

Payback

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This novel is a work of fiction. The names, characters and events portrayed are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

To Karla
for her inspiration

and

Tom and Adrian
at the Cafe Odean
Lagos, Portugal

whose steady stream of pancakes
tea and coffee
set me up to write each day

Chapter 1

“Mandy is dead!”

The bald statement stunned Frank Collins and everything moved out of focus. The room shimmered through a shifting mist. His knife slipped from his fingers, crashing to the plate, making every head in the café to turn in his direction. Crushing the mobile against his ear, he hoped the painful pressure might somehow negate the words he'd just heard. It didn't.

“What?” he managed around a mouthful of half-chewed bacon.

“I said, Mandy is dead. She killed herself,” the voice repeated.

His face grew cold and the world smash back into his consciousness with a frightening intensity: Lady Gaga extolling the virtues of giving birth; the over-loud chink of cutlery on china; footsteps passing outside the large steamed-up window.

A pain throbbed behind his left eye.

“Frank, you there?” The voice had a muted quality, muffled - as though speaking from the end of a fur-lined tunnel. It was a voice from a past he thought long dead.

Trying his best to stop the memories from flooding his mind, Frank screwed his eyes shut, but the complex patterns of constantly changing colours, shapes and sounds still bled through, dredging up feelings of deep guilt - along with an even deeper feeling of rage.

Mandy is dead!

He had pushed the memories so deep down in the past that he thought they would never return. Now here they were, bubbling back, lingering just out of reach, merging unbidden with those truly awful words.

She killed herself!

“Frank?”

“Huh?”

“Frank, what's the matter? You look terrible.” the waitress stared down at him, concern widening her pale blue eyes. The overhead lights glinted from her flame-coloured hair, and for one terrible moment Frank thought he was looking into the fires of hell.

Shaking the image away, he spoke into the mobile, his words quick and thick with anger. “What the hell? How could you let that happen?” Then realising how he must sound, he took a deep breath, fighting to keep his temper in check. “There must have been some signs that something was wrong. How could you let her do that to herself?”

Frank's eyes stung, his fingers numbed by the tight grip he had on the mobile. Swapping it to his other ear, he wriggled his fingers, hearing a sharp sob from the phone, followed by the rustle of someone taking over the call.

“Frank, this is Duncan.” A deep voice, laced with concern. “I understand that this must be a terrible shock for you, but upsetting Marcia this way isn't on. It's unreasonable. Can't you forget your ego this once and appreciate just how hard this is for all of us?”

His rising temper almost getting the better of him, Frank clenched his teeth, nostrils flaring. All he wanted to do right now was scream at Marcia's pompous ass of a husband. Get right in his face. Tell him just how bloody unreasonable they'd both been in keeping Mandy from him all these years. Now it was too late to ever get to know her - ever.

This was their fault - not his. No way his.

Instead, Frank unconsciously flipped the knife back and forth on the plate with trembling fingers. He nodded, even though the caller couldn't see him. “Yes, you're right. I'm sorry.” He glanced across the table as Karla settled herself into the opposite seat, blinking back unshed tears.

“We'll let you know when the funeral is going to be as soon as we've settled it. Goodbye Frank.”

He sat for a long moment, replaying the conversation back in his mind. Then, without a word, thrust the mobile into his pocket, scraped back the chair, snatched his crash helmet from the floor and left.

*

Frank pulled the big bike onto its stand, tossing the ignition keys back and forth between his hands as he strode up the overgrown path towards the low front door of his cottage.

It had been a long hot summer and the garden was a riot of colour, choked here and there with clumps of couch grass. A tightness choked his own throat - he knew just how those bloody flowers felt!

Banging the door shut, he entered the cool interior, dropping his crash helmet onto a small side table before stalking through to the kitchen.

The interior of the cottage was immaculate, but there were few personal possessions on show. Whilst functional, it had a comfortable, if manly, feel about it.

The small lounge was low ceilinged, with thick beams, and Frank had gained quite a few thumps on the head before learning to walk with a slight stoop when using the room. A large kitchen extension was built on the back of the cottage, giving it a good view over the fields leading up to the wood above the property.

Picking up the kettle, Frank paused, then changed his mind, going back to the lounge where he slumped into a leather chair. Eyes closed, thumb and forefinger rubbing the bridge of his nose, he sighed as a feeling of deep hunger unexpectedly swept over him.

Somewhere in the distance a dog barked and he sat forward, elbows on knees, face cupped in hands, staring at the floor. He felt numb, disconnected, adrift amid emotions he couldn't deal with.

Muttering a thick, "Fuck it," he crossed to a cupboard alongside the big brick fireplace and tugged on the door. It caught, as it always did when it wasn't opened just the right way. In his impatience to get in the cupboard, Frank almost pulled the handle right off.

Grabbing a bottle of Vodka from inside, he returned to the chair and half-filled a tumbler. Holding it aloft, he turned the glass back and forth, studying the clear liquid. It had been a long, long time.

The alcohol burnt its way down his throat, the sharp odour making his nose wrinkle. The first sip was quickly followed by another, then another - then a series of large gulps.

*

Karla drove her Jeep off the track and onto the grass verge alongside Frank's garden hedge. She eased herself from the driver's seat and stretched her back with a quiet sigh. It had been a long, hard day at the coffee shop and her feet hurt like hell.

Dusk was making itself felt and the sky was overcast. She noticed Frank's bike parked outside the garage, which was unusual. The garden gate was ajar - also unusual.

Closing the gate behind her to keep out the rabbits that would make short work of anything edible in the garden, she walked up the path, low heels clicking against the uneven concrete. A smile touched her lips when she saw how untidy the flower beds had become. Frank wasn't one for gardening. He preferred hiring a villager to do the work for him.

She knocked on the cottage door, then again when she got no response. Opening the door, she stuck her head inside and called. The interior was cool, subdued, the small lobby dark.

"Frank," she tried again.

Her voice rebounded off the white-painted, panelled walls. Closing the door behind her, Karla walked through to the lounge and turned on the lights.

Frank lay slumped on the couch, an empty glass clutched in his hand, a bottle at his feet. She stopped on the threshold, disappointment clouding her face as she took in the scene. "Oh Frank," she whispered.

*

Karla had met Frank three years earlier when he'd turned up at her coffee shop one lunch-time, looking for something to eat. The village had been abuzz with gossip for weeks on end about the man who had bought the old cottage below Thatcher's Wood, and now here he was, dressed in black leathers and big boots, a blue-tinted helmet cradled under one arm.

She'd smiled to herself when he joined the short queue at the counter, noticing the way the tip of his tongue flicked back and forth over a small scar on his upper lip. His hair was thin, brown, cut short. A small stud glinted in his left ear. He'd seemed friendly enough, if a bit reserved. She'd felt herself flush when his blue eyes turned her way, wondering why she suddenly felt like a school-girl.

After he'd left, a few discreet questions helped her discover that his name was Frank Collins and that he ran his own motor-bike courier service. One advantage of living in such a small community was that everybody knew everything about everyone - although it also had disadvantages, as Karla had found out to her cost in the past.

It seemed that Frank Collins liked Brambles Coffee Shop, because from that day on, he appeared every lunchtime, staying to eat-in instead of buying a take-away sandwich or roll, as he had for the first few days. Or perhaps, Karla thought, it was the slim, red-headed owner that kept him coming back? She certainly hoped so.

During the following three years, that first meeting had blossomed into a friendship that, although deep, had left Karla feeling very dissatisfied. Frank didn't, or couldn't, take things to the next level - something she wanted with a growing impatience.

*

Karla picked up the empty bottle, standing it on the thick wooden mantelpiece. Then she shook Frank's shoulder, catching the glass as it rolled from his hand.

"Frank. Hey, Frank."

She leant closer, smelling the alcohol on his breath, saw the glint of his eyes between loosely closed lids. He groaned slightly and turned his head. "Wha . . .?"

"Hey, it's me. Come on, let's get you to bed."

She was strong, but found it a struggle to get Frank out of his clothes and stretched out on the couch. His skin was firm, his muscles well defined and she loved running her finger-tips over them. She knew his body well, they'd made love many times. He was a considerate lover but always seemed to hold something back, as though he were afraid of giving himself completely.

Karla tucked a cover over him and sat down in one of the armchairs, head tilted, watching him sleep. He'd begun to snore quietly and she smiled as she studied his craggy face.

What secrets lay hidden away within this man?

She knew she was falling in love. Hell *had* fallen in love. What she did not know was how he felt, what emotions lay behind the words he used when they lay in bed together. Pushing such thoughts from her mind, she picked up the glass and bottle and made her way into the kitchen, flicking on the kettle as she passed.

Karla had ceased being amazed at how neat and tidy the cottage was a long time ago, but couldn't help admiring the sparkle on the worktop surfaces as she waited for the kettle to boil. It seemed almost a crime to dirty them by making a cup of coffee. She had taken the opportunity to peek inside a couple of the kitchen cupboards when he'd first invited her over and had been impressed at how tidy they all were.

Back in the lounge, Karla sat down again, the mug beside her on the arm of the chair. He hated when she did that, but he was asleep, so who was to know? More like unconscious, if he'd drunk the whole bottle, as she suspected he had. She'd propped him on his side, one knee drawn up, cheek resting on the palm of one hand, so he wouldn't come to any harm.

As she drank her coffee, her eye caught the glint of something under the edge of the couch. Retrieving the old photo album, she sat with it on her knee for a moment.

It was small, two pictures to a page. The yellow plastic covers dirty and worn. Idly turning the pages, Karla studied the photos inside.

They were all of the same blond-haired girl at different ages. Some had obviously been taken at birthday and Christmas parties, others showed her on holiday. For the next twenty minutes the room was quiet, except for the occasional brush of page on page as she worked her way through the album.

As Karla reached the last page, a letter slipped out onto her lap. It was written on lined notepaper, torn from a spiral notebook. Picking up the folded pages, she slid them back inside the album, then hesitated, torn by curiosity about who this girl might be and why Frank had so many photos of her.

He was so close-mouthed about his past, irritated if anyone probed too deeply. Here perhaps was an opportunity to find out more.

Karla hesitated, glancing over at him. He was in a deep sleep. Already feeling guilty, she pulled the letter from the album, smoothing it open on the cover.

The writing was child-like, the contents anything but.

Karla bent over the pages, hand rising occasionally to flick her hair behind her ear as she read. Finished, she carefully refolded the sheets, slipping them back where she'd found them, before closing the album with a thoughtful frown. It felt as though she were closing a cover on the life she'd hoped one day to share with this man.

How could he have kept such a secret from her!

Chapter 2

Frank opened his eyes with a groan. Sunlight streamed through the lounge window, hitting him full in the face. It took a moment to realise that he was lying on the couch, a cover tucked around his body. Sitting up, rubbing a stubby chin, he worked his tongue around his mouth, trying to wash away the terrible taste. His clothes were neatly piled on the arm of a chair.

After untangling himself from the cover, he stood for a moment, trying not to throw-up. Finally in control of his stomach, he headed for the kitchen, where he got himself a mug of water. Another two mugs followed in quick succession before he was forced to stop for a breath. Fifteen minutes later he was back in the lounge, showered, shaved and dressed; if not exactly on top form, then at least a little more functional.

It had been years since he'd drunk so much - back when drinking had been a part of his job, when it was the macho thing to do, when holding your own won respect.

Sitting down, Frank looked at the pile of clothes he'd worn last night. He hadn't undressed himself, which meant someone else must have done it for him. Face breaking into a knowing grin, he nodded.

Karla, but why hadn't she stayed the night like she usually did? Pushing the conundrum aside for the present, he decided to pop over and see her later, when he felt a little more civilised, meanwhile—

Digging his mobile from the pocket of his neatly folded jeans, Frank called his message service, making a list of the pick-ups and deliveries for the day, quickly realising that he'd already missed the first two.

Not feeling up to riding his bike in his present state, Frank rang a local courier he sometimes swapped work with and gave them his delivery list. Then picking up the pile of clothes, he headed towards the bedroom, but stopped mid-stride when he realised what he had just uncovered beneath them.

Jesus! The album of Mandy's pictures.

Had Karla seen it? Christ, of course she had. She must have left it there when she'd folded his things up.

The last time Frank remembered seeing the album was in the cupboard by the fireplace. Tossing his clothes into a chair, he grabbed the album and opened it, his fingers almost refusing to work as they eased the cover upwards.

Then he was staring at the first picture, his eyes misting. There she was, bundled up against the cold, asleep in her buggy - his baby daughter, Mandy.

Slumping back on the couch, Frank turned to the next page, realising that these images were all that he had left of his daughter now. And with that realisation came an almost overwhelming sense of loneliness, despair and shame.

Frank's eyes filled with tears. He let them come, unheeding as they splashed down on the plastic envelopes holding the last testimony of his little girl's short life. No shame in crying now that there was nobody there to see.

Jerking each wallet over, he stared at the photographs, page by page, age by age, until he had reached the last one, where he was confronted by the letter.

Hands trembling, Frank reached out, carefully opening the letter, just as Karla must have done last night.

Dropping the album and letter to the floor, guts heaving, he ran to the bathroom, where he vomited into the toilet, flushing away any hopes of ever being able to make up with his daughter again.

*

Sweat glazed Frank's face, his breaths came in deep, measured inhalations, and his arms and legs moved in smooth, measured union as he pounded his way through Thatcher's Wood.

Thatcher's Wood was a mixture of broad leaf and pine trees, planted years ago for tax purposes by a landowner now long forgotten. It spread out along the top of a ridge know locally as *The Mound*. Hidden in its centre was a loch formed back in the early 1950's by a mining company that had extracted gravel for the building trade, before moving on to more ambitious projects. It had been closed for decades now, the fences long rotted away, the tracks surrounding its big maw, long overgrown with vegetation.

Frank had discovered its existence while out jogging along the wood's half-hidden paths two years ago. He'd emerged from the undergrowth onto the edge of the deep water - a magical moment he still remembered, as clearly as though it had happened only yesterday. He had stood staring wide eyed at the view.

It had snowed the previous night and the trees were coated with white feathery fingers. The surface of the water was slicked with thin ice, broken here and there by dark patches. Across the loch a series of waterfalls led down from a shear bluff. It was magical.

Since that day it had become part of his daily run.

Frank stopped beside the bank and began a series of exercises that he'd built up over the years - a mixture of self-defence and heavy stretch workouts that now came naturally. He worked at a steady pace, muscles prominent beneath a sweat-soaked skin that reflected the bright sunlight.

Some time later, he took a break and opened his backpack, pulling out a bottle of water. Taking a long drink, he wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. Then, thirst sated, began a series of balanced power moves - a prelude to the harder exercises to come.

The voice caught him off-guard and Frank jerked his head around to glance back over his shoulder. Karla was leaning back against a tree, hands behind her back, watching him. She brought to mind a scene from a film he'd once seen as a teenager, but he couldn't quite recall its name.

Frank stood unmoving for a moment, unsure how to react, what to do - whether to go to her, or wait for her to come to him.

"We need to talk," she said, pushing herself away from the tree, pale hands smoothing down the front of her skirt as she came.

He nodded, heart sinking at her tone. "Thanks for taking care of me last night," he said.

She stopped, pupils widening, staring up into his face. He could see the tears in the corners of her eyes - tears she refused to release.

"Why Frank?" she asked in a quiet voice.

He shrugged, unable to answer, throat working as he swallowed the fear that unexpectedly threatened to boil up from his stomach.

"Don't you trust me? Haven't I shown you just how much you mean to me, that you can hide such a thing from me?" Her voice trembled with an ache that bit hard into his being. "Why?"

Frank stared at the ground, the trees, the loch - anywhere but at her.

They stood that way for a long moment, as both urged the other to take the lead, to make the first move, to reach out with a forgiving touch.

But neither did, and Karla turned away from him, body bowed, as though she could no longer carry its weight.

Frank watched her leave, insides churning, lips trembling on the edge of speech. He wanted so much to reach out, to shout her name, do anything to break the dark moment that had just passed between them.

Instead he stood like a mute statue, beads of sweat running down his back.

*

The sun was warm on his body, drying the last vestiges of water from his swim. Frank lay on a towel, hands cupping head, another towel loosely draped over his groin. He'd never met anyone else up here when taking a swim, but that didn't mean that somebody else might not unexpectedly appear and catch him unawares, just as Karla had done earlier.

It hadn't occurred to him that she might know that he used the loch as an exercise area, but then he should have realised you couldn't do much in such a small community without the whole village knowing about it. It was one of the things he both hated and liked about the place.

When the village had first appeared into view from behind the hill, Frank had fallen in love with it. He'd been roaring his way along the A9, mind idling, not a care for where he was headed, only that it was away from his past. Then he topped the rise and there it was, a small village snuggled into the hillside, the great brooding Mound looking down on it from above.

Pulling his bike into a lay-by, he snatched off his helmet, a wide smile lighting up his face. He kicked the bike onto its stand and stood for a long time, helmet clasped between hands, thumbs rubbing its smooth surface, while the tip of his tongue flicked across the scar on his lip like an agitated snake sampling the view.

He knew he had arrived.

God, it was beautiful.

Yes, this was the kind of place where Frank wanted to make a new start for himself, far away from the crowded city streets and his old life. This would be his new home, among the green rolling hills and clean air.

But as he lay now, quietly recalling that first sighting of his future home, and the desires it raised from somewhere deep within, he knew that the dream was beginning to unravel in the most terrible way.

Pushing such thoughts aside, Frank closed weary eyes and half-dozed in the sun, mind filled with vaguely remembered images of dark corridors and jingling keys. As he dozed, his head rolled slowly back and forth, eyes twitching behind closed lids when the past came back to claim him.

A hand clasped Frank's shoulder and his eyelids shot open in alarm. He lashed out, catching Karla a blow on the shoulder. She gasped in pain, eyes wide as she rubbed where he'd struck her.

He sat up and pulled her into his embrace, lips next to her ear. "God Karla, I'm so sorry. You made me jump. I was having a bad dream. Did I hurt you?"

She spoke into his shoulder, her breath cool on his skin. "Not much. It's okay. Sorry I made you jump." Pulling back from him, she looked down at his exposed groin, a slight smile twitching her lips. "You better get dressed before someone sees you."

"You came back," he said, hopping from foot to foot as he pulled on pants and jeans.

What did that mean? he wondered.

Karla ignored him, looking instead at the loch.

Frank sat beside her, their shoulders barely touching, mulling over where to start. "I didn't know she was pregnant," he began.

Chapter 3

Karla leant back her head and let the rain hit her face. She liked the feel of the stinging needles. They washed away her fears and uncertainties.

She had tossed and turned all night, finally wakening with a headache at six-thirty. Admitting defeat, she got up and made a cup of tea, then stood at the window sipping the hot liquid as she watched the rain. The sun was barely above the horizon, hidden by the dark clouds, which reflected her mood perfectly. After a bowl of bran-flakes and skimmed milk, she sat at her computer catching up with Facebook and emails. At seven-thirty she closed down her computer, donned her Barber coat and pulled a clumpy pair of Wellington's over waterproof pants.

The walk to the top of *Gorse Brae* was long, but always worth the effort, the view across the countryside below beautiful. Right now it was framed by high mist-shrouded mountains, with tall, elegant windmills just distinguishable in the distance, their lazy blades cutting the damp air in slow loops.

Karla sat on the hillside, a nearby gorse sheltering her from the wind, arms clasped around legs, listening to the steady thrum of rain. Up here it felt as though she were the only person in the world and she loved it. This was where she came to think, to sort out her emotions. Resting her chin on the wet coat draped over her knees, she closed her eyes and let the tears mix with the rain.

Why had Frank lied to her. It might not have been an outright lie, more an omission really, but he'd still hidden the truth from her. He had a daughter and for three years he'd kept that from her - a daughter of fourteen who lived with her mother and step-father in London.

She was at a loss to understand how anybody could keep such a secret from someone they professed such deep feelings for - hold it back, like some shameful secret. Think it was perfectly acceptable to hide it away like that. Well not perfectly alright perhaps, after all he *had* expressed some remorse, she supposed.

Raising her head, Karla studied the mountains across the valley, now covered so thickly in mist that only the highest peaks were visible - small truisms poking above the uncertainty of the swirling mists hiding their foundations.

Was this to be her life then? These feelings of longing and emptiness?

She loved Frank, she knew that now. This hurt she felt was too deep to be anything less.

Standing, she shrugged off the rain and made her way to the edge of the hill. Pulling off her wide, floppy brimmed hat, she dropped it to the ground, so the rain could run down her neck into her clothes. The light here had an ethereal quality. It shimmered beneath the dark overhead clouds with a life of its own, and for a moment, she wished it would swirl her away to a different land, like the storm had to Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*.

Frank had apologised, over and over again, had done his best to explain how he'd come close to telling her, but had always pulled back at the last minute for fear it would drive her away. He'd placed his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. His words had been sharp, almost spat at her, as though being torn from somewhere deep inside. Staring into the distance, eyes clouded with pain, he'd confessed about his past relationship with Marcia and how she'd left him - how she'd kept secret her pregnancy until it had been far too late for him to do anything about it.

And now here she stood in the rain, head thrown back, mouth wide in a silent scream, wondering if she'd ever find the strength to forgive him.

*

The rain had stopped but the clouds were still low and grey, holding the threat of more bad weather to come. Karla could smell the freshness of new mown grass, hear the drone of the mower from the rear of the cottage. A brief smile played about her lips.

"Just like Frank to try to cut the grass while it's still wet," she thought.

She sat in the car a while longer, wondering whether she should get out or just drive away. Eventually she opened the door and swung her legs out. Because she'd come straight from the coffee shop, she was wearing a blue blouse, black slacks and pumps - not the best clothes for such a damp, dark day.

Frank hadn't been in for his usual lunch-time meal, which had worried her, and he hadn't answered his phone when she rang, so she'd decided to come over and see if he was okay. But now, as she made her way up the path, she wondered if it was such a good idea after all.

Walking around to the back of the old stone cottage, Karla spotted Frank easing the mower over a rough patch of grass leading down to a fast flowing burn. Trees crowded the bank and she could see that he had already strimmed the surrounding grass. The bluebells that usually grew amongst the trees were long gone now and their absence brought an unexpected shiver of coldness to her upper arms.

She loved laying under the trees in the summer sun, head in Frank's lap as she listened to the water burbling its way past. It had become their special spot, the place they went when they needed time alone away from the stresses of everyday life. Except now the trees seemed to cast a forlorn shadow over the ground - as though trying to warn her away.

Frank must have sensed her presence, because the mower's engine spluttered to a stop and he turned, nodding as he saw her. She nodded back, somewhat shyly, all doubts about the rights and wrongs of being here blown away by his

winning smile.

"I was worried," she called. "You didn't come in for your lunch."

Frank abandoned the mower and walked over, giving her a quick hug and a perfunctory kiss on the cheek. She caught his face between her hands and kissed him deeply, her body pressed close against his.

He leant back, hands in the small of her back, chuckling, the skin around his eyes crinkling as he did so. "And it's nice to see you too. Sorry I didn't show up today. I didn't mean to worry you but I had a lot of things to sort out." Taking her hand, he continued talking as he guided her around the end of the cottage. "Marcia called this morning. The funeral's on Tuesday at 3 pm. I've arranged for another company to take over my rounds for a couple of weeks."

"Couple of weeks?"

"Yeah, I'm taking some time off. It's all been a bit much. Anyway, I haven't had any time to myself this year and I reckon I could do with some." He seemed to realise how hurtful his words must have sounded because he swore quietly to himself. "Hell, I've put my foot straight in my mouth again, haven't I? Sorry that came out all wrong. I just meant, I need a bit of a break." The tip of his tongue flicked across the indented scar on his top lip. "After the funeral I'm taking a bit of a holiday."

Karla stepped away and dropped his hand. "Where are you going?"

Frank glanced away for a moment and she saw the uncertainty in his eyes. "Thought I might stay over in London for a week or two and catch up with some old friends."

As they walked along the path towards the front door, Karla trailed her fingertips over the roses growing along the low fence. A few loose petals spiralled to the ground. She breathed in the heavy scent, conscious that the drone of bees was filling the awkward silence.

"Frank?" she said.

"Yeah?"

"I want to come to the funeral with you."

Frank stopped, turning towards her.

"Why?" he asked quietly.

She swung to face him, taking his hands in hers. "I just want to be there, that's all. To support you. To be with you." She gave a slight shrug, not daring to utter the words that were on the tip of her tongue, for fear they might drive a wedge between them.

He squeezed her hands, then gently kissed her lips. "Thank you. That would be nice."

Then why doesn't it sound as though he thinks it is? she wondered.

*

Frank shut his laptop and went to the window. Although it was getting late, the sun had just broken through the clouds, prolonging the day for a little longer. Wandering outside into the garden, he sat at the wooden table and watched a wasp strip tiny curls of wood from the top. Sipping his coffee with a quizzical frown, he admired the animal's tenacity, wondering how long it would take for a single wasp to carry off the whole thing.

Karla had left some time ago, a tacit agreement between them that she wouldn't stay the night. As the wasp left with its load clenched tightly between its tiny feet, he chewed over whether he still had the will to carry on with the relationship. Things seemed to be slowly falling apart lately, and if she found out about the other stuff that he'd kept hidden from her . . . well, best not to think about that right now.

A sigh escaped his lips and he leant back in the chair to watch the sun spread its redness across the sky. Had he made the right decision when he'd agreed to let Karla attend the funeral? He wanted her there of course, especially now that he'd told her about Mandy and his break-up with Marcia, but warning bells had begun to ring in the back of his mind. It worried him that if, no, *when*, she found out the rest, it would end their relationship for good.

Struggling with his feelings, Frank realised how easy it would be to lose it all. He owed Karla the truth, he saw that now - but the truth might well tear them apart. He couldn't let that happen. He so desperately wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, to have what he had been denied during those ten horrendous years.

Frank's mobile buzzed against his thigh and he dug it out, scanning the screen. It wasn't a number he recognised. Answering, he discovered it was just the hotel he'd booked a room with earlier, enquiring whether he wanted a double bed or two singles. He confirmed two singles.

They could always push the beds together if need be. If Karla wanted them to.

Frank finished his coffee and watched the sun go down, a deep depression settling over him. Why had Mandy done such a terrible thing to herself? To commit suicide was such a cowardly act. He found it almost impossible to associate his sweet baby girl with what she'd done.

Like he thought himself to be, Frank had always believed Mandy to be a fighter. For ten long years he'd clung to the belief that only the weak and cowardly gave in, and even when the loneliness overwhelmed him, he'd held fast to the knowledge that one day he'd be reunited with Mandy - but instead she'd committed the ultimate betrayal.

Because the act of jumping off a bridge in front of a train travelling in excess of a hundred miles an hour, wouldn't leave much to pick up, Frank couldn't help wondering just how much of his daughter would actually be in the coffin. Had they got all of her? Should he go and check himself - search around the site of her death? The very thought sickened him

and he jumped to his feet, throwing his mug at the front of the cottage as he shouted out his rage. The mug shattered against the pebbled render in an ineffectual imitation of his ambivalence.

Why the hell had she done this to him?

Body trembling, he sank to his knees, covering his eyes, sobbing quietly.

But Frank knew exactly why his daughter had done this terrible thing to him.

Because he'd not been there when she had needed a father's guiding hand.

Chapter 4

Inverness Airport was quiet, the flight to London only two-thirds full. Frank stowed their back-packs in the overhead locker and sat down beside Karla, staring out of the small window while they waited for the steward to finish her emergency instructions.

As the runway finally slid beneath the plane, a part of him wished that he was travelling alone. He'd known Karla for three years now, but still couldn't find it in himself to commit to her completely. Doing so would somehow mean losing too big a part of himself.

Sometimes when they made love, it was an almost religious experience, at others it felt as though he was being sucked into a darkness so total it threatened to swallow him whole.

"She was very pretty."

Karla's voice startled Frank and he glanced down at the photo in his hand, unaware that he'd taken it from his pocket. It was the last picture that Marcia had sent him. Mandy was dressed in a black tee-shirt and torn jeans, her blond hair blowing in the wind as she smiled at the camera.

He'd never known his daughter - hell he hadn't even realised Marcia was pregnant when she'd left him, and by the time he'd found out, it had been far too late to do anything about it, because he'd already begun his sentence.

Marcia had told him she didn't want her daughter growing up with a prisoner as a father, so he'd agreed to keep out of their lives, if she let him know what Mandy was up to at regular intervals. Marcia had agreed to send him photos a few times a year but made it very plain that was all she would do. And that had been the position until six months ago, when he'd received a letter that had torn his world apart - a letter from his daughter.

She had written how she'd recently found out that he was her natural father, and how she hated him for the way he had treated her and her mother - for deserting them both the way he had. Among other hurtful things she said, was that she considered her step-dad to be her real father and didn't want anything to do with him.

There would be no more photos.

*

Karla leant her head on Frank's shoulder and rested her hand on his arm. She wanted to take away the hurt she saw in his face, but knew she couldn't. She had read the letter and realised how much its contents must have hurt him. Wondering why he had kept it a secret from her, she closed her eyes and tried to block out the fear that hovered somewhere in the back of her mind.

*

Frank closed his eyes, letting the drone of the plane's engines lull him into a half-sleep, while the scent of Karla's hair pulled him back fourteen years . . .

The persistent ring of the phone woke Frank from a deep sleep and he fumbled in the dark, brushing Marcia's long hair from his face.

Clamping the receiver tightly to his ear so as not to awaken her, he grunted into the mouth-piece. "What?"

"Frank, that you?" Jeffrey Hunter's voice.

Swearing under his breath, Frank sat up. What the hell time was it anyway? Flicking on the bedside light he checked his watch. *3:30 am*. God-damn it, he'd only been asleep for about an hour. What now?

Marcia moaned softly and rolled her head on the pillow, so he slipped his hand under the covers, rubbing her buttocks. She wriggled deeper under the covers and began to snore.

"What the fuck's up?" he whispered into the phone.

"I need you here. Now!"

Swinging his legs out of bed, Frank stood up and scratched his head, squinting his eyes against the bedside light. "Give us half-an-hour, I need a shower."

"You been shagging again?" The question was followed by a throaty chuckle.

*

The streets were empty, just a mangy fox slipping along the dark hedges bordering the front gardens of tall houses. Closing the door of his car with a soft click, Frank started the engine. The low growl of the metallic-blue BMW always made him feel better.

At twenty-three, Frank was on his way up - a fast car, plenty of money, and a stunning girlfriend on his arm. What more could a guy want?

Jeffrey Hunter's club - *Nite-Lite* - was situated halfway down Vincent Street. At five in the morning there were few cars about and he was able to park right outside. Giving the doorman a nod, he made his way down the steep steps to the nightclub and pushed open the double doors, walking into a wall of thumping music. Ahead was a large stage, where a couple of bored dancers went through their routines. The place smelt heavily of sweat, make-up and stale beer.

One of the girls smiled at him as he passed the stage on his way to a room at the back of the bar, but he ignored her. Opening the door to the small office, he found Jeffrey Hunter sitting in his usual place behind a large battered desk.

Frank and Jeffrey had been friends since the age of ten. There had been something about the big rambling bear of a boy that had instantly attracted Frank's curiosity when he'd first seen him all those years ago. His scruffy clothes were thin - obviously hand-me-downs. His shoes, unpolished and scuffed, were a size too large. One grey sock had fallen down and lay puffed around his ankle.

The boy was standing head bowed, a look of bemusement on his face. A trickle of blood ran from a wound at the corner of his eye. His assailant circled him, fists raised. The rest of the pupils in the playground were gathered around the pair in a tight pack, chanting, "Fight, fight, fight."

Frank pushed his way to the front, just as the smaller boy landed another blow. Again, the larger boy didn't react, just stood quietly, hands dangling at his side, eyes unfocused.

Frank stepped forward and pushed at the bully's shoulder. "That's enough," he said.

The small boy turned, throwing a punch at Frank's face. Frank ducked the blow and the boy's fist flashed harmlessly passed. Then, while his attacker was off-balance, he scraped the inside of his shoe down the boy's shin, slamming his knee into the boy's exposed thigh while he was hopping about on one leg.

The bully went down and Frank stood over him. "I said that's enough," he growled before turning his attention to the large boy who'd raised such an unexpected protective feeling in him.

Walking his new friend over to one of the playground's benches, Frank sat him down and pinched the boy's bloody nose between thumb and forefinger, holding his head back to staunch the flow of blood.

"I'm Frank," he said, smiling down at the pale face.

"Jeffrey," the boy replied, licking blood from his top lip.

Later he had asked Jeffrey why he hadn't just beaten his assailant up, as he obviously had the size and strength to do so. Jeffrey just stared into the distance for awhile thinking. Then he shrugged. "Don't know how to," he finally replied.

Over the ensuing months, Frank taught Jeffrey how to defend himself, and by the following year there wasn't a pupil in the school that didn't look uneasy when the pair appeared in the playground. By the time they had transferred to their Secondary School, they had acquired a reputation that worried Frank's parents immensely.

Jeffrey Hunter lived with his younger brother and father, his mother having left them years before. His alcoholic father regularly beat the two brothers and often sent them out to steal food and alcohol. But for all the beatings, Jeffrey got from his father, he never retaliated and Frank was at a loss as to why.

Growing up together in the rougher parts of Camden Town - back when the Irish and Greek communities ran most of the gangs in the area - the pair learnt how to look out for themselves. They were seldom seen apart, regularly playing hooky from school during the summer, so they could swim in the local canal.

At fourteen, Jeffrey Hunter began to sell marijuana to the kids in the area, before gravitating to harder drugs as he widened his contacts. At twenty, with his younger brother Conrad, he took over one of the bigger Greek gangs, leaving the former leader crippled for life. His weapon of choice was a bicycle chain, and for short while after the attack he was known as *Links*. During his quick rise through the ranks of London's gangs, Jeffrey always kept Frank close by his side, treating him like another brother.

Now as he took the chair opposite Jeffrey's desk, Frank wondered why he'd been summoned here. Whatever the reason, it wasn't going to be good.

"We have a little problem," Jeffrey said in his low, rumbling voice.

"Problem?" Frank said, his fears confirmed.

Without a word Jeffrey stood up and walked to the door. He walked very lightly for a big man, on feet that appeared ridiculously small.

Frank followed as his boss led the way along a short dark corridor into a dank room. It was the first time Frank had seen a dead body and he stopped on the threshold, his stare riveted on the man slumped against the far wall.

"Come in, he won't bite," Jeffrey said.

"Not now he won't," Frank agreed.

The man's eyes were half-closed. A line of blood had trickled from one ear and a large red smear on the brickwork showed the path his head had taken when he'd slid down the wall.

Frank squatted by the man's head, pushing a tentative finger at the chalk-white cheek.

"Rigour Mortis," Jeffrey said, joining him by the body. "Least I think that's what they call it." He kicked softly at one stiffened leg, the highly polished toe of his shoe glinting in the overhead light.

"So what the fuck happened?" Frank asked.

*

Woken by the feel of Karla's hand on his arm, Frank opened his eyes, pushing the memories back into the darkness

from where they'd risen.

Karla's seat table was down and there were two cups of coffee on it.

"I got you a cappuccino," she said.

Wriggling into a more comfortable position, he smiled. "Sorry I must have nodded off."

"Yes. I think you must have been dreaming. You were muttering something about someone called Jeff."

Frank stiffened when Karla mentioned the name, but she seemed not to notice, leaning back in the seat so the air from the overhead nozzles blew across her face.

Chapter 5

The cortège from Marcia and Duncan Franklin's house headed through Hampstead Heath towards Golders Green and the cemetery that had been the last resting place of countless Londoners.

The occupants of the big black limousines were quiet. Mostly they just stared from the windows as they watched the large houses and occasional shop pass by. The lead car slowed and turned left into the cemetery, stopping at a small car-park outside a chapel. The other two cars squeezed their way alongside and the drivers opened the doors to help the occupants out.

Frank drove his hire car into another car-park at the rear of the chapel, then he and Karla joined the crowd in the front. Marcia was making the introductions and welcoming new arrivals. She studiously avoided eye contact with him, so he held on to Karla's hand and kept well back from the throng.

Not recognising anyone, he felt awkward and hoped the funeral would soon start. Finally the priest indicated that they should enter the chapel and they all followed the coffin and the bearers into the cool interior.

The chapel was small, the rows of pews on each side of a central aisle facing a low stage with a lectern off to one side. After placing the coffin on the conveyor and arranging the flowers on top, the bearers bowed their heads in respect and retired to a room at the rear.

The congregation moved quietly into their seats and Frank directed Karla to a row at the back of the chapel, where they could sit alone.

The service passed quickly and afterwards Frank couldn't remember much about it, just Karla's cool hand clasped in his as they sat in their own isolated little world. They followed the mourners back to the car-park, then to Marcia and Duncan's house, where the wake was being held.

Frank stood in the large living-room, a plate of small sandwiches in one hand, watching the dynamics of the crowd. Most people had already approached Marcia and Duncan to express their sadness and sorrow for the death of their daughter, but so far he'd kept back. Then the pressure of Karla's hand on his arm propelled him forward.

"I don't know what to say," he whispered, voice just discernible above the surrounding buzz.

"You'll know what to say when you start," Karla whispered back.

Frank stood in front of his daughter's mother and licked dry lips - a schoolboy waiting to be punished.

"I'm sorry, Marcia," he managed.

Marcia nodded. "Thank you Frank."

She looked at Karla.

"Oh sorry. This is Karla. Karla, Marcia and Duncan." Frank waited a beat before continuing. "Will it be alright if I go up and have a quick look at Mandy's room?"

Duncan started to protest but Marcia held up a hand and nodded. "Yes, I'll show you the way. Duncan could you show Karla where the tea and coffee are please? We won't be a minute."

Following Marcia up the sweep of the wide staircase to the upper floor, Frank marvelled at how big the house was. His footsteps were silenced by the deep-pile carpet as they walked down a long corridor to an oak door.

"Big place," he commented for something to say.

Marcia ignored his remark and threw open the door.

Frank wasn't sure what he expected to see, but the sheer size of the room took his breath away. The predominant colour was light yellow, which gave the room a golden glow in the late afternoon sunlight. A large bed took up most of one wall, with three small teddy-bears arranged on the pillows. He looked around, his gaze lingering on an enormous walk-in wardrobe and en-suite bathroom situated opposite the tall windows. A computer desk stood in one corner, next to an enormous flat-screened TV.

Mandy had certainly lacked for nothing.

Marcia's breath caught in a hiccup as she tried to speak. She gave a slight shudder before trying again. "She's gone, Frank. God I miss her so much."

Without thinking, he half-raised his arms to comfort her, then hesitated before dropping them to his sides again.

What could he do to comfort this woman? He didn't know her anymore, their relationship had ended years ago.

"Is it okay if I look around a bit?" he asked instead.

Marcia nodded, sniffing back tears as she headed for the door. But before she'd reached it, his quiet words caused her to turn back with an icy glare.

"I didn't do it Marcia, you know that. I was innocent and you took my daughter away from me. I just wish I'd been allowed to be a part of her life, have some sort of relationship with her. That's all I'm saying. You took that away from me."

Marcia's face twisted in anger. "You gave up your rights to any of that the minute you went to prison," she snapped. "You still don't get it, do you? It's *your* fault she did what she did to herself!"

The accusation sliced deep into Frank's chest and he stepped back, as though he'd been physically attacked.

What the hell was she saying?

Marcia took a step towards him, her voice rising even further as the tears streamed down her face. "Don't you understand, you idiot? She traced you, found out who you were, where you lived, what you did. Why do you think she

killed herself? It was because of *you*, that's why. She couldn't live with what you'd become."

Marcia ran from the room, slamming the door shut behind her. Frank's ears rang with the sudden silence. The truth of her accusations stunned him for a moment, and he stood stock-still, trying to make sense of what he'd just heard. Head buzzing, he turned, walking over to Mandy's bed on legs so leaden, he could hardly move them.

Collapsing on the edge of the bed, Frank gulped a deep breath as a hot iron ring tightened around his head. He could smell Mandy's scent in the room - almost hear her voice - see her shadow - feel her reproachful look. She seemed to be reaching out for his soul.

The door opened and Karla appeared, face clouded with concern. "She didn't know what she was saying Frank."

Karla came and sat next to him on the bed.

He couldn't look at her. "You heard then? It doesn't matter, she's right," he whispered, "You saw the letter Mandy wrote. Marcia's right. It's my fault that she killed herself."

Karla stood, one hand lingering on his shoulder as she looked down at him. "Frank—"

Getting no response, Karla shook his shoulder.

Frank looked up at her, eyes bloodshot and wide.

"Mandy didn't kill herself because of you," she said. "It doesn't make any sense. Marcia was just lashing out because she's distraught. Please, listen to me."

"Then why did she do it?"

Seeing how the agony in his voice had brought tears welling to Karla's eyes, he turned away.

"I don't know," she replied. "Maybe she was being bullied at school or something. Did she have a Facebook account we could look at? That might give us some idea at least."

"A what?"

"It's a social page thing. On the internet."

Frank glanced around the room, the computer desk in the corner catching his attention. Here at least was something to do.

Walking over he saw that there was a screen, keyboard and mouse, but no tower unit - just four small black circles marking the place where it had once stood.

"There's no computer here. Looks as if it's been moved."

Opening the desk drawer, he shuffled through some papers, spotting something stuck in one corner. Pulling out a SIM card, he jumped guiltily as Duncan spoke from behind him. Frank palmed his find and turned around.

Duncan stood framed in the open doorway, balding head catching the light from the window.

"Are you going to be much longer? Marcia's feeling a little unwell and wants to thank everyone before they go," he said.

Even from where he stood, Frank could smell the cigarette smoke on his clothes. "Where's Mandy's computer?" he asked.

Duncan's eyes turned towards the computer desk and he walked over, pointedly closing the drawer that Frank had left open.

He shrugged. "It was stolen last week, just before—" He seemed unable to continue.

"What else was taken?"

"Nothing much. The police said it was probably just kids looking for something to sell."

Duncan strode back to the bedroom door and held it open, waiting for them to leave.

As they left the room, Frank shot Karla a look when she thanked Duncan for letting them see Mandy's room, then followed him down the stairs.

Rushing passed Marcia without a glance, Frank left the front door wide open so Karla could follow him out. She caught up with him as he reached the car.

"Really Frank," she said. "That was very rude. What's got into you?"

Chapter 6

The hotel lounge was quiet, just the two of them. They sat at a glass-topped raffia table, and as Frank replaced his cup in the saucer and licked the foam from his lip, Karla's look settled on his scar.

She flicked her hair back behind her ear. She was worried. Frank hadn't said a word on the drive back to the hotel. He'd ordered them coffee when they'd arrived, and now sat silently sipping it, eyes half-closed.

Picking up the spoon from her saucer, she tapped it against the end of her finger, clearing her throat as she looked across at him. "You mustn't blame yourself," she said when he glanced back at her.

He grunted, settling in his seat. The raffia rustled as his weight shifted. "That's easy enough for you to say."

The last rays of the sun highlighted his eyes and Karla could see the fear and anger there. Dropping the spoon on the table as though it were hot, she felt her face flush. She leant forward, her own anger lending her voice a hard edge.

"Frank, I'm not looking to start an argument here. You're being really unfair and hurtful."

He stared at her and nodded, obviously trying to reign in his feelings. "Yes, I'm sorry. It's just that I don't really believe that Mandy killed herself because she found out about me." He leant forward, clasping his hands on the table, tapping his thumbs together impatiently. "Something else happened. Something else they're keeping from me."

Karla was nonplussed. Where the hell was this coming from?

"Bit bloody convenient that her computer was nicked, don't you think?" Frank continued. "No, they're hiding something, and I mean to find out what it is."

"Don't you think you're being a bit—"

But before she could finish, Frank snapped back at her. "She was *my* daughter, Karla. I've got the right to know why she killed herself."

Feeling like she'd been slapped, she sat back in her seat and took a deep breath.

Why was he taking his feelings out on her this way? All she'd try to do was help him.

Finishing his coffee with a quick gulp, he punctuated his next words with stabs of the cup. "He may have more bloody money than me. Have a bloody flash house and car. But she was *my* daughter, not *his*! He's got no right to hide things from me this way."

Karla felt her eyes widen as Frank's words bombarded her. She hadn't seen him act this way before, and it frightened her. His face was so alive with emotions, reddened. His breath coming in short grunts. She was afraid to speak in case it made matters worse.

Frank finally seemed to get a grip of himself, replacing his cup on the saucer with a tight, embarrassed laugh. "Sorry. I guess all this has got to me much more than I thought. I shouldn't be taking it out on you like this. Forgive me. Please?"

Karla nodded, aware that his temper hadn't gone away, that it still simmered just below the surface.

"Why don't you go up to bed," he said, "I'll stay here and have another coffee. I need to make a few calls anyway."

"No, it's okay, I'll stay and keep you company. You shouldn't be on your own right now."

"I said I need to make a phone call," he repeated in a tight voice.

Frank's tone left her little choice, so picking up her handbag, Karla walked from the lounge without a word.

Back in the hotel room she sat on the edge of the bed and thought hard. Finally she opened the bedside cabinet and took out a sheet of paper and a pen. Then, with an impatient flick of her hair behind one ear, she pursed her lips, bent over the paper and began to write.

*

Frank's black mood had lifted, which made him feel a little better. So, after finishing a second cup of coffee, he decided it was time to build some bridges with Karla. From the way she'd left, it was obvious that she hadn't believed his flimsy excuse of staying to make a phone call.

The soft carpet muffled his footsteps on the walk down the long corridor to the hotel room, bringing back memories of his recent visit to Mandy's bedroom. Swiping the electronic lock open, he pushed back the door, plastering a big smile across his face. It quickly faded when he found that the room was empty.

His mobile was sat on the bedside cabinet!

Damn it. He'd left it charging when they'd gone down to the lounge. See where lying gets you, Frankie boy? She must have thought you a right moron when she spotted it.

Assuming that Karla had gone downstairs to look for him, Frank sat on the bed, rubbing his face. He had some real apologising to do. He'd been really out-of-order losing his temper the way he had. Swinging his feet up and laying back on the pillows, hands behind his head, he pondered what the hell Marcia and her husband were trying to hide from him.

Then a sudden thought struck him, and he jerked upright, scrambling off the bed in his haste to reach the closet beside the en-suite. Karla had hung their things there when she'd unpacked, but now only *his* clothes were hanging on the rail.

It wasn't until he'd taken a more careful look around the room that he spotted the note draped across the top of the

TV. Picking it up he began to read.

Karla had written, that in the circumstances, she thought it best to get the next flight back to Scotland on her own. There were more words, but he couldn't make them out through the tears that blurred his vision.

Crumpling the hastily written note in his fist, Frank tossed it across the room, his mind suffused with a sudden coldness.

"Well fuck you too. You bitch!" he muttered.

Crossing to the small fridge, he pulled out a miniature whisky bottle, and with a final, "Fuck you!" sat back on the bed, flicking between TV stations, unable to concentrate on any one programme for more than a few minutes.

Having drained the small whiskey bottle, he went back to the mini-bar for another.

Much later, Frank tried ringing Karla, but she'd switched her mobile off, so he left a message to contact him urgently. Then, in need of a proper drink, he left the hotel and caught a taxi to the West End, asking the cab driver to drop him off at a club that didn't need a membership.

The taxi dropped Frank at a Greek club off Regent's Street, and he made his way down some stone steps to a large restaurant under the pavement. It was hot and loud, and as he entered, a dark-haired, slightly tubby girl, was belly-dancing her way around the long tables. Two waiters were sweeping the remnants of broken crockery from the floor, ready for the next round of plate smashing.

Pushing between long tables, which were mostly full of men cheering on the dancer, Frank found himself a small table tucked away at the back of the room. Most of the customers seemed to be eating humus and finger-food from dishes scattered across the table tops, so he decided to order the same, along with a bottle of house red and some sandwiches. Settling down to enjoy the show, he slipped a ten pound note into the dancer's waist-band as she writhed in front of him.

As Frank sipped his wine, the club's atmosphere began to bring back memories of nights he'd spent at the *Nite-Lite*. It had been different there of course, the dances more tasteless and seedy. This dancer seemed to take a great delight in entertaining the crowd, and was far better than the striptease girls his old boss had employed - with their unfulfilled sexual promises that never materialised.

Second bottle of wine almost empty, Frank wondered whether to order another or go back to the hotel. Feeling a bit light-headed, he caught the arm of a passing waiter and ordered a pile of plates. Smashing them on the floor brought a wave of freedom, and for the first time since the funeral, he began to relax.

A few hours later, while searching through his wallet to pay the bill, Frank spotted the small SIM card tucked away in front of his credit cards. Pausing, three twenty pound notes half-extracted, he sat back down and tucked them away again. Then holding the card at opposite corners between thumb and forefinger, he twirled it round and round.

Frank didn't know an awful lot about mobiles and wondered if it would fit in his own phone. Only one way to find out. Prying open the back cover, he replaced his SIM with the one he'd found in Mandy's drawer. A surge of excitement had him sitting forward when he turned the mobile back on and he was able to access Mandy's numbers.

The list was long - mainly girl's names.

Probably school-friends.

Frank ran down the contacts but none stood out, and his initial excitement began to fade.

Life was never that easy.

How often had he said that to himself during his years in prison?

Pouring himself another drink, Frank picked up the mobile and looked through the menus until he found the Call Log. It showed two people whom Mandy had constantly been in contact with during the weeks before her suicide. One was a girl called Rachael - the other a boy named Gary.

Satisfied, Frank finished his wine with a flourish, dropped sixty pounds on the table and headed back to the hotel.

*

Karla sank back in the taxi seat and sighed, wondering whether she was doing the right thing. Before leaving the hotel, she'd called Marcia, and now she stared into the black night, bottom lip clamped between her teeth as the indecision flooded through her. What had possessed her to make such a call? It could only have been desperation. Without asking, Marcia had seemed to understand why Karla was ringing her and brushed off her apologies, quickly inviting her over.

Paying off the taxi, Karla turned towards the house, wondering if she really wanted to learn the truth about the man she loved so deeply.

Yes, she did, very very much.

Straightening her shoulders and taking a deep reviving breath, she headed towards the front door. This was the moment of truth - the moment she found out why Frank wouldn't commit to their relationship, such as it was.

But nearing the door, Karla abruptly stopped, stomach churning with dread. No she couldn't do this.

She turned, about to hail the taxi before it drove off again - when the path was flooded with light from the opening front door.

Chapter 7

The morning was cool and overcast. Frank ate his breakfast beside a large window overlooking the hotel garden. He was depressed, deflated and lonely. Karla had gone back to Scotland and wouldn't return his calls, and he'd slept very badly, tossing and turning all night, disturbed by vivid dreams.

Crunching his way through a slice of toast, he tried to push the memories away, but they kept forcing themselves back - drawing him along corridors that echoed with hollow footsteps into a green painted room where conversations were anything but private.

Marcia had dumped him there - amongst the families, rowdy children and sticky-topped tables - cutting him out of her life forever. The memories were still fresh, as though they'd happened only yesterday, and they still hurt.

Now his daughter had done the same thing, sending him a letter full of hate. And then . . . then committing the final, irreversible act of rejection. She had killed herself.

Why was everyone in his life so keen to dismiss him this way? Why did they all want to hurt him? Even Karla was slowly but surely trying to cut herself off. What had he done that was so terrible?

Dropping the remains of the toast crust onto his plate, Frank lowered his head, determined not to lose it here in front of everyone. He would come to terms with his rage, as he had in the past - if for no other reason than he knew exactly what he'd done and that he'd have to live with the consequences for the rest of his life.

Determined to push such soul destroying thoughts aside, Frank turned to the window. A grey squirrel ran its jerky way across the thin offshoots at the tip of an oak tree on the far side of the garden, almost falling as it swayed back and forth in its eagerness to reach the next branch. He smiled, thinking that his own life was reflected in the squirrel's desperate attempts to reach a new place - that his own cover of lies and half-truths would be too thin to carry the weight of disappointment Karla was bound to feel if she ever found out the truth.

His fleeting smile disappeared, replaced by a grimace. He'd been to this place before and had worked his way through it - many many times - and he would do it this time. All he needed to do was find out why Mandy had killed herself, *then* he could get his life back on track, rid himself of this guilt that blackened every thought, every action.

Frank didn't - couldn't - wouldn't - believe that Mandy had committed such an act just because she'd found out what he'd done all those years ago.

In his nightmare last night, Mandy had come to him, called from the end of a long tunnel, voice child-like and innocent as it echoed along the twisted walls. He'd run towards her, but no matter how hard he'd tried, he hadn't been able to reach her. For every step he took, she'd retreated two, and he'd been forced to watch her move farther away, growing smaller, arms outstretched, begging him to save her.

Frank had woken in a sweat, sitting bolt upright in bed, heart hammering, Mandy's cries still echoing in his ears. Fighting down disgust and fear, he'd tried to drive that last dreadful scene from his mind - the image of her body exploding into a bloody mess as the train slammed straight through it, her entrails splattering his body.

As Frank staggered from the bed, he unconsciously brushed at his chest, trying to dislodge a nightmare that existed only in his mind. The next twenty minutes were spent repeatedly scrubbing himself under a hot shower.

Ordering another coffee from the waiter, Frank sipped the hot liquid, deep in thought, until finally deciding what his next move should be. Pulling out his mobile, he tapped at the keys with a renewed vigour.

"Hello is that Rachael?" he said when the call connected.

"Who's this?" The girl's tone was diffident, wary.

"Sorry to call you out of the blue like this, but I'm Mandy's father - her real father that is. I was wondering if we could meet after you finish school today? I'd like to talk to you about Mandy. Somewhere public if you prefer. And if it would make you feel any easier, you could always bring a friend."

"How did you get my number?"

"From Mandy's mobile."

The girl's voice took on a suspicious edge. "She didn't have a mobile. She broke the screen and was waiting for it to be repaired."

The line went dead.

Frank swore quietly, lowering his hand to the table, fingers whitening where they clutched the mobile so tightly. Eyes closing, he wondered why everything suddenly seemed to be going so wrong in his life - why he was being dogged by his own private little cloud of doom.

After finishing the coffee, he sent Rachael a text explaining that he'd found Mandy's SIM card in her bedroom, and that all he was trying to do, was find out why she might have killed herself.

Five minutes later his mobile beeped. It was a message from Rachael - short and to the point.

3 at KT's caf.

Letting out a long sigh, Frank smiled. At last things were starting to go right.

About bloody time!

Karla luxuriated under the water pounding her back, the hot needles easing the tension from her shoulders. She hadn't slept well, her mind constantly rehashing the conversation she'd had with Marcia.

What was she to make of what she'd learnt?

Marcia had been extremely open about her and Frank's breakup, and the reasons why she hadn't let their daughter have any contact with him for all these years.

Too open in some ways, because what Marcia had shared had shaken Karla to her very core - leaving her cold and numb.

Karla had been surprised when Marcia had invited her over, but surmised that the woman probably felt as guilty about her daughter's death as Frank did, and needed somebody to talk to. It never entered her head to question why that task had fallen to Karla and not the woman's husband.

Marcia had welcomed her with a smile, leading the way into a large, comfortable kitchen, where they sat at a table and made small talk - how good the weather was this summer, how the price of petrol was hitting the country's recovery, all the inconsequential tittle-tattle strangers used when they first meet.

They were still wary of each other and the conversation was strained. Until Marcia unexpectedly blurted out, "Do you love him?"

It took Karla a moment to recover, then she nodded.

Marcia gave her own stiff little nod and Karla suddenly realised that for all the years that had passed, this woman still nursed deep feelings for Frank.

"He's a bit of a charmer, isn't he?" Marcia said. "But be careful, things happened to him in prison that changed him. And not for the better either."

Karla felt a jolt straighten her spine and her brows lower into a tight frown. "Prison?" she said.

"You didn't know?" Marcia's wide eyes reflected her surprise. "Oh damn, I'm so sorry Karla. I just assumed —"

"Are you telling me that Frank was in prison?"

Marcia nodded, her embarrassment obvious.

"Why? What did he do?"

"I shouldn't have said anything. Look I'm sorry, but you'll have to ask him about that."

"But you can't just leave me hanging like this!"

"And I can't tell you either," Marcia said, her gaze fixed on the floor.

"Was it for something serious? At least tell me that."

Marcia shrugged. "If it helps at all, he claimed he was innocent, that he'd been set up by his boss."

Karla felt as though she'd been plunged into a bath of iced water, hardly able to breathe, even think. She sat and stared at the wall for a long moment, then grasped at the little hope Marcia had given her.

"Well if he says he's innocent, then I believe him," she said. "Whatever else Frank is, he's no liar."

Marcia's gaze hardened. "I suppose so, but they all say that, don't they. Show me one guilty prisoner!"

Karla didn't miss the bitterness in Marcia's voice and finally had to accept that even if this woman did believe in Frank's innocence, she wasn't going to admit it - to herself or anybody else. If she truly believed that her daughter had committed suicide because Frank had ended up in prison, she wouldn't be able to face the fact that it had all been a terrible mistake - that Frank may well have been innocent all along.

They studied each other for a long moment, both ill at ease, while Karla desperately tried to think of something to say.

"Is he happy?" Marcia asked, catching Karla off-guard.

"Sorry?"

"I don't mean right now, of course. But before he heard about Mandy. Was he happy?"

Features softening, Karla leant forward, touching her fingertips to the back of Marcia's hand.

"Yes, I think so. He's made a new life for himself up in Scotland. He started his own courier service a few years ago."

"And you - are you living together?"

Karla felt her face flush and shook her head. "No."

"I've seen the way he looks at you. He must love you very much."

"Well if he does, I'm afraid he hasn't admitted it to himself yet."

"He will. Give it time."

"Can I ask you something personal?"

Marcia nodded and withdrew her hand, her gaze hooded, as though she knew what might be coming.

"Why don't you believe Frank when he says he was innocent?"

Marcia stood, crossing to a kitchen cupboard. She came back with two glasses and a bottle of port.

"It's all I've got I'm afraid. Would you like one?" she asked.

Karla didn't feel like drinking but said yes, in the hope that it would keep the conversation flowing. Marcia removed the cork with a squeak that emphasised the quietness in the room, then poured them both a drink.

Karla became aware of the rich scent drifting up from her glass and took a sip as she waited for Marcia to answer her question. Well?" she finally prompted, discomfited by the extended silence.

"The evidence was overwhelming," Marcia answered, taking a sip of her own drink. "So I suppose the answer is yes, I do think he's guilty."

Marcia seemed relieved to have got it out in the open and finished her drink in one quick gulp. She then apologised that she was really tired and suggested that as it was so late, Karla might like to stay the night.

Feeling tired and emotionally drained, Karla had agreed.

Now, stepping out of the shower, Karla dried herself and dressed. Pushing her dirty clothes into the backpack, she lugged it downstairs to find Marcia. Duncan was sitting at the kitchen table eating breakfast.

“Hi,” she greeted him.

“Good morning,” he replied. “Marcia’s not up yet. Do you want a coffee or something?”

Feeling uncomfortable, Karla declined. “Please thank her for her kindness, but I must go now. I have a train to catch.”

And a hell of a lot of confronting to do, she thought.

This time she wouldn’t let Frank’s charming smile and easy ways put her off so easily. The damned man had some serious questions to answer!

Chapter 8

Frank smiled to himself, pleased that he was far better at this techy stuff now. It had only taken him a short time in the Internet Café to, *Google*, Katie's Café. It was situated opposite Haverstock Hill School, alongside Chalk Farm underground station.

Pushing his way into the café through the heavy glass door, Frank spotted two schoolgirls at a table near the rear counter, drinking something from paper cups. They were chatting away intently and hadn't seen him enter. He studied them from the corner of his eye as he walked to the counter and ordered himself a cup of tea.

One girl had brown hair with a purple streak, the other black hair with a blond one. They both looked to be somewhere between thirteen and fifteen. They wore their school ties short, with large knots, over white blouses. Purple streak glanced at him as he turned from the counter.

Frank smiled as he walked to their table. "Rachael?" he asked.

The girl with the blond streak nodded.

"Is it okay if I sit down?"

She nodded again, then sipped from her drink, watching him over the brim of the cup.

Frank sat at the table and tried to appear friendly and unthreatening. From the glances they gave each other, it didn't seem to be working that well.

"My name's Frank Collins," he said. "I'm Mandy's dad. Thank you for agreeing to see me."

They just stared at him and he noticed the girl with the purple streak had a constant tight grip on her mobile phone, almost like a child with its comfort blanket.

"Look, I know Mandy was probably pretty upset with me," he tried as an opener.

Rachael had a wide face and dark eyes, that were slightly too far apart to be attractive. Unlike her friend, she didn't wear any make-up. "That's one way of putting it," she said with a snort of disapproval, before going back to her drink and sullen stare.

Frank took a sip of his tea and wondered if this had been such a good idea after all. "Look, I'm just trying to find out why she killed herself, that's all. I need to know if it had anything to do with me." He waited while the girl turned that over in her mind.

"It wasn't because of you. She hardly ever mentioned you," the other girl cut-in before Rachael could respond.

"Hardly?" Frank said. So she had mentioned him occasionally then! "So why do you think she killed herself?" he asked. "Did she have a boyfriend? Was she being bullied at school or something like that?"

Rachael shook her head.

"And who the hell is this Gary guy?" Suddenly realising that he might be coming across too aggressively, Frank sat back from them. "Sorry, it's just that Mandy's death has been such a shock to me."

"How did you find out about Gary?" Purple Streak asked.

"Mandy had been phoning him a lot, right up until the day she died." Catching the look that flashed between the two girls, he leant forward again, forearms on the table, fingers laced. "Tell me," he said.

Rachael hesitated, giving her friend a sideways glance as though seeking her approval. "Look, don't say where you got this okay? He's not a nice guy and I don't want any trouble. I told Mandy to stay away from him, but would she listen?"

Frank rubbed the balls of his thumbs together. "Not nice how?" he asked.

Rachael paused again and Purple Streak took over. She seemed the more confident of the two. "He sells drugs. Thinks that flashing his money about will get him into girls pants. That sort of not nice."

"Mandy was taking drugs?"

"I don't know," Rachael shrugged.

"But she did sleep with him," Purple Streak added, frowning when Rachael kicked her under the table.

Holding up his hand, Frank gave a reassuring nod. "No it's okay. I need to know what happened, whatever it was. Do you know where this Gary lives?"

They both shook their heads, then Rachael pulled out her mobile and tapped at the screen.

"I've already got his number," Frank said, reaching for his own phone.

"No wait . . . here," the girl said, holding out her mobile. "I've got a picture of him. He's the one on the right."

Taking the proffered mobile, Frank studied it. The photograph showed the grassy bank of a canal, where a group of youngsters sat in a circle sharing a couple of bottles of what appeared to be vodka. Frank recognised Mandy. She sat beside a handsome boy with blond hair.

"The blond boy?" he checked. Rachael nodded. Frank looked closer. The group were near to a bridge in what looked to be a large clump of bushes. "When was this taken?"

"Mandy sent it a couple of months ago. She'd bunked off school for the day."

"Did she do that often?"

"Yeah," Purple Streak cut in, "She was always bunking off with Gary. Coming back flashing her latest presents around."

"Presents?"

"Yeah. Bracelets, rings, stuff like that. He even bought her a

pair of trainers for her birthday.”

“So this Gary was Mandy’s boyfriend then?”

Purple Streak laughed and shook her head as though she thought Frank was an idiot. “Haven’t you been listening? Gary doesn’t do ‘girlfriends’,” she air-mimicked a pair of quotation marks. “He just does girls.”

“Maisie!” Rachael snapped, red faced.

“Well it’s true. You know as well as I do what he does.”

“And exactly what does he do, Maisie?” Frank asked.

Rachael pulled Maisie to her feet. “I think we’ve told you too much already. We’ve got to go home now.”

And before Frank could object, they had gone, Rachael dragging Maisie from the café by her arm.

Ordering another cup of tea, Frank thought about what he’d been told. True, it wasn’t much but it was a start. He obviously needed to talk to this Gary character and find out what he knew, that much was certain.

His mobile buzzed, Rachael sending him a copy of the picture taken at the canal.

A slow smile spread across his face.

A good place to start.

Chapter 9

The soft couches were comfortable, set back in an alcove. The old pub had been renovated to a high standard, with many of the original features still evident. Frank had downed two whiskeys before Marcia arrived, surprised that she had agreed to meet him. Now, as he made his way back to the table with their drinks, he worried why she had.

Before Frank could sit down, Marcia had jumped to her feet, taken her drink from his hand and guided him towards the rear of the room, where she ushered him through a door, out onto a wooden staging cantilevered over the river. The afternoon clouds were low and hazy, blocking the sun.

Leaning on the railing, Frank looked over, gazing at the dark, green waters of the Thames far below, breathing in its unique aroma. Frank had always loved this part of London - the old buildings standing so proud, juxtaposed with the newer architecture. Farther along the bank, *The Eye*, revolved its slow way around its axis like an old watermill.

"Just like old times, hmm?"

Marcia's husky voice jerked Frank from his reveries and he grunted, a self-conscious smile twitching his lips. He sat opposite her at the wooden table. She was still beautiful - but in a more relaxed way than he remembered. As he took a sip of beer, Marcia tipped her glass at him and he saluted her back. It had always amused him how such a slim, sophisticated woman drank pints with the best of them.

"Cheers," he said, then asked her how she was doing.

Marcia took out a cigarette and lit up before answering him, studying his face through the smoke. "Up and down Frank. But mainly down right now."

He nodded, twirling his glass on the table as he watched the bubbles rise through the amber liquid. "Yeah, me too."

"Look Frank, there's something I need to tell you."

Not liking the sound of her words, Frank frowned, knowing from bitter experience that particular tone was always a prelude to bad news. He raised his eyebrows, prompting her to continue.

"I told Karla that you'd been to prison."

The bald statement left him speechless, and before he could react, she continued: "I thought she already knew, Frank. I'm so sorry, but I assumed you would have told her, being out on licence and all."

Frank stared at her as the world took on a fuzzy edge. She turned away, biting at her trembling bottom lip.

"What did she say?" he asked, voice low, almost a whisper.

"She wanted to know what you were in for." Holding up a hand to forestall his protest, she continued: "I didn't tell her. I said she should ask you."

"Oh that makes it all perfectly okay then, doesn't it?"

He could see the tears filming Marcia's eyes, but couldn't stop the bitter words that rose from somewhere deep inside him.

"Well thanks a bunch, you stupid bitch!"

Frank half-rose, but Marcia restrained him, her cool hand on the back of his. "Frank. Stop. I'm sorry, I really am. Sit down a minute. Please."

He sat, snatching his hand away. "What?"

Taking a half-breath, Marcia sighed, staring at the table. "Why did Mandy do such a thing, Frank? Was it our fault?"

"Did she ever mention a boy called Gary?" he asked, trying to change the direction the conversation was going.

Marcia glanced up at him with a half-smile. "Mandy had hardly spoken to us for the past six months. She was moody and argumentative. We didn't know what'd gotten into her."

Marcia's face was cloaked in cigarette smoke and she waved her hand to disperse it, dropping her half-finished cigarette into the river.

"Duncan was at the end of his tether, and so was I. I even rang her school to see if they knew what was troubling her. Do you know what they said?"

Frank shook his head.

"They told me she'd been missing school for days on end and that they'd written to me about it more than once."

Marcia took a drink, taking her time, her eyes still filmed with tears. Frank realised how guilty she must feel. He'd been so tied up in his own feeling that it hadn't occurred to him to wonder how she might be coping. He took her hand in his, rubbing his thumb over the back of it.

Marcia looked away as a tear fell unchecked. "She intercepted the letters and threw them away. That was never like her, she was always such a good, kind girl. Never any trouble."

"I talked to a couple of her friends yesterday. They said she'd been going out with some boy called Gary."

Marcia shrugged. "She may well have been. I don't know what she'd been getting up to behind our backs." Taking another sip of beer, she withdrew her hand and began moving her glass back and forth in small circles on the table. "I was frightened that if we pushed her too hard she might run away or something." Impatiently flicking away a tear, she looked up at him again. "We tried everything. We even grounded her, but she'd just climb out of her bedroom window when we weren't looking, disappearing for hours on end."

"The girls said this Gary bought her stuff. Bracelets and things."

"If he did, she kept them to herself. She never said anything."

“So was this what Duncan was hiding from me?” he asked.

Marcia’s eyes widened. “Hiding from you?”

Frank nodded. “Yes. Telling me that her computer’d been stolen. Didn’t you want me looking at it for some reason?”

Marcia sat back with a small gasp. “If you think the whole world revolves around you and your wants Frank, then your years inside didn’t teach you very much, did they?”

Frank swallowed hard, hurt by her attack, but doing his best to keep his temper, because this had been the way their fights had always started - first one making hurtful gibes, then the other, until it finally exploded in a fully fledged battle.

“Karla seems like a nice girl.”

Marcia’s words caught Frank off-guard, but only for a moment. He nodded slightly as he recalled her trick. When things got too emotional, she would unexpectedly change direction. It was the one thing that had truly infuriated him about her.

“Yeah, she’s okay I suppose,” he said.

“She phoned last night. Thanked me for letting her come to the funeral. Told me that she was going back to Scotland.”

“Did she tell you why?”

“Just that she needed to get back to work. She runs a coffee shop, doesn’t she?”

“Seems like you two had quite a cosy little chat then.” Disapproval thickened his voice.

“Well it was late, so I invited her to stay the night.”

Frank couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “She spent the night with you?”

“She’s obviously worried about you, Frank. That’s the only reason I agreed to see you today. She thinks you’re making far too much out of all this, and I must say that I tend to agree with her.”

Frank grabbed the edge of the table, fingers white with pressure. He leant forward, voice low - almost threatening. “Look Marcia, Mandy must have had a reason for what she did. I just want to know what it was. Is that such a bad thing? If you were any sort of mother, you’d want to know too.”

He could see the effect his words had on Marcia by the determined clench of her jaw and slight widening of her nostrils.

Frank prepared himself for the blast he knew was coming.

“Can’t you just accept that she’s gone and stop fooling yourself it was anything other than what you did to her? You had no part in her life because your precious boss meant more to you than we did. And don’t you dare speak to me that way. For once in your pathetic excuse for a life, own up to the fact that you can’t always put the world to rights like some freaking super-hero. Because I can tell you right now, mister. That’s the last thing you ever were.”

Frank sat back in his chair, stunned. Marcia’s words had cut deep, had pushed buttons that only she knew were there. She appeared to watch him with hooded eyes and he wondered if she thought she’d pushed him too far.

“Thanks Marcia, that’s very helpful.”

Frank knew exactly what Marcia’s comments had alluded to.

“Why did you do it Frank? Why did you throw away everything we had?”

Frank looked down at the river, wishing with every atom of his being that he knew the answer to that particular question. He’d asked himself the self-same thing over and over for the past fourteen years.

Marcia stood, handbag clutched to her stomach with both hands.

She looked down at him. “Go home Frank,” she said. “Go home before you fuck-up your new relationship the same way you fucked-up ours.”

After Marcia had stormed off, Frank got himself another drink and sat staring out over the Thames, his mind elsewhere.

Chapter 10

21st May 1989 - a day that had started out like any other, but one that quickly turned into a nightmare that had changed Frank Collins' life forever.

*

Frank stood up, staring down at the dead body, shoulders hunched as though sheltering from a cold wind. The room was overbearing, its dank smell filling his nostrils.

"It was just a bloody accident, Frank," Jeffrey Hunter said quietly. "That twat was ripping me off, dipping his sticky little fingers in places they didn't belong. We argued. I pushed him and he hit his head on the wall. Just a bloody accident."

The bare room echoed Jeffrey Hunter's words and Frank felt himself transported back to another time - to laughing boys, stamping feet, the shouted words, "Fight, fight, fight."

Frank's thoughts raced like a film spooling its way across the screen of his mind. The images flashed so quickly, one upon the other, that they were over before he'd realised they had even begun: two boys running from a shop as the fat owner chased them through the crumbling estate; the knife wound gaping open on Jeffrey Hunter's arm after a gang fight; the stumbling walk down dark streets as they passed a half empty whisky bottle between them. The images were many and varied, but they all shared one thing - a deep feeling of companionship, camaraderie and love.

Frank turned, stumbling his way from the room. He knew what he had to do. Jeffrey was married with two small children, while he had only a live-in girlfriend.

Just a bloody accident, Frank!

What could they do to him? Three - at the worst four years inside for manslaughter. He could do that standing on his head. Hunter would look after Marcia while he was away, no problem.

Just a bloody accident!

*

The trial had been a nightmare, over before Frank even realised it had begun. He'd sat in a daze as the evidence mounted against him: the man's cracked ribs, the broken nose, the bruised testicles - all the injuries pointing to a severe beating. Worst of all though, was the single knife wound to the heart, the killing blow entering the man's back just under his ribs and thrusting upwards.

Just a bloody accident, Frank. Just a bloody accident!

The sworn testament by one of the dancers that she had seen Frank arguing with the dead man earlier that evening in the club, added weight to the Prosecutor's contention that Frank had beaten, then stabbed the man to death.

Just a bloody accident, Frank. Just a bloody accident!

As the cell door banged shut behind him, Frank sat on the edge of his bunk, staring at the floor. Head in hands, he tried to shake off the feeling that he was drunk, maybe even having a bad dream, that he would wake up in the morning and laugh at the mad world he'd imagined himself to be in.

But all too soon, Frank found that his world was now restricted to a 3 by 2 metre cell that smelt like a urinal - that this was to be his home for the next ten years!

The first two years had been the hardest, and he'd only survived them by delving into the depths of his hatred for Jeffrey Hunter. Many a night, while listening to the shouts of the other prisoners, unable to sleep, he'd fantasize about how he would kill the big man when he got out. It would be a slow and painful death, a befitting payback for what Jeffrey Hunter had done to him.

During his first three months inside prison, Frank had been assaulted by a couple of prisoners from another floor. Both big men, with shaven heads and numerous tattoos. They shared a cell and, it was rumoured, a bunk.

They were waiting outside his cell, one either side of the door, as he left to take a shower. A hard punch to the stomach left him breathless, unable to defend himself. They dragged him back inside and threw him onto the bottom bunk.

Frank's face smashed against the metal frame, splitting his upper lip, giving him a scar which he carried to this very day.

After stuffing a pair of dirty rolled-up socks into his mouth, they took turns, grunting foul-mouthed jokes at each other as they pounded into him.

Frank had no idea how long the attack had lasted, only that when it was over, he was left feeling debased and worthless. He dressed himself with trembling hands then staggered out of his cell, straight into a warden on the landing outside.

The warden smiled at him, taking his arm. "Perhaps we'd better get you along to the infirmary, old son," was his only comment.

The medic who stitched up Frank's lip made such a mess of it that he was left with a permanent scar. His lip they could treat, but his pride they could not.

Frank refused to say who had attacked him, putting his injury down to a fall on one of the landings. Of course everybody knew what had happened, which he found the most difficult thing to deal with.

Frank vowed that he would never suffer such a deeply humiliating experience again, and spent months in the gym, learning how to box and lift weights, along with some simple self-defence tricks that an ex-marine taught him.

After the assault, Frank had grown morose and full of bitterness, his self-hatred rising to the surface in attacks of rage, during which he sometimes smashed up his cell. These uncontrollable rages deeply frightened him, but he eventually found ways to contain them. However, he was never completely free from the disgust, guilt and anger that now drove him, and at times like these, would sit in isolation and wonder how his daughter was and what she might be doing.

The years passed slowly, the only relief from the overwhelming monopoly, the regular change of prisons the system imposed on him. Occasionally he would receive a picture of Mandy from Marcia, which would lighten his day and bring a short burst of happiness, before he would once more decended into the black hole that had now become his life.

Marcia had visited him only the once. It had been a strained visit. She'd told him she was pregnant and was about to move back with her parents, leaving him in no doubt that he would be allowed no contact with his daughter when she was born.

Ten years later, Frank finally walked out of prison into a world that he no longer knew. The weather was overcast, the streets covered with a light frosting of snow. He'd been given a new set of clothes and some money. In his pocket was the address of a half-way hostel at which he could spend the night and the business card of his new Social Worker. He was out on licence and would have to report in regularly.

Frank's first surprise was the person who fell into step beside him as he walked along the slippery pavement away from the gates of the prison. 'Pinky' Bonner hadn't worn well over the years. His eyes were rheumy and his stature stooped. He looked to be about twenty years older than Frank remembered him, rather than the ten that had passed.

"Fuck off Pinky," Frank said to the bent old man.

Pinky kept pace with him, fumbling in his coat pocket for something. Finally, giving a grunt, he pulled out a piece of paper. Frank took it and watched him scurry away between two parked cars and across the road.

Pinky hadn't said a word, hadn't so much as acknowledged Frank's existence. Frowning in concentration, Frank studied the paper. Written on it in a scrawl were the details of a bank account, and a Username and Password.

He'd never used a computer, but had read about them and seen programmes on the TV. He turned the paper over and was gripped by a sudden chill. Written on the back was a message from Jeffrey Hunter.

In the note his old boss explained how he knew Frank would probably never forgive him for what had happened, but that if he could bring himself to meet up, Jeff would explain everything. In any event, the bank details would give Frank access to two hundred thousand pounds - his payback for all the years he'd spent in prison.

Just a bloody accident, Frank. Just a bloody accident!

Frank felt the world close in, clamping his teeth together as the anger mounted inside his head. He pushed down the tide of rage that threatened to engulf him, taking deep, long breaths. He hadn't had one of these attacks in years.

Finally in control of himself again, he unclenched his fists and tossed the scrunched up note onto the pavement, where it tumbled along in the breeze.

He had no intention of taking that bastard's money, not after he'd fucked up his life so royally.

Chapter 11

As the sun caressed his face through the glass, Frank closed his eyes against the glare. It had turned into a hot day. He was sitting in Katie's Café, mobile clutched in his hand, studying the photo Rachael had sent him, waiting for the school lunch-break. When it finally came, he almost missed the boy as he walked from the playground with a group of other pupils.

Leaving the café, Frank followed the youth down Haverstock Hill. They turned right at the Underground Station and up Adelaide Road. After a further five-minute walk the boy turned into a low block of flats and Frank followed him up the staircase. At the top landing the boy entered a flat.

After taking note of the number, Frank headed downstairs and made his way back to the café. Over another coffee, he considered his next move. Being a small-time drug dealer meant the boy would be suspicious, which would make getting him on his own difficult.

Frank felt drained. He hadn't been taking his usual daily runs and was missing the wide open spaces of the Highlands. "Well, that's easily taken care of," he muttered.

Paying the bill, he walked out into the sunshine and caught a bus to Camden Town to look for a decent sports shop.

Camden Lock was busy, tourists flocking in from the surrounding areas to visit the outlandish tattoo bars and punk clothes shops lining the crowded pavements. He spent the next two hours wandering from shop to shop, until eventually, off Parkway, he found what he was looking for and slipped inside the brightly lit store.

Inspecting the large selection of trainers, Frank picked one up, weighing it in his hand. A slim shop assistant approached and they spent the next fifteen minutes discussing the merits of the different footwear before he made a choice.

Frank left the shop with a pair of expensive Nikes, some shorts and a running vest, all neatly packed into a new rucksack.

Looking around for somewhere to change, he spotted a bar fronting the Regent's canal. Inside a lone customer sipped at a pint of beer. He was a small man in a flat-cap and had a half-eaten sandwich clasped in his hand.

The barmaid smiled as Frank entered, pleased to have something to do. He smiled back and ordered a sandwich and a coffee, then sat at the bar searching through the rest of Mandy's phone numbers while he waited for his meal. None of the numbers meant anything to him.

After eating his sandwich, Frank walked through to the toilets, changed into his running gear and folded his clothes into the rucksack. Walking back into the bar, he paid his bill and made for the door. Just before he reached it, a low wolf-whistle sounded and Frank glanced back over his shoulder.

"Nice legs," the man at the bar called with a salute of his half-empty glass.

Frank chuckled to himself and set out for an invigorating run along the nearby canal path.

His run took Frank passed seven or eight long-boats moored in a long line. The cabins were picked out in reds, yellows, blues and greens - swirling splashes of colour made vibrant under the sun that slanted down across the tops of the houses on the far bank. Spots of light danced on the dark green water swirling its lazy way around a slow bend ahead. It was a perfect day for a jog.

Frank ran at a steady pace, his new trainers hitting the path with satisfying slaps. Fifteen minutes later he passed under a road bridge, its cast-iron supports weeping brown stains down the brickwork, the patterns bringing to mind bloodstained tears.

Rounding a sharp bend in the towpath, Frank slowed, moving to one side as a bike approached from the rear. Two young boys cycled past, swerving their bikes around to face him. A couple more skidded to a stop behind.

Frank recognised Gary straight away. The other boy was older and a lot bigger. "This him?" the bigger youth asked.

Gary nodded. They all dismounted, circling Frank as he stood silently watching them.

"Why you been following him?" a tall black youth asked, tipping his chin at Gary, sucking air between his teeth to show his contempt.

"Don't know what you're talking about mate," Frank said, leaning forward slightly as the four teenagers moved closer.

"You followed me home from school," Gary said flatly.

"Fucking pervert," another muttered.

Frank wasn't frightened, he'd faced down bigger threats than this in prison, but he didn't want to blow his chances of finding out what Gary knew by frightening them off if he could avoid it.

The teenagers bunched together, making a game of trying to intimidate him.

Frank kept calm, backing away step by step until he fetched up against the arch of the bridge. Now at least no one could attack him from behind.

His position gave the group more confidence. They thought they had him just where they wanted him. "So what you got in the rucksack then?" the black youth said.

This wasn't working out quite as Frank had hoped when he'd followed Gary home from his school, but he'd have to make the best of it. He reckoned he had two choices - fight or give them what they wanted - or perhaps there just might be another way.

“Why don’t you come and find out?” he said.

The boy on his left threw a punch. It was slow and awkward. Frank saw it coming and turned with it. The punch hit him just under the eye and he dropped to one knee, catching the black youth’s foot as he kicked out, gasping loudly, jerking it into his side, doing his best to make it appear as though a powerful kick had been delivered, instead of the glancing blow it really was.

Careful not to make eye contact, Frank slipped the rucksack from his shoulders, tossing it on the ground at the youth’s feet, trying to appear frightened.

Picking it up the boy rummaged around inside for a few minutes.

“Sod all in here,” he said, throwing it into the canal. “Where’s your wallet then?”

“I don’t have one,” Frank said, holding onto his side where he’d been kicked, grimacing as though badly hurt. “Please don’t hurt me.”

Frank’s plea seemed to release any last restraint on the group’s behaviour and they attacked him again, punching and kicking until he fell onto his side, protecting his head with his arms.

The blows eased as one of the boys pulled Frank’s pockets inside out, then tore the trainers from his feet. Frank rode with the punches, not sure how much longer he could keep up the pretence without really getting hurt.

Fending off more blows, Frank managed to struggle back to his feet. He had to end this quickly. Deciding that his best bet would be to dive into the canal and make his get away, he stumbled towards the bank. The boys would never bother to follow him into the murky water, that much was certain.

“Oi! You lot!” The shout brought everyone to a standstill.

Glancing up, Frank saw two men looking down at them from the bridge parapet. The boys scattered, jumping on their bikes and riding back along the towpath the way they had come.

“You okay?”

Frank nodded, rubbing his cheek. “Yeah, thanks mate.”

“Little bastards deserve locking up. Long as you’re okay then,” the man shouted back.

The heads disappeared over the parapet again and Frank was left contemplating his half-submerged rucksack. Searching along the bank he found a suitable branch and used it to retrieve his sodden clothes.

After checking to make sure that the boys really had disappeared, he collected his wallet and mobile from under the stone where he’d hidden them as he fell to the ground, then headed up to the street level to find the nearest laundrette.

Ten minutes later Frank was bundling his wet clothes, shoes and rucksack into a dryer. Then, after asking the attendant to keep an eye on his stuff, he headed off to find somewhere to stay.

As he walked along in bare feet, trying to dodge any suspicious looking lumps on the pavement, Frank mulled over what had just taken place. He’d need to be a lot cleverer than he had been so far if he wanted to get the answers he was looking for.

Chapter 12

Gary Simpson was happy. If things went well, after he'd taken Jenny to the party tonight, he'd get his pay-off. Two hundred quid would go a long way towards the I-Pad he wanted.

The canal path was empty today, even the usual dog-walkers absent for a change. He smiled, recalling the pervert they'd beaten up here yesterday.

"What are you smiling at?" Jenny asked.

Gary shrugged as he looked at the thin girl holding his hand. She picked at her bottom lip, her braces dark against white teeth. She wasn't pretty but that hardly mattered. It never did.

"Come on," he said, pulling her along the path towards a large, overgrown bush where he kept his stash. "We haven't got all day."

He led her around to the back of the bush where its branches had been broken off to make an opening into a large interior space. Picking up a piece of wood, he dug into the soft earth, uncovering a small plastic bag, which he held up and shook.

"Party time," he chortled.

Gary carefully opened the snap closer, picked up a discarded CD case and tapped out some of the pinkish powder. He chopped and bumped the cocaine with a plastic library card into lines, then pulled a tampon applicator from his pocket, holding it out to the girl. Her eyes - alight with anticipation - didn't leave the CD case as she snatched the applicator from his hand. Holding the tip against her nose she sniffed deeply, then changed nostrils to take the second line. Finished, she sat back against the bush-trunk with half-closed eyes, waiting for the rush to hit.

Gary sneered at her and tapped out a small quantity of cocaine onto a cigarette paper. Twisting it tightly, he swallowed it with a gulp of water from a plastic bottle. He'd heard too many horror stories about people losing their noses to want to snort. He preferred snow bombs.

Sitting back, arms clasped around his knees, he waited, and as the first signs of euphoria came, stared hard at the girl.

Was she a virgin?

He took a deep breath, lowering his gaze, trying to remember her name. Whatever, he'd fuck her before taking her to the party later. Why should some rich old bastard have all the fun?

*

Frank was being extra careful this time, staying well back while he followed the boy from his school. He had no intention of getting caught twice in as many days.

It was easier to follow the boy without being seen this time, because his companion - a plain looking girl, thin, with short brown hair - was holding his attention. The way she jerked her head at every step reminded Frank of a bird he'd once seen at London Zoo.

The couple made their way towards the canal where Frank had been attacked yesterday and he trailed them quietly, checking nobody else was nearby.

The boy took the girl by the hand and led her down a set of steep steps to the tow path below. Frank kept well back behind the staircase's solid brickwork as he watched where they went. He cursed silently when he saw how straight the canal was at this point. If he stepped out from the buttress on to the path, he chanced one of them spotting him.

Taking quick peeks, he watched as they passed under a road bridge, where they unexpectedly disappeared from sight. He waited until he was sure they wouldn't reappear, then set out after them.

Reaching the far side of the bridge, Frank slowed, his soft-soled trainers making no sound as he eased towards the edge of the abutment. The embankment beyond the bridge widened out. It was covered with large, thick bushes, set between clumps of high grass.

Spotting the disturbed undergrowth leading around to the far side of the thickest clump of bushes, he crept closer, straining to hear the smallest sound, but apart from the steady background hum of the overhead traffic, and the gentle lap of water, he heard nothing.

Feeling like some character out of a comic cartoon, he took long, high stepping strides towards the back of the bush so as not to make any sound. Nearing his target he heard someone speaking.

"Stop it. No!" A girl's voice, high and panicky.

"You owe me, you stupid bitch!" This voice deeper, unmistakably the boy's.

Frank eased himself closer.

"Leave off Gary!"

"So you got any money then? No, you don't do you? You owe me for the stuff, so come on, just a quick suck. It won't hurt you. You got to pay me somehow, you silly tart."

Frank pushed his way into the bush.

The boy was sitting with his back against a large rock, legs splayed, trousers undone. One hand gripped the girl's

wrist, the other was bunched in her hair as he forced her head down over his lap. It was obvious what he was trying to do.

When Frank appeared, the boy's breath hissed through his teeth and he pushed the girl away. She fell backwards into the branches, cutting her face on the sharp tips. She began to cry softly.

Frank pulled her to her feet, shoving her out on to the towpath. "Get out of here and think yourself lucky I came along," he growled.

He'd just turned back towards the bush when the boy burst from it, face red with anger. "You bastard. Didn't I teach you not to fuck with me yesterday?" He was holding a knife and looked as though he was prepared to use it.

Frank backed away warily. If he wanted to get any information from the boy, he'd have to get rid of the weapon first, and without getting himself stabbed in the process.

A trick he'd often used as a child came to mind. It had gotten him out of more than one sticky situation when he was being chased by bigger kids at school.

Taking a couple of steps backwards, Frank laughed loudly, sneering as the boy threatened him. "Is that the only way you can get a girl then, Gary? Get her stoned and force her to suck your pathetic little dick?" Frank wagged his little finger at the boy. "Is it that small that you have to force a girl to give you some head?"

The boy's face contorted into an angry mask and he rushed forwards. Frank turned and ran, keeping his speed down so the boy could gain on him. Hardly out of breath himself, he could hear the youngster's laboured gasps as he closed behind him.

Frank picked his spot carefully, unexpectedly dropping to his hands and knees. The boy, so close now that he was unable to stop, slammed straight into him, sprawling face first onto the path. The knife span away into the dark water with a loud splash.

Frank was on him in a second, hand bunched in his hair as he pulled the youth's slim wrist up his back into a painful arm-lock.

"If you don't want a dislocated shoulder, do as I say you little turd," he said. "Come on, over here."

Frank forced the boy along in a half crouch, pushing him towards the bush and unceremoniously shoving him inside. Then he stood over the cowering youth and smiled. "You're going to answer my questions. Do you understand?"

"Fuck you!" the boy shot back, rubbing his shoulder. His gaze smouldered with hatred.

Frank pushed him in the chest. The boy landed on his back and Frank stamped on his instep. The youth gave a high-pitched scream, grabbing his injured ankle as he writhed on the ground.

"Now, once again. You're going to answer my questions. Do you understand?"

The menace in Frank's voice was unmistakable as he leant over and picked up a brick he'd spotted half-buried in the ground. Raising one eyebrow, he tossed the brick from hand to hand, weighing it. The boy's eyes followed the movements of the brick as though they were glued to it.

"You know, it's surprising what a brick can do, even to a thick head like yours. Believe me son, I know. If prison teaches you anything, it's how to inflict pain."

The boy slithered backwards on his buttocks, until he fetched up against the trunk of the bush and could go no further. The defiance in his eyes had gone now, replaced by a sudden, deep fear.

Frank dropped the brick and put his foot on it, dusting his palms. Then he bent over and picked up a plastic bag that had caught his attention. Holding it up, he studied it with a frown.

"This what you gave Mandy then, is it? This the sort of shit you started her on?"

"Who the fuck are you?" the boy whispered.

Squatting down so he was on a level with the boy's face, Frank stared hard into the soft brown eyes. "Well son, I guess I'm about to become your worst nightmare. Unless of course you decide to answer my questions honestly."

Frank pulled a set of keys from his pocket. Then taking his time to add to the effect, he slowly arranged them so that each key stuck out between the fingers of his clenched fist. When he was satisfied with the effect, he rolled his fist back and forth in front of Gary's face, nodding his satisfaction.

"I learnt this trick in nick," he said. "It's really neat and makes quite a mess of your face, but unlike the brick, your jaw will stay in one piece when I use it, you'll still be able to tell me what I want to know. One thing though son, if one of these catches you in the eye, well—" He shrugged to emphasise his point. "Let's just say that you really don't want to have that happen to you."

Frank feinted a blow at the Gary's face. The boy jerked his head back, smacking it against the trunk of the bush. Tears formed in the corners of his eyes and his face twisted in pain.

"So, you're going to answer my questions as honestly as you can. Understand?"

Eyes wide, the boy nodded quickly.

*

Frank leant forward, palms against the tiles, head bowed as the shower pummelled his back. He turned so the water massaged his side and the large red bruise that had begun to form there - the result of Gary crashing into him on the towpath. He grimaced, carefully soaping his knees were the small pebbles from the ground had peppered them.

And to top it all, he mused, I've ruined a perfectly good pair of jeans, he thought.

Frank sighed in frustration - all that and he was still no nearer to discovering why Mandy had killed herself.

Stepping from the shower, he picked up a bath towel, promising himself that he would find out why she had, if it was the last thing he did. It had become his quest now. Something that would haunt him forever if he didn't solve it.

Wrapping the towel around his waist, Frank walked through to the hotel bedroom, where he made himself a cup of coffee. It was bitter but eased the headache that had started just above his left temple. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he sipped at the hot liquid as he went over what he'd learnt from Gary again, unconsciously flicking his tongue over the small scar on his top lip.

The boy had eventually admitted supplying Mandy with drugs, but had insisted that she had contacted him in the first place, not the other way around. Because he knew so little about his daughter, Frank had no way of judging if the boy was telling the truth or not. He'd also had to be careful not to do too much damage to the boy, leaving him with just a couple of bruises. After all, he was out on license and if the boy reported him to the police—

Even though Frank knew he wouldn't be able to stand another stretch in prison, he'd decided to take the risk in questioning Gary. It had been a precarious balancing act but one he couldn't back away from. But in the end it had all been for nothing. He was no nearer his goal now than when he'd started.

Putting the cup on the bedside cabinet, Frank rubbed his face. What now? Home he supposed, to try to mend some bridges. There was nothing left for him here.

Grabbing his mobile he punched in Karla's number and listened to it ring.

Chapter 13

Gary stood in front of the open doorway, fidgeting uncomfortably as he tried to build up enough courage to enter. The music blasting from the flat was loud, bass notes so deep they vibrated in his chest. Scared of what might happen when he entered, he decided the safest policy would be to leave, but before he could turn away, a hand grabbed his shoulder and propelled him down the dingy hallway into a back bedroom.

Several candles lay scattered about the room and by their dim light he could just make out a tall Asian man lounging on the bed. He lay with one hand behind his head, blue tinted smoke curling lazily from the cigarette held in his other between two long fingers. The smell of skunk in the room was overpowering.

“Found him outside, Altaf. Couldn’t seem to make up his mind whether to come in or not.”

“Mr Chandio, I—” As Gary spoke, a hard slap landed on the back of his head and he lapsed into silence, rubbing at the spot with a shaky hand.

Altaf Chandio sat up on the bed and crooked his leg in front of him, gripping his ankle. Squinting his eyes against the smoke, he smiled. From somewhere deeper in the flat Gary heard the high pitched giggle of a girl, followed by the deeper laughter of an older man.

The music lowered and Chandio continued to stare at him, saying nothing, which made Gary more nervous. He’d been promised two hundred pounds if he bought the new girl to the flat tonight and didn’t need reminding of what might happen now that he’d failed.

“Where is she?” Chandio asked.

The man blew on the end of his joint, causing tiny red points of ash to drop onto his jeans. He brushed them away, candle-light reflecting from the large ring on his thumb. Finished, he looked up again, his gaze hardening.

Gary could only lick dry lips, unable to answer.

“You said you’d bring her to me tonight. I’ve got two guys lined up, ready to break her in. They won’t be pleased if she’s not here, and neither will I. Tell me she’s waiting outside Gary, so I can go back to my smoke.”

The man flicked his joint across the room. It hit Gary on the chest, giving off a burst of bright sparkles which fell to his feet. Smelling the pungent aroma of burnt material, he quickly flicked hot ash from the front of his hoodie.

Gary stared back at Chandio, nerves tingling as he saw the anger in the man’s eyes. The pungent scent of sweat permeated the room. Outside the window, pin-point pricks of brightness flickered against a blackness that seemed to be trying to claw its way into the room.

Stepping forward, Gary twisted his foot on the still smoking joint, teeth clenched as he ground his fears into the carpet along with the butt. “It wasn’t my fault,” he said.

A sudden whiff of garlic told him that the big Greek had returned and was standing right behind him.

“It wasn’t his fault Marcos,” Chandio mocked with a disarming smile.

The big man grunted non-committedly, but made no further answer.

“So my friend, whose fault is it then?” Chandio continued, turning his attention back to Gary. “I gave you plenty of time, some of my best shit, and the promise of two hundred pounds when you delivered her here. So where is she?”

Gary felt a large hand descend on his shoulder. It squeezed - hard. He ground his teeth against the pain, trying not to move. Chandio shook his head, then flicked his hand in dismissal. The pain stopped and the big Greek left the room.

“So, let’s go talk somewhere a bit quieter, my friend,” Chandio said, his tone making it perfectly clear that he considered Gary anything other than his friend.

Following Chandio down the corridor into an untidy kitchen, Gary sat at the Formica topped table. The sink was piled high with dirty dishes, and discarded take-away foil containers littered the worktop. A stinking bin overflowed with rubbish, its bulging bag reminiscent of a swollen black foetid tongue.

“Stay in earshot,” Chandio called after the Greek as he wandered back down the hall. “I think I may need a little bit of your persuasive methods if young Gary here doesn’t have a good enough excuse for fucking me over tonight. And while you’re about it, get one of those sluts in there to clear this mess up.”

Gary’s mouth was dry, his stomach knotted into a tight ball. He tried to appear nonchalant, because it wouldn’t do to let Chandio know just how frightened he really was. He sat at the kitchen table, sliding his hands under the sides of his thighs to stop them trembling.

“So, you met with the girl. Gave her a fix?”

“Yes Mr Chandio.” Despite his best efforts, Gary’s tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth making his words sound thick and unintelligible. He swallowed, then sucked some spittle into his mouth, sliding further back in his seat.

Chandio’s dark gaze continued to bore into his. “And?” he prompted.

“Well there was this guy. He followed us into the bushes. He beat me up. Told Jenny to get lost.”

Chandio’s chair scraped across the floor. Striding around the table, he grabbed Gary’s chin, jerking his head back and forth as he examined his face. Then dragging him to his feet, he tore open Gary’s hoodie, before ripping his tee-shirt from top to bottom.

“Don’t see any bruises,” he said softly, shoving Gary back in his seat. “Not trying to dick me around are you? That really wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“No Mr Chandio, honest. The man threatened me with a brick and stamped on my foot. He had some keys or

something between his fingers. You know, sticking out between them, like this.” Balling his hand into a fist, Gary showed Chandio how his attacker had held the keys. “Said that’s how they did it in prison. Some shit like that.”

Chandio’s eyes narrowed and he leant forward, elbows on the table, chin on his fists. “Prison you say?”

Gary nodded.

“What else did he say, this man? Was he trying to find out where you got your drugs from? Did he ask you who your supplier was? Anything like that?”

“No. He just wanted to know about a girl called Mandy.”

“Mandy?” Chandio thought for a moment, then clicked his fingers a few times. “Ah yes. I remember her.”

“She jumped in front—” Gary stopped when Chandio glared at him.

“So if he’s not the police, and he’s not some new supplier sniffing around for clients, then who the hell is he?” Chandio muttered to himself.

Gary sat quietly, head bowed.

“Marcos,” Chandio shouted, making Gary jump.

When the big Greek entered, the kitchen seemed to shrink. Chandio nodded across the table. “Take this idiot out and teach him to do as he’s told in future.”

“No, wait Mr Chandio,” Gary shouted in desperation. “I followed him back to his hotel, and—” Tugging at his pocket he pulled out a mobile. “Look, I got a couple of pics of him. Here, look. I don’t know who he is, but he was asking about Mandy.”

Chandio dismissed the big Greek with a nod and sat back down at the table, holding out his hand. A young girl unexpectedly burst into the room wearing nothing but a pair of white panties. She looked to be about fourteen.

“Get out,” Chandio shouted at her.

Rolling her eyes, she backed out of the room, muttering under her breath.

Chandio beckoned again and Gary handed him the mobile, a photo of the man who had attacked him clearly visible on the screen.

“That’s him, Mr Chandio. That’s the man.”

Chapter 14

The phone call caught Karla by surprise and she answered in a half-daze, stretching out her arm from under the warm duvet with a groan.

Who on earth was that?

It was Frank. Her eyes widened when she saw what time it was.

“Karla? Karla please, don’t hang up. Please. I have to talk to you.”

“Frank I’m tired.”

“I know it’s early. I’m really sorry but I have to talk to you. Explain about my past and why I didn’t tell you.”

Karla sat up, turning on the light. She pulled the duvet up around her shoulders and shivered. “Do we have to do this right now Frank? It’s half-past two in the morning for God’s sake!”

“Please Karla, I love you.”

The words she had waited so long to hear rebounded around inside her head, but instead of filling her with happiness, they filled her with despair.

No, no. Not now. Not after all she’d learnt about him in London!

Karla felt herself weaken. She wanted to hold him, stroke his face, nestle into his arms. Taking a deep breath, she pushed the images aside. “I can’t talk now Frank. Call me tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to talk Karla. Just listen. Will you do that for me? Please? Just listen for a moment.”

She didn’t answer, just closed her eyes against the pain in her chest. Taking her silence for agreement, Frank began to talk, explaining about his past life, detailing everything that had happened to him since he had first met his old gang boss, Jeffrey Hunter, at school all those years ago.

For the next fifty minutes, Karla listened without saying a word, and at the end of it felt dizzy and disorientated. After he’d rung off, she lay back in the bed, head buzzing as she tried to sort out her emotions; how she felt about the man who’d spent ten years in prison for man-slaughter, even though he was adamant that he’d been innocent, set up by his old boss, Hunter.

Did she - could she - believe him?

Every fibre of her body screamed out: *Yes*.

But her brain kept digging up little: *What ifs*.

After much persuasion, and against her better judgement, she had agreed to meet Frank at Inverness Station when he got back from London tomorrow. He’d told her that he was going to accept his responsibility for his daughter’s death and stop looking for reasons why she’d taken her own life. He’d sounded defeated, depressed, as though he’d given up on more than his search. It worried her and she spent the rest of the night tossing and turning, waking to the alarm unrefreshed and tired beyond belief.

As she showered, Karla wondered how she would react when they met. Frank had asked her to pick him up from Inverness station at ten this morning and she was already regretting having said yes.

*

Karla saw Frank step off the train and her throat tightened. He looked . . . so beaten. He spotted her in the crowd and waved, easing his rucksack onto his shoulders as he came, face set in an expression that suggested he thought she might have a go at him when they met up.

Unable to stop herself, she ran to him, flinging her arms around his neck, almost knocking him over in her haste. His face lit up and he looked down at her for a moment, unsure what to do next as he hugged her back. Finally he bent down and kissed her deeply, slipping his hand into her hair, caressing her ear with the ball of his thumb.

“Welcome home Frank,” she said.

She didn’t say anything else, because there was nothing else to say. He was home and she was happy.

Holding hands they walked along the platform together, both reticent to start a conversation, in case it led in the wrong direction.

Chapter 15

Karla raised an eyebrow as she walked over to the bed and looked down at Frank. He was lying with the duvet pulled up to his waist, one hand under his head, a big smile on his face, holding his other hand out to her.

"You look beautiful," he said.

Karla looked down at herself. The soft light was accentuating the fine downy hairs on her arms. She knelt on the bed and sat back, one hand resting on Frank's leg, massaging it softly through the thickness of the duvet. His smile widened.

She watched him watching her, luxuriating in the way his gaze seemed to devour her body. She knew she was pretty - not beautiful in that glossy, magazine kind of way - but nether-the-less pretty. Her face and body had a symmetry that attracted attention wherever she went.

Leaning forward, she kissed the tip of Frank's nose but suddenly found herself on her back as he swung her across the bed beside him. She felt his warm breath on the side of her neck, then a gentle tugging sensation as he began nibbling her earlobe. She giggled, pulling away, staring up into his eyes. He stared back down into hers, and for just a moment she thought she saw a tear there. Then his lips were on hers and she opened her mouth to let his tongue slip across her teeth. He groaned, the sound vibrating deeply in her chest. An unusual breathlessness overtook her and she broke the kiss, lightly biting his shoulder.

He cupped her cheek in his hand and she felt the roughness of his palm on her soft skin. He stroked her chin with the side of his thumb and her skin flushed, a hotness engulfing her as he kissed her again, less urgently this time. She kissed him back, his hardness against her stomach.

Somehow the duvet had ended up on the floor.

Frank eased himself up on to his elbows, running the tip of his tongue along her collar bone, then down across her breast, flicking her nipple. She sighed quietly as he sucked it into his mouth, rolling it between his lips. Sliding her hand into his hair she massaged his scalp with her fingertips, gasping as he gently rolled the other nipple between his fingers.

Closing her eyes, she tilted back her head, allowing the sensations to radiate outwards from her breasts, thrusting upwards as he sucked harder. Then, with a soft plop, he pulled his lips free and raised his head to smile at her. The wetness of his tongue continued its downwards journey and she clenched her teeth, tossing her head from side to side, gripping the sheet between balled fingers as he played with her.

The bastard always teased her this way, slipping his tongue through her pubes - almost but not quite there - then sliding it away again, over and over.

She groaned - louder this time as the sensation of his breath against the inside of her thigh brought a fluttering to her eyelids. He chuckled and she raised her leg as he moved it sideways, allowing him to blow on the back of her knee. She so loved it when he did that.

He began working his way up her leg with a series of small kisses along the inside of her thigh and she bit down on her bottom lip, rocking her hips.

At last he was there, his lips and tongue exploring her, pushing deep inside, then out again, slipping back and forth across her clitoris, taking her to higher heights. And when she finally came with a muted scream, the tensions that had built until she thought she might burst, dissipated as wave after wave rippled through her muscles.

"God," she breathed, the sweat trickling down between her breasts, "that was good."

She looked down at Frank and he looked back up at her from between her thighs, the dampness on his chin glinting in the light. She slithered downwards, rolling him on to his back, sliding off the end of the bed so she was kneeling between his thighs.

His penis was stiff, the glans tinged with purple and she took it in her mouth, feeling him shudder as she slid her lips down the shaft.

Then suddenly his hands were in her hair, but instead of easing himself deeper into her mouth as she was expecting, Frank roughly pulled her head away. He swore, his voice breaking as he softly mouthed obscenities.

When he got to his feet, Karla saw that his erection had disappeared, as though it had never been. She frowned, turning onto her side, watching him as he strode to the window and stood with his back to her, staring out into the blackness, shoulders slumped.

She went to him, gripping his biceps as she pressed her cheek between his shoulder blades.

He shivered at her touch. "Fuck, that's never happened to me before," he said, more to himself than her.

"It's okay Frank," she whispered into his back, not knowing what else to say.

"No it's not," he answered, pulling away from her, then stalking around the room, collecting his clothes and pulling them on.

Karla watched him dress, her heart heavy, until finally the door slammed and she was left alone, the duvet crumpled between clenched hands, wondering what she'd done wrong.

Frank stood in the wet road, letting the large summer rain-drops pound down on him. They felt refreshing. He turned his face up to them, but no matter how hard they fell, they couldn't wash away the rage permeating every pore of his body.

What was wrong with him? He loved Karla but found it impossible to tell her so, and now, God-damn it, he wasn't even able to have sex with her!

Wiping the rain from his face, he wished he could wipe away the memories that had so suddenly arisen from nowhere when Karla had taken him into her mouth - dark memories that in the end always sought him out, memories that had become more prevalent lately, memories that refused to be stilled.

Hunching his shoulders against the wind, Frank stuck his hands deep in his pockets and slogged his way through the deepening puddles back towards his cottage, angry tears mixing with the rain.

He needed time alone, time to think, time to understand where these feelings were coming from.

*

The cottage was dark and empty - void of life, with a coldness that reflected his feelings. Shrugging off his wet jacket, Frank tossed it at the coat hook, kicking it into the corner when it missed and landed on the floor in a soggy heap.

God, he needed a drink.

Changing direction at the last moment, he went into the kitchen instead and slapped on the kettle. Alcohol was not a good idea. Not right now. Not the way he felt. As he waited for the kettle to boil, he put the makings of a strong coffee into a mug, then leant back against the counter, lacing his fingers together, trying to calm the trembling in his hands. He felt as though his stomach was full of acid.

The kettle clicked off but he didn't hear it. He was elsewhere - elsewhere. The taste of coppery blood was in his mouth, his throat was clogged with stinking socks.

Forcing the memories from his mind he tried to lock them away once more, back where they'd been for the past thirteen years, but they kept running through his head, like a looped tape, over and over.

"Going to teach you how to enjoy it, you cocksucker!"

Frank turned back towards the counter, smashing his cup against the tiles, punching the wall until the plasterboard broke and his knuckles streamed with blood.

Sinking to the floor, he sat with his back against the kitchen cupboard, head bowed, the scar on his top lip clenched between his teeth, the shame and anger from the past overwhelming him once more.

Chapter 16

Frank stood in his kitchen, poking at the hole he'd punched in the wall, trying to pull the plasterboard - and his life - back together. A large piece broke off, clattering its way down into the dark interior. He sucked at his knuckles, examining the dark purple bruises.

He'd need to get the wall fixed before Karla saw it and asked how it had happened. But he knew deep down that he was just being wishful. After his performance in bed last night, he'd be lucky if she ever talked to him again, let alone came over for a visit.

Frank couldn't remember much after opening the first bottle, but knew he must have drunk a hell of a lot by the hangover he was suffering. Damn, even his eyeballs ached.

He glanced at the empty bottles lined up on the counter, then back to the damaged wall. Where did this rage come from. It frightened him that he could suddenly be so out of control.

It had been two weeks since his trip to London, and he still couldn't shake off the feelings of failure - the emptiness that filled him when he thought about Mandy. And now, on top of all that, he'd upset Karla - again. Things were spiralling out of control. He needed to get his life back on track and fast. The first step towards that would be to get back to work.

After a quick shower and something to eat, Frank rang the courier who'd been handling his business for the past few days and arranged to take back his deliveries.

*

Karla glanced up as the bell on the coffee shop door tinkled - something she'd been doing all morning as she waited for Frank to put in an appearance - but it was just the postman making a delivery.

Since returning from London, Frank had been moody, at times outright belligerent, and she wondered what had happened to him there. She'd tried talking to him about it a couple of times, but his reaction left little doubt that he didn't want to talk.

And now, this thing that had happened last night.

Karla shook her head. It was obvious that Frank was under some considerable stress. Wondering once again why he kept such things to himself, she picked up some dirty plates and took them through to the kitchen. The bell tinkled again but she ignored it, her thoughts still on Frank and his problems.

"Karla!"

Her shoulders jerked and she dropped the plates into the dishwasher with a crash.

"Won't be a sec," she called, picking up the pieces.

Her heart beat faster and she ran her tongue across her lips to check her lipstick. Hell, she was acting like a schoolgirl again. How was it this damned man had such an effect on her? Dropping the broken plates into the bin, she walked back out into the café, forcing a smile as she tried to ignore Frank's dour look.

"I owe you an apology," he said as soon as she appeared behind the counter. He waited a beat, as though trying to find the right words before continuing: "Look, you didn't deserve what happened last night. It was nothing to do with you Karla, and I'm really, really sorry."

She looked at the small, hurt child in front of her, feeling her resistance slip away. Reaching out a hand to touch him, but at the last moment rearranging the tips-box to a new position on the counter instead, she felt her cheeks flushing.

Frank put his hand on the back of hers. "Please forgive me," he said. "I'm back at work now. Perhaps you'd come out for a meal with me tonight? Let me make up for the stupid way I behaved last night?"

Karla looked down at the counter for a moment, then back up at his eyes.

She finally nodded.

"Great," he said in a lighter tone. "I'll pick you up at eight then."

As he opened the door to leave, she called out to him and he looked back over his shoulder, forehead lined in a frown.

"No bike, okay? Borrow Gordy's car," she said.

*

It had been a good day and Frank was glad to be back at work. The feel of the powerful bike between his legs had brought back his zest for life, the air whipping past his head seeming to brush away the last remnants of his dark feelings.

He'd made his last delivery to the Luxford General Hospital out in Inverdarty and was on his way back home. A quick shower and he'd pick up the car from Gordy's, collect Karla and take her to the new restaurant he'd found on the other side of the valley.

He had a lot of explaining to do about the way he'd acted, and why he'd found it so hard to be honest with her. Mandy's death had led to a roller-coaster emotional ride that he was only just now beginning to come to terms with.

He hadn't realised how deeply her death had affected him at first, the feelings of inadequacy and guilt it had aroused in him. Well now it was time to put these feelings behind him and build a new life with the woman he loved.

Turning his bike on to his road, Frank fought the deep ruts that had formed in the recent heavy rain, his hands locked on the handlebars as he kept the big machine on a straight track. After locking his bike in the garage, he hurried along the garden path, into the hall and up to the bedroom, where he dug out his best shirt.

Studying the purple garment with a critical eye, he shook his head and tossed it on the bed, deciding on a green one instead. Shrugging a light brown jacket over the top of the shirt and a dark pair of dark jeans, he looked at his attire in a full length mirror.

Great.

Satisfied, Frank made his way down to the lounge, snatched up the car-keys he'd borrowed from Gordy on the way home and headed for the front door.

Chapter 17

Frank's footfalls hardly disturbed the ground as he ran through the trees at a steady pace. He topped a low hill and turned towards the loch, wiping his forehead with his wristband. The day was overcast but warm. The birds quietened as he passed below them, bursting into song again once he'd gone, angry at being disturbed. He caught a glimpse of a vole as it flicked its way across the forest floor and grinned to himself, pleased that he wasn't the only creature out and about on such a dull Sunday.

Stopping beside the loch, he shrugged off his backpack and sat against his favourite rock. The waterfall murmured in the background and before long his eyelids began to droop. Somewhere nearby a bee droned.

Frank was woken by an angry buzzing and it took him a few moments to realise that it was his mobile, and not another bee. Fumbling his phone from the backpack, he thumbed the screen, breath catching when he saw the text.

ring if u wnt to no y man d died

Not recognising the number, Frank sat for a moment, tapping the tip of his thumbnail against the mobile's screen, wondering if he should make the call or not. He'd already made up his mind to put all this behind him two weeks ago.

Sighing deeply, he shook his head and lowered the mobile, thumb already halfway to the delete button - but then hesitated.

Would it be such a bad thing to find out what the text was about? Shrugging, he punched the call button and held the mobile up to his ear. It rang four times and he decided to terminate the call, relieved that the decision had been made for him.

"Hello?" a voice whispered in his ear. "I can't talk now. I'll ring you back later. Don't call me again."

*

Altaf Chandio leant back in his chair, flicking a leather key fob back and forth between thumb and forefinger. He studied the man sitting across the desk from him. Marcos Farris stared at the fob, seemingly spellbound by its movements. Chandio dropped the car keys on the desktop and the big Greek raised his gaze, blinking rapidly.

"So," Chandio said, "it seems this guy was the girl's father and he's been in prison for killing someone. That's interesting." Farris popped a pine nut into his mouth, chewing silently as Chandio clasped his hands on the desk and leant forward, "Perhaps he was just looking to find out why his daughter killed herself then, nothing more than that?"

"Looks like it might be that way, Mr Chandio," Farris rumbled around a fat digit as he picked a chunk of wayward nut from between his teeth with a fingernail.

Chandio sat back, grimacing in distaste as his minder fished about in his mouth. "Okay Marcos. But keep on eye out, especially on that little creep who supplies us with the girls. We got a good thing going here, and I don't want any trouble. Understood."

Farris nodded and got to his feet, lumbering his way towards the door.

"Oh and Marcos—" Chandio called. The big man turned back, eyebrows raised, "we need another delivery. See to it will you?"

*

Marcos Farris pushed open the lounge door, turning his shoulders as he went because they were too wide for the opening. He was an imposing man, his large frame - although covered with a generous layer of fat - carried enough muscle to ensure that he got the deference he was due. As Chandio's minder, Marcos was top of the pile, and earned enough to buy the respect of any woman he wanted.

Life was sweet, but if pushed, he would have admitted to feeling a bit uneasy about the way Chandio made his money. Trading in under-age girls rankled. He had a young daughter himself and would kill anyone who went near her. Coke, heroin, skunk - even breaking a few bones to hurry along payments on doorstep loans - all that was okay, but this? No, not something he was happy being involved in at all.

A few more years and he'd have enough saved to take his family back to Greece - visit some old friends, set up a business of his own. It was something he held firmly in mind as he went about his business for Chandio. Just a couple more years - maybe one if things went well.

Pushing such thoughts from his mind, Marcos entered the lounge. A young girl sat on the settee, feet up, watching TV. "Get out," he told her. "Go wash some dishes or something. Make yourself useful."

The girl rolled her eyes, making a quick exit for the door.

When she had gone, Marcos sat on the couch and pulled out his mobile. "Hello Con," he rumbled when the call was answered, unaware that the girl was listening from the other side of the partially open door. "Listen, we need another delivery of stuff. How soon can you do it?"

*

Chantelle pressed her ear to the opening and smiled. Information was power and she knew she'd need a lot of that if she ever wanted to get away from this lot with her life intact.

This was just what she'd been waiting for. Having the name of Altaf Chandio's supplier and when the next delivery was taking place would give her something else to take to the man she'd sent the text to earlier. She leant closer to the opening so she could hear better.

Suddenly a loud buzzing sounded and Chantelle jumped, panicking as she slapped her pocket, praying the big man hadn't heard the mobile.

Running down the corridor, she burst into the toilet, pulling the phone from her pocket, almost dropping it in her haste.

Shit! Shit! Shit!

"Hello," she whispered. "I can't talk now. I'll ring you back later. Don't call me again."

Chapter 18

“What is it Frank? You’ve been somewhere else all evening.”

Frank looked up from his steak, fork paused halfway to his mouth.

He nodded, then put his fork down, so he could take a sip of wine. “Yes, you’re right,” he said. “Sorry about that, but I had a rather strange text message earlier today.”

Karla leant forward, elbows on the table, her large wine glass cupped between her hands.

“Oh?” she said.

As he picked up his fork again, Frank was struck by how beautiful she looked under the dim restaurant lights. He chewed slowly, taking his time, trying to delay the inevitable, knowing it would probably be a mistake to tell her.

Karla put down her glass and touched her fingertips to the back of his hand. “Tell me,” she said.

He looked at her and smiled, a part of him glad that he had somebody he could share it with, but frightened she would be upset when he told her.

“Well,” he began tentatively, “I was out running this afternoon, up by the loch, you know, that place I like to exercise?”

She nodded, saying nothing.

After taking another sip of wine, he continued: “Well, I got this funny text message from a number I didn’t recognise.” He hesitated again, putting another forkful into his mouth.

Karla didn’t respond, just took slow sips from her glass as she waited for him to carry on. Frank picked up on her mood. He could see that she wasn’t about to try to pry it out of him, but he could tell that she was getting impatient. It was a tacit message, but one he couldn’t afford to ignore.

He sat back with a slight frown. “It said I should ring the number if I wanted to know why Mandy had died,” he finally said.

That got a reaction from Karla and she leant forward, eyes widening as she lowered her glass to the table.

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “Not why she committed suicide, but why she died.”

“And did you ring?”

Frank nodded, spearing a piece of steak and putting it in his mouth, chewing thoughtfully.

Karla kicked his leg under the table. “You really can be the most frustrating man, do you know that Frank Collins? What happened?”

It may have been a small victory, but it was one that lightened Frank’s dark mood a little. He chuckled, taking a large gulp of wine to wash down the steak so he could speak. Wiping his mouth with his napkin he shrugged his agreement.

“Any-wise,” he said, “when I rang the number, a young girl said she couldn’t talk right then. That she’d call me back later, which she did - a couple of hours later. And here’s the strange thing.” Frank leant forward, voice lowered so they couldn’t be overheard. “When she did ring back, she told me that she had proof that Mandy hadn’t committed suicide at all. She warned me not to go to the police yet as it would mean a lot of trouble for her if I did. I got the impression she was terrified of something or somebody. She wouldn’t tell me anything more than that. Said she wanted to meet up with me, and she’d tell me everything about it then.”

Karla took another sip of wine, her gaze locked on his. “And did you agree to meet her?” she asked.

Frank hesitated, knowing that if he said yes, it would lead to further questions he didn’t want to answer right then, but that if he lied, Karla would eventually find out, and that would be the end of their relationship.

Frank decided to go with the truth for once.

Taking both her hands in his, he flicked his tongue over the scar on his lip, looking into her eyes.

“Okay,” he said, “yes I did. She wants money for the information. A lot of it. So she can get away and set up home somewhere else.”

“What’s a lot?”

“Ten thousand.”

Karla gasped, then let out a muted laugh. Dropping his hands, she sat back, her disbelief obvious. “And you believed her?” Karla shook her head. “She’s obviously lying. And anyway, where would you get that kind of money?”

And there it was - the question he knew she’d ask - the question he really didn’t want to answer, because he knew it had the power to tear them apart.

*

Karla watched Frank struggle with her question, her stomach dropping as she realised that she might not want to hear the answer. A coldness seized her and she held up her hand to stop him, but he’d already begun to answer.

“Well there’s something I haven’t told you,” he said.

She sat silently as the person she loved - had so foolishly trusted - explained about the man who’d been waiting for him when he’d got out of prison, and the note from his old boss, trying to buy back Frank’s loyalty with a huge payback. He went on to explain that he’d thrown away the password, vowing never to touch the money that Jeffrey Hunter had

offered him.

Karla was stunned, wavering between awe and disbelief that someone could turn their back on such a large amount of money, just toss it away like a piece of trash. But more than that, she was angry that he'd kept this from her, had once again thought it perfectly acceptable to keep such an important part of his life hidden away.

Dropping her napkin on the table, she jumped to her feet, scraping her chair over the tiled floor with such force that other diners turned to look at them.

"Goodbye Frank," she said, trying to ignore the tears that stung her eyes.

Without a backward glance, Karla stalked from the restaurant; head high, face expressionless, emotions held in check - until she was outside, where she burst into tears.

*

Christ, why isn't life ever simple? Once, just once, why couldn't it just go right?

Frank pushed himself to his limit. He'd never run at night before and knew he should be more careful. The last thing he needed right now was a twisted ankle, or to lose an eye to a wayward branch. He pounded along the rough path, only half his mind on what he was doing, while the other half replayed his conversation with Karla back at the restaurant. He'd known it would be a mistake to tell her about the money. So why the hell had he gone ahead and done it anyway?

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

Reaching the loch, Frank followed the shoreline for a bit, then cut inland again, entering a part of the forest he wasn't so familiar with. The sky was clouded, the moonlight dim as it filtered through the thick canopy. He kept up his hectic pace, breathing hard now, heart beating in his chest as he pushed himself even harder.

What did you expect you stupid bastard?

Turning a sharp bend in the path, Frank's foot hit a damp patch of grass and he went down - hard - landing flat on his back, the breath knocked from his body.

Stunned and hardly able to breathe, he lay where he'd fallen, staring up at a moon that had chosen that very moment to break through the cloud in a shaft of light that picked out his fallen body.

It felt for all the world as though God's accusing finger was pinning him to the ground.

Chapter 19

Frank's decision to return to London had been a last minute one. So last minute in fact that he'd not even taken the time to tell Karla where he was going - he'd just jumped on his bike and set off during the night.

Arriving at a hotel in Swiss Cottage after a ten hour ride, Frank parked his bike, checked in and got his head down for a couple of hours.

Now rested, he checked his mobile again, just to make sure that Karla hadn't phoned, or that the girl he was going to meet hadn't changed her mind.

Frank was still not convinced that using on-line banking was safe, but didn't want his face plastered all over the security cameras at the cash machine, so using the password he'd thrown away all those years ago, he logged onto the bank's website. He was more than a little surprised that the account was still there and open to him.

Checking the balance, Frank felt a little dizzy when he saw the interest it had accrued. Logging out again, he shoved his phone back in his pocket, chuckling to himself at the password his old boss had chosen - *Links77*.

It was Jeffrey Hunter's old nickname, followed by the year of his birth. So bloody predictable.

But then Jeffrey Hunter had always been predictable hadn't he? Except just that once . . .

Just a bloody accident Frank!

Frank hadn't seen the double cross coming. But then, why should he have? He'd trusted his old boss, right up to the time the prison door had slammed shut in his face.

Still lost in his thoughts, Frank didn't notice someone sit down beside him on the park bench. She coughed quietly and he glanced at her. It was a young girl, perhaps fourteen or fifteen, and after a quick check, he went back to his reflections.

"You Frank?" she asked.

He turned to look at her again, eyes narrowing as he checked her out. Leaning forward, he looked up and down the path. Then satisfied that she was on her own, he nodded.

"Name's Chantelle. I'm the one who phoned you."

Frank nodded again.

"Got the money?" she asked.

"Not so fast," he answered.

The girl shifted under his gaze, looking around like a frightened animal. She had scabs on the corners of her mouth, her hair was a mess, and under the dirty hoodie she looked to be stick thin.

Frank was beginning to think that Karla might have been right after all. The girl was obviously on drugs.

"You think I'd be idiot enough to sit here with ten thousand pounds in my pocket?" he said, getting to his feet.

The girl grasped at his arm. "But you promised me. You said you'd bring me the money."

The desperation in her voice was obvious and Frank wondered what she was on. Grabbing her arm, he yanked up her sleeve, but her skin was smooth, no track marks.

"What you doing, you fuck!" she spat at him.

Sitting down again, Frank gave her a withering look. "Okay luv, I'll give you fifty quid. Here." Fishing his wallet out of his back pocket, he extracted the notes and held them out to her. "Take it and go. Just tell me before you do, how the hell you found out about me. Did Mandy's friend, Rachael tell you?"

The girl took the notes and stuffed them in her pocket, looking around as though she expected to see somebody.

Frank felt edgy, worried that someone might run up and try to mug him at any moment. The girl seemed to pick up on his uneasiness and nodded, as though she suddenly realised what the problem was.

"You think this is all a set-up, don't you? That I've got some mates waiting somewhere to do you over?"

"Well put yourself in my place," he replied, his gaze darting here and there as he spoke. "Some strange girl tells you to bring ten thousand to a park in the middle of London. What would you think?"

"Okay," she said. "Fair enough. Here, take a look at this."

Taking the wrinkled piece of paper the girl held out to him and smoothing it out on his leg, Frank studied it.

The sheet of A4 paper had a couple of photographs printed on it, obviously taken at some kind of orgy. Three men and two girls were having sex. He looked closer, his breath catching in his throat. The girls looked to be no more than twelve or thirteen.

"What the hell is this?" he said, tossing the paper back at her. "What's this got to do with my Mandy?"

A youth sauntered passed, dragged along by a big Pit Bull terrier on a lead. He gave the girl a hard look and she sat in silence until he'd disappeared down the path before answering.

"Look, it's dodgy sitting out here in the open like this. Anyone could see us, and if it got back to Marcos that I've been talking to someone like you, he'll make sure I regret it." Frank started to answer but she cut him short. "No listen. Those pics show what Mandy was involved in. She took them herself. Honest. I'm telling the truth. I've got more if you want to see them, but we can't talk here. We have to go somewhere safer."

Frank studied the girl closely, not really wanting to believe what she'd said. But there was something about her, a sincerity that made him hesitate.

"Okay," he finally agreed. At least there would be no harm in listening to what the girl had to say, and he just might

learn something. "Here's what we'll do. We'll go back to my hotel so we can talk. If you give me any sensible information about why Mandy killed herself, I'll give you two thousand pounds. Not a penny more, understand?"

Frank saw the disappointment in her eyes and sat quietly, waiting for her to agree, as he knew she would.

"Okay then," she finally said.

Pointing at the park gates, he stood up. "Wait for me outside. I want to make sure that no friends of yours are going to follow us. Give me your phone."

Defiance flickered in the girl's eyes for a moment, but then she relented. "You really don't trust me, do you?"

"No," he shouted, pushing her phone into his back pocket as he sprinted away from her.

Frank spent the next ten minutes jogging along the park's paths, checking out everyone he passed. Finally satisfied that the girl was on her own, he made his way to the park entrance. The girl was waiting for him on a low stone wall, her face lined with anxiety. It was obvious that she had begun to think he'd done a disappearing act on her.

Frank slowed to a walk, tossing her mobile at her, then hailing a passing taxi to take them back to his hotel.

Chapter 20

Jeffrey Hunter leant back in his comfortable office chair, smiling as he tapped the edge of the keyboard with a manicured fingernail, studying the bank statement on the screen.

Well, well, well. After all these years, Frank had finally made a withdrawal from his payback fund!

Frowning as the memories came flooding back, Jeffrey hit the PC's 'Shutdown' button and watched the screen go blank. He still felt guilty that he'd been forced to betray his close friend all those years ago, but it had been necessary. Family came first - before friendship, no matter how close that friendship might be.

He sighed, wondering what his old friend might be up to these days, and why, after all this time, he'd suddenly decided to withdraw a large amount of cash from the account. The last he'd heard of him, his old bodyguard had left prison and headed for Scotland.

Jeffrey's office door opened and a sudden blast of loud music dispelled his thoughts. His brother, Conrad, slammed the door shut behind him and sat at the opposite side of the desk.

"What's it like out there tonight?" he asked Conrad.

"Busy. Got a couple of stag-nights in, along with the usual punters lining up to stuff money down the girl's thongs."

"You been keeping an eye out that no dealers are using the place, like I told you to?"

Conrad sighed and nodded.

Jeffrey Hunter knew how much his brother hated being ordered around like the hired help, but he had been given the nod by one of his suppliers that a couple of dealers were using the club to shift their gear - something that could get them closed down, and might even lead to a spell inside prison if the police got to hear about it.

Turning his attention back to the computer, Jeffrey nodded at the screen. "Seems our old friend Frank Collins has succumbed to temptation," he said thoughtfully.

"Frank Collins?" Connie frowned at the name.

"Never mind," he said, "Just a blast from the past. So what was it you wanted?"

"Just to let you know that Altaf Chandio's got his delivery and is sending the cash over with Farris"

"Okay."

"You want me to take care of it as usual?"

"Yeah Connie. Thanks"

Conrad nodded and stood up, looking at the computer. He frowned for a moment, as though he was about to say something, but changed his mind and left.

Jeffrey watched his brother go, then reached for the throw-away mobile he used to contact his money launderer. After arranging for the money to be changed to Euros and moved abroad to another company, he sat back with a smile. He'd only get about a third of its face value, but there would be no comebacks. Nice and safe. No need to be greedy.

Finished making the arrangements, he sat back in his chair and hoped he hadn't made a mistake saving Conrad from prison all those years ago. As distasteful as he had found his younger brother's leanings, he was family and needed protecting. His brother had sworn that it had been a stupid mistake, a one-off thing.

Well Connie's word had been good enough for Jeffrey. And that had been the end of the matter.

*

Con left his brother's office and made his way across the large dimly lit club, still fuming inside. He hated being called Connie. His brother knew that, so why did he insist on doing it?

He glanced across at one of the dancers as he passed the stage. She'd been trying to come on to him for ages but he had no interest in her. None at all. He preferred his girls to be a little more modest.

Rounding the corner of the bar, he came to an abrupt halt and stared hard at the floor for a few moments, his face twisted in concentration.

Then the name came back to him.

Frank fucking Collins. Frankie boy!

Turning back to the office, he took a step, then changed his mind and turned away again.

While in prison, Frankie boy had threatened to kill Jeff when he got out, but all he'd done was bugger off to Scotland, tail between his legs. Now he knew why. His brother had paid him off.

Well, well well!

Con smiled, filing away the information for future use.

Every little helped, as the TV advert said.

Chapter 21

Frank thanked the waitress and closed the hotel room door, carrying the plate of sandwiches across to the desk, where the makings of two cups of coffee waited.

The girl sat crossed legged in the middle of the big double bed, watching him make the coffee with a slight smile on her lips. She had a confidence far above her years and Frank felt a little uneasy being in the room alone with her.

“Want something to eat with your coffee?” he asked, pouring hot water into the cups.

“Nah, just the coffee.”

Grabbing a sandwich, Frank brought the coffees over to the bed, and sat on the hard, straight backed chair he'd put there earlier. “So,” he said, “you seem to think that Mandy didn't kill herself. Is that right?”

The girl's eyes clouded over and her confidence seemed to drain away. She sat staring at the duvet, the contents of her cup dangerously close to spilling. Leaning over, Frank took the cup from her hand and placed it on the bedside cabinet with a muted chink, then studied her face, trying to remember her name.

She looked up at him, the defiance in her eyes gone now, replaced by a dull fear. “If they find out I've been talking to you, they'll hurt me,” she said flatly.

“Who?”

“Altaf and that big ape of his, Farris.”

Her name suddenly flashed into Frank's mind. “Look Chantelle, why don't we start with me asking you a few questions, that okay?”

She nodded.

“Okay then. For a start, how did you find out about me? Were you friends with Mandy?”

“Sort of.”

Frank sighed, doing his best to hold on to his patience. Getting angry now wouldn't help one bit. “I see. So you did know Mandy then?”

“Yes. She came to the parties. Gary used to bring her, but only when Con was going to be there.”

Frank leant forward, his sandwich forgotten in his hand, pieces of lettuce falling to the carpet. “Con?”

“Some guy who really fancied Mandy.”

“So you all went to parties together. Okay. Did this Gary give her drugs there? Was that it?”

Chantelle unexpectedly laughed and Frank cursed as the rest of his sandwich filling plonked onto the floor. He picked up the mess with a napkin and dropped it in the bin, then sat back down.

“You don't get it, do you?” Chantelle said when she had his attention again. “They weren't just about drugs, these parties. They were about sex.”

“But Mandy was—” Frank stopped, his mind unable to cope with the thought of Mandy having sex.

“Look mister, the parties are set up for the old perverts who like shagging young schoolgirls. They pay well for the privilege. Very well, 'cept we don't get to see any of the money. Altaf and his mates get all of that. We get some stuff bought for us now and then. Mostly drugs and drink. Mandy was Con's special girl. Nobody else was allowed to touch her. She was okay, he used to buy her expensive stuff.”

Frank half stood and leant over the girl, hands clenched at his side, face deathly white.

She shrank back onto the bed.

“Are you trying to tell me that Mandy was selling her body for money and drugs?”

Chantelle held up a hand, fending him off. “She didn't have a lot of choice. None of us did.”

Frank saw the fear in her eyes and backed away, lowering his voice. “Sorry. It's just—”

“If I tell you about it, you have to give me enough money so I can get away from them. I have some mates in Ireland. They'll see me okay. But I need cash to get there.”

Frank studied the girl closely. He didn't, couldn't, believe what she'd just told him. Nor was he sure that he wanted to know more.

But finally, Frank nodded. “I'll give you five thousand. Not a penny more,” he said.

Chantelle moved to the end of the bed and sat opposite him, swinging her legs back and forth. He passed her the coffee and she sipped the warm liquid, taking a bite from the sandwich he gave her. For a moment, she looked so young and unguarded that he couldn't believe the life she was leading.

Finished her sandwich, she sat quietly and Frank wondered if she was having second thoughts - or was maybe trying to think up a better story.

“So?” he prompted.

“There's this gang. Run by an Asian bloke called Altaf Chandio. They go out and find girls. Young girls, still at school. Preferably in care. They give them drugs and drink and buy them stuff. Clothes and trainers, stuff like that.” She laughed hollowly, as though remembering something from her own past. “Sometimes the girls think they've fallen in love with the guy.”

“This Gary from Mandy's school was part of this gang?” Frank asked.

“Yeah, but on the sidelines. He took quite a few different girls along to the parties and introduced them to the gang.”

“So these parties. The girls had sex there, with older men?”

Chantelle looked at the floor, her empty cup hanging from one thin finger. “They were made to. Even if they didn’t want to.”

“But why didn’t they tell someone what was happening? Go to the police or something. Surely they could have stopped this?”

Chantelle gave Frank a withering look. “Altaf has a bodyguard. He’s big, with a nasty streak. He can hurt you without leaving any marks. It’s no good, they always find some way of keeping you quiet. Threaten your family, hurt you so you’re too frightened to say anything. And anyway, most of the girls are in care. Who’d believe someone in care? We’re just seen as a load of trouble.”

Frank felt his world fall away and slumped back in the chair, running his hand over his thinning hair, hardly hearing Chantelle’s voice fade in and out as she described some of the things the girls were made to do.

“And they did this to Mandy?” he whispered at one point. “Those bastards raped her? Christ, no wonder she killed herself!”

Chantelle leant forward, grabbing his wrist. “But I don’t think she did kill herself. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

Frank looked into the girl’s eyes and saw the truth of her words there.

“They killed her?”

Chantelle nodded and wiped at her eyes with her fingers. “I think so. She wouldn’t always do as she was told. She was a bit wild, a bit of a rebel. She wanted money, a lot of it. She begun collecting evidence against them. Taking pictures of the guys who came to the parties, recording conversations on her mobile. Things like that. She even got me to take some pictures of her at a party once. When they were, you know—” Chantelle stopped for a moment, as though afraid that Frank might react badly to her words. After a short pause, she continued. “Mandy was determined to blackmail some of the old bastards. I think they must have found out what she was up to, because the night before she supposedly committed suicide, they had her locked up down in the basement. I could hear her screams from the front room. It was horrible. Later that night, Altaf came back with a computer. I think it was Mandy’s. He took out the hard-drive and destroyed it with a hammer.”

Chantelle took a large gulp of air. The cup fell from her lifeless fingers with a clatter, making Frank jump. The tears were flowing freely down her cheeks now.

“But Mandy was hit by a train. The driver said she jumped in front of it off the bridge,” Frank said.

Chantelle just shrugged, refusing to look at him

“So those pictures you showed me in the park,” he pressed. “Mandy took those?”

The girl nodded.

“Have you got any more? Some you took with Mandy in perhaps? I need proof if I’m going to the police with this.”

At the mention of the police the girl’s head shot up and she half-rose.

“Okay, take it easy Chantelle,” Frank said, pushing her back down on the bed.

“I won’t tell the police anything,” she shouted, spittle flecking her chin. She wiped it with the back of her hand, her eyes alight with fear. “They’ll hurt me real bad if I do that. You promised me, you bastard. You said.”

Her words turned into sobs and she collapsed in on herself, her arms wrapped around her waist.

Frank went to her, pulling her into an embrace. “Hush, it’s okay. Quiet now. I’ll give you the money. It’s okay. Just tell me where the other photos are.”

*

It took Frank a long time to calm Chantelle enough to get all the details from her. He’d sat in silence, listening head bowed, as she told him how the gang had used Mandy and the other girls, and how Mandy had grown so desperate that she’d even cut herself, scarring her arms so she wouldn’t be so attractive. But it had made no difference in the end, she’d still been sold to anyone who’d pay for her, until Con had claimed her for his own that was.

As he listened, Frank felt tears on his face and an emptiness fill his stomach. Other girls - the ones from care homes - were moved around the country and kept locked away in houses like the one in London.

Very few of the girls had reported the gang, they’d all been too terrified of what would happen to them if they did. And the courageous ones who’d tried, weren’t believed. So they took what little comfort they could from the drugs and presents they were given.

In the end, Mandy had decided to try to blackmail them so she could get enough money to run away to Scotland and her dad. She’d begun collecting photos and recordings of the men who abused the girls, which she hid away in the base of the settee in the lounge. The girls were searched whenever they left the house, so she’d had no chance to get them out before she died.

Frank had been surprised to learn that Mandy had been planning to come up to Scotland to see him, especially after the letter she’d written, but Chantelle explained that she thought his prison connections would keep her safe.

He wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

Chantelle - herself from a care home - had survived by making herself useful to the gang; cooking and cleaning, and running messages back and forth for other members, like the boy, Gary. When she’d overheard Farris and Chandio talking about Frank, she’d grabbed at her chance with both hands and called him, using the number Mandy had given her before

she'd disappeared.

Frank was still at a loss as to why Mandy hadn't told her mother what was happening, but had no other option than to take Chantelle's explanation as fact. He asked her if she'd go back to the house and get the photos for him, but she refused outright, becoming so hysterical at the suggestion that he became worried that someone might overhear her cries and report him. He finally managed to calm her down and gave her the money he'd promised her, plus an extra five thousand.

After Chantelle had gone, Frank had a long shower. As the water pounded on his back, he wondered yet again how anyone could put up with the treatment handed out by the gang and still come back for more. The thought of what the gang had done to his daughter turned his stomach and he ran to the toilet, where he threw up.

After rinsing his mouth he made his way back to the bedroom and sat at the desk, rummaging around in the drawers until he found some paper and a pencil. He spent the next hour listing out his options. It was a technique he'd learnt in prison and had served him well over the years.

But when it came down to it, his choices were short, very short. It all boiled down to just one option really. He'd have to break into the house and recover the evidence himself! Given that the girls involved were extremely unlikely to give evidence against the gang, the police would have little to go on if he went to them with no proof. Beside which, with his record, he wanted to stay as far away from the police as possible. If he had the photos and recordings he could send them in anonymously. That would be much safer.

But first there was something far more important that he had to do. Frank picked up his mobile and tapped out a number, and as he waited for it to be answered, he balled up the list, tossing it at the bin. It missed and rolled under the bed.

"Hello, it's me," he said into the mouthpiece.

Chapter 22

“Well where the hell is she then? Is it so hard to keep an eye on the goods? For Christ’s sake Marcos, I wouldn’t trust you to look after my cat. Get the hell out of here and find her. We’ve got a party to set up.”

Marcos didn’t react to the insults his boss threw at him, he never did. Nodding, he turned towards the door to set about finding out what had happened to the girl.

He soon discovered that Chantelle had been missing for most of the day, but nobody had thought to tell him, each assuming that someone else would. After thumping a few heads together, he learnt that one of the street dealers had seen the scrawny kid talking to some guy in the park earlier in the day.

Alarm bells rang in his head - either she was trying to earn some extra cash on her own, or she was out buying drugs. Both actions could bring them a ton of trouble. Stupid bitch! He’d warned her about going off on her own before, hadn’t he?

Marcos ambled back to the office to report his findings to Chandio, feeling sorry for the girl. He knew how sadistic his boss could be when somebody crossed him.

But it was all her own stupid fault.

*

“Keep walking,” Marcos growled. He had Chantelle’s arm clutched in his massive fist. “No, don’t look back, just keep walking.”

Chantelle screwed up her face at the pressure on her bicep and staggered along beside the big man, biting her lip at the pain.

None of the girls congregated around the entrance of the care home gave them so much as a second glance as they passed by. One or two looked, but quickly went back to their cigarettes and chat, too used to seeing girls walk off with older men to care about what might be happening.

“Where are you taking me?” she said. “And let go of my arm, you’re hurting me!”

Opening the rear door of his BMW, Marcos threw her inside. She landed awkwardly and twisted her knee. Tears welled in her eyes and she flung herself at the door, but the childproof lock was engaged and she couldn’t get out.

The big Greek got into the front seat,

“Please Marcos,” she said in a small voice.

He totally ignored her, so she settled back in the seat, watching the shops in the high street slide passed, wondering if Altaf had somehow found out she’d been talking to Mandy’s dad.

“Marcos?” she said, leaning forward. The slap knocked her against the door and she gasped as the handle drove into her ribs.

“Shut it!” Marcos snarled, taking a fast left at the next set of traffic lights.

Chantelle could see they were headed back to the house. She bit her bottom lip, thankful that she’d already hidden the money away back at the care home. No matter what happened now, she still had the means to escape, and she would, the first chance she got.

*

Chantelle watched Marcos leave the basement with a sinking heart. She was naked, tied to an old fashioned office chair, her arms and legs taped to the wood. The big Greek might be rough and knock the girls around a bit, but he wasn’t as sadistic as the man who now stood in front of her.

Altaf smiled down at her, his eyes lingering on the red bruise that had begun to show on the side of her face.

“Chantelle,” he said in a flat voice.

But she wasn’t fooled by his soft tones. She’d seen the results of his work when people didn’t give him the answers he wanted.

“You and I need to have a little talk.”

She whimpered, trying to free her arms.

Altaf walked behind her and she strained her head around, trying to see what he was doing.

It was somehow worse when she couldn’t.

She felt him grab a handful of her hair and sucked in her breath, waiting for the punch to land. But instead, he whispered in her ear.

“Tell me what you talked about with Mandy’s father.”

Her heart beat faster. Shit, he knew! Somehow he’d found out.

Altaf strengthened his grip and she squirmed upwards, trying to relieve the pressure. “He ... he wanted to know if Gary had given her drugs.”

Altaf walked back around the chair and stood over her. He just stared at her for a moment, his eyes alive with emotion. Then he raised his eyebrows and stamped down hard on her toes.

She screamed, her foot curling against the pain. He stamped again and she felt one of the fine bones in her foot break.

“Chantelle,” he said in a level voice, the smile widening on his lips. “Please don’t take me for an idiot. He already knows what went on between Gary and Mandy. What did he want to know from *you?*”

Chantelle sobbed, the pain in her foot a searing hot splinter twisting its way up her leg. If she told this man what she’d said to Mandy’s dad, she would be dead before she finished telling him. She needed another story and fast. One that he’d believe.

Chandio lifted his foot again. “Did he ask about this place?”

She nodded, her head bobbing like a balloon on a windy day. “Yes ... he did. He wanted to know about the drugs ... where you got them ... who your clients were ... how much you made. He ... he promised me a lot of money if I got him the information.”

“How were you going to contact him again?”

“He gave me a mobile number. Said to ring him when I had the info he wanted and he’d meet me.”

Chantelle watched through tear-filled eyes as Altaf thought this over, praying to God, telling him that if He just got her out of this one thing, she’d never, ever, take drugs again. She’d use the money she’d got to go to Ireland and live a good life.

Honest God. Honest!

Altaf turned and shouted for Marcos. The big Greek entered the room straight away. He’d obviously been waiting just outside.

“What do you think?” Altaf asked him.

Marcos shrugged and stared at Chantelle’s bloody foot. “Could be. He’s been in nick. Probably has contacts. Maybe he’s looking to start up on his own.”

Altaf turned back to her. She cringed in the seat, trying to put distance between them, the tears streaming down her face.

“Okay Marcos,” he said, turning towards the door. “Get the mobile number from her, then get her shipped up North somewhere.”

Chantelle looked at the big Greek, pleading with her eyes. “Please Marcos. Don’t do this. Don’t let them send me up there.”

His face softened a little, and for a moment, she thought he might be about to touch her cheek. Instead, he cut through her bindings and picked her up.

“Let’s get that foot bandaged,” he muttered, carrying her towards the stairs as though she weighed no more than a rag doll.

Chantelle sobbed into his shoulder, knowing that her life was about to change for the worst. Once they sent her up north, there’d be no escape, no coming back to retrieve up her payoff, no trip to Ireland - nothing but pain and abuse.

“I think he broke it,” she sobbed.

Chapter 23

After a restless night tossing and turning, her mind a mess of 'ifs', 'ands', and 'buts' of uncertainty, Karla had decided to put some distance between herself and Frank.

So for the past couple of days, she'd concentrated on working, spending long hours at the café so she didn't have time to dwell on him, or his lies and evasiveness.

Frank had failed to put in an appearance at the café, and for that she was glad. He'd tried to ring her a few times, but so far she'd ignored his calls.

Now, as she picked up her mobile from the counter and looked at it, she frowned.

Frank again. The fourth time in as many hours.

She started to put the mobile down, but relented. Now was as good a time as any to tell him it was at an end. Thumbing the screen she held it to her ear. "Yes?"

"Hello, it's me. I've been trying to ring you all morning. Last night too."

He sounded desperate, and Karla felt a pang of guilt. Nudging it aside, she put a hand on her hip, turning her back on the tables. Only one customer was in, but she didn't want old Mrs McLeavy gossiping to the whole village about her call. "Been busy Frank. Nice to hear from you," she said, her tone saying something different. There was a short pause as Frank seemed to think that over.

"Mandy didn't kill herself," he said eventually. "I think she might have been murdered."

That certainly got her attention and she leant forward, her voice rising. "What?" Noticing Mrs McLeavy's quick glance, she hunched her shoulders around the mobile. "What did you say?" she whispered.

"I said —"

"Hang on a minute." Karla moved to the kitchen and closed the door behind her.

"You there?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"Listen, I've got proof ... well not yet ... but I will have ... I've just got to—"

"What are you talking about Frank? For goodness sake slow down a bit."

"Yeah sorry. Guess I'm a bit uptight. I can't tell you everything yet 'cause I'm waiting on a call from a girl called Chantelle that's she's got the stuff I need. But listen ... I'm pretty certain that Mandy didn't kill herself."

Karla rubbed the side of her face, her confusion making it difficult to take in what he was saying. "You're not making any sense Frank. What's happened? Where are you?"

"In London. Damn. Look I got to go. Someone on call waiting. It's probably that girl I was telling you about. I'll call you as soon as I can. Bye."

"No Frank, wait—"

Karla was left staring at the phone as he rang off, wondering what was going on. One minute he was telling her that he had a fortune stashed away, the next he's running off to London again on some fruitless search. And now some cock-and-bull story about his daughter not having committed suicide.

Leaning over the stainless steel counter, Karla tried to make sense of it all, wondering if Mandy's death had affected Frank in ways that needed the sort of professional help she just wasn't able to give him.

No, it wasn't her problem anymore. She had to stop letting him drag her in time and again this way.

Then it hit her.

Frank had said that his daughter might have been murdered. Jesus Christ, that made her last thoughts all the more relevant, and all the more worrying!

*

"Yeah?"

"It's me, Chantelle." Her voice was hard and low, a throaty whisper. "I've got that information you wanted."

"Good. Bring it to the hotel and I'll give you the rest of the money."

"No, I can't get out for that long. Meet me somewhere nearer."

"Where?"

"The Inner Circle, at Regent's Park. There's a bench outside Queen Mary's Rose Gardens. In an hour. Wait for me there."

"But that's—"

Frank swore softly. She'd rung off.

It didn't make any sense, the Inner Circle was farther from the hostel than his hotel. Uneasy that she'd chosen such an isolated place to meet him, Frank looked up the last call on his mobile. It was listed as her number, but when he rang it back there was no response.

Turning off the TV, Frank sat down and thought about whether he should go and meet the girl or not. He didn't have much choice as far as he could see. He'd driven ten hours to find out why Mandy had committed suicide, to be told

she hadn't. If he wanted that proof, he'd have to go and meet her.

Mind made up, he crossed to the small safe in the bottom of the wardrobe and took out a wad of twenty pound notes. After counting out five thousand pounds, he wound an elastic band around the roll and stuffed it into his inside jacket pocket.

He had an hour to kill. What to do?

The hotel room felt fuggy and he couldn't get the air conditioner to work. It had begun to give him headache, so picking up his helmet he made for the door. He'd take a ride around London. That'd clear his head.

*

The girl turned off the mobile and Altaf nodded his satisfaction. She dropped it on the table, her eyes alive with the hunger that constantly drove her. She could smell the cocaine somewhere in the room - the faint tingle in the back of her throat, the itching in her nose.

Altaf raised his eyebrows, well satisfied, a slight smile twisting the corners of his mouth as he looked at her. They were all the same these sluts.

Pulling a small plastic bag from his pocket, he held it up and shook it, watching the girl's eyes widened as she ran the tip of her tongue over her lips. But as she reached out for her prize, he grabbed her wrist in a rough grip.

She managed to drag her gaze from the bag and look at him. "Say one word about this to anyone else," he said, "and I'll make you regret you were ever born."

The girl sniffed, rubbing at her nose with the back of her hand. She nodded and grabbed the bag, grasping it to her chest as though he might snatch it back again.

"Now get out, and tell Marcos I want to see him," he said.

When Marcos entered the room, he pushed a chair towards him with his foot.

The big man sat and waited.

"Did you take care of the other stupid bitch?"

Marcos nodded. "Yeah. Sent her up to Nottingham with Dodo. She won't be causing us any more trouble."

"Good," he hesitated, feeling uncomfortable at his minder's stare.

"What?" Marcos asked.

Pushing aside his uneasiness, Altaf tipped his chin at the mobile. "I've set up a meeting with this Frank Collins guy. Get him back here and find out what he's after. If he's trying to chisel his way into my bit of the city, make sure he knows what that'll mean. I want him to get the message good and clear, okay?"

His minder nodded slowly, but Altaf was already on his feet and halfway out the door.

Chapter 24

Karla paced up and down the kitchen, mobile clutched in her hand. Frank's call had really unsettled her. As she paced, she worried away at her bottom lip with her teeth, constantly flicking her hair behind one ear.

Just last night she'd made up her mind that she'd had enough, that it was time to end this one-sided relationship, and now here she was again, drawn into his web, acting like a nervous idiot in love.

Damn it, she *was* a nervous idiot in love. In love with the most frustrating, infuriating, self-centred, devious man she had ever met.

The doorbell tinkled and she headed back into the café, serving the young couple who had entered with cups of cappuccino and some sticky buns. They were her first customers since she'd talked to Frank a couple of hours earlier.

Karla hoped that wasn't a sign of things to come. With the economy getting so bad, the village had already lost two of its small shops. The News was full of doom and gloom these days. She rested her forearms on the counter, watching the couple talk. They leant in towards each other as they laughed quietly together, their eyes sparkling in the bright sunlight streaming through the window.

That was the sort of relationship she longed for. The sort of man she deserved. One who was light and full of fun, not heavy and full of dark corners.

After a lot of soul searching, Karla decided to call Frank and give him a piece of her mind - then an ultimatum. If he wanted their relationship to continue, there could be no more secrets.

*

Frank checked his mobile - almost three thirty. He strolled out of the gates to the Rose Garden and on to The Inner Circle, walking towards the green bench where Chantelle had arranged to meet him. On the way he stopped at his bike and stuffed his helmet into the pannier.

A large man sat at one end of the bench, reading a newspaper and, as Frank walked over and sat down on the other end, he glanced over and nodded. The man didn't nod back, just rustled the paper as he turned to another page.

Frank leant back on the bench, crossing his legs.

Where the hell was she?

The sun was warm, the scent of roses heavy on the air. Mind beginning to wander, Frank brooded about what Karla might be doing right now, and how he could get back into her good books again. He'd really messed things up with her this time.

Feeling the buzz against his thigh, he pulled out his mobile, smiling when he saw Karla's icon on the small screen.

"Hello babes," he said, turning his back on the man reading the paper.

"What the hell are you playing at Frank? Why are you still in London?"

Karla was shouting and Frank leant forward, stunned at her anger.

"Well, I'm waiting on Chantelle. I told you! It depends on what she's managed to find, but I reckon—"

Frank's breath burst from his lungs and his body exploded into a cauldron of pain, so fierce that he couldn't move. His mobile clattered onto the path and he dropped forward onto his hands and knees, moaning loudly. The last time he'd felt such an intensely burning, agonising pain was when he'd been kicked in the testicles, back in his third year in prison.

Writhing on the ground, Frank was dimly aware of a shadowy figure leaning over him, and the sound of a vehicle drawing up alongside.

"Quick, get him in the back before someone sees us." The deep voice faded in and out of Frank's consciousness as he was yanked to his feet. "Open the God-damned doors!"

Propelled across the pavement, Frank felt himself lifted and thrown into the back of a van. The doors slammed shut and the vehicle took off.

The whole thing had taken less than fifteen seconds.

*

Jerking the phone from her ear, Karla frowned at it. The loud percussive noise had almost deafened her. It sounded as though Frank had dropped his mobile on the floor.

Pressing the phone back to her, ear Karla listened intently, a finger blocking her free ear so she could hear better. She could just make out a deep voice talking, but not what was being said.

"Hello? Hello Frank, are you there?"

The only response was the sound of car doors slamming and the phone being picked up - then an empty silence as the call was cut off.

Karla's frown deepened as she stabbed out Frank's number. But all she got was an unobtainable message. His mobile had obviously been turned off. Temper rising, she tried again, with the same result.

“Can I have a cup of tea, please dear?”

“Huh?” Karla turned back to the counter, mouth half-open, mobile still crushed against her ear.

Mr Could frowned at her from across the counter. “To take-away if you would,” he said.

“Oh yes. Yes of course, Mr Could. Sorry, coming up.”

“Having trouble with your phone dear?” Mr Could asked.

“Yes, sort of,” she answered, almost burning herself on the hot urn in her hurry to serve him. She needed to get back on the phone and find out what Frank was up to, why he was still in London.

“Using all this technological stuff will end in tears, you mark my words dear. You see if I’m not right. Those phones do strange things to your head.”

“Well they’ve certainly done strange things to yours,” Karla mumbled to herself as the old man hobbled his way out of her café.

*

Frank rolled over onto his side. “What the fuck happened?” he managed between clenched teeth, trying to keep from throwing up.

“You got punched in the kidneys,” a deep voice said.

Someone knelt at his side, and as Frank tried to focus his eyes, he felt his wrist being tugged as they were secured with something. Next his ankles were fastened together and Frank guessed he was being tied up with cable ties.

Swallowing back the bile in his throat, he groaned loudly as the speeding vehicle threw him from side to side. He took a deep shuddering breath, then wished that he hadn’t when a sharp pain shot through his back.

The man finished his work and sat against the side of the van, head bent forward due to the restricted height.

“Where are ... you ... taking ... me?” Frank managed between bouts of nausea.

“Shut up.”

Frank saw the man’s meaty hand curl into a fist and quickly laid his head back down on the metal floor again, not wanting to chance another punch to his kidneys.

He closed his eyes, trying to recall what had happened. It was obvious that Chantelle had either been caught, or had sold him out, and that the big ape sitting next to him was part of the gang running the girls.

The van hit a speed bump and Frank banged his head as he was bounced across the floor. The big man went through his pockets, grunting in satisfaction when he found the rolled up bank notes. Luckily he’d left his wallet back at the hotel.

A short while later the van stopped and the doors banged open. Frank saw a tall, thin Asian man standing outside, arms akimbo like some old fashioned gun-slinger.

“Got some questions for you,” the man said. “Answer them truthfully and I just might let you live.”

Chapter 25

Frank was dragged from the van, thrown onto the big man's shoulder like a side of beef, and carried into the house as if he weighed no more than a child. After being dumped in a captain's chair and the cable ties removed, his wrists were taped to the arms. His captor then checked that the bindings were tight and left without saying a word.

The basement was cold and Frank looked about in trepidation. The low ceiling and enclosed space began to bring back unpleasant memories of years spent in similar enclosed places. His legs hadn't been tied, so he tried to stand.

Useless, the chair was fixed to the floor. He began to work on the bindings, flexing and relaxing his muscles to loosen the tape, aware that he was in deep, deep trouble.

After what seemed like an eternity, but was probably only twenty minutes or so, a door open and soft footsteps sounded on the wooden staircase leading down into the basement.

Frank watched as a pair of well polished shoes appeared, followed by grey coloured slacks, then a slim waist, clinched with a thick leather belt. The man came further down the steps, revealing a slim torso with narrow shoulders, his dark Asian features contrasting with the bright smile on his handsome face.

The man had a confident arrogance to his step, something Frank had seen many times during his spell in prison - the signature look of a cruel man who wouldn't baulk at inflicting pain.

The newcomer looked around the cellar, as if familiarising himself with a room he loved being in, then focused his full attention on Frank. His stance was relaxed as he stood hands in his pockets, legs slightly spread.

"Who are you?" he said.

"Frank Collins," Frank answered. "I'm trying to find out what happened to my daughter."

Frank figured that in the circumstances the truth was probably the best approach.

"That why did you beat up one of my runners and asked him questions about my suppliers?"

The man's voice was surprisingly soft. Frank could smell a faint odour on his breath but was unable to identify it.

He guessed that this must be Altaf Chandio, the man who'd ensnared Mandy.

"As I said, I was trying to find out about what happened to my daughter."

Chandio nodded. "Ah yes, Mandy. Your slut daughter."

Frank felt a sudden tightness in his chest, a shortness of breath, a ringing in his ears - signs that he was about to lose it in a big way.

Calm, Frank. Keep calm.

He had to somehow talk his way out of this. Loosing his temper now would get him nowhere. The man was obviously winding him up on purpose.

"Who are you working for? Someone up north?" Chandio asked.

"Look ..." Frank took a deep breath and swallowed hard as he pushed away the feelings that threatened to overwhelm him - anger, terror, regret, but most of all a deep-seated yearning to tear this bastard's head clean off his shoulders. "I just want to know what happened to my daughter. That's all. I couldn't give a shit about you and your sordid little drugs set-up."

Chandio pulled his hands from his pockets and clasped them together in front of him. He laughed softly. "That's rich coming from you, Collins. Especially since you stabbed some poor bastard to death. Sordid is as sordid does, isn't that what they say?"

Frank felt the shock of the man's words tighten in his guts and a surge of adrenaline straighten his back. "How the hell—" he began, but then lapsed back into silence.

"Oh don't worry, I know all about you and your time inside, Mr Big Man Collins. A quick check on your bike's plates by a special friend of mine told me all I needed to know."

"So you know that I'm not interested in your drugs then?"

"Well now, that may be true, or it may not. You get around a lot up there in Scotland, don't you? A courier gets to go lots of places, meet a lot of people - people who may want to expand down here perhaps?"

"I'm just a guy trying to get on with his life and make a living."

"Prove it."

"Are you fucking insane? How the hell can I prove that, you cretin!"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Frank regretted saying them. Chandio had pushed buttons he'd thought buried years ago - buttons that he had little control over.

The slap was almost feminine, but it still took Frank by surprise. Easing his jaw back and forth, he stared up into dark brown eyes and smouldered helplessly. Chandio leant forward, supporting his weight on Frank's wrists, almost nose to nose with him.

Garlic. The smell on Chandio's breath was garlic!

"Listen to me Collins. It would only take one quick call to someone I know in the Met to get you banged up again. Forget your daughter, she was a little slut who liked fucking for drugs, okay? Just concentrate on answering my questions."

Frank struggled against his bonds, face reddening as he tried to wrench his arms free. "I'll kill you for that, you fucking turd!"

Chandio stood upright, smiling his pleasure. He picked up one of Frank's fingers and bent it backwards, just far

enough to make him gasped.

“You know,” he said in a conversational tone, “I could break this thing like a twig, but then the pain would only last a second or two before it dulled to a throb. So I’d have to break another, then another, and another.” He stared into Frank’s eyes, picking up his fingers in turn as he spoke. “I prefer pain that lasts, don’t you? Pain that cuts to the very heart of matters. Pain that brings the truth flooding to the surface.”

Frank suddenly realised that Chandio was a Sadist, someone who took great pleasure in hurting people.

Had he hurt Mandy this way? Yes of course he had!

Frank watched as Chandio slowly withdrew something from his pocket and held it up for his inspection. Nodding, Chandio twirled it between thumb and forefinger.

Frank had recognised it immediately - a long, slender flick-knife. Chandio pressed the button and the shiny blade flicked out, the steely snick echoing around the basement. He tested the point with his fingertip, screwing up his face in mock pain.

“Sharp,” he said, looking down at Frank with an almost angelic expression. “So my friend, who sent you down to scope us out, hmm?”

Frank just shook his head. The truth wouldn’t help him now, this man wanted his fun and until he’d had it, whatever Frank said would make no difference.

Chandio picked up Frank’s finger, pressing the tip of the knife under his fingernail. “I’ve heard that the pain of having your fingernail eased off can be quiet intense,” he said. “So intense in fact, that it acquires the agonising touch of a religious experience. What say we find out?”

*

Frank was sweating the muscles along his jaws bulging, the sweet-sour smell of fear filling his nostrils. He screamed again, the sound throbbing back at him, rebounding from the walls as though six men were screaming, instead of just him.

“Who sent you?” Chandio asked again, voice high with excitement as he pushed the knife deeper, slowly easing the bloody nail from Frank’s finger. He held it up to inspect it, then dropped it to the floor.

Through his tears, Frank watched the man’s smile grow wider as he picked up another finger. “What did the girl say to you?” he asked. Come on, you’ll tell me eventually. Why not make it easy and save yourself the pain.”

Frank took a deep shuddering breath, trying not to sob. He’d never experienced such pain before. It devoured his mind, his very being - spreading outwards from a red-hot centre to invade his whole body.

“So what did the girl tell you?” the Asian repeated in a matter-of-fact tone, as though chatting to a friend across the dinner table.

“That you supply drugs and you sell young girls for sex. I already told you all that,” Frank managed between clenched teeth. “Please ... no more ... I’ve told you all I know.”

Frank didn’t know how long it had been since Chandio had begun sliding the knife up under his fingernail, wiggling it from side to side as he went. It could have been a few seconds, or a few hours. He’d struggled, had cursed at the top of his voice, had screamed - in the end had begged - but Chandio just kept right on, his eyes alight with pleasure.

When Chandio picked up his next finger, Frank began to struggle against his bonds again and noticed a slight movement in the arm of the chair.

Was the joint loose? Please let it be loose!

He pulled harder and the arm rose slightly.

As Chandio began to work on his second finger, Frank pulled against the wooden arm ... and pulled ... and pulled ... throwing his body back and forth.

“Wait ... wait ...” he whispered, voice hoarse. “She did say something else.” The pain eased a little and Frank mouthed something, too quietly for Chandio to hear.

“What? Tell me.” The Asian leant forward, keen to hear what Frank was saying.

Instead of speaking, Frank powered himself upwards, meeting the man’s nose with his forehead, feeling the crunch as he connected.

Chandio shouted in pain, clutching at his face. Frank kicked him between the legs, yelling his defiance as he managed to wrench one arm free. He swung a blow to Chandio’s head with the wooden arm of the chair, connecting with the side of his face. The man dropped to his knees.

Frank kicked out at him again, catching him alongside the chin.

Chandio fell forward onto his face, his flick-knife skittering across the floor. Frank twisted himself out of the chair, but one arm was still securely fixed. He reached out with his foot, trying to hook the flick-knife towards him, but ... it ... was ... just beyond ... his reach.

Chandio rolled onto his back, groaning. Frank swore, pulling at the chair in desperation, trying to free himself. He managed to gain another centimetre or two and reached out with his foot again. The toe of his shoe slipped across the handle of the flick-knife.

Fuck no. Please ...

Frank tried again, pressing down harder with his toes. The knife turned, then span out from under his foot.

Chandio shook his head and rolled onto his side. Blood ran down from the wound on his scalp. He looked up at

Frank with unfocused eyes. Frank ignored him, hooking the knife nearer, until, with a growl of triumph he was able to bend over and pick it up.

But before he could properly grasp it, Chandio reached out, snatching it from his fingers. In desperation, Frank stamped down on Chandio's hand. He felt something snapped under his foot. Chandio screamed, his voice high, like a girl's. He fell onto his back, cradling his hand to his chest and sobbing.

Frank snapped up the knife from the floor and cut himself free. He felt no pain, his body was electrified with adrenaline, heart hammering in his chest, his whole body alive.

Grabbing Chandio, Frank flicked him over onto his stomach, then knelt on his back, pulling his head back by his hair. Pressing the tip of the knife against the man's neck, he leant in to Chandio's ear.

"Did you kill my daughter?" he snarled.

"You going to knife me in the back as well? You're good at that, aren't you?" Chandio's voice was thick with sarcasm as he sneered up at Frank.

Frank switched position, so that the knife was across Chandio's throat. He pressed lightly. Blood oozed from beneath the blade.

"Did you kill my daughter, you bastard?"

Frank was sobbing his words - he just needed the man to tell him *yes*, so he could end this right here, right now - just a quick slice—

"Fuck you!" was the answer.

Frank began drawing the blade sideways and Chandio tensed. But at the last moment Frank threw the knife across the room and smashed Chandio's face down onto the floor.

No, there was a better way.

Frank stood up on shaky legs, giving vent to his feelings with a final kick at the Asian's ribs. He'd already spent time inside for murder - this wasn't the way. Far better to get the evidence and send it to the police, let them take care of this scum.

*

Frank eased open the basement door and listened hard. All was quiet, so he stepped out into the kitchen. The only illumination came through the window from a street light.

Holding his breath, Frank listened again, the flick-knife held tightly in his sweaty hand. Making his way over to the door, he took care not to bang the table that unexpectedly loomed out of the darkness at him.

The kitchen door creaked loudly as he opened it and he cursed softly, sticking his head through the doorway.

Nobody about.

Stepping out into the hallway, he froze when footsteps sounded overhead - somebody moving about upstairs. From the heavy footsteps, he guessed it must be the big ape that had carried him into the house.

He had to get out quickly, there was no way he could take on the big man, even with a knife.

Frank ventured out into the hall. The lounge door was open and he took a peek inside - empty. The TV was flickering in the corner with the sound turned off. Taking a few steps into the room he looked around. The settee sat opposite the fireplace and he hurried over to it, tipping it onto its back so he could get at the base.

A long sibilant hiss escaped his lips as his nail-less finger snagged the material. Tightening his lips hard to stop the curse that threatened to burst forth, he ripped across the material with the knife, exposing the interior of the settee.

Smiling in satisfaction when he spotted the big brown envelope stuffed in the back corner, he pulled the prize from its hiding place, opening the flap to look inside.

A toilet flushed upstairs. A door opened and closed.

Footsteps sounded on the staircase.

Frank turned, banging his hand against the wooden frame. A hot pain shot up his arm, causing him to drop the envelope. It hit the floor with a thwack, the contents spilling out.

The footsteps were louder now - nearer - nearing the bottom of the stairs.

Blood oozed from Frank's finger and he made a careful fist to protect it. The pain eased slightly as he applied pressure.

Kneeling down, he quickly collected the papers, DVDs and photographs from the floor, pushing them back into the envelope again, before stuffing it down the front of his pants as he got back to his feet. Entering the hall, he ran for the front door, his heart beating faster as he caught sight of a shadow from the corner of his eye.

"Fuck!" The single expletive was followed by the sound of thumping feet.

Frank made a grab for the door lock, but his bloody fingers slipped on the chrome knob. He tried again, heart beating wildly as footsteps thundered down the hall behind him.

Then he was out on the street and running, his long, steady strides taking him further and further from his pursuer.

I should have killed the bastard. After what he'd done to Mandy, I should have killed the bastard.

The thoughts pounded through his head as he ran, and they only eased after he'd hailed a cab and stumbled into the back.

Chapter 26

Marcos Farris stopped running and bent over, breathing in huge gasps of air. His heart was thumping in his chest as though it were trying to break out.

The man had disappeared around the corner at the far end of the street before Marcos had even reached the half-way point. He ran like an athlete and Marcos knew that there was no way he could keep up, let alone catch him. Taking a few more deep breaths, he straightened up and shrugged.

Wondering how the man had got free, he headed back to the house and made his way down into the basement. His boss was sprawled on the floor and Marcos hurried to his side, spotting blood on his face. Alarmed, he lifted his head, checking that Altef was still alive. He was, but it looked as though he'd bitten his tongue. His boss stared up at him, eyes unfocussed.

"What the fuck happened?" Marcos asked.

Altef didn't answer, but managed to struggle to his hands and knees. Marcos helped him to the chair, easing him down into it. His boss wiped his lips with the back of his hand, then spat a bloody gob onto the floor.

"Bastard took me by surprise," he mumbled. "Where is he?"

"Took off down the road like a bat out of hell," Marcos answered. "He's probably headed back to his hotel. Want me to try to find out which one?"

Altef shook his head, then groaned, holding on to the chair. "No, he's no threat. Just after info on his daughter."

Ten minutes later, Marcos' boss was forced to re-evaluate that statement as he surveyed the damaged settee. Taking the two photos that Marcos had picked off the floor, he studied them with a frown.

"Where they hell did these come from?" he asked.

"Must have been stashed in the settee by someone," Marcos said, uprighting the piece of furniture.

"But she convinced me that she just had the stuff you found on her mobile and computer."

"She obviously lied then," Marcos said. He tossed the cushions onto the settee and grunted. "Even after you spent two hours working on her."

Marcos didn't add that he thought his boss must be losing his touch, if a slip of a girl could survive a couple of hours with him in the basement and still be able to keep things hidden. He looked over Altef's shoulder at the photos and drew a sharp breath when he saw who it was.

"Jesus," he said, "do you think there were more of these?"

"I think that would be a yes," his boss said. "If Con finds out I've let that bastard get away with photos of him and the girl, I'm dead meat. We've got to get them back."

As Altef stalked back and forth across the lounge, blood-soaked handkerchief in one hand, photos in the other, Marcos' mind ticked over. Here was the chance he'd been waiting for - his chance to get out. If he played this right, he'd have enough money to take his family back home.

"Give me the photos," he said.

Altef's eyes narrowed and he stared at Marcos, as though wondering what his minder might be up to.

"I'll get rid of them for you. We know where Collins lives. I can go up there and get them. He's on a bike. If I leave now, I can get a flight up to Scotland and be there when he arrives. Once the photos are back, you'll have no worries."

Altef sat down on the settee with a thump and leant forward, head in his hands. "Christ I can't think. I think my nose's been busted. Look, it's started bleeding again."

Marcos held out his hand. "What do you say? Let me take care of it for you, boss. That's what you pay me for, right?"

Altef closed his eyes and nodded, holding the photos out. "Don't mess this up," he said, then leant his head back and pinched the bridge of his nose.

*

It had been two hours since Frank had arrived and he was still stuck in the uncomfortable plastic chair they'd assigned him, with no sign of being seen yet. He gazed at the collection of people patiently waiting their turn.

A woman coughed, then cursed softly to herself, watching as a man farther along the row picked at his nose, examining the results of his probing with rapped attention.

Frank pulled the piece of cloth covering his finger aside for the twentieth time, glaring at the bloody mess underneath. He winced as the cool air set it throbbing again and quickly recovered it.

The large A&E department smelt musty. It had been raining steadily for the past hour or so and a lot of people were sitting around in damp clothes. The harsh overhead lights reflected at him from the front of the drinks machine opposite and had begun to give him a headache, and on top of all that, his finger had started to throb like someone was trying to inflate it with a bicycle pump.

Frank was not a happy man, and after a further exasperating and unresponsive ten minutes wait, impatience got the better of him.

As Frank leant over the counter, the receptionist looked up with a weary glance, her desk was heaped high with folders and assorted papers, and Frank wondered for a moment how far down the pile his notes were.

“Help you?” she said.

“Can you at least get me some bandages so I can dress this myself?” he asked.

The receptionist shook her head, then went back to clicking her keyboard as though he didn't exist.

“Well thanks a million for all your help,” he said, but his sarcasm was wasted, she didn't even break her rhythm.

Frank walked over to a corridor, where pastel curtains divided the wide space into small examination areas. The first two were occupied, the third empty. Crossing to a stainless steel trolley, he dug out some sterile dressings, quickly pocketing them. The receptionist gave him a hard stare as he walked back passed her desk towards the entrance, but said nothing.

Out in the street, Frank hunched his shoulders as the rain lashed down on him. Where were all the damned cabs when you needed one?

Finally back at the hotel, Frank scrounged some aspirins and went up to his room, where he dressed his finger as best he could. The dressing was amateurish and cumbersome, but at least it would protect his mangled finger. He'd get it seen to properly when he got back to Scotland tomorrow.

Knowing he wasn't up to the ten hour drive back up to Scotland in his present state, he checked on-line and booked a ticket on the sleeper train for himself and his bike. He had enough time to get his head down for a couple of hours before it left.

Chapter 27

Marcos Farris paid off the cab driver and hurried across Vincent Street through the rain. The steep steps were narrow and he had trouble getting down them. Opening the double doors, he nodded at the doorman. "Got a meeting with Mr Hunter."

The doorman spoke a few words into his neck-mic before nodding back at him. "In you go," he said.

Marcos pushed through another set of double doors and stopped for a moment to let his eyes adjust to the dim light. The club was packed, every table taken, the music so loud it hurt his ears. All eyes were on the stage, where three girls danced around poles.

A waitress in a flimsy black chiffon dress stopped in front of him. "I'm afraid all the tables are taken sir," she said. "Unless you'd like to have a private session?"

"I'm here to see Conrad Hunter," he said.

Marcos' bulk made him feel awkward beside the petite girl, now standing on tiptoe as she checked around the club.

"Over there," she said, pointing a slender finger at the far side of the room.

Marcos made his way over, trying not to jostle too many punters as he threaded his way between the tightly packed tables.

Stopping in front of a table at the back of the club, he looked down at the occupant. Conrad Hunter looked so different from his brother that people found it hard to believe that they were. Where Jeffrey Hunter was a big man, very much like Marcos himself, Conrad Hunter was thin, his deeply sunk eye sockets giving him a slightly ghoulish look.

Conrad Hunter looked up as Marcos stopped by his table and nodded at the seat opposite, then went back to eating his Spaghetti Bolognese. Marcos sat and waited patiently while the man mopped up the last of the sauce.

"You said you got something for me," Conrad Hunter said around a mouthful of bread.

"I found some photos of you and a girl at one of the parties. They—"

Conrad Hunter's hand crossed the table in a blur. Bunching his fist into Marcos' crisp shirt-front, he pulled him forward over the table, glaring deep into his eyes.

"You trying to blackmail me, you big ape? 'Cause if you are ..."

Marcos held up both palms, aware that the people at the next table were watching them. He felt a jolt of anger. If it came down to a fight, he had no doubt that he would wipe the floor with the slim man sitting opposite him, but Marcos knew that it wouldn't stop there. The Hunters didn't let so much as an out-of-place glance go unpunished.

Marcos swallowed back his anger and smiled, even though this wasn't going quite as he'd planned.

Conrad Hunter seemed to sense Marcos' lack of fear and pushed him back into his seat. He clicked his fingers at a passing waitress. "Beer," he said.

After the waitress had left, Marcos tried again. "One of the girls took some photos and recordings at some of the parties. Altaf thinks she was going to use them to blackmail him."

"So what happened to her?"

"She's dead."

Conrad Hunter sat back in his seat and nodded. "So if she's dead and you got the stuff back, what's the problem? You got the photos here?"

"Altaf has them," Marcos said. He shifted in his seat, the next few minutes would be the making or breaking of his plan.

"Okay, I'll ring him," Conrad Hunter said, reaching out to pick up his beer.

Marcos put a restraining hand on his arm, retracting it quickly when the light blue eyes settled on his.

"What?" Conrad Hunter said.

"I don't know. I don't trust him. I think he may be planning to use the stuff himself. There was another girl involved and he let her walk away. Why else would he do that, unless he's up to something? I think she's holding the rest of the stuff for him."

Having planted the seed, Marcos sat back in his chair and studied the man opposite. He'd heard a lot about the Hunter brothers over the years, and what he'd heard wasn't pleasant. If he did this wrong, he wouldn't see his wife and kids again, that much was certain.

Conrad Hunter pursed his lips and tipped his head a little, an almost feminine gesture. His eyes became vacant for a moment, then he seemed to snap back to life.

"Why are you here Farris? What's in it for you?" he said.

"I can get the stuff for you. For a price that is."

Conrad Hunter chuckled, his high forehead crinkling, causing his widow's peak to catch the light. The waitress returned and placed Hunter's drink on the table. She looked at Marcos, eyebrows raised. He shook his head and she left.

"And how much will that cost me?"

"Twenty up front, another thirty when I bring you the stuff. I know it sounds high, but I'll be taking a hell of a risk. When Altaf finds out what I've done, he'll want me dead. I'll need the money to get out of the country."

Conrad Hunter stared at him for moment and Marcos shifted uncomfortably.

"I'll give you ten up front, and another twenty when I get the stuff."

Marcos kept a straight face as he nodded his agreement.

Ten thousand, along with what he'd already managed to save, was more than enough to get him back to Greece. All he had to do was take the money, collect his family and get the hell out of the country.

He slid two photos face-down across the table. "Here's a couple of photos I managed to get already. Give me the money and I'll get the rest for you."

Conrad Hunter picked up the photos and looked at them. Marcos saw the muscles in his face tighten and the anger creep into his eyes.

"Wait here," he said, pushing back his chair.

As Conrad Hunter disappeared through the tables towards a door at the back of the club. Marcos sat back in his chair, angling it slightly, so he could watch the show while he waited for the man to come back with his money.

So far, so good.

Chapter 28

Altaf Chandio's face lit up in a big false smile. The man sitting opposite him didn't return it. He could sense that someone had come up and stood behind him and a warning chill touched his spine.

Hunter's sallow features always brought memories of undertakers and funerals to his mind, and right now he was fervently praying that particular thought wasn't some kind of premonition.

When heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs, Altaf couldn't stop his gaze flicking towards the kitchen doorway, where two of his men, their eyes alive with fear, were being hustled from the house.

Where the hell was Marcos when he was needed? What the hell was he playing at?

Altaf could feel the sweat pool between his shoulders and licked dry lips.

"What—" he began.

Hunter held up a hand, cutting him off.

He lapsed back into silence.

Hunter continued to stare at him, ignoring the banging and crashing going on upstairs.

The noise unnerved Altaf and he wiped his forehead, swallowing nervously.

"What are you looking for Con? Tell me what it is and I'll help you," he said, unable to stay silent any longer.

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than Altaf's face exploded into a cauldron of pain. The blow threw him to the floor, blood running from a large, deep gash in his cheek. Hard fingers dug into his biceps and he was pulled to his feet, then set back in the chair again.

He hung on to the edge of the kitchen table, swaying slightly, watching through dazed eyes as Hunter removed the knuckleduster from his fingers and slid the heavy brass implement back into his pocket.

The man hadn't said a word, just held one finger up in front of his lips, his eyes cold and hard.

Altaf sat as still as he could, warm blood gathering at the neck of his shirt. He was too disoriented to check on how much damage had been done to his face - every time he moved his head, his vision took a few seconds to catch up. It was all he could do not to throw up.

*

Conrad Hunter sat quietly, patiently, his steady gaze fixed on Altaf Chandio. The Asian's face had been gashed by the heavy knuckle-duster, the edges of the wound gaping open like a small mouth.

Conrad might have been a tolerant man, but he had nothing but contempt for people who couldn't keep their mouths shut when they were told to.

He loved silence, the deeper the better. It helped him think, get out from under his older brother's shadow.

Conrad had spent many a pleasant hour, laying quietly, studying the countryside as he waited for a deer or a pheasant to appear, shotgun ready by his side. And when his quarry made a move, disturbing the foilage or flapping its wings, Conrad would explode into action, his movements almost too fast to follow. For a man of his diminutive stature, he had an unexpected grace and speed - as Chandio had just found out.

The man standing behind Chandio moved slightly and Conrad's eyes flicked to him. The man looked down at the floor and he kept as still as he could.

Conrad returned his attention to the Asian. He'd met many men like Altaf Chandio over the years - men driven by greed and power. The Asian was just a small time drug dealer, but to his credit, he had supplied him with what he had wanted most.

Conrad pursed his lips, wondering what his brother might do if he ever found out that he had drifted back to his old ways again. His thoughts returned to the time - must be thirteen, fourteen years ago now - when someone had threatened to tell his brother about his 'little peculiarity', unless he was paid off.

Conrad had promised the man his payoff, and had delivered it personally - a vicious beating and a knife-thrust in the back. The memory brought a slight twitch of a smile to his lips.

He'd been hot-headed back then, not thinking before he acted. It had got him into all kinds of trouble. But, as always, his older brother had been around to sort things out.

Persuading someone else to take the rap had worked well, but Jeff had left him in no doubt about what would happen if he ever found out that his little brother was back to his old ways again.

Of course Conrad had little choice but to agree, and since then had been extremely careful to keep his deviant proclivities hidden from his brother. Except now it was all poised to come out again. No, he couldn't allow that to happen. If Jeff ever found out, he would be a dead man. His brother was not a forgiving man and stood no-one crossing him.

Conrad studied Chandio, his heart beating a little faster. In his greed, the drug dealer hadn't seemed to consider what his payoff might be when he tried to blackmail someone like him. Well this payoff is about to turn into payback, old son.

One of his men stuck his head into the kitchen. "Can't find anything upstairs except this, boss," he said, tossing a large bag of powder towards him.

Conrad caught it, weighing the bag in his hand. "Okay," he said, tossing it back. "Give it to Danny."

"Shall I start down here now, boss?"

Holding up a finger, Conrad turned towards Chandio and raised his eyebrows.

"That's all there was," the man said sullenly.

"Okay, get the others and go wait in the cars while I talk to our friend here. You too," he said, nodding at the man standing behind Chandio's chair.

When his men had gone, Conrad clasped his hands together, resting them on the table in front of him. "Farris said you have some photos of me and Mandy," he said quietly.

Chandio's eyes widened slightly. "I found some that the girls had taken, yes."

"And where are they now?"

"Marcos has the only two we found."

"And—?"

Chandio fidgeted uncomfortably. "That's it. Listen Con, I didn't know what had happened till it was too late. When I found out what the little slut had been up to, I had her killed, pushed under a train."

Conrad watched the man lick dry lips. The blood from his wound had crusted under his chin, leaving a thick runnel down his neck.

He enjoyed seeing the man's fear.

"I swear to you Con, I swear. There was just the two photos, and I got them back."

Conrad thought for a moment, wondering who was telling the truth – Chandio, or his big goon, Farris. But in the end it didn't really matter. As long as he got all the evidence, he would be in the clear. Once he got rid of any loose ends that was

This time he wasn't going to be hot-headed and try to do it himself - this time he would use professionals.

Chapter 29

Cole and Mai Bell were disposal specialists, who, for a considerable fee, guaranteed the disappearance of packages with no traceability back to the client. They had been in the disposal business for ten years and enjoyed what they did enormously. As a couple they carried out their work with meticulous planning and panache, each with their own area of expertise, which they brought together with deadly effect. It was the reason they were the highest paid disposal specialists in the UK.

But this contract was a little different, involving, as it did, four packages.

As they made their way along the quiet road, Mai Bell berated her husband for agreeing to take on such a complicated contract.

"We'll have to keep the first package overnight. We won't be able to dispose of it until tomorrow and you know I don't like doing that. This is far too rushed," she complained, stepping around some puddles on the pavement.

Cole Bell nodded his understanding. He was used to his wife's little moans and knew that if he just let her get her feelings out, she'd be okay. She was always a little nervous before a hit.

"It's a lot of money," he said, cuddling her into his side as they walked along. "Funds are getting a bit low. We couldn't afford to turn it down, even at such short notice."

"Suppose so," she said, looking up at his sharp features.

Mai Bell was a small woman, barely reaching Cole Bell's shoulder, but she worked out regularly and could easily lift her husband off his feet. Something she loved doing when he was in a bad mood. She'd sneak up behind him, circle her arms around his slender waist, lean back and sweep him off his feet, giggling as he protested, refusing to put him down until he smiled.

Tonight they were walking along a quiet side street off Camden Town, arm-in-arm, for all the world like lovers on a night out. The man walking in front of them paid them little heed when they swung in behind him. He obviously had other things on his mind.

"So how are we going to do this?" Mai Bell asked.

Cole Bell considered their target. He was a big man, obviously well able to take care of himself.

"Well they said he carries a knuckleduster and a knife, so we don't want to get into a fight with him, especially out here on the street. Let's find out where he's headed and take it from there."

The couple continued following the package, not breaking stride when he turned into a small garden fronting one of the houses lining the street. Once he had disappeared inside the front door, Cole Bell walked back and examined it. He returned a few moments later and the pair carried on with their leisurely stroll.

"Just a standard lock. Be no problem getting in," Cole Bell said. "We'd have a hell of a job getting him out of the house afterwards though."

"He must weight a ton," Mai Bell responded. "And we have no idea who else might be in there."

"Yeah, you're right."

"Okay, this is what we'll do then. He's supposed to be delivering some stuff to the client later tonight. We've got his mobile number. You ring him and say that the client is waiting outside right now to talk to him. We'll get him in the back of the van and do it there, where he won't have any room to put up a fight." Mai Bell looked up and down the dark street. "It's pretty quiet right now and I can't see any CCTV cameras about. I'll go get the van, you hang on here a minute."

"Yeah, sounds good," Cole Bell agreed.

Cole Bell watched his wife run back along the street, his face relaxing into a smile. He loved the way she moved, almost like a professional. Sitting on a garden wall, he pulled out his throw-away mobile and waited for her to return with the van.

*

The train was packed and Frank was pleased that he'd booked a sleeping compartment. He settled down and waited for the train to pull out of the station, glancing out of the window. It was going to be a long journey and he was looking forward to getting some rest. He felt bone tired and his hand was throbbing again. Fishing around in his pocket, he pulled out another couple of the pain-killers he'd picked up from an all-night chemist, dry swallowing them.

Finally, settling on the narrow bunk, he got out the paperback he'd bought and flipped open the cover, determined to keep what he'd discovered tightly locked away in the back of his mind until he was back in Scotland. He'd talk it over with Karla, he couldn't deal with it on his own. Half his mind had shut down, refusing to believe what he'd seen - the other half was just a bloody mist of tangled emotions that wanted nothing more than revenge.

The train jerked into motion, quickly gathering speed, swaying slightly as it headed around a long bend. Frank concentrated on the words in front of him, but it didn't take long for his eyelids to grow heavy.

*

Frank woke with a start as a pain lanced through his finger. Easing his hand from under his body where he'd rolled onto it, he pulled aside the curtains and looked out of the small window. The train was sitting in a siding. He squinted, rubbing the condensation from the glass. Dawn was breaking, slivers of dark blue and red just visible on the horizon. Settling down again, he tried to get back to sleep, but the person in the top bunk opposite was snoring too loudly for that.

He lay in a half-doze, trying to keep the images from clawing their way back into his mind - images that sickened him. Last night - after he'd got back to the hotel - he'd gone through the photos he'd taken from Chandio's house. They were all pictures of older men having sex with young girls, some of whom looked to be no older than eleven or twelve. He'd studied each one in turn, dropping them onto the bed as he did so. There were perhaps twenty, and he was nearing the end of the pile when he suddenly froze.

The next photo - still half-covered by the preceding one - brought a surge of adrenaline shooting through his body.

Mandy's face was staring up at him!

She had a haunting expression and her eyes were empty - cold and empty. Knelt on a bed, she faced the camera. She was naked. A man stood behind her, obviously having sex, his head thrown back in ecstasy as he penetrated her.

Frank's mind reeled and he dropped the photo, scrambling from the bed in his haste to get to the bathroom where he threw up into the toilet. Arms circling the bowl, he heaved and heaved, until his stomach was empty and he could heave no more. Finished, he wiped his mouth with toilet paper and took a deep shuddering breath, too weak to stand for the moment.

Glancing back towards the bedroom, Frank could see that the photo was still there, where he'd dropped it on the bed. He gave an involuntary shiver, almost too afraid to face what he'd seen.

He'd recognised the man abusing his daughter. It was a face from his past!

As the train continued to clack its way along the rails, as though purposefully ignoring how near Frank's world was to falling apart, Frank realised that it might just be herding him towards the beginning of a dark and dangerous journey that would surely end in his death.

Chapter 30

Karla sipped her tea, a determined look on her face. "It's been almost two days since he rang," she said.

Lucie looked over her cup at her friend. She looked terrible, her skin pale and drawn. She'd obviously not been sleeping.

"I just don't know what to do," Karla continued. "One minute it's all okay and the next he's blowing all cold, like he wants to end it."

Lucie reached across the table, squeezing Karla's arm. "Perhaps you should think about taking some time out. Giving it a bit of space. You need some time to yourself Karla, you can't go on like this."

Karla's stared down at the table, red hair curtaining her face, and when she finally looked up, Lucie could see the tears flowing down her cheeks.

"Oh Karla," she said, wiping away her friend's tears with a tissue. "Is it really worth all this heartache?"

"I love him," Karla said. The simple statement implied that was all that mattered.

"I know, but even so." Lucie sat back, toying with the idea of being honest with her friend.

She should have told Karla months ago to end the relationship with this man - he was obviously a no good, selfish son-of-a-bitch.

"Listen Karla," she said, leaning across the table and taking one of her friend's hands in hers, "you said yourself that Frank has spent years in prison - and for murder! I mean to say—"

"Yes I know, but he was innocent. He promised me he didn't do it."

Lucie said nothing. Karla's eyes were fixed on hers, the hurt in them overwhelmingly powerful. She sat back and sighed. Karla's love for this man was obviously too much for her to listen to any reservations that she might have. There was nothing she could say or do that would dissuade Karla from continuing to see him.

"I don't care what you think, Lucie. I know he didn't do it. He's not capable of such a thing."

Getting up, Lucie fetched some biscuits. Not that she was particularly hungry, but because it gave her something else to concentrate on, and it just might stop her from blurting out something hurtful. This man was playing her friend for a fool. He had no real feelings for Karla at all, he was just using her. Why else would he still be playing these hurtful mind-games after all this time?

She returned to the table and sat down, pushing the plate of biscuits towards Karla with arched eyebrows. "So what do you intend doing then?"

Karla picked up a biscuit and studied it for a moment, then dipped it into her tea. She gave a shrug and a bitter half-laugh when a piece dropped off with a soft splosh.

"That about says it all, doesn't it?" she said, spooning out the soggy pieces and tapping them into the saucer. "My life is one big dog's dinner, just like this bloody biscuit, but no amount of fishing about with a teaspoon is going to sort out this particular mess, is it?"

Lucie shrugged, thinking it best to say nothing.

Sighing, Karla took a drink of her tea, pulling a face when she got a mouthful of soggy crumbs.

"Want me to pour you a fresh cup?"

Karla shook her head and picked up her phone to check the time. "No, it's okay thanks. Guess I should be going. It's getting late."

Saying her goodbyes, Lucie stood at her front door, watching her friend walk down the path to her car, wondering how such a nice person had managed to get involved with such a low-life as Frank Collins.

Whatever happened between them, it wouldn't be good, that much was for certain. Why couldn't she see the man for what he was?

"God-damned arse!" Lucie swore, slamming the front door.

*

After talking to her friend, Karla had made up her mind that she would put some space between herself and Frank, and this time she meant it. She needed time alone to think things over. Lucie had been right, something was wrong between her and Frank, and she had to figure out what to do about it.

Coming back to her empty house, she sat on the settee with a cup of hot chocolate, going back over the past couple of years, wondering where it had all gone wrong.

Why had he kept so many secrets from her? If he really thought anything of her at all, surely he'd have told her about his past and let her make up her own mind?

The doubts and questions flew around in her head like a murder of crows that had suddenly been frightened into the air; cruel, noisy black shadows, their calls only leading to further dark doubts.

Where had he been for the past two days? What had he been doing? What had he meant when he'd said that his daughter had not killed herself. That he had some kind of proof?

Unable to cope with the muddle of questions inundating her, Karla decided to go to bed and sleep on it before it

drove her crazy. Her mother had always told her to sleep on a problem - that it would become clearer in the morning. She hoped that her mother's advice would turn out to be right this time, even though she didn't hold out much hope that it would.

To make sure she had an uninterrupted sleep, Karla unplugged her landline and turned off her mobile. The last thing she needed right now was a call from Frank in the middle of the night.

Chapter 31

“Come on, get a move on. We have to leave for the airport in the next hour if we want to catch our flight.”

“But I still don’t understand, Marcos. Why do we have to go tonight? Why can’t we wait until tomorrow?”

Marcos tried to snap the locks on the suitcase shut, but it had too many clothes inside. He flipped open the lid and dumped a handful of his wife’s clothes back on the bed.

“Because we can’t,” he answered.

Marcos saw his wife eye the dresses he’d just tossed from the suitcase, but knew she wouldn’t argue with him, she never did. She turned to a smaller suitcase instead and began packing the children’s clothes. “Where will we stay?” she asked.

“With your mother. At least until I buy us a house.”

His wife straightened from her packing and stared at him.

“I’ve been saving,” he said, careful to keep his attention on the task at hand, so that he wouldn’t have to see the disapproval he knew would be lurking in her eyes.

“What have you done Marcos? Where has all this money suddenly come from that we can afford to buy a house? Is this why you’re making me rip our children away from everything they know - their friends and school? Have you done something so bad that we have to run away now?”

Marcos sighed loudly and went to her. He took her shoulders in his big hands and looked down into her eyes.

“Have I ever let you down?” he asked in a quiet voice. “Haven’t I always done what’s best for you and the children? Looked after you all like a good husband and father?”

Her head moved in a slight nod, the worry still bright in her eyes.

“I really don’t have time to explain it all now,” he said, planting a kiss on her forehead. “Just please do as I ask and get things packed as quickly as you can.”

“But—”

Marcos was saved from any further argument by the buzzing of his mobile. Pulling it from his pocket, he nodded at the suitcases and clothes spread out on the bed, then hurried from the room.

“Yes?” he shouted into the phone.

“Is that Marcos Farris?” A pleasant voice he didn’t recognise.

Marcos closed the kitchen door and sat on the edge of the table. It groaned slightly under his weight.

“Yes,” he responded after a slight hesitation.

My name’s Bell, Cole Bell. Mr Hunter asked me to collect you.”

“Collect me?” Marcos tried to switch his thoughts from getting out of London as quickly as possible, to the man on the phone. He didn’t have time for this. He had a plane to catch.

“Sorry I don’t understand,” he said.

“Mr Hunter would like to see you. Right away.”

“Look I’m busy right now. Tell him I’ll be there in a couple of hours.”

Shoving the mobile back in his pocket, Marcos headed back up the stairs to the bedroom, but had only taken a couple of steps when the doorbell rang. Swearing, he turned back and hurried down the hall.

A small, slightly Chinese looking woman, stood on the doorstep. She had a gun in her hand and a slight smile on her lips.

“I suggest you accompany me to the van, Mr Farris so that we can have a little talk,” she said. “Mr Hunter has a few questions he would like answered.”

Marcos hesitated, calculating whether he could disarm the woman without getting himself shot.

“Who is it, Marcos?” his wife called from the top of the stairs.

“Get back to the bedroom and keep packing,” he called to her, eyes still firmly fixed on the woman in front of him.

“But the—”

“I said get in the bedroom!” he yelled.

The woman nodded and stepped to one side. “Good, that’s very sensible of you. We don’t want any unpleasantness with your family, do we?”

A man stood on the pavement, holding open the garden gate. He nodded and smiled, directing Marcos to a van parked at the kerb with a wave of his hand.

Marcos felt the fight leave him and stepped out onto the path, closing the front door behind him with a soft click that had a fatalistic finality about it.

“You wouldn’t have been able to disarm me, you know,” the woman said, ushering him down the path towards her companion. “I saw the thought in your eyes. Far better that you come with us, than to get yourself and your family killed, is it not?”

The van took off at a sedate pace, with Marcos securely cuffed hand and foot behind the driver’s seat. He swallowed back the dryness in his throat and the sickness that sat in his stomach, struggling quietly with the cable ties that bound his wrists and ankles. All he managed to do was make his wrists sticky with blood, so he gave up, turning to look towards the front of the van.

The woman and man sat silently in their seats. Marcos could see the passing buildings through the windscreen between their heads. He wondered where they were taking him.

“Lay still,” the man ordered when he tried to sit up to get a better view. The gun pointed at his head persuaded him to lay back down and keep very quiet.

The van finally pulled into what appeared to be a large unlit car park. The woman turned off the engine and the couple sat quietly for some time. They seemed to be studying their surroundings. Marcos could hear the soft tick of the cooling engine and the rustle of the man’s clothes as he leant forward to check something he’d spotted outside.

“Nobody about,” the man said softly. “Let’s get this done.”

As the doors opened, Marcos shot his feet out in a powerful double kick. In the time it had taken for his captors to get to the back of the van, he’d managed to work himself over to the doors and lay on his back, knees drawn up to his chest, ready to kick.

Marcos had no intention of going down without a fight. He knew in his heart of hearts that this was going to be no question and answer session, where he’d get to go home afterwards. They intended to kill him.

The woman took the full force of his kick in the centre of her chest. The blow lifted her off her feet and shot her backwards. She collapsed onto the tarmac and lay still.

Marcos’ legs were now hanging out of the van, and he struggled to sit upright, banging his skull off the roof. He swore, shaking his head, trying to clear his vision.

The next thing he knew, his face exploded in pain and he was slammed flat on his back, his head cracking off the metal floor. The man climbed into the van and knelt beside him, the point of his knife pushed up into Marcos’ nostril.

“You’d better hope that you didn’t do any permanent damage,” he said in a low growl.

The knife sliced through the soft skin of Marcos’ nose and he was left groaning, tears flooding his eyes as the man clambered back out of the van again.

Marcos could hear the couple’s murmuring voices outside, but could make no move to escape. His eyes wouldn’t focus and he felt a cold patch on the back of his head where it had connected with the floor.

The couple finally climbed into the van, slamming the doors shut. Marcos swallowed hard.

The interior light flicked on and he could sense that the woman had her gaze locked on him. She was breathing heavily.

Marcos’ vision cleared a little and he looked up into her eyes. He didn’t like the expression he saw there one little bit.

The man leant over and poked Marcos’ nose. The pain was incredible, but he did his best to hide it. The man smiled and nodded, as though in appreciation of a challenge well met.

Then brought his hand into view.

Marcos’ eyes narrowed as the overhead light glinted from the sharp blades protruding from the handle of the craft knife.

Chapter 32

If he was being honest with himself, Frank would have had to admit that he was despondent and angry in equal measures - an unusual combination of feelings that he was having trouble dealing with.

On the one hand, whenever the image that was now permanently burnt into his mind popped into his consciousness again - something that it did with a disabling regularity - a terrible black rage overtook him, and he could think of nothing other than tearing Conrad Hunter's bowels from his body and making him eat them in front of him.

On the other, was a terrible realisation that his relationship with Karla was falling apart and he could see no way of saving it . . . except perhaps one.

Frank had tried ringing Karla a couple of times while on the train, but his calls had gone straight through to her answering service. He'd left messages that he would be arriving at Inverness soon, and that he had something really important to tell her.

He planned to ask her to marry him!

The train finally pulled into the station and Frank hurried back to the guard's van, where he unloaded his bike. Trying Karla's number one last time, he grunted his dissatisfaction when he had no success, slipped on his gloves and pulled his bike out on to the main road. Traffic was light this early in the morning and twenty minutes later, he was speeding down the A9 toward home.

As Frank's bike purred its way along the tarmac, his mind was only half on his riding. He eased his grip on the handlebars, suddenly aware of how tightly he'd been grasping them. His thoughts had been back with Conrad Hunter again and what he would do to the man who'd destroyed his daughter's life - probably not the best thing to be thinking about when speeding along at nearly eighty miles an hour.

One thought dominated now - one thought that kept returning to haunt him, no matter how he tried to push it away. He fought hard to dismiss it, arguing with himself that he had all the evidence he needed now to get Hunter sent down for murder, so he had no need to take any action against the man himself.

He should let the police do it. The photos would be enough proof . . . but at the back of his mind, he knew that without the evidence of the girl, they might not be. She had run off to Ireland and he had no idea where she might be.

Conrad Hunter deserved to die for what he'd done to Mandy, and it was up to Frank to make sure that he did. He had no option. There was no other way.

The realisation brought a kind of relief and he straightened his back, sitting more comfortably astride the big machine as he opened the throttle and amalgamated with the throb of the engine - totally alive for the first time in a decade.

He hadn't been there for Mandy when she was alive, but he damn well would be now that she was dead!

*

The ride back to his cottage had enlivened Frank and he now felt as tall as a tree, slamming his bike up onto its stand with a new vigour. He could do what needed doing, he had the contacts - it would just take some planning and a little bit of luck. He was on a swing now, nothing could stop him. It was just like the old days again - when he was Hunter's minder - a time when nobody would have dreamt of getting in his way.

This one is for you Mandy, my precious baby. This one is for you!

As he entered the lounge, Frank's attention switched to the answering machine. A single red light blinked on its silver fascia, and the intermittent bleep notified him that a message was waiting. Pushing the button, he listened as Karla's voice came from the tinny speaker. She spoke in a halting tone, her words disjointed and making little sense.

Frank played the message again, slowly sitting as he listened, his whole body ice-cold, a large empty space where his stomach used to be. He sat perfectly still after the message had ended, unheeding of the bleep that indicated a further message waited, his mind numb.

Slowly he stood, grasping the arms of the chair to steady himself, then made his way across to the cupboard, stretching out a trembling hand for the bottle he knew was there.

He didn't bother with a glass.

Chapter 33

Mai Bell clutched a handful of the big man's thick hair, steadying his head while her husband held the knife close to the sweating face.

"We prefer using two blades in this craft knife," she said in a gentle tone. "That way the skin is shredded far too badly for any doctor to repair. It leaves a real nasty mess." She sounded as though she were lecturing a class on plastic surgery.

Mai Bell nodded at her husband and, using a quick downward thrust, he sliced the man's cheek open. She could see the shock in the man's eyes, but he made no noise. At the moment it would feel like a sharp stinging sensation, no more than a nasty paper-cut, say. But later, when Cole had added a few more, deeper cuts, the pain would become apparent.

Mai Bell smiled down at him, ignoring the story of the future in his eyes, should he ever manage to get free. She nodded again and a second pair of deeper, parallel cuts, appeared alongside the first. This time the man did flinch.

"What the hell you want from me?" he managed between gritted teeth, his accent much thicker now.

"Two things," Mai Bell said. "Firstly, do you have any more photos of Conrad Hunter and the girls? And secondly, where do I find the girl called Chantelle?"

The man stared at her silently and she nodded again.

"No, wait!" he shouted.

Mai Bell held up her hand and her husband lowered the knife.

"I don't have any more photos, but some other guy does. I think he's called Collins, Frank Collins, or something like that."

"And the girl?"

"She's at the house with Chandio."

Mai Bell sat back on her haunches, studying the man. The blood from his cuts had flowed across his cheek and was trickling down into his ear. She looked at her husband and nodded. The Greek began to buck under her husband's weight but she placed a hand on his chest and made a hushing sound, as though reassuring a child.

"Shush, shush. It's okay," she said. "We believe you. Cole here just has to gag you, that's all. Take it easy now and open your mouth like a good boy."

The fear was obvious in the Greek's eyes as he flicked his gaze between the two of them, but Mai Bell reassured him with a pleasant smile, and he reluctantly opened his mouth.

Cole Bell pushed a wadded sanitary towel firmly into his mouth, then slapped a large piece of duct tape across it. The man's nostrils flared as he sucked deep breaths through his nose.

Cole Bell eased his weight off the man, so he could breathe a little easier.

"Kill him," Mai Bell whispered to her husband as she clambered past them.

Her last glimpse of the scene inside the van, was her husband reaching out to pinch the big man's nostrils tightly closed.

*

The house seemed quiet.

Mai Bell stood with her ear to the letterbox, listening intently. After standing quite still for nearly ten minutes, she eventually returned to the van and climbed into the passenger seat.

"Can't hear anyone moving around inside the house, and there doesn't seem to be any alarm as far as I can see," she said.

Taking the cheese and onion sandwich her husband held out to her, she absentmindedly chewed it while she studied the house.

Cole Bell grunted, crushing the empty cola can in his hand, then tossing it into the back of the van over his shoulder.

"Oh, my Tarzan," Mai Bell said with a twinkle in her eye.

"So, I wonder how many are inside?"

Mai Bell wiped her lips with a napkin, burping quietly behind it. "No way of knowing."

As the smell of second-hand onions wafted over him, Cole Bell wrinkled his nose. "Got the gear ready?" he asked.

Mai Bell nodded, reaching for a bum bag, which she fixed around her waist. "Should be enough for about six people. If there's any more than that in there, we'll have to come up with a different plan."

"Well doing it this way certainly beats taking them all to the crematory tonight. That would really freak old Bert out. You know how twitchy he gets."

Mai Bell chuckled and shook her head. "Don't you worry any about Albert. I'll take care of him. That's if our little plan works out, of course."

Cole Bell took a sideways glance at his wife. Her eyes were shining in the light from the street lamp, her lips slightly parted. He could feel her excitement, as though it were his own.

“Albert always had a soft spot for me,” she finished.

“More like a terrified one,” Cole Bell quipped.

Mai Bell slapped her husband on the thigh, then tutting, climbed out of the van, sliding the door closed as quietly as she could. Cole Bell opened the glove-box, pulled out a couple of night-vision goggles and joined his wife at the front door. By the time he'd reached her, she already had the door open and was waiting in the dark hallway.

“Yale lock,” she muttered.

He nodded, following her into the lounge. It was empty, stripes of light from the street lighting shining through the thin curtains, reaching far into the corners. He kept his goggles up. They weren't needed in this brightness.

Using well rehearsed hand-signals, Mai Bell told her husband to search the rooms downstairs, while she explored the upper floor. Giving a thumbs-up sign, he eased his way back into the hall.

Mai Bell had chosen to explore the upper floor because she weighed far less than her husband, which made it less likely that she would set any stair treads creaking.

Keeping to the side of the staircase, she slowly made her way upwards, balancing her weight on the balls of her feet, testing each tread before putting her full weight on it.

The top landing was small, with four doors leading off it. The doors of two rooms were ajar.

The sound of muffled snoring came from one. Easing over to the other, Mai Bell saw the reflection of white wall tiles.

The bathroom then.

Moving on to another door, she slipped down her goggles, then slowly - very slowly - eased it open.

There were two beds in the room. Both were occupied. A man slept in one, the other held an older man and a young girl. The older man gave a snort, turning over as the dim light from the landing fell across his face.

Mai Bell backed out and eased the door closed, turning her attention to the last two rooms. The first one she tried was empty - just three double mattresses spread on the floor. She exited with a nod, licking dry lips, trying not to let the tension and excitement get to her.

The last door made a quiet squeak when she opened it. She froze for a moment, foot half raised, holding her breath. Then, when there was no reaction from within the room, she eased the door open just far enough to slip inside.

The room was furnished with a king-sized bed, a double wardrobe, and two chest-of-drawers, set against the wall opposite, and to the left of the door. It was well lit by the outside street lighting, and Mai Bell could easily make out the tousled black hair of the man occupying the bed. The side of his face was dark against the crisp white pillows.

Bingo! This had to be Altaf Chandio.

Moving across the room, Mai Bell eased over to the side of the bed on the balls of her feet, then stood looking down at the man as he slept. He was handsome, but that meant little to her - she'd always considered good looks to be a negative.

Pulling a slim metal bar from her bum-bag, she raised her arm, sighting up on the large carotid artery throbbing in the man's neck. Gritting her teeth, she punched it downwards with a sharp slap, knowing that if it didn't work first time, they were in trouble.

The man opened his eyes in surprise, but didn't utter a sound. The shock to his artery had cut off the supply of blood to his brain, rendering him incapacitated. She had perhaps five seconds before he came to his senses again.

Taking a bottle from her bag, she uncorked it, quickly upending it on a pad. Careful not to take in the fumes herself, she held it across the man's mouth and nose, forcing him to breathe in the vapour. The chloroform would give them the time they needed to set up the scene.

As she left the bedroom, Mai Bell saw a warning flash of light from the floor below - the prearranged signal that her husband had found nothing and was on his way up the stairs. A few moments later he was at her side and she signed that one man was down, but that three others were still in the last room off the landing. He nodded and followed her as she eased her way in.

They stood beside the beds, mimicking each other's movements, as though attached by invisible threads. It took just a few moments to knock the men out, but the girl woke up before Mai Bell got to her.

Looking up at the dark figure standing over her, the girl opened her mouth to scream. Mai Bell dropped her bottle, pulled the pillow from under the girl's head and held it over her face.

“Don't smother her,” Cole Bell whispered in a harsh voice. “Hang on, we have to make it look like an accident.”

Mai Bell continued holding the pillow over the bucking girl, while her husband ran around the bed and picked up the bottle, quickly corking it.

“Now,” he said, and as Mai Bell pulled the pillow aside, he held the last pad in place.

The girl took a deep breath, then fell quiet. They both breathed a sigh of relief that she hadn't managed to scream. Mai Bell looked across at her husband. His forehead was lined with sweat and he was breathing in short excited gasps. It reminded her of a panting dog.

She could see how charged up he was. There was nothing so arousing as taking somebody's life - he had taught her that. Later, when they got back to their hotel, they would make love.

“Everything good downstairs?” she asked.

Cole Bell nodded, easing the tension from his neck. “I'll go sort the boiler out,” he said. “It's in the kitchen - gas, just like we thought.”

As Cole Bell attended to the gas boiler, partially blocking the vent with the remains of a bird's nest, and adjusting

the burners to the most inefficient setting he could, Mai Bell made sure all the windows were tightly closed.

Double glazing really was a wonderful invention, she mused, moving from room to room. No drafts to disperse the fumes that would soon be spreading throughout the house.

Just another tragic case of carbon monoxide poisoning!

Chapter 34

Albert Gray was not afraid of death. To him death was a release - the final full stop at the end of life's long story; the start of a new Chapter; the epilogue to birth's prologue. Albert Gray knew this first hand, because he was an undertaker.

However, Albert Gray *was* afraid of pain. Very much afraid. And he knew - also first hand - how much pain the diminutive Mai Cole could inflict on the human body.

Albert Gray had trained under his father - one of the best undertakers in Golders Green, they used to say. After his father's death, he'd taken over the business, got married, and had a son. All the things he'd ever dreamt of doing.

At first it had been a satisfying life, but somehow things had changed and the satisfaction slowly died. Nagging little suspicions that other people were doing better, were happier, had more things than he did, began to fill his mind.

Over the years these dissatisfaction mounted and Albert Gray began to gamble, the thrill of the chase replacing his deep feelings of inadequacy.

Then one day, Albert Gray had a visitor. A thickset, ugly looking man, who informed him, that if he didn't pay back what he owed to the bookmaker by the end of the month, he wouldn't have a business, a house, or legs that worked.

The man had spoken in soft tones, which made the threats all the more frightening. And as a parting gift, he had left Albert Gray with a broken nose. A token of things to come should he default, so to speak.

So when they came - when they offered him such a tempting escape route - Albert Gray grabbed their money with both hands.

It had started slowly at first, just the odd body now and then. Easy enough for him to dispose off in the oven, after his staff had gone home. And the money was good, enabling him to pay off his debts and buy the things that made life worth living: a bigger car, good clothes, a watch to match his new position in life. The money also opened new doors for him - the golf club, the Masons, membership of an exclusive club in the West End.

Life was good, but three years in, the body count had begun to rise and Albert Gray found it harder to cover up what he was doing. Stupidly, he complained, tried to back out, even made a veiled threat about going to the police when that didn't work.

They had seemed like such a nice couple when he'd first met them, Mai and Cole Bell. She so small that she barely reached his shoulder; he tall and slim and dressed like a banker.

Mai Bell always had a soft smile on her thin lips. She was wearing it the day she looked up into his face and made it plain that if he didn't want to end up in one of his own coffins, he would carry on supplying them with the services they paid him for.

Tonight they'd woken him from a deep sleep. He was still a little bleary eyed as he stood looking at his visitors, the body they'd brought laying on the trolley between them like a large restrictive lump in his throat.

He sighed heavily, shoulders slumping as though the worries of the world were weighing him down.

Before leaving, Cole Bell tossed a heavy envelope at him. It hit his chest and he fumbled at it, but it fell to the ground, spilling out twenty pound notes.

As Albert Gray scrambled about on the floor for his money, Mai and Cole Bell turned and left without a word, their distain apparent on their faces.

Chapter 35

Looking down at the creature's jerking death, the excitement of the climb was quickly replaced by a series of chest heaving sobs.

Frank's dream had taken him back to a time when he'd been playing on a undeveloped building site. He was trying out the new plimsolls his mum had bought him for his tenth birthday, climbing his favourite tree. He'd climbed the tree many times before, but this time had pushed himself harder, had gone higher, had almost reached the top.

As he sat on the swaying limb, a bird swooped down behind him. Turning, he spotted a nest built in the fork of the branch. Excitement growing, he eased himself further outwards, scared and aroused in equal portions as the branch bent beneath him, creaking with his weight.

The nest had three eggs in it and he poked at them with his fore-finger. They were warm. Carefully picking one of the delicate eggs up, he balanced it in his palm, fascinated by the pattern of spots covering its surface.

A sudden fluttering of wings made him jump. The bird swooped at him, chattering angrily. Almost losing his balance, Frank grabbed at the branch, the egg arcing from his grasp, out through the leaves, where it fell to the ground far below.

Easing his way back to the trunk, he hurried down to the ground as fast as he could, heart beating wildly. Back on the ground he knelt and picked up the delicate object. It was smashed at one end, and as he turned it over, a half-formed chick fell out onto his palm. It jerked weakly in his hand, its tiny beak opening and closing in the cool air.

As it lay twitching amongst the yolk and albumen shimmering in his palm like a mound of putrid snot, Frank could see that the tiny creature was in pain. He couldn't help empathising with the tiny creature and the feelings frightened him. They were too similar to what he felt when he heard his parents shouting at each other after he'd gone to bed.

Frank knew that he should put the half-formed chick out of its misery, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. So he just watched helplessly, tearfully, as the chick slowly died.

Horrified at what he'd done, and not wanting to believe that he'd been the cause of the tiny creature's death, he threw the dead thing as far from him as he could, wiping his hand down his jeans over and over again, sobbing loudly.

In reality, Frank had run home that day, doing his best to push the experience from his mind: but in his nightmare, the chick had clung tenaciously to his palm, and no matter how hard he had tried, he just couldn't shake it off.

Then, as he watched in horror, the tiny form morphed into a miniature Conrad Hunter, who grew taller and taller, until he finally stood life-sized on the palm of Frank's hand, staring down at him with yellow eggs where his eyes should have been. The man's face twisted into a grotesque smile, and when he tried to speak, a white, glutinous substance flowed from his mouth.

Frank screamed himself awake, struggling at the branches that suddenly gripped him tightly, only to find himself thrashing about in the tangled bedsheets, head thumping so hard that his eyes pulsed.

It had been a nightmare, just a drunken nightmare! Groaning, Frank fell back onto the pillows, eyes screwed shut against the daylight pouring through the window. He felt like hell - but then a three day binge tended to do that to you!

Turning onto his side, he cracked open his eyes again and listened to the birds singing outside. Was it them that had kicked off the nightmare, or was it something deeper inside him - something that told him, no matter how much he hated Conrad Hunter and wanted him dead, there was no way he could kill him?

*

After a long hot shower, Frank felt almost human again, and even managed to eat some poached eggs on toast. As he ate, he thought about the nightmare he'd had.

All the bravado about him going to London and killing Conrad Hunter had been just that - empty bravado. He knew he could no more kill a man, than he could the half dead bird of his childhood days.

No, the best he could do was try to find the girl, Chantelle, and get her to come with him to the police. In the meantime, he had a living to make, he'd neglected his business for far too long.

Checking in with his answering service, Frank picked up the day's delivery schedule and entered them into his mobile sat-nav. Then planning his day's deliveries, he purposely kept his thoughts away from the account Jeffrey Hunter had opened for him - one step at a time.

The sky had clouded over and as he pulled his bike off its stand, Frank felt the first drops of rain. Heading up the track, he shook the raindrops from his helmet, speeding up as the downpour started, so the wind would clear his visor.

Fifteen minutes later, he was sitting astride his bike outside Brambles Coffee Shop, trying to see through the steamy window. Torn between wanting to see Karla, and not being late for his first pick-up, he shrugged, then opened the throttle and headed out on to the A9: he'd call in at lunch time and talk to her then, explain what an idiot he'd been.

The rain settled down to a steady drizzle, making for slow progress. The roads around Ross- Shire were more like lanes in places, narrow and winding, often just single track, where you were forced to pull into a lay-by for traffic to pass. Add in the diabolical weather, and he was finding it hard to keep up with the deliveries.

Lunch time came and went, but Frank had no time to make it back to Brambles Coffee Shop for his planned talk

with Karla. Her message had shaken him, but he really couldn't believe that she'd meant it when she'd said she didn't want to see him anymore.

At least the rain had eased and he could speed up a bit now.

Chapter 36

“We should have flown. It would have been far quicker.”

Mai Bell shook her head, concentrating on finding her way to the M1, almost missing the turning as her husband’s voice drowned out the instructions from the sat nav.

“I said—”

“I know what you said,” Mai Bell answered. “Can you just be quiet for a minute, until I get us on to the motorway?”

Cole Bell sat in silence while his wife concentrated on the voice giving instructions on which turnings to take. He hated driving long distances in cars, unlike his wife, who loved the open road. He would do anything he could to avoid long hours spent cramped in a vehicle. It was so boring.

“Could have taken a train,” he complained in a sulky voice, the one he used when he couldn’t get his own way. “It’ll be motorway all the way up.”

Mai Bell giggled. “It won’t work,” she said. “And you can forget the little boy lost voice, we’re driving. It leaves less paperwork for anyone to follow up on. You know that. Tickets can be traced.”

“Not if we’d paid cash.”

“Even then.”

“Suppose so.”

“Anyway, I’m taking a detour once we get as far as the Scottish Border. I thought we’d go up the west coast and cut across by Loch Ness. We haven’t had a decent holiday for years and I hear the scenery there is quite dramatic.”

Cole Bell groaned. “Thought we’d got enough drama as it was,” he said.

“Will you stop bitching?”

Cole Bell didn’t answer. He knew when he was beaten. Pulling out a Kindle reader, he switched it on, settling back in his seat.

“Wake me up if I fall asleep,” he said, still using his sulky voice.

Mai Cole just smiled and concentrated on her driving.

*

Karla was feeling guilty - really guilty. She’d not answered any of Frank’s calls.

It had been three days since he’d returned from London and he hadn’t put in an appearance. But isn’t that what she’d wanted? Why she’d left that message on his phone? She preferred not to follow up on that thought. Feeling that the drinking was her fault.

Putting thoughts of Frank aside when the microwave gave a soft ping, she got on with her job. Using a pair of stainless steel tongs, she took a baked potato from the oven and scored it with a cross. “Butter?” she called.

When the man sitting at a nearby table shook his head, Karla dolloped a generous portion of tuna, sweetcorn and mayonnaise mix on it, arranged some salad around the plate, and carried it over to the table.

“Your toastie won’t be a moment,” Karla said, setting down the plate and smiling at the man’s companion.

“Thank you.” The woman’s voice carried a hint of the orient and as she hurried back behind the counter to plate up the toasted sandwich, Karla day-dreamed about which country the woman might be from.

China? Thailand? Perhaps one of the islands off Japan? It was a game she often played when strangers showed up in her café.

The lunch time rush passed and Karla went through into the kitchen. “Not many customers left now,” she told Jenny McDonald, her chief cook and bottle-washer. “Do you think you’d be able to handle the rest of your shift on your own?”

“Of course. Something wrong?”

Karla shook her head. “No, just something I have to check up on.”

*

Jenny McDonald watched her employer shrug her coat on and walk to the door. It was raining outside - a typical summer drizzle that seemed to soak you to the skin.

As Karla left the café, she glanced back and wiggled her fingers. “Later,” she called.

Jenny waved back and smiled. She’d been working for Karla for three years now, since leaving school in fact. She still couldn’t believe how her boss could be such an idiot. The whole village was awash with rumours about her relationship with Frank Collins and how badly he treated her.

If she had a boyfriend like that, Jenny would have kicked him out ages ago. Only last night, Mandy Brownlow had sidled into the kitchen with the latest news on how Frank Collins had been on a three day bender, only leaving his cottage to buy more alcohol.

“Stunk to high heaven of drink and sweat,” Andy Campbell, the proprietor of *Clinks* - the local off-licence - had reported to anyone who’d listen.

But of course, nobody had told Karla this news. People living in a close-knit village, such as theirs, might know each others business, but that didn’t mean to say that they’d pass it on to those concerned.

*

Karla wrinkled her nose as she closed the cottage door behind her. The whole place stank of stale alcohol. Crossing to the lounge window, she open it and took a deep breath. It was obvious that Frank had been binge-drinking again.

“Oh Frank,” she muttered, collecting the bottles scattered about the room, “this has to stop. This really has to stop.”

After tidying the lounge, Karla made her way into the kitchen, which looked like a party had taken place in it. Empty beer bottles lay on the work tops, along with the remains of what looked to her like poached egg on toast.

“Well at least you managed to get some breakfast down you,” she muttered, loading up the dishwasher with the dirty dishes she found in the sink.

Finished in the kitchen, Karla went upstairs to the tiny bedroom. The bedclothes were hanging off the bed and the pillows were screwed into big lumps. Pulling the bedding free, she headed down to the utility room and pushed them into the washing machine, setting it for a hot wash.

Then, resting her butt against the dryer, she listened to the washing machine clicking its way through the programme, suddenly wondering what the hell she was doing.

Chapter 37

It was getting late, the sun low, spreading a pink wash along the horizon, but at least it had stopped raining.

Frank was tempted to take a break and enjoy the scene, but he still had one more pick-up to make. His damaged finger had begun to throb, so it was just as well he was nearly finished. He didn't think he'd be able to keep riding the big bike for much longer.

Pulling into the roadside, he eased off his glove and inspected his hand. The bandaged he'd wound around the top of his nail-less finger was speckled with blood. Little fires of pain ran from the tip up his arm when he touched it. He'd have to go see the doctor when he'd finished work. Sticking the gloves in the pannier, he set off again, finding it less painful to ride gloveless.

The road had narrowed down to single track now and Frank was keeping an eye out for the turning he needed - an unmade road somewhere on the left. Hearing a car coming up behind, he pulled over as far as the tall hedges would allow, waving the car past . . . but the next thing he knew, the car had slammed into his rear wheel and he was thrown backwards out of his seat .

Managing to keep the bike upright as it was pushed away to the right, and biting his lower lip against the pain in his finger, Frank clung on tightly, accelerating the bike straight. But he over-steered and had to pull it back the other way, easing off the throttle before he finally managed to get the machine back under control.

With the adrenaline rush came the anger and he pulled into the roadside to tell the driver just what he thought of his driving, when he heard the car accelerating again. A quick glance in the mirror showed it coming straight for him.

There was no mistaking the driver's intention this time.

"What the fuck—!"

The words were hardly formed, when Frank sprang into action, twisting the throttle wide open as he fought the spinning back wheel. Knowing what was about to happen, he accelerated away as fast as he could, trying to keep the big bike under control on the wet surface, burning rubber spewing white smoke from under the rear tyre.

The car kept pace with him, in fact it slowly gained ground. It was obviously being driven by an expert, or a complete idiot. It didn't make any difference to Frank which it was, all he knew was that someone was trying to drive him off the road.

Leaning into the turns, Frank managed to put a little distance between himself and the car, his mind working overtime as he tried to figure out what was going on.

The back wheel slid when he strayed too close to the side of the road, hitting a patch of wet leaves. It bucked under him again and he moved his body completely off the saddle to the right, pulling the bike back to the centre of the road. His heart was thumping so hard that he could feel the arteries pounding in his neck.

Rounding another tight bend, he saw that the road straightened out for a long distance and throttled the bike up, grinning as the surge of power whipped the wind around his body.

Let's see the bastard catch me now!

But taking another quick check in the mirror, Frank's eyes widened. The car was still close behind, in fact closing fast. Looking back over his shoulder to get a better view, he spotted two people in the front seats.

The driver, barely tall enough to see over the steering wheel, was a woman. But what alarmed Frank the most, what snapped his gaze back to the front and the road rushing past under his wheels, what made him open the throttle wider in fear - was the sight of her companion leaning from the passenger window, pointing a gun at him.

Crouching low on the bike, decelerating hard as he reached the end of the straight, Frank hit the bend. The bike backfired at his mistreatment and he only just managed to hold it on the road.

Frank was physically shaking now, fighting hard to concentrate, hands cold and sweaty.

Tyres squealed behind him as the car took the corner in a four wheel drift, its bodywork brushing along the hedge. The driver corrected the overshoot rear-end with a blip on the throttle.

Frank's mind was a blank, he was operating on blind instinct and terror, laying into the corners much too fast, but knowing he had no option if he wanted to stay alive.

Maybe, if he could just gain a few hundred metres or so on the car, he'd be able to cut out across one of the fields. His pursuers would have no chance of following him in the car if he managed that.

Then Frank suddenly recognised where he was. This lane ran alongside Hugo's field . . . and there was a big gate coming up on the left any minute now. He'd have to chance taking it at speed, he couldn't slow down. It was a slim chance, but his only one.

The gate was just around the next corner.

Feeling his heart beat building, Frank took a deep breath, squinted his eyes to see better, and lay the bike over to take the bend.

It was then that he heard the gunshot—

Hugo Miller was annoyed. The rain had left everything dripping wet, and even though it had stopped now, it had made him late with the days chores. The sun was setting and he'd only just finished pairing up the big round bails of straw for collection in the morning.

It had been a bad summer for crops and his mind was on the phone call that he'd had from a consortium in England. They were looking for some land in Scotland and had led him to expect a call sometime today with an offer. But it was already past six and no call. Just his luck if they'd backed out. He wouldn't blame them though, the way things were with the economy at the moment.

Switching on the big tractor's headlights, he slipped it into gear and drove across the field, stopping at the big field gate. Groaning his way out of the tractor, he climbed down to the ground, his battered Wellington boots slurping and plopping as he slogged his way across the boggy soil. The ground needed digging up here and a new field-drain putting in. It was always sopping wet. Maybe next year, if the funds stretched to it.

Having opened the gate, Hugo grunted his way back up into the high cab and drove the tractor out on to the lane, checking that the gate had swung closed behind him. He was about to set the long pronged, loading arm into the raised road-driving position when his mobile rang.

"About time."

Leaning over, he fumbled the mobile from his back pocket. "Yeah?" he said.

"Anything yet?"

It was his wife, Janet. "Nah. Reckon it's too late for them to phone now. Perhaps they'll call in the morning."

"Oh, okay. Will you be long, I've got a pie in the oven?"

He could hear the disappointment in her voice. "Long as it ain't a bun," he joked, trying to lighten her mood. "Just on my way back babes. I'll—"

But Hugo never finished the sentence. His world unexpectedly exploded into a frenzy of tearing, screaming metal, and as the tractor shunted backwards, he was slung forwards, banging his head off the metal upright supporting the windscreen.

The phone dropped from his hand and, knocked cold, he didn't hear his wife's voice frantically calling his name from the floor - or the soft ticking of a cooling engine - or the loud groans of somebody dying in pain.

Chapter 38

Cole Bell stared from the window of the BMW they had stolen and wrinkled his nose. The sun was going down. It would be dark in perhaps an hour. The sky was turning red and Mai Bell had just commented on how fabulous it all looked. He hadn't answered. He hated the countryside. Countryside was for smelly animals and thick yokels. Cities were where the action was.

"Okay, let's get this done," Mai Bell said, sitting straighter behind the steering wheel.

Cole Bell smiled at his wife's attempt to be taller. Her chin only just cleared the top of the steering wheel, but even so, he knew she was a far better driver than he was. She'd spent five years in some Government agency before he'd met her. She was still very closed mouthed about it all, but had told him some of the things she had learnt there - one of which she called *combatitive driving*.

They'd been following their package for perhaps ten minutes, having picked him up back at the turn-off a couple of miles back. A quick phone call this morning had added them to his collection list. Cole Bell had apologised and stipulated that the collection wouldn't be ready until six o'clock that night but, he'd pay extra if the courier could pick it up that late. The package had agreed and all they'd had to do was put in an appearance and wait for him.

Mai Bell had decided to run him off the road, making it look like a hit and run accident. Afterwards they'd dump the BMW and pick up the stolen van they'd left hidden behind a hedge. If they left the van in Inverness Multi-story Car Park it wouldn't be found for a long time. They'd grab a quick cab ride out to the airport and, hey presto - another package taken care off. Cole Bell really loved his job.

"Look, he's slowing down," Mai Bell said, easing the car to a stop. "What's he up to?"

"Looks like he's taking off his gloves. Oh there he goes, off again."

"Okay let's take him here. The road seems clear."

"Haven't seen any traffic in ages. A guy could die out here and not get found for weeks."

Mai Bell gunned the car, speeding up behind the bike. The rider pulled over, waving them past, but she cut across the road and slammed into the back of the bike. The rider nearly came off, his body actually leaving the seat like something from a cartoon film. His bike slewed sideways but by some miracle, he got it back under control again.

"Damn!"

Cole Bell knew his wife hated swearing, and that meant she must be really angry with herself for not taking the package out at the first attempt.

"Quick, before he gets away," he shouted.

Stamping on the throttle, Mai Cole span the tyres on the wet road. They suddenly caught, pushing them both back into their seats.

At the same moment the bike took off down the road with smoke pouring from under the rear wheel.

After a few minutes it became obvious that they were not going to catch the bike. Mai Bell's driving was skilful, but even she was finding it difficult to keep up on such a twisting, narrow road.

Cole Bell realised that they were going to have to try something else. But just as that thought entered his mind, his wife slewed the car around the next bend, and there in front of them was a long straight stretch of road.

"Got you know you bastard," Cole Bell muttered.

"Cole!"

"Sorry Mai. Just excited. Go get him, girl."

"I don't think I'll be able to catch him before the next bend," Mai Bell said after a few minutes of hard driving. "Get ready to shoot him if I don't."

It took the full stretch of road for Mai Bell to get them close enough for her husband to get a decent shot, and they were only a couple of metres from the bend when he leant from the car and fired his gun.

"That's my Cole!" Mai Bell squealed in excitement when a spurt of blood and leather flew from the rider's shoulder.

Pulling the steering wheel hard left, she slid the car around the corner in another four wheel drift. "We've got him now."

*

As Frank rounded the corner, two things happened in quick succession: a sudden red hot pain exploded in his left shoulder, and he was blinded by a bright light.

A vehicle was sitting in the middle of the damned road!

Wrenching the bike hard to his left, Frank leant way over, feeling the big machine skidding away from under him. Completely loosing control, the bike was flipped from his grasp and he was catapulted high into the air. Smashing through the hedgerow, he hit a large bail of straw sitting in the field, bounced off and finally landed on the ground in an expanse of soft mud.

*

The first thing Frank was conscious of, was a rooster crowing on a nearby farm . . . then somebody groaning . . . then the smell of petrol . . . then a pain that seemed to envelope his whole body.

Opening his eyes, he tried to sit up, but his left arm wouldn't work. He managed to turn himself over and get to his knees, his head swimming with dizziness.

His leather jacket and trousers had been torn to shreds, and in places, the skin beneath looked as though it had been flayed. His helmet was still on his head.

He wanted it off but didn't have the strength to remove it.

Finally easing himself on to his feet, Frank swayed for a few moments, then slowly turned to face the road.

His bike had demolished the field-gate and now lay on its side a few metres away. The front wheel was badly buckled, but apart from that, surprisingly little damage had been done. The petrol pipe must have fractured because the smell of petrol was strong. He prayed that it wasn't about to explode.

Something was wrong with his left shoulder. Easing the pain by cradling his elbow, he negotiated what was left of the gate and staggered out on to the road, momentarily closing his eyes to the horror he saw.

The BMW was crushed against the front of a large tractor parked in the centre of the narrow road. The tractor's loading forks were down and he could see that they had skimmed across the top of the car's bonnet, making deep furrows, before smashing through the windscreen and impaling the two occupants.

Hobbling over to the car, Frank looked through the broken passenger's window and saw that the driver was dead. Her eyes were wide open, as though in surprise. The long spike had completely impaled her head, from front to back. There was very little blood, and for one crazy moment, Frank thought she might be about to speak to him.

He jumped when the passenger moaned. The man had been hit in the left side of his head by another spike, which had torn a big hole in his skull. Frank could see the brain beneath and took a deep breath to stop himself from puking. The man's scalp was peeled back and a curtain of blood had washed down his face, making him resemble one of the living dead from the zombie films Frank so enjoyed.

Seemingly sensing somebody nearby, the man opened his remaining good eye.

"Mai?" he whispered between trembling, blood coated lips.

"What?" Frank said, leaning in so he could hear what the man was saying. "Don't worry. I'll get help. It'll be okay. You just hang on there. I'll call an ambulance. Just wait there."

The man managed to raise his arm in a series of slow jerks

Frank froze, all thoughts of calling the emergency services gone when he felt the gun pressed against his cheek.

"Kill . . . you," the man faltered, his voice weak, his one good eye alight with a fire that cut right into Frank's brain.

Frank knew he was about to die. He was too frightened to move and could only stand on trembling legs, waiting for the man to pull the trigger.

Then unexpectedly, the light in the man's eye died and his arm dropped to his lap. Frank reached in through the window and grabbed the gun, backing away from the car, his whole body trembling as though somebody was shaking him.

Bending over, he threw up on the side of the road.

Finally pulling himself together, he staggered away from the wreckage and threw the gun as hard as he could over the hedge, then collapsed onto his back, his helmeted-head hitting the road with a dull thunk.

*

Karla closed the kitchen door, hooked her handbag over the back of the captain's chair, switched on the kettle and sat down, sighing deeply. Kicking off her shoes, she rubbed her feet. It had been a hot, hard day at the café and she was looking forward to a deep bath, laced with some of the salts Frank had bought her a couple of months ago. She sighed again as his name popped into her head.

Frank, Frank, Frank. What am I going to do about you?

The kettle switch popped and she went over to the counter, dropped a tea-bag into the cup and poured on hot water. After a quick stir, she dropped the used tea-bag in the sink and went back to the table. Not having the energy to get up and walk to the fridge, she sipped the tea black, gazing from the window but not really seeing anything.

Lucie had dropped into Brambles during the afternoon and tried to persuade her to go on a girl's night out. She'd declined but Lucie had insisted, nearly leading to a row between them.

In the end her friend had held up her hands and pulled a face. "Okay, okay. I know when I'm beaten. Just remember Karla, I'm here if you need me." She paused a moment, as if not sure how to continue, then squeezed Karla's arm. "He's really no good for you, you know that, right?"

"Goodbye Lucie," she'd replied coldly.

Her friend glanced down at the floor, giving a barely perceptible sigh before turning away.

"Maybe tomorrow night. When I'm not so tired," Karla called as Lucie opened the café door.

Thinking back on it now, perhaps she shouldn't have been so dismissive of Lucie's attempt at helping her. They'd known each other for years, had cried on each other shoulders, more times than she cared to remember - usually because of some man or other.

Nothing really changed, she realised.

Rubbing her tired eyes, she stood up. Time for that bath. Things always felt better after a bath.

A soft buzzing from her bag drew her attention and she looked across at it for a second, wondering whether to let it go through to her answering service. Pulling the bag towards her, she fished out the phone, flipped it open and held it to her ear.

“Is that Karla Lachlan?” an officious sounding voice asked.

Before she could answer, Karla heard another voice speaking in the background: “Okay that’s the air-ambulance loaded. The rescue guys are still cutting the others out of the car. We’ll clear up the mess and then you can open the road whenever you like. Should be a couple of hours I reckon.”

Karla felt a coldness well up from deep inside, tingling down her arms and legs. She couldn’t move, as though she’d been glued to the spot. Her spine arched of its own accord and goosebumps broke out along the backs of her arms.

“Hello! Hello!” she called into the phone.

“Oh yes. Sorry. Miss Lachlan?”

“Yes. What is it? What’s happening?”

“Look, there’s been an accident involving a Frank Collins. Sorry to call you out of the blue this way, but we didn’t know who to contact and your number was in his mobile.”

“Is he hurt? Is he okay?” She was almost screaming into the phone now, too frightened to ask the question she so desperately wanted the answer to.

“Is he dead?”

Chapter 39

Karla snorted, waking herself from a deep sleep. She'd been dreaming about car smashes, and was still a little bleary when she woke. The hospital armchair was soft and she reclosed her eyes, nestling into a more comfortable position, but then flicked them open again after a couple of seconds. Something had woken her. But what?

Looking over at Frank, she saw that he was still laying in the same position as she'd last seen him - shoulder and hand bandaged, a line snaking from his forearm to a drip stand. He was breathing quietly and still seemed unconscious.

Getting up, she yawned and walked to the window. The sky was black, the clouds hanging low. A large car park stretched away in front of the window, security lights picking out the herringbone lines of the parking bays. Like her mood, it was desolate and empty. Glancing at her watch, she saw it was almost three-thirty in the morning.

Licking dry lips, Karla decided to go down to her car and fetch the bottle of coke she'd left on the back seat, recalling that she might just have a bar of chocolate in the glove-box as well.

*

When he heard Karla leave the side ward, Frank snapped open his eyes. He'd been awake for some time, listening to her gentle snores. Easing himself into a more comfortable position had rattled the stand holding the drip and woken her.

Not wanting to talk, he pretended to be asleep - perhaps she would go home now that she was awake. He prayed she would. His head was pounding and right now, he had nothing to say to her.

Keeping perfectly still, he followed the sounds of her movements as she crossed the room and stood by the window. She stayed there for a bit, then abruptly turned and left.

A wave of relief washed over him and he opened his eyes. The darkness outside told him that it was late at night, probably early morning. A dim bulb glowed over his bed, giving just enough light to see by, and as he eased himself upright, he wondered what day it was, how long he'd been out.

Footsteps squeaked in the corridor outside and his heartbeat rose. He expected to see Karla walk back through the door at any moment . . . but the footsteps passed by and receded.

He relaxed again. Just a nurse doing her rounds, he guessed.

As he leant back against the pillows, the memories flooded back, and with them the feelings of helplessness and terror that had overwhelmed him when the gun had touched his face.

They'd tried to kill him - run him down - and when that failed, shoot him! The scene replayed over and over in his mind, and as it did, the helplessness was slowly replaced with a deep, resentful rage.

His breathing deepened and his jaws tightened. They had set him up and tried to kill him. What the hell was going on? But wasn't it obvious? It had to be connected with his visits to London and the girl-running gang. They must have sent someone up here to shut him up . . . permanently.

Frank slid the tip of his tongue across the scar on his upper lip, thinking hard, rolling the drip line between thumb and forefinger as he considered what to do. He knew the police would be all over him when they realised he was awake. That thought brought him upright, straining to see through the small glass window next to the door.

Was a policeman sitting outside the ward right now, ready to cart him back to jail? God, he couldn't deal with the thought of that happening again.

*

"Oh, you're awake then? Good. How are you feeling?" Karla hurried over to the bed and gave Frank a perfunctory kiss on the forehead. "They were worried that you might have suffered more than concussion. They said they're taking you up for a scan in the morning. Oh hang on a minute."

Karla put the coke and chocolate on the night stand and pulled a chair closer to the bed.

Frank looked at her and smiled. "Hello Karla," he said.

"Sorry," she replied, sitting down and picking up his hand.

He winced and she could see that she'd hurt his injured shoulder.

"Sorry," she said again.

"No, it's okay," he said placing his other hand on hers.

"How do you feel?"

"Yeah, okay I think. My shoulder hurts, my hand hurts, my skin feels like somebody's tried to peel it off, and my head is thumping like a drum . . . but yeah, apart from all that, I'm fine."

Karla wasn't sure whether he was being serious or not, but when he chuckled, she smiled back and clasped his hand in hers.

"Whoa," he said, "that's the hand that hurts."

"God, sorry," she said yet again, dropping it quickly.

“So many apologies in one day,” he said with another chuckle.

“So what happened?” she asked, trying to stem her flood of apologies. “The police said you’d had some kind of accident on your bike, but won’t tell me anything else at the moment. I expect they’ll be back to talk to you in the morning, now that you’re awake.”

“Expect so,” he said.

Karla could see that he was tired and disorientated.

“Look,” she said, “why don’t I go and let the nurse know that you’re awake, and come back in the morning?”

“You been here all night?”

She nodded.

“Thanks,” he said.

*

After Karla left, Frank had to put up with a young doctor prodding and poking him. Then answer a barrage of questions while a penlight was flashed in his eyes.

Frank had a few questions of his own, but the doctor knew very little, or was keeping stumm about what he did know. However, he did let slip that the tractor driver had been knocked out for a time. Apparently he’d received some spinal injuries, but had managed to call the police on his mobile before passing out again. And no, he didn’t know how the tractor driver was at the moment, only that he was in Intensive Care.

The doctor outright refused to answer any questions about the occupants of the car.

When the doctor had gone, Frank thought back over the whole incident again, starting with the phone call that had led to him being in the lane. He’d have to check the address and see if that booking was genuine.

Somehow he didn’t think it would be.

Chapter 40

It was three weeks since Frank's *accident*. He was healing well and was fit enough to ride his bike again, something he'd missed while recovering from his injuries. He hadn't been out running yet, and had put on a bit of weight, but that was next on his to-do list.

The police had interviewed him three times since the crash and he wondered whether they were showing so much interest because he was out on licence for murder. It would be no surprise, after all, nothing much happened in such an isolated village.

The police hadn't mentioned finding the gun, which surprised him - but then he supposed that there had been no reason for them to be looking for anything beyond the scene of the accident. The bullet had only grazed his shoulder, and being one of many such injuries he gotten that night, hadn't been of any special significance as far as the hospital was concerned.

Frank was relieved that there were no awkward questions from that direction.

All in all he'd been extremely lucky, and thought it best to stick to his story of just being on a routine delivery for the present when the accident had happened, and see how it went.

Yes, he'd agreed with the police when they'd questioned him, perhaps he had been going a bit too fast. He'd been late for his next pick-up, and the headlights had blinded him as he came around the bend - what else could he have done? Other than that, he couldn't remember anything about the accident and had no idea where the car had come from, or who'd been in it. Finally they seemed satisfied with his story and left him alone to recover.

After a couple of days in the hospital, Frank was discharged and went home. It took a lot of arguing to persuade Karla that he didn't need her help and was quite capable of coping on his own.

He could see how hurt she was by his persistence, but stuck to his point. He knew that anyone close to him right now might be in real danger, and he wanted her well out-of-the-way until he'd taken care of the situation.

The first thing Frank did when he could get around, was check out the address he was picking up from on the day he was attacked. As he'd suspected, it had been a set-up. The old lady living there had no idea what he was talking about, adding weight to his theory about why the attack had happened, and who might be behind it.

He should have gone to the police then, but still held back. Someone had tried to kill him, but more than that, *had* killed Mandy. If there had been any doubts left in his mind about Chantelle's story, they'd been swept aside.

No, helping lock up whoever had done this for the next twenty years wasn't an option - no way good enough. An eye for an eye. The man had to die, just as Mandy had.

On the way back from talking with the old lady, Frank searched the field for the gun he'd thrown over the hedge. It took him a couple of hours to find it because it was half-buried in a deep wheel-rut. Finally spotting it, he eased it free, wondering who had taken over the running of Hugo's farm now that the poor sod was confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life - another reason to settle the score with Conrad Hunter.

There was no doubt in Frank's mind any longer. Conrad Hunter was behind all this!

Rubbing thick mud from the gun, Frank took up the *stance*, holding the weapon out in front of him with both hands, just as the detectives did in all those American cop shows he so avidly watched, fantasizing about how he was going to make the bastard kneel in front of him and beg for his life.

Yes. Payback was going to be sweet. Oh so sweet!

*

Karla was sitting at Frank's kitchen table, a cup of tea steaming in front of her. She looked down at the page again, pushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. Picking up the ballpoint pen, she twiddled it between thumb and forefinger, so quickly that it became a blur.

What to write? What to write?

She needed to call an end to the relationship - if that's what it was. Frank had pushed her away for the last time. Lucie was right.

Karla knew how she felt, but couldn't find the right words to express it. Sighing, she pushed back her chair and walked to the window. The rain had stopped and the horizon was shot with red. The fading light stained the sky a dark mauve. It really was a beautiful sunset.

What to write? What to write?

Returning to the table, she sat down and picked up the pen again.

Dear Frank, she wrote, then scribbled it out.

Frankie,

Yes, that was better.

Frankie, I'm writing this letter because somewhere I once read that it helps to sort out your feelings if you express them in writing.

Good, that was a good start.

I'm leaving the key to your cottage with this letter, as I don't want to see you again.

Was that too harsh? God yes, far too harsh. Crumpling up the page, she pulled out her notebook and tore a new one from it.

Then she sat staring at a white blankness that was only relieved by faint blue lines.

A sharp rapping on the front door pulled her attention from the letter and she pushed back her chair, popped the notebook and pen back in her purse and went to answer it.

*

Karla doubled over in pain.

She couldn't breathe; couldn't speak; couldn't think.

The blow had caught her completely unawares and it was all that she could do not to throw up. Never having been hit in the stomach before, she was taken aback by how disabling it was.

The man who'd hit her, shouldered his way into the small hall, catching her by the neck with one hand, his fingertips pushing deeply into her muscles like steel claws. The pain was incapacitating, but she managed to rake her nails across his wrist, trying to free herself.

Slammed backwards against the wall, Karla's skull bounced off the wood panelling with a bang that made her head ring.

"Don't say a word," the man growled. "Just nod if you're here on your own."

Karla nodded, still trying to free herself from the man's grip, her mouth opening and closing soundlessly.

Suddenly spun around, she was pushed against the wall and her hands secured behind her back with tape.

She managed to get her breath back and began begging her attacker not to hurt her: telling him that her money was in her bag in the kitchen; that he should take it and go.

Karla got as far as the first word, then found herself spun around again as the man secured a large piece of tape across her mouth. Eyes wide with terror, nostrils flaring as she tried to draw in enough air to breathe, she was pushed into the lounge and tied to a chair.

The man left the room, and even though she struggled as hard as she could while her captor thoroughly searched the house, she couldn't free herself.

After a lot of banging and crashing, the man finally reappeared and stood over her, a baseball bat in his hand, a sneer on his face. "Found this in the wardrobe," he said, patting it in his palm. "Just don't go giving me no reason to use it."

He fixed Karla with a stare of such intensity that she shivered and stared down at the floor. The man moved around behind her chair, and she heard the bat thump to the carpet.

"Your boyfriend's been busy down in London," he said. "He's caused me a lot of trouble. He's either very good at staying alive, or very, very lucky." Leaning over, he ran the tips of his fingers down her cheek, then tilted her head back, so he could stare into her eyes. "What say we find out which it is, hmm?" Karla tried to pull away, and he chuckled. "Don't worry your pretty little head," he sneered. "You just ain't my kind of girl."

Letting go of her chin, he came around the chair and sat down opposite her, drumming his fingertips on the arms of the chair. Then checking his watch, he leant forward, elbows on knees, hands open as though trying to appease her.

"Here's the thing, my pretty. That boyfriend of yours has got something of mine that I want back. So we're here to do a swap, you see. His belongings for mine." Steepling his fingers, the man nodded and smiled, then sat back in the chair. "Only fair," he said.

Chapter 41

Frank rode his bike into the garage and turned off the engine. He stayed astride it for a few moments, looking at the blank wall.

He was tired - so, so tired.

Tired of thinking about Karla, tired of thinking about Mandy, but most of all, tired of having to fight his rage.

Leaving the garage, he locked the doors, deciding to phone Karla tonight and tell her that he needed to go back down to London one last time. He'd keep it vague - what were a few more lies amongst the many he'd already told? He had to take the fight to them, otherwise this would never end.

Frank's grim mood lightened when he entered the kitchen and spotted Karla's bag hanging from the back of a chair. She'd come over to see him. Great, that'd make it easier. He hated trying to explain things on the phone.

As he walked around the table, Frank's foot hit a screwed up piece of paper. It rolled across the tiles. He picked it up, smoothing it out on the table top. What he read sent him hurrying to the lounge for a stiff drink.

Throwing open the lounge door, Frank strode in, but froze when he saw the couple sitting waiting for him.

Karla was trussed up with tape in one of his armchairs.

A slim man sat on the arm of the chair, holding a long, wicked looking flick-knife to her throat. A small tear of blood had trickled from under the tape covering her mouth.

The man holding the knife jerked his head for Frank to come farther into the room. "Come in and join the party," he said. "We're just about to play a game called, *Cut-throat*. The rules are pretty simple really, Frankie boy. You give me what I want, or I'll cut your girlfriend's fucking throat!"

"Connie," Frank breathed between stiff lips.

"Don't call me that, Frankie boy. You know how much I hate it." He pulled Karla's head further back, emphasising his point.

"What are you doing here. What do you want?" As he spoke, Frank eased his way towards the cupboard beside the fireplace.

"Cut the crap and sit down," Conrad Hunter ordered.

Frank did just that, glad to be off his feet, because his legs felt close to collapse.

He tried to reassure Karla with a look that everything was going to be alright, that he'd handle this, but her eyes were wide and glazed, blinking fast. Frank wondered if she was even aware of him right then.

Conrad Hunter sat with his arm draped around her shoulders, so he could keep the knife at her throat. Apart from the knife and tape, they might have been any ordinary couple cuddling up in a big, soft armchair, ready to watch their favourite film.

But the film running through Frank's mind right then was one that ended in tragedy - both him and Karla dead. There was no way that Conrad Hunter could let them live after this little show.

"Where are they, Frankie boy?"

"Where are what?"

"Don't fuck me around. You know what. The damned photos!" Karla's eyes flicked back and forth between the two men as they talked, her nostrils flaring wide as the point of the knife drew a fresh bead of blood from her skin.

"Okay! Okay!" Frank shouted, holding up his hand. "Stop it and I'll get them for you."

"Where are they?"

Frank pointed at the cupboard beside the fireplace, raising his eyebrows. Conrad Hunter nodded for him to proceed and Frank got up, walking to the cupboard, keeping it shielded with his body.

"Hold it," Conrad Hunter said.

Frank froze, his hand on the knob, his heart beating wildly.

"Don't try anything stupid, Frankie boy."

Keeping his back to Conrad Hunter, Frank allowed himself a small smile, flicking the tip of his tongue over his scar as he took a deep breath and opened the door.

It stuck fast.

No! No not now. Please, not now.

Giving the handle a twist sideways as he pulled, Frank felt the door give and open wide. Breathing a silent sigh of relief, he slid his hand into the cupboard and grasped the object inside.

Turning, Frank quickly rose to his feet, the gun he'd taken off Cole Bell, pointing at Conrad Hunter's chest.

The man just sat there, a big smile still spread across his face - as though he were enjoying some private joke.

"You haven't got the balls," he said.

Standing up, Conrad Hunter closed the flick knife and slid it into his pocket. Crossing his arms, he raised one eyebrow slightly, as if asking - what now?

Frank took a steady breath, feeling cold but in control.

"You know something, Frankie boy? You're just like that slut of a daughter of yours. It was a hoot tossing her off that bridge, it really was."

The words hit Frank like a punch in the guts.

“So you did kill her, you bastard,” he breathed, his voice soft and low as the rage gripped him again.

“So what’re you going to do about it, big man? You haven’t got Jeff to back you up now, have you? Always did protect you, didn’t he? Never could figure that one out. Why he gave you all the cushy jobs like he did. He looked after you like a brother, didn’t he? Like he should have looked after me - me, his real brother. Not some cocksucker like you. What did you do for him that was so special, Frankie boy?”

The word cocksucker reverberated around Frank’s head.

Cocksucker. Cocksucker.

His eyes glazed.

He was thrown onto a hard bunk, his face bouncing off the metal frame.

He was pulled to his knees and men pounded into him, taking him from behind, the camera flashing in his face over and over again, synchronising with the shouted words.

Cocksucker. Cocksucker.

The bunk vibrated and he was tossed about until his head rang with them.

COCKSUCKER. COCKSUCKER.

Finally, as the pain and rage built to a crescendo that Frank thought would surely blow him apart, a train burst through the bunk from below, slamming straight through his body . . .

And Frank suddenly ran, screaming his rage, rushing across the room, pulling the trigger of the gun over and over again as he went.

*

From the moment that Frank had walked into the lounge, Karla had tried to warn him with her eyes.

The man had searched the cottage from top to bottom, including the cupboard by the fireplace, removing the gun he found there with a knowing twist of his lips.

“So, Frankie boy,” he’d said quietly, “all prepared were we?” Looking over at her, the man hefted the gun in the palm of his hand, a quizzical look on his face as he noticed her expression.

Karla couldn’t believe her eyes. Frank with a gun! What the hell was he doing with a gun? No, the man must have put it there himself for some reason.

Karla watched him fiddle with the weapon, heard a snick as something slid out. Catching it in his other hand, he slipped it into his jacket pocket, then put the gun back in the cupboard.

Then he came and sat on the arm of her chair, looking down at her. She felt the excitement in his body, a sort of tension that brought his eyes alive. After sitting there for some time, he left the room but was soon back, her mobile phone in his hand.

“So here’s how it goes,” he said. “You’re going to make a call and tell Frankie boy that you’re waiting here for him.”

He tugged off the tape covering Karla’s mouth, and she gasped as the glue tore at her skin. Taking a deep shuddering breath, she shook her head.

“No,” she said.

“No?”

“No, I won’t do it.”

The blow took Karla by surprise and her head snapped to one side. For a moment she couldn’t think, but her thoughts quickly cleared when he grabbed her by the hair and forced her head back so he could look into her eyes. She saw only a painful death there.

“You’ll do what—” The man unexpectedly stopped, cocking his head to one side.

Then Karla heard it too. The sound of a motorbike coming down the track outside.

Crossing to the window, the man looked out, nodding, as though happy.

“Frank, get out! Call the police! Get out!”

The rest of Karla’s shouted warnings were silenced as the man rushed back to her side and slapped the tape back in place.

“Shut it, you stupid bitch,” he said, sitting down on the arm of the chair, holding the knife to her neck. “If you want him dead, you’re going the right way about it.”

The look of shock on Frank’s face when he entered the room made Karla’s heart sink.

The man told Frank to sit down. He did so, staring at her captor with a look that made her feel uncomfortable.

The man asked about some photos, and with a nod, Frank indicated that they were in the cupboard. The man nodded back that Frank should get them.

The next thing Karla knew, Frank was threatening the man with the useless gun.

As Frank levelled the gun at him, Karla could feel the man chuckling to himself. Then he stood up and began taunting Frank with a foul-mouthed tirade.

Seeing Frank’s temper rising, Karla struggled against her bonds, trying to call out to him as she saw his finger whitening on the trigger.

“Please God no,” she pleaded from behind her gag. “No Frank. Don’t. Please don’t.”

But her pleas were in vain, because Frank seemed to be beyond reason, somewhere else.

Then suddenly, he was screaming at the top of his voice, charging across the room, repeatedly pulling the trigger as he came.

If the gun had been loaded, her captor would have gone down under a rain of bullets.

As it was, he moved behind her chair, then quickly reappeared with the baseball bat. Frank dropped to the floor with a thud as the man struck out, catching him in the arm and ribs. The gun skittered across the hardwood floor, fetching up against the wall next to the open lounge door.

Taking his time, the man walked across to the gun and picked it up. Slipping in the clip, he clicked a bullet into place, then shook his head. "Do you really take me for such an idiot, Frankie boy?" he said. "You never were the brightest bulb in the pack were you?"

Frank groaned, sitting up and leaning back against the settee for support. His left arm dangled by his side and Karla wondered whether it was broken.

"The photos, Frankie boy. Where are the photos?" The gun was steady and pointing straight at Karla's head.

"I haven't got them," Frank answered helplessly, looking over at Karla with large, sad eyes.

"Then who the hell has? I'm not going to ask you again."

Karla felt her heart freeze as the gun was pressed against her temple. She heard a click and closed her eyes, waiting to die.

"I have," a deep voice said from the doorway.

Karla's gaze swivelled to the door.

A big man was standing on the threshold, hands behind his back, his deep blue eyes surveying the room.

"You got them, then?" Frank whispered, cradling his ribs with his good arm.

"Jeff," Conrad Hunter said, his face losing all colour. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I warned you what would happen last time, didn't I? I told you what I'd do if I caught you fiddling with kiddies again."

"But Jeff, I can explain. It's not what you think. Really it's not. Those photos you've got, they're old ones, from before."

The big man walked into the lounge and stood looking down at Frank.

"Frank," he said, with a slight nod of his head.

"Jeff," Frank acknowledge with his own nod.

"So, is this true then? Are these old photos?"

"He killed my daughter, Jeff. Threw her in front of a fucking train."

"You lying bastard!"

The shout made them all turn. Conrad Hunter was standing with legs apart, gun aimed at Frank's chest, his finger already whitening on the trigger.

"I'll kill you for that!"

Nobody saw the big man move, but the next thing anyone knew, the gun went off, the bullet smashing harmlessly through the lounge window.

Conrad Hunter was down on his knees, clawing at the long bicycle chain that was now wrapped around his neck.

Jeffrey Hunter held the other end, just as though he were taking his pet dog for a walk.

Conrad Hunter fell to his side, mouth opening and closing as he struggled for breath, face turning a deep red, lips a light blue.

Jeffrey Hunter slowly knelt by his brother's side, picking him up like a child. He kissed him on the forehead, then stood, turning to Frank.

"He's my brother," he said. "I'm sorry but I thought I had no choice at the time. The man was blackmailing him. He was family. I had to protect him."

"I know," Frank said, struggling to his feet.

Karla was at a loss as to what they were talking about, only able to follow the big man's steps with tear-filled eyes as he nodded at Frank and left the room, his dead brother in his arms.

A few seconds later she heard the front door shut with a bang.

Chapter 42

It had been almost four years since she'd been kidnapped, but as Karla sat in the bright sunshine, staring out over the loch, she still couldn't shake the memory of that horrible night from her mind.

Her daughter ran across the tufted grass chasing a butterfly, screeching in pleasure as she grabbed at it. But it escaped her, fluttering off over the water. Changing direction, she ran straight at Karla, landing in her lap in a heap of childish giggles.

"Can we go home now mummy?"

"In a little while darling. Just a few more minutes, I promise."

Karla watched as her daughter ran off again, smiling as she nearly fell in the long grass. "Be careful, Mandy," she called, thinking how like Frank her daughter looked.

Karla's smile slowly faded as the yearning filled her stomach yet again - a kind of trembling emptiness that she knows will never be filled. Not really wanting to relive the past, but unable to lock the memories out, she closed her eyes and sighed. But then she'd come up here to do just this, hadn't she? Every year on this day, she came and sat beside the loch that Frank had loved so much, remembering the last time she'd seen him.

They'd meet up in a lay-by on the A9 - him on his bike, she in her car. He was already there when she arrived, sitting astride his big machine, looking larger than life in his new leathers and bright blue helmet.

When he saw her car pull up, he got off his bike and walked over to her. She got out of the car and faced him, mouth dry, stomach knotted, realising that this was the last time she would ever see him.

"Karla—" he began.

She hushed him with a finger against his mouth, feeling the familiar indented scar on his upper lip. "I've made up my mind, Frank," she said. The hardest words she'd ever uttered - words that left her dead inside.

He just nodded, a sad smile on his face. "I know," he answered quietly.

Fishing in his pocket, he pulled something out and gave it her. "Here, take this," he said. "I won't be needing it where I'm going."

"What is it?" she asked, opening the envelope and pulling out the cheque inside. Her eyes widened when she saw the amount it was made out for. "But I can't—"

"Yes you can. For me, please."

And she had agreed.

Karla had agreed because she'd already felt the first stirrings of life in her belly, and knew that the money would ensure their baby had a good life and education.

"I still don't understand," Frank had called, remounting his bike.

Karla said nothing, just looked at him with tears misting her eyes.

"I thought you loved me, Karla. I really thought you loved me."

His words wrenched right through her and she felt the first tear roll down her cheek. "I do love you," she screamed at him in her mind. "I do love you, but I can't live with a man who could so cold-bloodedly kill someone, no matter what the provocation."

Frank blipped the throttle, gave her one last look over his shoulder, and pulled out on to the road. There was little traffic and she stood watching him until he'd grown so small that she could no longer see him.

Then she'd stood watching the space where he'd disappeared, until her eyes grew too tired to stare any longer.

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