

UNLUCKY CHARM



AIDAN LUCID

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PART ONE: THE GIFT

A smile of satisfaction spread across Jared's face as he relished the cool softness of his pillow. It was good to be back home from college for two weeks. He had missed being here. He'd missed the smell of freshly washed bed clothes and mom's home-cooked meals.

The last year had been a rollercoaster of emotions. Never in his wildest dreams did Jared think he'd face a demon and a ghost who tormented him and his friends: Jessica Barlow and Adrian Cole, after they'd made a wish in the cursed well in the woods. Some nights Jared still had nightmares about the exorcism he had to perform at the well with the help of his Aunt Maybelle to banish a demon and the ghost of racist Caleb Hammerson. It had happened twelve months ago and there were still some days he pinched himself to make sure it was real.

After that, Jared, with Maybelle's guidance, honed his powers by meditating and praying. Some ghosts came to him and he helped them cross over. There were still sometimes the boy would nearly jump out of his chair or bed when a spirit would walk through the dormitory walls to ask for help. This took some getting used to but Jared coped by continually practicing the meditations Maybelle gave him.

Drifting off to sleep, Jared was roused from his slumber by the sound of humming coming from the hallway.

"Ma, knock it off," he mumbled before turning over on his side.

Just as he was about to close his eyes to try and catch some sleep, he heard more humming.

"Dammit Ma," Jared grumbled, swinging both legs from underneath the duvet and off the bed. He stomped out of his room.

Looking in both directions, Jared couldn't see anyone. His parents' bedroom door was closed.

Maybe I was dreaming the whole thing. Just as he was about to return to bed, in his peripheral vision, he saw the end of a frilly dress entering the kitchen. It was similar to the dresses seen on the old cowboy movies his dad, Oscar, loved to watch.

He followed the female spirit into the kitchen.

There, standing with her back to him, was a tall black lady dressed in a light blue elegant 19th century plaid dress. Her hair was tied up in a large bun. A gold ring was on her left index finger.

"Ex- excuse me, miss," Jared stuttered, "are you okay?"

Almost floating instead of turning around in an ethereal manner, she faced him. Her brown pupils were accentuated by the whites of her eyes. The ghost brimmed an aura of authority. Jared could sense that this woman had power when she was alive. A witch possibly, he surmised.

"Those brigands took what don't belong to them," she said in what Jared thought was a French accent. Her voice was laden with hurt and urgency.

"Who took what from you?"

"They know not the perils."

"Wait a second. Hold up. What are you talking about, ma'am?"

Staring down at her feet, she took a deep breath, trying to remain patient. Looking back at him again, both eyes were filled with pleading. "Monsieur, find it or it shall be too late."

The kitchen light's luminance increased to an almost blinding level. Jared shielded his face with both hands for a few seconds until the light had returned to normal. Once his eyes were re-adjusted, he was able to see that the woman had disappeared.

"Where'd she go?" he asked himself while giving a quick glance around. Popping his head out the door, Jared surveyed the hallway but it was empty.

What is it I gotta find? Sure seemed important to her.

Returning to bed, Jared tried numerous times to sleep. Her warning kept reverberating around his mind. He couldn't shake the feeling that someone was in a lot of trouble. The question was who and what could he do to help them?

Zane Miller, a 24-year-old six-footer with a ginger crew cut, in a beige store uniform, locked the doors to "Jamie's" - a family-owned mom and pop store. He had just finished his eight-hour shift. Zane rubbed his hands together while blowing on them. Frost lingered in the air and he whistled while walking to his Renault Clio, glad to be going home.

Just as Zane was nearing the car, an old lady passed him, her face caked in dirt. An acrid stench wafted from her. She dragged a bulging suitcase behind her. She rummaged through some pockets in a long, tattered, camel-colored trench coat. A ten-dollar bill fell out of the pocket but the woman walked on unaware. Zane waited a few seconds to see if she'd notice. It remained on the ground as the vagrant walked on further.

"Well, thank you, ma'am," he said while picking up the wrinkled note.

On the opposite side of the car park, voices could be heard shouting as two men in their twenties in white tracksuit bottoms and sweaters, with NFL footballer physiques, were pushing and shoving a lanky kid in his mid-teens. His glasses were knocked off from a slap by one of the men. The teen had a bag full of groceries ripped from his hand, canned food and fresh vegetables spilling everywhere.

"Good luck with that, kid," Zane said while getting into the car. Gunning the engine, sounds of heavy metal music belted out through his speakers. Switching on the headlights, he pulled out of his parking space and stopped at the entrance to Jamie's car park, waiting for traffic to pass. In his rear-view mirror, Zane could see both men pushing the teenager to the ground, kicking the groceries as if they were footballs.

Memories of being bullied in high school came flooding back. Many times Zane would wander home, trying to hide bruised ribs when jocks would punch him, stealing what little lunch money he had. A pang of sympathy for the kid hit him.

"Damn," Zane cursed, hitting the steering wheel. Signaling right, he did a U-turn, parking close to where the fight was. Popping the trunk, Zane took out a baseball bat.

"Hey guys," Zane cried out, walking closer.

Both men stopped as he wielded the bat, swinging it about.

"This is none of your business," one of the men replied. "Get lost."

"I'm making it my business. Why don't you try pushing me around, huh?" Now the weapon was held tightly, ready to knock one of their heads off.

Taking one look at the boy still on the ground, both bullies backed away, wandering up

the street.

Zane lent his hand, helping the kid get up.

"Thanks," he said in a meek voice, brushing dirt off of his red t-shirt and black shorts.

From his trunk, Zane took out a spare plastic bag. He picked up the canned food items, putting them into it. "You got a name?"

"Billy," the boy said, fixing the scruffy blond hair.

He gave the bag to the kid. "How did the fight start?"

"They made fun of my t-shirt and I told them to go screw themselves. That's when they started pushing me."

"Take it from me, sometimes it's best to say nothing and walk on."

"I think I'll do that in future."

Zane watched Billy put on his glasses.

"You live far from here?"

"No, just a few minutes' walk." Billy took what remained of the bag of groceries, leaving the now dirty produce behind. He looked unsure what to do next.

"I'll get the rest of this," Zane assured him. "Go home, your parents might be worrying about you."

"Thanks mister," Billy replied, avoiding eye contact, his head lowered and shoulders slouched while walking away.

Zane knew how Billy felt. Once or twice someone came to his rescue but he was so overcome with shame for not being able to stand up for himself that he didn't know how to thank the rescuer.

Picking up the vegetables, Zane threw them into the nearest trash can and went home.

Zane closed the door of his two-bedroom apartment and sank into the couch, putting his legs up on the small, mahogany coffee table. Only the four avocado green walls with a mixture of family pictures and photos of his Little League playing days kept him company. Sometimes Zane wished he had a woman to cuddle up with at night to watch some TV or go for walks with at the weekends. He never had much luck with girls, always feeling awkward and jittery around them, and never knowing what to say. In Zane's mind, his father was to blame for that, always calling him a 'pansy' for never having a girlfriend.

Taking a bottle of beer from the fridge, a date circled in black on a sports calendar, caught his attention. Zane cursed when he saw this. It was his father's birthday soon. Even though he still had some hatred toward the man, his mother would be angry if he didn't get him a present.

Tomorrow after work I'll order something online. The usual go-to, New York Nicks t-shirt or boxing's greatest fights DVD would keep Dick happy. Last year Margery scolded Zane for not making more of an effort, but he refrained from telling her that

'dear old dad' was lucky to be getting anything at all. His parents were copy editors at a large publishing house.

Switching on the TV, all thoughts of birthday gifts were put aside as sounds of wrestlers slamming each other filled the living-room.

Reggie Danes and his girlfriend, Monica Walker, flopped breathlessly back onto their bed. They just finished fifteen minutes of sex.

Wow, that's the best we've had for a while, Reggie thought, smoothing down his long, dirty brown hair. Beads of sweat were knitted on his forehead and back.

"Was that good for you?" Monica asked, pulling bedclothes around her toned, naked body.

"Sure was. You?"

"Did you not hear me moan?" She lay her head on Reggie's chest.

"Yeah, think the whole neighborhood did." They laughed at that comment. He loved the smell of the new coconut scented shampoo she'd been using coming from her auburn hair.

Reggie always considered himself lucky that a beautiful girl like Monica, with her model looks: luscious, pouty red lips and sky-blue eyes, wanted to be with him. He'd caught Zane secretly watching her a few times. He had been there before, single and wishing to be with someone.

Reggie had met Monica nine months ago at the garage where he worked. Her carburetor had been faulty and one of the tires had blown out so she had to get it towed. From the moment they met, there was a 'spark' between them. He liked her sense of humor and she his, even some of the crude jokes. Reggie was surprised that she could swear like a sailor when vexed.

He had moved into her house two weeks ago and their relationship blossomed even more as they got to know and understand one another better.

One thing that Reggie didn't like was their bedroom. Monica insisted on keeping her tulip pink wallpaper. If that didn't make him feel emasculated enough, on a dressing table nestled between two large wardrobes, were her fluffy orange photo frames. In them were pictures of her family and friends. Numerous times Reggie wanted to throw out the frames or pretend he accidentally broke them but didn't because Monica would be hurt.

"You know, I was thinking," Reggie said, choosing his words carefully, as he tried to pluck up some courage. "Maybe we could change the room a little."

"Really? You want to talk about that now after what we just did?"

"Why not?"

"Okay," she replied, her tone a combination of surprise and slight annoyance. "What's wrong with it?"

"Can we make it less...girly?"

"How?"

“Change the wallpaper or paint the walls a different color.”

There was silence at first as Monica mulled over her answer. After what seemed like a few minutes, she replied, “I like this wallpaper. It’s been here for a while.”

“Yeah, but I’m here now. Can we give it a more...neutral color?”

“Yeah, sure. I’m open to change.”

That went well. Reggie sighed with relief while getting out of bed. “Gotta take a whiz.”

“Need a hand?” Monica joked.

“I’m good. Got two of my own,” Reggie said with a wink while waving both palms.

Zane sat in the car, eyeing a bunch of his DVDs and video games sitting next to him on the front passenger seat. He hated parting with them but there were too many lying around. He needed the extra space and cash.

Giving one last sigh of regret, Zane picked up the bundle and went into Mr. Stevenson’s Pawn Shop.

When he opened the door, a ding from a bell greeted him. This place had been a video game arcade until five years ago. There were many fond memories of he and Reggie spending hours, and nearly all their weekly pocket money, here. He remembered slotting quarters into the machines, sometimes in the elusive hope of winning a cuddly toy. Then Ron Stevenson bought the place, turning it into the only pawn store in Hopps Town. Walls were lined with high-end TVs, video game consoles, rare memorabilia and other products people considered valuable. Zane just thought of it all as junk folks wanted to buy.

Ron’s hulking frame stepped out from the plastic drapes separating the backroom from the store. Looking at him, one would think that he belonged to a biker gang with his long white beard, and leather jacket that couldn’t fit around his pot belly. A navy bandana with an American eagle was on his head. Zane always swallowed hard when looking into Ron’s black eyes and their no-nonsense gaze. He was pretty sure a gun of some sort was under the counter. Zane just hoped that he’d never have to find out.

“Hello there,” Ron boomed in his deep husky voice. “What can I do for you?”

“How much can I get for these?” Zane asked, holding up the bundle.

“Let me take a look.” Ron opened each case, inspecting the discs. When finished, he stared at them for a moment, sizing up their worth. “How about forty bucks?”

“Can you do better than that?”

Smacking his lips, Ron studied the items for another few seconds. “I can stretch to fifty but no more.”

Zane ran a hand through his crew cut, feeling like someone punched him in the gut. Fifty Dollars for all this, especially some games that were only a few months old, seemed like a low-ball figure. Then again, he thought it was better than going home empty-handed.

“Okay, I’ll take it.”

“My man,” Ron said with a smile while shaking Zane’s hand. “I’ll just take these to the store-room and will give you the cash in a minute.” Gathering up the bundle, Ron stepped through the drapes.

While Zane waited for his money, he stared at the jewelry section in front of him. There, glistening under the light, was a shiny, silver pocket watch. Unusual engravings like those of some unknown alphabet curled around a symbol of a square. Two diagonal lines were on either side of it. The watch seemed to call to him, making Zane want it even more.

Maybe mom might like this. His mother loved antiques. The watch would be a perfect Mother’s Day gift.

Ron returned with a clipboard and five ten-dollar bills, laying them out on the glass counter. “Here you go, sir. I just need you to fill out your details here.” He handed the clipboard to Zane.

“How much for that pocket watch?” Zane asked while writing down his address.

“That’s new. Just came in yesterday.”

“Okay but how much?”

“One hundred and ninety bucks. Why? You want it?”

“Yeah,” Zane answered, hoping for a large discount.

“Tell you what, since I’ve seen you here a few times before, I’ll give it to you for one twenty.”

Score, Zane thought. Yes, it meant he’d be coming out with no cash but he really wanted it for his mother. “All right.” He gave Ron a fifty and a twenty-dollar bill on top of what was on the counter.

Ron put the money in the cash register before writing up a receipt. Taking out the pocket watch, he slid it into a small paper bag.

“Whoever that’s intended for, hope they like it.”

“Yeah, me too.” Zane stuffed the bag into his coat. “See you.”

Sitting into the car, he held the pocket watch up to the light, letting it dangle in front of him. The sun’s rays made it light up even more. Opening the watch, a cream background with gray numbers stared back at him. The hands were red with a white tinge up their center.

I sure hope Mom likes this, Zane thought before putting it into the glove compartment and driving off.

Zane gave the old customer he’d just rung up his change and said goodbye. The man nodded his head in gratitude and left. Zane’s eyes lit up and he smiled upon seeing Reggie stepping up to the counter, holding a can of soda and a bar of chocolate.

“Hey, Z. How are you, man?”

“I’m good, bro. You on a quick break?”

“Yeah, just here to get these.”

“That’s four bucks.”

Reggie shot Zane a stunned look. "Are you serious? Four bucks for these?" he asked while raising both items.

"I know but hey, it's Robertson who sets the prices."

"That's extortion."

"Tell me about it."

Reggie reluctantly reached into his pocket and pulled out a five-dollar bill.

"Thanks." Zane took a dollar change from the register, handing it back to his friend. Looking left and right, he reached under the cash register to pull out a small bag. "I got something to show you." He opened the paper bag and took out the silver pocket watch.

"Whoa, nice piece of jewellery there, bud."

"It's for my mom. Got it in Stevenson's Pawn Shop this morning before work."

"Can I hold it?"

"Sure. Here." Zane dropped it into Reggie's hand.

"Feels a little heavy," he said, lifting his hand up and down with the beautiful object in the center of his palm. "Must be worth a pretty penny despite the funny markings on it."

"Stevenson gave me a discount. Just hope Mom likes it."

"I'm sure she will." Reggie put the watch back into Zane's hand again. "I gotta bounce. Catch ya later, Z."

"See you." Zane put the pocket watch into the bag again, wrapping it up before he placed it underneath the cash register.

Placing his key in the lock, Reggie turned it and he entered his apartment.

Sitting down on the couch, he turned on the TV, watching an NFL game. A few hours before, Monica had texted to let him know she'd be late. Her boss was working on a case and he needed extra notes typed up for court, which meant she'd have to work overtime.

He had not been sleeping well lately, waking up three or four nights a week around 3 am. Then he remembered the first aid cabinet in the kitchen. Monica always kept some sleeping medication in there. A few months ago she suffered two weeks of insomnia, staying up for a while until she could go back to sleep again. Even though he hated taking medication of any kind, Reggie guessed it might help him get some sleep.

Putting what remained of his beer into the refrigerator, Reggie popped a pill from its packaging into his palm. With a glass of water, he swallowed it, waiting for tiredness to take over.

Returning to the couch, Reggie watched the match. After thirty minutes, his eyes became too heavy to keep open. Soon his head began to drop and this was a sign that it was time to go to bed.

Later, caught in the midst of a pleasant dream, Reggie smiled, dreaming that he was lying on a sun-drenched beach. Suddenly he heard a familiar scream and saw a wounded young girl

standing on the shore, water lapping upon her feet, staring at him while putting her hand up to a stomach wound, blood cascading through her fingers.

Reggie sat straight up, breathing heavily. He recognized the girl, all too well, from a past event too traumatic to ever forget.

“It’s all right. It’s over now,” Reggie reminded himself. *But why did she come to me now after all this time?*

He laid down again. It took him a few minutes to fall asleep.

Later and with a grin of approval, Reggie felt Monica’s fingers running through his hair. This always calmed him and brought back memories of when they first started dating. Every Sunday they’d sit under a large tree in the park, his head on her lap. He’d look up at the sunshine filtering through leafy branches while her fingers combed through his hair. It was always so soothing. No matter what was on his mind or what worries Reggie had, Monica’s caressing and stroking erased them.

“That’s nice, hon,” Reggie muttered, his words a little slurred as he was still half asleep.

The sound of their front door being closed woke him completely, along with Monica calling out his name.

“Reg, you up?” she said.

Frozen stiff with fear, Reggie stared straight ahead and didn’t answer. *What the hell was stroking my hair just now?*

“Hey, baby, are you-” Monica stopped when she saw him lying in bed. Reggie closed both eyes, pretending to be asleep. She closed the door, going to the kitchen. He opened his eyes again, taking deep breaths, trying not to panic.

Did I imagine that? Was it even real? One thing was for certain: there wasn’t going to be much sleep tonight either.

Zane sank into his couch, his legs aching from standing all day. Taking off both shoes, he massaged his ankles. Propping an orange pillow behind him, Zane laid his head on it. Switching on the TV, he flicked through the channels, stopping when a sitcom he loved came on.

Once the show was over, he got up to make a hot cocoa. Zane scrolled through his Instagram while the kettle was coming to the boil. Suddenly his attention was drawn back into the living-room in surprise when the TV switched off.

“What the...?” he asked himself while investigating. Pressing the power button on the remote, the screen came alive again with a commercial about a new superhero series airing on that channel.

“Weird,” Zane muttered.

After pouring hot water into a purple LA Lakers mug, the TV switched off once more.

“What the hell?” He put his hot cocoa on the table and went into the living-room. Switching on the TV again, it worked as normal, the superhero commercial just finishing.

Zane returned to the kitchen but froze. His mug was now on the opposite side of the table. "I could've sworn I put it over here...or did I?"

Music blared from his cell phone, disturbing his inner debate on where the mug had been placed. It was a tune that triggered a horrifying childhood memory. "Dream a Little Dream" made him break out in a cold sweat. He retreated a few steps, his heart hammering against his chest.

"What's going on here?" he said, snatching up the phone and ending the YouTube video. Even though he really wanted the cocoa he'd just made, Zane instead left the apartment, to clear his head.

Parked on top of Bunker Hill, Zane stared out at the town's lights. He knew this place was usually reserved for lovers in their more intimate moments but didn't care about that right now. He was still trying to figure out what had just happened. Did a ghost suddenly come into his home?

Ghosts and the paranormal were something his family never believed in. Halloween wasn't celebrated in the Miller household when he was a kid. His father, Donald Miller, scared away trick or treaters when he'd answer the door holding his replica sawn-off shotgun. Kids had always run away, screaming in terror. Zane chuckled the first time Donald did it, but after a while, nobody would play with him at school, except for Reggie. Any time an episode of *A Haunting*, came on, he laughed at the poltergeist activity and spooky happenings the victims went through. Now it wasn't funny anymore. A part of him was afraid to go back.

Heck, I can't stay here all night, Zane thought. Turning the dial, he put on the radio for an hour, listening to old country music songs until it was time to go home.

Jared sat watching TV in the living-room. His parents, Maria and Oscar, had gone to bed. It was Thursday night and on the horror channel, they were showing '80s horror flicks. Tonight they showed Kurt Russel's classic, *The Thing*. Sitting on his lap was a bowl of popcorn with butter melting on top. Jared munched on some as his eyes were glued to the screen.

Someone pulled down on the door handle and opened it. He expected his mother to be standing there complaining about the TV being too loud. Catching the remote, Jared lowered the volume, but stopped when he realized nobody was standing outside the living-room. Putting down the bowl of popcorn, he got up and glanced down the hallway to see if either parent had gotten up.

Their bedroom door was closed and it looked like no-one had been walking about.

Remembering what happened last time something like this occurred, Jared walked into the kitchen.

Standing over by the window was the mysterious woman in 19th century clothing. She stared out into the horizon, her eyes fixated on some anonymous thing.

Jared exhaled a deep breath, plucking up the courage to speak. "Excuse me, ma'am. Why are you here? What do you want me to do?"

Turning around, she faced him, this time with an even grimmer expression than when he'd last seen her. "Beware."

“Beware what?”

“Death is coming.” The mysterious woman faded until she had completely disappeared, leaving Jared to wonder, who exactly was going to die: him or someone he loved?

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