Chapter 1. Highgate Hill.

It was a fantastic view.

Sumner before today hadn’t known that this building existed.

There were police stations and there were police stations.

There were the ones with the Dixon of Dock Green Blue streetlamps outside and there were the ones with revolving signs – what was the story with that? He should look it up sometime.

And then there were buildings like this is. Fifteen storeys, not a mark on it to say that it had anything to do with the police. No police cars in evidence.

An underground garage.

Dan had a secretary! She’s shown him in. She’d offered him coffee. She’d brought in a tray with a pot of the stuff. It was delicious, and milk (not in coffee) and biscuits (he was trying to stop himself at two).

But no Dan yet. But this was definitely his office. Pictures of the boy on the wall. Pictures of Dan, Fingal and Olga on the desk.

It was his office alright.

He’d been on gardening leave long enough now that he had a different plan for his day. He been planning on walking around north London. Maybe starting on Stanmore common – with a different view of London and then walking down towards Hampstead heath. He could see Highgate hill out of Dan’s window.   
  
It was a lovely day. His dress uniform chafed him at the neck. It had never fitted properly. That was a metaphor for something he thought.

Finally, in came Dan.

He got up, they shook hands. A weird, artificial thing for two very good friends to do. But were they still good friends? Well, we’ll see thought Sumner.

Dan gave the impression of a man who had a hundred things to do that day, and, even though it was eleven o’clock (twenty past actually, the appointment had been for eleven). Even though it was after eleven, he’d only, so far, managed to do two or three of the items on his list.

“Long and short of it, is I’ve got a job for you.”

“A job? But I’m still working on…”

“No, you’re not,” Chief Superintendent Dan Donne gave Sumner a warning look. “Not officially, and not even unofficially. I’ve seen you’re social media, you’re taking advantage of the nice weather and walk the tallest hills in London.”

Sumner nodded. He’d stopped working the Solomon Griffiths case, at least that was the impression he was trying to give to the outside world.

“And thanks for that,” said Ben, “It’s made this a lot easier.”

“Made what a lot easier?”

“I was at a chief constable’s conference last week.”

“Oh how the might have ascended,”

“Shut up – this is me fucking saving your bacon.”

“Right.”

“West Yorkshire.”

“Yes.”

“You’re familiar with it.”

“Depends what you mean.”  
“You were born there.”

“Yes.”

“And you grew up there.”  
“Yes.”

“Do you think you could be a policeman there.”

“Fuck! Seriously. That’s what you’re going to do? Rusticate me?”

“They’ve got a serial killer.”

“I haven’t read about it.”  
“They’ve kept it out of the papers.”  
“Why would they do that?”

“Because they’re fucking it up, and right now, they don’t feel that detailed scrutiny of their fuck ups is really going to help matters.”

“How many?”

“Three so far – that they know of, maybe a fourth. But they’re not all in West Yorkshire, they’re all over the north, one in Manchester, one in Nottinghamshire. That’s part of the fuck-up. They went undetected because they were with different forces.”

“What can I do?”  
“What you always do.”

“What I nearly always do. Solomon Griffiths.”

Dan cut him off with his most soon to be assistant commissioner Donne voice. “Solomon Griffiths has been dead 40 years. This chap’s last victim was last Tuesday.”

“How do we know it’s a chap?”

“We don’t. But whoever bought the vodka is a bloke.”

“What vodka?”

Now Dan looked at him and smiled and there was actually good humour around the eyes. Sumner could see the raw recruit that he’d befriended at Hendon.

“The victims all committed suicide by drinking vodka and pills.”

“But it’s not suicide?”

“Apparently not.”

“How do they know?”  
Dan shook his head. “I don’t know any of the details.” He knew Sumner was hooked, that’s all he wanted to do before he moved on to the rest of his day – which not likely to be filled with any more easy victories. “All I do all day is look at spreadsheets with highlighted overspend.”   
  
He paused. “And deal with disciplinary cases like you.”  
  
Dan pushed back in his high-backed chair and looked north towards Highgate.   
  
“I suggest you get on train to Leeds and find out.  
  
When you get there talk to detective sergeant Beverly Fletcher. She’s expecting you tomorrow at 9.”  
  
That was it. Sumner was dismissed. This was one of the most awkward aspects of having former friends who were know senior offices in the Met – well, that and the times when they tried to fire you.

Chapter 2 Dark Arches

Coming out of King’s Cross on the train that same afternoon, it was a blisteringly warm late April. Everything was in flower. But the clouds started to gather by the time they got to Grantham. And as the train finally wound its way across six or seven sets of points to come to rest at platform 12 of Leeds station, it was raining. He’d found a hotel near the station.   
  
He remembered catching trains from here when he was a teenager. Breathless catching the last train having seen bands at the student union. Fifty pence a pint! And a deal between the student union and the brewery that mean that the beer tasted like it had just come out of some magic beer fountain.

Even though he’d been brought up fifteen or so miles from Leeds, he didn’t know it that well. He knew the route from the university to the station. And the police station was halfway between the two.

He planned to check it out that evening, so he’d know exactly where to go in the morning. An appointment at 9? He would always be there, lurking in a café that was in view, if possible at 8.

Mary o’clock. People in his family called it. After his grandmother Mary, who would always insist on being at any appointment at least three hours before the appointed time.

But before that, he needed to check into his hotel. Which appeared to be directly inside the station. It took him a while to realis that it was actually directly under the station.

A left turn off of the “Dark Arches” a set of tunnels under the station. One of which carried a main road, but the hotel was several turns down side roads off of that road. Of course, down there the GPS on the phone didn’t work and he was left walking “blindly” – in modern terms - through sodium-lit tunnels. When he finally emerged into the daylight, he was hit by the smell. Because he smelled it first, and instantly knew what it was, before he saw it.

The canal. Canals in Yorkshire had black, black, water. And, if it were possible, they had an even darker stink. He didn’t know exactly what caused either the colour or the smell, his suspicion was coaldust – but maybe he was being naively optimistic that it was that wholesome. The area had in the past been surrounded by every kind of manufacturing, chemical factories, printers, breweries. He didn’t really understand how it could endure still, nearly half a century after any industrial activity in this part of town. But endure it did. The black oily water. The hellish stink.

His hotel was in an unaccountable patch of daylight, if it were in Brighton, you’d call in boutique. But this was a difficult to pull of in such a dark corner. In and amongst the tangled arches around and below the station. He inhaled deeply of an instant coffee he made himself with all the sachets in his tea and coffee making facilities. In fact, his room had a view of platform 12. The essential connection between Leeds and the outside world.

For a brief moment, he was surprised by a thought. He could just walk back to the station. He hadn’t unpacked anything yet. He could go back to London. And the relatively safety of only about half of the metropolitan police wishing him ill.

This thought shocked him. He was always alert to these “new flashes” from his unconscious. They didn’t happen often. But they weren’t often wrong. Was he really in danger here? Already?

Chapter 3. The Headrow

Sumner had been watching the police station on the Headrow for at least an hour. He’d found the idea seat in the coffee shop across the road. But by 8:30 he couldn’t resist it anymore. He walked into the reception and announced himself at the desk.

“Detective Chief Inspector Ian Sumner, for Beverly Fletcher.”

“Is she expecting you?”

“He clearly wasn’t on any list?”  
“Are you West Yorks – you can just use your pass.” She was scanning his chest, expect the ever-present lanyards and photo cards.

“I’m…” He hesitated. Was he Met now? Officially suspended, on gardening leave.

“No. I don’t have a pass. She is expecting me. I’m a bit early.”

The uniformed receptionist looked him up and down. He was wearing the suit that he always wore when he was in the met, he tended to buy them from Marks whenever he found an actual hole in the one he was wearing. Or whenever he got any kind of sideways remark from his sergeant.

People came and went pushing their passes at a reader on the gate.

He realised that here in Yorkshire, the detectives dressed smarter. He also realised that there was a code. Probably not explicit. Maybe explicit. Dark suits. Grey or blue, but charcoal or navy. No one was wearing light grey, like his. White shirts. All of them. His was blue. And colourful ties. He noticed that the older guys were wearing cufflinks.

Observation. It was his job. Some other people didn’t think it should be. But it was.

He was reminded that this was often how he realised that there was a new fashion in London. At the barriers on the tube. You see one pretty girl in a poncho. You think “hey! A girl in a poncho.” You see three within a minute you think – oh right. A trend. And you’re slightly less impressed by the choice of the first girl in the poncho.

Shoes. They all wore black, shiny shoes. He looked down at his own. They were brown. They weren’t shiny.

And then, not for the first time in his life, not for the hundredth, he found himself asking if he was going to fit in, if he was going to change what he was going to do because of his surroundings. Because of what other people were doing. The answer came back. The answer was always the same, but maybe it took just a half a beat longer. Because he was in Yorkshire. What was that line from Larkin? About a refusal being much more serious. This wasn’t elsewhere. This was officially home.

“Good morning.” The mouth was smiling. But the eyes weren’t, “DCI Bev Fletcher” she said, holding out a hand.

“Hello, Ian Sumner,” he said shaking it, “I’m sorry if I’m a bit early.”

Bev looked away. “Let’s get you a pass.”

What? Had he made some kind of faux pas already? How? Was it the suit?

A few minutes later she handed him a lanyard. He looked down at it and noticed it was temporary – it said it in red letters – and it also said he had to be escorted – Jesus, that mean someone was supposed to follow him to the loos.

“You didn’t say you were from the Met did you?”

“No, I realised that I’m not sure that I am now. I’m not suspended. I’m on gardening leave.”

Bev looked at him, maybe properly for the first time and certainly for the first time, genuinely smiled.

“Gardening leave? You can come round and do mine.”

Sumner tried to pretend it wasn’t the fifteenth time he’d heard the gag. Why did plod only seem to have about six jokes?

“You’re not telling them I’m from the Met?”

“You’re a data expert. From Hendon. You’re helping me with the technical side, because I’m rubbish with computers.”

“Why on earth would…”

“You know about computers and stuff don’t you?”

“Well, I’ve got a degree from.”

“Cambridge, I know.”  
“Actually, the degrees from Oxford – in maths, the diploma in Computing is from Cambridge.”

Everything he said was true. And getting the details right. That’s what being a detective is about – isn’t it?

Bev looked at him levelly. “Bradford Uni. Sociology – I did that because I fancied my A-level sociology teacher. She gave his clean-shaven chin a brief glance. I’ve always had a thing for men with untidy beards.”

“But you got on graduate fast track for West Yorks police. And you never really slowed down did you? Youngest female detective every in the force, youngest female to be given a murder, and now this serial…”

Ben shot him a look and then looked around the floor. They were walking across an open-plan floor, which was sparsely occupied. The desks that there were, were all around the edges. Clearly, they didn’t say the s-word.

They were heading to the only walled-off corner office on the floor.

Finally, they were sitting down in it.

“Look I’ve read your file,” said Sumner.

“How did you get my file?”

“And you’ve read mine” he continued.

“If it were still and actually paper file, it would have FUCK UP – AVOID! Written on the outside in red felt tip.”

“And I’m not a fuck up. But, divorce and cancer – they’ve been something of a distraction. And they don’t want to be seen to take me off the case. The optics. Whatever the fuck they are. Actually the main reason is that no other bugger wants it.”

“Really? That’s it? I’d have thought, I mean, high profile serial killer, they’d be champing.”

He saw Bev wince again. “We’re not officially saying their connected.”

Sumner had suspected this from what he’d read. But you never really know until you meet someone. Bev wasn’t stupid. So what was all this pretending that these four killings weren’t linked.

“What’s going on? Why pretend they’re not linked?”

“Take a guess.”