

"Inked"
by Traci Clark

Jason grabs Sophie's hand as they head to the tattoo parlor. "This is so awesome." He swings their arms back and forth as they walk. "Do you need to get money? There's an ATM up ahead."

Sophie shakes her head no--she has enough on her to cover it. She's just as giddy.

Sophie's had a fascination with tattoos ever since she was little. The tattoo parlor is one block over and two blocks up from the coffee shop where they ate lunch. There's no name on the outside of the building, which she also likes. Once they step inside, she feels good about the place. There's a small lobby that is painted entirely turquoise blue, even the ceiling. In front of the floor-to-ceiling windows are two black couches separated by a large plant. There's no one in the reception area. Jason sits on one couch. Sophie walks around the large coffee table and thinks about taking her own couch, but decides to sit next to him.

She looks around the room. There's a huge red Buddha in the corner by the reception desk, but there are no pictures of tattoos on the walls like she expected. There is a small sign that says, "*Circles and straight lines are done at your own risk.*" She has no idea if it is a joke or not. The magazines on the coffee table all have to do with smoking marijuana. She picks one up, browses through it, and wonders about the ins-and-outs of the medicinal marijuana laws that various states have. Most of the ads are from doctors that offer physicals and then marijuana prescriptions. There seems to be a list of ailments that will warrant a prescription--Sophie has at least three of them.

Jason walks up to the reception desk, reaches behind the counter, and comes back with a pad of post-it notes and a pen. "Do you really want the elephant that I drew?"

Sophie nods her head yes. Jason sits down and draws on the small piece of paper. She can tell that he's being more careful than he was in the coffee shop, but it still takes him less than five minutes. She takes a look at the drawing. It's a little different, but she loves it.

He gives the drawing to her. "I've made some adjustments. I added a blanket to it's back, just in case you wanted to get some color."

Sophie leans over and kisses Jason on the cheek just as a guy walks into the lobby from the back. He's short, but he doesn't act like he's short. He's wearing jeans and a plain black t-shirt that shows off his ripped arms and elaborate tattoos. His hair is so black that Sophie wonders if he dyes it, but it could just seem that way because his skin is pale white in contrast. He could be in his twenties; he could be in his thirties; she has no idea. He speaks with an Australian accent, "Well hey now. Luck is usually a lady, but I would say luck is all yours today mate."

Sophie is so taken aback by his accent that she doesn't respond. It just doesn't seem to suit him, and the thought strikes her that he may be faking it. If she had a job where she only saw people for an hour or two and then never saw them again...why not pretend to have an accent?

Jason extends his hand. "Hey man. How's it going?"

Sophie likes the way Jason greets people. She can't tell if he knows him or not, but she gets her answer as the Australian responds. "Good, good man. I'm Simon. You can call me Si. And you are?"

"Jason. Good to meet you man."

"Likewise." He turns to Sophie. "And you are?"

"Sophie."

"Well Sophie, do you always go around kissing men in tattoo parlors?"

Ah, so he saw it. He must have also seen that she was embarrassed. She awkwardly giggles, but then responds. "Let me see. Nope. This is the first time I've been in a tattoo parlor."

"A first-timer? So you don't have any ink yet?"

Sophie shakes her head no. He turns to Jason. "You?"

"Not yet. But I've seen your work. A friend of mine came in about a year ago. Brian Carlson."

Si looks in the air as if he's trying to remember. "What did he have done?"

"He got a lighting bolt on his chest."

Sophie has to stop herself from laughing aloud. She can't stop thinking about Brian unbuttoning his shirt and yelling "Super Brian!" She wants to ask Jason if that ever happened, but she decides to wait.

Si shakes his head. "Oh yeah, that kid was a total bad ass. Not one peep out of him. I've seen big dudes cry real tears when the gun moves over the breastbone."

Si leads them down a long hallway off the reception area. Each side is lined with small offices. Some are tidy and spacious, while others have drawings tacked all over the walls and are crammed with various pieces of furniture, including beds, tables, and an assortment of instruments that look like they belong in a dentist's office.

As they turn into one of the more cluttered offices about halfway down the hall, Si asks in his thick Australian accent, "So you're both virgins then?"

Neither Jason nor Sophie respond.

Si laughs. "Tattoo virgins. So do you know what you want?"

Sophie nods her head yes, but Jason responds, "I was hoping to see what you have."

Si extends his hand across the room like he's the ringmaster at a circus. "Well go ahead mate."

Sophie looks at the hundreds of pencil drawings on random pieces of paper that are tacked along three of the four walls. "Are these all yours?"

"Well they ain't the sugar plum's."

Sophie has no idea what that means. She responds but withholds any hint of an accent. "Crikey."

Si looks at her with a devilish grin on his face. "I think I'm going to like you."

Sophie smiles and looks at the drawings. They're really good--some are weird, but they are all really, really good. There's at least twenty different types of dragons, some magical dark princesses, lots of tribal designs, and just about every animal that she can think of, each drawn to be a total bad ass.

Si points to the far wall. "I think there's one over there of a girl kissing a guy in a tattoo parlor."

Sophie gives him a look but doesn't respond. Si has an indomitable confidence that she's immediately drawn to. He's flirting with her, but not really. She's flirting with him, but not really. It seems to be the way of the tattoo world.

Si asks. "So who's first?"

Sophie immediately responds, "I'll go." She hands him the piece of paper with the drawing.

Si looks at it then her, but doesn't say anything.

"What?"

Si doesn't look up from the drawing. "Nothing. It's cute."

"It's not cute. It's adorable."

Si asks, "There's a difference?"

Sophie stares him dead in the eye. "Of course there is."

Si looks at her but doesn't respond. He sits down at his computer and flips through some files, but Sophie can't make out what any of them are. They seem to be part sketches, part graphics, and she has no idea what program he's running, or for that matter why he even needs to use a computer. He asks her without looking up from his computer if she's thought about where she wants the tattoo.

She's always known where she'd get her tattoo, once she figured out what she wanted.

"On the side of my leg, near the very top."

Si turns around in his chair. "Just under the bikini line?" There is no sexual connotation in his tone, although there could have been, and Sophie likes that he's keeping this part all business.

"Yep."

"Right or left side?"

"Right."

Si stares at her as if he's envisioning the work already done. "Color?"

"Purple elephant. Green blanket."

"You're very decisive."

Sophie raises her eyebrow. "Aren't most people decisive when they get a tattoo?"

"Nope." He looks at Jason who is looking at the drawings. "But the ones who kiss boys in the lobby usually are."

Before she can respond, Jason pipes up. "This one's awesome. What do you think Sophie?" He pulls a picture of a scary-ass joker off the wall and shows it to her. It's really well done, but it's gruesome.

Sophie can't hold back her surprise. "Why would you want that?"

"Because it's awesome."

She tries to keep her voice neutral. "The drawing's incredible. Where would you put it?"

"On my shoulder."

She doesn't know what else to say about Jason's choice, so she turns to Si. "Will it hurt?"

"You'll be fine. You're not getting it on the bone. You'll notice it, but it won't be bad." Si looks at Jason. "The shoulder's a bit more intense. The muscle part should be okay, but I'm not going to lie, it'll hurt like a bitch over the boney parts."

The way he says "boney parts" with his Australian accent makes her giggle. Or maybe it's just because she's actually getting this done. Her parents will hate it, but there's nothing they can do about.

Si stares at the post-it note drawing of her elephant. "So how big are we talking?"

Sophie shows him with her thumb and index finger.

Si looks at her. "That's not very precise."

"I forgot my ruler at home."

Si laughs a big, booming laugh. Because all of the ceilings of the offices are open, the sound resonates more than she expected it to. A deep and raspy man's voice asks from somewhere towards the back. "What are you laughing at now Si?"

Sophie has no idea whose voice it is, but she instantly has an image of a barrel-chested biker complete with black leather vest and a Harley in the parking lot.

Si is still laughing as he takes her post-it note drawing and leaves the room. She sits on a table that has spread across it a clean white roll of paper that she's only seen in doctors' offices. She swings her legs back and forth off the side and watches as Jason circles the room and inspects all of the drawings. A few minutes later, she hears the trumpet call of an elephant--not a cartoon animated sound of an elephant, but the kind of sound that you would hear at the zoo.

Si enters the room just in time to see her reaction. She's not sure exactly what her face looks like, but she knows her mouth is open. She closes it and suppresses a smile.

Si looks at her. "What?"

She lowers her voice, being half serious/half sarcastic. "That was a really good elephant."

"Did you hate to admit that?"

Sophie shrugs her shoulders. Maybe it's the Australian accent that's doing it for her.

Si switches back into his professional tone. "I've got the stamp. Is this the size you were thinking?" He holds out a small square piece of paper that looks like the fake tattoos she used to get when she was little, except that it is of her elephant drawing.

She has no idea how her exact drawing was made into a temporary tattoo--maybe that's what he was doing on the computer. "Yeah, that's exactly it."

"Okay then, we're ready to go. Lean back now."

She does as she is told, leaning on her left side so that her right side is facing up towards Si.

“Okay, now scooch up your shorts a bit. I’ll press this on so you can make sure you like the placement.” He pulls a pair of rubber gloves from a box on the table next to the door. The smell reminds her of a condom, and she takes a quick glimpse at Jason, but he doesn’t seem to notice. Si takes a towel wrapped in plastic and an old fashioned water bottle with a built-in bendy straw from the table. He squeezes the water bottle and squirts a cold liquid onto her skin that her nose quickly identifies as rubbing alcohol. He then unwraps the towel and catches all of the drippings before it gets on her shorts or the table. The towel is super warm and bites at her skin a bit, but she loves hot showers, hot tubs, hot towels, so she lets the heat sink into her muscles, and she can feel it open up her hip flexor a bit. Si takes off the towel then holds the stamp over her leg in a couple of different positions before carefully placing it down on her wet skin. She never was that precise when she put on a fake tattoo, but she appreciates the skill and concentration that Si exhibits. As Si holds the stamp on her leg, she notices that the work table is perfectly in order--a complete contrast to the desk where Si does his drawings. It makes sense though. To do this job well, you’d have to be both creative and precise.

Si removes his hand and carefully peels off the piece of paper. “Okay. Jump off and give it a looksee.”

Sophie swings herself off the table and holds the side of her shorts up. She looks at herself in the full-length mirror that is behind the door. She catches her first glimpse of the elephant and completely loves it. She turns and smiles at Si.

“Take a good look at it. Make sure you like it from all of the angles.”

She does as she is told and looks at herself in the mirror. Even though half of her ass cheek sticks out because she has her shorts hiked so high, she's not at all embarrassed. She twists her torso a bit to see what it'll look like from the back and notices that she is doing a perfect pinup girl pose, with raised heel and all. She catches a glimpse of Jason's face in the mirror as he watches her and knows what he is thinking. Si's face doesn't change at all, and she really likes that about him.

Sophie turns and faces them both. "It's exactly what I want."

Si pats the table. "Let's get started then."

Sophie lies down again. Si brings a small, white package over to her. "Okay." He flips the package back and forth in his hands in front of her. "You can see that this is completely sealed." He slowly pulls back a corner of the package to reveal a set of needles that are much longer than she expected. "Here's the thing. Wherever you get ink, you have to make sure they do this. If they don't do this, get off the table and run." Si sits in the swivel chair and turns on something that looks and sounds like a dentist's drill. He loads the needles into the device, which she now recognizes as the tattoo gun. Si looks at her. "You alright so far?"

Sophie gives him an are-you-serious look.

"Right. You look fine. Just got to make sure. I have the longest streak in the shop right now, and I want to keep it."

"Longest streak of what?"

"Of people not passing out."

Sophie laughs. Si makes another elephant noise. She laughs even harder. She never thought about passing out, but it must happen a lot. Being a goof is another sign of Si's

professionalism--it helps to relieve any anxiety. But why the hell would people who are afraid of needles get a tattoo?

Si adjusts in his seat and just as he is ready to begin, Jason goes to the door. "I'll be right back."

Sophie looks at him but doesn't respond.

When he's gone, Si whispers. "Probably a good thing. Your boyfriend might have ruined my streak."

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Oh. It's just one of those things?"

"Exactly."

"Okay then. We're going to start. It should feel like a pinch."

The whirring of the tattoo gun gets louder as Si presses into her leg. He's right--it's not too bad. It kind of feels like she has a sunburn and someone is pressing down into it with a pen. It's not comfortable, but she can live with it. Si traces the outline of the stamp with the tattoo gun. Occasionally, he stops to wipe off the excess ink with some gauze. He finishes the outline a lot quicker than she expected. She can't wait to see what it looks like in color.

Si turns to his table, adjusts some levels, and loads the color. She stops paying attention to Si once Jason walks back in. His eyes are almost completely slanted. She has no idea how much he just smoked, but it must have been a lot.

Jason looks at her tattoo. "It's so good Sophie. It looks awesome. Are you doing okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Si seems tough, but I think he's really a softy."

Si answers without looking up from the table. "You know me so well." Si swivels in his chair and turns toward her with the tattoo gun in his hand. He looks at Jason. He's not staring him down, he's just assessing the situation. "Okay. Here we go again."

Si presses the gun into her leg. Jason looks at the drawings again. He seems fidgety.

Si pauses to wipe the excess ink and looks up at Jason, then presses the gun into her leg again. "So why are you getting an elephant?"

It's a perfectly reasonable question, but Sophie realizes that she doesn't have a reasonable response, so she says the first thing she can think of. "Ever hear of Ganesha?"

Si finishes his stroke then addresses Jason. "Hey buddy. Move that picture of a peacock on your left, will ya?"

Jason does what is asked of him and reveals one of the most elaborate drawings of Ganesha she has ever seen. She asks Si. "Did you really put that on someone?"

"Yep, right on the keister. Got me a photo in *Tattoo Monthly* for that one."

Jason turns towards them. "Really? That's awesome man."

Si presses the tattoo gun to her leg again. "Thanks."

Sophie is relieved that the subject doesn't turn back to why she got the tattoo. She's going to have to come up with a better explanation.

Si swivels in his chair and turns off the tattoo gun. He gives her a hand-held mirror. "Here. Take a quick look before I wrap it." He yells over the open ceiling. "Katie, we're ready for a towel."

Sophie takes a look at her tattoo in the mirror. She loves it. She doesn't want to stop looking at it, but Katie--a short indie rock girl with 1950's cat rim glasses--walks in carrying a

tray with a pair of tongs and a towel wrapped in plastic. She looks at Sophie's tattoo. "I love it. You put it in the perfect spot on your leg."

Sophie tries to turn to make eye contact, but because she's on her side, it doesn't really work. "I love it too. It's exactly what I wanted."

"Si is our best."

Si pulls on the end of his rubber gloves but doesn't take them off. He grabs the towel and unwraps it. Steam wafts towards the ceiling. "Katie's our resident sweetheart." He pats Sophie on her knee. "This can hurt."

Si puts the towel on her leg. It's way hotter than before, and Sophie has to stop herself from screaming out. After a few seconds, the shock of the heat lessens, and she is able to cope without biting on her lower lip.

Si talks to her about why the towel is necessary--something about the blood coagulation--but she knows he is doing it to distract her, and she appreciates it. After a few minutes, Si pulls the towel off and covers the tattoo in plastic wrap. He pulls off his gloves. "You'll need to leave the plastic on for the next couple of hours. It helps the ink stay nice and tight. What you're going to need to do is get some unscented lotion--none of that fruity, girly crap--preferably something with aloe or vitamin E, and then just keep lubing the crap out of it. Your skin will scab up, but whatever you do don't pick at it. Just keep putting lotion on it until the scabs fall off. You should be totally fine within a week."

Sophie gets up off the table and carefully pulls her shorts down over the plastic wrap. She walks around the room a bit, just to give her legs a chance to stretch. Si tidies his work station, then turns to Jason. "Alright man. You're next."

Jason puts his hands in his pockets. He looks down as he bends his ankle out to the side.

"Man, I don't think I can. I smoked too much pot. I'm afraid it won't take."

Si responds. The sarcasm in his voice brings out his Australian accent even more. "Right man, because we never have people in here who smoke up before hand."

Sophie laughs, then she looks at Jason and realizes that he's not kidding. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, I really don't think I can."

Sophie just stares at him. She can't fucking believe it.

Si is the first to break the silence. "Alright then." He hands Sophie his card. "If you have any questions, just stop in or give a call."

She grabs the card but doesn't look away from Jason.

Si swivels back and forth in his chair. "Right. You have any questions then?"

Sophie knows exactly how she is staring at Jason and knows she should stop giving him her death look, but she's so pissed right now. She turns and looks at Si. "Nope. I don't think I have any questions."

"Alright. I'll walk you out then."

Si leaves first. Sophie follows. They walk down the hall in silence. When they get to the lobby Si turns to her. "How does sixty sound to you?"

Sophie's taken aback. She was expecting to pay way more than that. She's raging on the inside, but it's not Si's fault, so she sucks it up and puts on her happy voice. "Yeah, that's totally fine. I love it. It's exactly what I wanted." She pulls her ID holder from her back pocket, takes out eighty dollars, and hands it to Si.

"Do you need any change?"

Sophie shakes her head no.

Si takes the money and puts it in his pocket without counting it. "Thanks. You really were a trooper you know."

"Thanks." Sophie gives him a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and not just to piss off Jason. She's unbelievably happy with her tattoo, even if Jason is a total douche.