

Chapter Six

Tattoo

It wasn't the best sex she'd ever had, or indeed the longest, but it was pretty wonderful. He'd forced himself to stay awake in her arms for fully one minute, bless him, before his eyes inevitably rolled up into his head and he fell into a deep sleep.

Gina held him for a while, thinking about home and Phil and all the friends she'd left behind, as she gently stroked his smooth young skin with her fingertips. She didn't feel the inner hatred she'd thought she feel, running from the arms of one rock guitarist with delusions of grandeur, straight into the arms of another. Maybe it was the age gap that made things different, maybe the fact that this was probably just a quick fling with someone much younger that wouldn't amount to anything anyway. Who knew how these things worked out? And what did it matter anyway?

She reached across from under his dead weight, smiling as she saw the jumble of their mixed clothes scattered across her bedroom floor, before switching off her bedside lamp and sending her room into a snug darkness. She'd wanted to keep a light on so that they could both see each other naked, see exactly just what they were exploring with their fingers and lips. Plus she'd switched off the main light in favour of the bedside light, purely because of this moment just after sex, of not having to sneak out from under his arm and the duvet to the light switch next to the door before

sneaking back into bed. Been there, done that, learnt that lesson.

Gina studied the semi-darkness of the room as she idly stroked his hair with her fingertips, the only light coming in through the thin curtains that of the gentle, warm-yellow glimmer from the streetlamps down below. The road was pretty quiet now, with only a few cars passing by. She glanced back over at her bedside table and saw that the clock read 02:40. Wow, she smiled, they'd gone longer than she'd thought. Then she thought of Amber, and how she'd not even bothered herself to come and find her to say that she and Colin would be tied up for the night and could Rich possibly find his own way home.

Unless this had been planned, she thought with dread. No, of course not. She and Amber were just a couple of sluts, that's all, and older, more-experienced sluts at that. Gina grinned childishly in the dark, feeling like she was maybe not so different to the rest of the girls in the shared house after all, a glimmer of fitting in or even belonging starting to creep in.

And so she fell asleep, ultimately, with Rich's unconscious arm draped across her bare belly, and with her own arm entwined a little more consciously around him, maybe subconsciously pulling him a little bit closer to her. It suddenly felt a little less lonely in her new single room in her new big city. She didn't know how long Rich was likely to hang around with his new older woman, now that he'd gotten what he wanted, but she'd guessed that at least she would be aware of that, maybe even more aware of it than he. Anyway, whatever. Right now was all that mattered, and right now was pretty nice.

She woke to a dull thudding in the room. Rolling over beneath the duvet Gina opened her eyes, saw daylight, and then saw Rich attempting to open her locked bedroom door. He was wearing his black jeans, but his chest was bare. He glanced round at her as he heard her moving.

“You know,” she said to him, rubbing what was left of sleep from her eyes with the heel of her hand, “if you’re going to fuck and run, etiquette calls for you to at least put your shirt on first.”

That pained him, and she felt guilty for the comment almost straight away.

“Is that what you thought?” he said, almost angrily. “I was going to go and make you a cup of tea. But I can’t get out of this fucking door.”

“Even if you had made it all the way downstairs, I’d be surprised if you actually found any unused teabags. Besides, I don’t drink tea.”

“Oh,” he said.

“But thanks for the thought anyway.”

Gina sat up, letting the duvet fall to expose her bare breasts as she ran both hands through her hair. She looked back to find Rich uncomfortable about looking at them.

“They’re not just for checking out after dark, you know.”

“I know.”

“Then come back to bed and kiss them some more.”

Rich responded like a dog, wandering back

towards her and climbing in after her as she opened the duvet to receive him. They kissed for a bit, and stroked one another, and then finally lay in each other's arms.

"I meant to ask you something last night," Gina murmured, as she fingered his right shoulder. "Your tattoo. What does it mean?"

"What? Oh, I don't know."

"You don't know?"

He shrugged inside their embrace.

"I'd seen it a few times, on walls and that, and down near that blue pyramid place, and just kinda liked it. Probably either a band logo or a gang thing or something. I thought it was pretty cool, so I thought why not?"

"Yeah. Be even cooler if you knew what it meant."

He shrugged again.

"What difference does it make?"

"What if it's an ad for a new Chinese takeaway," she said to him, "and it means something like sweet and sour pork balls."

"Yeah, you're right. I don't want anyone's balls on me," he said, with a grin. "Anyway, it's not Chinese."

"I know it's not Chinese, I was just saying a for instance," Gina explained. "It looks like Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. Well, the first one does anyway."

"I know. The first one's the Eye of Horus. Everyone knows that. The other two kinda just finish it off. Balances it all out. It's called being artistic, you know."

"Really," she said, returning his youthful

sarcasm. "And you being the experienced artist, of course."

"I've read books," he quipped, badly impersonating a hillbilly with a single figure IQ. "Seen my share o' tee-vee programmes too. We's got toose channels now. And we's likes a bit o' culture where Ise comes from."

Gina slipped out of his arms and out of bed, hiding her smile from him, and went to her desk where she began flipping through a few of her textbooks piled up on one side.

"Not fo'gotten some late o'ssignment, has yoo?" Rich asked gleefully, happy with his new accent. "Coz yoose picked a fine time -"

"Shut up, Cletus. I've got books on these things, you know, or didn't you take time out from shagging me for two hours to ask me what course I'm doing."

"Hey -"

"And it's archaeology, before you embarrass yourself even further. Here we are."

She picked up one of her books and came back to bed with it, wrapping the duvet around herself before flipping through to a section near the back, a kind of glossary of ancient pictograms and symbols. She scrutinised Rich's shoulder again, and then went back to the book. Then she frowned, and checked Rich's shoulder again.

"What?" Rich wanted to know, unsuccessfully trying to look past her breasts to study the pages at the same time.

"The Eye of Horus, sure, that's a given," Gina said, "but the second one..."

"What?" he wanted to know again.

“Well, that second symbol... the knife... here it is,” she said, indicating thoughtfully by tapping her finger on the page. “It refers to retaliation. Or, more literally, revenge. Maybe you have got yourself tattooed with some kind of gang propaganda. Well done with that.”

“Shit,” Rich said under his breath, now intently studying the pages open in front of Gina. “So what does that mean?”

“It means that maybe you shouldn’t start walking around London with your shirt off.”

He stared at her, terrified.

“Relax, I’m just ribbing you.”

“Thank God for that. So what does the second one mean?”

“No, I was right about that, it does mean revenge. It’s just the walking around half-naked I was joking about.”

“Fuck,” he said. “So what about the third one?”

Gina examined his shoulder again. It was a strange symbol, no doubt about it, kind of like a porcupine surrounded by dots. It could be a vague sun symbol with solar flares, but Ancient Egyptian symbolism was pretty specific when it came to the sun god Ra. There was nothing left to the imagination as far as their ultimate symbol went.

Gina began flicking again through the handful of pages at the back of the book that covered Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics - it was not exactly a comprehensive language, or even one hundred percent agreed on, and far from linear.

“Well?” Rich wanted to know.

“I don’t know,” Gina murmured, still turning pages. “It’s not listed here.”

“What do you mean it’s not listed. It’s a bloody university textbook, isn’t it?”

“Hey, I’m only a first-year student, have a bit of patience. Ask me again in God knows how many years when I might actually have a degree in my hands and a smug look on my face. I’m not Indiana Jones, alright?”

Rich took a deep breath and began again, speaking very slowly and carefully.

“So why do you think, given your experience of your first year of studying, that it isn’t in your university level textbook?”

“Maybe it’s not Egyptian,” Gina suggested, shrugging.

“It’d be a bit stupid putting three symbols together if one of them doesn’t belong.”

“But we don’t know that, though, do we? Maybe the person who’s gone around graffiti-ing these symbols all over the place was like you, and just scrawled them on walls because he liked the look of them. Jesus, you had them tattooed on you, and you have no idea what they mean.”

She looked across at him, but he was no longer studying her textbook, he was looking past her, lost in thought. Maybe he was contemplating having them lasered.

“Can you find out?” he asked eventually.

“Really, Rich, I was just joking about gangs and stuff. Young people who have sex together are supposed to have fun and joke around, and generally aim to enjoy themselves. Lighten up.”

“But you’ve got me thinking now.”

“And at this time of the morning too.”

“Please,” he asked, earnestly. “Could you try and find out what that third symbol might mean?”

Gina exhaled, and saw that he really did need to know now. But like she’d said to him earlier, it was all a little bit too late for that now.

“I can look on the university intranet in the library,” she said. “If you want me to.”

“Yeah, thanks,” he said. “I’d appreciate that.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked him.

He pursed his lips.

“Just got me thinking, that’s all.”

“About what?”

“About whether it’s a good idea having all these things tattooed on me after all. Shit, it might be a curse or something.”

“Well,” Gina said, snapping the book closed. “That curse would certainly explain your tiny penis.”

Rich stared at her, as though tears were suddenly close.

“That was a joke,” Gina said. “And a cruel one at that. I’m sorry. You have a lovely penis.”

Rich’s face brightened instantly.

“I knew it,” he said, with a conspiratorial grin.

“See?” Gina went on. “I told you that young people who have sex together are supposed to have fun and joke around.”

Then she leant over and kissed him.

Chapter Seven

Heavy Shit

Gina met Amber in the university cafeteria at one o'clock, relaying to her, over a dry ham salad sandwich, the ins and outs of Rich's tattoo. She still hadn't really forgiven Amber for last night, for just dumping on her and scurrying off to her room for a quick shag with Colin. Maybe it had been Colin's impromptu magic show that had been the catalyst for nookie, Gina didn't really know or even care, but for Amber to just up and go, leaving her, and more to the point Rich without his ride home, to sort things out, was way out of order. As it turned out, the rest of the night had gone well for her. But then it might just as easily have gone way worse.

"But don't you think he's the coolest?" Amber drooled, looking wistfully over her equally dry-looking chicken salad sandwich.

"Why, because he can light up a small room without a light bulb?"

"There's no need to be like that," Amber pouted. "I thought he was cool way before. Plus he's a singer in a really good rock band, you said so yourself. And he's cute."

"Whatever," Gina said, going back to her sandwich, thinking disdainfully that a pig had to die for this sorry-ass almost meal.

"You still got lucky though, didn't you?" Amber smirked. "I didn't hear you complaining."

“You didn’t hear me, period,” Gina retorted, unable to keep from smirking back, “because you’re a floor below and on the other side of the building. And maybe if you’d been a bit quieter yourself you might have heard me.”

Gina burst out laughing at this last comment, she couldn’t help it, and it brought a laugh out of Amber too. She was a funny girl, Amber. Quiet but outspoken, shy but forward. It was weird. It suited her. She certainly got the bloke she wanted anyway, Gina thought. And the laughing had helped disperse the tension between them.

Gina’s next lecture wasn’t until three and, after leaving Amber, she popped up to the library to check out Rich’s mysterious third symbol as promised. Only one of the twelve computer terminals was vacant, and she slipped quickly behind the keyboard and brought the machine out of its hibernation.

She typed the words Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics into the archaeology department’s internal search engine and glanced down the list of results. She knew the list would be long, but not this long, and so she added the words eye and Horus to the search bar and pressed enter. Pretty much the same results came back. Gina added dictionary and pressed enter, and now began perusing the pages more closely.

Most of what she began scrolling through she had already either covered in class or found in her textbooks. There was no shortage of information offering explanations and descriptions of specific hieroglyphics and motifs, of course, so she wasn’t quite sure what she was looking for or hoping to find. She didn’t really notice at first either, and maybe she had

just assumed that both eyes were the same thing, but she discovered that the right eye of Horus symbolised the exact opposite of the left eye.

From her bag she retrieved the sketches she had made of Rich's tattoos, and set them in front of the keyboard, examining them afresh against what she had now found on screen. While Rich's tattoo did indeed seem to portray the Eye of Horus, it was the left eye that he'd had tattooed on himself and not the right, which literally meant a world of difference.

She searched on, scrolling down the page slowly, reading intently the mythology that had dominated one of the most important and longest-running civilisations in world history. It was hard not to get involved, and Gina read on, utterly absorbed.

She found the second symbol quite quickly, and confirmed its meaning as revenge, or literally an eye for an eye, blood spilled for blood spilled. But she could still find no mention of the third symbol, the mysterious porcupine surrounded by dots, or anything that came even vaguely close.

Going back to texts about the left eye, Gina read that it was also called the Eye of Thoth, a god that represented not the sun but the moon and lunar energy, and ruled over learning, writing and magic. She stared at the screen for a while, wondering just where all this was going, and also if she might get some extra credit come exam time.

She reached across the keyboard and added the word magic to the search bar, and tapped return once again. A handful of new results appeared this time, and Gina clicked on the first one. Amongst its lists of hieroglyphics she found several new symbols.

One of them was the porcupine. But unfortunately it symbolised nothing nearly as cuddly.

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Rich's mobile went straight to voicemail, so Gina had to leave him a brief message, asking him to call her back as soon as he had a chance. She pressed end on her phone and glanced once again over her scribbled notes, of which there were many. Packing up her things, she left the library and headed outside to get some fresh air. It had taken the best part of an hour to find all the scraps of information she now possessed, and although she had confirmed the information with a dark but quite specific website she'd found online, she still couldn't be sure whether it was all accurate or even real.

There were some real weirdoes laying shit on the Net, and some of them had multiple websites with the same disinformation just trying to make stuff real. Yet these websites still had a lot of information, and she meant a lot. It was hard to really dismiss any of it as bullshit, and yet it all seemed so unlikely. Like, this was England for Christ's sake. And the 21st Century too.

Gina sat on a bench and watched the endless throng of students milling about. Most were laughing, having a great time away from home, planning where they were going to get pissed next and who they were going to sleep with. It just seemed to be her with a problem, only her with bad shit spiralling round inside her head. Then her phone rang, and she pulled it out

of her bag.

“Hello?”

“It’s me, Rich. I got your message.”

“Where are you?”

“At work. I was in some boring staff meeting. I had my phone on silent. What’s up?”

“Your tattoo. I’ve been trawling the university’s intranet and beyond.”

“Oh, cool. What did you find?”

“Well firstly, that’s not the Eye of Horus you’ve got there,” she began. “I know we both agreed that it is, but it turns out that it isn’t.”

“Then what is it?”

“Well, just to clarify, it is and it isn’t.”

“Eh?”

“Ra was the original Sun God, okay?” Gina explained, struggling to put her copious notes into some kind of order, none of which now looked intelligible. She tried to go on from memory. “The right eye, as everyone knows it, is called the Eye of Ra, or the Eye of Horus, and it’s designed to look like the eye of a falcon, hence Horus, the falcon-headed sky god.”

“What? Slow down a little. I’ve got no idea what you’re on about. I’m not on your course, remember?”

“Wait,” Gina said, flipping pages but not finding what she was looking for. “What you’ve seen on various buildings, and what you’ve paid good money to have tattooed on your person, is not the right eye or the Eye of Ra at all, but the left eye or the Eye of Thoth, that of the moon god, or the fabled blood god.”

“Thoth?” was all Rich could manage to utter. It sounded like he had a lisp, or that she had a lisp and he’d misheard her.

“Thoth was basically the moon god, he took the form of an ibis-headed man because the curved beak of an ibis looked like a crescent moon, and he had dominion over night and everything that dwelled in the darkness of night. He was the mediator between Set and his nephew Horus, who fought for kingship back then. He was also a healer, and the god of wisdom and writing.”

“Sounds like a good bloke. So, not Horus, but no bad fella.”

“In itself, Rich, yes.”

“I can feel a but coming on.”

“That first symbol you’ve got on your shoulder represents the moon god, or the bloodgod, which is all well and good. However, your second symbol does indeed mean revenge - not good. However, the third symbol I tracked down on a site which dealt more with the magic in which Thoth was involved.”

“Here we go...” Rich groaned.

“That third symbol, the one I thought looked like a porcupine, literally means a plea or a call to arms. Someone’s looking for an army, Rich, and it looks like it’s either Thoth himself, or someone praying for assistance.”

“So...” Rich began, on the other end of the phone. “Just someone having a laugh then, eh?”

“Shall I tell you how it gets worse?” Gina asked slowly.

Rich remained quiet now, just listening.

“The porcupine symbol is linked very heavily with both the Feather of Ma’at - which represents balanced order and morality, both lost when a pharaoh dies - and another god called Set.”

“Who is..?”

“Literally the god of the desert and its wastelands, the god of storms and chaos. He was Osiris’ brother, and he murdered him. He was the introduction of divine and moral evil in both the real world and the immortal world. He was the personalised focus of deicide, calamity and absolute oblivion. And he was an angry power that continually fought with his nephew Horus for ultimate control.”

“He sounds like not quite such a good bloke.”

“This is not a good thing, Rich. I don’t know where you’ve been to see these symbols, but I think it’s very unlikely that someone’s been painting them all over London without actually knowing quite what they are.”

Rich was quiet for a while. Gina watched the students strolling merrily around campus while she waited.

Then Rich spoke:

“So what am I going to do?”

“Well I doubt that you can afford laser surgery,” Gina said, without humour.

“How do you know? I could be on a massive wage.”

“Are you?”

“No.”

“Then I suggest you keep your head down, keep your body covered, and don’t go anywhere near those places ever again. I think something bad’s being invited or invoked, and I wouldn’t want to be too close to it if anything happens, or wearing any tags relating to it if the heavens do all suddenly come crashing down.”

“Come on, Gina. You can’t really believe all

that shit. Not really.”

“After what I’ve seen lately,” Gina said, “I’m liable to believe anything.”