

## CHAPTER 1

### ~ The Gang of Three ~

The last minutes of the last lesson of the last day of term were ticking away, and Martin Turner could not wait to be set free. The minutes dragged on as Mr Lincoln, the form tutor, lectured the class on using holiday time constructively, not giving the school a bad name and staying safe.

‘Remember all that we talked about in Drug Awareness Week,’ he said. ‘And don’t go giving your parents a nervous breakdown.’

Martin raised his hand to get the teacher’s attention. He had his ‘up to no good’ look on his face and everyone in the class knew it. ‘Sir, have you got any advice on holiday sex?’

The whole class burst into uncontrollable laughter as Martin stood up, turned and bowed to the class like an actor takes a bow at the theatre.

‘QUIET,’ Mr Lincoln shouted at the top of his voice. ‘Sit down, Turner, and take that grin off your face.’

Mr Lincoln surveyed the class as if it were his domain. 'While you are out there having fun, take time to consider the fact that next term will be your last in this year,' he said. 'So now you should seriously begin to consider what type of employment or further education you will be seeking. I suggest that you don't waste this holiday period. Talk to your parents, read up on your options and remember there is no reason why you can't use some of the time for study.'

'STUDY!' came a cry from someone at the back.

'Yes, study.'

Now it was Matthew's turn. 'Sir, I thought that holidays were for holidays? If we have to think about work and school stuff in the holidays, then it's not a holiday, is it?'

'That's right,' Mark added. 'Holidays are not for working, holidays are for not working.'

'Education never ceases,' Mr Lincoln replied as the electronic bell rang out all around the school. There were no 'goodbye sirs', just a mad rush for everyone to grab their belongings and escape as if there were some emergency. Even Mr Lincoln seemed relieved that school was over for a while. But as each member of his class raced past him, he looked lonely and neglected, slowly packing his books into his old leather briefcase.

Outside the school, crowds gathered. Meetings, raves and parties were planned. Pupils split into their

various groups and gangs. Sometimes at the end of the school day, fights would happen, but not today – today it was all cool. Even the Big Six Posse, the most respected and feared school gang in the whole of East Ham, were celebrating, practising dance moves and wishing ‘peace an luv’ to everyone in sight.

One of Martin’s best friends was Mark Thorpe, but in school Mr Lincoln insisted that Martin sat in the front row and Mark at the back. Even so, they still managed to cause trouble and entertain the class. In other lessons they would be in the same class as Matthew, who was the laid back third member of the gang. They called themselves the Gang of Three. Together you could feel them planning the defeat of order.

In truth the Gang of Three was just a name they called themselves; to others they were simply known as Martin Turner and his mates – Matthew the quiet one and Mark the silly one. But the three did have a reputation for mischief making and playing tricks. Almost every page of Martin’s school reports said that he could do better but that he needed to pay more attention. Martin saw school as somewhere he went because he had to by law, so the least he could do while he was there was to have some fun. Although he was one of the best gymnasts in school, he never made the team because he ‘lacked discipline’.

The three also had a reputation for chasing girls.

Mark and Matthew were free and single and Martin was going out with Natalie Hepburn. But that didn't stop the three of them from admiring the scenery. What they called the scenery were the cars and the girls. Fast cars or cars that sounded fast were greeted with a collective 'Corrr' and girls were greeted with 'Hey', 'Look at her,' 'Come 'ere' and the occasional whistle. Mark and Matthew never found a girlfriend this way but they still insisted on using this tactic. On this particular afternoon Mark's eye was caught by Jennifer Hamilton from Year 11. She was sixteen years old, and a lot taller than him.

Mark whistled to her and shouted so that everyone could hear, 'Come 'ere, Jenny baby, and give us a kiss goodbye.'

She walked straight up to him, looked down on him and said, 'I'm here, boy, let's do it.'

Mark was shocked.

'OK, you start it,' he spluttered.

'What, do you want me to start without you?'

Laughter burst out as spectators gathered around, all wanting to see the action. Jennifer stood towering above Mark like a gladiator. Mark got himself into more trouble every time he spoke.

'I tell ya what, close yu eyes and I'll start.'

'Close my eyes. What's the matter, boy? Don't you want me to see you? Look, everyone else is watching, I wanna see too!'

The laughter got louder and now the crowd, girls and boys, started to shout encouragement.

‘Do it, man, and do it good.’

‘Teach him a lesson, girl!’

‘Come on, Mark . . . show us how it’s done.’

‘Give her one for me.’

Even Jennifer cracked a smile when one of her best friends shouted, ‘Don’t hurt him, have mercy upon his lips, for he is young and fragile.’

‘All right.’ Mark got serious. ‘Bend down and let’s do the business.’

As Jennifer bent down towards him, Mark squeezed his eyes shut, every muscle on his face tensed and his feet gripping the floor. Jennifer put her hand under his chin and tilted his face towards the sky, the crowd sounding like supporters at a boxing match. Jennifer stuck out her tongue and unleashed it all over Mark’s forehead.

The crowd roared with laughter. Mark opened his eyes and shouted, ‘I’ll kill you, Jennifer Ham!’ Jennifer ran off laughing and Mark tried to give chase. As they ran around the playground it was easy to see that Mark was no match for her ability to dodge or her speed. She was six foot tall. He would take a multitude of steps for one of her gigantic strides.

That was the kind of thing that made Mark funny. He was desperate to try and be like Martin. He loved

Martin's confidence and sense of trickery but most of his tricks would backfire leaving him with egg (or saliva) on his face. Deep down he was a little unhappy about this.

Matthew was quite different. He liked a laugh but he was more cautious than the other two. Matthew could often be heard saying, 'What if we get caught?' or 'I don't know if this is a good idea,' when the other two were in full swing. When the gang were up to mischief, Martin and Mark always complained that Matthew slowed them down. He was continually doing good deeds. Once when they were being chased by the park keeper for doing high jumps over the tennis nets, Matthew actually stopped to return an old man's hat that had blown off his head and was drifting in the wind. The other two stuck by him because he did like a bit of fun – and anyway, they had been The Gang of Three since primary school days.

Some people thought of Natalie Hepburn as the fourth member of the gang – but she didn't. Natalie was her own person, an individual who just happened to be going out with this kid who thought he was a clever dick. Many of the girls in school had a lot of respect for Natalie because she would not allow anyone to push her around. She was a bit of a judo expert and she had once been used in a hair commercial

because of her Mediterranean looks and her long black hair. She had been going out with Martin for five months now, which was the longest Martin had been out with anyone. Natalie loved Martin's looks – his brown eyes, his long, thick brown hair, which just rested on his shoulders, and his slim build. She knew that because Martin had such a cute baby face, lots of other girls found him good-looking. He had the kind of face many actors and impressionists would dream of, able to mimic almost any person or animal and able to convey any emotion in a second. Natalie knew that he was aware of this gift and always used it to his advantage, but she also knew that looks weren't everything. Her friends thought she was a bit mad for going out with him, but she reckoned there was an intelligent person under all that front and that maybe one day she would get to him.

Natalie knew just how to deal with Martin when he tried to see how far he could go. Just five months ago Pat James, who was in Year 9, really fancied Martin. Martin played it dangerously by sweet-talking both of them at the same time. When Natalie heard about this, she arranged for both of them to confront him together. Martin couldn't believe it. One dinner time they walked up to him in the playground and demanded that he decide who he really liked. He chose Natalie of course and Pat James had hated the two of them ever since. But Natalie didn't leave it at

that. Once Pat was out of the way, she made Martin ask for forgiveness in front of all her friends and demanded that he bought her a friendship ring costing no less than ten pounds. That was Natalie's way.