

BITE
DEAD · CAUGHT DEAD · CAUG
RISK

S.J. WILLS

SIMON & SCHUSTER

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd

Text copyright © 2024 S.J. Wills

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention.
No reproduction without permission.
All rights reserved.

The right of S.J. Wills to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor, 222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

Simon & Schuster: Celebrating 100 Years of Publishing in 2024

www.simonandschuster.co.uk
www.simonandschuster.com.au
www.simonandschuster.co.in

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

PB ISBN 978-1-3985-2097-4
eBook ISBN 978-1-3985-2099-8
eAudio ISBN 978-1-3985-2098-1

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Typeset in Archer by M Rules

Printed and Bound in the UK using 100% Renewable
Electricity at CPI Group (UK) Ltd



For Tiggy

TREMORGLADE: MARCH - SIX
MONTHS AFTER THE RIPPOCALYPSE

Some people call me a hero, though it's fair to say not everybody sees it that way.

Until six months ago, the people of my town were living a lie.

Our internet was being controlled, our movements tracked, our texts read, our heads and bodies messed with, by a company called Sequest. It had been conducting experiments on us for twenty-five years, selling its findings to dodgy corporations and governments all around the world. Unknown to us, its founder and director was living among us as an observer: Harold Poulter, the only adult in town who didn't turn into a vicious beast on a full moon.

In hindsight, that should have been a clue.

For twenty-five years, here in Tremorglade, we believed

that the whole world had the same problem as us: that the virus *corpus pilori* had caused everyone over the age of about fifteen to turn into werewolves – or Rippers as we’ve always called them – once a month. That’s what we’d been told. It wasn’t true.

Sequest had cut off our town without anyone knowing it. They’d carefully separated us from our friends and loved ones outside, scared us about what was out there so that we never tried to leave, and for good measure kept us behind an actual wall as well as a virtual one. In reality, all that time, Tremorgladers were the only ones howling at the moon and occasionally trying to eat their kids. And you know what? We coped pretty well, despite Sequest blasting infrasound over the entire town during full moons, in order to make Rippers unnaturally aggressive.

Then six months ago I escaped Tremorglade, along with my friends – Ingrid, Elena and Pedro.

If this was fiction, you’d expect me to end the story by telling you that we stopped it all, wouldn’t you? That full-time humanity was restored to Tremorglade, and we all lived happily ever after, cured of our sharp claws, fangs and fur.

But, as we all know by now, that’s not exactly what happened.

Instead, now you have it, too.

You’re welcome.

Get used to it.

CHAPTER 1

Sel

When you've already helped cause the end of the world, what's left to be afraid of?

I'll tell you. Forgetting to take your strictly-homewear-only socks off for Howl night.

I've just spent my entire night as a Ripper – the only time when, let's face it, I actually look kind of good – prancing round town wearing tiny booties adorned with cartoon puppies. If any of the kids saw me and got their phones out last night, I'm toast.

The socks are ruined, of course, the elastic knackered by being stretched round my oversized furry ankles. Now they hang loose and limp on my cold human toes. I shake them off, cringing.

It's not enough to bring me down, though. Nothing will, for a while. Returning after a Howl night these days

is like stumbling off the best roller coaster in the world; woozy and breathless, but exhilarated. Ready to take on anything.

I first Turned in November, just a couple of months after we broke out of Tremorglade, and it was a complete surprise because I hadn't had my blood tested for a while. The first time it happened, I thought I'd just blacked out. Then I saw my clothes all torn up next to me, and realized it was dawn. Probably brought on by all the stress.

So last night was only my fifth time, but it feels completely natural, like I've been doing it for years. Ingrid Turned a month before I did - a fact she mentions a lot more than necessary. It's just how she is. You don't get to be Tremorglade taekwondo champion without being a little bit competitive.

I'm meant to be doing a livestream with her early this morning - we started doing them shortly after the world changed, because it was obvious people were hungry for information.

But I've got a few minutes before I need to move. Downstairs, there's the sound of drawers opening and cutlery clinking - Mum getting herself a coffee. It took a few months to persuade her she didn't need to go in the cage anymore, and she still insists on locking herself in her room on Howl nights. Everyone adjusts at their own pace, and it's taking her a bit longer to get over the worry that she might get up to something 'too wild', whatever that means.

At least she doesn't try to make *me* stay in. That ship has sailed and she knows it.

Sunlight slices across from the crack in the curtains and warms my chest. I smile to myself; it's peaceful.

The end of the world didn't turn out all that bad.

There's nothing left to be afraid of, right?

» » »

My livestream is going better than I hoped. My online following has been building slowly over the handful of videos I've made over the last few months, but this is on a whole new level. There are *a hundred thousand* people watching right now, and the number's shooting up by the minute. More will watch it later. As the *corpus pilori* virus has zoomed around the world putting the fun into full moons, so has my face telling everyone hey, don't worry: sprouting fur, fangs and claws once a month isn't such a big deal. Chill. Don't overreact. Put down that weapon and pick up a banana - Rippers love them and they're full of vitamins for glossy coats and healthy teeth.

It's important. While Tremorglade is not so different from how it's always been - with a few exceptions - things out there in the rest of the world are kind of dicey at the moment. Sequest totally lied to us about how bad things were - most of the deadly weather and diseases and roaming gangs they scared us with, never existed... until now. It turns out that a lot of people panic when they hear

there's an 'unstoppable werewolf plague' on the way. And when people panic, stuff gets messed up.

It's not 'societal collapse' like some of the TV news presenters kept warning about in the early weeks, before they realized they weren't going to need to hide in bunkers, emerging only to battle to the death over tins of beans. It's just ... a period of adjustment. To be fair, we've had twenty-five years to get used to the idea. The whole world Turning in a matter of months has blown a lot of minds. My videos are helping everyone adjust, whether they Rip out on a full moon like most people, or they don't - because they're a kid, or they're Immutable, which means they're immune and don't Turn.

Today, I've promised to show viewers where it all started, and remind them of the truth about what happened. Because there are a lot of rumours and lies flying around, about who's responsible for Rippers, and about how dangerous they - we - really are. I'm here to set the record straight.

Ingrid's behind the camera, refusing to have her face on screen because 'people on the internet are creepy'. Elena would have been all over it, but she's not here.

'We're coming to you from inside Shady Oaks, the local hangout for luxury senior living,' I tell the viewers. We're filming in Harold's old room. The whole place is locked up, empty, but it was easy to get in. Tremorglade has never had much crime, so isn't built to protect against it.

Eddie sniffs around, at the armchair where he used to curl up at Harold's feet and snaffle biscuit crumbs. I wonder if dogs feel nostalgia? He's mine now, and at home I let him on the sofa, on my lap, and sometimes he gets a bit of cheese, so hopefully he feels like he's better off now.

'This is where Elena and Harold and I used to play cards, all the while he was experimenting on us and the rest of Tremorglade, for his company, Sequest. Across the corridor was Dora's room.'

Ingrid swings the camera round slowly to get it all in, as I talk about the experiments Harold designed and carried out, and mention that Dora tried to protect us from him, in her own way.

They're both dead, now. I'm sad about Dora. I'd only just started getting to know her. But at least she lived long enough to see Tremorglade free, and it wasn't a bad way to go - she died of old age, on Howl night towards the end of last year. Just lay down where Shady Oaks' grounds meet the edge of the forest, on a soft carpet of snow under the full moon, and never woke up. When dawn came, her body stayed Ripper. She was buried under the trees, in accordance with the instructions in her will. I think she knew she was dying, and went out there to do it in peace, under the glittering stars.

Also, I can't prove it, but I have a feeling she ate Harold.

Not the night she died, I mean. She must have done it that same night me and Ingrid and Elena escaped from

Tremorglade. Dora was out of her cage – ironically, *he* let her out – and at that time Sequest was still blasting the town with infrasound, driving all the Rippers berserk, so she'd have been deadly. I was worried Harold had escaped but, a couple of months back, investigators found his remains in the forest. They reckon he was killed around the time of the Rippocalypse. According to the experts, given the distribution and condition of the remains, it was either a frenzied Ripper attack, or he spontaneously exploded. On balance, probably the former.

If it *was* Dora that got him, she would have Returned the following morning, put her dentures back in and gone about her day with no idea she'd done it, since we can't remember anything about the nights we're Turned. Probably just as well.

But even if Harold's death was at the claws of a Ripper, things were different then. It doesn't mean we're dangerous. Which is the point of this video.

'Remember, now they're not being tortured by Sequest, Rippers *don't hurt people*.' I speak the words slowly and clearly, looking straight into the camera, my serious face on.

I take a quick glance at the comments feed on the little screen next to the camera – a constant scroll of mostly positive emojis from what Ingrid calls my weirdo fans.

Okay, some of them are weirdos.

There are a few who take it a bit far. Ripper Cultists.

It's a thing, now. When they discovered the joys of Turning, some people didn't just accept it, they didn't even just embrace it, they threw themselves into it and refused to come out. They wish they could do it every night. *Corpus pilori* is the best thing that ever happened to them: a miracle that has given their lives meaning, a community, rituals. A few have even made pilgrimages to Tremorglade. I found one a few weeks ago trying to burn incense on my porch. Some of them started Turning even before I did, but they still look at me like I invented it.

But mainly my audience are just truth seekers and a lot of commenters are saying that they aren't afraid anymore, that they are actually excited for their new lives. I feel pretty good about that.

Occasionally, one or two comments on my videos are less positive. I get that. It's a big change, and in some places around the world people aren't coping too well. But some of the conspiracy theories that are popping up are ridiculous - there's no need to try to force us back in cages when they're not needed.

And let's remember who the real villain was here: Sequest.

Technically, it's no longer the same company, even if the name hasn't changed. Harold's deputy, Dr Smith, is in prison awaiting trial, along with every other employee who knew about the Tremorglade experiment. But you can't make a huge company like that just disappear

completely. There are labs, equipment, files, systems. New staff have been drafted in to take care of those things, everything we need to make our new reality work.

Ingrid's hand is flipping around, imploring me to get on with it. I drag my eyes away from *We love u Sell!* in the midst of a long block of heart emojis sailing up the screen, and realize Ingrid's moved the camera to film something behind me.

I turn and nearly jump out of my skin. There's a face pressed up against the window, hands cupped round to peer in, breath steaming. Sunglasses on, despite the freezing fog. Eddie belatedly notices, and starts barking. He's not much of a watchdog.

Recovering quickly, I take it in my stride. 'Now, this is one of the other Tremorgladers you've heard me talk about - Sergeant Derek Hale. A key member of our community,' I say, raising my voice, hoping he'll hear and feel too flattered to kick us out and make trouble for me with Mum.

No such luck. He bangs on the window, frowning, and jabs a finger towards the door.

I can't figure out Hale. When we returned to Tremorglade, after nearly dying in our attempt to find out the truth about Sequest, I honestly expected that our relationship might change. Finally, I thought, he - and Mayor Warren too - would be less patronizing, maybe even grateful.

If anything, Hale is worse. When we had a moment to

actually speak to each other, he started by asking if I'd caught up with my schoolwork yet, or if 'events' had got in the way. Like I'd been bunking off, rather than exposing a huge lie and changing the world.

But that's the thing: we're still very isolated here, even though the road is open. *Our* everyday world isn't all that different. It's everywhere else that's changed.

There are new people in Tremorglade now, visitors and residents, but that hasn't turned us upside down or anything. We still mainly get what we need via drone deliveries, but now we get the odd truck, too. The only change Hale's really had to make is to add traffic management to his duties, now that there are more cars here.

I suppose it's a comfort, in a weird way. If things ever do go really bad, if society does collapse, if Sequest messes up again and turns half the world into zombies, he'll be out there giving them parking tickets.

Ingrid and I reluctantly make our way out the front of the building and onto the lawn, where he's waiting for us, hands on hips, chewing gum. Eddie finds an interesting smell on the grass and starts rolling in it.

'Know what trespassing is, kids?' he asks, then clocks the camera. 'Come on, turn that thing off.'

'Say hello to the world, Sergeant Hale.' Ingrid grins, shoving the camera in his face. 'You're live to thousands. Sel was just explaining that Rippers don't bite, and no one needs to be scared of them. Would you agree?'

His jaw freezes mid-chew and I stifle a snigger at his stage fright. But then I see he's not looking at the lens. He's staring past it, into the forest. Ingrid and I follow his gaze to the treeline, the camera still rolling.

So it's fair to say there are an awful lot of international witnesses who see the man stumbling towards us, covered in blood, naked and shielding his dignity with his hands. Rippers have a strong homing instinct and we almost always find ourselves back home by dawn, unless we get stuck somewhere. In those cases, politeness reigns and everyone averts their eyes or discreetly passes something to wrap up in for the journey home - it's rare, but we'd all want them to do the same for us if we were as unlucky.

It takes me a moment to recognize him - it's our school's Recent History teacher, normally only to be seen in a pristine suit and tie, droning on at the front of the classroom. He was brought in at the start of the new term to bring us up to speed on the actual twenty-five years of history Sequest faked for us.

'Mr Costa?'

Even at a distance, it's obvious that he's badly hurt. His shoulder is a glistening wet, fleshy open wound, seeping blood. His skin is a horrible pale grey, streaked with sticky dried-red rivulets.

'Help me.' His voice is rasping and broken. Hale moves first, rushing to give first aid as Mr Costa cries out, 'I've been ... I think I've been ...'

And then he collapses face down on the grass.
When I turn back to Ingrid, her horror reflects my own.
Because we both know what Mr Costa was about to say.
He's been bitten.