**Chapter 1**

The Yorkshire Wolds must have hired the wrong publicist. That was Lisa Mirren’s private theory. Compared to the Yorkshire Dales and the North York Moors, few tourists have heard of these chalk hills to the east of the county. Unlike the other two celebrated regions, they were never awarded National Park status or classed as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. If landscapes were in any way sentient, Lisa decided, the Wolds would definitely feel like the poor relation. The forlorn member of the trio, reminiscent of that other Kennedy brother – JFK, Bobby, and the Chappaquiddick one who never shone politically or got to sleep with Marilyn Monroe. Since her medical career brought her to York, Lisa had fallen in love with the Dales and moors, but she found this gentler terrain almost as beautiful.

The bright sun had little effect upon the temperature – a glacial cold, more suited to a Siberian night than a Saturday afternoon in the English countryside. Standing on a footpath beside a stream, Lisa peered into the hawthorn thicket on the opposite side of the shallow water. Deep inside, one of the five roosting owls blinked drowsily as it watched the girl.

‘That’s right.’ Lisa’s excited whisper clouded on the frigid air as she adjusted her camera tripod. ‘Just keep looking this way.’

Long-eared owls gather at traditional sites during the winter and she’d discovered this secluded roost on an Internet birdwatching forum. Birdwatching and wildlife photography are mistakenly regarded as masculine pursuits, television and old movies collaborating to typecast any female who strays into the domain as a tweed-clad eccentric. Lisa’s striking looks instantly demolished the frumpy stereotype.

‘Now don’t move.’ She brushed a lock of fair hair from the camera viewfinder and fired off two shots. ‘Good boy.’

With only seven shopping days remaining before Christmas, most people would be spending their weekend buying gifts in city stores. Lugging camera equipment around the frozen Wolds wasn’t on the festive priority list of the average thirty-year-old girl, but Lisa was far from average. Tugging up the collar of her combat jacket against the chill, she turned from the bushes and raised her binoculars to scan the meadows and clumps of woodland beyond the water.

Rippled and undulating like an unmade bed, the landscape rolled away towards the east coast, crisscrossed with drystone walls and the dark skeletons of hedgerows. This was the last place to need a makeover, but the midday sun transformed the frosted panorama into a glitter-dusted Christmas card. Lisa remembered the James Herriot books she’d loved as a child, and the tales of the country vet visiting such places to tend to livestock.

Why hadn’t she studied veterinary medicine instead of biochemistry? How wonderful it must be to work somewhere like this instead of her York dermatology lab.

Completing her binocular sweep, the young doctor returned her gaze to the hawthorns and smiled wistfully at a sudden recollection of last Christmas. The candlelit dinner where her ex-fiancé gave the binoculars as a gift didn’t seem like a year ago, yet their summer break-up felt so distant. Time screws with the memory, she contemplated sadly, and all things come to an end.

Lisa sighed and focussed on the roosting owls again as crows exploded raucously from the tops of nearby ash trees. They sat erect, eyes wide and ear tufts raised in alarm. Excellent! This was better than the dazed expression owls normally wore during the day. She stooped to the camera, but it didn’t show much–just a tail as the last bird bolted, and darkness as someone blocked the lens.

‘Huh?’

‘Well, Lisa, I can certainly see the attraction of ornithology. Fresh air and beautiful, isolated spots such as this.’ Her visitor stepped around the tripod, squinting up at the sun. ‘Ah, this amazing sunshine. I honestly can’t remember it looking and feeling so good.’

‘But I never heard…’ A breeze wafted Lisa’s face and, despite the warm jacket, her spine frosted over in gooseflesh. ‘What are you doing here?’ She laughed nervously. ‘You sneaked up like a cat. Where did you come from?’

‘I always liked you, Lisa. I realise how clichéd it must sound, but this really is nothing personal.’

‘What the hell…’ A hand shot out, tearing open Lisa’s collar and snapping the binocular strap. They fell to the ground as the girl pulled back. ‘Those cost a fortune.’

Arterial blood splattered the camera and sprayed the frozen grass. As last words went, Lisa Mirren’s killer had heard better examples.

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**Chapter 2**

The small city of York was named Eboracum by the Romans, but the Vikings christened it Jorvik, if indeed Pagans could christen anything. The Norse longships were an everyday sight on York’s River Ouse before 1066 and little has changed topographically since their reign. The principal thoroughfares of Fossgate, Coppergate, Ousegate, Spurriergate and Gillygate still follow the same winding routes and bear the same Viking names. Elizabethan city walls encircle the centre with fortified barbican towers punctuating their two-mile run like miniature castles, Bootham, Micklegate, Walmgate, and Monk being the largest of these thirteenth-century gateways. John Watson knew quite a bit about this. Not because the boring history of his birthplace interested the teenager in any way, but because his new employer was constantly rambling on about how wonderful and fascinating it all was.

‘Oh, come on.’ The words were whispered through chattering teeth. Watson peered through a dripping camera, his numb hands protecting the lens as he focused on a van by a garage. ‘Turn this way again.’

The teenager stood a short way south of the Micklegate barbican, at the end of Saxon Street. A row of honey-coloured houses, the Victorian terrace was built just below the city wall and its grassy embankment. Watson had found a hiding place with a good view of the rear garages, and sleet pelted the ramparts above him, soaking into his jeans and jacket as he sheltered behind shrubbery. Thrills, diversity, adventure – he recalled the various expectations when he answered the jobcentre advert for Bernard Quist’s consultant detective agency, but he never anticipated this.

A lean, black youth of nineteen, friends often mentioned Watson’s cheeky smile–an insolent smirk, his schoolteachers used to say–but there was no sign of it this Monday morning. The teachers also said: extremely clever but doesn’t try, intelligent and quick-witted but lacks discipline, and quite frequently in his final year: I see the smart-mouthed bastard is absent again.

‘Just a couple more shots,’ he muttered, zooming in on an overweight man by the van. ‘Let’s finish this so I can get to a nice warm office.’

With his beer-belly and broken nose, Ronnie Garbutt was hardly photogenic, but Watson’s picture of him loading the vehicle with plaster was the tenth taken in the past few minutes. Garbutt wasn’t a plasterer; he was a council cleaner. None of his colleagues had actually seen his work-related accident, but it must have been a bad slip. He was supposedly incapable of any manual labour, yet he’d tossed five weighty sacks into the van and never shown a flicker of pain.

Wind whisked an accumulation of sleet from the wall above Watson, half of which landed on the back of his head.

‘Brilliant,’ he hissed. ‘How wonderful.’

Yes, his employer loved these historic fortifications, but Watson guessed Bernard Quist had never had to stand beneath them in this kind of weather. The private investigator, or consultant detective, as Quist insisted upon being called, had a huge admiration for the ancient city of York, often referring to it as a splendid medieval jewel. Watson lived in an area that wasn’t too splendid and was never mentioned by the Yorkshire tourist board – the Grimpen housing estate. He’d worked as Quist’s assistant for the past three weeks and for the most part he’d enjoyed it. The detective work was varied, but hardly exciting, the assignments revolving around gathering divorce evidence, serving papers and tedious surveillance. Watson had grown up on a diet of private eye movies and television shows where the detectives had thrilling adventures that never seemed to involve being bored or piss-wet through.

‘That’ll do it,’ he murmured to himself, lowering his camera as Garbutt vanished inside the garage. Stepping back behind the bushes, he ran a hand through his short black hair and shook off the icy drips. ‘Those pictures should be enough.’