

# WEIRDO



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CATHI UNSWORTH



SPIDERLINE

From WeirDo © 2013 Written by Cathi Unsworth

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For Matthew, Yvette, Thomas, William and Sophie Rose



*Death to come  
to those we husband,  
frightened crowds  
running circles –  
on the path and down the hill.  
I'm not the man  
here to murder  
but in his time  
he will come.*

Benedict Newbery,  
'Some Man's Business'

*Normal is for shit*  
Harry Crews





**Part 1**

\* \* \*

**SMALLTOWN  
ENGLAND**



# You're Already Dead

March 2003

They had hidden her far from the rest of the world, deep within a forest. Nearly twenty years she'd been there now, still not long enough to stop the murmurs of hate, nor keep them from turning into a clamour each time her name was recalled. Whenever another case hit the headlines of teenagers killing each other.

*Wicked Witch of the East*, the tabloids called her. *Killer Corrine*, High Priestess of a Satanic cult that had gripped the teenage population of a Norfolk seaside town in the summer of 1984, bringing death in its claws. Social transgressor, female aggressor. Bloody weirdo, the locals said. They'd always known Corrine Woodrow was a wrong 'un. Never any doubt in their minds about her guilt and the need for her punishment to be both severe and eternal.

*Keep her away.*

Sean Ward had read all the files and all the news reports he could lay his hands on from the bloody summer of 1984. Had a teenage face in his mind, a girl with spiked and shaved black hair, thick lines of kohl around what were routinely described as 'the eyes of evil'. The picture of her at her arrest, rather than the smoothed-down, smartened-up teenager that had finally

arrived at court, was the one they went on repeating. Usually next to the shot of a bleached-blonde Myra Hindley.

The forest was dense with pine, branches swaying under the force of the wind and slanting rain. The only other traffic Sean had seen on this B-road through the Cambridgeshire countryside was an ancient Massey Ferguson tractor, driven by a hunched figure in a woollen cap, that had lurched past at the last crossroads and disappeared down a cart track. Sean couldn't help thinking that he had taken a detour from the real world somewhere between here and the M11, got lost in a folk tale instead – travelling through the wild wood to the fortress where they kept the Witch bricked up.

The windscreen wipers swooshed as the rain pattered down on the roof of his dark blue Peugeot 207. He had long since turned off the radio, preferring the solitude and the drizzle to the darker clouds of war in Iraq that dominated today's headlines: George Bush and Tony Blair demanding Saddam stand down and knowing he wouldn't, pushing towards conflict at any cost.

Sean had had enough of conflict. He had been a detective sergeant in the Metropolitan police when his job had nearly killed him, in a spray of semi-automatic gunfire that the teenage drug dealer had fortunately not been capable of aiming with deadly accuracy. Had spent the best part of a year in hospitals and recuperation after that, his nights haunted by visions of the look in that young man's eyes.

He had a new line of work now, not so different from the old. Pensioned out of the Met, Sean had ended up doing the only thing ex-coppers really knew how to do – private detective work. He hadn't liked the idea of it, imagining a dull, endless line of cheating spouses and petty fraudsters. But it was

preferable to life as a social worker or a prison guard, or worse still, slipping into the inertia of sofa and daytime TV, a life devoid of purpose.

To his surprise, he had found there was a new area of detection providing the sort of work that would allow his brain to go on doing what it had been designed for. A field opened up by the advancement of chemistry and physics, DNA technology; a boom area for lawyers with good money to pay.

Cold cases.

Which was why, having almost been felled by one child villain, Sean was now driving towards another – or whatever Corrine Woodrow had become in the years since her incarceration.

Janice Mathers, the QC who was behind this, the second attempt to appeal against indefinite sentence, was the type of lawyer that induced fury within his former profession – a trendy lefty who had made her name taking on unpopular cases in a quest to expose the miscarriages she felt were at the heart of the justice system. She'd had a fresh forensic test done on clothing recovered from the murder scene and, thanks to a new technique called Cluster DNA, had found evidence that cast doubt on Corrine's sole culpability.

Someone else's genetic imprint was smeared across it, a person unknown to the police, an anonymous entity who must have stayed clean ever since, never been caught for another offence or put on a file anywhere. She had engaged Sean to try and find this phantom accomplice who could be anywhere else on earth, including underneath, it by now.

He had taken Mathers' coin despite the disapproving faces of friends from his old squad, first amongst them Charlie Higgins, Sean's old chief super, the guiding light of his ten

years on the Force. Not that he didn't have misgivings. Even if an injustice had occurred, what hope would the Wicked Witch of the East have for rehabilitation now? She would have to live the rest of her life under a false identity, permanently looking behind her back, never able to rest. Sean had seen what could happen at the first whisper of suspicion, seen the shit through the letterbox, the windows smashed, the graffiti scrawled and the fires lit. Seen it happen to innocent people, let alone those who really were tainted by past deeds.

But the real reason he had taken the case was becoming clearer to Sean with every mile he drove: after long months of inactivity, his brain was crawling. He needed a case, needed a purpose. He could do with a new identity himself – if this really was a folk tale, he would be the white knight on his charger – but he had never been comfortable with the 'hero cop' handle the press had bestowed on him while reporting his misfortune. Welcomed instead the anonymity of criminal archaeology.

Sean had been eleven years old when Corrine had committed her crime. He had no memory of it happening. Nor had he ever been to this part of the world before. After his stop here, he was headed further east, to the coastal resort of Ernemouth in Norfolk, where it had all begun, to meet with the man who had headed the original case, the now retired Detective Chief Inspector Leonard Rivett. But first, he wanted to meet Corrine. Wanted to look into her eyes and see what they revealed.

On the passenger seat beside him, the map showed that beyond the next bend would be the entrance to the perimeter fence of the high-security facility. It was a Victorian institution, as so many of them still were, forbidding brick pillars and arched iron gates guarding a grim stately home for the criminally insane.

The sentry waved him through with a bored expression and Sean found himself on a pale grey ribbon of road that stretched on through a clearing of heathland, the heather and gorse bushes dripping with rain. He saw no signs of life; not even the murder of crows you might expect to find circling such a desolate location. When the secure unit finally came into view, he understood why.

It really did look like a fortress with its turrets and towers, its slits of windows reflecting nothing but the iron hue of the sky. Sean felt a shudder of revulsion so deep that it was all he could do not to put on the brakes, swing round and head right back. Hospital had been bad enough, but this . . .

*How long would it take in a place like this before you became infected too?*

Taking a deep breath, he swallowed his fear and drove on.