



THE SCAVENGER

Second Edition

Aidan Lucid

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

For permission requests, email the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the following email address: aidanlucidauthor@gmail.com

First published by Jongleur Books in 2020

Second edition published by Aidan Lucid in 2024

Front cover created by Artistly 3.0 App

Text for front cover by SM Studio Inc.

Back cover by Get Covers

© Copyright Aidan Lucid 2020 & 2024

BOOKS BY AIDAN LUCID

The Zargothian Saga

The Lost Son

Deadly Pursuits (winter 2024)

When Worlds Collide (winter 2026)

Jasper's Christmas Adventure (winter 2027)

The Hopps Town Series

The Scavenger

Unlucky Charm

Dark Secrets

Lurking Beasts (fall 2025)

Stand-alone Fiction

The Perfect Christmas Gift

A Beast Within

PART ONE: THE WISH

The school bell rang to sound the end of science class. Soon, the halls of Hopps Town High School thronged with students. Some, like Jared Duval, put books they no longer needed back in their lockers. Others just chatted for a few seconds before going to the next class. Jared—17, African American, and of medium height and athletic build—turned the key in his locker door to close it. He idolized Will Smith and sported the same hairstyle that the actor had in the early nineties.

Jared froze as he heard an all-too-familiar, taunting voice.

“Well, if it isn’t my *friend* Jared,” said Lydia Moran sarcastically, a small 16-year-old with cherry-red pigtails and purple-framed glasses over her blue eyes. She looked the picture of innocence. Everyone knew she was anything but that. For two years, Lydia tormented Jared, leaving notes shoved in his locker or bag when he wasn’t looking, sending him crude Facebook messages, and teasing him in front of her friends.

Jared learned a long time ago the best way to deal with bullies was to ignore them or show no fear, or both.

He knew that as usual, Lydia’s sister, Hazel, would be standing beside her. She was taller and more muscular. Hazel’s coffee-brown hair fell just below her shoulders. She worked out regularly and competed in boxing tournaments every year.

He turned around slowly, his brown eyes ready to meet hers.

“Get lost, Lydia,” Jared said.

Suddenly the halls became silent. All the students disappeared!

“Whoa. O ... kay,” he muttered. Walking on, Jared turned the corner; and again, no-one was about. “What the hell ...? Where is everybody?”

Blood drained from his face as eerie, indistinct whispers reverberated around the pale orange walls. At first, it was difficult to understand what was being said as the words rammed into one

another. After thirty seconds, the whispers transformed into a lone male voice with a Southern accent.

“Jarr-red ... Jarr-red,” it called out in a sing-song tone.

“Is anyone there? Hello?” the boy replied, looking into each now-empty classroom he passed. “Who’s that?”

“Jarr-red,” the mysterious voice called out again in a slightly higher pitch. “Jarr-red.”

Lights flickered overhead. Jared rubbed his hands together to keep them warm as a frosty chill circled him.

“Screw this.” He swallowed hard, retreating towards the school’s front double doors.

All the lights in the halls went out. The voice was replaced with sinister laughter which approached Jared at a pace, sounding like it was halfway down the hallway.

Jared no longer walked but ran towards the double doors. The laughter matched his speed, always just behind him. His green t-shirt became soaked with sweat.

Gotta get outta here, he thought, now in the final hallway, seeing the doors at the end of it. Having reached them, he tried to shoulder them open. They wouldn’t budge.

“Dammit,” he cursed, pushing again but to no avail. Jared stopped as he felt the ground tremble. Classroom doors on either side of the corridor began to shudder and shake so violently that he feared the glass would shatter. Hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, letting him know that something was coming. Jared tried to move, but his feet were rooted to the spot.

“What the hell?” he cried out, wondering what was causing this. He didn’t have to wait long to find out.

Tumbling into view from the opposite end of the hallway was a large mass of jet-black smoke. It rolled along towards him.

“Oh crap!” Jared exclaimed, trying once more to lift his legs. He couldn’t.

“Why you runnin’, Jarr-red?” said that Southern voice from within the smoke.

“God, no.” Jared banged on the doors. “Somebody let me out!”

A sulfurous odor now invaded his nostrils as the black mass

stopped right in front of him. Two pulsating red eyes appeared in it, boring into the frightened teenager, who had his back pressed tight against the double doors.

“You’re mine now, boy.”

Black tendrils shot out from the mass and made their way up Jared’s nose, despite him turning his head frantically to avoid them. He could feel the cold, slimy things slithering inside of him. Others found their way down his throat. Jared tried to scream, but couldn’t.

The sinister voice came to his left ear. “Don’t fight it, boy. It’ll be much easier.” The tendrils squeezed on his windpipe. “Just accept that you’re ours now.”

Evil cackling rang out as the tendrils’ grip squeezed tighter to finish him off.

Jared bolted upright, catching at his throat and gasping for air. His t-shirt was drenched with perspiration. It took him a few seconds to realize that what had occurred was all a nightmare.

“That was ... messed up,” he said, panting. The lime green figures from the digital clock showed that it was 3 am.

Swinging his legs from underneath the blankets, Jared took a moment before standing up. He went to the bathroom to splash some cold water onto his face. Staring into the shiny ceramic sink, the boy couldn’t help but feel that this was more than just a dream; that it was a possible warning of some kind. Of what, he was unsure—and he hoped that he would never find out.

Jessica Barlow’s heart thumped as she ran. All the pictures that hung on the cream walls in the hall were a blur as she dashed to her bedroom. Her mother, Bertha, quickly followed her up the stairs and neared the top step. The 40-year-old woman held a carving knife in her left hand.

“Come back here, you little tramp!” Bertha roared.

Jessica turned the handle and rushed into her room, slamming the door behind her, pressing her back up against it. She could hear

her mother's heavy footsteps and wheezing as she approached. The girl jumped as Bertha pounded the door.

"Open up!" Bertha shouted. "I sssswear," she slurred, the liquor finally affecting her speech, "you're dead if you come outta that room tonight."

There was silence for a moment. Jessica hoped that Bertha had run out of energy.

She was wrong.

Her bedroom door shook as Bertha shouldered it, trying to ram it open.

"Lemme in, you no-good brat," Bertha barked.

The girl held firm, planting her feet into the floor, putting all her weight against the only thing separating herself and her mother. If Bertha got a hold of her, Jessica knew she'd end up in the ER.

Another bout of silence passed until, finally, Bertha said, "Ah, you're not ... worth it," before turning around to go back downstairs. Heavy breathing followed every step she took.

Jessica let out a sigh of relief before sliding to the floor in exhaustion. Pushing back the red hair that was stuck to her cheeks, her eyes darted around the pink room. This ordeal had happened two to three nights a week for the last six years, since her dad left. Bertha had always blamed her daughter for it, but Jessica never knew why. She was too afraid to ask.

Bertha started drinking six months after Jessica's dad took off. Jessica got used to being the whipping post, constantly trying to avoid her mother's wrath.

Tonight, in a moment of frustration, Jessica had told her to get lost after Bertha teased Jessica about her skinny frame.

There were no aunts or uncles Jessica could move in with, and she didn't want to report her mom to Child Protective Services because being in the foster system was not ideal either. *Only six more months* was the mantra Jessica had adopted to get herself through. By then, she'd be eighteen and, hopefully, going to college to study business law – and to be free.

Jessica got up and laid down on her bed. Her eyes were lured to the family pictures sitting on the gray-painted dressing table opposite her. On it was a mirror draped in multi-colored fairy lights.

Night after night for that first year, Jessica would pray for a better tomorrow. That never came. Soon, she just stopped praying.

After staring up at the ceiling for an hour, Jessica lost the battle to stay awake. With her eyes heavy from tiredness, she finally fell asleep.

Sunlight broke through a tiny slit in Jessica's teal curtains. To anyone else, seeing such beautiful sunshine outside would inspire feelings of joy and put them in a good mood. But not Jessica. She always dreaded the morning after the night's terror.

Jessica tiptoed downstairs and thought she was home free entering the kitchen; but the girl didn't see her mother sitting in the corner. Mascara had run down Bertha's face, and her dirty blonde hair looked unkempt. There were dark circles around her eyes.

"Don't make noise or I swear—"

"Yes, Mom, I know. You'll kill me." Jessica finished what had been said to her on many mornings since her father left.

"Don't get smart with me, girl." Bertha's white dressing gown rolled over her robust frame. She lit up a cigarette.

"I'm not." As Jessica poured herself a bowl of Cheerios, she could feel her mother's dark-gray eyes watching her every move.

"Did you do all your homework last night?"

"Yes."

"You sure? Don't lie to me. God knows I'm paying enough for your education."

"Yes, Mom, I know. I work too, at the weekends at the supermarket. Remember?"

"That ain't enough to pay for books and all."

"But it's something. And yes, I did my homework, in between being chased by you with a carving knife."

Bertha banged her fist on the table. "Damn it, what did I tell you about running your mouth?"

Jessica lowered her head and kept quiet.

Bertha took another drag of the cigarette, eyeing her daughter up and down. “You know what your problem is? You’re too skinny. Gotta put some meat on those bones. No wonder you ain’t got no boyfriend.”

Jessica shoved back her chair and got up, taking her pale-brown jacket from the back of her seat. She slung the schoolbag over her left shoulder.

“Hey! You sit your ass down there and finish that damn cereal,” Bertha demanded, pointing to the bowl.

“I’m not hungry,” Jessica replied, walking out.

“That food costs money, you ungrateful little brat!” she heard Bertha roar before slamming the door behind her.

Jared smiled and shook his head in humorous incredulity as he approached Jessica and Adrian. They stood against a sidewall of Hopps Town High School and were arguing again over whether Superman or Wonder Woman was the strongest.

“Come on, Superman wins every time. He’d kick Wonder Woman’s ass,” Adrian said. He was tall for a kid of 17. He ran his hand through his short black hair, flattening it down, to get rid of the just-out-of-bed look. Adrian was part of the school’s soccer team and kept himself in good shape by going to the gym some evenings or just jogging in the park at the weekends. It was evident, too, that he was a Superman fan from the logo on his yellow t-shirt.

“No, he wouldn’t. Diana is the only one who can stand up to him and beat him, blow for blow,” Jessica countered.

“Uh, hello, did you not see *Justice League*? He totally owned her in that.”

“That movie doesn’t count. It was wrong on *so* many levels. And besides, if Superman is so strong, how come Batman beat him a few times?”

Jared nodded in agreement. *She has him there*, he thought.

“That’s because he used Kryptonite. Without it, Batman wouldn’t stand a chance. And yeah, *Zack Snyder’s Justice League* was better.”

“Seriously, guys? Are you still fighting about this?” Jared chimed in. “There are other things to talk about, you know.”

“Well, he started it,” Jessica replied.

“Okay, well, what about the SATs coming up? You ready for that?” Jared asked.

“Yeah, just about. Math might give me trouble, though,” Adrian answered.

“Biology is, like, my worst enemy. But I’ll get there ... eventually,” Jessica said.

Jared was slow to ask his next question. “How you holdin’ up, Jess? Your mom still giving you a hard time?”

The girl stared at her feet for a few seconds before speaking. “You know. Same old, same old.”

“Did she have another episode?” Adrian said gingerly.

“Yeah, last night. Thank God I’ve only got another six months. Don’t think I could last any longer.”

Adrian put a comforting arm around her shoulder. “You know we’re here for you, right?”

“What he said,” Jared added.

Jessica patted Adrian’s hand and held Jared’s in appreciation. “Thanks, guys. It means a lot.”

A ping sounded from Jared’s phone. Taking it out and swiping the screen to unlock it, his good mood evaporated.

Hey Dweeb, read the Facebook message from Lydia Moran. Looking up, Jared saw her standing across the yard, greeting him with a false, amiable smile and a wave. He gave her an equally fake grin before flashing her the middle finger.

Jared’s attention was then drawn to Tim Hobbs, who had a cool fade-and-taper haircut. His blond hair complimented his square chin and million-dollar smile. Tim played quarterback on the football team, so his broad, well-toned frame was also easy on the eye. Jared had had a secret crush on him for a few years now, but he knew that Tim wasn’t gay.

Jared then noticed something on the horizon. A flock of birds, formed in a straight line, were flying to the east. For a moment, it reminded him of the evil, black, smoky mass in his nightmare. Even thinking about it sent an icy chill down his spine.

“You okay there, bud? You look a little spaced out,” Adrian said.

“Yeah.” Jared put on a brave face. He tried to sound more convincing, putting weight behind his words. “I mean, yeah, sure. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Lydia giving you trouble again?” Jessica said.

“Nothing I can’t handle.” It was true. He could deal with Lydia Moran; but this dark feeling that hung over him, that he couldn’t handle, along with the sleepless nights and the feeling of being watched, sometimes, during the day.

Adrian closed the stained-glass front door and put his bag down in the hall. The image depicted in the glass was of the baseball icon Babe Ruth. It had been Adrian’s dad, Don’s, idea to put it there.

“It gives the house a bit of color ... and character,” Don would often reply whenever anyone asked about this quirky feature. He was a successful realtor who took over his father’s property business in his early twenties.

Adrian made his way into the ultra-modern kitchen with white marble countertops. A large refrigerator stood by the door. In the center was a long glass table, dotted with colorful placemats that were evenly spread out. To the right, standing in front of the island, was Don, a tall man with a graying, receding hairline. He wore navy suit pants, a white shirt, and a colorful tie. He was chopping carrots on a wooden board with a small silver knife. Beside it was a bowl of lettuce that had just been rinsed.

“Hey, Dad,” Adrian said, taking out a bottle of cold water from the refrigerator.

“Hey, kiddo, how was school?”

“Same as usual. Boring.” Adrian took a chocolate bar from a cupboard.

“Don’t eat that. Dinner will be ready in an hour.”

“I got training in two hours, so I want to have enough energy.”

“Put it away. It’ll ruin your dinner. Besides, the salad will give you just as much energy,” Don replied, continuing to chop.

“Too late,” Adrian took a bite out of the bar. “I’ve already started eating it.”

Don stopped, giving him a stern stare. “You know the rules, Adrian. No junk before dinner. You gotta stick to your diet for the soccer team. Coach gave me hell at the last parent-teacher meeting.”

“Chill, Dad, it won’t affect me. I promise.”

“Yeah, sure, try telling that to the coach. He’s gonna freak if you put on weight.”

Adrian was halfway out the door when he stopped. “Oh, one last thing: can Jared come over tomorrow to help me with a project?”

“I guess so,” Don said.

Adrian closed his bedroom door and turned on his laptop, which sat on the desk that was beside a long, wide window. Once the machine had booted up, he clicked on a Google Chrome browser, logging into Facebook. Another tab he opened to use for research.

While he was taking out some books from his schoolbag, the laptop dinged. Switching back to Facebook, he saw there was a message from Jessica. He laughed after opening it. She’d sent a picture of a bruised and cut Wonder Woman standing, triumphant, with a foot on a downed Superman with torn suit and cape. Underneath the picture was the caption, “*You see, she wins EVERY time! :)*”

In the corner of Adrian’s desk was a picture of his mom, a brunette with piercing brown eyes and a smile that would light up anyone’s day. He still remembered when she got hit by a car seven years ago. Every time he’d look at the photo, it would trigger a quick flashback to her funeral: how the rain poured down relentlessly while he stared at the sleek, silvery coffin. Adrian cried while they lowered it into the ground, Don squeezing his shoulder in comfort.

Dragging his eyes away from her photo, Adrian closed the Wonder Woman image and began his homework.

Jared licked his fingers after finishing the last morsel of the pepperoni-and-meatball pizza they were eating at Adrian's house.

"Mmm-mmm, that was *really* good," Jared said.

"Yeah, Toni's does the best pizza in town," Adrian said, putting his plate on top of Jared's and placing them in the sink. "Let's get on with that project. It could take a while."

Jared picked up his navy schoolbag and pushed in the chair before following Adrian. Although he had been here numerous times before, Jared always admired the Coles' home, secretly envying them. "You got nice digs, man."

"Thanks. I just wish my dad wouldn't keep adding to it, though. Kind of embarrassing."

Closing the bedroom door, Jared replied, "You talking about the stained glass?"

"That, and the stained-glass windows he wants to put in the porch." Adrian opened his laptop.

"Oh, I see. Yeah, that's a little eccentric all right."

Once the desktop screen appeared, Adrian clicked his way into Facebook. "Hey, get a load of this. Jess sent it to me yesterday." Clicking on the message's icon, he showed Jared the victorious Wonder Woman standing over an unconscious Superman.

Both boys laughed.

"She never lets it go, does she?" Adrian asked.

"Nope, she doesn't. I worry about her, though ... You know, with her mom and all."

"Tell me about it. I'd hate to be in her shoes."

While opening up a Microsoft Word document, Adrian asked his next question with care. "Does your mom still give you a hard time over ... you know ... being gay?"

"Totally. I just try to avoid her whenever I can."

"Sorry to hear that. Maybe she'll come around eventually."

"Not a chance. At least, not anytime soon."

Jared took out some science notes from his bag. "Here's what you asked for." He handed them to Adrian.

As Jared pushed his chair a little closer to the laptop, his eyes were drawn to some birds flying over a tree line that was about a mile away. They were heading east, then they changed direction. Soon, they were just a few houses away from Adrian's, and Jared noticed that one crow broke from the flock, making a beeline for the Coles' home. It flew over the telephone wires, swooping down, narrowly missing the cars.

Jared's face turned a little ashen. "Oh, crap."

"What's wrong?"

The crow started to fly straight for Adrian's window. Jared moved his chair back a few inches from his friend's.

Flying over the small wall separating the Coles' house from their neighbors', the bird was now less than five feet away.

"Um ... Adrian ..." Jared shifted his chair back further, sweat beginning to trickle down his temple. "Fly up ... fly up," he muttered.

"Why are you freaking out?" Adrian asked.

Jared tried to utter the words to explain his sudden panic but couldn't. Instead, he could only point at the crow that was now only two feet away from colliding with the glass.

"Fly up, you stupid bird!" he cried as it was now less than a foot away.

"What the hell is going on?"

"Move back!" Jared pulled Adrian away from the window as there was a sickening thud. Blood from the crow's beak began to ooze onto the glass.

What happened next horrified him even more. There was a fiery red glow emanating from the dead bird's eyes.

Jared blinked and it was gone, reverting back to a lifeless glare.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Adrian shouted, shrugging his friend's hands off him.

"Are you blind? Don't you see it?" Jared pointed to the gory sight.

"See what?"

As Jared stared at the window again, he saw that the bird had

disappeared. There was no trace of blood or feathers on the glass. “What the ...? A damn crow flew into your window, man. I swear!”

“A *crow*?” Adrian replied with a semi-incredulous laugh. “There’s no crow. There never was.” He now had worry etched on his face.

“But I saw ... I mean, it was ... I ... Damn.” Jared rubbed his eyes before running a hand through his hair, trying to come to terms with what had just happened.

“Why don’t we do this tomorrow? Maybe you need some rest,” Adrian suggested.

“Uh ... Yeah, sure.” Jared put his notes away. “See you tomorrow.” He slipped the bag over his left shoulder.

Before leaving, the boy gave one last glance at the window, doing his best to shake off that icy chill surging up and down his spine.

“What gives? Why the hell’s this happening to me?” he mumbled to himself while exiting the house.

Jessica lay on her bed, doing her homework. Her eyes drifted to the pictures of her father on her dressing-table. In one photo, her dad, Bill, was stooped down and had a broad smile, standing behind her as she was sitting on the grass. Both his hands were on her shoulders. Jessica had been twelve when that was taken, and she viewed the world differently. She hadn’t known about the constant fighting between her parents when she wasn’t around – she only learned of it when Bill left.

He’d never phoned, or wrote to her, since. Jessica wondered if this was Bertha’s own doing, cutting off all of Jessica’s contact with her father.

The front door being slammed shut made her jump.

“Oh, crap,” she said, looking at her watch. The girl had been so caught up in her homework that she had forgotten to make dinner. Swallowing hard while going downstairs, she braced herself for a verbal barrage, if not more.

Bertha, in her dark-cream store attendant's uniform, stood at the kitchen door, glaring at the table.

Jessica stopped at the last step. Although she was over a foot away from her mother, she could smell alcohol.

"Where's my dinner?" Bertha snapped.

"I ... I, uh ... forgot to make it. I'll do it now."

"You what?" Bertha barked.

"I said—"

"I know what you said, you idiot. All day I bust my ass and you can't even do the one thing you're asked to."

"I was just finishing some school work."

Bertha pointed to the stove sitting in the right-hand corner.

"Don't wanna hear no excuses. Get your skinny behind over there and start cooking."

As Jessica was passing her, Bertha caught her daughter's ponytail, yanking it back. Tears almost flooded Jessica's eyes.

"Sorry, Mom. I won't forget again."

"You're *sorry*? I'm sorry I ever had ya! Now get." Bertha belched while letting go of Jessica's hair. She took off her coat, putting it on a hook on the rack by the door.

Jessica started washing some onions and peeling carrots to make a stew. She could hear her mother shuffling to her chair. The *click, click, click* of Bertha's cigarette lighter made Jessica roll her eyes. She didn't want the stale smell of cigarette smoke on the new daffodil-yellow sweater that she'd bought a few days ago. Already a small plume was forming and wafting over the table. As usual, the customary biting remarks also came.

"Cut them onions good now. I don't wanna see big chunks in my stew."

"I know, Mom."

Another long drag made Bertha pause for a few seconds before continuing. "Daddy was right. Having children really does bring you down."

Jessica bit her lip and cut the carrots a little more ferociously. Half a piece jumped after she brought the knife down, falling on the floor.

“Good God, child, can’t you do anything right? Yeah. Shoulda aborted you when I had the chance.” Bertha shook her head in dismay. “Just my luck that I got the dumb kid.”

I so can’t wait to get outta here, thought Jessica as she continued focusing all her rage into chopping up the vegetables.

Jared rubbed his tired eyes while walking into the bathroom. He pulled the cord to turn on the light over the mirror. Today had been tiring. Each class dragged on to the next, and yesterday’s unexplained event was all he could think about, which had already made him lose a lot of sleep last night.

Taking his blue toothbrush from its holder, he put some mint toothpaste on it and began brushing his teeth.

As he did so, Jared scrolled through his Facebook and Instagram feeds. Tim Hobbs appeared in one post. The star quarterback was in mid-air, intercepting a pass. He looked like a Greek god with his chiseled physique and piercing emerald eyes.

Pity he’s straight, Jared thought.

Although dusk was creeping in, there was still some daylight; but an unusual, eerie darkness hovered around outside his window.

“Not again,” he said, his heart racing.

A fly landed in the center of the glass. Jared watched it for a moment until another one came, and then another. Soon there were ten, hovering and buzzing outside. These ten became twenty. Scared, Jared spat out the toothpaste in disbelief.

Within minutes, half the window was covered in flies, and the intense sound of buzzing increased. To the boy, it felt as if the glass was vibrating from the insects pressing on it.

Jared rinsed out his mouth. As he raised his head, two red eyes stared back at him from the mirror. A crack formed on the bottom right-hand corner of it.

Jared began panting and backed away from the sink as the crack spread diagonally. The eyes continued to bore into him, their glow

getting brighter. Jared shut his own while repeating, “This isn’t happening, this isn’t happening, this isn’t happening.”

When he opened them again, everything was back to normal. No crack on the mirror or flies hovering outside.

“This is crazy.” Jared turned off the light, heading straight to his bedroom for yet another sleepless night.

Adrian sat at his desk in History class, tapping his pen on his textbook to stave off boredom. Mr. Worthington was unusually late and some of the students began murmuring about his absence. Adrian loved history, but Mr. Worthington made it boring, with half the class time spent on him giving long lectures on his personal views of how important events of the past should have played out. How could Adrian forget the twenty-five-minute speech the teacher gave last week on how he felt the American War of Independence should have been won and what George Washington did wrong?

One or two whistles from boys behind him made Adrian look up. An attractive woman of medium height, in her early 30s, dressed in a beige suit and with long, chocolate-brown hair, stood at Mr. Worthington’s desk.

Hello there, Adrian thought, his attention and curiosity piqued.

She held a bulky red folder in her right hand. Her blues eyes, partially hidden behind indigo-framed spectacles, studied the class before speaking. “Firstly, that’s not how you greet a woman,” she said in a cross tone and with her arms folded.

“It is when she’s hot.” Wayne Durham, the red-haired, six-foot, smart-ass jock replied. The other boys in the class laughed too, except for Adrian.

“Really?” The new teacher walked down to Wayne. As she passed Adrian, he got a whiff of her strawberry-scented perfume.

“Uh-huh,” Wayne replied.

“Then how about me and you spend a little time in detention, and you can write a three-thousand-word essay on why you think it’s appropriate to speak to a woman like that?”

“Can’t. I got football practice.”

“One quick word with your coach and your diary will be cleared for lunch.” The boy never answered back. “Well? Got anything else to say?”

“Yes ... Sorry, miss,” Wayne replied while staring down at his book, browbeaten.

“That’s better. Any more interruptions?” she asked while looking around the class. “Anyone?” There were none. “Good.” She walked back up to the desk again. “As I was about to say before being rudely interrupted, my name is Miss Byrne. Mr. Worthington is out sick for a few weeks, so you’ll have me instead. I’m hoping we can get along well—” Miss Byrne stared at Wayne again, “—without any further disruptions to the class.”

Everyone nodded their head in agreement.

“Great. So, let’s get started.”

Yup, History definitely got a lot more interesting, Adrian thought, giving her a quick eye up and down before opening his textbook.

Later that evening, while putting the finishing touches to his science project, his mind kept drifting to Miss Byrne. She was one of the most attractive women he had ever seen. He struggled with the temptation, for thirty minutes, on whether or not to run a Google search on her. Adrian knew that this was what most people called “creeping” on someone and that it was wrong, but his curiosity got the better of him.

After typing in her name, a lot of different images of various women popped up in the results page. Refining his search to “Miss Byrne, history teacher,” he was soon presented with images of the woman from various stages of her life. Adrian learned that her full name was Cilla (short for Priscilla) Byrne. In one newspaper article, which was fifteen years old, she was standing with her school quiz team, in a wine uniform and white shirt, holding a large trophy after they won the national finals. In another picture, taken two years later, she stood wearing a white gi, holding a trophy after winning a local karate tournament.

Smart, gorgeous, and a badass. Nice! Adrian thought before clicking out of the Google search.

Jared saw Jessica walk into the cafeteria, join the line to get some food and go to the vending machine to get a carton of apple juice before joining them.

“Hey, Jess,” Jared said as she sat down.

“Hi guys,” she replied. Opening the carton, Jessica poured the juice into a glass. “So, Adrian, what do you think of Miss Byrne?”

“I don’t know yet. Only had her two days.”

“I heard what the other guys thought of her. Do you think she’s hot, too?” Jessica said.

“I don’t know. Guess she’s pretty-looking.” Adrian didn’t raise his head to meet her eyes as he just played with his pasta.

“Oh, I know that look,” Jared said. “You think she’s hot, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t,” Adrian answered unconvincingly. “So, what are you guys doing at the weekend?”

“Nice change of subject there,” commented Jessica. Both she and Jared gave their friend a knowing smile as his cheeks blushed.

“Not much, but I might go to the movies on Saturday night,” Jared said. “Anyone wanna come with me?”

“What are you going to see?” Adrian asked.

“Maybe the latest Star Wars movie. Don’t know.”

“Count me in if you are,” Adrian said.

A short, preppy brunette in the school’s blue-and-yellow cheerleading outfit came over. She put a flyer down next to Jessica. “Hey, beautiful people. There’s the annual Halloween party on next week. All students are encouraged to come.”

“What’s the theme this year?” Jared asked Adrian as his friend examined the flyer.

“Halloween’s roots?” Adrian asked.

“Yup. Look, I totally get that it’s a weird thing, but it’s to do with going back to the origins of Halloween or something like that,” the girl said.

It was Jared’s turn to study the flyer and read: “‘Come dressed as druids. Understand its Celtic origins. A no-alcohol event.’ Yeah, it has exciting written all over it.”

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger,” replied the cheerleader before leaving.

“Guess we got something to go to now at the weekend,” Adrian said. “You guys going?”

“Yeah, why not?” Jared said. “It’s not like I got a busy social calendar or something.”

“Yeah, I’ll go too,” Jessica chimed in. “I need to get out of the house anyway.”

Cilla Byrne entered the cafeteria, immediately drawing the eyes of a lot of boys, including Adrian’s. Jared saw Jessica give Adrian an I-told-you-so grin and arched eyebrow as she caught him staring at the teacher.

“Still saying you don’t know if you like her or not?” Jessica asked.

Adrian lowered his gaze once again to his tasteless lunch and never answered.

Jared lay on his bed, reading a spy novel. Tonight, he’d decided to take a break from homework and just chill. His relaxing came to a halt when he heard his mother, Maria, calling from downstairs.

“Jared, hon, come and give me a hand with these groceries.”

He groaned while getting up. “So much for R and R.” Putting the book on his bed, he headed downstairs.

Maria, short and plump with long, silky black hair and hazel eyes, waited in the kitchen, taking out groceries from plastic bags. He noticed that she’d gotten her hair straightened, with little curls at the end.

Jared put some food into the cupboards.

“Heard there’s a Halloween party on at the weekend. Is that right?” Maria asked.

“Uh ... Yeah, there is. It’s something the school’s doing.”

“You going?”

“Yeah. Wasn’t going to, but Jess and Adrian are, so ...”

“Good for you.” Maria put away one or two things herself. She turned around and asked in a casual tone, “You going to church on Sunday?”

“You know I am, Ma,” Jared said, slightly irked. A part of him knew where this conversation was leading to.

“God is good, you know.”

“Yes, Ma, I know.”

“He cures every one of their ... sickness.”

“Seriously, we’re going to go there? Being gay is not a sickness!”

“Well, it ain’t natural neither,” Maria retorted.

“Every goddamn time you talk about church, this happens. Jesus.”

“Language!” Maria rebuked him. “You don’t speak to me like that, and you don’t cuss either.”

Jared slammed a cupboard door. “I’m gay, get over it.”

“Sorry, but I can’t. It isn’t right, baby. It’s not the way God made man.”

“Newsflash, Ma: God made me the way I am. So if me being gay is too hard to handle, then tough.”

“But the Bible says—”

Jared cut her off. “I don’t care what the Bible says. He’s supposed to be a loving god, right?”

“Uh-huh,” Maria answered while nodding in acknowledgment.

“Then if He can love me for who I am, why can’t you?” The boy set down a glass jar of peanut butter on the counter so hard that it shattered. Jared stopped for a second, shocked that it had exploded. Peanut butter and glass covered the counter and the floor. With sorrow and regret on his face, he stormed out.

“Come back and clean this up! Jared? *Jared!*”

The angry teen drowned out his mom's voice as he went further up the stairs, slamming his bedroom door shut.

Jessica sat at the checkout, scanning groceries for an old lady. Even though it had been relatively quiet, with only a few customers coming in, she had been kept busy with stacking shelves, sweeping floors and doing an inventory check. In a few hours, she'd be finished her shift and going to the Halloween dance with Adrian and Jared. She knew it wouldn't be the most exciting thing in the world, but it would be better than being stuck here, or at home trying to avoid her mom.

"That's ten dollars, ma'am," she told the old lady.

The woman opened her teal leather purse and took out a ten-dollar bill. She gave it to Jessica with a broad smile and took her items, piling them into a brown paper bag.

The next customer loaded a few products onto the conveyor belt. It was a mother in her early thirties with scraggy black hair. Her daughter, with sandy hair in a neat ponytail, sky-blue eyes and a little button nose, made Jessica smile. The child gave a goofy grin and waved.

While Jessica scanned this woman's groceries, seeing the little girl triggered a memory from a happier time in her life: of her mom and dad, with ten-year-old Jessica in the back seat, rocking out and singing the choruses of 1980s power ballads from bands like Bon Jovi, Europe and Van Halen. They all sang like they didn't care, hands waving or punching the air to the songs' pulsating beats.

Jessica sighed, missing those times and wishing she could go back to those days: when the world wasn't so complicated, and her drunk mother didn't threaten to beat her three or four nights a week.

Jared stood in front of his mirror, straightening the shiny, raspberry-colored dickie bow. He smoothed down the creases on his purple shirt. Spraying a small shot of mousse into his right hand, he ran it through his hair.

“Looking good,” Jared remarked with a wink.

A knock came to his door.

“It’s open,” he said.

The tall, lean figure of Oscar, his father, in army fatigues, walked in. Despite his tough, no-nonsense military exterior, Oscar had a good, kind heart, often taking pity on homeless people. In his spare time at the weekends, he also helped coach the local under-18s basketball team. This was one trait Jared liked about his dad: the man was a great people person, someone he looked up to a lot.

Oscar sat on the bed and whistled at his son’s snazzy clothes. “Well look at you, the belle of the ball,” Oscar chuckled.

Jared shot him a semi-bemused expression before answering, “Dad, enough of the gay jokes.”

“Come on, son, you know I’m only ribbing you. So, are you meeting Jessica and Adrian?”

“Yeah. Adrian’s picking me up any minute now.”

“Great. Is your car still being fixed?”

“Ma said the garage phoned and they told her it would be ready by Monday.”

“Okay. You know you’re lucky to have good friends like them.”

“Yeah, they’re cool.” Pouring a shot of cologne from the dark-green bottle onto his left hand, Jared patted some on both sides of his neck.

“Expecting to meet someone there?”

“No, Dad,” Jared said in a slightly embarrassed tone.

“Okay.” Oscar folded his arms before clearing his throat. “Heard about the fight with your mama yesterday.”

Jared sat down on the chair opposite his bed. “Is that the real reason you’re here?”

“Look, I’m not gonna give you a hard time. I know you’re gay, and I’ve come to accept that.”

“Then why can’t Ma?” Jared said, his voice raised in frustration.

“Her family’s old-school. Being gay in her folks’ eyes is like saying you’re the Devil.”

“But this is 2019, for God’s sake!”

“Hey, I know. All I’m saying is give your mama some time. She’ll come around.”

“Yeah ... like, never,” Jared scoffed.

“She’s stubborn, sure, but she loves you. I promise, your mama will change her mind.”

The boy shook his head in disagreement. “I don’t think so.”

“Sure she will. I’ll talk to her too.”

Jared’s phone vibrated inside the pocket of his black, baggy trousers. Adrian’s name was on the screen. He pressed the answer button. “Hey, what’s up?”

“I’m outside,” Adrian said.

“Cool.” Jared hung up.

“Guess it’s show time, huh?” Oscar said. He stood up and placed both hands on Jared’s shoulders. “You’re turning into a fine young man, J. I’m proud of you.”

With a mixture of being choked up and a little embarrassed, Jared didn’t know what to say. He settled on, “Um ... Thanks, Dad. That means ... a lot.”

“Come here.” Oscar grabbed his son, putting him in a mini-bear hug and lifting him a few inches off the ground.

“Easy, you’ll crease the shirt!” Jared smoothed it down again once Oscar let him go.

“Have fun, and remember—”

“No alcohol or I’m grounded for two months. Got it.” Jared repeated what he’d been warned about since he mentioned the party a day ago.

“Good. Move out, soldier,” Oscar said in a semi-serious, drill sergeant tone.

The boy didn’t have to be told twice, making a hasty exit.

The double doors to the cafeteria, where the dance was being held, were opened. Instantly, Jared, Adrian and Jessica were hit with a barrage of music. All the tables had been stacked on top of one another over on the right wall. A banner which read *Halloween Dance 2019* was hung over the stage that the DJ was on. Black and orange balloons hung from the ceiling. Artwork of bloody Celtic crosses was stuck on the walls in various places.

Jessica looked perplexed while staring at the crosses. “Wasn’t this supposed to be about the origins of Halloween? Didn’t that, like, come before Christianity?”

“Not too sure, Jess,” Adrian said.

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” Jared added.

“Then why do they have Celtic crosses?” she asked.

“Maybe someone didn’t get the memo?” Adrian suggested.

“Or maybe it’s to do with Ireland somehow?” Jared said.

“Yeah, that’s it. It’s a Celtic tradition, so maybe that’s why. Nice one, Jared,” Jessica replied.

“You see, beautiful and smart,” Jared answered with a proud grin. He looked around at how the place was decorated. “Man, they went all out this year.”

“Uh-huh. Music’s better too.” Adrian nodded his head to the rhythm. He glanced at the soda stand in the corner. “Anyone want one?” he asked, pointing to the drinks.

“Sure, I will,” Jared said.

“Jess?” Adrian asked.

“Yup. Diet soda, please.”

“I’ll get it.” Adrian went to the stand and Jessica joined him.

In the far corner by the stage, Jared saw Lydia and her cronies staring at him. She leaned into one of her friends, who was dressed in an orange druid’s robe, and whispered something into her friend’s ear. The girl’s eyes drifted to Jared. He knew they were talking about him. Then Lydia took out her phone. Her fingers darted around on the keys.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. He took it out, frowning when the screen lit up to reveal a message from Lydia. It read: *Nice shirt. NOT.*

Taking a deep breath, Jared pressed the Home button and locked the screen.

Adrian and Jessica came back.

“Here you go.” Adrian handed him a soda.

“Thanks.” Jared gave him a thumbs up while taking a sip from the paper cup.

Jessica’s focus was on watching all the students dancing. “You guys wanna join in?”

Adrian put up his hands in refusal. “No. No way.”

Jessica gave him one of her adorable pleading faces. “Aw, come on. Please!”

He shook his head. “Nope.”

Jared gave Adrian his cup. “Well, in that case, can you hold mine?”

“Sure.” Adrian took it, and Jessica’s too, placing both his friends’ drinks on a table beside him.

“Let’s go, girl. Time to get a groove on,” Jared said as she grabbed his hand.

Both teens busted out their best moves. In his peripheral vision, Jared saw Adrian laughing and cheering them on. He also saw Lydia holding a cup of soda in her left hand. Her sister Hazel and the other girls followed her as she walked around the edge of the dance floor.

As Lydia approached them, she fake-tripped, her drink splashing all over Jared’s shirt and pants.

Everyone around them stopped. Some began laughing in derision.

“Damn, this shirt is new!” Jared yelled.

“Oh. Oh, I’m sorry,” Lydia said with a hand raised to her mouth in mortification.

“You did that on purpose,” Jessica accused her.

“I swear, it was an accident,” Lydia answered.

“We all know it wasn’t,” Jessica continued. “You’ve had it in for him for a while.” She got within an inch of the bully’s face. “You know, without your clique you’re nothing but a pathetic loser.”

Hazel stepped forward, both her fists clenched.

“You can call off your dog,” Adrian intervened, gently guiding Jessica away before punches were thrown.

“Dude looks like he pissed his pants!” Wayne shouted, pointing to Jared’s wet trousers. The jibe made other boys laugh out loud.

“Screw this.” Jared headed straight for the bathroom to dry himself off. He looked in the mirror while wiping down his clothes.

I’m so sick and tired of her crap, he thought. I wish somebody would sort her out for good.

Adrian came in, handing him a fresh piece of toilet paper. “You all right?”

“Nah, man, I’m gonna leave.”

“Don’t do that because of her. Stay and have fun.”

“What, so more people can laugh at me?”

“Ignore them.”

“No, I’m gonna go. You guys stay. I’ll phone my dad.”

Jared was about to take out his cell when Adrian placed a hand on his arm to stop him. “If you really want to leave, I’ll drive you home.”

“You don’t have to go ’cause of me.”

“It was a dumb party anyway,” Jared said.

Jared smiled as he took his hand off the phone in his pocket. “You know you’re a bad liar, right?”

“Guess it’s a good thing I don’t play poker then.” Both boys laughed. Adrian opened the door and held it. “Come on, I’ll drive you home.”

Jessica stood outside, her arms folded and a face full of concern laced with pity. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll live. Adrian’s taking me home.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“You don’t have to,” Jared told her.

“I *want* to. Besides”—she turned around to give a quick glance in Lydia’s direction—“I’m turned off this party anyway.”

“All right. If you insist. I appreciate it, guys.” He pointed towards the double doors. “Lead the way.”

Jessica and Adrian walked out. Just as he was about to leave, Jared stared at Lydia one last time. The girl looked back at him with a sly, smug grin.

“Buh-bye,” Lydia mouthed while waving in a taunting fashion. Hazel and her friends joined in too.

Screw you, he thought while pushing open the doors, sighing a breath of relief.

A few minutes later, Jared, in the back of Adrian’s white Honda Civic automatic, watched the trees blur into one another as he passed by them.

“What is Lydia’s problem?” Jessica asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe she’s a homophobe,” Jared replied. “I just wish she’d back off.”

“I second that,” Adrian added. “How long has this been going on for anyway?”

“About two years. Around the time I came out.”

Jessica shook her head. Jared knew that she hated gay-bashers. “Did you tell your parents about her crap?”

“Nah. My mom would kick her ass, even though she hates me being gay, too.”

“Maybe that’s what Lydia needs,” Jessica suggested.

This made everyone laugh.

“A little extreme, don’t you think?” Adrian said.

“Not for her,” Jessica replied curtly.

Adrian drove around a corner, leading onto a long stretch of road.

As everyone grew quiet again, Jared’s mind drifted back to Lydia’s smug face. *If I were a girl, I’d totally kick your butt.*

As they were passing a field, Jared saw someone running towards the road—right into the path of the car.

“Adrian, watch out!” Jared roared.

“Shit!” his friend exclaimed before slamming on the brakes.

There, standing just a few feet away from the Honda Civic, was

a young girl in tattered clothes. She looked to be no more than twelve years old, her face caked with dirt. The child's black hair was covered in dust.

"Everyone okay?" Adrian asked.

Both answered in the affirmative.

The girl stared back, unfazed.

"I wonder if she's all right?" Jessica asked.

"The kid almost gave me a friggin' heart attack!" Adrian shouted.

Jessica undid her seat belt and opened the door.

"Jess, what're you doing?" Jared said.

"Are you all right?" Jessica asked her.

The stranger took one look at her and bolted across the other side of the road, running into a field that was just in front of a large forest.

"We gotta go after her, you guys," Jessica said. "Her parents could be missing her."

"I don't know ..." Adrian replied.

"Yeah. I feel sorry for the kid and all, but we don't know where she's going. She could be leading us into a trap or somethin'." Jared could see from Jessica's expression that she wasn't going to just walk away.

"No. I can't abandon her like that." Jessica took her phone and got out, running in the same direction as the child.

"You go after Jess. I'll park the car," Adrian said.

"Aw man," Jared moaned while getting out. "Hey, Jessica, wait." He ran as fast as he could to keep her in his line of sight.

"She's going this way," Jessica yelled back, pointing to her right. She now ran into the dense thicket of trees that lined the field.

Jared stopped when Jessica halted for a moment. He welcomed the brief reprieve, taking in gulps of air. Jessica turned her head left and right in a frantic manner.

"Where did she go?" Jessica mumbled to herself just loud enough for Jared to hear.

Jared began searching amongst the tight-knit cluster of trees. From behind one of them, he saw the child darting off to the right. One quick flick of his watch revealed that it was nearly 8 p.m.

“I see her,” Jessica said, and they gave chase.

The teens ran, weaving in and out between the trees. Just when it seemed that they were getting close, the girl would elude them.

After running in vain for what seemed like five minutes, Jared stopped to catch his breath.

“Jess, stop. We’re not gonna catch her.”

“But she’s just a kid. We can’t leave her out here alone.” There were tears in her eyes.

“I know. But she’s too fast. We gotta get back before we get lost ourselves.”

The silence around them was disturbed when Adrian called their names.

“Over here,” Jessica shouted.

It took another few minutes before Adrian met them. “Guys, we gotta go back. It’s gonna be dark soon.”

“That’s what I said,” Jared replied.

“I don’t like doing this, but you’re right. We’ll phone the police when we’re in the car,” Jessica conceded.

Adrian took out his phone, looking at the screen. “There’s no signal here anyway.”

Sighing in defeat, Jessica said, “Let’s go. Sorry I dragged you out here.”

Adrian turned to lead the way back to the car when he paused for a moment, something catching his eye. “Look at that.”

Jared followed the direction his friend pointed in. He could see what was once a shotgun shack. Some of the roof was missing and the windows were smashed in. Something beside it was covered, mostly by moss. Taking a few steps forward, Jared could now see more clearly that it was an old well.

“What’s that doing out here?” Adrian voiced what Jared felt everyone was thinking.

“I don’t know. Guess it belonged to whoever lived there.” Jared stayed with Jessica as Adrian wandered towards it. “Be careful, Adrian.”

“What? It’s just a well.” He shook his head at his friend’s over-cautiousness.

“Watch your step, man. There could be traps or something,” Jared advised.

Even though Adrian continued, he took Jared’s advice, watching where he placed his feet with each step before reaching the old well. “You see, no traps. I’m fine. Come on, take a look.”

Jessica beat Jared to it when she said, “Why? It’s only a well.”

Adrian ignored her, leaning on the gray bricks that looked like they would crumble if one pushed on them too hard. “I got an idea.” He took out a quarter from his pocket.

“What are you doing?” Jared asked.

“Making a wish.” Jared thought Adrian must have seen the incredulity on their faces when he added, “What? How often do we see something like this?”

“That’s a corny idea. That’s like hoping for some money from the tooth fairy,” Jessica said.

“What harm’s it gonna do? Come on, make a wish.” He took out a few more coins from his pocket. “I’ll even give you some change if you don’t have any.”

“I don’t know. This is dumb,” Jared remarked.

“Let’s just do it and go home,” Jessica suggested

“All right,” Jared conceded. “Give me a quarter.”

Adrian handed a coin to each of his friends. “Right, guys, make a wish.” He flicked a quarter, a plop sound confirming when it hit the water.

“I feel like an idiot doing this.” Jared tossed his coin in. Jessica did the same. “Happy now? Can we go?”

“Sure, you never know. It might come true,” Adrian replied.

Jared shook his head. “Oh, I doubt it.”

All three made their way back to the car.

An hour later, from deep within the well, something stirred. Water began to bubble for a few seconds until it stilled again.

When it had calmed, two red eyes formed on the black surface. An eerie cackling rang into the night sky.