

HOT NIGHTS, DARK DESIRES

Eden's novella, THE ART OF DESIRE, part of the HOT NIGHTS, DARK DESIRES anthology

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"Here it is." Crystal stopped in front of a storefront with a blue neon sign in the window that spelled out 'Beneath the Skin'. The glass was painted in classic Japanese style: tsunami waves, cranes flying against a backdrop of snow-capped mountains, warrior gods with frightening faces brandishing swords.

"Wow. This is beautiful." Sophie reached out to lay her fingertips against the cool glass. "Did he do all this?"

"Tristan? Yeah. He owns the shop. Come on, wait until you see what he can do on skin."

*On skin. Yes...*

Just thinking about it made her shiver with anticipation. She followed Crystal into the shop.

Inside the cool air washed over her, raising goose flesh on her skin for a moment before her body adjusted. Music played, a hard-driving rock song. Godsmack, she thought. She looked around curiously. She'd never actually been inside a tattoo parlor before. The first thing she noticed was the enormous carved desk to her right, a beautiful Asian piece. A

tall, skinny man with fully tattooed arms stood behind it, bent over an appointment book.

Crystal approached him. "Hi. I'm here to see Tristan."

"Sure, I'll get him."

He came around the desk and disappeared through a heavy gold velvet curtain. Sophie and Crystal sat on a wooden bench against one wall to wait.

Sophie's heart was pounding as though she were the one about to be tattooed. She glanced at Crystal, who was humming her new song again, as calm as though she were there to get a massage.

"Aren't you nervous, Crys?"

"Why should I be? I've done this before. It doesn't really hurt much, you know. God, you're pale, Sophie." Crystal laughed, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze. "Maybe you'll relax when you see how hot Tristan is."

"Hey, Crystal."

Sophie looked up to find a man coming through the curtain. He was tall and broad; a football player's physique outlined by his fitted black T-shirt and worn jeans. His head was nearly shaved, just a layer of dark stubble showing against his skin. Square features, partially covered by a dark, close-cut goatee. But the most striking thing about him was his

eyes. They were a dark shade of gray, like smoke. Striking. Intense.

Sophie blinked, letting her gaze fall to the dragons tattooed in coils of black, red and gold around both arms. The work was exquisite, she saw right away. But that wasn't the only reason why her entire body was lighting up with need.

*Calm down.*

She had to tear her gaze away, to look instead at the samurai swords that decorated the wall behind the desk. To catch her thready breath.

But then Crystal was standing up, pulling Sophie with her. "Hi Tristan. This is my friend, Sophie Fiore. She's going to sit with me today."

"No problem. Hey there, Sophie."

Deep voice, with a beautiful accent; a little of the South mixed in with that exotic European inflection so many people in New Orleans spoke with. And oh God, he was holding his hand out to her. She couldn't very well refuse to take it. His fingers wrapped around hers, warm and strong. Her knees went weak.

*Pull yourself together!*

But he was still hanging on to her hand, making it hard to think. And he was looking at her, a small smile on his strong

mouth. Too beautiful, this man. She tried to smile back, to behave normally.

"It's nice to meet you, Tristan."

"Very," he murmured, staring at her a moment too long. Then, "Let's get started."

He released her hand and she had to pull in a deep breath of the air-conditioned air to cool her system, to clear her head. She felt as though she'd just been slammed in the chest by a wall of heat.

And pure desire.

Was it this man? Was it being here, in this place? Was it the sheer ecstasy and fright of being so close to her most secret and powerful fantasy?

But she had to follow Crystal through the curtain, which Tristan held aside for them. As she passed, she caught a faint whiff of his scent, something dark and fresh at the same time. Like the deepest part of a forest.

God, she must be losing her mind.