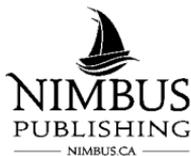


THE WEREDUCK CODE

Book 3 of the Wereduck series

Dave Atkinson



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PROLOGUE



TABLOID JOURNALIST/COUNTRY SINGER STILL MISSING

*Investigation into unexplained disappearance
stretches to eighth month*

NEW YORK—POLICE SAY THERE ARE STILL NO NEW leads in a mysterious missing-person case involving a reporter at the infamous and journalisticly dubious tabloid newspaper *Really Real News*. Dirk Bragg, a senior investigative reporter at the paper, failed to show up to work the day after filing a bizarre story involving werewolves and a previously unheard of beast from even the most fantastical fairy tale: a wereduck. Bragg, whom friends and colleagues variously describe as a “paranoid conspiracy theorist,” a “superstitious nut job,” and an “outright lunatic,” hasn’t been seen or heard from since.

“Dirk started acting weird after coming back from a work trip to Canada last November,” said Sandra Postcop, managing editor at *Really Real News*. “I’m not going to lie to you—that’s saying something. Dirk’s kind of an odd bird at the best of times, but those last couple of days? *Hoo boy!* He was acting strange. Kept mumbling about werewolves and trains, and he was rubbing tube after tube of antibacterial hand sanitizer on a scratch on his ankle.”

Police are stumped by the case and haven’t ruled out any possibility, including foul play. They also say, given what they’ve learned about Bragg’s personality, he may have gone into hiding.

“Yeah, that’d be just like Dirk,” acknowledged Postcop. “One time he wrote a story about how taxi drivers could read people’s thoughts and how they were planning to use this power to pull off the biggest electronic bank heist in history. After that, he became terrified of every yellow car on the street. He went into hiding for, like, five weeks? I mean, I love the guy, but he can be a bit cuckoo.”

In a peculiar twist to an already-peculiar story, the second single from Dirk Bragg’s debut album climbed to the top of the country music charts this week. “A Bunch of Bananas (and This Lonely Heart)” is currently the most popular country song in the nation. It replaces another song by Bragg, “My Wheels Belong to the Road (But My Heart Belongs to You),” which held onto the top spot for an impressive 13 weeks. Bragg recorded his debut album, *Tabloid Blues*, in the weeks before he went missing, but hasn’t appeared publicly to celebrate its meteoric success. A statement

released from his label, B & M Records, says it prays for Bragg's safety and hopes he comes home soon to record another album.

CHAPTER ONE



KATE THUNDERED DOWN THE STAIRS TO THE basement. Her long, brown hair streamed behind her as she leapt over the pile of dirty laundry in front of the washing machine and burst through her bedroom door.

“G’morning, Wacka!” she shouted.

A little mallard glared at Kate through half-closed eyes and resettled herself into a warm corner of her nest.

Kate flipped open her laptop and tapped her finger impatiently as she waited for the chat window to load.

Loading...

Still loading...

A little green light popped up beside John’s name. A tiny excited duck fluttered in her stomach. Kate clicked on his name and began to type.

Kate: Oh good!!! Glad I caught you.

A few seconds passed as she waited for his reply.

John: Forgot about the hour time difference between Ontario and New Brunswick, did ya? I'm going to be late on my first day.

Kate: I just wanted to say good luck!

John: I can't believe Mum is actually going through with sending me to school.

Kate: It might be kind of fun! I always wondered what it was like to be a normal kid and go to normal school.

The screen sat idle for a moment.

John: Kate, they don't come any less normal than you.

Kate smiled. He was the same old John, even half a country away.

Kate: Well, they don't come any more MORON than you.

John: BTW, that thing arrived in the mail yesterday.

Kate: That thing?

John: That icky DNA thing.

Kate: Oh, THAT thing! Did you do it?

John: Yeah, it was no big deal. It's just a swab inside your cheek. I sent it back already.

Kate: Oh cool! Mine should be arriving soon too!

John: Yeah. Listen, I really need to go. My actual bus is waiting to take me to actual school.

Kate: Have a good day! Don't make a new best friend.

The screen was quiet for a moment. Kate thought he had logged off, until...

John: Ain't gonna happen, pal. ;)

Kate shut her laptop and leaned back in her chair. She looked around her little basement room. When she'd first moved last summer with her family from their camp in New Brunswick to this little farmhouse in southern Ontario, she'd hated it. Her whole family and John were packed like sardines, but it was the safest place they could be after nearly being exposed to the world by that gross reporter, Dirk Bragg (better known by Kate and John as Dirt Bag).

It turned out to be John's dad, Marcus, who had led Dirt Bag straight to them. Marcus had been so tired of running from the reporter, he was willing to sell out Kate's family to the front pages of *Really Real News* in exchange for his freedom. But when John wasn't willing to betray his new friends, Marcus didn't take it well. He abandoned John in the forest, leaving Kate's family to take care of him.

So much had happened since then. If she hadn't lived through it, she wouldn't have believed it.

For starters, John discovered his mother was actually alive. It was a huge shock, since his dad had told him his entire life she was dead. John, Kate, and their duck friend, Wacka (who was a reverse wereduck—long story) travelled to New Brunswick to meet her. It didn't...go well. John's mum mistook werewolf John for werewolf Marcus, who had stolen John from her. She shot him with a silver bullet. Marcus showed up just in

time to save John with something called the Cure for Werewolf. The silver bullet killed the werewolf within John, but he survived. He was now just plain old John.

Which brought them to today. John had moved in with his mother in Moncton. Her full-time job got in the way of his homeschooling, so she decided to enroll him in the local high school. John was far from enthusiastic, but had reluctantly agreed it was for the best.

Kate's stomach rumbled. She yawned and headed back upstairs to the noises and smells of a big family breakfast.

"Your tea's cold," said Grandma Marge as Kate slid into the seat next to her at the table. "A crime against the world's most perfect drink."

Kate smirked as she topped up her half-empty cup from the pot. "Sorry, Grandma. I wanted to catch John before his first day of school."

"Oh, that's right," said her father, Brian, from across the table. "My favourite son is heading to class."

"Hey!" objected Bobby, Kate's twelve-year-old brother. "What am I, chopped liver?"

In the short time he had lived with them, John had endeared himself to Kate and Bobby's parents by getting a job, spending his spare time studying at the library, and generally being a helpful presence around the house.

Brian pushed his chair back. "Why don't you come dry the dishes, and maybe we can renegotiate your place in the pecking order?"

Marge stood up. "He can't. My favourite grandson has already volunteered to help me clean out the loft in the barn."

Bobby scowled. "Is it still volunteering if it wasn't my idea?"

"Semantics," said Marge, pulling on her boots.

Bobby cleared his plate and followed his grandmother to the door.

"And if we finish the barn by this afternoon, you can volunteer to help stack firewood," said Marge. She opened the door for her grandson and flashed him a big smile.

"I sure do seem helpful today," said Bobby.

"That's what's so refreshing about you!" said his grandmother, as the door swung closed behind them.

Kate grinned as she buttered a slice of toast.

"How did you manage to dodge that bullet?" asked her mother from across the table.

"Who do you think she volunteered to chop the firewood in the first place?" replied Kate. "Grandma told me last night I had signed up for *that* job."

Her parents' laughter was interrupted by the slam of the front door. Kate's aunt Bea walked into the kitchen. She was sorting a small pile of mail.

"You almost ready for work, Lisa?" said Bea, not looking up.

"Just need to grab my tool belt, and I'm good to go," said Kate's mother, finishing the dregs in her cup.

Bea flicked through bills and flyers. She paused at a thicker, padded envelope and eyed the address suspiciously. "Mrs. Katherine El Duckminster," she read. She looked at her niece with a raised eyebrow. "You?"

"It came!" exclaimed Kate, jumping from her seat and snatching the envelope.

“What the heck is that all about?” asked Brian as he watched Kate tear open the envelope.

Kate laid the contents on the kitchen counter: a slender plastic tube, a long stick, and a few pages of printed instructions.

“Home DNA kit!” announced Kate, scanning the instructions.

Her parents and aunt stared at her. Her mother broke the silence.

“A...home DNA kit?”

“Yeah!” said Kate, as if the allure of such a product would be obvious to anyone.

“Kate,” prodded her father. “*Whyyyy?*”

Kate looked up from the paper into the confused faces of her family.

“I’m testing John’s and my DNA,” she explained. “I’m trying to figure out the whole ‘werewolf’ thing on a genetic level. With John suddenly not a werewolf anymore, it gives me a chance to test my theory that there’s a protein switch embedded within the so-called ‘junk DNA’ that remains inactive in the ninety-eighth percentile of the human genome that is assumed to be non-coding!” Her eyes sparkled.

Brian’s stare went from Kate to his wife, and back to Kate. “Kate, you know your mother and I love you very much, but...*what?*”

Kate sighed. “I’ve just been doing a little research about DNA and human genetics,” she said. “Haven’t you ever been curious about why you live in a werewolf family?”

Brian let out a breath and raised his eyebrows. “I guess,” he said with a little shrug.

“Kate, it’s impressive that your understanding of science is so...advanced,” said Lisa carefully. “But, don’t you think it’s a bit...dangerous to be sending this kind of information to a company that might find werewolf and wereduck DNA a bit, well, suspicious?”

“No, it’s perfect!” said Kate, holding up the paperwork. “Look!” She smoothed the paper on the counter in front of her. “I chose this company really carefully.” She pointed at a series of check boxes. “You can choose for them to screen your DNA for a number of factors—genetic markers for disease, that sort of thing—or, you can just leave it all blank and check the last box.”

Her finger underlined the last option on the page. It read: *Don’t screen for anything, just send me my genetic sequence. Discretion: GUARANTEED.*

“See?” said Kate. “It’s perfect.”

“I hope so, Katie,” said Lisa. “The last thing we want after the year we’ve had is someone finding out there’s a family of werewolves living here.”

“Don’t worry, Mum. I’ll be careful.”

Her mother ran her hand down Kate’s hair and kissed the top of her head. “I know you will, sweetie.”

“You ready?” said Aunt Bea from the front door.

“Right,” said Lisa. “Work. Right.” She picked up a tool belt draped over a chair.

“Have a good day, Mum,” said Kate.

Kate gathered the contents of her envelope and took them downstairs to her bedroom. She dropped everything on her bed, plopped down beside them, and scanned the instructions once more.

“This doesn’t look too hard, Wacka,” said Kate without looking up. “I just have to scrape a sample from inside my cheek.”

She popped open the plastic tube. Inside was what looked like a Q-tip, but about twice the normal size. She opened her mouth and began to rub gently on the flesh just inside her mouth.

“There,” she said after a minute. She removed the swab and placed it back in the container. “Now I just package it up and pop it in the mail. Want to come to the mailbox, Wacka?”

The room was quiet.

“Wacka?” said Kate, looking up.

The little mallard lay in her nest. Her eyes were still closed. She wasn’t moving. Kate rushed to her side.

“Wacka, what’s wrong?”