



Brushstrokes Preview

It was a bad day to be lounging in the bathtub.

It was an even worse day to be lusting over a man she didn't know.

It was Mia Drake's thirtieth birthday.

Lifting a bubble-covered foot from the water, she used her toes to twist the faucet off. She should be back in New York celebrating with her friends, she thought. She should be hitting her usual Lower East Side haunts, badgering the manager of her favorite Orchard Street gallery to look at her work. But instead she found herself in tiny Dawes, South Carolina, soaking in her Great Aunt Clara's old clawfoot tub, pretending a few bubbles and the scent of an aromatherapy candle would make everything better. And if that wasn't bad enough, she was thinking dirty thoughts about Rick Rose, the brawny dark-haired bar owner she'd seen in town.

She lay her head back on the edge of the tub, indulging fully in the simple but effective fantasy. *The bathroom door opens and she looks up. It's him - all strong, sexy six feet three inches*

of him. Neither seems surprised to see the other; his eyes burn with a knowing, confident desire that makes her shiver despite the warm water. His gaze lands on her bare breasts, the nipples jutting through a thin film of suds, and she feels his look everywhere. Her breasts turn heavy, needy, beneath his scrutiny.

"Am I intruding?"

"No," she replies, her voice as smooth as melting butter. "In fact, I was just thinking about you, wanting you. Come into the tub."

He strips off his clothes with swift, sure movements, revealing a muscular chest, a great butt, and an incredible erection that makes her feel empty and achy between her thighs. She wants to wrap her hand around his length, caress him. No, more than that. She needs him to fill her.

Sadly, she'd never even met the man; she'd just seen him around - standing outside his bar chatting with locals, driving his Dodge Ram 4 x 4 up Main Street, eating in the local diner, and once in the grocery store when she'd stopped to get some cherry tomatoes for a salad Aunt Clara was making. The mere sight of his face - all serious gray eyes and commanding jawline - had delivered the same sensations she was experiencing now. She'd had a hell of a time selecting her tomatoes while imagining those strong arms closing around her, those big hands touching her. He struck her as a bit gruff - it was something in his eyes, something in his voice on the few occasions she'd heard him speak - but that didn't seem to lessen the effect he had on her. She'd lingered over the tomatoes until he'd collected a few ears of corn and an onion, then gone on his way.

After he eases into the water behind her, she leans back against his chest. His hands come around to cup her wet breasts as his hot arousal presses into the center of her bottom, making her rub against him. Turning her head, she draws him down into a delicious tongue kiss that adds to their indelible heat. As he caresses her sensitive breasts, squeezing her taut nipples ever-so-slightly between his fingers, his raspy voice comes as a whisper near her ear. "Ride me."

Of course, there were worse things than coddling herself with a little birthday fantasy, she decided as her face warmed with the impact of it. And certainly worse things than living with Aunt Clara for a while, until she got back on her feet. The truth was, if she'd stayed in New York, she didn't know where she'd be right now, but it probably wouldn't really have equated to that fun, buzzing-about-the-city birthday she'd just envisioned. Five out-of-work artists sharing a loft didn't add up to a rent payment, let alone a birthday party. She was just thankful Aunt Clara had always been so welcoming. It had been a huge comfort to have someplace to go where she wouldn't be a burden. When Aunt Clara's last letter had come, bearing the line, "I can't stand to think of you living in poverty, and I would love having some company around this old place," Mia

had done the only practical thing. She'd packed her easels and canvases and brushes into the old family station wagon she'd never gotten rid of, and she'd headed south for the winter.

Now it was almost spring, though, and what had she done for herself? Painted a lot, yes. Found a way to make some money, no. And despite Aunt Clara's endless love and generosity, the guilt of freeloading weighed on Mia. She had to earn her keep and earn it soon. But ... not right this minute, she consoled herself. It was her birthday, after all. And there was an imaginary man in her bathtub who needed to be ridden.

Turning, she straddles him in the water. His hands find her breasts again and she glances down to see his fingers capturing the mounds of flesh, a few remnants of white bubbles peeking through. His slow, firm massage turns her breath thready as she looks into his eyes. They meet hers; they own her. Gripping the white porcelain with both fists, she leisurely slides herself up and down the column of stone between his legs. They both let out light moans of pleasure, but he's impatient, planting his hands on her hips, positioning her for entry, murmuring one demanding word. "Now." Then he pushes her down.

A knock came on the door and Mia flinched. For a fraction of a second, she actually expected Rick Rose to be on the other side. But then Aunt Clara's soprano tone echoed through the old wood. "Mia? Are you in there?"

Inside, she groaned. *Fantasy killer* .

"Yes," she said. "I'm taking a bath."

"Well, have a good, relaxing soak, dear. I simply wanted to let you know I'm home. When you're done, we'll have a nice birthday lunch on the back patio and I'll tell you what I found out in town today."

Mia looked toward the door. Her imaginary lover wasn't the only one in this tub who was impatient. Not that she suspected her aunt really had anything *big* to tell her, because what could Aunt Clara have discovered in town that would interest Mia, someone who didn't even belong here? "You can't tell me now?"

"You just take your time and enjoy your bath."

Sure, easy for Aunt Clara to say. She hadn't had a totally splendid tub fantasy doused with a huge splash of cold water just when things had gotten really hot. Besides, she could hear her aunt pattering around the house now, humming while she worked on lunch. There was no hope of sinking back into her sexy vision at this point.

With a sigh, she used her toes to flip the handle that opened the drain, then stood and reached for a towel. So long, imaginary birthday sex.

Drying off, Mia sighed. Sad when it came to this. Thriving on fantasies. Clearly, it had been too long since she'd had a *real* man.

Ten minutes later, after changing into jeans and a t-shirt, she exited through the back door to find Aunt Clara waiting at a white wrought-iron patio table. She'd made dainty finger sandwiches of ham salad, as well as deviled eggs and baked beans, all served on old-fashioned plates and bowls with roses circling the rims. Cups of tea had been poured and a small birthday cake set perched on an antique pedestal at the table's center. The bright sun of the early March day only added to the warmth that filled Mia. It had been a while since anyone had done anything this special for her birthday.

She smiled lovingly. "Aunt Clara, you're too good to me. This looks wonderful."

The old woman's face wrinkled around her grin, and eyes still as blue as the ocean shone beneath silvery hair, pulled back into a bun. "Now, you know I like having someone to do nice things for. It's been too long since I've had a proper tea party, and this seemed the perfect occasion."

As the two women sat and enjoyed the lovely lunch, Mia's thoughts still lingered over how much she appreciated Aunt Clara's presence in her life. She'd lost her parents in a car accident seven years ago, and since then, her mother's aunt had been her touchstone. They'd not known each other well while Mia was growing up - Aunt Clara and her now departed husband Frank had lived down here in the Carolinas, "in a little town near the ocean," her mother used to say, and Mia's family had resided in upstate New York. Yet when the devastation of her parents' death had driven her to drop out of grad school and head to the city in reckless pursuit of her dream to be an artist, Aunt Clara had been there for her, with phone calls and letters and care packages, and plane tickets to South Carolina for a week every summer.

Sometimes Mia wondered if she'd been trying to hide by going to New York, by becoming one of the thousands of struggling artists who practically blended into the city landscape. Now she couldn't help but wonder if she was hiding *here*, in the proverbial middle of nowhere. She'd been in Dawes for over two months without earning a dollar, letting her Aunt support her. Somehow Aunt Clara's unconditional love made Mia's lack of direction painfully apparent. As did turning thirty. For Mia, the age signaled full-fledged adulthood.

Even as she listened to Aunt Clara talk about the things she'd done and people she'd seen this morning in town, Mia found herself feeling as if she were at a fork in the road. Maybe it was time to grow up, time to be practical and take responsibility for her life. Maybe it was time to give up the dream.

"Where are you, dear?"

Mia lowered the deviled egg between her fingers to her plate. "Hmm?"

Aunt Clara's eyes turned pensive. "Your body might be sitting here with me, but your mind is someplace else."

True enough, but Mia didn't want to admit her troubling thoughts. Aunt Clara would just pour on the sympathy, and that's not what she needed right now. What she needed was fortitude, the will to make herself do something it would be easier not to: quit feeling sorry for herself and make some practical life decisions. "Just thinking about my birthday," she replied. "Just thinking this is something my mom would have done for me. Thank you, Aunt Clara. For everything." She hoped her aunt understood the full measure of her gratitude. "Now, what were you going to tell me?"

"Oh me," her aunt laughed. "I'd nearly forgotten already. But I ran into someone who's looking for a painter."

"Looking for a painter?" Mia had the feeling Aunt Clara was barking up the wrong tree here.

The old woman nodded. "A sweet young man I've watched grow up over the years, along with his brothers. He needs someone to paint the interior of his tavern. You know, the one on Main? The place belongs to Rick Rose."

Mia couldn't have been more stunned to hear her bathtub lover's name on Aunt Clara's lips. Never mind that he wasn't a man who struck her as even slightly sweet, and that Dawes was apparently an even smaller world than she already thought - was her aunt actually suggesting she work for him?

"Generally, the Snapply family takes care of most folks' painting needs around here," Aunt Clara went on, "but Pete Snapply's down with a broken ankle and his boys are backlogged something fierce. I heard Rick say he's in awful need of a paintjob, has been for months, but he doesn't have the time to do it himself. During the days, he helps at his parents' feed store out on Highway 45. So when he said he was looking for a painter, I told him my great niece was a painter, and that I'd put you in touch with him."

Mia quietly digested the new information about Rick Rose. Up to now, he'd been only a name, a face, a body. Okay, one hell of a face and a body. But someone to think about in an almost abstract, this-isn't-real way.

Not that any of this mattered, Mia reminded herself. "Aunt Clara, I don't do that kind of painting."

The old woman shrugged. "Painting is painting, isn't it? Colors, brushes." She narrowed her brow and leaned forward slightly. "I worry about you, dear, being stuck inside this house all the time. I think it would be good for you to get out, start a new project."

And make some money, Mia thought. She knew that wasn't Aunt Clara's motive, but this *would* be a paying job, a way she could contribute to household expenses while she figured out what to do next. And painting some walls wouldn't require much concentration; the task would give her plenty of time to figure out her next steps in life.

Of course, other than having painted the occasional room, Mia didn't have the faintest idea how a painter - *that* kind of painter - worked. But how hard could it be? And it would also provide her with a first: she'd make money from painting.

The harder part would be approaching Rick Rose, fantasy bathtub stud, someone she'd never expected to have any dealings with outside her own mind.

Mia checked her watch as she traversed the sidewalk toward the Rose Tavern, its windows the only ones alight on Main Street. The dulled sounds of laughter and talk mixed with Bruce Springsteen's "Glory Days," growing louder as she approached.

It was ten-thirty. Why had she waited so late to come? Probably because she'd spent the evening trying to talk herself out of it, trying to tell herself she'd go see him tomorrow, or maybe next week. But then she'd reminded herself that ambitious, determined people didn't put things off, and that she really wanted to repay Aunt Clara for her kindness, at least as much as she could.

Clearly, a lively Friday night crowd had gathered and it probably wasn't the most conducive time to talk business with Rick Rose, but that was too bad. As she opened the heavy wooden door, the previously-muffled noises blared out at her, and more than one eye turned her way. A few people appeared vaguely familiar from around town, but most were strangers. This was obviously a place where everybody knew your name - unless you were a temporary resident in Dawes, and one who stuck close to home while you were here, like Mia.

The men studied her approvingly while the women only glared. She still wore blue jeans, but had traded in her tee for a casual yet fitted low-cut top that showed off a few curves. Not that she expected anything to come of it, but if she was going to have a one-on-one with Rick Rose, she wanted to look good.

She made her way to an empty barstool, still aware of the curious glances, even as people went on with their conversations and laughter. She spotted Rick easily; he stood behind the bar, at the

opposite end, flirting with two brunettes, one of them wildly overdressed - or was that underdressed? - in a stretchy skin-tight leopard-print dress, the fabric sprinkled with bits of metallic gold.

"Donna, what are you doing in here dressed like that?" Rick Rose asked, adding a rich, baritone chuckle. Despite the remonstrance, his tone said he didn't mind the view.

"Lookin' for love, sugar." Donna flashed suggestive eyes and leaned slightly over the bar to give him a glance down her cleavage, as if she wasn't revealing enough flesh already.

"In all the wrong places?" he asked.

She shrugged. "You know I'm not a stickler for right and wrong."

He laughed and gave her a wink. "And that's exactly what I like about you."

They were sleeping together, Mia just knew it.

"Hey Rose, you got a customer down here."

Mia flinched as the middle-aged man two stools away hiked a thumb in her direction. "Uh ... thanks," she murmured.

As Rick turned to look, Mia's body blossomed with the same awareness he'd brought out in her at the grocery store. Only this time she was forced to envision him naked, beneath her in an antique bathtub. A shiver snaked through her, especially when his dark eyes pinned her in place as if she were a butterfly in someone's collection case. Amazingly, his gaze left her with the same powerful sensations she'd experienced in the fantasy: possession, sexual ownership.

Crazy, she thought. She was taking the images in her mind too far, and had definitely gone too long without a lover.

Even so, one thing was clear - the man was a walking, talking chunk of raw sexuality. He hadn't noticed her in the vegetable section, but he was definitely noticing her now. Crazy or not, the mere knowledge made her nerve endings hum with a desire that felt almost dangerous.

Approaching, he leaned confidently against the bar, his predatory gaze never leaving her. "What's your pleasure, sweetheart?"

She considered being offended and telling him she wasn't his sweetheart, or maybe if she were smart she'd just take the cue and say, *You. Right here. On the bar. Closing time.* Instead, though, she swallowed nervously and replied, "I'll have a Bud Light."

Her fantasy man popped the top on a longneck and set it before her. "Glass?"

She shook her head. "Bottle's fine."

Still studying her in an unnerving way, he crossed strong arms over his snug navy blue t-shirt and tilted his head slightly. "Have we met?"

Kind of. I ogled you over fresh produce last week. She took a sip of her beer and set it back down. "No."

He leaned his head in the other direction, his gaze still intense. Never before had a man's mere look had such an effect on Mia. Her skin tingled and her breasts ached; she could almost feel her nipples puckering in her bra. The longer his eyes examined her, the more real the sensations from her fantasy became. "I could swear I've seen you around. Are you sure I don't know you?"

She took a deep breath, then followed an impulse. "Yes, I'm sure, but *I know you.* And I have a proposition for you."

A few chuckles and one low whistle from nearby reminded her that she was on a stage here, suddenly the main event of the evening in Dawes, South Carolina.

One corner of Rick Rose's mouth curved upward - not quite a smile, but enough to say she'd surprised him and he was enjoying the game. "I should warn you, this won't be the first time I've been propositioned by an attractive woman."

"I don't doubt it."

"So let's hear what you've got to offer."

"In private," she told him. "Do you have an office or something?"

A few more snickers filtered through the smoky air, but she kept her eyes on the man before her. His expression grew a little closer to a smile, the skin around his eyes crinkling slightly. "Sure, sweetheart. Follow me."

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