

# THE SCAVENGER



AIDAN LUCID

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**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 for the day into their lockers. Others just chatted for a few seconds before going to the next class. Jared, 17, African American of medium height and athletic build, turned the key in his locker door to lock it. He idolized the actor Will Smith and sported the same hairstyle that his idol had in the early nineties.

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

"Well, if it isn't our resident queer," said Lydia Moran. Lydia, 16, small with cherry red pigtails and purple-framed glasses covering her blue eyes, looked the picture of innocence. Everyone knew she was anything but that. For two years, she tormented Jared, leaving notes shoved in his locker or bag when he wasn't looking, sending him crude Facebook messages or teasing him in front of her friends. He learned a long time ago the best way to deal with bullies was to ignore them or show no fear, or both.

Jared turned around slowly, his brown eyes coolly meeting hers. As usual, Lydia's sister, Hazel, stood beside her. She was taller and more muscular. Her coffee brown hair fell down just below her shoulders. She worked out regularly and competed in boxing tournaments every year. Now both sisters stood staring back at him with their arms folded.

"You know you can't go around saying that," Jared said. "It ain't exactly PC."

"You know I don't care, right?" Lydia replied.

"Yeah, whatever." Jared turned around to leave when suddenly the halls had become silent. All the students disappeared.

"O... kay," he muttered. Walking on, Jared turned the corner and again, no-one was about. "What the hell...? Where's 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 crammed into one another. After for what seemed like thirty seconds, the whispers transformed into a lone, male voice with a southern accent.

"Jarr red...Jarrrr red," it called out in a sing-songy tone.

"Is, anyone there? Hello?" Jared replied, looking into each now empty classroom. "Who's that?"

"Jarr red," the mysterious voice called out again in a slightly higher pitch. "Jarrrr red."

Lights flickered overhead. He 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 mysterious high-pitch voice was replaced with sinister laughter, which approached faster, 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 now became soaked with sweat.

Gotta get outta here, he thought, now in the final hallway, the doors at the end of it. Having reached them, he shouldered both open but they wouldn't budge.

"Dammit," he cursed, trying again but to no avail.

Jared stopped as he felt the ground tremble. Soon classroom doors on either side began to shudder and shake so violently that he thought the glass would shatter. The 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 on the opposite end of the hallway was a large mass of jet-black smoke. It slinked along towards him.

“Oh crap,” he exclaimed, again trying to lift his legs but couldn’t.

“Why you runnin’, Jarrrr red?” said that southern voice from within the black smoke, which was now halfway down the hall.

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

A sulphuric odor now invaded his nostrils as the smoky black mass stopped right in front of him. Two pulsating red eyes appeared in it, boring into the frightened teenager, his back now pressed tight against the double doors.

“You’re mine now, boy,” said the southern voice.

Black tendrils shot out from the mass and made their way up Jared’s nose, despite turning his head frantically to avoid them. He could feel the cold, slimy tendrils slithering inside of him. Others found their way down his throat. He 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 now squeezed on his windpipe, “Just accept that you’re ours now.” Evil laughter rang out as the tendrils’ grip squeezed tighter to finish him off.

Jared bolted upright, catching his throat and gasping for air. His white t-shirt was drenched with sweat. It took him a few seconds to realize that it was all a nightmare.

“That was...messed up,” he said, panting. The lime green numbers 3:00 glowed on the digital clock.

Swinging his legs from underneath the blankets, he 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, a possible warning of some kind. Of what he was unsure but hoped that he would never find out.

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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 now 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 in, 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,” the woman shouted while continuing to pound her fist on the door. “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 ground, putting all her weight against the door. If Bertha got in, 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 now followed every step she took.

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

Bertha started drinking six months after he took off. Jessica got used to being the whipping girl, always trying to avoid her mother's wrath. Tonight, in a moment of frustration, Jessica had told her mom to 'get lost' after Bertha teased Jessica over her skinny frame. There were no aunts or uncles to move to, and she didn't want to report it to child protective services because being 'in the system' was not ideal either.

"Only six more months" was a mantra she adopted to get through this. In six months, Jessica would be eighteen and hopefully going to college to study business law and be free.

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

Night after night for the 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, it would inspire feelings of joy and put them in a good mood seeing such beautiful sunshine outside. But not for her. She always dreaded the morning after the previous night's terror.

Jessica tip-toed 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 the dirty blonde hair looked unkempt. Dark circles were around the woman's eyes.

"Don't make noise or I swear--"

"Yes, mom, I know, you'll kill me," Jessica had finished what had been said to her many mornings over the years.

"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, girl, 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 her school-bag over her left shoulder.

"Hey, you sit your ass down there and finish your 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.

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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 a tall boy 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 'S' shield 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 *soo* 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, you know, another episode?" Adrian said gingerly.

"Yeah, last night. Thank God I 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 a Facebook message from Lydia Moran. Looking up, he saw her standing across the yard, greeting him with a false amiable smile and a wave.

He gave a quick wave back before showing 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 with the football team, so his broad, well-toned frame was also easy on the eye. Jared had a secret crush on him for a few years now but knew that Tim wasn't gay.

On the horizon, something else caught Jared's attention. 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 last night's nightmare. Even thinking about it sent an icy chill down his spine.

"You okay there, bud? You look pale," Adrian asked.

"Yeah," Jared put on a brave face, this time sounding more convincing, putting weight behind his words. "I mean, yeah, sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Lydia giving you trouble again?" Jessica said.

"It's 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.

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

"It'll give the house a bit of color...and character," Don would often reply whenever anyone asked about this quirky feature. Don 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 table mats spread out evenly. 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 with a small silver knife on a wooden chopping board. 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 the carrots.

"Too late," Adrian took a bite out of the bar, "I've already started eating it."

Don stopped chopping, giving him a stern stare. "You know the rules, Adrian. No junk before dinner. You also 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 the laptop, which sat on the desk that was beside a long, wide window. Once it had booted up, he clicked on a Google Chrome browser, logging into Facebook. Another tab was opened to be used for research for a project. While taking out some books from the schoolbag, the laptop *dinged*. Switching back to the Facebook tab, there was a message from Jessica. He laughed after opening it. She had sent a picture of a bruised and cut Wonder Woman standing triumphant with a foot on a downed Superman with his torn suit and cape. Underneath the picture was the caption, "You see, she wins EVERY time." with a little smiley face emoji at the end.

In the corner of his desk was a picture of his mom, a brunette with a smile that would light up anyone's day, and piercing brown eyes. 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, he closed the Wonder Woman image and began his homework.

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

"That was good, *really* good," Jared said.

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

"Science projects always do." He picked up the navy school bag and pushed in the chair before following Adrian. Jared, although he had been here numerous times before, 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 stain-glass windows he wants to put in the porch." Adrian opened his laptop, booting it up.

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

Once the desktop screen appeared, Adrian clicked on Chrome, opening up his Facebook home page. "Hey, get a load of this. Jess sent it to me yesterday." Clicking on the message's icon, he showed 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 opened up his school bag and took out some science notes. "Here's what you asked for." He handed them to Adrian.

As Jared pushed in his chair a little closer to the laptop, his eyes were drawn to some birds flying over a treeline that was about a mile away. They were heading east then changed direction.

Soon they were just a few houses away from Adrian's, and the boy noticed that one crow broke from the flock, making a beeline for the Coles' home. It flew over the wires, swooping down, narrowly missing the cars.

Jared's face blanched a little. "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 neighbor's, the bird was now less than five feet away.

"Um...Adrian..." Jared moved 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 made his face even paler. There was a fiery red glow emanating from the dead bird's eyes. Jared blinked again and it was gone, reverting back to the lifeless glare.

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

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

"See what?"

As Jared stared at the window again, the dead bird had disappeared. There was no trace of gore or feathers on the glass. "What the...? A damn crow flew into your window, man. I swear!"

"A *crow*? Adrian replied in 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 just happened.

"Why don't we do this tomorrow? Maybe you need some rest," Adrian suggested.

"Uh...yeah, sure." Jared put his notes back into the bag. "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 again.

"What gives? Why the hell's this happening to me?" he mumbled to himself while leaving the house.

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Jessica lay on her bed, doing her homework. Her eyes drifted to pictures of her father on her dressing-table. In one photo, her dad, Bill, 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 was twelve when that was taken, and she viewed the world differently. What she didn't know about was the constant fighting between her parents when she wasn't around. This she learned when Bill left. He never phoned or wrote to her since. She wondered if this was Bertha's own doing, cutting off all contact with her father.

The front door being slammed shut made Jessica jump.

"Oh crap," she said, looking at her watch. The girl had been so caught up in doing 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, the girl could smell alcohol.

"Where's my dinner?" Bertha snapped.

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

"You what?" the woman 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 doing my homework."

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 drowned her eyes.

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

"You're *sorry*? I'm sorry I ever had ya. Don't forget again. Now get." Bertha belched while letting go of Jessica's hair. She took off her coat, putting it on the hook on the coat rack by the door.

Jessica started washing some onions and peeled 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 bought a few days ago. Already a small plume was forming and wafting over the table. As usual also came the customary biting remarks.

"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. One-piece half jumped after being chopped, 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 cutting up the vegetables.

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Jared rubbed his tired eyes while walking into the bathroom. He pulled the chord to turn on the light over the mirror. Today had been a tiring one. Each class dragged into the next. Yesterday's event was all he could think about, which made him lose much sleep last night.

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

He scrolled through the 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 now, an unusual eerie darkness hovered around outside his window.

"Not again," he said, his heart racing.

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

Within minutes, half the window was covered in flies, 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 back up, two red eyes stared back at him from the mirror—a crack formed on the bottom right-hand corner of it.

He began panting and backed away from the sink as the crack spread diagonally across. The eyes stared back, their glow getting brighter.

He shut his own while repeating, "This isn't happening, this isn't happening, this isn't happening." Opening his eyes again, everything was back to normal. No crack was on the mirror or flies hovered outside.

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

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Adrian sat at his desk in history class, tapping the 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 giving long lectures on his personal views of how important events of the past should have played out. How could he 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 with long chocolate brown hair and dressed in a beige suit, stood at Mr. Worthington's desk.

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

She held in her right hand a bulky red folder. Her blues eyes hid 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-footer, 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,” he 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 the 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 won the battle.

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 Pricilla) 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 the team won the national quiz 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.

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Jared saw Jessica walk into the cafeteria, join the line to get some lunch 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 apple juice into a glass. “So, Adrian, what do you think of Ms. 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 as he just played with his pasta.

“Oh, I know that look,” Jared said. “You find her hot, don’t you?”

"No, I don't," he 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 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 last 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 roots 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 woman.

"Still saying you don't know if you like her or not?" Jessica asked.

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

\*\*\*

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

"Jared, hon', come down and give me a hand with these groceries."

He groaned while getting up. "So much for R and R." Putting down the book, he headed downstairs.

Maria, short, plump with long silky black hair and hazel eyes, waited in the kitchen, taking out groceries from plastic bags. He noticed that she got 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 going 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 put down a glass jar of peanut butter on the counter so hard that it shattered. Jared stopped for a second, shocked that the jar exploded, peanut butter and glass spread on the counter and floor. With sorrow and regret on his face, he stormed out.

"Jared, come back and clean this up! Jared, *Jared!*"

He drowned out her voice as he went further up the stairs, slamming his bedroom door shut.

\*\*\*

Jessica sat at the checkout, scanning through 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 a inventory check. In a few hours, she'd be finished her shift, 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 groceries, piling them into a brown paper bag.

The next customer loaded a few grocery items onto the conveyer 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 through, seeing the little girl triggered a memory from a happier time in her life. Her mom and dad with ten-year-old Jessica in the back seat, would be rocking out and singing choruses of 1980s power ballads from bands like Bon Jovi, Europe and Van Halen. They all sang like they didn't care, hands waving in or punching the air to a chorus's pulsating beat.

Jessica sighed, missing those times and wished she could go back to those days again 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 dark raspberry colored dickybow. He smoothed down the creases on his grape jelly purple shirt. Spraying a small shot of hair mousse on 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," Jared 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's person, someone he looked up to a lot.

Oscar sat on the bed and whistled at Jared'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, he'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 fixed 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, he patted some on both sides of the 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 have 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 sakes."

"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 come around."

Jared shook his head in disagreement. "I don't think so."

"Just give it time, son. 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 was heard saying.

"Cool." Jared pressed the end-call button.

"Guess it's showtime, huh?" Oscar said. He stood up and placed both hands on the boy'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, settling on, "Um...thanks, dad. That means...a lot."

"Come here." Oscar grabbed his son, putting him in a mini-bearhug, lifting the boy a few inches off the ground.

"Easy, you'll crease the shirt." He 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 had been warned 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.

\*\*\*

Jared opened the double doors to the cafeteria where the dance was held. Instantly, he, 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 the DJ was on. Black and orange balloons hung from the ceiling. Artwork of bloody Celtic crosses were on the walls in various places.

Jessica looked perplexed while staring at the bloody Celtic 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 music's 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 dressed in an orange druid's robe and whispered something into the girl'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 the keys.

Jared's 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, he 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 dance?" Adrian put up his hands in refusal. "No, no way."

She gave him one of her adorable pleading faces. "Aw, come on. Please!"

He shook his head. "Nope."

Jared gave him 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 bumped and grinded on the dance floor, each showing off their 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 cronies following her as she walked around the edge of where everyone danced.

As Lydia approached them, she "tripped", her drink splashing all over Jared's shirt and pants.

Everyone around them stopped also. It was soon followed by snickers or laughs of derision from onlookers.

"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." Now 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. This 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 pants and shirt.

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 to dry his clothes with. "You all right?"

"Nah, man, I'm gonna leave."

"Don't leave because of her. Stay and have fun."

"So what, 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 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 open. "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. I'm going home. Adrian's taking me."

"I'm coming with you."

"You don't have to."

"I *want* to. Besides," she turned around to pay 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 a taunting goodbye. Hazel and her friends joined in waving at him.

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

A few minutes later, Jared sat in the back of Adrian's white Honda Civic automatic, watching 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 is this going on for anyway?"

"About two years, around the time I came out."

Jessica shook her head and 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 ass.*

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 12 years old, her face caked with dirt. The girl'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 the girl.

The stranger took one look at her and bolted across the other side of the road, running into a field that was just before 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." She took her phone and got out, running in the same direction as the girl.

"You go after her. 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 some 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 bark, he saw the child darting off to the right. One quick flick of his watch revealed that it was nearly 8 pm. If they didn't get out of here soon, it would be dark and they'd be lost too.

"I see her," Jessica said and they gave chase.

In and out, each teen ran, weaving between the trees. Just when it seemed that they were getting close, the girl would elude them.

After running for what seemed like five minutes in vain, 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." Tears were in her eyes.

"I know. But she's too fast. We got to get back before we get lost ourselves."

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

"Over here," Jessica shouted back.

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 get back to the car."

Adrian took out his phone, looking at the screen. "There's no signal here anyhow."

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. Behind some trees, 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 in 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 here." 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 there," 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 leaned 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 into the dark well, a *plop* sound confirming it hit the water.

“I feel like an idiot doing this.” Jared flicked 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, leaving the forest, well and the girl behind them.

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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 water. An eerie cackling rang into the night’s sky.

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