



# **Table Of Contents**

## **Fate**

**Chapter One**

**Chapter Two**

**Chapter Three**

**Chapter Four**

**Chapter Five**

**Chapter Six**

**Epilogue**

# Chapter One

Andrea Steel was probably the only one in the Rugby Club not enjoying herself. She hadn't wanted to be here at seven and she wanted to be here even less four hours later. Tony Collins was twenty seven and this was his birthday party. Tony was in The Crew therefore every other Crew and their girls were there too. Andrea was Crew property on a few levels.

Firstly she was Stevie Steel's kid sister and Stevie was The Crew's topdog. Stevie was thirty one and ten years older than Andrea, they being from two of their father's three marriages. Wife one, Stevie's mother, had took off with an oil rig worker. Wife two, moved in when Stevie was eight and Andrea appeared two years later. Andrea's mother had left five years ago when Andrea was seventeen and wife three was installed only months later. Andrea moved out as soon as she could get a council flat, Stevie was still living with their dad where it was cheaper.

Andrea was also supposed to be Tony's girl even though she never, ever had any say in the creation of that relationship. Tony had gone to Stevie and Stevie had *told* Andrea that Tony was taking her out. Andrea hadn't liked Tony Collins then, and she hated him now. He was a nasty drunk and a bully. Stevie thought Andrea was whining and exaggerating because Tony told him that Andrea was whining and exaggerating.

All in all Andrea was pretty miserable with her life and found the whole gang thing pathetic and childish. Tony was now absolutely blotto, shirtless, senseless, and lurching around the dancefloor with Gaz and Terry. He spied Andrea and reeled over.

"Where's my pint?" He shouted, staggering to one side.

"You drank half of it and spilled the rest down Stacy." Andrea told him.

"Don't tell me how much to drink!" Tony yelled in Andrea's face, even though she hadn't.

"Andrea!" Stevie held up a note. "Go get them in." Andrea took Stevie's money and stamped over to the bar. Stevie's girl, Heather, followed to help carry the glasses.

"Cheer up Andrea for god's sake." Heather tutted.

"Cheer up? Look at the rotten state of him." Andrea snapped. "I think I'll bugger off through the fire exit and leave them all to it."

"Oh stop your moaning." Heather got the barman's attention by rattling an empty can on the bar. "It's his birthday Andrea! What do you expect?"

"I know what to expect." Andrea said angrily. "So what's his excuse any other time? I can't bloody well stick him Heather. He makes me sick."

"Look, kid, blokes go out on the piss. End of story. Get used to it." Heather said sagely.

"My arse I will. It's OK for you, our Stevie's always good with you no matter what state he's in." Andrea argued.

"Trust me, big brother is no saint. We fight like hell at times, just like everybugger else." Heather grabbed two drinks and pranced off. Andrea seriously considered leaving the other two and just walking out. Get used to it? Was she for real? There again, she probably was for real. Heather was as thick as two short planks and her claim to fame was graduating to Stevie from Lee Monk. Andrea snatched the pints off the bar and turned round just in time to see Tony puking his guts up, missing Stevie by inches.

"Oi! You dirty bastard!" Stevie bellowed. "Ugh! Andrea!"

"No chance." Andrea put the drinks on another table. "I'm not cleaning that up." Tony was just lolling on the seat.

"He'd better get home." Stevie looked at Tony in mild disgust.

"His home, not mine." Andrea said flatly and Stevie snarled at her. "No Stevie, I don't want him in my flat in that state."

"He can't go to his Old Man's like this. He'll kick the shit into him." Stevie glared at Andrea.

"I can't help that. Stevie I can't manage him like that and it is my flat."

"For shit's sake you'd think you were the only person with a bloody flat! Give Gaz your keys." Stevie ordered.

"I'd rather not. Just send him home!" Andrea objected.

"Gaz and Terry will take him in a taxi and chuck him through the door. I'll get Gaz to hang around and wait for you in the next taxi. OK? Pretty Princess Andrea gets a nice fairy taxi all to herself?" Stevie snatched Andrea's keys from her and Andrea flung herself onto the chair next to Heather. They watched Gaz, Terry, Scott and Liam drag Tony across the club and towards the door. Stevie was growling orders down his mobile phone at the taxi firm.

"Looks like you pissed Stevie off too. Cheers." Heather said nastily to Andrea.

"I'm not barfing all over the place, Tony is. Just don't, Heather. I've enough crap with Tony, don't you start too." Andrea stood up as Stevie barged towards her.

"Don't you ever do that again." He pointed at Andrea. "I trust Gaz with your keys so you trust Gaz with your keys. Got that?"

"Stevie it wasn't Gaz, or the keys." Andrea said desperately. "I do not like Tony full of drink. Why won't you listen to me?"

"You've had a few pints yourself sis." Stevie clapped his arm round her and almost knocked her over. "He'll be comotose by the time you get home. Just let him sleep it off, Andrea. OK?"

"Can you say something to him, Stevie? He broke those dragons mum bought me. I really think me and Tony have run the course."

"He broke your dragons by accident, sis. He told me. Knocked them off the shelf carrying that coffee table didn't he?"

"No but what does it matter." Andrea said miserably and Stevie grimaced.

"Go see if your taxi's here Andrea. I'll have a go at Tony and tell him to replace your dragons. I know you liked them. Go on, Gaz'll be waiting with your keys." Stevie nudged Andrea towards the door. She yanked her arm away from her brother and marched out of the club. Stevie had missed the point by eight furlongs! There again, Andrea hadn't told him directly that Tony had thrown the ornaments at her. Would Stevie believe her if she told him what Tony was actually like? The reason Andrea only hinted was because she'd be devastated if he didn't.

Andrea almost burst into tears when she got out of the taxi. Every light was on in her flat and loud music blared out. Tony, Gaz, Scott, Terry and Liam had stopped off somewhere for cans of beer and they'd taken over her flat. Andrea walked in and pocketed her keys first.

"Where the hell have you been?" Tony tried to stand up and fell back down again, spraying beer everywhere.

"In the taxi." Andrea was furious and she glanced at the clock to see if it was too late to call Stevie. He'd be home by now, probably at Heather's bedsit.

"Yeah I bet you have, you whore." Tony belched and waved his can around.

"I'm going to bed." Andrea managed to get to the stairs before Tony got her by the hair.

"Where you going? You bitch Andrea! We're hungry." Tony shoved her into the kitchen door.

"Hey it's OK Tony." Gaz was on his feet. "It's fine. Come on, we'll just have more beer." Tony hit Gaz first with his beer can, then turned on Andrea in an utter rage. She felt fists and slaps then an impossible pain in her head where he split her skin with the beer can. Gaz shouted and tried to grab Tony's arms and Andrea took advantage of the situation. She swung the coffee table up and round and almost decapitated Tony when it connected with the side of his head.

"You arsehole!" Andrea sobbed. "You're all arseholes!" She ran out of her flat and hoped Tony had stopped breathing. She jumped over four walls and ran through the gardens just incase anyone followed her. At last, Andrea came to the low wall that surrounded the recycling bins. Only then did she stop and cry. She could feel the blood cooling on her head and matting her blonde split ends together. She could feel the bumps and bruises aching. Despite that, Andrea's tears weren't for the pain, they were for the hopelessness and the apathy and no way out of this dead end town and her dead end life.

"Which one's for cardboard?" A voice frightened the life out of Andrea. "You OK?" Andrea nodded at the appropriate bin and wiped

her nose on her sleeve. She watched the man as he tore up his cardboard boxes to fit in the bin. He was around Stevie's age but he was a bit taller, Andrea guessed around 6'2. He had floppy brown hair and round, gold framed glasses. "So do you often sit by the bins at 2am? Your head's bleeding."

"I'm fine. No of course not. Do you often bring out your rubbish at 2am?" Andrea began shivering. Her jacket was still in the flat.

"No. I followed you." The man smiled and Andrea panicked hugely.

"I ... I'm waiting for my brother. Stevie Steel's my brother. He's coming here really soon." She babbled.

"Maybe he should have come the other times you and your boyfiend got to fighting." The man looked at Andrea who was shaking with cold and fear. "I'm not going to hurt you, don't worry. James Carling." He held out his hand and Andrea just looked at it and shook her head.

"How do you know about my ... my ... the fights?" She asked through chattering teeth.

"I've just moved into the flat along the street from you. You could hear that in the town centre, let alone the next block." James took off his jacket and gave it to Andrea. She took it reluctantly and wrapped it round herself.

"Thanks. So my fights with that asshole have embarrassed me all over the estate." Andrea said glumly. "Sorry I disturbed you. Andrea Steel." Andrea held out her hand to be shaken.

"No." James shook his head. "I saw a few of them getting out of that taxi. That's why I followed you down here to see if you were OK. Do you want me to go and see what's going on?"

"What?" Andrea said in alarm. Send this nice, polite, bespectacled man in with that pack of shits?! "Hell no! No, that's fine James, really it is."

"I don't mind. I'll come back with you."

"No you won't." Andrea smiled. "Thanks for offering, that's really good of you, but I can't let you do that. I'll be OK." She took off James' jacket and handed it back to him.

"Will he be expecting you going back?" James asked.

"No he'll be in a heap in his own puke by now. The others will have scarpered out of the way of it. I'll just give it a while to make sure he's definitely unconscious."

"Come on, wait in my flat. You can't stay out here all night." James turned round and set off home.

"James!" Andrea blurted and grabbed for him. "James I can't do that! Shit Tony will have a fit and Stevie will meltdown altogether! James!" James stopped and looked at her. "I can't go to your flat. Honestly James, I'd be putting you in line for a hiding and you don't deserve it. Thanks."

"Well I wasn't planning on telling Stevie and Tony. Were you?" James unlocked his door. "Who'll know? You're on the sofa."

"OK." Andrea darted into the warm flat. It was exactly the same layout as her own but it was cluttered with packing crates, bags, books and computer discs. The computer itself sat in a corner next to a chair with a guitar propped up on it. It was a typical nerd's bachelor den. "Don't say anything at all about this James. Please don't tell anyone. If Tony found out ..."

"Oh nevermind Tony for now. I won't say anything. Get some sleep Andrea and knackers to Tony." James put a sleeping bag on the couch then smiled at Andrea before going upstairs to bed.

## Chapter Two

Andrea woke up among a maze of packing crates and it took her a while to remember where she was. Then the dread set in. How could she have done something as stupid as this? Computer boffin James would stand no chance against Tony so Stevie would completely obliterate the poor man, and it was all her fault. James himself came walking through the front door with a carton of milk and a newspaper.

"Tea? Coffee?" He asked, headed for the kitchen.

"Yes. I mean thank you." Andrea trotted after him. "I shouldn't be here James. I have to go."

"It's fine. Your flat is an arsehole free zone. I just saw Collins getting on the bus. Who's turned his face over? He has two shiners and split nose." James put the kettle on.

"Er ... I think I hit him with the coffee table." Andrea scratched her ear and James snorted a laugh. "I hate all this crap. I shouldn't have come here. I'd better go fix my flat."

"Have your tea first." James handed her a cup. "Just move the guitar off the chair and sit down."

"I wish I could play guitar." Andrea carefully moved the instrument.

"Well I'm only learning. That was my brother's guitar." James told her.

"So he's teaching you?"

"No. He died five years ago."

"Oh shit." Andrea almost burst into tears. "I'm sorry. What a big mouth I have."

"No need to apologise. It was five years ago. So how long have you lived here?" James changed the subject and Andrea was grateful for it.

"Since I was seventeen. Four years. I think my mum pulled a few strings after my dad moved another woman in the house." Andrea smiled. "It's a bit rough but it's mine."

"I've only been here two weeks, as you can see." James nudged a crate with his foot. "I got a job in the library in town four weeks ago and spent two weeks in the vilest bedsit in the universe."

"The council must have thrown this flat at you and hailed you a hero. A Paying tenant! I don't think there are any more of those on the estate." Andrea said and James started to laugh. "I've been on the dole since I left school. How pathetic is that?"

"Over half the population of this area is on the dole, Andrea. I'm from here so I know there are no jobs. I got lucky."

"You're clever too." Andrea nodded towards a stack of books. "I'm as thick as a plank. I didn't get the exam grades to go to college and definitely not to take A Levels. Stevie has three GCSEs and he's still only lugging boxes about in the docks warehouses. Waste of time around here."

"It's never a waste of time. We're all entitled to try the best for ourselves. Don't let anyone stop you." James told her. "Especially not Tony or even Stevie. The Crew doesn't own you despite how it feels."

"You know about The Crew?" Andrea wasn't really surprised. Everyone had.

"Well I know of them, everyone does." James shrugged his shoulders. "Don't look so frantic, Andrea. You're worried incase they catch up with the specky nerd who had the nerve to live next to a 'Crew Girl!'"

"It isn't funny, James. You don't know what they're like." Andrea exhaled loudly. "I have to go. Tony will have gone pissing himself to our Stevie by now. Wait for the bang." She rolled her eyes and stood up. "Thanks for all this James, I really do appreciate it."

"I'm only a few houses away, Andrea. Don't worry about The Crew and me. I'm good at difusing situations." James opened the door for Andrea and Andrea left him with his delusions.

Andrea felt like fleeing her flat and going back to the one she'd just left. There were beer cans everywhere and beer soaked into the carpets and up the walls. Her CD rack was over on it's side and her coffee table was in bits. She booted an empty beer can box and grabbed her mobile phone from her jeans pocket. It rang loudly while Andrea was fumbling with the buttons.

"Andrea!" Stevie barked down the phone.

"Oh good. I was just phoning you." Andrea snapped. "Get up here and see this. I won't touch anything, just come and see this place."

"Trust me Andrea, you don't want me up there." Stevie growled.

"Oh great. Tony gets to you first and fills you full of shit. I'm your sister Stevie!"

"OK! O ... bloody ... K! Christ I do not need all this shit and a hangover! It's like babysitting a pair of chimpanzees with that YMCA disorder!" Stevie ranted and Andrea snorted a laugh despite her rage. "What's bloody funny?"

"ADHD, not YMCA." Andrea smirked.

"Andrea I couldn't give a toss!" Stevie howled. "Look, can you come down to the Railway Arms? Something's come up and I need to be here but I also need you and bloody Dorothy here sorted out."

"No. I have a flat to fix. I'll fix the Dorothy problem. Tell him he's dumped." Andrea said, knowing damn fine that meant absolutely nothing.

"OK so rest of them will believe him. See you la ..."

"What's he said? Usual crap? I trashed my own flat I suppose? I split my own head open? Oh yes, how did he explain that? Did I fall? Open a cupboard into it? Lame Stevie, lame. Let the rest of them think that." Andrea said angrily.

"Oh shut up!" Stevie bellowed. "Tony said you slagged off with someone else. OK?" Andrea almost had hysterics. James? Surely not. Not already.

"Railway Arms. I'm coming down there. I have not slagged off with anyone and Tony needs a bloody good kicking for saying that." Andrea hung up, grabbed her jacket and ran out of her flat.

Tony looked terrible with his black eyes and cut nose and Andrea felt her mood improving at the sight. Stevie held up a ten pound note as a sign for Andrea to get the drinks in before she sat down. She got herself and Stevie one and ignored Tony.

"Where were you after you left here Andrea?" Stevie asked.

"In the taxi. You ordered it, Stevie." Andrea said flatly.

"Who else was in it?" Stevie looked at Andrea.

"Huh? No one. This lot had already gone. You sorted it out Stevie for shit's sake. What have you said Tony?" Andrea snarled at him.

"I'm telling you Stevie it took her two hours to get home. Two pissing hours! There's not alot else she could be doing without me and at that time of night." Tony snapped and glared at Andrea.

"Eh?" Andrea blinked in shock. "Two hours? Where the hell did that come from? I got home twenty minutes after you and you'd turned my flat into a frigging nightclub! Where did two hours come from?"

"You were slagging about Andrea, admit it. Stevie knows. OK? Stop with the lies." Tony pointed in Andrea's face.

"Have you asked him?" Andrea pointed to where Gaz was playing pool with one of the barstaff. Stevie rubbed his eyes and then looked at Andrea. "Well? Ask Gaz! He was there when this arsehole trashed my bloody flat, AGAIN!"

"Gaz says it wasn't that bad, Andrea." Stevie scowled. Andrea flung up her arms in despair. "As for trashing stuff? What the shit did you hit him with? You can't tell me you were completely asleep during all that shite!"

"No, I brained him with the coffee table. I was not slagging about! Stop trying to get away from the accusation. I was not missing for two hours." Andrea said stubbornly. She certainly wasn't going to make this easy for Tony. She hated the man.

"Collins!" The pub landlord waved the phone in their direction.

"I bet the old girl's told the old man I've been brawling. You can look out if I get bollocked, Andrea." Tony went to answer the phone. Stevie threw a beermat at Gaz and Gaz looked like he'd rather walk over hot coals than walk over to Stevie.

"Right Gaz." Stevie glared at the other man. "No crap. OK? I'm fed up of it, I have a hangover, and I have people telling me Lingsy re-emerged and is sniffing around. I do not need shit Gaz. Understand? Now did it take two hours for her to get home?"

"Hell I'm not sure Stevie. I was drunk man." Gaz rubbed his eyes. "Maybe not that long." He glance at Andrea and Andrea looked back in disgust. These were fully grown, adult men, all covering for each other like a bunch of naughty five year olds.

"What did you do to your chin Gaz?" Andrea asked and pointed to a curved purple bruise on the side of Gaz's chin. Gaz just shrugged. "Weird shaped bruise eh Stevie? It's beer can sized. Now who would clout you with a beer can?" Andrea pointed to her own scabbed forehead.

"Tony!" Stevie roared over the pub. Stevie was on his way back from the end of the bar and he looked even worse than he had earlier. "I want a word with you in private."

"Stevie that's not important. I've just been threatened down the phone!" Tony dropped onto his seat.

"Huh? Who by?" Stevie asked.

"How do I know! He told be to step off if I liked my legs unbroken. I asked who it was and he laughed and said he would be around. What does that mean?" Tony's hands were shaking, probably due to the drink wearing off.

"So who have you pissed off? You're a gobshite when you're drunk." Stevie preached.

"No one! I haven't been anywhere except with Crew. I get told if I'm being gobby by our own. Step off what?" Tony sounded very rattled indeed.

"How did he know you were in here?" Stevie asked, automatically looking out of the window. "Someone follow you?"

"I didn't see anyone. I don't know why anyone would be after me! You'll sort it Stevie, won't you? I haven't done a thing, I swear." Tony also looked out of the window.

"You touch her again and I'll be sorting you. You got that?" Stevie glowered at Tony and Andrea felt like crying in relief.

"Stevie! Come on man." Tony tried to laugh. "We're Crew! No woman is going to cause shit between Crew. Me and her scream and yell alot, that's all. I didn't ... hang on." Tony frowned and grabbed Andrea's arm. "So you *were* slagging off! You slut Andrea! You slag off with god knows who, then you get him to threaten me! Are you really that stupid? *Him* threaten *me*? I'm Crew, you stupid bitch!" He pushed Andrea away and Stevie looked a bit astonished and rather hysterical.

"I was not slagging off! I'm not surprised someone's after you, you shitbag!" Andrea moved closer to Stevie.

"I woke up at five this morning with a bouncing head and churning guts. You were not in that flat! I threw up and went back to sleep. I woke up at ten and you still weren't in it. Explain that one, you whore." Tony snarled.

"I was at Sammi's. Sammi is a girl, Tony, don't wee yourself. Stevie knows her and her husband. You'd just battered me with a full can of Export and split my head open, you arsehole. I had to leave my own house in the middle of the night because of you and the rest of the scumbos. I went to Sammi's flat rather than sleep on the pavement. Stay away from me Tony. Stevie just keep him away from me." Andrea stood up and ran out of the Railway Arms before the tears started.

"Bad work, Tony. I mean it." Stevie said darkly. "Don't argue, it's gone. You and our Andrea are over, OK? If you weren't Crew, I'd have ripped your head off for belting my sister. Don't you forget that."

"It wasn't all one sided Stevie." Tony shook his head and Stevie glared horribly at him. "OK it's gone, like you said. Over." He looked at his shaking hands. "I feel like shit."

"So who's going to break your legs? Everyone knows The Crew so whoever it is, is either very hard or very stupid. It hasn't got anything to do with Andrea before you start, Tony. That was just you being an arsehole." Stevie sighed heavily. "Why does everything come at once eh? OK you keep your head down. You hear me? If you think of anyone who might have it in for you, tell me. I'll send the feelers out."

"Good. I knew you would. Straight up Stevie, I haven't aggravated anyone. I'd tell you if I had." Tony went and bought himself and Stevie a pint. "So what's the story with Lingsy?"

"Oh so we can address that now can we?" Stevie said sarcastically. "You sure? You don't need your arse wiped and a bedtime story? Go get the others from the games room. We need to talk." Stevie frowned out of the window and saw Andrea getting on the bus. He wanted nothing more than to follow her and tell her how sorry he was for not listening to her. He'd always looked after Andrea since she was a toddler with scabby knees and a snotty nose. A good hiding still wasn't out of the question for Tony yet. Stevie decided to hold it over him as 'persuasion' to lay off his sister. He watched old Charlie totter in through the door on his sticks. You could set your watch by Charlie. Same time, every single day of every single year for decades. Same two glasses of stout, same read of the racing page, same time for leaving. Stevie was thirty one now. Would he still be Crew in his seventies? Of course not. Would he quit while he was on top? If so, how? Or would he just sit there in middle age and wait for the embarrassing beltings from kids twenty years younger than him? Stevie was rapidly growing tired of the whole, life consuming thing. He'd done absolutely nothing else since he was fifteen. Even his girlfriend was Crew and only there as some sort of status symbol. That's how Andrea had felt and Stevie knew this. She was far better than the gang scene, she was far more intelligent and had more sense. Andrea was head and

shoulders above the rest of the crap in the town, in Stevie's opinion. He felt like screaming his lungs raw every time the crap dragged her back down. What the hell had ever made him think that Tony Collins deserved his sister. He didn't, end of story. That sorted out, what the hell made the others think that Stevie could tell Lingsy where and where not to go?! Why had they all come running to him? Stevie got another pint and waited to hear half a dozen hairy arsed blokes twittering and getting agitated over one ex-thug, Lingsy.

## Chapter Three

Twelve Crew sat at the wooden tables in the Railway Arms. Two were even older than Stevie and the youngest was Andrea's age. A lot of the town's kids claimed to be Crew and that was fine. Those kids would probably kick Stevie's wrinkled old arse for him in time. The group in the pub were all diehards.

"So what's the score with Lingsy? I haven't seen him." Stevie began.

"I have." Terry spoke up. "He was in Tesco's. It definitely was him."

"So ... we all get excited over a bloke doing his shopping?" Stevie rolled his eyes. "Look, I'm not saying he isn't back in town, I'm asking why he shouldn't be? Is he causing trouble? Bothering anyone? Paying for his beans in Lira or something?"

"Well no but no one's seen him for five years. He just vanished. The SBC is all made up of kids now because all the old timers left when Lingsy did. He could be going back to that lot. He'd walk in right on top too. They're only kids." Gaz said. The SBC was the South Bank Clan, another gang from the south of the town, by the river and Lingsy had ran the show alongside his kid brother.

"After five years? I can't see it, Gaz. He's nearly as old as I am and he went a bit mental in the head after his brother got knifed. Depressed and all that stuff. That's what I heard anyway." Stevie shrugged his shoulders. "So has anyone got any real reasons to say he's going to be a problem? We can't all panic just because the bloke's in Tesco's."

"I think he's just moved back because he's from here." Tony said. "Liam saw him on Wood Street three weeks ago so if he was going to cause shit, he'd have done it by now."

"Yes he'd have gone for you Stevie. The Crew is the only old gang left now and you're the main target." Billy who was thirty four reminded him. "No disrespect Stevie, I know you're a hard bastard, but the Lingsys were harder."

"I know." Stevie agreed. "So I count my blessings that Lingsy's satisfied with Tesco's and isn't interested in taking over The Crew. If you hear anything else, let me know. It's always good to know where blokes like Lingsy are. Right! I'm going home for my dinner and a sleep." One thing about Carol, wife three, was that she knew how to make a bloody good dinner. Stevie made eye contact with Tony and Tony nodded slightly his understanding to behave himself.

Andrea started to clean her flat. Luckily, none of her CDs were broken and only two of the boxes. The wall would need painted where the beer had left a stain and the carpet had to be scrubbed. The poor coffee table pitched at a forty five degree angle and swayed every time Andrea walked past it. She couldn't bring herself to throw it out so she set about it with the HardAzNailz. It was quite late by the time she'd finished and she was quite disappointed that no one had phoned. Stevie hadn't and neither had James. Thankfully, nor had Tony so that was a good thing. Andrea was putting away the cleaning things when her eyes fell on a box in the back of the cupboard. She smiled to herself then darted into the bathroom to shower and change.

James answered the door with a book in one hand and a sandwich in the other.

"Hello!" He smiled. "Recycle bins are that way."

"Do I meet you there or do you want these now?" Andrea laughed as James let her into the flat. "Curtains so you can take that bedsheet down."

"Fantastic! I'll give you something for them." James put his book down and went to put the kettle on. "Has everything been OK today? Tony?"

"Awful." Andrea said ruefully. "He's such a lying sack of crap. At least Stevie doesn't see him as golden boy anymore though so that's one good thing. He's on a warning."

"Lets hope he heeds it." James gave Andrea her coffee.

"He'll stay out of my face for while. Someone threatened to break his legs today so he has that to keep him occupied. Stevie reckons he's opened his big nasty mouth when he was drunk and upset someone. Sounds about right." Andrea said bitterly, then grimaced. "I'm sorry. Listen to me eh? Who cares about Tony? No bugger. I didn't come here to moan on like that."

"It's fine. I don't mind. I'm pleased you told me. Stops me worrying." James smiled at Andrea.

"Worried? You were worried about me today?" Andrea felt suddenly exhausted. Everything seemed to catch up to her and she felt like collapsing.

"Of course I was. I was worried last night, I told you that. That's why you ended up here. You think I just forgot about it after you left? I'd go and put Collins in his place myself if I didn't think it would come straight back at you."

"That's a nice thought, James. You're a fantastic man. You're right, he'd take it out on me, but that's nothing new. He'd take it out on you too. Can't you see that? He's an arsehole, James. Even without Stevie's backing, he's still capable of making things miserable for me and of hurting you." Andrea felt tears pricking her eyes. "I have to go. The hooks are in with the curtains."

"Andrea?" James stood up. "Andrea would it make a difference if you were with me ... properly? I mean would you feel safer if everyone, including Collins, knew you were going out with me?" Andrea stood there and just cried. "This isn't right. No one should be this bloody miserable." He sat Andrea on the couch and sat next to her. "You can't let The Crew run your life Andrea. You could trust me and give me a try?"

"You mean it?" Andrea snivelled and James nodded. "You have to let me talk to Stevie first." James let out a loud sigh. "Please James, I do have my reasons. If I can get Stevie to accept that I have a new boyfriend then he'll be there for when Tony has a tantrum. I know you want to try and have a go at him, and talk to Stevie, but you have to trust me, James. I know them better than you do."

"OK. I suppose so." James heaved a sigh. "Stevie's stuck up for Tony too long Andrea. Tony's rotten and he's going to drag Stevie into trouble one of these days."

"Isn't it pathetic? I despise the whole gang crap, I really do. My friend Sammi is married to a lovely man who's Stevie's age. Stevie looks like a complete retard next to him. Stevie's there playing gang raids with thirty year old men, then going home for his bloody dinner! Sammi's husband is on the dole, James. He can't get a job yet he trawls every paper and every advertisement in the town then he goes home like a man to Sammi. I don't want my brother to be embarrassing himself like this when he's fifty. It's bad enough now." Andrea exhaled loudly. "But that's a different thing completely. All I want is to be away from Tony and to be left alone."

"With me." James smiled.

"Yes with you. I've had enough. They either have it or I'll have Tony lifted if he comes near me."

"That'll go down well." James said ruefully. "It won't come to that. I won't let it. Talk to Stevie tomorrow and let me know how it goes. OK?" Andrea nodded then whimpered when James kissed her. "You can stay here if you like?"

"I like, but I can't just yet. Stevie will phone me because I was upset when I left the pub. He always phones my housephone rather than my mobile." Andrea explained.

"I understand. Unspoken gang law." James smiled and followed Andrea to the door.

"What is? Stevie caring for me?" Andrea asked in confusion.

"No the phone thing. Gang lads phone each other on mobile phones, they phone their girls at their home addresses. That way they know they're at home out of the way." James shrugged his shoulders.

"You what?" Andrea spluttered. "You think so?" James smiled at Andrea's outraged face and nodded. "I'll get the bugger disconnected. Just wait until I get Stevie about that, the big ape."

"Remember, just talk to Stevie. Stay away from Collins. Please?" James pushed her hair behind her ear. Andrea smiled and nodded and hovered about for another kiss. She wasn't disappointed.

Stevie woke Andrea up the next morning by hammering on the door.

"Bloody hell Stevie. Have you wet the bed? It's only half ten." Andrea let him into her flat then went to put the kettle on. She heard a loud crash and ran through to see her coffee table in a heap against the wall. Stevie had put his big booted feet on it.

"Coffee table's shite." Stevie observed.

"It is now, yes." Andrea said in dismay and went back to the kettle.

"You OK?" Stevie followed her.

"I'm fine." Andrea said quickly. "I have to talk to you Stevie." She nudged Stevie back into the sitting room with two full mugs of tea. "First off, I'm sorry there was a scene in the pub. I shouldn't have roared at shit-head. You shouldn't have to clean up after everyone." Andrea knew exactly how to talk to Stevie, she'd had plenty of practice.

"Well Tony's a tosser. He won't be hitting you again, sis. I'm not having that crap even from Tony." Stevie said flatly.

"That's great Stevie. Thanks." Andrea hugged her big brother. "There's something else I have to tell you. It's not related directly but it sort of is. I need you to help me."

"Oh?" Stevie was suspicious straight away. "Help how? What have you done?"

"Help with Tony." Andrea sighed wearily and sat down. "Stevie there's a really nice man I'd like to start seeing. He's ..."

"Stop!" Stevie held up his hand. "Crew?"

"I said nice. No not Crew. I really could do with your support here Stevie. Tony will never let it go, you know he won't." Andrea hung her head.

"Honest answer here, Andrea. You didn't cheat on Tony, did you? I know he was an asshole but you said you didn't so that would be a lie to me too." Stevie asked.

"No of course I didn't. I didn't want away from Tony to be with this man either. I wanted away from Tony because he's a bully and a turd. He has nothing to do with any gangs at all. He's nice and quiet. You'd like him, Stevie." Andrea nodded eagerly.

"OK don't go overboard." Stevie tutted. "Just keep him away from the lads, Andrea. Deal? Tony is a turd, I know, but flaunting a new fella in front of him would just be bitchful." Stevie preached.

"Bitchful isn't a word." Andrea smiled. "I'd never parade him in front of any of you. All I want is to be left alone, Stevie. He won't hurt me, but if he ever did, I'd be straight for you. That's a little sister thing, not a Crew thing."

"Soppy tart. Get off." Stevie grumbled and answered his buzzing phone. "Tony. How nice."

"Stevie! Christ Stevie I think it's Lingsy who's after my balls!" Tony howled so loud that Andrea heard him too.

"What? It better bloody not be, Tony! Shit! What the hell have you done?" Stevie had to sit down.

"Nothing! I keep telling you that! Stevie I saw him in the newsagents this morning. He was handing something over the counter. He

came out and didn't see me, he went in the other direction ..."

"Tony get the shit on with it!" Stevie shouted. "Hell's teeth man you do talk shite!"

"The newsagent went straight to the window and put a notice up. 'For Sale, ticket for Tony Collins. Unwanted gift, ready to punch.' What have I ever done to him? Stevie why is Lingsy after me?" Tony shrieked.

"How the hell do I know? Just stay calm, Tony. Are you sure it was him?"

"Yes! He's a bit older now but it's still him! Where should I meet you?"

"Well I'm at Andrea's just now. I'll ..."

"I'll get the next bus." Tony hung up and left Stevie hanging.

"Don't shout!" Stevie said to Andrea, who was not happy. "He didn't let me finish. Can he stay for a bit Andrea? I'll be here too, I promise. It is serious, actually. Lingsy, for shit's sake."

"Is he that bad? Why would he want Tony?" Andrea settled down a bit.

"I don't know why he wants Tony. Tony just isn't important enough to have the likes of Lingsy on his case." Stevie exhaled loudly. "I'm going to have to go and see Lingsy myself. He'll pulverise Tony if he starts with him."

"He sounds bloody awful. What a nut case! Tony isn't my favourite person just now, but I don't want him batterd, you either." Andrea said.

"This is weird. He does sound like a nutter but he isn't. That's the strange thing. He's incredibly hard. People used to actually pay him to go and belt folk. Lingsy did it too but only if the reasons were right. He ran the SBC and at that time and because of him and his brother, the SBC covered just about all the area. According to talk, he's lucky to be alive. He's had his house firebombed, his motorbike boobytrapped, and he was once ran down and chucked in the river. He's been stabbed and shot and he's still here." Stevie told Andrea and she was revolted. "Rumour has it that the knife that killed his brother was meant for him. It was during a brawl with a gang from the coast. Both Lingsys looked alike, basically and the younger one got stuck through the heart. Lingsy just jacked the lot in and vanished. Some say he went off the deep end with depression and what not. Some say he went and joined another gang. The SBC just fell apart without them. This lot now are just pissy kids. This is the first time anyone's ever seen Lingsy for five years. No way in hell will I believe that he came back just to batter Tony. Just no."

"Do you want me out of the way. I could go upstairs, or I could even go out somewhere." Andrea was quite scared.

"Don't be daft. It's your flat. We'll just give his a cup of tea and I'll cart him off. I need this sorted." Stevie rubbed his temples and Andrea went to hide in the kitchen.

## Chapter Four

Tony was hysterical and almost hammered the door off its hinges. He pushed past Stevie and collapsed on a chair in the sitting room.

"Tony that message can't have been from Lingsy. It just doesn't make any sense." Stevie tried.

"He was the only one who handed something over the counter, Stevie. Are you going to do something useful, Andrea? Get the kettle on." Tony snapped.

"I'm going to the shop. I need coffee. Put it on yourself." Andrea marched out of her flat before an argument emerged. She could see James' flat from the road and reasoned he'd be at work. Not that she'd have been stupid enough to go there just now. The local shop was an ugly grey box with steel bars over the windows and door. It stocked the basics and no more. The woman who shambled over to get Andrea's coffee was probably in breach of health and safety in her own right. Outside, the watery sun was trying to muscle through the clouds, not very successfully. Andrea wondered how long she could make a trip to the shop last.

"Andrea!" Stevie came striding round the corner. "You on go slow?"

"You that desperate for a coffee?" Andrea felt very fed up indeed.

"Bugger the coffee. I've just got a text and I don't know who off. It says 'keep Collins in order'. I've also got one off Gaz telling me Lingsy just came out of the post office using his phone." Stevie showed Andrea the texts. "I have to go and see him, sis. No one knows what the shit is going on!"

"No! Stevie he'll clobber you! Why do you have to go and sort him out? This is Tony's fault, not yours." Andrea said in panic.

"Calm down, I'm not going to sort him out. I need him to know that Tony really has no idea what he's done to piss him off. Maybe if Lingsy tells me, I can sort Tony out. I have to go, Andrea. Trust me, Lingsy will make a mess of Tony and I mean a real mess." Stevie said seriously. "Now I've warned him and threatened him with a toeing from hell so he won't lay a finger on you ..."

"Hey! No Stevie!" Andrea shrieked. "I'm not being a bitch, I swear I'm not. I don't want him battered to a pulp even though he's a knobhead. I don't want anyone battered, myself included! If this Lingsy psycho tracks him down, what am I going to do, slap him with my handbag? He seems to know Tony, you, the Railway Arms and the newsagents so he'll probably know where I live!"

"Andrea calm down." Stevie grabbed her elbows. "Shh. I'm sorry I didn't mean to scare you. Listen to me. Even if Lingsy walked past your flat six times a day, he'd never bother you. If you ran out and smacked his face for him he still wouldn't bother you. I'll take Tony and deposit him in the pub with Gaz and Terry. OK?"

"I think would be a better idea Stevie, yes." Andrea nodded. "How do you know where Lingsy will be?" They started walking back to Andrea's flat.

"I don't. I'll just make myself obvious and hope he sees me, or I see him." Stevie shrugged.

"What if he starts with you Stevie? I feel like kicking the shit into Tony myself." Andrea followed her brother into her flat. Tony followed Stevie like a lost child. Andrea felt a bit sorry for him, he was terrified, but she also saw how pathetic he was. He was also spineless enough to hide and let Stevie tackle this man. This ex-professional thug who's been stabbed, shot, ran over and thrown in the river to drown. "Don't forget to phone me Stevie." Stevie nodded and left with Tony.

Andrea fretted herself to tears for four hours. At last she couldn't stand it and dashed out of the flat, headed for James' flat. She knew the library closed at three so he was probably home. She ran straight into Stevie.

"I couldn't find him." Stevie propelled her back into the flat.

"I was just going to get the bus down there." Andrea lied. "Any more messages?"

"None. I left Tony playing darts with Scott. He seems a bit calmer now. He says he's going home soon." Stevie told her and she just nodded. "That pleased eh?"

"I'm pleased he's not hurt." Andrea said defensively. "Believe me or don't. I *am* pleased he's not hurt. I could never bring myself to be happy about anyone getting a hiding, not even Tony. I don't want him back with me, Stevie. I know he's having a rough time of it but that isn't a reason for me to be interested in him. I'm not."

"This new boyfriend must be impressive." Stevie shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't start with that Stevie, please. He hasn't had chance to be my boyfriend yet with all this crap going on. You think about it. I'm twenty one years old and my private life has been put on hold until everything's good with a pack of adult blokes. Why? Do I really have to clear everything with you lot? Seriously?" Andrea was getting upset again.

"Don't cry, sis." Stevie gave her a hug. "Them lot, no. Me, maybe. I'm your brother and I want to know who I'm trusting my sister to. I'm about fed up with it all, Andrea. Friends are friends and that's all well and good, but this shite? They're all expecting a fight between me and Lingsy just because we're two gang lads. The fact that neither of us has anything at all against the other doesn't come into it. Oh don't worry, there'll be no fight. I honestly don't think Lingsy's back on the gang scene. He'd have to be bloody insane. My own Crew are expecting me to lose. Arseholes. Heather's pissed off to Billy Frost and Liam's been talking to the SBC kids by the river. Oddly enough, Tony is the only one I'd trust completely just now and that's because he knows blood better."

"Stevie I'm sorry." Andrea said miserably. "So they're all turning against you? After you've wiped their arses for over ten years? Bloody Liam Harrison! Pfft! I could turf him over on my own! Little creep. Heather's always been a trollop, you're better off shot of her."

"Not turning against me, no. They're just edging their bets when it comes to a hard bastard like Lingsy. Yes, Heather's a trollop." Stevie laughed. "Isn't this shite eh? Should we move to France or somewhere?"

"Good idea. Can ..." A loud hammering on the door terrified Andrea and had Stevie on his feet.

"Tony for shit's sake! Knock a bit louder!" Stevie snapped as Tony barged in. "Hey you! Settle down. I mean it. Stop charging about. What's up?"

"Why don't you ask this slag here?" Tony yelled, pointing at Andrea.

"My *sister* you mean? Watch it pal, I'm warning you." Stevie growled quietly.

"Do you know why she ditched me? Do you? She has another bloke, Stevie." Tony shouted.

"Tony you didn't think you'd grow old together, did you? It's no big deal, really. She didn't cheat on you with this bloke." Stevie said calmly.

"She dumped me! Stevie she dumped *me* for a four eyed pouff nerd bloody fairy. Rose Ford told me she saw them together. I'll kill him. How bloody dare you, Andrea?!" Tony roared and Stevie pushed him so he had to sit on the couch. "Stevie ..."

"Cool it." Stevie ordered. "Cool it or I'll bust your nose and turf you out of here. Yes I do mean it. Nerd?" He lifted his eyebrows at Andrea who snarled and marched off into the kitchen. "Nerd."

"That's an insult and you know it Stevie. A bloody specky geek! Don't say it doesn't matter, you know it does. If Billy Frost was a fairy uni boy you'd have ripped his face off by now, and Heather's." Tony said angrily.

"Stop making lame comparisons Tony. For one thing, our Andrea has a brain and can use big words. Heather's as dull as a badger's arse. They're welcome to each other. Listen, just let it go. Andrea will keep out of the way with him and you don't even have to bother about it. Bigger me, Tony, don't you think you've got bigger things to bother about just now?" Stevie sat down. "Kettle Andrea!" He shouted.

"Knackers!" Came the reply.

"Good girl!" Stevie nodded. "How can I get to know why he's after you? I honestly don't think he's out to mash you otherwise you'd be mashed by now. He's putting the wind up you for some reason."

"He has to have the wrong bloke." Tony said desperately. "It can't be me."

"I agree with you." Stevie nodded. "I could set him right if I could get to talk to him." Stevie exhaled loudly. "Andrea I need a favour."

"Depends." Andrea gave Stevie a mug of coffee and glanced swiftly at Tony.

"I could do with you down the Railway Arms, sis. Normally, Heather squawking on and calling me shit would be laughable but I don't need it just now. I need to sort this crap out. If she starts in the pub, have her outside and crust her one."

"I'll tell her to pipe down, yes." Andrea said moodily. "I'll have to use my phone first."

"OK." Stevie nodded.

"Well? Naff off then! I'll catch you up at the bus stop." Andrea glared at her brother who took the hint and dragged Tony out with him. Andrea was so happy to hear James' voice on the phone.

"I was going to call round until I saw Stevie getting off the bus." He said.

"Well Tony's here too and I hate them both just now." Andrea quickly gave James an update and explained that Stevie wanted her to keep Heather in line if she started talking crap about him. "Pathetic, I know already so don't say it. Stevie's been good about me and you, James. He puts Tony in his place."

"That's good. So he should." James sounded far from happy. "As long as you're with Stevie I suppose you'll be OK. I've a mind to crash into the place and waste the bloody lot of them."

"Umm ... yes." Andrea had to smile at the image that conjured up. "I'll be fine and I'll phone you tomorrow. Stevie just needs this Lingsy shite sorted out then it'll all settle down. I hope."

"Don't worry about Stevie and Lingsy, Andrea. Stevie will be fine and so will Lingsy I'm sure."

"No one knows what he wants, James. Stevie thinks he's got Tony mixed up with someone else, like I said."

"Don't worry yourself over it. Leave it to the rest of them, Andrea. Phone me tomorrow, OK? You can stay here tomorrow night if all is well." James suggested.

"I'll make it well. See you then." Andrea grinned widely and ran out of her flat.

"Where's she going?" Tony saw Andrea striding across the road by the shop and not headed for the bus stop at all. "Should I ..."

"No you bloody shouldn't. This should be good." Stevie snickered and nodded towards Andrea. She hammered on a door with her fist and didn't stop until Rose Ford answered it. As soon as she opened the door, Andrea headbut her straight in the face, sent her sprawling, slammed the door and marched to the bus stop. "Smoothly done Andrea." Stevie complimented.

"Thanks. Slag arsed old boiler." Andrea sniffed and stepped forward to stop the bus.

# Chapter Five

Stevie dumped Andrea in the Railway Arms and left with Tony. The place was deserted except for the barman and old Charlie.

"If they start in here, you're all banned." Jeff the barman told Andrea.

"Nothing to do with me, Jeff. I'm just waiting for Stevie." Andrea replied. "Can of Export please."

"You can use the juke box for ten minutes, then we want the footie on." Jeff informed her. He must have been using the royal 'we' seeing as Charlie simply didn't care and no one else was in. She was almost asleep an hour later when Tony wandered in with Gaz and Scott.

"Where's Stevie?" She felt the panic rising.

"Bridge and Wheel." Tony told her then ordered a drink.

"Bridge and Wheel? By the river?" Andrea asked in alarm. In days gone by, the Bridge and Wheel was the meeting place of the SBC. "You let him go there on his own?"

"Oh shut it." Tony drawled and sat down, away from Andrea. "Pool Gaz?"

"Why has he gone to the Bridge? Is Lingsy there? Tony! Don't you bloody ignore me you tosser!" Andrea raised her voice and Jeff glared at her.

"Don't talk crap Andrea. It's full of kids these days. He's just gone to check, that's all. He has Billy with him." Tony gave Andrea a dirty look.

"Billy Frost? Er ... OK. Heather?" Andrea asked in confusion.

"Think I saw her outside. Go get her, Andrea. We may as well all stay together until this is sorted." Tony nodded. Andrea thought this was a sensible idea, the only one Tony had ever had in his life. Andrea looked up and down the road but there was no sign of Heather. She tried the toilets and they were empty too. She bumped into Tony in the corridor.

"No sign of her." Andrea shrugged. "She'll ..." Tony pushed Andrea back into the Ladies Toilets and stood against the door. "What the shit are you doing?"

"You owe me. On your knees you slut." Tony started to unbuckle his belt.

"What? Are you bloody mental? You come near me and I'll bite your knob off. Our Stevie with snorter you, you shit!" Andrea backed up against the far wall.

"I don't think so. Anything happens to me and I put that pathetic nerd of yours in hospital. Don't believe me? Try it." Tony grabbed for Andrea's hair but Andrea ducked. He ended up cracking the mirror with his knuckles as he swung for her and missed. Andrea kicked him as hard as she could in the kneecap and he fell into the mirror. She then booted his other knee and ran like hell out of the toilets. The safest place was the bar so she tried to compose herself first. "He's dead, Andrea. Tell him from me, he is dead." Tony pushed her out of the way and went into the bar first. She discovered a cut on her cheek when she felt the blood trickle down so she had to go back into the toilets. Thankfully, Tony didn't follow her. Andrea sat at the bar and watched the door for another two hours and almost burst into tears when Stevie walked in.

"Stevie!" She jumped of the stool. Tony caught her eye and gave her a warning look. "Well?"

"What's up your cheek?" Stevie examined the cut on Andrea's cheek. Tony was still looking at her.

"It's just a scratch. I did it with my bracelet. Does it look bad? It didn't look too bad before. Is it bruising?" Andrea touched her cheek.

"Just a scratch. It's OK." Stevie nodded. "No Lingsy anyway and the SBC kids know nothing either. Half of them wouldn't recognise him because they aren't old enough so that was a waste of sodding time. Pint please Jeff."

"Heather hasn't been in. I think I'll go home, Stevie. I'll get the last bus." Andrea felt like beating the living daylights out of Tony with his own pool cue.

"Stop and have a beer. I'll get you a taxi. You aren't bothered about Tony on the drink are you? You don't have to worry about that shite now." Stevie assured her.

"I'm getting a headache, that's all. I'm tired." Andrea lied. "The bus is in five minutes." She smiled and left the Railway Arms. She knew Stevie would be watching out of the window so she kept her back to it just incase he saw her crying. Tony Collins was going to haunt her forever. He probably wouldn't beat James up just yet because Stevie's warning was still recent and fresh in his mind. He's hang it over Andrea and threaten her with it just to be an arsehole. She managed a wave to Stevie as she got on the bus then watched the windows as it started to rain.

Andrea saw a hunched figure trudging through the rain along the road that lead away from the recycle bins.

"Do you live down there?" Andrea shouted and James looked up and peered through the downpour.

"Andrea! You're home soon. You coming in?" James dragged his jacket over his and Andrea's head and steered her towards his flat. "Sodding rain. I'm bloody soaked." He grumbled, opening the door. The flat had less boxes in it now, hence the trip to the bins.

"Me too. Maybe I should have gone home for dry clothes." Andrea took off her dripping jacket and put it over a chair to dry. Her jeans were cold, heavy and wet and so was the neck of her T-shirt.

"Give me a few minutes and I'll sort you out a shirt or something. You can bung your jeans on the radiator." James ran upstairs to change first. Andrea ended up in a red T-Shirt and a pair of flannel shorts that she had to clutch at the front to keep up.

"Aren't I stunning?" She laughed, shuffling into the sitting room.

"Of course you are." James smiled. "So did everything go alright? I didn't expect to see you tonight to be honest."

"There was no point in staying in the pub. Heather wasn't going in at that time of night so I got the last bus. I feel sorry for our Stevie, James. Now Tony knows that Stevie's going to handle everything for him, as he does, he just leaves him to it. He happily wandered off to the Railway Arms while Stevie trailed all the way to the Bridge and Wheel. The tosspot." Andrea said in disgust.

"Did he?" James blinked in surprise. "It's full of kids isn't it?"

"Yes but that's not the point. Poor Stevie. This is doing his head in and it's unfair. It's Tony's crap, not Stevie's. He's even lost his girlfriend through it all. Not that the hag is much of a miss." Andrea heaved a sigh and leant against James.

"Gone far enough eh?" James put his arm round her. "I honestly expected Tony to be more of a man instead of piling all of it onto Stevie."

"Yes well he isn't. I suppose Stevie is partially to blame for taking it all on too." Andrea turned to look at her lovely, kind, boyfriend. "You will keep out of Tony's way, won't you James? I'm not saying you have to hide, and I'm not saying you're a coward or anything like that, I just don't want you near any of that. Not ever." She felt more tears and was surprised she had any left.

"He's threatened you." James said flatly, the muscles bunching under his clenched jaw. "Is that what that cut is on your face?"

"It's OK! James it's OK. I'll ... I'll ... tell Stevie tomorrow, I promise." Andrea said in panic. "I hate him so much, I really do. Why can't he just leave me alone?"

"Arsehole. Don't cry, Andrea." James put both arms round her. "I'll ... " Andrea shook her head and James stroked her hair. "OK. It'll be OK, I know it will." For the rest of the night, it was. It was better than OK, it was beautiful. James certainly showed her what a selfish and immature little shit Tony really was in that department. She went to sleep vowing to stand with James and rip Tony a new arsehole herself.

Andrea woke up alone in James narrow bed the next morning. She found a note on top of her dried clothes telling her that he'd had to go into work for a while and that she'd to help herself to the kitchen. Andrea did so with a permanent smile on her face. Stevie soon spoiled that by phoning her mobile which meant he'd already phoned her flat.

"Where the hell are you? Nevermind, it doesn't matter. Someone put Tony's dad's garage door in this morning! Rammed it with a set of steel ladders! His Old Man brained the shite out of him and he ended up round here. I had to drag him into the shed before our

Old Man brained him too!"

"I'm sick to death of hearing about him, Stevie. It's you I'm worried about, you. Did Mr. Collins call the coppers?" Andrea began putting her clothes in a bag. She intended to keep James' shorts and T-shirt on forever.

"No. He knows it's to do with Tony." Stevie heaved a sigh. "I've left him in the Railway Arms to settle down a bit. He was still bitching on about that fella of yours."

"W ... what? What did he say about him?" Andrea panicked and ran out of James' flat and towards her own. "Stevie! What did Tony say about him?"

"Just the ranting and raving you'd expect. That's why I left him with Gaz. He needs to come down a notch or two. He's still smarting over being dumped and now this happens." Stevie sounded stressed to hell.

"Are you not with Tony?" Andrea was fighting to dress herself in her own flat, and also fighting against the panic that was threatening to choke her.

"No I'm out looking for bloody Lingsy. I'm in Tesco's. Christ how hard can he be to find?"

"I have to go Stevie. You should have stayed with Tony. If anything's happened to James I swear I'm going to the police. I'm deadly serious." Andrea frowned at looked at her phone. flat battery. She wondered how much of that Stevie had got.

Andrea jumped off the bus in town and ran flat out in the direction of the library and thanked god there was only one library in the town. She flung the door open and received a withering glare from a middle aged lady behind a desk.

"I'm very sorry, excuse me." Andrea tried to catch her breath. "I'm looking for James Carling. He works here."

"I know he does, but not today sweetheart, it's his days off." The lady smiled.

"What? Are you sure? He was in this morning." Andrea was confused.

"Yesterday afternoon was his last shift. He'll be back in the day after tomorrow." The woman told her. Andrea thanked her and left the building. What was that all about? She was pretty sure the note had said 'work'.

"Excuse me, can you help me please?" Andrea turned round to see a teenager dressed in jeans and a combat jacket, with a blue and yellow scarf round his neck. "I'm lost." He pushed his glasses closer to his face and squinted at the map in the library window.

"Where do you want to be?" Andrea asked.

"Union Road College for a lecture." The student exhaled noisily. "Am I as far away as that map suggests?"

"I'm afraid so." Andrea said sympathetically. "You need to go to the end of here and head ... shit!" The student lurched forward and knocked Andrea into the wall. "What the hell ... oh no." Tony was standing behind the student with a broken beer bottle in his hand and the back of the teenagers head was bleeding. Tony booted the kid in the ribs and fell as a dead weight against Andrea. "Tony! What the hell are you d ..."

"I told you!" Tony screamed and punched Andrea in the face. "Didn't I? This is your fault! I told you I'd waste him!" The unconscious student got another boot to the ribs and Andrea tried to shield him with her own body. "Not much of a man now is he Andrea?" Tony punched Andrea again.

"Tony ... Tony it isn't ... stop ..." Andrea gurgled a mouth full of blood.

"Stop? You bitch!" Tony screamed. Andrea just blinked in a daze and a glinting object sticking out of her shoulder. Tony no longer had the broken bottle in his hand. "James." She heard a siren wailing, then the blackness swamped over her.

## Chapter Six

Stevie stood in the hospital car park with two police officers and twenty cigarettes.

"I am calm!" He howled at Ken Stoddart, one of the policemen. "OK I'm calmer. That's my sister in there and that doctor was being ... secretive."

"You were roaring, Steel. Settle down and Tom will take you back in." Ken told him, nodding towards Tom, his colleague. "So you don't think Andrea knows Simon Fields?"

"No. I told you about all that. I don't know what Andrea's nerd's name is but he's not bloody sixteen, is he eh?" Stevie said sarcastically. "I can't believe he did this, I honestly can't. I didn't know he was so far gone. The bloody psycho." He sat on the litter bin and took a few deep breaths.

"So Andrea got a new bloke and Collins didn't like the idea. Right? So he mistook Fields for this boyfriend of hers. That right?" Ken nodded.

"Yes! He was hugely pissed off because our Andrea got on with the boffin type. I should never have left ... left ... Jesus!" Stevie jumped off the bin and threw his cigarette away. Lingsy was on his way to the hospital entrance. "Who would you say that was?"

"You know who it is otherwise you wouldn't have asked. We've been watching him, he's clean." Ken said. Stevie nodded and ran off towards Lingsy. "Oi! Get back here you nutter."

"I just need to ask him something! Five mintes, OK? I'm not going to start anything. I'm not that daft." Stevie sprinted up the path. "Lingsy! Lingsy hang on!" Lingsy spun round and he looked bowel wrenchingly pised off. "Oh shit."

"Has he got bail?"

"No. They're holding him." Stevie tried to get his breath. "Shit Lingsy what the hell did he do? I swear I've no idea what any of this is about."

"Oh? You do a good line in being blind, don't you Stevie? I suppose you had no idea he was battering your sister until he carved her up with a bottle? You have no idea what a struggle I'm having here not to rip you inside out, Stevie."

"Crap. No I didn't know he was battering her." Stevie hung his head. "I knew they argued. They argued all the bloody time. I can't believe that little bastard did this to her. I couldn't see why someone like you was after his arse but seeing what he's capable of, it's obvious I don't know the little shit at all. Lingsy whatever he's done, our Andrea won't know anything. She wants nothing to do with any of it. Leave her alone Lingsy."

"Stevie!" Carol, Stevie and Andrea's step-mum came tottering down the path on high heels. "She's awake and her mum's on her

way."

"Let's go." Stevie grabbed hold of Carol and hauled her back up the path. "Has she said anything? Is she OK? Did you tell her that shitbag is locked up?"

"Stevie!" Carol yanked her arm free. "Slow down and get along here." She pointed down the corridor. "Yes you've gone the wrong way you big numb bugger!"

"Arse!" Stevie marched down the right corridor and the secretive doctor was blocking his way. "I'm OK now. See? I'm fine. I was distraught earlier and I only picked you up because ... because ... look can I go in? Please?"

"You'll have to wait until the other man comes out. Only two visitors are allowed at a time." The doctor informed him.

"Other man? You mean my dad?"

"No the other one. Stay out until one of them comes out." The doctor ordered. Stevie darted at the door and looked through the glass.

"Hell's teeth! What the sodding hell is he doing in there? I asked him not to grill her!"

"Weakest grilling I've ever seen. He has hold of her hand." Carol observed.

"Huh?" Stevie had another look. "What in blue soddery is going on? Dad!" He tapped on the window and began waving his arms around. "Oh get out here you old fart." Frank Steel kissed Andrea's head and came out. "Dad! Do you know who that is in there?"

"Andrea. Carry on and I'll bust your snout for you. Pipe down, gobshite." Frank wandered off with Carol. Stevie darted into the hospital room and just blinked at Lingsy, the hardest set of goods in the area, and his little sister. Things didn't just fall into place, then avalanched, loudly and clearly.

"Stevie." Poor Andrea was all bandaged up and three drips threaded their way into her arms. "Stevie?"

"Yes." Stevie gave himself a shake and went to Andrea's bedside. "I'm here sis. Shit." He bit his lip to stop it trembling, and held her hand. "I'm so sorry Princess. None of this would have happened if I'd listened to you. Christ I'll never forgive myself."

"It's not your fault Tony's a psychotic scumbag. You told him to back off and he didn't. He went for that student thinking it was James. This is James Carling, Stevie. James, this is my brother." Andrea smiled and her eyelids dragged with the painkillers.

"James eh?" Stevie lifted his eyebrows at James Carling, formerly knows as Lingsy, as in *Car-ling-sy*. He'd never have made that connection if he'd lived to be a hundred. "Andrea says you're ... um ... well an intellectual type." Stevie said tactfully. Geek, nerd, boffin whatever, it was still Lingsy.

"Desgree in English, Steven. I'm a librarian." James smirked at Stevie's face.

"Really? Piss off! You serious?" Stevie said in shock.

"Hey! James is quiet and computery. Stop swearing at him you ... twat! Say sorry." Andrea slurred.

"Er ... yes. Sorry. Andrea go to sleep and stop earwiggling." Stevie kissed his sister's head and nodded to the door.

"Get some rest Andrea. I'm just outside with Stevie, I'm not going anywhere." James straightened the blanket across Andrea's chest and followed Stevie out of the room. The doctor was giving Stevie a hard stare so they went outside. The two police officers were still there and Stevie excused himself on the pretence of getting his cigarette lit.

"How's she doing?" Ken asked. "And what are you and Carling up to?"

"She's doing fine. Me and Lingsy aren't up to anything, I swear. Listen, Tony isn't getting bail is he?" Stevie asked quietly.

"Can't say. Nothing for you to bother about anyway Stevie. Andrea will be fine with us lot here." Ken replied.

"I don't mean that. I know who Andrea's nerd is and he's not all that nerdy afterall. It's Lingsy and he'll cripple Tony if he gets hold of him." Stevie rubbed his temples.

"What's Lingsy?" Ken just looked at Stevie. "Jim Carling is seeing your Andrea?"

"It seems so, yes. Just keep Tony where he is for a while for his own safety." Stevie nodded and went to sit on a wooden bench with James. "So how were you planning on keeping it all from Andrea? She has no idea who you are."

"Yes she does. She has no idea who I *was*." James sighed. "I knew she'd know eventually. I just couldn't bring myself to tell her. I know her opinions on gangs and gang mentality. She hates it Stevie. How could I tell her I *was* the gang until Mark got stabbed? She'd have ran a mile."

"So how did you know Tony was being an asshole with her? Hell I'll never get over that." Stevie lit another cigarette.

"I only live down the street from her. I saw, and heard him. He split her head open Stevie. She was terrified of him, and of you. She was frantic incase either of you took exception to me and turned me over. She ran down to that library to protect me, Stevie." James said wearily.

"I know. I worked it out that she'd gone to warn you at work. Did you mean to scare Tony that badly? Trust me Lingsy, he was crapping himself." Stevie asked.

"I meant to scare him off but I never thought it would go the way it did. I didn't think he'd go straight to you for one thing. I didn't

expect to be doing your head as a side effect." James said. "I was furious when I saw that cut on her face. I don't know the details, but that's down to Collins. I dented his garage door out of sheer temper. Poor Andrea." He shook his head. "I wasn't even in work this morning. I told her I was but I was over at the cemetery. She didn't need to know that. She had enough to depress her."

"What are you going to do now? Tony'll get sent down so he's a non issue. I mean about Andrea." Stevie asked.

"Wait until she's recovered and tell her everything, I suppose. It's the only thing I can do. What's the chances of her sticking around me after that? You know her better than anyone." James looked at Stevie.

"I've no idea, mate, honest I haven't. I do know she thinks a hell of a lot of you, that's obvious by the way she protected you. I don't know, Lingsy. She hates the gang scene but so do you." Stevie shrugged. "No matter how it turns out she'll always have me and I've had a gut full of it. Just disappearing isn't an option for me so I'll just have to tell them all to piss off."

"That's all there is to it, yes." James nodded. "Oh they'll bitch and cry at you for a month or two but they'll soon get the message. Just go to work, earn your wage and keep your nose clean. I know Andrea will always have you so even if she rejects me I'm pleased you're still there."

# Epilogue

Andrea was discharged after three weeks and her mum moved into her flat with her until she recovered. James and Stevie had told her the score regarding the most fantastic man that Andrea had ever met. Despite these warts, she knew she couldn't reject him. To her, he'd always be James, her geeky librarian. Andrea loved her mum, and loved to see her, but she was pleased to have her little flat back to herself. She had it to herself for a whole twenty minutes before Stevie turned up.

"I got two hours overtime in this week." Stevie announced. "I've not seen anybugger for eight whole days and it's great!"

"You lie, Stevie Steel. You went for a pint with Gaz the other night." Andrea laughed.

"Well yes." Stevie conceded. "Just an ordinary pint though. No drama and no bitching. I expected them all to go boohooing to Billy Frost but Gaz reckons not. Oh well, stuff them." Stevie shrugged his shoulders.

"Pisser for Heather then eh?" Andrea smirked. "I'm going to the Feather and Cap later with James. You coming?"

"Nah. There's a program on telly I want to watch. Oh speak of the devil." Stevie opened the door for James. "Mr. Carling."

"Mr. Steel. You coming for a pint?" James asked.

"Andrea's just asked me. No I'm OK."

"Her behind the bar was asking about you last time I was in." James said.

"Oh? What's she like?" Stevie got interested.

"Single, but for a good reason. And she's fifty two." James guffawed a laugh.

"Arse." Stevie grumbled. "You not got any sisters?"

"Yes. Five and you're not getting near any of them." James kissed Andrea and handed her her jacket. Stevie looked like he'd gone into labour.

"What did you say? Five sisters? Five?"

"None for you."

"Aw! Why? You've got mine and I only have one! Five! Is there one my age?" Stevie badgered.

"Come on Andrea. Close the door when you go out Stevie." James steered Andrea through the door with a big smirk on his face.

"Eighteen up! Any one will do!" Stevie shouted after them and they laughed and waited for him to catch them up.