the paints I have ... they wouldn't wash off," he finally managed to say.

"Do you have anything that would?"

He thought it was a guileless question until he tore his eyes away from her back to look into her face again. Her pupils had completely overwhelmed the blue irises, and her lips were wet from the way she continually darted her tongue over them. All of a sudden, Mark realized that she was just as aroused as he was, that this didn't have to be simply an academic exercise she was proposing.

"I think I can find something," he murmured. He took a step back toward the door, unwilling to turn away in case she did something crazy like disappear.

"Will the light be good enough in here?" she asked.

It wasn't, but he didn't know what else to suggest. His bedroom would be too presumptuous, the kitchen too cold. That left only...

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"I'll lay out a sheet in the living room," Mark said. "Do you want a pillow?"

When she smiled this time, all doubt finally fled. "You're the artist," Tallulah said. "You decide."

* * * *

It wasn't the best of palettes. He'd scrounged around in his cupboards, pulling out everything he could think would color her skin and still be workable, and had come up with very little. What was worse was feeling each minute tick away, knowing that she was in the next room with nothing on, waiting for him to do ... what exactly? God, he hoped he wasn't reading this wrong. It had been a long time since he'd had to worry about interpreting signals.

When he stepped into the living room with the tray of supplies, his throat tightened at the sight displayed before him.

She'd taken the sheet he'd given her and spread it out in the middle of the floor, just as he'd suggested. Then, she'd stretched out along the smooth cotton, folding her arms so that she could lay down her head. The hair that she'd released from the bun now spilled over her shoulders, but when she saw him enter, Tallulah reached to push it out of the way, baring the soft slope of her unblemished back.

"I was starting to get cold," she said softly.

That got his feet moving faster than anything else she could've said. Crouching at her side, Mark arranged his materials while surreptitiously glancing at the way her breasts

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still managed to seem so full in spite of being pressed into the floor. He wondered if her nipples were hard.

When he picked up his brush, she turned her head quizzically toward him. "Aren't you worried about getting stuff on you?" she asked. Her thick lashes dipped, taking in the long line of his legs folded beneath him. "It's OK. I don't mind if you take something off."

He didn't expect her to watch as he pulled his shirt from his waistband, so when her eyes followed the upward path of his fingers as he undid the buttons, Mark's mouth went dry.

"Is it weird for you?"

He hadn't been expecting her to speak again. "Is what weird?"

She waited until he'd slipped the shirt from his shoulders. "Letting your model see just as much as you do."

"You're not my model. You're my canvas."

"Is that all?"

He averted his gaze at that, deciding in that moment to leave his jeans on. His cock was achingly hard, and if he stripped down the rest of the way, he was certain there wouldn't be any painting getting done.

The tip of his brush dipped into the bowl of strawberry jam, coating the bristles thick with the sticky red. When he turned back to Tallulah, she'd resumed her original pose, gazing straight ahead with her chin resting on her folded hands. If he looked closely, he could see the gentle rise and fall caused by her breathing, could see the tenuous sinew beneath the tender skin. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen anything so erotic.

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The first trail of the brush across her back left a curlicue around her shoulder blade. He wasn't entirely sure what he was going to create, but the soft exhalation that escaped Tallulah's lips as he painted emboldened his efforts, drawing the scarlet lines down and around, sweeping both broad and fine as he let his hand take the initiative. He had to reload his brush more than once, and when the color seemed to fade from his initial strokes, he went over them again. Every curve of her back became another plane for him to mold, her spine the stratum from which the rest took life. By the time he set aside the red and began with the rich brown of the chocolate sauce, Mark could already feel the spirit of the work taking hold.

He couldn't reach the far edge of her shoulder sitting as he was. Propping himself on the knuckles of his left hand, Mark leaned forward so that he could keep his brush straight as he painted. His bare chest was scant inches from her skin, the scent of sugar mingling with that of her perfume. If he turned his head, he would be able to bury his nose in the long tangle of her hair, but that was a possibility he couldn't entertain. Not just yet.

"You have a camera, right?"

Her voice was barely a whisper, but she shifted just enough to make her words clear. It put her profile into view, and he hesitated with his next stroke as he glanced over and saw the soft swell of her lower lip.

"Somewhere," he replied. "Why?"

"Because I want to see it, silly."

"It's not done yet."

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"I don't care." This time, the muscles in her back flexed as she rolled slightly away so that she could look at him more directly. It put their skin into direct contact with each other, and Mark was shocked at just how warm she really was.

"You're spoiling it by moving," he warned.

"Am I?" Craning her neck, she peered over her shoulder, her eyes widening with delighted surprise at what she could see. "How do you do it?" she asked.

He shook his head, though he couldn't bring himself to separate from where their bodies touched. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know. Creating something so beautiful from nothing."

What bothered him the most was that it looked like she actually believed what she said. "You're not nothing," Mark whispered.

It was meant to be just a gentle, reassuring kiss. When he lowered his head to meet his mouth to hers, Mark had every intention of it being fleeting, more affirmation than aspiration. But the taste of her, the willing parting of her lips the moment they touched, made that purpose vanish.

The brush fell from his fingers so that he could cup her cheek, holding her still while he deepened the kiss. She tasted of the ginger she'd had with her sushi, spicy and warmer than he'd imagined she would, but there was nothing timid about the way her tongue invited his into the swelter of her mouth, teasing him into taking even more. He fell into the appeal with an abandon that almost frightened him. Letting his hand slide away from her face, he let it drift to the slope

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of her shoulder, pulling her against him so that she could sit up.

Tallulah broke from the kiss and stared at him with dark eyes. "Don't," she murmured. She shifted to separate their torsos, being careful to make it a clean movement. "You'll destroy it."

He knew without her elaborating that it wasn't the moment to which she was referring. "I'll paint you another," Mark said, pushing aside the palette at the side of the sheet.

"But I didn't get to see this one."

He paused, unsure what to do. His pulse was thudding in his throat, his skin flaming for more of her body's heat. The last thing he wanted right now was to paint, but the way Tallulah carefully laid back onto her stomach meant that she was serious about not losing what he'd already finished.

"Can you show it to me?"

Her query was simple, so simple that he didn't understand. It took meeting her eyes, seeing his desire mirrored there, for him to finally decide what to do next.

Slowly, Mark leaned over, his mouth hovering over her shoulder blade where he'd first placed his brush. "It starts here," he whispered and closed his eyes. He didn't need to see how the design went; it was already imprinted onto his brain.

She gasped when his tongue touched her skin. He was very careful not to let any other places on their bodies touch, allowing the trail his mouth made as it followed the lines of the painting be the only sensations Tallulah felt. By the time he'd finished the first scarlet swirl, she was already trembling,

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her breath coming in shallow pants. The second line had her skin raised in goosebumps, and the third drew a whimper from deep within her throat.

"Don't stop," she begged when he pulled away.

"I couldn't even if I wanted to," he replied. "Come here."

She was already shifting when he slipped his hands beneath her arms to help guide her to a sitting position. Her legs splayed out in front of her, and Mark sat directly behind, mirroring her pose so that her ass pressed lightly into his crotch. Though his mouth was sticky from the jam he'd already licked from her back, he pressed his lips to her bare shoulder, silently thrilled when she tilted her head to allow him better access.

"I didn't feel you paint up there," Tallulah said.

"I didn't. I just can't resist tasting you."

His hands slid around to her stomach, then skated upward to cup her full breasts. They weighed heavy in his palms, and his mouth watered at the prospect of tasting there as well, driving him to nip at the sinew of her neck.

Tallulah arched away at the sudden bite, her hiss of delight echoing into the room. Arching her arm back, her hand cupped Mark's nape, keeping his mouth close as her fingers coiled into his hair. "I'm beginning to wish I was the one who painted you," she breathed. "You're getting all the fun."

He chuckled against her skin. "Oh, I don't think I'm the only one."

"Next time, I'm going to be the one with the brushes. I'm staking my claim here and now."

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Something inside him delighted at her automatic assumption that there was going to be a next time. Not that he didn't want it, but after his less than stellar record with women, Mark had long ago stopped trying to predict how long a relationship might last. That way led to heartache. His path with Tallulah, however, hinted at anything but.

His hands found her nipples, already hard with desire. As he nibbled a trail up her neck to the tender flesh of her earlobe, he rolled the puckered buds between his fingers and was rewarded with her nails digging into his scalp. "Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?" he whispered when his mouth reached her ear. "It feels like I've wanted you for forever."

Her small laugh made her body vibrate. "That's because you're male and you saw a naked woman in front of you," she teased.

"No matter how many times you say that, it won't make it true. This..." One of his hands left her breasts to slide down her side and around her hip, slipping beneath her bottom to hold her more tightly against him. "...is just a bonus."

"So I'm some kind of prize?"

While he knew she was only playing, the word games were beginning to wear a little thin. Releasing his hold on her, Mark crawled around until he was kneeling in front of her, positioning himself so that they were looking at each other eye to eye.

"You're the first woman in two years who's been in this apartment because I wanted them here," he said. "This ... whatever it is ... this doesn't happen to me. I don't see

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inspiration in every pretty girl that walks down the street, and I didn't get inspired because you were lying naked in front of the class." He felt like his hands were shaking when he lifted them to cup her face, but to his shock, they remained steady, even as his thumbs caressed the arch of her cheekbones.

"Don't turn this into some kind of a game." He was pleading, and he knew it, but Mark didn't know how else to convey just how serious he was about this. "It's not for me. I really don't want it to be for you."

The longer she stayed silent, the more he began to worry that he'd said too much. Damn it. He was way out of practice when it came to women. Amy had accused him of being distant and now here he was, trying to overcompensate by sounding too needy. Tallulah was going to walk out the door any second now.

Except she didn't. She just watched him with those eyes that looked as if they'd seen everything. Then she was reaching, pressing her hands flat to his chest and then skimming downward over his taut stomach. His muscles fluttered at the faint touch, but when she reached the button of his jeans, Mark came back to life.

"Did you hear what I said?" he asked, grabbing her wrists to keep her from continuing.

"I heard."

"And...?"

"Thank you."

Gratitude was most certainly the last thing he expected to hear. It must have shown in his face because he was now at a loss for words.

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"You trust me enough to be honest with me," she explained. A ghost of a smile curved her lips. "I did mention how much I hated poseurs, right?"

"Yeah," Mark breathed.

Slowly, he relaxed his grip on her wrists, feeling her fingers fumble with the stiff denim. His cock was straining inside his jeans, and the thought that she was so close, that any second now, her hand would be wrapped around his length, almost made him come right then.

She didn't touch him, though. Instead, once the zipper was pushed down, Tallulah took Mark's hands in hers and rose to her feet, tugging him up with her. His jeans slipped a little down his hips, and when she started pushing them down the rest of the way, he realized that had been her intention all along.

"Can I taste you now?" she asked.

She was on her knees, long hair trailing over her shoulders to nearly cover her breasts. How was he supposed to answer that? he wondered. If he said anything at all, he was going to sound ridiculous. But when she ran the tip of her tongue over her lips, moistening them so that they gleamed in the dim light of the room, Mark couldn't help but groan at the sheer promise of it.

Tallulah took that as a yes. Gripping his cock lightly at the base, she tilted it downward just enough to be able to flick her tongue across the slit at the tip, lapping the drop of fluid it found there. His knees quivered, and his hand went automatically to the back of her head, but Mark used every last ounce of his control to just rest it there rather than begin

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guiding her movements. The last thing he wanted was to spoil the moment by appearing over-eager.

He watched her lick around the head, tracing the ridge where soft met hard, before taking just the tip into her mouth. He had no delusions that she'd get anywhere near getting his whole cock in; at almost eight inches fully hard, he was more than aware that it was just too much for most women to handle comfortably when it came to oral sex. That was okay. He wanted more than that tonight anyway.

Another inch disappeared past her lips. As her tongue continued swirling and circling the hard shaft, Tallulah began sucking up and down, each time taking just a little bit more into the warm haven of her mouth. She kept the pace slow, the suction tight, until he could feel the tip of his cock nudging against the back of her throat. In and out, over and over, seconds melting into minutes until the shivers running down the back of his thighs threatened to make his legs buckle. If she kept this up, he was going to come much sooner than he wanted.

"Tallulah..." Mark murmured. His voice sounded like a hungry gasp, and it amazed him that he could speak at all. But when she didn't stop or even slow, he caught his fingers in her hair, preventing her from sucking down his shaft again. "Stop, please."

This time, he tugged enough to pull her away. His cock slipped from her mouth with a wet plop, and she sat back on her heels to gaze up at him quizzically.

"Don't tell me you weren't enjoying that," she said carefully.

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It was almost a question. He hated that he'd caused even an iota of doubt as to her ability to make him feel good, and he crouched down so that he could pull her into his arms.

"This'll probably sound selfish as hell," he said, "but I'd rather have this last all night than give in to how good a blowjob might feel right now."

"All night?" she said with a small laugh in her voice. "You're not interested in even a little bit of sleep before class tomorrow?"

He grinned, brushing his mouth across her temple. "Well, maybe a little."

Now that he was so close to her, Mark couldn't resist bending to run his tongue across the top of her nearest breast, watching the nipple pucker and harden even more right before his eyes. Tallulah fell back against the sheet, pulling him with her, and his mouth slid upward to find hers. Kissing her was like setting his body on fire without worry of combustion, and by the time they parted, all he wanted was to start again.

His cock nudged against her thigh. "You don't have to wear anything," Tallulah said softly. "It's safe without."

The worry of how he was going to ask about protection fled with her confirmation, and Mark smiled, brushing back a lock of hair from her sweat-sticky brow. "I'll remember that. Right now, I have something else in mind."

He loved the feel of the tiny tremors beneath her skin as he began kissing a path down between her breasts. Knowing that he was the cause of it, that she was as excited about him as he was for her, made Mark want to please Tallulah all the

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more. He veered away from the wet trail to circle first one nipple and then the other, capturing the second between his teeth when she arched her back in pleasure.

"God, yes," she breathed. Her nails dug into his nape as she held him closer, her hushed encouragement spurring him to repeat the nibble on the other side. Every bite made her skin flush just a little bit hotter, until by the time he abandoned her breasts to slide even further down her stomach, he could smell the heat emanating from her pores.

He let his fingers touch her first, skimming over the soft flesh of her inner thigh. Resting his cheek against her plush hip, Mark played the role of both voyeur and instigator as her hand joined his, stroking and exploring before her legs parted, the smell of her sex growing thicker in the air.

"Touch yourself," he murmured.

Her fingers hesitated, then glided over her outer lips to dip lower and lower, only delving in between when they began to travel back up. His mouth watered at the sight of her clit, glistening with her fluids, and he forgot all about his game as he bent to dart his tongue across it.

Tallulah cried out at the unexpected contact, her hips rising from the floor to drive her pussy deeper into his mouth. It smeared his lips with more of her, made it impossible not be aware of just how aroused she really was. For me, Mark thought, smug and amazed at the same time. Shifting across her leg, he began licking along her slit, tracing her opening while he learned her every curve, all the while letting his hands caress the tremulous muscles of her thighs.

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"I'm going to have to paint you down here some time," he murmured at one point.

"You just want to be able to eat away the paints," she teased.

"Well, yeah." Mark lifted his head, eyes glinting in amusement. "You're bringing out an oral fixation I didn't realize I had."

"What about other fixations?"

Her hands pulled at his shoulders, and he allowed himself to be maneuvered upward so that his long body was hovering over hers. He swiveled his hips so that the head of his cock nudged against her clit. "Is that what you meant?" he asked, his voice husky.

"Getting a little closer." Slipping her hands between their bodies, Tallulah wrapped her fingers around his shaft, pumping up and down several times while her legs spread wider, her calves hooking around his thighs to keep him in place. "So. Do we call this performance art?"

Though he smiled, Mark didn't say a word. He just angled his hips so that his cock dipped lower in spite of her hold, swiping across her opening until it was poised for entry. Leaning forward, he kissed her, swallowing her down, and almost forgot for a moment the way they were positioned. It was so easy. Everything about her made the world seem simpler. He could fall in love with a woman who could do that. He was half there already.

She coaxed him on, letting him go and lifting her body just enough for the head of his cock to slip inside. She was so wet that it was effortless, hot and slick and inviting him even

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deeper, that Mark finished the stroke without thought, groaning into her mouth as each inch grew tighter, each centimeter grew hotter. When his balls finally brushed against the curve of her ass, he shivered at her breathy sigh of satisfaction.

"I hope you're not disappointed," she whispered when their mouths separated.

He wasn't sure she meant for him to hear, but he gave her the only response he could before kissing her again.

"Never."

They started moving, slowly at first, just taking pleasure in the sleek glide of their bodies against each other. He loved how plush she was, soft and pliant against his harder form. It was the crush of her breasts to his chest that finally tempted his mouth away from hers, his neck bowing so that he could capture a hard nipple between his teeth again. He sucked it sharply into his mouth, making her gasp, all the while sliding in and out of her wet heat, and wondered just when he'd become so intent on devouring this woman completely.

When the nearly silent words started tumbling from her mouth, phrases like feel so good and harder and don't stop inciting him to start thrusting faster, Mark finally lifted away, looking down at her glazed eyes, wondering just what he'd done to merit having these few stolen moments with her. Would he wake up in the morning and find out that this was all just another wet dream? Would she be gone with barely a glance back? The latter possibility was the more frightening. He didn't want to think that he could get this close just to have it dissipate like smoke through his fingers.

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She came unexpectedly. His strokes were rougher, their hips slapping together audibly from the force of their coupling. Then, her eyes went wide, her breath hitching in her chest, and she sank her nails into his straining biceps as her pussy clenched around his cock, the vibrations of her orgasm rippling down his shaft to spur him ever faster.

"That's it," Mark said. "Come for me."

Relaxing the death grip she had on his arms, Tallulah pushed at his elbows so that he lost his balance, falling against her chest and bringing their mouths just inches apart. It was obviously the effect she'd wanted, because the next moment, she was kissing him like it was going to be her last, their tongues tangling and slowing as the rest of them sped to rhythms that made him feel like he was going to be torn apart. Faster and faster, each thrust its own epicenter of pleasure until they began to blur, to burn, hotter and wetter and tighter, driving him over the edge with a single thrust that slammed him into her clit as he came.

She screamed. He didn't really hear it. He was too busy listening to the roar inside his own flesh, listening to how everything came crashing around to envelope him in the warmest deluge he'd experienced in a very long time.

He realized he was lying too heavily on top of her when her gasping kiss flitted across his cheek, and Mark rolled to the side, disengaging in a sticky tumult that left him feeling cold. Unwilling to abandon her heat just yet, he pulled her against his chest, smiling when she automatically lifted her leg to drape it across his.

"Sleepy," she murmured.

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He glanced down. Her eyes were already closed, thick lashes tangling to hide the moment from him. Something nudged him to keep her awake, but Mark tamped the impulse down. "Are you going to be comfortable here?" he asked.

Tallulah rubbed her cheek against his skin, her lips brushing against his nipple. "Yeah," she said. "I think I can be very comfortable here."

His arms tightened around her back. No other words had ever sounded as good.

* * * *

Mark discovered that Tallulah didn't sleep. She catnapped. He woke once to the sounds of her messing around in his kitchen, but by the time she emerged with a big glass of milk and some cookies she'd found, he was already drifting away again. The only reason he knew she'd gone back to sleep at all was because she was out like a light when he finally roused for the day.

The sheet was a disaster. Some time in the night, one of them had kicked over his palette and there was chocolate sauce pooled around the legs of his one good chair. The ends of Tallulah's hair were sticky from jam, and she'd fallen asleep with the hint of a milk moustache. He smiled. It made him want to lean over and lick it off.

His own body ached, but the memory of the pleasure of the night before more than made up for it. Stretching, he sighed at the pleasing burn of his muscles coming back to life, hearing his joints crack from being positioned so awkwardly during his sleep. When he turned his head to wake Tallulah,

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he was greeted with a soft smile, her lashes blinking slowly as she struggled into consciousness.

"Next time, we get to the bed before crashing," she murmured.

Mark smiled. It was silly, but she'd said next time.

"I don't think you have time to go home and get clean clothes before class," he said in apology.

"Then I guess it's a good thing that I don't wear any clothes for class," she joked back. Grabbing his hand, she stood and pulled him to his feet. "Let's go make me a clean canvas."

* * * *

His painting in class was slower that day, more controlled. It was difficult not to superimpose the spectacle of Tallulah's back with the curvy sway of her body on the platform, so Mark eventually gave up looking at her at all, concentrating instead on the water surrounding her body in his painting.

"This is supposed to be a life studies class," the instructor said when they were packing up. She was busy staring at his work, arms folded across her chest while she scrutinized it.

"You don't like it?" he asked.

"No, it's not that," she replied. A small line formed between her brows as she weighed her next words. "I'm just not sure where your subject ends and your scenery begins. It ... merges, don't you think?"

His smile was brilliant. "Then it's doing exactly what I want it to."

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He raced out, anxious to try and catch up with Tallulah before she went to work. They were supposed to meet up again after she got off though their plans had been kept vague on purpose.

"You never can tell what the day will bring," she'd said. "And as long as we're doing it together, what does it matter what it is?"

When he reached the Admissions building, Mark almost bumped into Tallulah hurrying out of it.

"I thought you said you had to work," he blurted.

"I do. We've got bigwig alumni coming in last minute. I'm being sent over to help get all their arrangements finalized."

There was no mistaking the apology in her eyes, but it didn't stop Mark from being disappointed. "Are you going to be done in time for us to get together tonight?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Honest. I hope so, but..." Stepping closer, she stood on tiptoe and brushed a soft kiss across his mouth. "I'll call you, all right?"

He mumbled some sort of acquiescence to her statement and watched her hurry away, his mood crashing at the thought of not getting to see her later. She wasn't giving him the brush-off, was she? She'd seemed so serious earlier, so honest about how much she'd enjoyed their night together.

Then again, he was way out of the dating loop. Maybe there was some new rule that he didn't know about. Or an old one he'd forgotten. Either was entirely possible.

He kept his mind off the matter by staying busy throughout the afternoon, going back to his apartment and scrubbing it until it shone. Though it desperately needed it, he

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was oddly reluctant to wash the sheet, but common sense eventually won out. Besides, Mark thought, if Tallulah saw him hanging onto it like some sort of souvenir, she'd dump him for good.

The call came at six-fifteen, shattering the silence within his apartment. He scrambled to answer, his heart already thrumming by the time he heard her voice on the other end of the line.

"I hope those bigwigs appreciate the red carpet treatment they're getting," he teased.

She hesitated. "Well, we'll know that after they get here tomorrow afternoon."

It was the careful way she phrased it, the emphasis on the following day that made Mark's excitement start to fade. "But you're done for now, right?" he asked.

"No." There it was. He should've known better. "You should see where they wanted these guys to stay," she continued. "You'd think none of them knew how to make a person feel welcome, or appreciated, or anything."

"Which you so happen to be good at."

If she heard the bitterness of his tone, she ignored it. "Once they get here, I'll be done. But until then, they're chaining me to getting this sorted out. I even have to cancel out of modeling in the morning."

So, not only would he not see her tonight, he wasn't going to get to see her in class, either. Closing his eyes, Mark leaned his forehead against the wall, trying to fight back the letdown. He only marginally succeeded.

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"Mark?" Her voice was soft and pleading. "Are you still there?"

"Yeah."

"You know I'd much rather be with you, right?"

"Sure."

He heard her quiet breath. "You don't sound sure."

"What do you want me to say? That I'm not disappointed? We both know I'd be lying."

"I just don't want you to think that I'm doing any of this because I don't want to see you," she said. "Last night ... you don't really think I do one-night stands, do you?"

Hearing her ask so blatantly made him feel like a jerk, and he was already backpeddling before she'd even finished the question.

"I like you," Tallulah interrupted. "It feels silly having to say that out loud, but I guess ... well ... I know ... I know that somebody, or maybe a couple somebodies, made you think you can't trust people, that everybody's going to lie to you. But I'm not everybody, Mark. And all I'm asking is that you trust me enough to learn that for yourself."

She made sense, but then again, she always seemed to make sense. "I'm out of practice on this whole dating thing," he joked. "I've gotten used to instant gratification."

"Well, if you can wait until tomorrow night, I can help you with that gratification problem if you want."

"Sounds like a plan." He grimaced when he remembered his arrangement with Thia. "Except it'll have to wait until after dinner. I have plans to meet up with the woman who shows my work. She wants to see what I came up with this week."

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"You're going to sell the painting of me?"

It hadn't occurred to him that Tallulah might object. Models for classes signed away all their rights before posing; in any other case, he wouldn't have given it a second thought. "Would you rather I didn't?" he asked.

"It's yours," she said simply. "I want you to do with it whatever will make you happy."

It didn't really allay his worries, but he knew it was the best he was going to get from her. "I'll call you when I'm done with Thia," he said.

"I'd like that. Good night, Mark."

He hung up the phone and turned toward his empty apartment. He felt better about the situation with Tallulah even though he would've much preferred getting to spend more time with her. There would be plenty of time for that later, he decided.

He smiled, suddenly content. There would be plenty of time for a lot of things later.

* * * *

Mark felt no need to actually attend class the next morning. With Tallulah not going because of her work commitments, he knew that the instructor would most likely have a substitute model, asking the class to either incorporate it into their current work or start a new one. He wasn't interested in either option. Thia would just have to deal with his skipping.

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He did, however, need to pick up his painting. So, once he was dressed and ready to face the day, Mark headed off to the campus.

The other students were already drifting out of the room when he arrived, and he hung back out of their way, waiting until the last had gone before stepping inside. A waif-thin girl who made Kate Moss look like Roseanne was speaking with the instructor near the platform in the middle of the room. Must be the new model, he thought as he headed for his easel. He was even gladder that he hadn't bothered to show to paint. She was as inspiring as a watercolor left to fade in the sun.

His hope that he wouldn't be bothered was dashed when the model left the room.

"Mr. Douglas," the instructor said, coming to his side. "We missed you this morning."

"I overslept," he explained. He continued packing the painting, eager to be rid of the entire place.

"If I didn't know that Lou was busy with the alumni fundraiser this afternoon, I would've bet you two were playing hooky together."

Though she was clearly jesting, Mark shot a frown in her direction anyway. "I overslept," he repeated.

The hardness in his voice made her faint smile disappear, and she shied away from him. "I didn't mean," she started to say, but then pressed her lips together, obviously deciding that saying anything more on the topic would just annoy him further. "Are you going to show it?" she asked instead, gesturing toward the covered painting. "I know what I said to

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you yesterday, but that was just in the context of the class. Really, it's a marvelous work. It deserves to be seen."

Mark's fingers tightened around the frame of the canvas, his thumb absently stroking the raised edge where the wood met the stiff fabric. Images of Tallulah's painted skin danced across his mind's eye, making his flesh heat and his mood soften. "I don't think so," he said. "It's ... a work in progress. I'm going to keep it for my eyes only for awhile."

He didn't wait to listen to her murmured disappointment, tucking the painting carefully beneath his arm as he walked out of the room. The desire to get back to his place and back to work was suddenly overwhelming.

* * * *

He was almost late for his dinner with Thia. Only the thought that the sooner it was done, the sooner he could call Tallulah spurred Mark to change out of his painting jeans and ripped tee into something more presentable. He even remembered to run a comb through his dark hair before heading out. It wouldn't do to show up at Fleur de Lys looking like someone they wanted to bar from entry. He had a meal owed him, damn it.

Though he'd picked it for the quality of the food, Mark was fairly certain that Thia had agreed to his choice of restaurant because of the soft internal lighting. Muted and elegant, it instantly made everyone appear ten years younger, while the fabric-covered walls enhanced the intimate atmosphere. He relaxed more than he'd thought possible as he followed the

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host back to where Thia waited, even smiling when he saw her light up at his approach.

"You look like you're in a good mood," she said as he sat down.

"That's because I know I'm not paying."

Laughing, they ordered a bottle of wine and settled to looking over the menus when the waiter disappeared. "I never know what to get," Thia mused. "Maybe I should wait to pick. I'll see what you guys get and then want to change my mind."

His mouth opened to tease her about her indecision when Thia's specific word selection made him stop. "You guys?" he said. "Who else is coming?"

"The woman who bought your life studies painting," she replied. She jumped when Mark grabbed the edge of her menu and pushed it down, out of the way of glaring at her. "What?"

"You sold my painting? How the hell did you do that so fast? You haven't even seen it."

Thia frowned at his unexpected vehemence. "Someone from your class called me this afternoon about it. She said it was amazing and offered me almost twice what your usual going rate is. I wasn't about to turn her down."

"Well, you can't sell it. It's not done."

"She knows that. She said she'd wait." She shook her head. "I thought you'd be excited. Tonight's a double celebration for you. No more class and a huge sale. What's your problem?"

"My problem is—"

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"His problem is that he's a perfectionist."

His heart leaped at the soft voice behind him, and Mark twisted to see Tallulah hovering just a few feet away. Her hair hung in thick ringlets down her back, and her skin glowed from the faint smattering of make-up she'd used to enhance her natural beauty. A midnight blue dress clung to her curves, sweeping luxuriously around her legs while revealing the soft swell of her cleavage. She was radiant.

She was also ignoring him. Holding out her hand, she stepped closer to Thia and said, "I'm Tallulah Weaver. You must be Ms. Barcelo."

"What are you doing here?" Mark blurted, still stunned.

"Mark!" Thia admonished. She turned an apologetic smile toward Tallulah. "You have to forgive my client. Temperamental artists, you know."

"I'm not..." He growled in the back of his throat and rose to his feet, curling his fingers around Tallulah's elbow to turn her toward him. "What did you do?"

"Didn't Ms. Barcelo tell you? I bought your painting."

"But why? I told you last night—"

"Because I knew you'd be unhappy about it showing up in some dentist's office instead of somewhere it'll be appreciated." She smiled. "And maybe because I'm a little selfish, too. You should appreciate this. It took me all afternoon to figure out who showed your work in San Francisco, and then I had to convince Ms. Barcelo that selling it to me was in everybody's best interest."

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His surprise soothed into a warm glow, the corner of his mouth lifting as he shook his head at her. "I would've just given it to you if you'd asked for it."

"I know. This way is better."

Mark wasn't even aware of his surroundings when he leaned down to capture Tallulah's mouth in a hungry kiss. His arm slid around her waist, tugging her more closely against him, and his body grew harder at the feel of her plush curves. It took Thia's small cough to break them apart.

"I'm guessing you two know each other," she said when he glanced in her direction.

"A little." Taking Tallulah's hand in his, Mark leaned over and grabbed his coat. "You're going to have to figure out what you want to eat on your own, Thia," he said. "We're not going to be sticking around."

"What? Why?"

The soft stroking of Tallulah's thumb against the side of his drew shivers down Mark's spine. "Because I have a canvas that needs my attention. And I'm feeling more than a little inspired right now."

They were out on the sidewalk, laughing breathlessly together at the astonished look on Thia's face as they'd rushed out, when Tallulah asked, "What happened to my turn at painting you?"

His hand cupped her cheek, and he bent to kiss her once again. Her mouth was warm and sweet, with the faintest taste of cinnamon to make his own mouth tingle. "We've got all the time in the world for that," he said when they parted. His lips brushed against her temple before he turned and

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started pulling her away from the restaurant. "Starting right now."

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About the Author

Vivien was born in a house very familiar with the written word. The daughter of an author and sportswriter, she fell in love early on with the stories that played inside her head, transcribing the first of those at the age of five. She moved on to explore other formats, including acting and film production, but always came back to her storytelling roots.

Currently, Vivien resides in northern California with her British husband and two beautiful children. She's thrilled to be back to her romantic roots, and looks forward to sharing with you some of the voices that have been living inside her head.

Visit Vivien's site at www.viviendean.com.

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