

## CHAPTER 1: HOW TO TALK TO GIRLS

Joel shot a glance at the trio of zombie werewolves that were staring at him from the other end of the room.  
“Hey—Suzuki,” the tallest one called out.

*Ugh*, Joel thought as he quickly averted his eyes. *Shouldn't have looked over there.*

“What're you reading?” the tallest one asked in a tone of voice that didn't sound particularly friendly.

Joel clenched his teeth as he took a deep breath in through his nose. He sank a little lower into his couch seat and hid his face behind his brand-new tablet computer.

“Hey—I'm talking to you,” the zombie werewolf continued as he took a few steps in Joel's direction. “You have Asperger's, right? Does that make you deaf or something?”

“No,” Joel replied, not looking up.

“Then answer me. What are you reading? You seem pretty into it—must be interesting.”

“Just—um, just some random sci-fi book.”

*Be confident*, the words on the screen said.

“Lemme see that,” the zombie werewolf grunted, reaching out and grabbing the tablet from Joel's hands.

“Hey!” Joel protested. He lunged for the tablet but seized only air as the zombie werewolf jerked it away. “C'mon, give it back.”

The zombie werewolf inspected the tablet's screen for a couple of seconds before he burst into laughter. “*How to Talk to Girls?* Oh man, that's hilarious. Dudes,” he chortled, turning to the other werewolves, “he's reading an article about how to talk to girls.”

“What a loser,” Werewolf #2 scoffed.

Joel pursed his lips as his face grew hot.

“Seriously, that's pretty sad,” Tall Werewolf said, tossing the tablet onto the empty space on the couch next to Joel. “Some rock star you are.”

“Yeah, I can't believe you even got a record deal in the first place,” Werewolf #3 spat as he strapped on a five-string Music Man bass.

“I can’t believe that we have to open for you guys,” Werewolf #2 said scornfully, playing a sweeping arpeggio on his Washburn Flying V guitar. “Joel Suzuki and the Aspies.”

“Um, that’s Wavemakers,” Joel said. “Joel Suzuki and the Wavemakers.”

“Pfft, I know, I’m not stupid.”

*I didn’t say you were stupid, I was just correcting you* is what Joel wanted to say, but instead, he closed his eyes and took another deep breath.

“Anyway,” Tall Werewolf said as he picked up a drumstick and twirled it between his hairy fingers, “after tonight, people will know who the real rock stars are.”

“And they won’t be wearing lame wolf costumes,” Felicity remarked as she trotted down the stairs into the club’s green room, which was really just a basement storage area dressed up with tattered couches and old carpet that smelled like vomit.

“Hey, these costumes are awesome,” Tall Werewolf retorted. “I don’t even know what you poseurs are supposed to be.”

“Houseplants?” Werewolf #2 said, to the laughter of his bandmates.

“Just get your set over with,” Felicity shot back, rolling her eyes.

Joel allowed himself a small smile as he inspected his tablet to make sure it wasn’t damaged. Only he and Felicity knew that they were dressed up as Spectraland natives, with their sleeveless vests, light-green body paint, and the little fake leaves that were attached to their arms and legs. As an added touch, Felicity had dyed her grown-out blond hair a dark shade of green and woven it into multiple long braids, making it appear as if vines were sprouting out of her head.

“These guys giving you trouble?” Trevor smirked as he emerged from the stairway. He sauntered up next to Felicity and placed an arm around her shoulder.

“That’s an original line,” she replied, sounding annoyed but not making any attempt to escape from the physical contact.

Joel’s smile faded.

“Gross. Let’s go before they start making out or something,” Tall Werewolf grumbled as he pushed past Felicity and Trevor toward the stairs. The rest of his pack followed.

Trevor took his arm off of Felicity and aimed a high-five gesture at Joel’s face. “Joel, my man! Ready to rock this joint?”

Joel raised his hand and squinted, as if warding off the sun’s rays. “Uh, yeah, I guess.”

“You guess? Dude, this is so cool!” Trevor raved, completing the high five with such fervor that Joel was knocked backward in his seat.

“Settle down there, tiger,” Felicity muttered as she took her white Gibson SG guitar out of its case.

“I’ve always wanted to play here,” Trevor chuckled, looking around at the flyer-covered walls. “Man, I’m so glad I joined your band.”

Joel wasn’t sure if the feeling was mutual. Trevor was a talented bassist, to be sure,

but his relentless energy and over-the-top mannerisms could be very tiring and intimidating at times. And then, there was the other problem...

"Better not get too comfortable," Felicity said with a half smile. "One day we might realize you're not good-looking enough to keep around."

"Babe, I'm hotter than Brad Pitt, and you know it," Trevor declared.

Joel's brow furrowed. *Is this considered flirting?*

"Brad Pitt?" Felicity scoffed. "He's, like, ancient. And don't call me babe."

"You know you love it."

Joel stood up and placed his tablet on the couch as he tried to ignore Trevor and Felicity's ongoing banter. He'd thought about firing Trevor, but after their original bassist left during the summer, the ensuing search for a replacement had been so grueling that he really dreaded the prospect of going through that process again.

"Hi, honey!" a voice called from the stairway. Alison, his mother, was there, along with his kid sister Taylor and Art, his former boss at the music store—and current drummer.

"Oh—hi, Mom," Joel said.

"Good luck with your show tonight," she said, hugging him.

"Um, okay."

"Hey, kiddo!" Trevor called to Taylor. "Ooh, sweet Zelda costume. Where's Link?"

"I dunno." Taylor shrugged.

"I'm taking her trick-or-treating," Alison explained to Joel. "We'll see you at home. Don't stay out too late, okay? You still have school tomorrow."

Joel nodded.

"He'll be fine, right?" Alison said quietly to Art.

"Of course," Art replied.

"Thanks," she said before planting a light kiss on Art's lips.

Joel cringed. It had been over three months now, but he still wasn't used to the idea of his mom and Art...*dating*.

"Bye, everyone!" Alison waved before she headed up the stairs with Taylor in tow.

"Bye, Joel's mom! See ya, Zelda! Watch out for Ganondorf!" Trevor called after them.

"Later," Felicity said without looking up from her guitar tuner.

The sounds of the werewolf band's opening song came crashing down the stairs.

"Hey, babe, let's go check them out!" Trevor said to Felicity.

"Hello? Still tuning here," Felicity objected, nodding at her guitar.

"Tuning is overrated," Trevor sniffed before turning his attention to Art. "Dude, I have this great idea. You should, like, make a naked drummer video, like in that Rainn Wilson movie."

Art laughed. "Because I'm old?"

Trevor's eyes widened. "Yeah! And Joel's sister can post it online, and we'll get all super famous and stuff! We're just like the band in that movie— isn't that weird? It's,

like, a sign or something.”

“I have to admit, it is pretty uncanny,” Art said with a smile.

“Anyway,” Trevor continued, turning back to Felicity, “c’mon, let’s go. Those guys actually sound pretty decent.”

“Fine,” Felicity sighed as she laid her guitar down on the couch. “Joel, can you finish tuning this thing for me?”

“Um, sure,” Joel said dispiritedly.

Art took a seat on the couch across from Joel as Trevor and Felicity darted up the stairs. “I can do it for her, bud.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll do it,” Joel replied.

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Want to go check out that band after you’re done?”

Joel shook his head. “No.”

A piercing guitar solo wailed from the stage above.

“You all right?” Art asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

Art stood up and walked past Joel toward the disassembled drum kit in the corner, placing a reassuring hand on Joel’s shoulder as he did so. Joel picked up Felicity’s guitar and plucked each string in quick succession. Every one of them was already perfectly in tune.

“Art?”

“Yeah, bud?”

“What do you think love is?”

“Wow,” Art laughed. “Are you sure you want to ask me that? This could take hours.”

Joel inspected the white guitar in his hands. A barely visible three-inch hairline fracture ran down the side of the instrument’s body. He assumed it was from the time Felicity threw the guitar across the stage at their summer-tour stop in San Francisco one hundred and ten days ago, the day after his birthday.

“Well,” Art continued as he unpacked his cymbal bag, “love comes in many different forms. You care deeply about your family and want the best for them—that’s love. You lose yourself in a great song or a great book—that’s love too.”

Joel blinked. The werewolf band’s first song ended, to raucous applause.

“Love is attachment, and letting go,” Art said, assembling his hi-hat cymbal. “Love is affection...attraction...forgiveness, even. Or, like Mr. Rogers said, to love someone is to accept that person exactly the way they are, right here and now.”

“Who’s Mr. Rogers?”

“A wise man who had a long-running show on TV.” Art smiled.

“Okay, this is pretty confusing.”

“Believe me,” Art chuckled, “you’re not the only one who feels that way.”

Joel took a deep breath. “Do...do you love my mom?”

A sympathetic expression spread across Art's face. "I do—very much. I hope you're okay with that."

"I guess."

The werewolf band launched into a cover of a song by the multiplatinum band Biledriver. Instantly, Joel was reliving the incredible events he'd experienced a little over six months ago: near the end of a particularly bad day, Marshall Byle, the supposedly dead lead singer of Biledriver (who also happened to be Joel's idol at the time), showed up out of nowhere and invited Joel to a place called Spectraland—a tropical island on some alternate, alien world where music had magical effects. Marshall said that learning how to create musical magic in Spectraland was the key to his success on Earth, and that if Joel and Felicity (who had been invited separately) followed his teachings, then they too would unlock the secrets of hit songwriting and become rock stars, just like him.

Unfortunately, it all turned out to be an elaborate ruse designed to trick Joel and Felicity into helping Marshall retrieve a powerful artifact known as the Songshell, which he intended to use for malicious purposes back here on Earth. In the end, however, with the help of a Spectraland native named Fireflower, they were able to confront and defeat Marshall, who ended up exploding with the Songshell in a blinding shower of light.

Despite his anger at Marshall's betrayal, Joel felt a twinge of guilt about that. *He got what he deserved*, he reminded himself.

"I'll never replace your dad," Art was saying, "but just know that your mother and I make each other happy and I care a lot about you and Taylor—like I always have. In a way, it almost feels like we were all meant to be together."

"You can replace my dad, that's fine," Joel stated matter-of-factly, shifting his negative thoughts about Marshall to the other adult male in his life that he resented. "He was the one who left us. Stupid jerk." There were some other words that Joel thought about using, but swearing in general made him feel uncomfortable.

"I'm sure there were a lot of complicated reasons for what happened," Art replied in a gentle tone. "Has your mom ever talked to you about it?"

"Not really. She just said that they grew apart, or something like that."

Art stroked his goatee. "Well, regardless of what really happened, you should probably try to forgive him. I know it's hard to do—I still struggle with forgiveness myself—but if you can do it, it makes your own life that much brighter."

"Okay," Joel said, not really wanting to continue with the current topic.

Art changed the subject, apparently picking up on Joel's discomfort. "By the way, I really dig these costumes. We're plant people, like Poison Ivy, right?"

"Um, yeah, right," Joel responded. Being on the autism spectrum, he still wasn't really sure how so-called "neurotypical" people—people not on the spectrum—were able to do what Art had just done. It was like some kind of magical mind-reading ability. Although Joel knew he was smart and had come to accept that being neurologically different from most of his peers was part of what made him unique, he still had to deal with a lot of challenges, particularly when it came to reading body language, staying

focused, and communicating with others. In school he had a social communication class where he practiced skills like making small talk and advocating for himself. Although he had improved over the years, it never felt natural—like it seemed to be for most of his classmates, his mom, his sister, and Art. It's like they were using different operating systems. He was a Mac and they were PCs.

“Cool. You and Felicity did a great job putting these together,” Art said, wiggling one of his arm-leaves.

“Do you think she likes him?” Joel blurted out.

“What? Who?”

“You know...Felicity and Trevor.”

“Oh—well, I don't know, to be honest. He's a pretty friendly guy—he seems to get along with everyone.”

“Yeah,” Joel said, absently strumming an open G chord on Felicity's guitar. “I mean, I can't really tell for sure, but they seem to act like the people in movies do before they end up becoming a couple...you know, like in *The Empire Strikes Back*, when Han and Leia were arguing and stuff. I dunno—does that make any sense?”

Art nodded and gave Joel an understanding smile. “I know what you mean. But hey—I wouldn't worry about it. You're an awesome guy, and the two of you seem to have a lot in common. Just relax, be yourself, and things will work out the way they were meant to.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I think you know,” Art replied as he carried his kick drum over to the base of the stairs.

Joel frowned. If things were working out the way they were meant to, then apparently they were meant to be kind of lousy, at least as far as his “relationship” with Felicity was concerned. When the two of them were in Spectraland, they had slowly developed what he thought was some kind of a connection as they discovered that they were not only both musicians, they were both on the autism spectrum as well. Ever since they got back, though, her attitude toward him seemed...*different*, somehow, as if some kind of switch had flipped in her head. Joel couldn't quite put a finger on it. They were still friends and bandmates, but that was the extent of it, and he had no idea what to say or do to change the situation. All the books and articles that he read about the subject—even the ones that supposedly broke things down into steps—were not very helpful. There were simply too many different directions in which a particular situation or conversation could go, and, like when he had tried to ask Suzi Lee to the prom in April, things never turned out quite the way he expected them to. If regular everyday conversation was like algebra, then this whole talking-to-girls thing was like quantum physics. Only more complicated.

“Sounds like that band is having some technical difficulties,” Art noted. The music had stopped, and Joel could hear unintelligible shouting and the rumblings of general crowd discontent.

Just as Joel was walking over to Art, Trevor and Felicity came hustling down. “Oh man,” Trevor laughed. “Those guys are *ticked off*. It’s hilarious.”

“What happened?” Art asked.

“Mister real-rock-star-drummer-singer-dude doesn’t like the sound in his monitors,” Felicity scoffed.

“Yeah, I guess the sound guy tried to fix it after the first song, but he still wasn’t happy,” Trevor added.

“Oop, here they come,” Felicity warned.

Tall Zombie Werewolf stormed into the green room and flung his drumsticks at the wall. “Nope, the show is over!” he shouted.

“C’mon, man,” Werewolf #2 pleaded. “Let’s just finish up. This is the biggest crowd we’ve ever played to.”

“And you want to sound terrible in front of them? I don’t.”

“Sounded okay to me,” Trevor opined.

“The sound was fine. The songs...meh,” Felicity said, making the so-so gesture.

“Shut up, Aspie Chick,” Tall Werewolf snapped.

“Wow, nice comeback,” Felicity replied.

Joel noted the devilish grin on her face. *Ah—sarcasm.*

“What’s going on here?” a short, stocky man yelled as he came running down the stairway. It was Julio, the representative from the record label that had signed Joel’s band. “Why did you guys leave the stage?”

“The sound sucks,” Tall Werewolf spat. “I couldn’t hear anything in my wedge.”

“So?” Julio spat back. “You guys are loud enough as it is. Get back up there. The crowd is getting mad!”

As if on cue, the sound of boos started to rain down from above.

“Yeah, let’s go,” Werewolf #2 said, grabbing Tall Werewolf’s arm and casting an anxious glance in Julio’s direction.

“No way!”

“Look, we don’t have time for you guys to argue.” Julio waved his index finger at the various wolves. “Either get back up there, or I’m sending the other band out.”

“Sure, let those poseurs go on,” Tall Werewolf said, turning and heading for the door that led to the street outside. “See how *they* like not being able to hear themselves.”

“Dude—you know that’s the guy from the record label, right?” Werewolf #3 hissed as he and Werewolf #2 followed their bandleader out.

“Morons,” Julio sighed, shaking his head. “Think they’re rock stars already. So—Art, can you guys set up real quick and start your set? And maybe play a few extra songs?”

Art glanced around at each of his fellow band members. Trevor nodded. Felicity shrugged.

Joel stood there in silence as everyone turned to face him. “Oh—um, yeah, that’s cool,” he said after a two-second delay, realizing that they were waiting for his consent.

“Great,” Julio said as he leaned into Joel. “Listen, promise me that you guys will

play a longer set. If we don't fill the time and people ask for refunds, it's not gonna be pretty."

"Uh...what's not gonna be pretty?"

Julio leaned in closer. His breath smelled like beer and cigarette smoke. "I mean, we're going to lose money. And if we lose money, the booking agent will get mad. And if the booking agent gets mad, we won't get any more shows. And if we don't get any more shows, the label might just drop all of us—including me. Understand?"

"Um, sure." Joel gulped.

Julio exhaled. "Okay, get up there. I'll tell the sound guy what's happening." He vanished up the stairs.

"Wait, do we even *know* a few extra songs?" Felicity asked no one in particular.

"C'mon, we'll just improvise, babe!" Trevor smirked.

Joel felt a knot form in his stomach. *Ugh*, he thought. *I hate improvising.*