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For the weird, wise, and wayward who would have once been called witches

Part One

A lie never lives to be old
– Sophocles

1

SEPTEMBER 2016

IF AN ASSAILANT TAKES YOU to a second location, chances of escape or rescue are significantly reduced.

It's one of the things Erin frequently tells herself whenever she steps outside the house. She's thinking it now, while at the same time trying to convince herself that the man isn't really following her.

If you are being followed, find an open place of business like a coffee shop or petrol station and go inside.

Erin steps into Costa Coffee on the high street and joins the queue. She'd been thinking about coming in anyway but she does it now out of necessity rather than as a treat, knowing that the lemon muffin she orders will stick in her throat and the cappuccino she's been looking forward to will taste of nothing.

She'd noticed the man in the art shop. Prior to that it'd been an average sort of morning. She'd popped to the supermarket early, got back, put the shopping away and opened her mail: a bank statement, an invitation to cervical screening and, less depressingly, a cover proof for a forthcoming picture book she's illustrated. She'd spent a few minutes studying it, her mood lifting briefly, as it always does, at the sight of her name and her artwork on the cover of what will be an actual book, in actual shops, in a few months' time. She'd allowed herself a moment to take it in. To feel something like content.

Erin loves her job. It's one of the very few things about her life that is good. She knows she's lucky, luckier than she deserves to be. Seeing the cover prompted her to pick up her phone and check her emails. She's been waiting for a response from Sam, her agent, on a picture book idea she sent him – her own text this time instead of someone else's. Her inbox loaded two new messages, neither from Sam. The first from Tesco Clubcard, which she deleted without reading, and the other through the contact form on her website. The subject line sent her mood, and her stomach, spiralling.

MURDERING BITCH.

She'd clicked on the message only to find the main body of it blank. The field meant for the sender's email was filled with a string of meaningless letters and numbers. With shaking fingers, she'd deleted it. And then she'd put on her coat and forced herself to go out.

It's the last week of September and autumn has crept up stealthily. A few days ago, on Erin's thirty-seventh birthday, the damson tree in her tiny garden dropped most of its leaves, which she has already swept up and disposed of. *Got to stay busy.* There had been a chill in the air when she'd left this morning, which nipped at her despite the faint, pear-golden glow of the sun. She'd walked briskly to the compact but well-stocked art shop on the fringes of town and spent a peaceful half hour choosing some new paints and replacing pencils that have worn to stubs. She has decided to work up three sample illustrations while she waits for Sam's reply. It will keep her occupied.

The man had entered the shop shortly after her and was the only other customer. Erin had looked up briefly as he came in, eyes skimming over him. White, stocky, a shaved greying head, blue jeans, brown corduroy jacket. A bent nose, the result of multiple breaks, his skin heavily pockmarked. Not the usual bohemian type she sees there, or the students with alternative haircuts and piercings.

Always be aware of your surroundings. Know who and what is in the immediate area, and where the exit is.

Passing him to pay for her items, Erin had noticed the man was holding a set of watercolour paints and staring intently at a couple of box canvases. It'd been a small detail, but one that had got her attention. She'd wondered then whether he was a clueless dad or husband picking up a gift for a creative relative, but Erin is not the type to point out that box canvases are for oils or acrylic paints, not watercolours. She doesn't speak to strangers if she can avoid it. In any case it was likely that the shop assistant would alert him to his mistake.

She'd been halfway down the street when she'd paused to look at some boots in a shop window and, on the edge of her vision, she'd noticed someone mirror her movements, stopping abruptly to look in a neighbouring shop.

The man from the art shop, just few steps behind.

Erin looks up from the counter now as the door to Costa Coffee opens, and in he walks. She turns back quickly to the barista, who has moved along to take the order of an older couple behind her. She could say something. Ask for help, say she's being followed. Doubt keeps her silent. Erin has been wrong before, created a scene and drawn attention and it's all turned out to be a misunderstanding. A couple of months ago she'd been returning a supermarket trolley when an abrasive voice sounded close by: 'I know what you did. Liar. Don't think you're getting away with it.'

A ranting woman charging towards her, face twisted. Erin had freaked and launched the trolley at her before seeing, too late, the earphone wires under the woman's hair. Connecting her on a phone call. Her words not meant for Erin… until they were, and more people had gathered by then to hear her being sworn at. Being called a nutjob.

She often thinks she's being followed, being watched, and today the email has left her more on edge than usual. She is

used to jumping at shadows, to messages from anonymous aggressors –

MURDERING BITCH…

… You don't deserve to live…

– to fearing everyone and everything.

She watches the man in the mirrors behind the counter. He's picked up a panini and is scanning the overhead coffee menu, paying no attention to her. She risks a glance his way and sees he has no bag from the art shop; nothing was bought there. He must have left right after her. She squashes down a wave of dread. It doesn't mean anything. He could have changed his mind, left empty-handed.

Or he could be following her.

She pays and sits at a table by the window, an equal distance between the counter and the door. Between help and escape. She only starts to calm down when the man takes his tray to the far end of the shop near the loos. He settles at a table with his back to her, taking out his phone to scroll through it. He is not watching her. He is not following her. She stirs her cappuccino. The drink is foamy and perfect and the muffin is soft and fresh. Perhaps she will enjoy them after all.

The woman who was behind Erin in the queue comes to sit at the table next to her, fussing with her shopping bags. Erin studies her, glad of a distraction. She is a people-watcher, always noticing posture and movement and doing her best to capture it on paper. Clients are consistently impressed by how well she draws hands. The woman removes her coat and fans herself. A minute later her partner joins her, setting down a tray.

Erin glances behind at the man with the corduroy jacket – still there, not watching her. As she turns back her eyes seize on the couple next to her.

The man has taken out a tabloid newspaper and is holding it up to read the sports page on the back. The front page faces Erin. She doesn't see the headline at first, only the picture.

A bite of lemon muffin dries up and sticks to the roof of her mouth.

In every high-profile murder there is a photo that is synonymous with the case; an image that etches into the nation's psyche to become instantly recognisable.

The girl's photograph was taken in her final year at school. She wears a green blazer and her thin hair is mousy brown, parted on the side. Her eyes look black in the picture, with no hint of the murky pond colour of her irises. *She looks so young*, Erin thinks. The article will name her as Belinda West, but Erin first knew her as Belinda Webb. She would have been almost thirty-seven now, same as Erin. But she never made it to eighteen.

At first Erin never understood why they used this picture of Bee. It bore little resemblance to her at the time of her death. There's no red hair, no vampy make-up. She's fresh-faced, if a little pale. Her expression is curiously neutral. But the answer, Erin had eventually learned, was a simple one: there were never many pictures of her in existence.

Erin's attention finally goes to the headline. It reads: CHILD BEE.

It's as though someone has pushed an alarm button in her brain. She stares at the two words, trying to work out what's wrong through a growing fog. Because something *is* wrong, even though the image and headline both fit with everything Erin knows. Her eyes drop to the subheading: DEAD GIRL ONE OF THE TWO LITTLE LIARS.

She stands up quickly, her knee knocking the table. Her half-eaten muffin lands on the floor and the man with the paper glances up, concerned. Erin ignores him, tugs on her coat and rushes out on to the street. Her face burns in the cool autumn air. Raindrops speckle her cheeks. The town is busy. People squeeze past her, shaking open umbrellas or diving into shop doorways to escape the rain shower.

She doesn't hear the voice at first. Doesn't hear the approaching footsteps. She's momentarily forgotten the man in the brown jacket until now, when she feels the hand on her arm and whips round ready to run or to lash out. But it's the woman from the coffee shop, slightly out of breath. Erin waits, for what she is not sure. Abuse? A slap? Recognition of some kind, for now the truth is out it will lead to her. It has to.

The woman hands her something.

'You left your bag, dear.'

Erin gazes at it blankly. Her art materials, forgotten under the table in the coffee shop.

'You ran off in such a rush,' the woman adds with a tentative smile. 'Are you all right?' She has a kind face. Erin imagines she has grandchildren that she does puzzles with and takes to farms for wholesome days out.

'I'm fine,' Erin mutters. 'I just remembered I've got a… an appointment.'

She sounds croaky and weird. She tries to smile, meeting the woman's eyes. A forgotten bag, that's all. The woman's smile falters as she looks back at her. It's a look Erin's seen countless times. Where people stare into her eyes, trying to work out what it is about them that's odd. The woman is uncomfortable now. Her hand reaches to the neck of her coat, gathering it tightly as if to protect herself.

Fuck off, Erin thinks viciously, but of course she doesn't say it. She is quiet. A mouse. A hider. She takes the bag a little too abruptly.

'Thanks,' she says in a tight voice, then turns and walks away. The rain gets heavier but Erin barely notices. She heads for home with one stop off in mind. There's a newsagent at the top of the high street, five minutes from her house. She picks up an overpriced bottle of milk she doesn't need, then scans the news stand. Aside from the tabloid she's already seen, there's only one other paper with Bee's face on the front. Its headline is

less sensational: 20 YEARS UNSOLVED. Then underneath: ISLAND MURDER BAFFLES TWO DECADES ON. There's no mention of the *two little liars*, but this does nothing to unknot Erin's insides. Tomorrow it'll be on every one of these front pages.

She buys both papers and leaves.

When Erin arrives home she abandons the bag with the art stuff by the front door and goes straight to the kitchen table. She sits, not even bothering to remove her jacket, eyes barely leaving the picture of Bee's face. If she blinks she knows she'll see it behind her eyelids, inverted like a negative.

She begins to read.