

# BODY LANGUAGE



A.K. Turner's first foray into crime fiction was a detective thriller trilogy, written under the pen name Anya Lipska, following the adventures of Janusz Kiszka, a fixer to London's Polish community. All three books won critical acclaim and were twice optioned as a possible TV series. In her other life as a TV producer and writer, A.K. makes documentaries and docudramas on subjects as diverse as the Mutiny on the Bounty, the sex lives of Neanderthals, and Monty Don's Italian Gardens.

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*For Katy*  
*And in memory of Ann Edwards – the real ‘Mrs E’*

# Chapter One

The zip of the body bag parted to reveal Cassie's first customer of the day. The woman's half-open eyes, a surprisingly vivid blue, gazed up at her, unseeing.

'Hello there, Mrs Connery.' Her voice became gentler than the one she used with the living. 'My name's Cassie Raven and I'll be looking after you while you're with us.' She had no doubt that the dead woman could hear her and hoped she took some comfort from the words.

The previous evening Kate Connery had collapsed while getting ready for bed and died, there on her bathroom floor one week short of her fiftieth birthday. Laughter lines latticed her open, no-nonsense face beneath hair too uniformly brunette to be natural.

Cassie glanced up at the clock and swore. There was a new pathologist coming in to do the day's post-mortem list and with Carl, the junior technician, off sick and three bodies to prep, it was shaping up to be the Monday from hell.

Still, she took her time working Mrs C's nightdress up over her head, registering the faint ammoniac smell of sweat or urine, before carefully folding it away in a plastic bag. The things somebody had been wearing when they died meant a lot to their loved ones, sometimes more than the body itself, which

grieving relatives could struggle to relate to. A dead body could feel like an empty suitcase.

‘We need to find out what happened to you, Mrs C,’ Cassie told her. ‘So that we can get Declan and your boys some answers.’

From her first day in the mortuary five years ago it had felt totally natural to talk to the bodies in her care, to treat them as if they were still alive – still people. Occasionally they would even answer.

It wasn’t like a live person talking – for a start, their lips didn’t move – and the experience was always so fleeting that she might almost have imagined it. *Almost*. Usually they said something like ‘*Where am I?*’ or ‘*What happened?*’ – simple bewilderment at finding themselves in this strange place – but now and again she was convinced that their words contained a clue to how they’d died.

Cassie had never told a living soul about these ‘conversations’; people thought she was weird enough already. But they didn’t know what she knew deep in her gut: the dead could talk – if only you knew how to listen.

The only outward sign of anything wrong with Mrs Connery was a few red blotches on her cheeks and forehead and a fist-sized bruise on her sternum where either her husband or the paramedics had administered desperate CPR. Cassie looked through the notes. After a night out at the pub watching football, Declan Connery had come home to find his wife unconscious. An ambulance rushed her to the hospital, but she was declared dead on arrival.

Since Kate Connery had died unexpectedly – she’d apparently been in good health and hadn’t seen her GP for months – a basic or ‘routine’ post-mortem to establish the cause of death was an automatic requirement.

Cassie put her hand on Mrs C's fridge-cold forearm and waited for her own warmth to expel the chill. 'Can you tell me what happened?' she murmured.

For a few seconds, nothing. Then she felt the familiar slip-sliding sensation, followed by a distracted dreaminess. At the same time, her senses became hyper-alert – the hum of the body-store fridge growing to a jet-engine roar, the overhead light suddenly achingly bright.

The air above Mrs Connery's body seemed to fizz with the last spark of the electricity that had animated her for five decades. And out of the static Cassie heard a low, hoarse whisper.

*'I can't breathe!'*



## Chapter Two

As always, it was all over in an instant. It reminded Cassie of waking from an intense dream, your mind scrabbling to hold onto the details – only to feel them slipping away, like water through open fingers.

In any case, Mrs Connery's words weren't much help. Cassie could find no history of asthma or emphysema in the notes, and there was a whole bunch of other disorders that could affect breathing. She was still wondering what, if anything, to make of it when she heard the door from the clean area open. It was Doug, the mortuary manager, followed by a younger guy – tall, with a floppy fringe – who he introduced as Dr Archie Cuff, the new pathologist.

Stripping off a nitrile glove, she offered Cuff her hand.

'Cassie Raven is our senior mortuary technician,' beamed Doug. 'She's the one who makes everything run like clockwork round here.'

Although he wore cufflinks (*cufflinks?!)* and a tie, Cuff couldn't be much more than thirty, barely five years older than Cassie. A single glance told her that his navy waxed jacket was a genuine Barbour, not a knock-off – its metal zipper fob embossed with the brand name – and going by his tie, a dark blue silk with a slanting fat white stripe, he'd been schooled at

Harrow. Cassie noticed things like that, had done ever since she could remember.

‘Looking forward to working with you, Cathy.’ He spoke in the fake, demi-street accent favoured by the younger royals, his smile as glib as a cabinet minister’s, but it was clear from the way his glance slid over her that she’d already been filed in a box labelled ‘minion’.

Cassie didn’t often take an instant dislike to someone, but in the case of Archie Cuff she decided to make an exception.

‘Me too,’ she said, ‘especially if you get my name right.’

A flush rose from Cuff’s striped shirt collar all the way to his gingery sideburns, but at least he looked at her properly this time. And from the flicker of distaste that crossed his face, he didn’t much like what he saw – although it was hard to tell whether it was her dyed black hair with the shaved undercut, her facial piercings, or simply the way she held his gaze. She had to fight a juvenile impulse to lift the top half of her scrubs and flash her tattoos at him.

Doug’s eyes flitted between the two of them like a rookie referee at a cage fight, his smile starting to sag. ‘Right then, I’ll leave you folks to it.’ Cassie knew he would probably remind her later of his golden rule: *‘Never forget, the pathologist can make your job a dream – or a nightmare.’*

After Cuff’s brief external examination of Mrs Connery, during which they barely spoke beyond the essentials, he left Cassie to do the evisceration.

She placed her blade at the base of Mrs C’s throat. This was the moment when she had to stop thinking of Kate Connery as a person and start viewing her as a puzzle to be unlocked,

unmapped territory to explore. Without that shift of perspective, what normal person could slice open a fellow human being?

After the initial incision, a decisive sweep down the sternum laid open the tissue as easily as an old silk curtain. Reaching the soft gut area, she didn't pause but let up the pressure to avoid damage to the organs beneath, ending the cut just above the pubic bone.

Within five minutes, the bone shears had cracked open Mrs C's ribcage, exposing her heart and lungs, and Cassie was deftly detaching the organs from their moorings. Once that was done, she used both hands to lift out the entire viscera, from tongue down to urethra, before delivering them gently into the waiting plastic pail. This was a sombre moment, which always made her feel like a midwife of death.

Now for the brain. Going behind Mrs C's head, Cassie repositioned the block beneath her neck. The scalp incision would go from ear to ear over the top of the head, so that once it was stitched up again the wound would be covered by her hair – especially important since the Connerys were having an open coffin funeral. Combing the front half of Mrs C's thick dark hair forward over her face, Cassie noticed a shiny red patch on the scalp. Eczema? It hadn't been mentioned in the medical notes, but in any case, eczema didn't kill people.

After peeling the bisected scalp forward and back to expose the skull, Cassie reached for the oscillating saw. Moments later she had eased off the skullcap and was coaxing the brain free. Cradling it in both hands for a moment, she imagined Kate Connery as she would have been in life – a down-to-earth matriarch with a ready laugh, surrounded by family and friends in a Camden Town boozier.

When Archie Cuff returned in his scrubs, the atmosphere between them stayed chilly: in the forty minutes it

took him to dissect Mrs C's organs, he only spoke to Cassie once, to complain that the blade of his PM40 was blunt. That only confirmed her initial impression of him as the latest in a long line of arrogant posh boys who viewed mortuary technicians as one step up from abattoir workers. A more experienced pathologist would have asked her opinion on the cause of death, and not just to be polite: technicians spent far longer with the bodies and sometimes spotted clues that might otherwise be missed.

As Cuff moved along the dissection bench to rinse his bloodied gloved hands in the sink, Cassie started to collect Mrs C's organs into a plastic bag, ready to be reunited with her body.

'So, what's the verdict?' she asked him.

'There's nothing conclusive to account for her death.' He shrugged. 'We'll have to wait and see whether the lab finds anything useful.' Toxicology would test Mrs C's bodily fluids for drugs, while samples of her organs would undergo histopathology to look for any microscopic signs of disease.

'Did you find any petechiae in her lungs?' asked Cassie, keeping her voice casual.

Cuff turned to look at her. 'Why do you ask?'

*So he had.*

She lifted one shoulder 'I just thought her face looked quite congested.'

*I can't breathe.*

Petechiae – tiny burst blood vessels – could signal a lack of oxygen.

Cuff looked flustered. 'She was found face down. It's clear from the latest literature that a prone position post-mortem can cause petechial haemorrhage.' He managed a condescending smile. 'If

you were hoping for a juicy murder, I'm afraid you're out of luck: there's absolutely no evidence of strangulation or suffocation.'

Cassie knew as well as Cuff did that asphyxia could just as easily have a medical cause, but she stifled a comeback. Dropping a nugget of kidney into a pot of preservative for the lab, she caught sight of Mrs C's body on the autopsy table – her ribcage butterflied like an open book, a dark void where her organs used to be. Above the ruined body, her shiny brunette hair looked out of place.

The light from the fluorescent tubes overhead flared, forcing Cassie to close her eyes, the ever-present reek of formalin suddenly harsh enough to claw at her throat. Behind her eyelids, images flickered: Mrs C's blotched face, the scaly patch on her scalp. She felt her throat start to close and in an instant, everything clicked into place.

'Just popping to the loo,' she told Cuff, before slipping into the corridor, where she pulled out her phone.

'Mr Connery? It's Cassie Raven from the mortuary.'

Ten minutes later she was back. 'Sorry I took so long,' she told Cuff. 'But I just had an interesting conversation with Mrs Connery's husband.'

'Husband . . . ?' He sounded confused at the idea of a body having a spouse.

'Yes. Before he went out last night, she told him she was going to colour her hair.'

'I don't see what . . .'

'He says that she had suffered allergic reactions to her hair dye twice before. Nothing too serious. But this time, it looks like it triggered a fatal anaphylactic shock.'

## Chapter Three

‘It’s only me, Babcia!’ Cassie had learned the hard way that it was a good idea to announce her arrival when letting herself in to her grandmother’s place, which had become her childhood home, after her parents died. Once, when she was seventeen, she’d nearly got a rolling pin over the head, crashing in at three in the morning off her face on MDMA.

As a little girl, she’d always loved this moment of leaving the wind-lashed concrete walkway and stepping into the flat’s toasty, cinnamon-smelling interior, as if the doorway was some kind of magic portal to another world.

‘Cassandra, *tygrysek!*’ Her grandmother turned from the stove to greet her. The top of her head barely reached Cassie’s nose, but her hug was fierce enough to crack a rib. ‘You’ve lost weight,’ she observed, accusingly.

‘No thanks to you.’ Cassie sniffed the air. ‘Mushrooms and sour cream. With . . . dumplings. And poppyseed cake for afters?’

Her grandmother looked up at her through narrowed eyes. ‘The mushrooms of course you can smell, but what about the dumplings?’

Cassie ran a finger along the worktop edge and showed her grandmother the trace of white dust on its tip. ‘You’ve either been making kopytka or bread – and I can’t smell yeast.’

‘And the poppyseed cake?’

‘There’s a new copy of that magazine you like in the hall. Which means you’ve been to the Polish shop in Islington – and you never go there without buying makowiec.’

‘Go and sit down, clever-clogs.’ Unable to suppress a smile, her grandmother shooed her out of the kitchen.

In the front room, Cassie sank into an armchair and felt the warmth settle over her like a duvet, the only noise the comforting *pop pop* of the gas fire. Hard to believe now that as a teenager she’d seen the place as an overheated prison cell, with her grandmother as the beady-eyed chief warden. By the age of sixteen Cassie had already had her tongue pierced, put a turquoise flash in her hair, and smoked her first skunk. As for school, ‘*Cassie prefers to question her teachers rather than learn from them*’ went a typical report card. Back then, it had felt to her like the entire adult world was united in a single aim: to destroy her right to self-expression.

From the kitchen she heard ‘I’ve got something for you!’ – followed by the sound of the freezer door closing.

Babcia came in with her hands behind her back before holding out a long, rigid plastic-wrapped package. ‘Can you guess?’

Inside, Cassie found a squirrel, frozen stiff. Laying it face-up in her lap, she examined it as gently as she would one of her human charges – already picturing it restored to a kind of life through taxidermy, which she’d recently taken up.

A dead squirrel would seem like a seriously weird gift to most people, but then they didn’t know what Babcia knew – that ever since she was tiny, Cassie had been drawn to dead things. She could still remember the first time she’d seen a fox lying in the gutter, killed by a car. Bending to stroke the poor thing’s bristly

gingernut fur, she'd seen him transformed, just for a moment, restored to a frolicking cub.

'Aren't you beautiful?' She stroked the squirrel's pristine pelt – too perfect to be roadkill. 'Where did you find him?'

'I got it off the dustman. He owes me one.'

Cassie didn't like to ask what *that* meant: her grandmother waged a one-woman war in the tower block against graffiti, rubbish dumping, and other antisocial behaviour. A few weeks ago, she'd even confronted a drug dealer who was selling weed to schoolkids in the stairwell. But whenever Cassie tried to talk her out of such risky behaviour, the old lady raised her chin and said that she hadn't emigrated to a free country only to live in fear. Like Cassie, Weronika Janek had been a rebellious youth – with the difference that in 1950s Poland her involvement in protests against the communist regime had earned her six months in jail.

When the food was ready, Cassie folded out the old green baize card table her grandmother used for meals. As they ate, she mentioned the arrival of the new pathologist.

'And you don't like him.' Weronika's gaze was piercing.

'My opinion is irrelevant. I'm just one of the underlings.'

Except today, the underling had scored a small victory.

She told the story, leaving out the bit about hearing Mrs Connery say she couldn't breathe. Her conversations with the dead were too . . . *sacred* to be shared with anyone, even her grandmother. In any case, whenever she examined these moments rationally she had to admit that they could simply be her subconscious putting two and two together: for instance, hadn't she noticed the blotches on Mrs C's face *before* hearing her speak?

'Her husband told me she'd had outbreaks of hives before, after dyeing her hair.'



‘But she carried on using the same dye?’

‘She probably thought a bit of skin irritation was worth putting up with.’ The red patches on Mrs C’s face and neck hadn’t been eczema but the last traces of urticaria, an allergic rash. ‘Maybe her GP didn’t warn her that there was a serious risk her immune system would get more sensitised every time she coloured her hair. Yesterday it went into overdrive. Her airway swelled up so much she literally couldn’t breathe.’

‘Poor lady.’ Weronika crossed herself. ‘So, why didn’t the smartypants body doctor work it out?’

Cassie pictured again Archie Cuff’s astonished expression when he realised a lowly technician might have stumbled on the cause of Mrs Connery’s death. A couple of minutes later he’d signed a form ordering the specialist blood test needed to confirm the theory – all without saying a word.

*Twat.*

‘To be fair, they only get thirty to forty minutes for a routine post-mortem and anaphylaxis is notoriously difficult to diagnose after death.’

‘But *you* noticed something. You pick up small things that other people miss – you always did, even as a little girl.’ She pointed her fork at Cassie. ‘You should be one of the body doctors, you have the brains for it!’

Cassie’s shrug was sceptical – this was a well-worn argument between them. She knew she was a pretty good mortuary technician, but the idea of becoming a pathologist? It was laughable – like going from five-a-side knockabout in the park to playing for Arsenal. Medical school wasn’t for girls like her – semi-educated and raised in a council tower block – it was for people like Archie

Cuff; posh and male, who seemed to float through life on a bubble of unshakeable self-confidence.

‘What about those A levels you got at night school?’ Her grandmother counted them off on her fingers. ‘A’s in biology and chemistry, a B in physics. *And* an A star in classics!’

‘Which is about as much use as macramé.’

After leaving school with four poor GCSEs, Cassie had been consumed with the idea of escape: she loved her grandmother but back then, the near fifty-five-year age gap between them had felt like an unbridgeable chasm. Her ultimate dream had been to go abroad and live somewhere cool like Berlin, but when Mazz, her boyfriend at the time, told her about a room going begging in a squat in a disused office building in Chalk Farm, she decided it was better than nothing.

The day after her seventeenth birthday, bent under the weight of an overstuffed rucksack, Cassie had hugged her grandmother goodbye on the doorstep, both of them fighting back tears. But by the time Cassie reached the street her tears had dried, replaced by a rising sense of excitement: she was finally free, and starting adult life properly at last, answerable to no one.

After the relationship with Mazz fizzled out barely three months later, Cassie had stayed on at the squat, moving on to the next place after each inevitable eviction. You couldn’t call it a comfortable life – everyone was skint, and they often had no water or electricity – but her shifting band of housemates were an exhilarating mix of the crazy and the creative. Fiercely loyal to each other, they shared everything from food to drugs, and she had revelled in the freedom of living beyond the margins – at least for a while.

After about eighteen months of this vagabond life, Cassie was selling the *Big Issue* outside M&S one day when she had the chance encounter that would change everything. A stylish woman in her late forties stopped to buy the magazine and stayed to chat. A science teacher from the local adult education college, she quickly became a regular visitor, always bringing Cassie a sandwich and a cup of coffee.

Their conversations had ranged thrillingly wide, from how the eye perceived colour via the discovery of water on Mars, to the finding that Europeans had as much as five per cent Neanderthal DNA – encounters that sent Cassie’s brain firing off in all directions like a Catherine wheel. A few weeks later, she found herself signing up for science evening classes with Mrs Edwards – or Mrs E, as all her students called her. After a rocky start, Cassie had inhaled knowledge like a free diver coming up for air.

‘Well, I know one thing,’ Weronika was saying, ‘your mama, God rest her soul, would be so proud of you.’

Cassie followed her look to the photograph on the mantelpiece that showed a pretty girl in her late teens wearing a ruffle-necked blouse, her smile shy beneath auburn hair. Her mum had been just twenty-five, her dad a couple of years older, when they were killed in a car crash, victims of a teenage driver in a stolen Porsche. Orphaned at the age of four, Cassie could barely remember her mother beyond a handful of impressions – a soft cheek at bedtime, the watermelon sweetness of her perfume, a dress bedecked with giant orange poppies. For some reason, her memories of her dad were more vivid. Being carried on his shoulders through woodland, her hands clutched tight in his dark curls, the funny faces he would pull, playing airplane with

a forkful of some food she wouldn't eat – the same face that could stretch suddenly, thrillingly, into a scary monster.

'Babcia . . . how old was I when I started bringing home dead animals?'

Weronika looked up, startled. 'Oh, about four, or perhaps five. Our first house guest was a dead magpie you found in the walkway.'

'I remember! He had such beautiful plumage, I couldn't believe that something so perfect would never fly again.'

'It was the Devil's own job getting you to part with it,' chuckled Weronika. 'I told you that the dead body was just a wrapper – like an empty sweet packet – that its soul had already flown away. *Pfouff!*' She opened both hands in the air as if releasing a bird. 'In the end, I persuaded you that if we gave the poor thing a proper funeral, its body and soul would be reunited in heaven. I dug out a shoebox for a coffin, and you sprinkled some of my potpourri around the body.' She gave a hoot of laughter. 'We launched it in the canal like a dead Viking. It didn't stop you bringing dead things home, but at least they didn't turn into permanent lodgers.'

'Did you ever think of taking me to see a shrink?' Cassie took a sip of water, avoiding her grandmother's penetrating stare.

'Why do you say that?' – Babcia's tone sounding suddenly guarded.

'I don't know, a little kid collecting dead animals . . . it's not what most four-year-olds are into, is it?'

Not for the first time in her life, Cassie felt a distinct shift in the atmosphere. Something unspoken hung in the air, as if her grandmother was holding something back from her.

‘You didn’t need a head doctor,’ said her grandmother reaching out to enfold Cassie’s hands in her warm leathery grasp. ‘I understood. You were a little girl who had lost her mama.’

Cassie unlocked the door to her own ninth floor flat in a dilapidated council estate north of the canal. A third of the block was boarded up, but she’d been lucky to get it – being bumped up the housing list was one of the few perks of working for the NHS.

Inside, a sinuous movement in the darkness made her jump.

‘Macavity! Don’t do that!’ As the cat threaded himself through her legs, she imagined him laughing silently.

Stroking his silky head gave her a pang: he was the only one to greet her these days. It had been four months since the split with Rachel – about the same length of time they’d spent living together – but now that winter was starting to bite down, coming home to a cold and empty flat felt harder.

Cranking up the heating, she recalled what her grandmother had implied: that her childhood fascination with dead animals had been a way of dealing with the loss of her parents. Rachel – who was training to become a psychotherapist – would have agreed, having tried more than once to persuade Cassie that she might be suffering from something called ‘unresolved grief’. According to Rachel, Cassie found relationships difficult because she’d never properly processed her parents’ deaths.

*Psychobabble.*

For Cassie, her connection with the dead was a vocation, a gift that she’d been lucky enough to discover early in life. And if she had difficulty finding a partner who understood her, well, that wasn’t exactly unusual, was it?

On impulse, she did something she'd been resisting for months and opened Rachel's Facebook page. Annoyingly, her stomach still did a flip at the sight of that laughing freckled face. Then she saw the three words.

*In a relationship.*

She instantly closed the window. Well, it had been bound to happen sometime. She didn't regret the split, she told herself, the time had been right to move on. A treacherous thought bubbled up: *you're always moving on*. It struck Cassie that she'd be twenty-six in a few weeks and her longest relationship to date hadn't even made the six-month mark.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, her ex-lovers, male and female, would parade through her thoughts, repeating their complaints. *I can't reach you, Cassie . . . I never know what you're thinking . . . It's like you're behind glass*. All variations on a theme. Recently, they'd been joined by the memory of what Rachel said on the day she left. *I realise now that you're never going to let me in*. Her words sounded final, but her expression told Cassie that she was waiting for her to protest, to fight for her, to promise to change.

Maybe they were right, she thought. Maybe I'm just not cut out for relationships with the living.

Picking up the cat, she buried her face in his fur. When he objected, stiffening his legs against her chest, she put him back down. He stared up at her for a moment before looking away, the muscles of his back convulsing in a single, economical twitch of protest that made her smile. 'You and me are two of a kind, aren't we, Macavity? We're better off on our own.'

## Chapter Four

There was no better way of putting your own crappy little problems into perspective than looking after a bereaved family. The thought sprang into Cassie's mind the next morning as she led Mr and Mrs Middleton towards the dead body of their nineteen-year-old son Jake.

Jake Middleton had collapsed during rugby practice the previous afternoon. Despite being airlifted to hospital, he'd died of a cardiac arrest an hour later, defeating all attempts to resuscitate him. His mum and dad were away on holiday in Barcelona when it happened and had come straight from the airport that morning to see their boy.

Mrs Middleton's swollen eyes and ruined face spoke of a night of unimaginable grief, while her husband was so rigid with repressed emotion that he looked like he might shatter at a touch.

*My father loved me like that once*, thought Cassie suddenly – seeing her dad's encouraging smile as he pushed her along on a scooter. She felt conflicted – wanting to hold on to the new memory but unsettled by it arriving at such an inappropriate moment.

Ushering Jake's parents into the viewing suite, she closed the door behind them, using the moment to focus. 'So, when I open the curtains you'll see Jake through the glass lying in a

bed. He's got a coverlet over him, and a pillow under his head.' Preparing people for what they were about to see helped to dull the shock a little. And she had taken her time over Jake's appearance: combing his hair, cleaning the smears of mud from his face, and remembering to put a rolled-up towel under his neck – it tilted the head back, preventing the lower jaw from falling open.

'Just let me know when you're ready,' she said.

Mr Middleton nodded, impatient. The A&E staff nurse had mentioned that he was something big in the City and seeing the tidemark of dried shaving foam under one ear, Cassie felt a rush of pity: it must be hard for someone so used to being in control to come up against a problem that he couldn't fix.

She pulled on the cord that opened the curtains.

At the sight of her son's blade-clean profile, Jake's mum sagged, and might have crumpled without Cassie's steadying hand beneath her elbow. The father stayed dry-eyed, his face as immobile as a carved wooden mask: the type who in her experience might implode without warning.

'Can I . . . touch him?' Mrs Middleton's tear-wrecked face was hard to look at but Cassie held her gaze.

'Of course,' she said, opening the glass door for her.

After just a few minutes with his son, Jake's dad emerged alone, a strange half-smile on his face.

*Here we go,* thought Cassie.

'The doctor mentioned a . . . post-mortem.'

'Yes, Mr Middleton. The coroner has asked for one – to find out what caused Jake's death.'

He bent his head towards her. 'Listen to me,' his voice a low growl. 'You tell the coroner that if anyone lays a finger on that



boy – *my boy* – in there, I will make it my business to find him and to kill him.’

Cassie met his eyes. ‘I’d feel the same if he was my son. He’s such a beautiful boy, isn’t he?’

Mr Middleton looked confused for a moment, before nodding wordlessly, the long-suppressed tears spilling down his cheeks.

When Cassie saw them out more than an hour later, Mr Middleton was no longer threatening blue murder against anyone who touched his son, and had even agreed that maybe it would help to know what had taken Jake from them.

In the loo, Cassie replaced her lip rings and eyebrow bolt and scooped the top layer of hair back into its usual topknot, exposing the shaved undercut arching above her right ear. She always toned down her look for a family viewing, knowing that some people, especially the older generation, found it off-putting. It was a bit of a chore, but she didn’t mind: making the bereaved feel as comfortable as possible trumped everything.

Maybe it had become something more than that over the years, she realised: a ritual marking the borderline between her work with the living and the dead.

It was a relief to get back to the autopsy suite, where a body-bagged figure lay waiting on her table. Carl, the junior technician, back at work after his day off sick, had thoughtfully retrieved her customer from the fridge for the midday PM list.

‘Heavy viewing?’ He looked up from laying out the clean sample pots.

‘Aren’t they all?’

Carl nodded. Although only twenty-two and a relative newbie, he already knew the score: the toughest part of the job wasn’t dealing with the dead, it was looking after their grieving relatives.

There was a crackle of heavy-duty plastic as Cassie unzipped the body bag. But she'd only got it open as far as the collarbone when she stepped back, her breath trapped in her throat.

She must have made some kind of noise, because the next thing she knew Carl was next to her, putting his hand under her elbow just like she'd done with Mrs Middleton.

'Cassie? What's up?'

'It's . . . this lady.' She pointed to the body-bag label, amazed at how calm her voice sounded. 'Geraldine Edwards. I know her.'