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.”

Sumner pulled a face. As if he were smelling something he didn’t want to smell, but needed to, to get done what he needed to get done.  
“Politics.”

“You are a real copper.”

## Chapter N. The Long walk back

He checked it on his phone. It was six miles back to Huddersfield station, walking that was. He eyed the route. Down into the valley, and then following the river. He would be, literally, out of the woods before it got dark. And then he’d be strolling through street-lit suburbs, finally he’d cross the river Coln and then the canal by it’s side. It occurred to him that maybe he could wall all the way to Leeds on the towpath. But it he wasn’t exactly sure that he could – weren’t there bits that were just the river? With no towpath.

He found himself descending away from the housing estate that was below Clegg’s farmhouse. And following a winding path through a wood. He himself. He knew that he wouldn’t sink instantly into the kind of thinking that he wanted to be doing when he didn’t know the way.

He knew he’d be checking his path on his phone. To try to avoid this, he put it in the small rucksack on his back.  
  
Four murders. They were the officially the problems of four different forces. There was some effort made to make all of them look like suicide. But in each case, the effort wasn’t really enough. And the murderer seemed to be getting more careless.   
  
Had he seen it on a TV programme, or had he read it somewhere that there were two kinds of serial killers. The path came right down to the river now. And crossed it on a wooden laited bridge.

Yes, that’s right. Two kinds of serial killers. Organised, and chaotic. But this seemed to be a third kind. One who started off organised and then became increasingly chaotic. Was that a recognised this? Could that be right?

Was it even worth doing the victimology on these four guys? The thing that they had in common was that they all looked the same. They varied in height from 5’10” to 5’11” (he could never really get the hang of metric for heights) and they were all about the same weight, slightly chubby, a hundred kilos. But that was it. They all had completely different jobs. They lived in different houses. A terraced house, a flat, a bungalow, and then this farmhouse, which was reasonably remote. None of them were married – that’s maybe another connection. One was divorced, one was widowed. One was gay – with a long-term partner, but not married, and one was divorced.  
  
The path had now emerged from a bush, onto the end of the green of a golf course. There were stern signs everywhere informing him that he had to stick to the right of way, and pointing out exactly where that was. He also cause the blank stare of a pair of golfers who were just a few feet away. Sinking puts.

It flashed across Sumners mind that the one in the fuscia polo shirt could have easily been another victim of his killer.

He couldn’t resist checking his phone again, as the path spilled out onto the road. He saw that, if he doubled back under a road bridge, he would walk most of the way into “Town” as locals referred to Huddersfield on a disused railway.

He picked up his chain of thought. One of them used to be a woman!  
  
He couldn’t see anything in the victimology. The look seemed to be the most important thing.

Then there was another question. Was the actually, intended victim, amongst these four? Was this a trans hate murder, covered up by three decoys? Was this something to do with Barry’s divorce?

He just couldn’t see it.

## Chapter N. Now what?

He was just walking over the Colne, and wondering what he was going to eat for dinner when his phone rang. It was Bev.

“Are you near a computer?”

“No, I’m on the street, just walking up to Huddersfield station.”

“How come you’re still in Huddersfield.”  
“I walked from Shepley?”  
“You, did what? Nevermind. Look we’ve got some forensics back. And they’re mental.”

“That’s a technical term is it?”

“Female DNA.”

“OK, at which crime scene.”

“All of them.”

“What? Where?”

“That’s the thing, that’s why it’s taken so long.”

“What?”

“Well, look, the Manchester scene was the first?”

“Yes.”  
“And on all the obviously surfaces, they take samples straight away – and in a murder obviously they’re all a rush job.”

“Hopefully you mean, priority, you don’t actually rushed.”

“Let’s blood hope so, but if this is a cock up it’s a weird one. Let me finish.”

“Tell me.”  
“They took samples from all of the toilets – apparently that’s a standard thing as well, but in these cases, unless the killer did a massive poo after each murder, they weren’t expecting anything.”

Sumner walked through the barriers at Huddersfield’s station and clocked that he had a minute to make a train to Leeds. He started to sprint down the stairs, under the tunnel.

“But one of these strips made it through the backlog. And they found female DNA on it.”

“Right,” Sumner managed as he sprinted up the stairs. The orange lights on the side of the train were still lit, he could see that other people were still opening the doors, he thought he could make it.

“So, well they ran these toilet swabs from the other scenes.”

“And?”

“And it’s there – in every toilet. The same female DNA. The West Yorkshire lab thinks it’s from menstrual blood.”

“Fucking hell.”  
“But it’s just there, no where else, in any of the scenes.”  
Sumner realised that he’d stopped dead. And was staring off the end of the platform, watching the train that he’d planned to get on, departing without it.

“But that’s not the mental part.”

“If it isn’t, what is?”

“We shouldn’t know whose DNA it is. But we do.”  
Sumner stuck his thumb and forefinger as far apart as he could. Applied them to his cheekbones and then pulled them together into his eye sockets, under his glasses, until they ended up pinching his nose.

“We know whose DNA it is?”

“Yes, she’s called Sheilagh Brande.”

Why do we know who she is?  
“Her DNA was collected ten years ago for elimination and – shit, I can feel this case going sideways as I’m telling you. For some reason it didn’t get deleted.”  
“Nothing gets deleted.”

“You’re the computer guy.”

“Does she have any kind of record.”

“No, she’s a victim. At least we thought she was a victim.”

“Your making sense score is quickly approaching zero.”  
“What.”

“Just fucking tell me Bev.”  
“Fifteen years ago, Sheilagh Brande’s father was murdered. The case is still open. It initially looked like suicide but….”  
“Oh no.  
“He was a white man in his fifties.”  
“You are fucking kidding me.”

“About 5’11”.”

They had a bar in the station. He didn’t often eye the optics – the actual optics – in a pub. But right now, he fancied a double whisky and a Guinness chaser. And he had 20 minutes before his next train.  
“Did he by any chance have a full head of grey hair.”

“How on earth did you guess?”

“Do you know where she is?”  
What was that he could hear? Laughing? Was Bev laughing?  
“Google her – she’s pretty easy to find.”

Sumner sighed, “we’re going to have to bring her in.”

“She’s coming in tomorrow morning – to the Headrow. She’s bringing her own solicitor.”

He did Google her.

For fuck’s sake.

## ## Chapter N – Wheels? What wheels?

“Good morning Sheilagh”

Shelagh was tiny. He wasn’t sure if she was five feet tall. A dark bob. Fine features. And these dark, dark, clever eyes. Most people were terrified in police station. And they had good reason. Horrible, horrible things happened in police stations. And it was a rough, but extremely helpful indication of guilty or innocence, just how scared people were.

He’d known a few Yorkshirewomen. And he’d got a reasonable sense of the ones that it wasn’t a good idea to be enemies with. And she was one.

She wasn’t scared at all. She was looking Bev straight in the eye. He wasn ‘t sure that was something he was comfortable doing.

“Hello,” she said finally.  
  
“We have some questions that we’d like to ask you about some murders that we’re investigating.”

“Murders? What do you mean murders? Murders plural?”

It was an absolute maxim of interrogation that the interrogator asked the questions. Bev moved on.  
  
“Are you familiar with an area just outside of Huddersfield called coal pit lane?”  
  
Now the solicitor piped up. Sumner had got during brief introductions that he had some kind of foreign accent, he’d though maybe Northern Irish. Now he realised, it was an American accent. This was a first. At a guess he would say that it was a New York accent.

“My client isn’t going answer any of your questions she has a prepared statement.”

“Your client is going to answer their fucking questions,” interrupted Sheilagh.   
  
“But Sheilagh.”  
  
“Shut up Bernie.”

“Ask me again.”

“Are you familiar with an area outside of Hudderfield, Coal Pit lane, near the village of Shepley. And a farm Nether Field Farm?”

Sheilagh stared hard at Bev. Again, those dark, super clever eyes. He thought for a moment that she was suddenly going to go no comment. That happened sometimes, it was a kind of climactic moment. The moment when the bluster collapses. When you know that they’ve got something on you. Maybe this was going to be over really quickly.

Then Sheilagh started to talk slowly, and deliberately and he realised that it wasn’t over.   
“I’ve never been there. I of course know the name, because it’s the farm where Gregory Bower was found dead. And I’m a true crime podcaster. You say it’s suicide. Everybody with more brain cells that tits says it’s murder,” Surely Sheilagh could n ‘t know about the mastectomy.

From the side, Sumner couldn’t exactly tell what was going on with Bev. He realised now that this was the first time they’d been in an interview together. They’d had brief chance to go through how they were going to handle it. But he could see whatever preparation that they’d had wouldn’t have done them much good. He managed to listen to two or three of the podcasts last night. In the slow, spread out, make the absolute most of the material that you possibly could way of true crime, he’d picked this up.  
  
He dad had been killed when she was fifteen. It had ruined her life. She was all set up to go to university, after her dad died? Cue five or six years of drink, drugs, promiscuity and dressing like a goth. The she’d heard another true crime podcast. She’d realised that it was the death of her dad that was causing her to self-destruct. She’d got clean. She’d got herself a lot of heavy blankets to like a cupboard and a fancy microphone and she’d started podcasting.

All the time while he was thinking this, he realised that he was staring at Bev. Then he realised that they all were. He got the feeling that not much shut Sheilagh up but she was quiet now.

Maybe what was fascinating them all, Sumner, Bernie Gaetz (he checked his notes, that was his name) and Sheilagh was that two things were going on on Bev’s face at the same time.

Superficially, there was a calm, that – it looked like it was being cemented into place. But behind that, although she was doing her best to control, was a rage. He wondered if Bev was any good at poker, he couldn’t guess. At that moment, if Bev had stuck out a hand, grabbed onto Sheilagh’s bangs and pulled her face SMACK right into the table, he wouldn’t have been exactly surprised. Jesus. Talk about a clash of the titans.

“What about Coalbroke Villas, in the Park in Nottingham?” Is all Bev said.

“You know I lived in Coalbroke Villas.”

Sumner and Bev exchanged glances.

“Oh my God! You didn’t know!”

“Oh fuck.” Thought Sumner. You know that feeling when you’re in a car, driving in snow, and everything starts to seem weird? The steering wheel feels weird the brakes feel weird. And for half a second, you wonder why everything is feeling weird. And then as the scenery goes past you in directions that you weren’t expecting, you realise. “Oh I’ve lost control.” And then there are those awful seconds, seconds that feel like hours, before you end up in a ditch, maybe upside down. Somehow he felt that the chair under him was moving. Somehow he thought that in a few seconds he and Bev were going to be upside down in a ditch.

“Not entirely a surprise is it that you haven’t found my father’s killer. OK, well, if you’d listened to my podcast – which is hardly a secret – you’d know that I have lived in Coalbroke Villas when I was a student. You’d know that I lived in Calder view road, just after my dad was killed, with my auntie Jane. You’d know…”

She looked at them. Mouth open, looking down her nose.

“You’ve done none of this research have you? You don’t know that I stayed in a flat share in Whitby Street in Preston, and that’s two streets over. You’ve shot your load haven’t you? You’ve got something that you think ties me to these murders and so you’ve just gone with that. Even if it were me, you’d have fucked this up.”

“It not supposed to go like this,” thought Sumner. He’d read somewhere that the IQ of people arrested was less that 100. Nobody you ever meet normally has an IQ less than a 100. The other thing of course, is that the police only interview, and then arrest people who they have good reason to think have done whatever it is that they think they’ve done.

Sheilagh didn’t go to Oxford. Rather unsurprisingly after her dad’s murder, she got terrible exam results. They’d given her a lower offer at Edinburgh and she’d gone there.  
  
But he knew the type. Saying she was bright didn’t capture it. Yes, sure she was bright. There was something particularly upsetting about encountering someone who could not only see your own chains of thought, but see what was wrong with them, before you even made it to thinking them. That would have been Sheilagh on an ordinary day, talking to her about any subject.

But when it came to this case, they’d strayed onto her home patch. To say she was informed about everything that went on in this area was putting it a bit too fucking mildly.

“You’ve got something on me haven’t you? You’ve brought me here to put it to me. But you haven’t done *any* research. Not 10 minutes of basic googling. Yes, I know those other addresses. But unlike you, apparently, I’m very busy. I have a podcast to put out and I’ve just written a book and I’m combining both in a tour. But I still managed to google you – she nodded at Bev. Sumner allowed himself a little gasp. What was was there online that let everybody know about Bev’s mastectomy.

As he’d kind of disappeared into himself, thinking about this, he resurfaced to find those dark eyes on him.  
“Facebook. She said. Your colleague here is who they send when someone gets killed in West Yorkshire – but he hasn’t managed to figure out the privacy settings on facebook, which is, y’know, less than reassuring.”

She was really looking at him now.

“They say you should never meet your heroes. And they’re right about that aren’t they? You’re detective Chief Inspector Ian Sumner. ‘Sleepy Sumner’ they call you, because you never look like you’re doing anything.”

Sumner had a feeling in his arse. It was the skidding on the snow thing, combined with maybe the kind of diarrhoea that you only get during a visit to the tropics. Like that but on a Walzer. She knew who he was.

A really, really bleak though crossed his mind as he felt that he was losing control in multiple directions. “If she is the killer, how on earth are we going to lay a glove on her?”

“The night of the Coalbroke Villas murder, I was in Austin Texas, doing a live, joint podcast with Jayne Mercy Lee – in front of about 500 people. There’s a video of it on this thing called the internet.

“The night of the Masham street murder, I was in the country, I’ll give you that. But I was in Cornwall. So happens that night I was fucking a pathetic excuse for a human being Golly Brax.” She paused and sighed. Suddenly she was a lot younger and a lot more vulnerable. That’s not his real name. His real name is Kevin Lairds. He’s another true crime podcast. Actually he’s a conspiracy theorist who tries to impress you with pictures of *other people’s* dicks! What is that? Not Catfishing, fake worming?

“What about the other two?”

“Nether Field Farm?” said Bev.

Sheilagh thought for a just a second.

“Japan! Oh my god! I was actually in FUCKING JAPAN. At podglobal!”

“Then why is your blood at all of these crime scenes?” Sumner found himself just saying it. Before they’d gone in, they’d agreed that Bev would do the talking. It was a fairly standard interrogation technique. Oh yeah everybody thought they new about good cop bad cop. But most of the time, what you needed was someone watching. It was hard to talk to someone and watch them at the same time. He couldn’t count how many books and videos he’d read about the importance of listening. But the only one he’d read that made sense was one that admitted that it was so hard, that if you were doing it in really important situations, like hostage negotiations, he thought the book was about, you needed other people listening. You just couldn’t do it all at the same time. But here, he just needed to knock her off balance. And besides the last thing he needed to hear anything about was his own catastrophic career, or any kind of true-crime take on Solomon Griffiths.

There were apparently six universally recognised emotions. Sadness, fear, anger, disgust (but that’s enough about my love life!) thought Sumner, but then SURPISE! The eyes wide open, and the mouth puckered into a perfect O. This was a look of surprise that – according to the book he’d read by some psychologist – was universal. It was the same expression on the face of recently contact tribes, on bushmen in the Kalahari – and Belgians.   
  
And lo and behold! Here it was on the face of Sheilagh Brande. Three perfect O’s. The eyes wide now. And he could see that they were blue. A deep, deep blue. And they widened as she sucked in air through her mouth.  
  
Then he saw her look to the side. Even give her lawyer a little glance. It was the first moment of weakness he’d seen from her.

But then was back. The direct, dark gaze.

“Somebody put it there.”

## Chapter N – the desert

He’d been supposed to be keeping a low profile. And now they had that worst, the humiliating kind of publicity. Web publicity. How on earth could you control that?

Of course, what Sheilagh was saying wasn’t true. They weren’t trying to pin the murders on her. And when they found her DNA, they had at least to talk to her. And she travelled a lot internationally. They knew that now! She was out of the country for two of the murders. And she was publicly, verifiably, at the other end of the country for the other two.

## Concordance

### Dramatis Personae

Daniel Donne – Sumner’s mate from Hendon who’s now something really important in the Met.

Ian Sumner – we don’t quite what at the beginning, but he’s got obsessed with a case in London and it’s upset too many people, maybe in the met, maybe outside it.

Beverly Fletcher – Sumner is there because she had a bit of a breakdown – actually her life fell apart – she got cancer and her husband didn’t want to support her. Neither do her kids.

Sheilagh Brande – Somebody killed her father – he was a man in his late forties, with a full head of grey hair.

### Murders

Nether Field farm, near Shepley, West Yorkshire – 15th April 2025

Coalbroke Villas, the Park Nottingham, 15th April 2024

Masham Street, Preston – a terraced house. 14th September 2024

Calder View Road – Wakefield, 10th January2025

Sheilagh’s dad – Armley Park Road - terraced house, 15th April 2024

Bernie Gaetz – Sheilagh’s lawyer, but he works for an American media company that has picked up Sheilagh’s podcast.