

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 loosing 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.

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