

**Crying
Wolf
Curse Of The
Beast**

By

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PROLOGUE

It was late one night, as a pair of teenagers, a boy and a girl, wondered the Pennsylvania woods to do what teens did in the woods late at night. The boy was, of course, the more cheerful of the two, skipping along and singing an old folk tune rather badly. "Old Dan Tucker was a good ol' man," he belted. "Washed his face with a frying pan..."

His girlfriend was more cautious. "Brad, I really don't think we should be here..." she whispered nervously. "Oh c'mon, Jenny." the boy teased. "What, are you scared of monsters? The Bogeyman, maybe?"

"No!" the girl stammered defensively. "It's just, you never know what kind of psychos are roaming around here at night, you know?" "Like me?" her boyfriend suggested playfully. "Shut up." she giggled as she gave him a gentle shove.

The boy then felt an all-too-familiar sensation. "Cuse me, Jenny." he informed her. "I gotta go answer the call of wild. Wait here." He then started walking away, much to his girlfriend's dismay. "But, Brad..." she objected. "I'll be fine." he playfully reassured her as he continued to walk off. "I'm just going off on my own and leaving you here defenseless in the middle of the

woods late at night. What's the worst that can happen?"

"Brad!" the girl snapped in frustration. "More than welcome to come and watch!" her boyfriend called out, a big smirk on his face. She was none-too-pleased at this. "Fine. Whatever." she said as she rolled her eyes in disgust. "Just go." With that, he walked off, and before long he was completely out of her sight.

The boy soon made his way to a shrub on the far side of the woods. *A decent enough spot.* He then proceeded to unfasten his belt, only to be stopped when he heard a creeping sound behind him. "Huh?" he asked aloud. He turned and looked around nervously. If someone was following him... "Who's out there?"

He heard the noise again, prompting him to pull out a rather small and unimposing switchblade knife. He had seen enough scary movies to know not to go out in the woods unprepared. "If you're looking to cause trouble, I've got a knife!" he threatened. He himself wasn't convinced at how scary he sounded. He waved his weapon in the air, making *sure* whoever was out here saw it. "See here, knife! Ima shank you!" he called out, his voice cracking with fear.

Behind him, a menacing shadow lurked behind a tree, like a hunter stalking prized game. The guy heard an ominous growling sound. He turned around to find, to his horror, a pair of creepy red eyes fixed on him. "What the he..." He was cut off as the shadow pounced on him, causing him to cry out in terror. And then, he was silenced.

At the other side of the woods, his girlfriend heard his screams echo across the land. "Brad?" she called out in alarm. She then ran off in the direction of the scream, eventually making her way to the shrub her boyfriend was at. She started surveying the area, fearing the worst. "Brad?!?" she asked again, this time considerably more upset.

She looked down at the ground to find the knife the

guy was wielding. The girl's blood ran cold. This was his lucky knife. He would never just drop it on the ground like this. Something was *wrong*. She resumed her search more frantic than ever. "Brad?!?" she cried out once more, this time at the height of all fear. "Brad, where are you?!? If this is some kind of prank, I swear to God..."

Her worried threat was cut off by the sight of an ominous shadow with sinister red eyes perched on a tree just above her. She froze, paralyzed with terror as the figure, a dark, evil creature, leapt upon her. Her scream of horror echoed throughout the wilderness, but ultimately went unheard.

CHAPTER 1

Any minute now...

Zack Rodgers laid half-awake in his bed, waiting for his alarm clock to signal that it was time to get up. After a brief moment of silence, a beeping noise sounded from the device, and the 16-year-old boy begrudgingly pulled himself out of bed, stretching his unused muscles and shaking the cobwebs from his mind.

Zack was a rather skinny boy, tall and lanky, with pale skin, green eyes and blackish-brown hair. He looked around his room, a quaint little hovel containing his bed, a dresser, a desk with a computer and a couple of gaming consoles hooked to a small flat-screen TV, and a few posters of various Star Wars and comic book characters covering the walls. On the door hung a flannel robe, which he put on as he made his way downstairs.

The TV was on in the kitchen, displaying the latest stock news, something about a company called Bryce-Mackendale Incorporated. Zack paid it no mind, however, and went about his morning routine. He set the family Keurig to brew a single cup of tea and placed a Toaster Strudel in the microwave, cooking it for a good 40 seconds. He alternated between these tasks in near-perfect sync, having done this for so long he could

practically do it in his sleep.

That was the way he liked it. Zack had Asperger's Syndrome, a high-functioning form of Autism with many symptoms and variations. The short version: Zack had trouble socializing with others and valued structure and routine. Not that there was anything wrong with that. The way Zack saw it, it was the people running around *without* a routine that were setting themselves up for problems later on.

He had finally finished preparing breakfast and sat down to eat when his mother walked into the room. Patricia Rogers was the coroner for the Lunar Valley Police Department, a fact her son took great pride in telling the other kids at school. She was a short woman, with the same green eyes as Zack and a lighter shade of brown hair, and dressed in formal black attire. She was talking to someone on her cell phone as she walked across the kitchen nervously.

"Alright, I'll be right in." she said briefly. She then hung up as she noticed Zack eating at the table. "Oh Zack, you're awake." she noted with a smile. "It is a school day." her son replied slyly. "Morning, mother."

"Morning." she answered softly. She then frowned as she started gathering things for her job. "Look, I'm going to have to head to work early today. A couple of kids were just found dead in the woods." "Ah, man." Zack sighed. One of the downsides to your mother working with the police was hearing sad stories like this on a regular basis. "Do they know what happened?"

"That's what I hope to find out." Patricia replied. "I trust you'll be fine getting to school?" "I'll be fine, Mom." Zack reassured her. "You worry too much." "Sometimes I wonder if I worry enough." she uttered with a frown. "Bye."

"Bye." Zack nodded softly as his mother headed out the door. She meant well enough, being concerned. He

was all she had left since Zack's father...

Now isn't the time to be thinking about things like that.

Zack resumed eating his breakfast. Once he finished, he headed upstairs to the bathroom for a quick shower and to brush his teeth. Afterwards, he got dressed for school, putting on the polo shirt and jeans he had picked out the night before, strapping his watch around his left wrist and tying on his sneakers. He nodded at himself in the mirror, then headed back downstairs to the kitchen to pack his lunch. A container of leftover baked ziti and a bottle of cherry Kool-aid would suffice, and he stuffed his filled lunchbag into his backpack.

Zack eyed the clock as he slung said backpack over his shoulders. *Perfect time*, he thought to himself. Now fully ready to leave, he headed out the door, locking it behind him as he made his way to the curb, where the bus was to pick him up for school. He waited for it to arrive, alternating between nervously tapping his foot and pacing along the path of the sidewalk.

That was another symptom of his Asperger's: he always felt the need to *do* something: pacing, twitching, you name it. Even when sitting idly, he would gently rock back and forth (other people called it "bopping"). Of all the ticks his condition caused, this was the one that gave him the most unwanted attention.

The bus soon pulled up, and Zack eagerly boarded. He picked out an empty seat near the middle, as he preferred to sit at the window and there wasn't anyone who got on before him that he necessarily felt comfortable sitting with. He looked out said window, his thoughts trailing off as he bopped softly.

Today was to be the first day of 11th grade. Zack had come a long way since he started going to school. Back then, he throwing tantrums left and right and freaking out about things that he realized later on were rather

silly. But those days were behind him. He was older and wiser now: he ranked tenth place in his class grades-wise, most of the teachers saw him as a prized student, and in another year he would graduate. Imagine that! Zack let out a smile. Indeed, the worst was truly over, there was nowhere to go now but up. *This was going to be the best year ever*, he thought to himself.

He was wrong.

CHAPTER 2

The bus finally pulled into the front lot of Lunar Valley High School. Zack stepped off of it and let in a breath of that fresh school air. *Best year ever, here I come*, he thought cheerfully as he headed off toward the great unknown... only to be pounced upon by another student.

“Yo, Zachariah!” Zack’s visitor yelped cheerfully as he playfully noogied him, the other arm wrapped around his neck in a mock sleeper hold. “Zack Attack! What’s shakin’, my man?” “Good God, Kevin, warn somebody before you pounce on them.” Zack lightly scolded as he pushed his friend off of him. “Or yell a little louder, maybe next time you’ll succeed in giving me a heart attack.” “Sorry ‘bout that.” the other boy replied indignantly. “I’m just so amped up. Junior year, man!”

“Um-hm.” Zack agreed softly as the two boys started walking towards the school. He first met Kevin Laird in the 5th grade, and he had remained one of Zack’s few consistent friends since. Kevin was short and rather heavyset, with curly blond hair and the beginnings of beard stubble covering his face. He wore thick-rimmed glasses and was dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and baggy Khaki shorts. Unlike Zack, Kevin was a lot more open

socially, and somehow managed to be a bigger nerd than he was.

“I just wish we didn’t have our first day of school on a Friday.” Kevin sighed as he shook his head. “I mean, who does that?” “Yeah.” Zack agreed. “It’s like having the last day on a Monday.” He then took on a playful, mocking tone. “Let’s go to school for one day this week.’ At that point, why bother?”

“It’s all a big conspiracy, man.” Kevin replied with a wave of his stubby finger. “Illuminati, I tell you. Soon they’ll be runnin’ us all.” Zack could only shake his head and sigh. Kevin was all into ancient conspiracies and supernatural phenomena. In his free time, he would watch Bigfoot and UFO sighting videos online and chat with people on conspiracy forums. Of course, Zack didn’t believe in such things, but he did his best to grin and bear it for Kevin’s sake. After all, whatever quirks he might have had, Kevin was one of the best friends Zack had. One of the *only* ones, at any rate.

“Or it could just be a coincidence.” Zack offered his friend. “There are no coincidences, Zachary.” Kevin retorted urgently. “There are no accidents. Everything happens for a reason...”

Without warning, Zack felt a sudden jolt to the side of the head as a dodgeball struck him from out of nowhere. “Ow!” he cried out in pain as he rubbed his temple. “Like *that*.” Kevin flatly noted. “There’s probably a reason for *that*.”

Sure enough, there was. Zack and Kevin found that reason in the direction of a shrill whistle. They looked over toward the source: a blond, muscular boy wearing a sleeveless t-shirt, jean shorts and a smug look on his face. Trent Lawson was the class star athlete, whose father owned and ran the county’s largest and most successful logging company. Trent was rich. Trent was handsome. Trent was popular. Trent was a jerk.

He was also a senior, meaning Zack and Kevin only had to put up with him for one more year. Unfortunately, that also meant they had to put up with him for *one more year*.

Trent walked up to the two, a posse of about six of his football teammates swarming behind him sharing the same smug look on their faces. "It's called 'dodgeball,' Rodgers." He told Zack condescendingly. "As in 'dodging the ball.' When the ball flies at you, you dodge it." "Well, you see, that's hard to do when you don't know the ball is headed for you." Zack replied sarcastically.

"Or that you're in the game." Kevin added.

"Or that there even *is* a game." Zack chimed in.

Trent just brushed them off. "That's alright, Rodgers." he said dismissively. "We all make mistakes. Just try to pay attention next time. You never know, with all that bopping you do, you might be a pro at this someday!"

Zack gritted his teeth. Trent *never* turned down an opportunity to make fun of him, his Asperger's, his bopping, or all of the above. "Just like you're good at being a *prick*," he muttered under his breath. Kevin heard this and let out a good chuckle.

Trent was not as amused. "I'm sorry, what was that?" he asked angrily as he leaned toward the two smaller boys, filling them with dread. "Uh, he said 'pick.'" Kevin stammered nervously. "Like you're good at picking people to play dodgeball with you." "Yeah... yeah... that's what I said alright." Zack added, looking down at the ground in conceit. He *really* wanted to tell Trent *exactly* what he said, followed by a quick jab at his mother's former profession. But, since Trent was perfectly capable of pounding him into a fine, Play-Dough-like substance, Zack decided to hold his breath.

Trent smiled, his anger replaced with shallow

amusement. "That's what I like about you, Rodgers." he chirped as he mockingly slapped Zack on the shoulder. "You're always so polite and helpful. Speaking of, could you be a dear and pick that up for me?" He pointed to his ball, which had rolled a considerable distance away on the ground.

"You've got legs, Trent." Kevin shot out in Zack's defense. "Why not go get it yourself?" "Because I asked Rodgers to do it, stubby." the bully fired back. "When I ask people to do something, *they do it.*" He then gestured towards the student parking lot, where a large, yellow SUV sat, front and center of attention. "See my hummer?"

Zack and Kevin let out a small groan. Ever since his dad bought it for his birthday last year, Trent was always bragging about his hummer. When he wasn't bragging about his looks, his money, his athletic ability, or the number of girls he's had in the back seat of said hummer, that is. "That hummer's like me." he lectured pridefully. "The biggest thing on the road. When it rolls along, the little cars pull over at let it pass. Because it's the big dog in the pack. Like me. I'm the big dog. You two? You're the little dogs."

He paused his boasting to lean over at Zack menacingly, his tone growing more threatening. "So, little dog, go fetch me my ball."

Zack wanted to tell him no, tell him exactly where he could shove his ball, but he couldn't. Not without getting the living crud kicked out of him, anyway. "I... I..." he stammered nervously. He then let out a sigh and hung his head in defeat. "I'll get it for you."

He shamefully proceeded towards the ball, Trent and his fellow bullies giggling behind him. Once again, Zack Rodgers was to be made the subject of amusement for the local band of privileged thugs. And on the first day of school, to boot. *To think this was going to be a good*

year, he thought bitterly.

Just as he bent over to pick the ball up, however, someone else beat him to it. He let out a smile at the figure standing in front of him. "I'll take that."

CHAPTER 3

Sara Anderson had been Zack's best friend since the 1st grade, and had enough confidence for the both of them. She casually held the ball in her hands as Trent noticed her arrival.

"Sara!" the bully called out cheerfully. "Fancy bumping into you here. Zack was just getting me my ball back." "Yeah, I overheard." she replied as she walked up to him. Trent's tone grew flirtatious. "But since you've got it, care to pass it over?" "Sure thing." she said with a smile.

She proceeded to kick the ball over to the student parking lot. It actually hit the hood of Trent's hummer, triggering its anti-theft alarm as it bounced off and rolled into the shrubbery surrounding the school.

Zack and Kevin howled with laughter. Sara had a rightfully smug grin about a mile wide. Trent was *not* amused. "Girl, what the *hell?!?*" Sara only waved him away playfully. "Run along now, little dog." she said as though she was speaking to a small child. "Time to fetch your ball." "If that dented my car, you're paying!" Trent grunted in anger as he and his goon squad headed off toward the parking lot in a huff.

"Send me the bill!" Sara called out behind them. She

then turned toward Zack. "You okay?" "I am now." he answered with a smile. There was just something about her, a courage to stand up for herself and others that he lacked. Maybe it was because her dad was a detective in the Lunar Valley Police. Maybe she was just tougher than most. Whatever the case, she was always looking out for Zack like a guardian angel.

A rather pretty guardian angel, he would add. Sara was stunning and well-developed for her 17 years of age. Her hair was a medium brown with red highlights, and she sported the most beautiful brown eyes Zack had ever seen. He usually had difficulty looking people in the eye, Asperger's and all, but he never had such trouble with Sara. Today she wore a white tank-top and a pair of stonewashed jeans that complemented her figure. Around her neck was the silver necklace she always wore, a round pennant with a cursive F embossed on the front. It once belonged to her mother.

Sara's mother passed away when she was 3. No one was sure what had happened, she just got sick one day. The doctors said it was exhaustion, but that only begged the question of what could be so tiring that a perfectly healthy middle-aged woman just up and died. In any case, it was something the two friends had in common.

We both know what it's like to lose a parent...

"So, what do you have going on today?" Zack asked her as the three friends started walking towards the school. "Not much." she answered. "My dad had to go to work early today. Something about a case..."

Zack perked up. As his mom was the police coroner and Sara's dad was a detective, the two often worked together. "A couple of dead kids in the woods?" he asked. "Yeah, my mom got called for that too." "Maybe Bigfoot got 'em." Kevin chimed in. "Government's covering it up."

"Kevin, you have *got* to stop reading those

conspiracy forums...” Sara groaned as she hid her face in her hand. Like Zack, Sara did her best to put up with Kevin’s wild conspiracies in the name of friendship. But they could get a little much every now and then. “You missed how us getting the first day of school on a Friday is the work of the Illuminati.” Zack added flatly.

Kevin just shook his head playfully at his friends’ skepticism. “Make fun, but I’m telling ya: Bigfoot, Dracula, Wolf-Man; they all exist.” “Yeah, sure.” Zack sarcastically replied. “And JFK...” He and Sara then continued in unison. “...was actually abducted by aliens so they can use his DNA to create a race of hyper-intelligent super-beings.” “Uh-huh.” Kevin nodded. “And their leader now walks among us as Donald Trump’s hair. The body’s a robot puppet, you see.”

“Oh, Kevin.” Sara sighed. “Whatever would we do without you?” She then changed the subject. “I hear Stacy’s throwing a bonfire tonight. Something about the ‘end of summer.’ You guys interested?” “This the same Stacy that has come to me in my dreams clad in rose petals for the past six months?” Kevin chirped with a smile. “You bet I’m interested.”

“You *do* realize she’s seeing Trent now?” Sara added skeptically. “A minor detail, I assure you.” Kevin dismissed. “Once she sees my winning personality, she’ll come *running*.” Sara just rolled her eyes. “More like *go* running. As in ‘away.’”

She looked over to Zack for his input about Kevin’s romantic folly, but he was off in his own little world, swaying back and forth gently. “Easy there...” she told him softly as she rested a hand on his shoulder, snapping him back. Zack came to and felt slightly embarrassed over spacing out like that. “Sorry.” he said sheepishly. “What did I miss?” “Party at Stacy’s.” she answered with flat urgency. “Kevin’s going to try to win her over. You going?”

“Are you going to be there?” he asked. Zack usually didn’t care much for parties, but if Sara went, he was *much* more inclined to partake. “Uh-hum.” she nodded. “Then count me in.” Zack answered with a smile. “You never know. It could be fun after a long week of school. Consisting of a day.” “C’mon.” Sara chuckled. “We don’t want to be late for Homeroom on the first day.”

With that, Sara and Kevin headed off toward the school building while Zack stayed behind, trailing off into a deep thought. He was lucky to have people like Sara and Kevin in his life. Indeed, it was often hard for him to talk to people, and making friends was a challenge in the early days. Heck, when he first met Kevin, he didn’t know what to make of the boy. So loud and cheerful. And a messy eater. Don’t get him started on *that*... But the two had similar interests, namely Star Wars and superheroes and old Kaiju movies, and it wasn’t long before they were as close as friends could be.

Sara, now that was another story...

Suddenly, Zack was thrust back to reality as he hit the ground with a thud, a great weight pinning him down. Something warm, hairy. An animal of some kind. A dog? A bear? A sharp pain soon pierced his left shoulder, like four thick needles, two above the arm and two below. It was biting him! He could do nothing but cry out as the creature growled and tore into his flesh.

Luckily for him, Sara and Kevin heard his screams and came running. The weight that kept him on the ground, whatever it was, then lifted, apparently scared off by the coming help. Zack smiled weakly as he saw his friends.

“Zack!” Kevin cried out in alarm as the two made their way to him. Sara rushed to his side. “Zack, what happened?!?” she asked worryingly as she and Kevin helped him to his feet. “I don’t know.” Zack grunted.

“Something bit me, an animal, I guess. I didn’t get a good look at it...”

“Where did it bite?” Sara asked with concern. “Let me see...” She and Kevin inspected Zack’s shoulder to find a rather nasty-looking bite wound. There were indeed four puncture marks, bleeding and swelling around the edges. They were spaced out pretty far, too. Whatever did this, it was *big*. “Ah, dude...” Kevin moaned sympathetically. “Does it look as bad as it hurts?” Zack asked through grit teeth. He tried to move the shoulder, only to be greeted with another pain spike. He let out another groan.

“Careful!” Sara urged. “C’mon, let’s get him to the nurse. I’ll try to call your mom, let her know what’s up...” With that, she pulled out her cell phone as she and Kevin started helping Zack inside. Poor Zack could only cringe through the pain.

Some first day of school this is turning out to be...

CHAPTER 4

“Is he okay?... Yeah, she’s in the middle of an autopsy. Phone’s off... Uh-huh... Uh-huh... I’ll let her know. Love you.”

Detective Keith Anderson hung up the phone. He was at the Lunar Valley Morgue, where the bodies of two teens found dead in the woods that morning were being examined for evidence. His daughter Sara had just called to tell him that her friend Zack was bitten by an animal at school.

It’s always one thing after another..., the man thought to himself. Keith was a gruff man, with shaggy black hair and a thin coat of stubble covering his face. He had been an officer in this town for 14 years, plenty enough time to give him a hardened edge.

Not that he couldn’t be kind and loving. Quite the contrary, in fact. He loved his Sara more than life itself, and even took a liking to her friends. Like Zack. There was a good kid who had some tough breaks if Keith ever saw one. Of course, it didn’t hurt that he worked with Zack’s mother...

Still, a father couldn’t help but worry from time to time. Especially if that father was also a cop. *And after what happened to her mother...* Keith knew better than

most that if you weren't careful, you could wind up in a very bad way...

Like the two poor souls in the room ahead of him. Keith opened the door to the Autopsy Lab to find Dr. Patricia Rogers hard at work examining one of said bodies. She hovered over the boy that was found, scanning the corpse for a sign of any kind, a clue. Whatever trail of thought she had, however, was broken when she heard the detective's approach.

She jumped at the sound of a footstep. "Oh, Keith!" she said when she saw who it was behind him. "You startled me. You *do* know I work with dead people, right?" "Sorry 'bout that." the detective shrugged. "Listen, I just got off the phone with Sara. Zack got pounced on. Some kinda animal bit him."

Patricia started toward Keith, obviously concerned for her son's wellbeing, but he lifted his hands in front of her in a stopping gesture. "He's fine." he reassured her. "They took him to the nurse and got him patched up. He's in class now. Boy's tough." He then added with a smile, "Gets it from his mother."

Patricia let out a sigh of relief, then turned back to her work. "Well, I hope it wasn't the same animal that got *this* poor kid." she said as she eyed the dead body in front of her. "Multiple bite and claw marks all over his body. His chest seems to have been ripped open at the stomach, all the vital organs looks like they were... *eaten*." "My God..." Keith sighed as he shook his head. "And the girl?"

"She's in even *worse* shape." Patricia continued. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say that whatever was doing this *enjoyed* it." "We both know there's only one species on the planet capable of that." Keith replied wearily. It was the same kind he stuffed into the back seat of his squad car day after day. "But it's not the kind capable of leaving these kinds of injuries." the doctor pointed out.

Keith took another look at the mutilated corpse. Indeed, there was no way a human could do the things seen on that body. “So, million dollar question is: what kind *is* it, then?” Keith asked.

“I wish I knew, Keith.” Patricia sighed as she shook her head. “I wish I knew...”

CHAPTER 5

Zack's mother was working late that night, so he had to take a taxi to Stacy's house. By the time he got there, the moon was full and the bonfire they had lit for the party was in full blaze. He was able to change his clothes quick before leaving: instead of the polo he now wore a novelty Star Wars t-shirt with the phrase "Vader Is Coming. Look Busy" scrawled across and a portrait of the dark lord himself in the middle. The air was a little chilly that night, but it was nothing he couldn't handle.

He was too busy noticing how itchy he had become. Ever since the sun went down, his skin itched like crazy. Usually so, he noted. He scratched his arms profusely as he wandered the yard, scanning the party crowd in search of Sara.

Zack finally found her talking with Stacy. The other girl wore a color-coordinated purple and white outfit and sported straight, blonde hair. Sara had a jacket on over her clothing from before. Zack quietly approached them, the two girls scarcely noticing him as they carried on their conversation.

"So, this guy you want me to meet, is he cute?" Sara asked enthusiastically. "Divine." Stacy nodded with a smile. "It's like he stepped off the cover of a romance

novel. In a rugged, manly kind of way, you know?”
“Sounds interesting...” Sara mused.

“Talking about me?” Zack chimed in playfully, finally drawing the girls’ attention. “Ah, Zack. There you are.” Sara said cheerfully. “I was beginning to think you weren’t gonna show.” “You know I wouldn’t miss this for the world.” Zack replied. “And what does the great Zack Rodgers have going on tonight?” Stacy asked him. “Oh, nothing much.” Zack responded modestly as he feverishly scratched the back of his neck. “I *am* very itchy though. Must be something in air. Pollen count, I guess.”

“Well, I have to go switch up the music.” Stacy announced as she started backing away. “Later...” She then turned toward the DJ booth, only to bump into an approaching Kevin. “Oh!” the startled boy yelped. He then noticed who he bumped into and proceeded to turn on the charm. “Hey there, Stacy.” he greeted her in a slightly deep, sultry tone. Zack and Sara just rolled their eyes. “Hey there, uh...” Stacy replied wearily. She had forgotten his name. “Kevin.” he answered with a frown. “Oh, Kevin. Right.” Stacy repeated. She then perked up. “I have to go now...”

With that, she walked off as Kevin skipped toward Zack and Sara. “And the dance continues...” he muttered to himself playfully. He then turned his attention toward his two friends. “Hello posse...” he greeted them with a waving gesture. “Hello, Kevin.” Sara echoed as she mimicked said wave. Kevin then turned to Zack, who was now scratching his back with a fallen tree branch. “So, Zack Attack, how’s the shoulder treatin’ ya?”

“Better.” Zack answered, holding the branch in one hand and scratching his chest with the other. “My mom had a look at it, made sure it wasn’t infected or anything. Changed the bandaging, gave me some painkillers, you

know, the works. Having a doctor for a mom sure comes in handy.” “Yeah, your mom is boss.” Kevin agreed. “Speaking of, did your folks find anything else about that couple?”

Zack just shook his head. “If Mom did know anything, she didn’t tell me...” “You know how it is.” Sara added. “Case Confidentiality. All my dad said is that ‘the investigation is ongoing.’” “Mom *did* tell me one thing.” Zack then pointed out. “Apparently, the bites on the victims are similar to the one on my shoulder...”

“You think whatever attacked you got them?” Sara asked curiously. “I don’t know.” Zack shrugged as he set his scratching branch back on the ground. “Like I said before, my mom didn’t tell me much. She *was* a little concerned about me coming here.”

“My dad was the same way.” Sara replied. “Matter of fact, Stacy told me her dad considered calling this party off, but he didn’t want to cause a town-wide panic. Or some such.” “Dude’s trying to save face.” Kevin chimed in. “Isn’t he trying to run for mayor or something next year?” “Even then, I don’t think he’d put a bunch of kids, including his daughter, at risk if he felt there was something to worry about.” Sara pointed out.

“At least Stacy’s got a dad to care about her...” Zack muttered as his thoughts trailed off. All this talk about dads was bringing back memories of his own father...

CHAPTER 6

Zack didn't remember his father much, but he would never forget the day he left. When he was 3 years old, and his teachers began noticing his troubles learning new things and socializing with the other kids, his parents had him tested. This was the day they found out Zack had Asperger's. His father was in denial throughout the whole trip to the psychiatrist: there couldn't be anything wrong with *his* kid. And there wasn't.

Too bad Dad didn't see it that way.

As soon as the doctor gave the news, Zack's father walked out. Out of the testing room, out of the doctor's office, out of Zack and Patricia's lives. Of course, Zack was just 3 at the time, he didn't understand what was going on. What he was doing looking at flashcards in a strange room. What the lady in the green tie was talking about when she said he was "different." Why Dad was angry and walking away, and why Mom was running after him. Why everyone was so upset...

Back at the house, Dad was packing his things, saying the same thing over and over: "There's nothin' wrong with *my* boy." He then got in his car and drove off, all the while Mom calling out to him and begging him to come back. That was the last time Zack ever saw

him.

Later on, Zack's father filed a motion in court, claiming that his wife had cheated on him, that Zack wasn't really his son. Even though he had his hair and nose. The judge somehow bought this line, however, and the old man was off free. Free from visiting, free from paying child support, free from even acknowledging Zack's existence at all.

As the boy grew older, he realized what had happened, and it left a scar on his heart that remained to this very day.

Dad left because of me.

Now, Mom said nothing was wrong, that she wasn't upset, that Zack was "the only man she needed in her life." But Zack knew better. He thought about the times he had trouble in school, all the outbursts, all the trips to the principle's offices. Heck, even his picky eating must have been a pain.

No parent should have to go through all that alone. Especially someone who worked with the police, who set out to make the community a better place.

Zack made a promise to himself and to her: That he would be the best son a mother could ask for. He would make something of himself, make her proud to call him her son. When people heard the name "Zack Rodgers," they would think something other than that autistic kid whose own father didn't want him.

Maybe then I'll make up for scaring Dad away...

He snapped back to reality when the world started to spin. He moaned as he struggled to stay on his feet, but he slipped and fell. Sara caught him when she and Kevin noticed what was going on. "Zack, what's wrong?" she asked with concern. "Whao, dude, are you okay?" Kevin added, hover over his friend.

"I'm fine." Zack reassured his friends as he regained his footing, leaning on Sara for support. "Just got a little

dizzy, that's all." His head felt heavy, his left shoulder ached, and he started to sweat. A lot. "Does anyone else feel really hot all the sudden?" he asked. "All the time, man." Kevin joked with a cocky grin. This earned him a slap upside the head from Sara as Zack slowly stood up.

"I think its passing." he told his friends. "Maybe I'm just too close to the fire. I should try walking it off..." He started to walk away as Sara and Kevin looked on in concern. "You want someone to come with you?" Kevin called out. "No, just go back to enjoying yourselves." Zack called back. "I'll be fine. Just need to walk for a bit..."

Zack stumbled through the party crowd, favoring his bitten shoulder and his head still feeling like a ton of bricks stacked neatly in a sphere on the top of his neck. At one point, he tripped and bumped into Trent. "Hey, dork! Watch where you're goin'!" the bully yelled as he angrily shoved Zack away. "Sorry." Zack apologized wearily. "I... uh..."

He then ran off, feeling increasingly faint and hot and itchy all the while. Zack didn't know where he was going, but he knew he had to get away, get somewhere where he can be alone and let whatever was happening to him pass. He then made his way past the drink coolers Stacy's parents had set up for the party at the back of their house, to a secluded part of the woods. *Here*, he thought. This was where he could rest for a bit.

Zack never felt anything like this before in his entire life. He had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, like he was about to throw up, and his left arm hurt so bad he could barely move it. He let himself sit down for a while, groaning as he did so. He glanced up at the sky, the full moon hanging high above his head.

Then it happened.

A violent muscle spasm, a sudden contraction of his tendons, gripped him. He collapsed on the ground in the

fetal position, a sharp pain filling every inch of his body and electricity surging through his blood. Zack cried out in agony. *What is this? What's happening to me?!?* He thought he was going to die.

From that point on it grew worse, and he realized he wasn't dying; he was *changing*. His muscles stretched and grew; his body bursting out of his clothes as they did. He looked down at his hand as his body twisted and convulsed, watching in horror as a thick fur coat covered his skin and his fingernails grew into fearsome claws. He also felt his face stretch outward at the mouth, his skull reshaping itself into a form he can't quite comprehend, and his teeth grow into fangs.

Then it all stopped.

The pain was over.

The creature that was once Zack Rodgers rose to his feet and let out an inhuman howl at the moon, then ran into the woods, his mind reeling with terror.

"It's been... one week since you looked at me..."

Kevin was singing badly to himself as he headed to the back of Stacy's house for a drink at one of the coolers. By the time he got there, however, he found that one of them had been knocked over. "The world...?" he whispered to himself in confusion.

He then moved in for a closer look, when all of the sudden an inhuman howl filled the air. Kevin jumped and spun around. "Holy...!" he cried out. He then regained his composure and realized the sound came from within the woods.

Kevin let out a gulp and proceed to follow the sound, determined to find the source despite having seen enough scary movies to know what tends to happen in moments like this. He moved a few branches aside just in time to see a strange, furry creature run through the

forest.

“Whoa...” he uttered as the monster, whatever it was, disappeared into brush. He didn’t have time to figure out what he was seeing, much less get his phone out for a picture. He instead walked over to where the beast was standing before, hoping to find some clues as to where it came from.

As he made his way to the clearing, Kevin found the shredded remains of an outfit lying on the ground. He inspected the tattered fabric: jeans, socks, underwear, a pair of broken shoes, a shirt of some kind. *So, whatever that thing is, it’s human. Or it was. What the heck was it, anyway? I didn’t catch its face. Werewolf? Bigfoot?*

His trail of thought was interrupted when he noticed something. He bent over and picked up one particular strap of shirt: an all-too-familiar portrait of Darth Vader.

Kevin let out a gasp. He was starting to realize what this meant. *This changes everything.*

CHAPTER 7

A million thoughts raced in Zack's mind as he stumbled through the woods. He eventually lost his footing and collapsed at the side of a lake in the middle of the forest. Wanting, no, *needing* to see, he looked down at his reflection in the water. What he saw made him recoil in horror.

A tall, slender-looking creature covered in grey fur looked back at him. Where a human face used to be now sat a wolf's head with glowing green eyes. He noted that his clothing had been completely torn away and a bushy tail now protruded from his hind end.

Not believing his eyes, he felt his face with his clawed hands to verify what he was seeing. It certainly *felt* real. He took another look at himself as he realized what he had become.

A werewolf.

He couldn't believe it, though he saw it with his own two eyes. Zack had heard all of Kevin's crazy theories and stories about the supernatural, aliens and demons and people turning into monsters. But before then, they were all just that: stories. They weren't real. They didn't exist. People couldn't just turn into wolves. It went against everything Zack was taught in science class, and

what his mother told him as a doctor.

Yet here it was, staring right back at him in his own reflection. *Could it be true?* he thought to himself. *Could werewolves really exist? Could I be one?*

No. He shook his head. *This has to be a dream, a hallucination. Someone must have slipped me something back at the party. Now that you mention it, that soda did have a funny aftertaste. I thought it was just because it was Diet. I'm on something, that's it! I just need to see a doctor, that's all! I'm not a monster, I'm just on a bad acid trip. I need to find help...*

With that, he began running around the lake, starting on two legs, then instinctively switching to all fours, going ever faster past the clearing and the trees as he made his way to the nearby road. *How am I doing this?* he wondered. *How can someone all doped out on drugs run this fast?* He felt the wind whip into him as he ran, hopping over rocks and logs, adrenaline flowing through his veins. If this wasn't a horrible nightmare, he actually might have *enjoyed* it.

Zack made a flying leap into the middle of the road. He then stopped for a moment to catch his breath. *That was intense*, he thought. *Now, to find someone to take me to see a doctor...*

As if on cue, Zack's train of thought was then interrupted by a pair of bright lights coming from the road ahead. He looked over to the source: a large tractor-trailer truck speeding toward him! There was no time to get out of the way. All Zack could do was curl up in a ball, brace for the collision and hope the inevitable damage wasn't lethal.

Impact!

Zack opened his eyes when he realized he wasn't dead or in a comma. He looked down at himself. *Nothing's broken. But how...?* He glanced up at truck to see a massive dent where the cab used to be, right at the

point the vehicle collided with his body. Zack just stared in disbelief for a moment. *How did I do that...?*

The driver! he then realized. *He could be hurt! I have to help him!* Zack rushed over to the door of the truck. Thankfully, it wasn't too messed up. He tried to open it the traditional way, but he didn't know his own strength and, to his continuing bewilderment, tore the door right off its hinges! *How is any of this even possible!?!?* he thought. It didn't matter now, he realized. He needed to see if the driver was okay.

He looked inside the truck to find an old, heavyset man in a flannel shirt and orange hat. This man, in turn, looked up at his "rescuer" and recoiled in horror. "***Are you alright?***" Zack asked in a voice that was his own, but distorted, deeper, growling. He almost didn't recognize it himself.

"What the hell?!?" the driver cried out. "***It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you.***" Zack reassured him as he held out a clawed hand. "***Listen, I need help. I don't know what's happening to me...***"

But the driver pulled back, still afraid. "Whatever you are, you stay away from me!!!" he yelled. He reached behind his seat and pulled a shotgun. "***What are you doing?***" Zack asked in confusion. The driver pointed his weapon at Zack. He was going to shoot him! "Back off!!! I mean it! I'll use this thing!!!" Zack was scared and confused. If he was just hallucinating being a werewolf, why was the driver freaking out like this?

"***Wait... don't...***"

"I said BACK OFF!!!"

The gun fired, and a great pain spiked in Zack's left side. He ran off, back into the woods, favoring the wound. He soon tripped over a log and fell to the ground. *He shot me!* Zack thought to himself. *I've been shot!* He sat up and inspected his injury. It was real.

If he were dreaming, the shot wouldn't hurt. So it

was real.

All of it was real.

This was really happening.

He was really a werewolf.

Zack felt a tingling sensation. He looked at his wound to find, to his amazement, that it was healing. The bleeding stopped, the buckshot fell out, and the holes closed. He then started to panic. His mind reeled from all this: Fear, confusion, and despair all set in.

What have I become?

Will I ever be human again?

I just want everything to go back to normal!

I WANT TO GO BACK TO NORMAL!

This last thought triggered something, a strange sensation, cooling, like a cleansing rainfall in his veins. Zack felt his muscles shrink, the fur and tail and claws retreat back into his skin, the wolf's snout pull back into a human's face.

He was reverting back to normal. Just like he wanted. *The thought must have triggered it.*

Zack fell back onto the ground as the transformation completed, a feeling of complete exhaustion like he'd never felt before sweeping over him. It was like the transformations and the running and the getting shot took every last ounce of him. He eventually found the strength to lift himself to his feet, his nude body shivering in the cool night air.

I want to go home. he thought weakly. *I just want to go home.*

His head heavy and his muscles aching, Zack slowly walked toward his house, practically sleepwalking. He wasn't sure how he knew where he was going, he just did.

He eventually made it home, unlocking the door with the spare key hidden inside a fake rock at the side of the door. His mom wasn't home yet. That was good, he

would have had quite a bit of explaining to do otherwise. He stumbled up the stairs to his room and entered, closing the door behind him. He felt so tired...

He didn't bother getting dressed. He didn't bother pulling his sheets over himself. He just collapsed onto his bed and drifted off into a deep sleep.

[Series Available On Amazon.com]

