

# THE CUTTING PLACE

Jane Casey has written ten crime novels for adults and three for teenagers. A former editor, she is married to a criminal barrister who ensures her writing is realistic and as accurate as possible.

This authenticity has made her novels international bestsellers and critical successes. The Maeve Kerrigan series has been nominated for many awards: in 2015 Jane won the Mary Higgins Clark Award for *The Stranger You Know* and Irish Crime Novel of the Year for *After the Fire*. In 2019, *Cruel Acts* was chosen as Irish Crime Novel of the Year at the Irish Book Awards. It was a *Sunday Times* bestseller.

Born in Dublin, Jane now lives in southwest London with her husband and two children.

 @JaneCaseyAuthor

Also by Jane Casey

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# THE CUTTING PLACE

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*For Claire Graham*



‘Ask yourself “Am I satisfied that I have done all I can?”’

from the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and  
Harassment and Honour Based Violence (DASH 2009)  
Risk Identification and Assessment  
Checklist for Police Staff  
*Laura Richards, BSc, Msc, FRSA*





# 1

For a few moments, it was the quietest place in London. The area under the footbridge was as hushed as a chapel while the black mortuary van was pulling away. A little group of us had gathered there to show our respects, photograph-still: uniformed officers, forensic investigators, a team from the Marine Police unit in their wetsuits, a pair of detectives and a small grey-haired woman in waterproofs and rubber boots standing to one side, her arms folded. Then the van disappeared from view and the picture dissolved into movement. Back to work. Life goes on.

The woman in waterproofs turned to me.

‘Is that it, then? Can I go?’

‘Not yet, if you don’t mind. I need to hear your account of what happened.’

Kim Weldon gave a deep, testy sigh. ‘I’ve been here for hours. I’ve told you everything I know already.’

She hadn’t told me, because I’d only been there for a few minutes, but I decided not to point that out. I was used to arriving at a crime scene last of all, the detective sergeant coming in with a notebook and a pen and an endless list of questions when everyone just wanted to go home. ‘I know it’s frustrating, Mrs Weldon, but we’ll try not to keep you for

much longer. Do you need to let someone know you're running late?'

She shook her head. 'I live alone since my husband died. No one's waiting for me. But I got here at five this morning and I'm tired.'

'Early start.' The comment came from over my shoulder, where DI Josh Derwent had apparently decided to take an interest in the conversation. 'That's keen.'

'Of course. It's the best time to be here. Before all of . . . *this*.' She gestured at the footbridge over our heads, where the tide of commuters heading to work in the City formed a second river, flowing as ceaselessly as the Thames towards the great dome of St Paul's. 'It's so busy now. I can't even *think*.'

It seemed quiet enough to me, but Derwent nodded. 'Let's find somewhere more peaceful where we can talk. A café, or—'

'The best place to talk around here is down there.' She gestured over the wall to the foreshore, a strip of shingle a few metres wide that extended to the left and right along the river bank. 'I can show you where I was. Easier than having to describe it all.'

'How do we get down there?' I asked.

'There are steps.' She set off towards them, moving briskly, and we followed her obediently. 'But you'll have to come down one at a time and mind how you go. It's steep and it gets slippery.'

The steps were concrete and more like a ladder than stairs. The treads were so narrow I had to step sideways, juggling my bag and clipboard awkwardly, off balance. My long coat threatened to trip me up at every step. Kim Weldon was short and had a low centre of gravity, unlike me, so that explained why she had found it easy. On the other hand, Derwent was taller than me – just – and he had rattled down in no time, as light on his feet as a boxer despite his broad-shouldered build. He stood at the foot of the thirty or so steps and watched my progress, which didn't help.

‘You could come down backwards.’

‘This is fine.’

‘Do you need a hand?’

‘I can manage.’

‘Only we all have other places to be.’

‘I know,’ I said through gritted teeth, concentrating on placing my feet carefully. The shingle below shimmered in the morning light, out of focus and dizzy-making.

‘Like a cat coming down a tree. I can call the fire brigade out to rescue you if you like. It’s not as if Trumpton have anything better to do.’

‘I’m fine,’ I snapped, and ignored the hand he reached up to help me down the last few steps. He stuck it back in his coat pocket with a grin that I also ignored as I made it to the shingle at last. Kim Weldon was watching us with interest. Considering I spent so much time assessing witnesses it shouldn’t have surprised me to remember it was a two-way process. I tried to see us as she might: officialdom in dark trouser-suits and polished shoes, Derwent’s hair cropped close to his head in a way that hinted at a military background, broodingly handsome. I was younger than him as well as junior in rank and aimed to be as neat, though my hair was already beginning to spiral free from the bun I’d trapped it in. We stepped around each other with the practised ease of longstanding dance partners. As a rule, Derwent was rude enough to me that even people who knew us well suspected we were sleeping together, or hated each other, or both. The truth was that we’d never slept together, and I only hated him from time to time. We were closer than most colleagues, it was fair to say – friends, after all we’d been through together. There was also the fact that he was my landlord. I currently lived in a one-bedroom flat he owned, though I fully intended to look for somewhere else to live. I just hadn’t got around to it yet. We bickered like children and trusted each other’s instincts without even thinking about it.

No wonder Mrs Weldon looked puzzled.

‘Where do we need to go?’ I asked her.

‘Along here.’ She gestured to the left of the bridge. ‘That’s the way I went this morning. I came down the steps around five, as I said. Sunrise is about half past five at this time of year but it was starting to get light. I could see well enough without a head torch.’

‘Do you do this often?’ Derwent asked.

‘Most days.’ She smiled, looking out across the river and breathing deeply. The air was fresh down by the water, and the hum of the city seemed to recede. Seagulls hovered overhead, peevish and mocking as they floated on the cool spring breeze. ‘This is my place. I’m a licensed mudlarker. I take what the river chooses to give me, whether it’s treasure or trash.’

‘Treasure?’ Derwent scuffed the shingle with the toe of his shoe. ‘What kind of treasure?’

‘Nothing valuable, exactly. But items of historical interest. And sometimes the trash is interesting too.’ She bent and picked up a small white tube. ‘What do you think this is?’

I peered at it. ‘A bit of china?’

‘It’s the stem of a clay pipe. I can’t date this without having the bowl, and the bowls are harder to find, but it could be from the 1600s. The pipes were in common use up to Victorian times. When they broke, they couldn’t be repaired and people would chuck them into the river.’

‘An antique fag end.’

She looked at Derwent sharply, her eyes bright. ‘You don’t see the appeal, Inspector. But that’s a little piece of London’s history. The man or woman who smoked it is long gone and forgotten, but we know they were here. I might be the first person to touch it since they flung it in the water.’

‘What sort of things do you find?’ I asked.

‘I’ve found Roman glass once or twice, and coins, and bits of pottery. Last year I found a medieval die made out of bone. How did it end up here? Maybe someone flicked it into the river because they’d had a run of bad luck, or maybe they

stumbled as they boarded a skiff to cross to the other bank and it fell out of their pocket. There are a hundred possibilities, a hundred stories in one small scrap of history. My favourite was a bone hairpin that was a thousand years old. That's in the Museum of London, now, with my name recorded as the person who found it. That pin will still be there long after I'm gone too.'

'And people will know you were here,' I said.

The fan of wrinkles around her eyes deepened as she grinned. 'Everybody wants to leave a trace of themselves behind, after all – some evidence they walked the earth. One day someone might be grateful I was in the right place at the right time to find something special. That keeps me coming back.'

'So what was different about this morning?' I asked.

'Nothing. Everything was the same as usual. At least it was until I found it. Then everything went sideways.' A low chuckle. Kim Weldon struck me as the kind of person who didn't allow herself to be unsettled by anything; if what she had found upset her, she had got over it by now.

But I noticed she said 'it', rather than what she had found.

'Where were you when you saw it?'

She pointed. 'See the white stripe on the wall? I was halfway between here and there. I always give myself a marker to reach because it's too easy to get distracted and forget to keep an eye on the tide. You can get caught out – never happens to me but I've seen other people get soaked. So I always give myself a limited search area and then I go once I've covered it.'

A Thames Clipper barrelled past, ferrying commuters up the river, and the wake sent a wave that splashed over one of Derwent's shoes. He stepped back quickly, swearing under his breath, shaking his foot.

'It's all right, the water is quite clean these days. They've even found seahorses down the river, near Greenwich, so it's fresh. But you really need boots like mine, and you need to

be more respectful of the river.' She looked wistful. 'I've seen grown men tipped over by a wave like that.'

'I'll bear it in mind.' From his tone of voice, I strongly suspected that he wouldn't be returning to the foreshore any time soon if he could help it, boots or no boots.

'This way.' The slight, upright figure crunched away from us to where a wooden post stuck out of the shingle, frayed with age and the action of the water. 'They used to tie up barges here.' She pointed at the sandy edge of the river. 'This is where it was.'

*It.*

'And it was just lying there?' I checked.

She looked baffled. 'What else would it be doing?'

'No, I meant – it wasn't buried, or wrapped in anything?'

'No, no. It was lying there on the shingle. I thought it was a tree root at first – you do get them washed down the river from upstream where the banks are overgrown. I was going to take a picture of it to put on my Facebook page, because it looked like a hand. But then, when I got a bit closer, I thought it looked a bit too much like a hand. And then, of course . . .' She shrugged. 'It *was* a hand.'

'Did you touch it?' Derwent asked.

'Before I knew what it was. I turned it over. It was palm down, with the fingers curled under it, you see.' She held up her own hand to demonstrate, a loose fist with knuckles to the sky. 'Then when I felt it, I knew it couldn't be a root. Too soft. Too much give in it. But it wasn't until I saw the fingernails that I was sure. It was such a strange thing to find that I couldn't quite admit to myself what it was. I took some pictures of it and where I found it and then I picked it up. I was afraid it would be washed away before anyone came to recover it.'

'You must have had a shock,' I said.

'Well, you expect to find bones here – this was London's rubbish dump for thousands of years, and this area in particular was full of markets. But the bones tend to belong to sheep or

pigs or cows. Sometimes you find a bit of a fox. I've never found a hand before.' She faced into the breeze and smiled. 'But then you never do know what the river will give you.'

At the top of the stairs, the Marine Unit were packing up to head back to their base at Wapping.

'Finished for the day, lads?' Derwent demanded as they went past us.

The sergeant stopped. He was mid-fifties and serious. 'Tide's coming in. We're not going to find anything else here today.'

They had found three other pieces of tattered bone and flesh that had all been carefully preserved in coolers for transportation to the mortuary along with the hand. Thinking of what Kim Weldon had said about animal remains, I asked, 'Are you sure that what you found is human?'

'No idea.' He heaved a bag onto his back. 'But the pathologist will tell you if it's not.'

'Where's the rest of the body?' Derwent asked. 'In the sea?'

'Could be. Could be we'll find some more bits in the next few days. We'll be looking. Where we find things has a lot to do with the tide and the shape of the river. The way the water moves through it depends on whether the banks are concave or convex. You get lots of stuff washing up around Greenwich, for instance, and at Wapping, and at Tower Bridge. You won't find as much on the opposite banks. So we have a few places to look.'

'I never really thought about the tide coming up the river,' I said. 'I thought it flowed out to the sea and that was it.'

He shook his head, not even trying to hide his scorn. 'Why do you think the flood barrier exists? There's a clue in the name, love.'

'I'm not saying I couldn't have worked it out,' I protested. 'I've never thought about it before.'

He grunted. Clearly I was worth even less of his time now, which was a shame because I needed his expert knowledge.

I tucked a stray curl of hair behind my ear, widening my eyes to play up the helpless look. 'As you can tell, I don't know much about this. The river flows in both directions, so does that mean we can't tell where the body parts might have gone in? Could they have been moved up here by the action of the tide?'

He wrinkled his forehead, considering it. 'The tide moves things up but then it moves them back again on the way out, if you see what I mean. That makes it hard to pinpoint where items enter the water. They sometimes wash around the same area for a while.'

'Could they have been dumped off a boat?' Derwent asked.

'Yeah. But why draw attention to yourself by hopping in a boat to dump body parts when you could slip them into the river from the shore? No one would have noticed if it was small parts, which is what we've found. People don't realise but the river is a busy place. You wouldn't want to be out there midstream and not know what you're doing.'

He was right. I'd never realised how busy the Thames was with constant boat traffic: commuter boats, tours, barges loaded with building materials, small speedboats and larger vessels crewed by competent-looking people in high-vis overalls.

'If the body parts turned up in this area, does this mean they were all thrown in the river here?'

'I wouldn't want to try to guess, love. But we only found four pieces. Better hope there's more to come.' He nodded briskly and strode away.

'Thanks for the help,' I called after him.

'I don't know much about this,' Derwent cooed in my ear. 'Please explain it to me, Mr Police Diver.'

'And did he explain it to me?'

'Sort of.'

'So it worked.' I put my notebook away. 'But don't get used to it.'



## 2

‘Hello, you two.’ The pathologist Dr Early barely looked up as we walked in; at the best of times she was a fast-moving blur in scrubs, humming with nervous energy, and she didn’t waste precious seconds on elaborate greetings. ‘I was wondering who was going to be lucky enough to get this one.’

‘Nothing like a nice easy case to start the week,’ I said.

‘And this is nothing like an easy case.’ Dr Early gathered an armful of files and headed for the door.

‘I was going to say that.’ Derwent was actually sulking as we followed the pathologist through the security doors that led to the morgue.

One of her assistants was photographing a collection of objects that lay on a metal table under the glare of a bright light. He was heavily built but he moved with precision and focus as he skirted the table.

‘Here we are.’ Dr Early slipped a pair of gloves on and pulled her mask up over her mouth and nose. ‘You need protective kit too. Then it’s jigsaw puzzle time.’

‘I’m not a doctor, but it looks as if you’re missing a few pieces,’ Derwent said before he tied his mask on.

‘And I’m not a detective but it looks as if it’s your job to find them.’ Dr Early raised her eyebrows at him meaningfully

and I smirked to myself under the cover of my own mask: victory to the pathologist.

None of us had forgotten where we were or what lay on the table beside us, but banter was one of the only ways to feel normal when your job involved looking closely at fragments of a human being. Not that I would have known what I was looking at, if I hadn't been told. No piece was bigger than a shoebox. The skin was yellowed, bleached by the river, and the flesh underneath it was pale and ragged, bloodless. White bone gleamed under the bright lights that shone on the table.

'So. What we've got are four pieces of what seems to be an adult female. She was probably IC1, probably light-haired and probably younger rather than older, but I'm not putting most of that in my initial report because it's an educated guess at the moment – it's purely for your benefit.'

'Why do you say it was a woman?' I asked.

'I'm going on the size of the hand and the joints that we've recovered – they would be average for an adult female. The muscle development and fat ratio suggests a reasonably fit, relatively young woman. The body hair was removed from the legs at the root – waxed, epilated, something like that. She had very fine light brown body hair on her hand and shoulder. And the fingernails were painted at some stage because I can see tiny traces of dark polish around the cuticles. It is still possible that it was a man, but I think it more likely we're looking at a woman. No tattoos, no scars, no distinguishing marks so far.'

'Any idea when she died?' Derwent asked.

'I'd guess she's been in the water for a couple of days. Do you want me to talk you through her piece by piece?'

'No, but you probably should.' Even with the mask obscuring most of his face, I could tell Derwent wasn't enjoying himself.

Dr Early pointed. 'This is an easy one. It's a right hand.'

'That's what our mudlarker found.' I leaned in to see it,

trying to imagine how it might have looked on the shingle. 'She didn't know what it was at first.'

'It's out of context, isn't it? We don't expect to see something like that without the rest of the body to go with it.'

'What other bits have we got?' Derwent was peering at the three other pieces of flesh on the table. The way they were laid out reminded me of a butcher's window.

'We have one part of a thigh, one part of a lower leg and a left shoulder joint. We won't get all of her but it would be very helpful if your lot could track down a few more pieces. Currently this doesn't tell me very much at all. The rest of the torso would be a great help. And the head would be the best thing of all to find, if we're going to identify her. Unless her DNA is in the database, of course. Then it'll be straightforward. I've submitted a sample already so cross your fingers.'

'Is there anything to suggest how she died?' I asked.

'Not so far. All I can tell you is that she was already dead when she was cut up.'

'That's something,' I said, and the pathologist nodded.

'They did a very thorough job on her, I have to say.'

'Was she cut up deliberately? Could it have been an accident? A propeller, something like that?' Derwent asked.

'Definitely not a propeller.' Dr Early turned one of the leg pieces so we could see the end of the bone. 'When you cut into a bone like this, the marks you leave are called kerfs and they can tell us a huge amount of information about the instrument that made the cut. See this notch here, about a centimetre from the end? It's a false-start kerf, where whoever dismembered her started cutting into the bone, stopped, and moved down to begin a new kerf. Second time, he managed to cut through the fibia. The first cut is precisely parallel to the second. He didn't move between the two attempts and her body wasn't moving as it would have been if the cuts had been made in water by something like a boat's propeller. This was deliberate dismemberment, not an accident.'

‘Can you tell us anything about what they used to cut her up?’

Dr Early frowned, her forehead puckering. ‘I knew you’d ask that. I’m not an expert in this but I’ve been reading up on it. I’m going to get one of my colleagues to take a much closer look once we’ve cleaned the bones up, so again, this is preliminary information. I can’t give you a detailed description of a cutting tool that you can use to eliminate suspects. But if you look up close at this cut, you can see lines running horizontally across it. They’re called striae and they’re made by the teeth of a saw cutting back and forth. It tells me this wasn’t done with a knife or an axe. They use a chopping motion, not a sawing one.’

‘Could it have been a handsaw?’ I asked.

‘That’s what I think it was, but that would be a long, slow process, especially given the size of the pieces.’ She leaned forward again, beckoning us in for an even closer look. ‘Then this part here – the small step at the bottom? That’s called a breakaway spur, where the bone finally fractured and gave way. The saw didn’t cut cleanly through the entire bone because it didn’t need to – the weight of the bone itself snapped it. If you find the other side of the bone, there’ll be a matching notch in it where this bone came away. Think of breaking a green stick. You don’t get a clean edge – you take a bit of the other side of the break away with you. The size of the spur varies but, in general, the more powerful the saw, the larger the spur. These are small.’

‘Messy,’ I commented.

‘And slow. Cutting someone up isn’t the kind of job where you want to take your time. Bodies are cumbersome and it’s a horrible working environment. On the other hand, if you want to avoid attracting attention, a handsaw has the virtue of being quiet.’ She straightened up. ‘The kerfs will help us narrow down the kind of saw you’re looking for – the number of teeth per inch, the direction of cut, the set of the blade and

so forth. We'll be able to find out a lot more once this lot is under a microscope.'

'Looking forward to it.' I ran through my notes. 'You said she'd been in the water for a couple of days. Any idea when she actually died?'

Dr Early shook her head. 'Too many variables. We don't know where the body was kept before or after it was dismembered. If it was refrigerated, for instance, that would have delayed decomp. I don't have enough of her to tell you anything so useful.'

'And we don't have any trace evidence to speak of because of the water.' Derwent's shoulders slumped. 'It's almost as if they didn't want us to work out who killed her.'

'It's not playing fair, is it? She's going to be a bit of a mystery until we can find some more of her. Or unless you work out who she is, obviously. That would help.'

'Wouldn't it, though?' I closed my notebook with a snap that made the pathologist's assistant jump. 'It shouldn't take us long to look through the missing person reports for a woman—'

'—or a man,' Derwent chipped in helpfully.

'Who disappeared at some time or other that wasn't in the last two days, probably, and *might* be twenty-something and *might* have light brown hair—'

'—but otherwise has no distinguishing marks—'

'—on about ten per cent of his or her body,' I finished.

'At least you were paying attention. It sounds as if you've got quite a lot of work to do.' Dr Early nodded at the door. 'Better get on with it, hadn't you?'

We were almost at the car when Derwent's phone rang.

'Boss.'

I waited, watching his face, trying to read what he was thinking as the boss – DCI Una Burt – talked on, and on, and on. Derwent wasn't her biggest fan, and the feeling was entirely

mutual. He started out looking irritated but that faded, replaced with grim resolve.

‘Yeah. OK. I understand. No, it’s fine.’

Silence as she spoke again. He rubbed his face with the hand that wasn’t holding the phone and turned in a tight circle, impatient now. I could practically hear what he was thinking. *Get on with it.*

‘Yes. As soon as I can. Yes. Yes. OK.’ He ended the call and stood for a moment, staring down at the phone absently. His face was bleak.

‘Everything all right?’

‘I have to go to Poplar.’

‘Why?’

‘Another case.’ He put his phone away and started searching his pockets, distracted. ‘A cot death. Suspicious circumstances.’

‘Oh.’

‘The boss doesn’t want to send Liv. She thought it might hit too close to home.’

‘Oh,’ I said again, this time with more understanding. Liv was six months pregnant, at the stage where you couldn’t miss it. Sending her to a cot death would be hard on her, and hard on the parents whether they were guilty or not. ‘So she’s sending you?’

‘She asked me if I minded.’

‘And you said you didn’t?’ I raised an eyebrow at him.

‘Look, it’s not my favourite kind of job but I’ll do it. She’s getting Liv to help you on this one instead.’

I didn’t know if I was relieved or disappointed. By swapping a detective inspector and a detective constable, Burt was effectively putting me in charge of finding out who murdered the woman in the river. It was a vote of confidence.

I could have wished it had come on an easier case though.

‘And who are you working with?’

‘Georgia.’

*Of course.* I did my best to look blandly interested. Detective

Constable Georgia Shaw was more or less the last person I'd want to work with, but Derwent didn't mind her. She was pretty and ambitious and overwhelmingly irritating to me. If Derwent had been describing her, he would have stopped at pretty, and that seemed to be good enough for him.

He was still patting his pockets, swearing under his breath.

'I have the car keys,' I said. 'If that's what you're looking for.'

'Why didn't you say?' He held out his hand for them and I shook my head.

'I'll drive.' I wanted him to have time to prepare himself for what lay ahead, to get his game face ready. He wasn't as tough as he pretended to be, I knew, and when cases involved children he struggled to maintain his objectivity. Taking on this case would cost him something he'd never admit, even to himself. But I couldn't say any of that out loud. 'I need to get back to the office and I don't trust you not to drop me at the nearest tube station so you can get to Poplar sooner.'

'I would never do that,' Derwent protested.

'You've done it before.'

'Only a couple of times.'

'And I should have learned my lesson after the first time.'

He looked amused. 'Thanks, Kerrigan.'

'Any time.' I unlocked the car. 'Now get in. We have places to be.'

# 3

Five hours after leaving the morgue, I had looked at hundreds of missing persons files on my flickering computer screen. The smudgy images and bland descriptions had all merged into one faceless, anonymous woman. I leaned back in my chair and tipped my chin up, easing the muscles in my neck.

‘I can’t bear to look at any more. My eyeballs feel like leather. I can’t tell if there’s something wrong with my screen or my eyes.’

‘No luck?’ DCI Burt paused by my desk and peered at my notes. ‘You’ve got a shortlist, I see.’

‘Of sorts, ma’am.’ I straightened up, pulling myself together, because she was the boss after all. ‘The trouble is that there are too many women who fit the description of what we’ve found.’

‘We limited it to women who’ve gone missing in the last month.’ Liv was looking pale, I noticed, with dark shadows under her eyes. She was slight and delicate, and six months of pregnancy had left her more exhausted than blooming. It had given her backache, insomnia, heartburn, an insatiable appetite for cake and an obsession with finding the perfect pram which involved endless arguments with her girlfriend over email. I had found her relieved beyond words not to be



heading to Poplar, but now I wondered if she was regretting it. Ploughing through missing persons reports was unrewarding to say the least.

‘Dr Early thought she was IC1 but we’ve included other races, just in case she’s not white. She could be light-skinned,’ I said.

‘And we’re including females aged thirteen to forty,’ Liv added.

‘Wise,’ Burt said. ‘I’ve seen the pictures from the morgue. They looked as if she could be anything. We probably shouldn’t rule too many people out.’

‘But that doesn’t really help us to narrow it down in any meaningful way,’ I explained. ‘The volume of mispers is too high. There are too many runaways and domestic violence victims and people skipping out on rent or expired visas, let alone women who might have actually come to harm.’

‘Especially since we have to look at mispers from outside the Met too.’ Liv sighed. ‘There’s nothing to say she went missing in London, just because she ended up in that part of the Thames.’

‘You’re going to have to make some choices about who you include eventually,’ Burt said. ‘Use your judgement. But remember that you’ll make things very hard for yourself if you can’t identify her.’

*No shit.* ‘On the bright side, she looked as if she’d been taking care of herself. I’d be very surprised if she was someone who would count as a vulnerable adult,’ I said. ‘I’m leaving out homeless people, known drug users – anyone who is unlikely to have time for a full wax and manicure every couple of weeks, basically.’

‘But what we really need is a DNA match,’ Burt said.

‘It would be a help.’

‘We might have her on our list already but we won’t know it until the DNA comes in,’ Liv said.

‘Assuming someone’s reported her missing and we’ve taken

it seriously enough to put her DNA in the system.' Burt smiled at me and carried on to her office, as if she'd said something helpful.

'Yes, we may never identify her. Thanks so much for your input, boss,' I muttered.

Liv yawned. 'Do you think it's time to knock it on the head for today?'

'Definitely.' I checked the time. 'Shit, I've got to get changed.'

'Going out?'

'I've got a yoga class.'

'*You* are going to yoga. Maeve Kerrigan, going to yoga.'

I stood up and stretched. 'What's so weird about that? It's good for my posture.'

'Yeah, of course it is. But that's not usually a priority.' Liv darted over and yanked open the bottom drawer of my desk before I could stop her. 'What the hell is this?'

'Snacks.'

'Nope. Don't lie. These are not snacks. You used to have snacks in here. There used to be crisps and multipacks of Twixes. Don't try to pretend this is the same.' She started going through the packets. 'Puffed peas – I don't even know what they are. Turkey jerky, gross. Cashew butter protein balls, no thanks. Spicy chickpeas. This is so bleak. Where's the chocolate?'

'There's probably something in there like chocolate.'

She pulled out a bar and inspected it. 'This is carob. *Carob*. I'm going to be sick.'

'I'm being healthy. So what?'

'It's not healthy to eat spiced grit for the sake of feeling virtuous. Baked hemp sticks, for God's sake.' She threw them back into the drawer and shook her head. 'And they say pregnant women are supposed to eat loads of weird stuff. I wouldn't touch any of that.'

'Oh, come on.' I toed the drawer shut. 'Stop giving me a hard time.'

‘This is all *his* idea, isn’t it?’ She meant my boyfriend, Seth Taylor.

I felt the colour rise in my cheeks at her tone. ‘Seth did suggest it.’

‘And the yoga is his idea too, I bet.’

‘I’m meeting him there.’

‘Couples yoga? Please tell me you’re joking.’

I grinned at her horror. ‘It helps my stress levels and my flexibility. It’s fun, too. Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it.’

‘You’ve changed.’ Liv was looking at me as if she was confused about something. ‘I’ve never known anyone who needed to do yoga as much as you do, but I can’t help noticing that you’ve avoided doing anything healthy for as long as I’ve known you. You thrive on shit food and too much caffeine. If you’re not stressed out of your mind, who even are you?’

‘A better person. A happier person.’

‘I suppose that’s a good thing.’ She didn’t sound as if she was convinced about it though.

I grabbed my bag from under the desk. ‘I’m going to get changed. Help yourself to a snack if you’re peckish. I can recommend the kale crisps.’

‘No, you can’t.’

She was right, I couldn’t, but I wanted to get rid of them. ‘Try them. Maybe you’ll like them.’

‘What do they taste like?’

‘Indescribable,’ I said truthfully.

I’d never actually asked her, but I had a secret suspicion that Liv didn’t like Seth much. There was no law that your friends had to like your boyfriend, I reminded myself as I laced up my trainers in the locker room. And Liv was picky about men. Seth was used to winning women over on sight, but his height and build and wide smile had cut no ice with Liv. It was taking him longer than I’d expected to work out how to deal with a woman who wasn’t attracted to him, someone he

couldn't charm. Their sense of humour was very different, and Seth could come across as arrogant, unless you knew him well. He had a lawyer's need to get the upper hand in arguments and persevered even when I was trying to change the subject, a little beyond the limits of polite conversation. But he could have been Prince Charming and it wouldn't have mattered. She was always going to prefer my old boyfriend, Rob, even though he had broken my heart. There was no one else who would be good enough for her.

I had needed to move on, I told myself. Rob was old news. Besides, Seth cared about me. He was attentive and kind and made me feel as if I was the centre of his world, not an afterthought. As if to prove it, my phone pinged with a message.

Don't forget we have yoga.

I snapped a picture of myself in leggings and sports bra in the mirror and sent it to him.

See you there!

The phone hummed in my hand.

Good girl.

I pulled a face and threw my phone into my bag. 'Good girl' sounded patronising even if he didn't mean it that way. I'd mentioned it before, and hurt his feelings. I wouldn't bother raising it with him again. Compared to everything else I got out of our relationship a throwaway remark was the opposite of important. He was perfect in almost every way and I was fixating on the tiniest of flaws.

He was almost *too* perfect.

I slammed my locker door, irritated with myself. Really, there was something wrong with me if I wanted a boyfriend

who was more detached, less keen, harder work. Seth was easy. I was the one who made things difficult. I needed to relax.

Hence the yoga.

‘Going out?’ Georgia Shaw was unlocking her own locker.

‘Exercise class.’ I shrugged myself into a hoodie. ‘How was Poplar?’

‘Grim. Very, very grim. A six-week-old baby. A little girl. Both the parents are distraught, as you can imagine. We had to take the bedclothes, the toys, search everything, ask them loads of questions. The baby was so tiny. Like a doll.’ She leaned against the lockers. Her make-up had smudged under her eyes and she’d chewed off her perfect pink lipstick. ‘How were the body parts?’

‘Inconclusive.’ We weren’t friends – we might never be friends – but I was trying to make common ground with Georgia where I could. I didn’t want her as an enemy. ‘Is Derwent back?’

‘He stayed in the house.’

‘Huh.’ I shouldered my bag. ‘Interesting.’

‘You’re really unfair to him, you know.’

I stopped on my way to the door. ‘Excuse me?’

‘The way you said it was interesting. It wasn’t *interesting*. It was kind. He’s got a heart of gold.’ Her voice sounded strained as if she was on the edge of tears.

‘What makes you say that?’

‘The last thing I would want to do is stay in that house. We’ve been there all day, getting in the way, making cups of tea and trying to say something comforting. It was stifling. Mind-numbing. I couldn’t wait to get out of there, so I could breathe again. But Josh stayed. He said he’d be there as long as they needed him to be there.’

‘I bet they were delighted.’

‘They’re *grieving*. Of course they weren’t delighted. But it’s got to be a comfort for them. Josh was so kind. He even

carried the baby out to the ambulance when they took it away for the post-mortem.'

I could imagine it quite clearly, I found: the small bundle held with tenderness on her last journey out of the only home she had known in her short life. Derwent would do that well.

'Was she their first child?'

'Yes.'

'What's the age-gap between the parents?'

'She's only seventeen. He's twenty-eight. How did you know there was an age gap?'

I ignored the question. 'Are they close?'

'Very. They were supporting each other through it. Barely left each other's sides all day.'

'Josh isn't staying because he thinks they need his support. He's staying because one of them killed the baby and the other one will tell him the truth.'

Her eyes went wide. 'No way. You didn't see them. They're devoted to each other.'

'Some time tonight, or tomorrow, or the day after, maybe when everyone's supposed to be asleep, one of them will come downstairs because he or she can't stand to share a bed with their child's killer. Guess who will be waiting. He's shown he cares about their child, and about them. He'll have grieved with them. They'll have come to trust him. Even if they don't want to get their partner in trouble, they'll be exhausted by the effort of lying all the time. That'll wear their resistance down until they find themselves telling him the truth.'

'You're so *cold*. Every tragic death isn't a crime, you know, and everyone doesn't lie.'

'No, but—'

'You don't know these people. They're a sweet couple. The nursery was beautiful. And she was a gorgeous little girl. She only started smiling two days ago.' Georgia's bottom lip trembled before she could stop it and there were tears standing in her eyes.

‘I know Josh Derwent and I know he’s not spending the night there because he thinks this was a tragic accident. I’ve seen him do it before.’ I shrugged. ‘It doesn’t mean he’s faking it, you know. He’ll be just as upset as you are about the baby. That’s where he gets his energy from. He won’t give up until they give in.’

‘You’re wrong. He’d have told me.’

‘Nope. He wanted them to think they’re going to get away with it. That’s more likely if you’re sincerely sorry for them.’

‘You mean he doesn’t trust me.’

‘I have no idea whether he trusts you or not.’ *But I definitely don’t, so . . .*

She lifted her chin, hurt. ‘I think you’re wrong. You don’t know anything about them, or the baby. You’re jumping to conclusions.’

‘Probably.’ I zipped up my top. ‘We’ll have to wait and see who’s right.’

‘Enjoy your exercise class.’

I thanked her as if she’d meant it, and left.

## Two years earlier

To his great disappointment, he wasn't dead – he just felt that way. A bird had woken him, singing frantically in the tall trees that screened the house from the road, throwing an alarm call into the still silence.

(And how did he know about the trees? It had been dark when they got there, piling out of the car onto the gravel drive, and he had been drunk already. Whose house? Whose idea to go there? Who had been with him in the car, jammed up against his legs, a high-heeled sandal digging into his instep when the girl moved carelessly? Who had stolen the champagne, handing him a bottle that he'd tipped down his front in the dark, on the motorway?)

Waking up properly was slow, a process of adjustments. He had a temperature, but no, he didn't, it was the room that was hot. He felt dreadful. He was ill. No, hungover. The thumping headache, the nausea, the felt surface of his tongue, the burning dryness of his eyeballs: all of that was a hangover. There was someone lying beside him, but no, there wasn't, it was a coverlet rucked up into a ridge that pressed against his thigh companionably. His watch had been stolen – no, he hadn't worn a watch. He had dreamed such a strange, exciting dream, weird and utterly wrong—



Not a dream. He sat up. He *remembered*.

The bird was quiet now, stunned into silence by the heat of the day. The curtains were open, limp in the airless warmth. The sun struck into the room, across the floor. And here came fear, like an unwanted guest swaggering into the room to sit on the edge of the bed and chatter.

The small injuries that told him what he remembered was true. Here, a bruise. There, a bite mark.

*white teeth in the dim light grinning as he hissed in pain and pleasure and reached out—*

He couldn't get away from the shards of memories that kept slicing into his brain.

Kissing, too aroused to be wary.

The taste, wine edged with tobacco and salt from the sweat that glazed them both.

Full lips, a probing tongue, a tattoo that covered one beautiful arm from shoulder to wrist, a flat stomach, long legs.

He had been clumsy, fumbling with a button. A laugh in his ear that he felt as much as heard, and then a whisper.

'Come on. Let's go somewhere else.'

Which meant that part had been in front of everyone. Anyone could have seen.

Stumbling into the bedroom, kissing already, his clothes coming off, until they were both naked.

*We don't have to*

*I want to*

*Say if you want to stop*

*Please*

*You're hurting me*

*Oh God*

The door had been open. He remembered that. He remembered someone standing, watching them for a while.

What had he done?

## 4

I couldn't see the river from where I stood, but I knew it was there. The harsh squabbling of seagulls cut through the air, louder than the traffic rumbling past the end of the quiet street. The morning light had a pearly quality, hazy as an impressionist painting, and the breeze carried a faint, dank suggestion of briny water and black mud. I wondered if the woman had been drawn to the river in life as in death – if that was why she had chosen Greenwich as a home, if she had been fascinated by the dark water sliding endlessly towards oblivion in the sea, or if she had had any inkling that one day it would take her too . . .

‘Maeve.’

I pulled my mask back up to give myself some protection from the smell before I turned away from the window and faced the room. Liv was making her way towards me carefully, picking her way over boxes and the legs of a crime-scene officer who was lying on the floor, inspecting the area under the kitchen cupboards.

Two tedious days of file-sifting and phone calls and river-dredging had ended with a positive DNA match, the miracle of forensic science coming to our aid with an unarguable answer that should have made my life easier. The woman in

the river had a name and a face now, as well as an address and a job: Paige Hargreaves, 28, freelance journalist. I could congratulate myself that she had at least featured in one of the piles of possible victims. I might have tracked her down eventually, without the DNA match, but it would have taken weeks, and it would have been a provisional identification. DNA left no room for doubt.

Being in her home should have given me a proper insight into the murdered woman. In my experience, there was no quicker way to get to know someone than to see where and how they lived. On this occasion, though, I was finding it hard to concentrate, which explained why I was lurking by the window instead of searching. Partly it was the smell: the unemptied bin, the fridge full of sour milk and greenish meat, a bowl of blackened bananas and soft brown grapes complete with orbiting fruit flies. Partly it was the forensic investigators who were tripping over one another in their efforts to examine every inch of the small flat's rooms. Mainly, though, it was the mess that was frustrating me.

Liv made it to my side, swamped in her paper suit. 'This is grim, isn't it? When was she reported missing?'

'Eight days ago.' I flipped through the notes I'd taken when the phone rang that morning. 'Her best friend made the report.'

'Not the neighbour downstairs? Or an employer?'

'Nope. She was a freelancer. No one knew she was gone.'

'And the break-in?'

'That wasn't reported at all.'

Liv looked around. 'I mean, I suppose there was a break-in. This isn't how she lived, is it? No one could live like this.'

I might have been finding it irritating but it was causing Liv acute distress to stand in a room where every surface had disappeared under miscellaneous objects: open letters, piles of books, unframed canvases and stacks of photographs, shoes, clothes, dirty plates and mugs, magazines and newspapers in teetering, disorganised columns, a cascade of empty suitcases

in the corner. Everywhere there were notebooks and pens and make-up jumbled together, and headphones tangled up with chargers like mating snakes.

‘I think it’s *possible* she was burgled,’ I said carefully. ‘There are chargers everywhere but I haven’t found a computer or mobile phone. She was a writer, a journalist – there’s no way she didn’t have her own computer.’

‘She might have had them with her though. If she was out somewhere, working, I mean.’

‘Her wallet was here. Her passport.’

‘No keys.’

‘There’s a set of keys behind the door in the hall.’

‘They could have been her spare set.’

‘They were on the floor as if she’d dropped them there on her way in or out. There was a key for her bike lock on there. You wouldn’t have one of those on a spare set, would you?’

Liv shrugged. ‘Dunno. Depends on how often you lose your main keys, I imagine. So you think she was taken from here?’

‘Maybe.’

‘No sign of a struggle.’ That was true. The flat was heroically untidy but there were no overturned chairs, no smashed glasses or plates, no damage. No blood, notably. There would have been blood, I thought, unless she hadn’t been able to fight back because she was overpowered too quickly, or because she was drugged or drunk.

Two dusty windows looked out over the street. A table stood in front of one, while the other had a small, sagging armchair beside it. There was no television, I noted, thinking of the possible burglary, but then again there was nowhere obvious where it might have stood. The rear wall of the room housed the kitchen, which had seen better days even before everything in it had rotted. The laminate was peeling off the cupboard doors and the cooker was missing two burners. I had already noted the sink was piled high with mugs and glasses; impossible to guess whether Paige had had visitors or

if she'd been the sort of person who washed up once a month. A clothes horse was draped with bedsheets and clothes that had dried as stiff as cardboard. I could picture her flinging the damp laundry over it with careless haste.

'Did you look at the bathroom? My pet hate is mildew.' Liv shuddered delicately. 'And underwear everywhere. I suppose everything was *clean*, but . . .'

I shrugged at the thought of the straggling tights looped over the shower curtain rail and the squadron of knickers hanging on the rusting radiator. 'No garden. Nowhere else to dry them. Heaven preserve us from being murdered on laundry day.'

'Amen.' Liv's eyes were solemn above her mask. 'What do you think this place cost her?'

'More than it was worth.' I was looking at the area of black mould that had gathered in one corner of the ceiling, above the fridge. A tongue of it extended down the wall, out of sight, and I didn't like to think what we might uncover when we pulled the fridge out to check behind it. 'Presumably the landlord didn't mind the mess if she didn't complain about the condition of the place.'

I moved across so I could look through the open door into the small bedroom, which had a bed and a bedside table and a clothes rail jammed into the corner. Half of the hangers had shed their dresses and jackets so they puddled on the floor, and the drawers hung open, spilling a waterfall of clothes in bright colours. She had worried about her image in public but behind closed doors she hadn't cared enough to keep her home tidy. Well, everyone had their guilty secrets about which domestic tasks they shirked. Paige had simply chosen to ignore all of them.

The crime scene manager, bulky and red-haired and short-tempered, was lifting a champagne bottle off the bedside table with exquisite care.

'Found anything, Adrian?'

He grunted. 'One set of prints. It's half empty. Looks as if she was drinking in bed.'

'On her own?'

'You'll have to wait for DNA and trace on the bedclothes. My crystal ball isn't working.' He carried the bottle out of the room, holding it in front of him reverently.

'So maybe she was alone and maybe she wasn't.' I rubbed my forehead with the back of my hand, hating the feel of the latex glove against my skin. 'Too early to say. In fact, it's too early to say much about her.'

'She had expensive taste in clothes and shoes.' Liv peered into a knee-high boot. 'Dior. Very nice.'

'I didn't think journalists got paid that well any more.'

'Family money?'

'Or she could have been doing something else on the side to make some cash.'

'Like what?'

'Dealing? Prostitution? Stripping?'

Liv raised her eyebrows. 'Based on what?'

'Nothing? It's a possibility, that's all, and I don't think we should rule it out straight away. Sex work is something young women get drawn into from time to time, and it's high risk. They encounter the kind of men who are used to chopping people up. I'm not judging her – I just think it's worth finding out if she had some extra income to fund her lifestyle.' The photographs I'd seen of her in the missing person file showed a thin woman, tanned and groomed, her eyes heavy-lidded, her nose long, her face narrow. Her hair had been blonde with the kind of sheen that took regular salon appointments to achieve. She had dropped her chin to her chest in all three pictures, peering up at the camera with insouciant sensuality. It looked like a studied pose, practised.

'No boyfriend to get in the way if she did do sex work,' Liv mused. 'Or girlfriend, as far as we know.'

'Which means no main suspect for us to question.' I flipped

my notebook shut. 'I'd guess she left here in a hurry, maybe to meet someone, possibly for work given that her computer isn't here.'

'And she never came home.'

'I wonder what she was working on.'

'I'll have a look to see if I can find any notes.' Liv flexed her small hands in her gloves. 'I can't wait to get this place straightened out.'