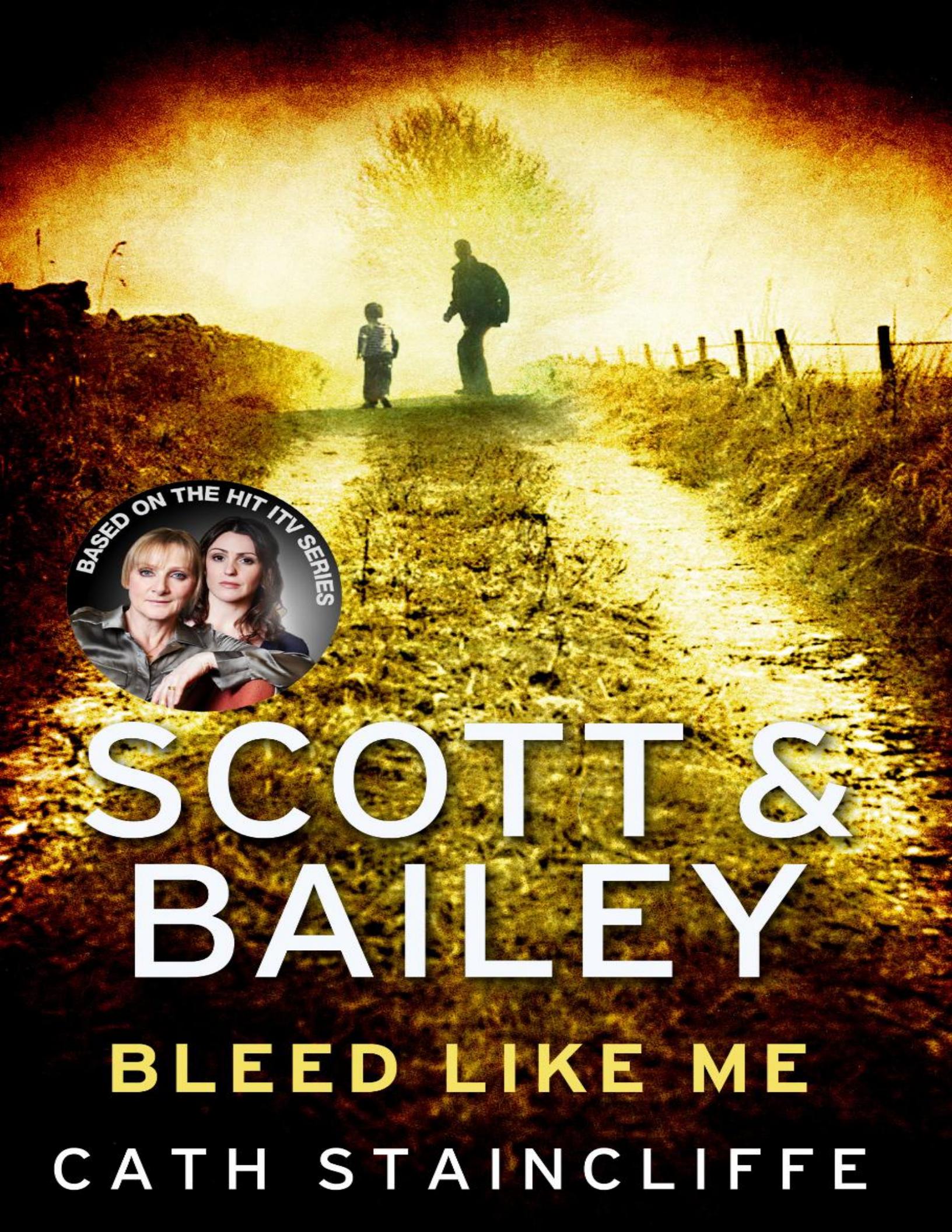




SCOTT & BAILEY

BLEED LIKE ME

CATH STAINCLIFFE



About the Book

A NEW STORY BASED ON THE HIT TV SERIES
SCOTT & BAILEY

Three ordinary women, one extraordinary job

DC Janet Scott

Janet is a long-standing member of Manchester Metropolitan Police's Major Incident Team. Married with two teenage daughters, she's a reliable colleague and a true friend to Rachel and Gill - but underneath her calm demeanour lies a steely determination and a tumultuous personal life.

DC Rachel Bailey

A relative newcomer to the team, Rachel is knife-sharp, instinctive and fiercely ambitious. But she's got terrible taste in men and, whilst she gets results, her brash behaviour often lands her in trouble.

DCI Gill Murray

Unfairly nicknamed Godzilla by Rachel, Gill is the dangerously sarcastic head of the MIT and the harried single-mother of a seventeen-year-old boy. A talented and no-nonsense leader, her only fault is that she cares too much about the job.

Together they must hunt a killer, but a life fighting crime can be no life at all...

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BLEED LIKE ME

Cath Staincliffe

For my agent, Sara - thank you for everything

Day One

1

Rachel was running. Running for her life. Air burning like acid in her chest, feet pounding the tarmac. Everything around her, the shops and passers-by, lampposts and railings, smudged, a blur of shape and colour.

She risked a glance behind, hair whipping in her eyes, almost losing her balance as one ankle buckled, and she saw the car was gaining. He was at the wheel, his face set with intent, eyes gleaming, mouth curved in a half-smile.

Running her down, running her to ground. For a moment, her legs stalled, numb, weak as string, before she took flight again. Arms slicing the air, throat parched, sweat cold across her skin and the thud of her heart ever louder in her ears. Then the roar as he gunned the engine, the screech as the car leapt towards her, close enough for her to smell burning oil and petrol fumes high in her throat. Dizzying.

The thump of impact. Hurling her forward, a bone-cracking crunch and Rachel fell, sprawling along the gutter and into the pavement's edge, legs twisting the wrong way beneath her, skinning her chin and shoulder and the length of her forearms. Smacking her head against the kerbstone. A jolt that turned the world black and brought vomit scalding her gullet.

The engine cut out and then she heard his footsteps, the smack-smack of best Italian leather on the gritty stone.

She tried to draw away but was pinned, paralysed, and her attempt to shuffle brought scarlet pain licking through her hip. She tried to cry for help but her voice was frozen too and all the people had gone. She was alone with him.

'Rachel,' he said sadly, 'Rachel, Rachel, what will I do with you?'

Tears burnt the backs of her eyes. Then his hands were on her, yanking her over, ignoring the howls she gave.

Nick, shaking his head, disappointed in her. 'I warned you,' he said.

And he had.

'I can't trust you, Rachel.'

That was fucking rich, that was. She'd have laughed if the pain hadn't been so brutal.

He lifted his foot, pressed the sole of his shoe on her neck. His eyes drilled into her.

There was something she must do, must remember to do, something . . . The knife! She still had the knife. Her fingers tightened round the handle. She kept her gaze locked on his. Just stab his leg and then . . .

'We could have been so good. But you wouldn't listen, would you? Threatening me. You silly bitch.' He pushed down, his mouth tightening with the effort, crushing her windpipe.

She raised the knife, so heavy, her arms spasming with cramp, and plunged the blade into his calf and heard the sudden high scream, half pain half rage, that he gave as he stumbled back.

Rachel couldn't move. Her legs wouldn't work. Nick bent over her, grabbed her hand, peeling back her fingers to get the knife. 'You bitch, you mad bitch.' He spat the words, spittle landing on her face.

'Bastard,' Rachel whispered.

He had the knife.

She would not beg.

He moved closer, the knife ready, smeared with his blood. His eyes brilliant with hatred. He touched the tip of the knife to her cheek. 'I've got to kill you,' he said softly, 'you know that.'

Panic skittered in her chest, making her shudder uncontrollably. The pain from her hip rolled over her in waves.

Fuck you, she thought. Fuck you, Nick Savage. Fuck you to hell and back. She lunged for his arm, determined to fight, grabbing at his wrist, but he dodged, lifting the knife away.

Swiftly he moved back, stooped with the knife and swept it under her throat.

Rachel felt the spill of warm blood across her neck and down her chest, heard the gurgling noise she made, saw his smile, wide, gleeful. She tried to scream but her throat was full of blood. No air. Help me!

She reared awake, choking, sucking in breath, the knife in her hand.

The room full of snow, white, floating, spiralling down. Touching her neck, sticky, itchy. And something sharp in her mouth, making her retch. She felt for it with her fingers, drew out feathers, curled and slick with saliva. Feathers, not snow. Her pillow slashed. She spat more feathers from her mouth, wiped them from her neck.

Alive.

Awake.

Rachel Bailey wept. Huge noisy sobs while the feathers swung and floated in the silvery beams of first light that stole into her bedroom.

2

Gill Murray had barely got her coat off when the call came through. Suspicious death. Serious Crime Division wanted her as SIO, senior investigating officer. The syndicate were next in line for any new case, so the shout had come to her. She got the location, Journeys Inn on the far side of Oldham, and left word with her sergeant, Andy Roper.

Probably a bar brawl, or some payback exacted after last orders, she speculated as she drove, heading out of town past the slow-moving traffic coming in the other direction into work. Some scrote getting mouthy with some other, blood on the floor. But why hadn't they heard about it till now? Why hadn't the landlord called them out last night?

Don't get ahead of yourself, she thought, looks suspicious, might not be. There are plenty of sudden deaths that turn out to be natural: hearts stopping, brains stroking out. Or suicides. Or accidents.

The road climbed out of the valley past old warehouses and sheds edging the canal and a scattering of new industrial units, and switched back on itself as the incline became steeper. Terraced houses sprouted in little hamlets, more or less merged these days, some looking abandoned, threadbare, with boarded windows, others maintained well enough.

She travelled up through the Larks estate, social housing built in the sixties, three-bed homes with pebbledash and open-plan front gardens. The estate was laid out like a maze, Gill knew; the main road bisected it but either side there were endless semicircular drives that sprouted more crescents and cul-de-sacs and all looked interchangeable.

Up on the brow of the hill was Journeys Inn. As Gill's car crested the rise, she could see a row of vehicles parked on the roadside in front of the pub, among them CSI vans and two squad cars.

Journeys was an old coaching inn. Three storeys high with six windows on each floor at the front and probably the same at the back, thought Gill, though she could not see from where she was. She pulled in behind the other vehicles. The scene had been secured with tape which ran along the perimeter wall of the pub by the road and across the drive at the side which led behind the building. A sign pointing that way read *Car Park*.

Stepping out of the car, Gill felt the breeze coming over the hills. Beyond the inn lay open country, the mix of heather and bracken that covered the slopes interrupted here and there by dun-coloured grass. The bracken a blaze of vermillion in full autumn glory. It was not dissimilar to the view from her own house a few miles further to the east. Gill estimated the nearest houses, on the Larks, were perhaps three hundred yards from the pub. So no immediate neighbours, no one overlooking the place.

Gill got out and opened the car boot, fighting against the wind as she unfolded a disposable paper suit and pulled it on. She did the same with a pair of gloves, covered her shoes with protectors and opened a face mask, leaving it round her neck until she got into the scene. Immediately, she was hot, and with the mask on she knew her glasses would soon steam up.

Gill showed her warrant card to the man staffing the crime scene perimeter at the entrance to the drive. He signed her in and she ducked under the tape and followed the designated path that had been marked out along the lane. To her right, parallel to the side of the pub, was a long single-storey building, roof long gone and the internal walls reduced to piles of stone. Probably stables for the inn, during its heyday. The car park at the back was almost

deserted. Just a small grey hatchback parked at the far side.

The ground was hard-packed earth, rutted where heavy vehicles had churned up mud. Much of the lot was overrun with weeds, cow parsley and dandelions and nettles, suggesting it wasn't prone to heavy use.

Either side of the main double doors were picnic tables, the wood grey and splintered, and to the right in the corner a play area with a rusting swing set and a climbing frame. There was a second single door almost at the corner of the building. CSIs had protected both entrances with tents.

The main doors were ajar and Gill read the brass plate above them: *Owen Cottam, licensed for the sale of alcoholic beverages for consumption on the premises.*

'Gill Murray.' The man, suited and booted like Gill, came out of the building.

'Gerry. You CSM?' Responsible for managing the crime scene.

'Coordinator,' Gerry said. 'They tell you we've got three victims?'

'Three! Oh, God.' Gill felt the kick of adrenalin speed up her pulse though she was professional enough to appear calm and collected.

'Three separate scenes. Gonna be a long day,' he added.

Week, month, Gill thought. Each scene would have its own crime scene manager and Gerry would oversee them all.

'Take you up?'

Up. She heard the word and revised her expectations. Upstairs. Not a bar fight, then. Unless they'd a function room upstairs and someone got killed without any of the other guests noticing. And again, how come the landlord hadn't summoned help till now?

The interior of the inn was gloomy. No one had turned any lights on. A cardinal rule of crime scene management. Touch nothing, preserve the scene. The CSIs would bring in

any lighting required, to enable photographs and video to be taken of the scene, to allow the techs to document and recover any evidence. After all, who knew if a fingerprint might be on the light switch. Might tell a crucial part of the story. There was always a story.

Gill followed Gerry through the pub to the right with its smell of damp carpet and beer and old cooking oil and cigar smoke. Years since the smoking ban but nicotine still tainted the air.

The place was cavernous, though some attempts had been made to section off the space with booths and some raised sections. As her eyesight adjusted she could see that the banquette seats looked greasy with use, and the fussy wallpaper, Regency stripes, had come away in some places. Design circa 1980s, Gill guessed, thirty years out of date.

A door marked *Private* led off the bar into a narrow hallway, with an external door to the right (the one she'd noticed from the outside) and stairs leading up to the left. The tenants' entrance. So they could come and go without traipsing through the pub itself.

The fire door at the top of the stairs had been propped open and they went through it, took a quarter turn to the left on to a short landing. 'Bathroom on the right,' Gerry said, 'kitchen and living room on the right.' Both doors were shut. The landing led to a hallway that ran down the centre of the building with doors off either side. Stepping plates had been placed on the carpet along the hall to protect the scene and small markers sat here and there, indicating potential evidence.

Gerry turned left. 'First scene - master bedroom,' he said. The room would look out on to the road at the front. Viewed from the road it would be in the extreme right corner of the building.

Gill could hear the murmur of voices, the sound of the CSM and CSI techs already busy at work. She pulled her mask on. They stepped inside. Gill greeted the people

there, who were filming in the light from a stand of specially rigged lamps, then focused on the scene.

The victim lay in the double bed. Face up, eyes closed, covered by the duvet from the waist down. Her hands were out of sight. The woman, dark-haired, looked to be in her late thirties, Gill thought. She wore a nightdress. From the short sleeves you could see it had once been blue with sprigs of dark blue flowers printed on it, but now the bulk of it across the whole of the woman's torso was dark red, the colour of drying blood. The smell, sickly sweet, hung in the air.

The room was otherwise undisturbed. Make-up and jewellery on the dressing table. A round stool in front of it. A fitted wardrobe along the outer wall, easy chair by the window, blue velvet curtains closed. Wicker laundry basket by the door. Gill noticed the bedside tables, his and hers, water glasses and lamps on both, alarm clock on his side, a mobile phone, indigestion mixture and book on hers.

'No sign of a struggle,' Gill said.

'No defence wounds, or nothing visible anyway,' Gerry agreed.

'She's not been posed,' Gill said.

'Don't think so,' he said. 'Be hard to move her without getting blood everywhere.'

Gill peered closer. Could see two puncture slits on the chest where a sharp implement had pierced the nightdress and the woman's body. The puckered fabric, knitted to the congealing blood around the edges of wounds.

A sudden volley of barking made Gill start. *What the fuck?*

'Pet dog in the kitchen,' Gerry said, nodding back towards the stairs. 'The next one's this way.'

In the hall, crime scene tape demarcated the next crime scene, in the adjoining room. In order not to contaminate either by tracking evidence with them, both Gill and Gerry changed into fresh paper suits, boots, gloves and mask.

Sealing the ones they had already used in bags and labelling them.

For the same reason a separate team of CSIs were at work in this room under the guidance of their own crime scene manager. And a further log was being kept of who entered and left each scene.

A plaque on the door read *Penny*, the letters made out of pink and red hearts. A girl, perhaps eleven or twelve, lay prone on her bed, face partly hidden by her dark hair turned to one side. The back of her pyjama jacket was thick with blood. The duvet was hanging off the foot of the bed, smeared with blood. Gill noticed the girl had painted toenails, glittery pink. She was slightly built, bony ankles and slender wrists. Just a child. Gill felt her guts tighten in response, the pity of it, always that extra sense of tragedy with a child involved, but it would not affect her ability to do her job. If anything, she would strive even harder.

Gill surveyed the room. One wall had fitted wardrobes, white with folding shuttered doors, the others were a mix of posters, One Direction and Justin Bieber, and drawings: cartoon figures, anime style, *Penny* signed at the bottom of them. The girl had liked to draw. There was a photograph too, which Gill looked closely at. A family group on a sofa. The woman from the room next door with a baby in her arms; a man, well built, with a moustache and close dark hair, had a toddler on his lap. In between the adults was Penny. They were smiling for the camera. The toddler had one hand up, touching the man's cheek; the child was turned slightly towards the man and his mouth was open as though he was telling him something.

A row of stuffed toys - a dragon, a panda, a meerkat - occupied a long shelf next to a desk cum dressing table. Homework and make-up littered the table and mounted above it was a flat screen television.

Though the bedding was less neat here, still there was very little disruption. In both cases it looked to Gill as if the

victims had been attacked where they lay.

‘They could have been sleeping,’ she said to Gerry.

‘Looks that way,’ he said.

The dog barked again, fast and furious. Gill turned to Gerry and gave a nod to say she was ready for the next. They moved further along the hallway to the end of that crime scene cordon and repeated the business of changing their protective clothing and logging in.

The next scene was the bedroom at the far end, at the back of the building.

The man was on a single bed, partially on his side, head bent backwards, hands closed on his breastbone, the gaping wound on his neck curving open, giving a glimpse of the tube of his oesophagus and a gleam of white bone. Blood had sprayed on to the headboard and the wall behind the bed. His fingers and T-shirt were stained with it. The man had very short hair and his eyes were open, filmy. Part of a tattoo showed beneath the sleeve of his top.

‘Owen Cottam?’ Gill asked. The name on the licensee plate. Had someone broken in and slaughtered the three of them? But he didn’t bear any resemblance to the man in the family snapshot.

‘No IDs yet,’ said Gerry.

‘Not the man from the photo next door. Too old to be a son,’ Gill thought aloud, ‘only looks a few years younger than the woman. Sleeping in a single room.’ She looked again at the savage cut. Sensed the enormity of the crime. Three dead. And the killer? ‘Looks like they used a knife.’

‘We found it in here,’ Gerry said, ‘under the bed.’ He asked one of the men in the room for the knife which was in a rigid, clear-plastic knife tube. Gill took hold of the tube. The weapon, a sizeable kitchen knife, non-serrated, was smeared with blood.

‘Fast-track this for swabbing and prints,’ Gill said. ‘The whisky bottle from the bathroom as well.’

She scoured the room, the curtains still closed but some light coming in through the gaps where the hooks had gone missing. A Man City scarf the only decoration. Chest of drawers with clothes spilling out, more clothes littered on the floor. A small telly and a gaming console. Xbox. Same as Sammy's.

'Who called us?'

'Brewery. Delivery arrived at eight to find the place deserted, no one answering the door and the dog howling the place down. Wagon driver rang his boss who assumed Cottam had done a runner, abandoning the dog.'

'Bit of a leap,' Gill said. 'Might just have nipped out for milk and a paper.'

'Except no one else was responding,' said Gerry.

'Maybe there was some existing trouble with the business, then,' Gill said, 'if their first thought is he's done a moonlight flit.' All questions that would be asked and hopefully answered once the investigation got under way.

'Local bobby came out, found it all locked up and forced entry.'

'Found a bloodbath,' Gill said. 'Which door?'

'The single one. The family entrance,' Gerry said. 'Look at this.' He took her back along the hallway, to the room opposite the daughter's. A child's bed and a cot. Everything, the blue décor, the duvet covers, the toys scattered on the carpet, the train frieze running around the walls, screamed little boys.

'No sign?' Gill asked. *The baby and the toddler. The toddler with his hand up to his father's face.*

Gerry shook his head.

'Upstairs?' Gill said: the third storey.

'Padlocked. Been up - full of junk, nothing else. And the cellars are clear.'

No more bodies. Small bodies. So where were the other children?

The dog was yelping and whining, scratching at the kitchen door.

‘Can we get shot of Fido?’ Gill said.

‘In hand,’ he said.

‘Right,’ she said, ‘I’ll call the coroner.’

Ten minutes later Gill had secured the coroner’s authorization to order forensic post-mortems on the three victims. Next she contacted the Home Office pathologist and asked him to attend the scene.

Gerry called her name from the ground floor. Gill peered down.

‘Someone here with intel on the household,’ Gerry said.

Gill descended, went through the pub and outside. The sun was warm and Gill was steaming inside the protective suit.

‘Jack Biddle, CID,’ the man waiting for her introduced himself, then began to read off the facts. ‘Owen Cottam, publican, aged forty-five . . .’

Not the man in the single bed then, she was right about that.

‘. . . wife Pamela, forty, daughter Penny, eleven – just moved up to high school.’

Gill nodded. ‘You know the family?’

‘My lass is at school with Penny.’ He swallowed but retained his composure.

Hearing the names, learning them, names that would become second nature, part of her waking life as the investigation progressed. People she’d come to know inside out. ‘Looks like Pamela and Penny,’ Gill said. ‘We’ve a man as well, ten years younger than Pamela perhaps, very short hair, tattoos.’

She saw a flicker of recognition in Biddle’s eyes. ‘Pamela’s brother Michael Milne. The two little ones, Theo and Harry?’

‘Not here. How old?’

'Toddlers.' He dipped his hand, palm down by his knee, indicating their stature. 'I can check the ages.'

'Thanks,' Gill said. 'No sign of them or Cottam. Any ructions you heard about? Domestic violence, family feud?'

Biddle shook his head. 'Nope.'

'Any criminal associates, prior offences?'

'Nothing,' Biddle said. 'Magistrates approved his licence every time.'

'Car reg?'

He read it off. No match to the Vauxhall at the edge of the car park. 'Blue Ford Mondeo.'

'Whose is that?' she asked, pointing at the car.

'The brother's - Michael's.'

Gill had a sudden chilling thought: had the boot been checked? 'Give me a minute,' she said and went to ask Gerry.

Minutes later a CSI came down from Michael Milne's room with a set of car keys, accompanied by a woman with a camera. She ran off a series of shots of the Vauxhall before the boot was opened. Gill was holding her breath but when they found only a pair of wellies, a carrier bag of old drinks cans and a leaking can of motor oil she could breathe again. Drew in a strong draught of air perfumed with the smell of moorland. The CSI went to look in the old stables too, though as they were pretty much open to view anyway, Gill didn't think the children would be there.

'You think Owen . . .' Biddle broke off, trying to digest the news.

'Yes,' Gill said, 'I think he's our suspect. Killed his daughter, his wife, his brother-in-law, then took off for the hills with his sons. I'm sorry. We have to find the bastard.' She gazed out over the sweep of the hills. Sheep dotted here and there. Heard the burbling of a grouse on the wind. *Before it's too late.* She didn't say it out loud. And hard on the heels of that thought came another. *It probably already is.*

3

‘Family annihilation.’ Janet caught the urgency in Andy’s voice as she walked into the incident room. The buzz was palpable, people talking across each other. ‘That’s what they call it in the US,’ Andy said, his lean face brightening as he set eyes on Janet.

‘Multiple homicide,’ Rachel said. Rachel looked rough, Janet thought. Her friend burning the candle at both ends again, no doubt.

‘Whereabouts?’ asked Kevin.

‘In the UK,’ Rachel said slowly, tapping her own head.

‘No, where’s the murders?’ Kevin said.

The term woodentop could have been invented for Kevin but this time it was Rachel who’d got the wrong end of the stick.

‘The Larks,’ said Andy. ‘Journeys Inn.’

‘You’re joking!’ Janet stopped by her desk, jacket over her arm.

‘You know it?’ said Andy.

Suddenly there was another agenda, a subtext beneath the interchange. Forcing her to censor her words slightly. ‘Used to go there when the kids were little, walk and a pub lunch.’ Leaving out Ade’s name. Because Ade, his name, the very fact of his existence, was there like a pit, a snare, a trapdoor, something to stumble over. The small matter of him being her husband something that she and Andy were trying very hard to ignore, to forget about, to glide over.

‘Three dead,’ said Andy, all businesslike. ‘Believed to be the wife, daughter and wife’s brother, still awaiting formal identification. Gill’s on her way back. Suspect Owen

Cottam, landlord there, missing along with two younger children.'

There was a pause as they each absorbed the information. Janet felt dizzy, the floor swirling under her feet. She could feel Andy's eyes on her. She pulled out her chair and sat down. Felt sick and bloated. Her hand moved protectively across her abdomen over the scar where they'd sewn her up after surgery. Injuries sustained in the line of duty. She shouldn't be feeling like this. She'd recovered well over the last six months. Been back at work after three.

'You okay?' Rachel, standing opposite, leant forward, hands on her own desk.

'Fine.' Janet smiled. Rachel stared, head tilted, waiting for something closer to the truth.

'Okay,' Janet said sotto voce, 'I'm knackered. Up till the early hours on homework duty with Elise, the Long March and the Cultural Revolution. Then Taisie has a nightmare at half three and the alarm's set for six. What's new?'

'Why's she having nightmares?' Rachel asked.

'Because she can?' Janet shook her head. It was one thing after another with Taisie. No sooner through one crisis or drama than she swanned in with another. 'And because she's stupid enough to watch some 18 certificate Japanese horror movie at the sleepover she went on, even though she knows she'll freak out after.'

Gill arrived then, issuing instructions as she walked. 'Briefing in ten. Get me sandwiches - no onions - and coffee. Andy, bring the press office in, we'll be holding hands on this. All other actions suspended for the foreseeable. Kevin - exhibits.'

'Yes, boss, course boss.'

Gill, DCI Gill Murray, was Janet's age, late forties, but the similarities stopped there. Friends for years, Janet had finally joined Gill's team seven years ago. Gill was a human dynamo with an ability to think strategically; she relished

the role of leading her syndicate. Janet knew her own skills were as a communicator, an interviewer. And she'd rather sit opposite some witness or suspect and persuade them to tell her the truth than command a team, oversee development, play the public relations game and manage resources.

Gill could inspire, she had inspired many a young detective, but cross her and she was a formidable foe. Even when she was working all hours, like now, Gill crackled with an energy and zeal, a lucidity and clarity that Janet envied. But also found exhausting at times. Of course Gill only had one teenager at home, but she'd managed the last four years as a single parent since Dave had left. Recently Sammy had moved in with his dad, to Gill's dismay. But even when Gill had been looking after him on her own she had still managed eighteen-hour days and turned up for work looking impeccable. Hair neat and shiny, a practical cut that skimmed her chin, trademark red lacquered nails, clothes clean and pressed. Gill was one of those people who could get by on four hours' sleep a night.

And I, thought Janet, getting up with her notebook and pen, am most definitely not. *Gill's driven. I'm just driven up the wall.*

Godzilla, as Rachel most frequently thought of her boss, was briefing them on the Journeys Inn crime scene and the unfolding manhunt for suspect Owen Cottam. The whole team were there. After two years, Rachel felt like she belonged, as much as she belonged anywhere. They were a mixed bunch. Pete, the doughnut man, solid, steady, paunchy, balding. And next to him, big man Mitch, ex-army. Turn his hand to any job, Mitch could. Loads of experience, well travelled, he was the oldest detective constable in the syndicate. He'd a quiet confidence, perhaps from knowing he was good at what he did, and he could handle himself in a fight, of course. Andy, at the head of the table beside Gill,

was their sergeant, which set him apart in his roles and responsibilities. A sharp dresser, bit of a mod about him: Rachel could just see him on a scooter, a Lambretta. Andy was single and now and again she wondered what that was about. Not bad looking, probably the best of the bunch, but Rachel had never actually clicked with him; he was a bit cool, a bit distant - and he was her supervisor. Lee, on Rachel's right, he was more of a thinker, letters after his name and widely read. Sort that made Rachel feel uneducated. She learned from Lee, soaked it up like a sponge, stuff she could regurgitate to impress Nick. Back in the days when she was still trying. Before the assassination attempt. Lee was the only black member of the syndicate. Lee was the one got sent on courses for offender profiling, criminal psychology and behaviour analysis.

Then Janet, of course. Rachel couldn't imagine the syndicate without Janet and usually the two of them were paired up, which Rachel liked. And Kevin Lumb. They got that wrong by one letter. Kevin Dumb it should have been, the div, like an eight-year-old. Kevin and Rachel the youngest on the team, but she was light years ahead of him most of the time.

'Question one,' the boss said, 'why is Owen Cottam our prime suspect? We have three members of the family dead in their beds, father and two youngest children missing. As is Owen Cottam's car. No sign of burglary or forced entry, no evidence of a struggle. Cottam is not a known associate of the criminal fraternity and there have been no problems, no forfeiture of his personal pub licence. Of course he was CRB checked prior to being granted that by the local authority in Birkenhead. To date no talk of any enemies, any feuds or threats made to the family, though we'll need to see what we get from house-to-house and talking to friends and family.'

She stopped for breath and then continued, 'Nothing is ever sure in this game, you all know that, but to date there

is nothing to suggest a third party was involved. Knife recovered from the third crime scene is being fast-tracked for evidence, as is a whisky bottle and items belonging to Owen Cottam. As far as the public is aware we urgently wish to speak to Owen Cottam in connection with our inquiries. And we want to find two children missing from home. We are setting up for a child rescue operation running concurrently alongside our murder investigations. Priority of course is to prevent further loss of life. That means we have the authorizations in place as of now for telecoms, warrants and so on so we can work in real time.'

That appealed to Rachel. Their work on the Major Incident Team was investigating murders and the information was usually gathered slowly and painstakingly with often frustrating waits for data from telecom providers and financial institutions and the like. Those protocols went out of the window when a life was at risk. Already data on Owen Cottam would be flowing in to be logged and analysed by readers and actioned by receivers for the various strands of the investigation.

'Border control, ports and airports, alerted,' the boss said.

'Found his passport at the pub,' Kevin said.

'Kevin's exhibits officer on this one,' Godzilla said.

Sooner you than me, Rachel thought. Keeping track of all the potential evidence from a scene meant you were stuck in the office for the duration. Drowning in evidence bags and chain of custody forms.

'His computer has been removed for examination,' the boss said. 'As yet nothing obvious leaping out at us, no Google maps or ferry sailings. His phone is missing.'

'Do we know if he has access to firearms?' Mitch asked. Rachel knew he'd be trying to assess how dangerous the man was.

'No guns licensed to him,' the DCI said. 'Now, we've ANPR, of course,' referring to the automatic number plate

recognition system that had fast become a major tool in police work, routinely recording vehicle registrations on major routes nationwide. 'So if Cottam's in the Mondeo we'll find him before too long. Soon as we're done here I want Rachel heading house-to-house, looking for witnesses. Good revision for your sergeant's exam.'

Rachel nodded, a glow of satisfaction at being allocated the task. She glanced across at Janet, who winked at her.

'Next of kin have been notified. Pamela Cottam's mother, Margaret Milne, is on her way over from Cork. Post-mortems expected to start later this afternoon. A complex scene means the CSIs will be there for several days. Cottam has a father, Dennis, in Liverpool and a brother, Barry, Preston way. We are talking to the brewery and his family as well as his neighbours on the Larks. So far the picture emerging is that of a regular guy, a family man. Lee.' The boss raised a finger to him. 'We'll be liaising with a forensic psychologist on this and a hostage negotiator obviously,' she said, 'but in the meanwhile Lee can tell us something about this particular type of homicide.'

Lee nodded; he'd got a psychology degree and was studying for a master's in his spare time. Rachel knew he was fascinated by what made people tick, what pushed them over the edge to kill, why one individual would take a life when another similar person would not. Frankly, Rachel didn't give a toss. They'd done it: her only interest was in catching the toerags and seeing them banged up for it. Whether their parents had been a walking disaster zone or they'd been bullied at school or there was something buggered in their brain chemistry was neither here nor there to Rachel. You broke the law - you paid the price. End of.

Lee put his pen down and tugged at his tie, loosening it as he began to speak. 'We average a handful a year, single figures, though that's on the rise: in periods of recession we tend to get an increase. Economic hardship is often a