

Synopsis of
Burning Leaves

by Tom Rowan

CAST OF CHARACTERS

MATT LELAND, a teacher, 32
JESSE WADE, a student, 16
JANE POTTER, a counselor, 40
HALLEY POTTER, her daughter, 16
ALICIA HOGAN, a student, 17
CARL WADE, Jesse's father, 48

The play begins on the first day of the fall semester at Pittsville High, a public school in a small Illinois town. Matt Leland, the new drama teacher, is meeting his students for the first time—and having a bit of trouble figuring out how to present himself. Should he let them call him by his first name? After all, he was an actor in New York until a couple months ago, and he never really thought he'd end up teaching...

Matt rents a room in the home of Jane Potter, a single mom who is also the counselor at the school. Ambitious and idealistic almost to a fault, Matt starts by assigning his students Shakespeare monologues. This proves too challenging for most of them, except for Jesse Wade, a quiet, sometimes sullen young man who brings surprising conviction to Hamlet's soliloquy—even to the point of pulling out a pocket knife at the end of the speech. Matt explains patiently that in theatre you never use real weapons—then confiscates the knife. That evening at home, he learns from Jane that Jesse really did try to kill himself a year earlier.

As Matt slowly adjusts to his new life and surroundings, he helps out around the house. He rakes the fall leaves in Jane's yard and burns them in the driveway, claiming he likes the aroma because it smells like starting over: the end of one season and the beginning of something new. Jane asks if he's running away from something; he says he needs a fresh start. When her awkward attraction to him becomes impossible to ignore, he tells her he's gay.

Matt takes Jesse on a road trip to Chicago to see an old friend in a play. On the way home, Jesse asks Matt's advice on an acting career and decides, with his teacher's encouragement, that he's no longer going to wear the wristband that conceals the scars from his suicide attempt.

On Parents Night, Matt finally meets Carl Wade, Jesse's widowed father, an unemployed construction worker who drinks too much and doesn't like the idea of Jesse wasting time on play rehearsals when he should be doing something more manly, like playing football. The Drama Club, meanwhile, is picking up momentum, as Matt guides the students in putting together a documentary theatre piece about the controversy surrounding plans for a new nuclear power plant outside town. As Matt strives to make theatre relevant to the kids' lives, some of them, like the popular but self-centered Alicia Hogan, lament the loss of the traditional spring musical.

When Jesse turns in his acting class journal, Matt learns something he hadn't even suspected: his star student has fallen in love with him. Fearful of upsetting the sensitive and sometimes unstable teen, Matt struggles with how to handle it—and Jesse demands the return of his pocketknife as the lights fade on Act One.

In Act Two, Matt turns to Jane for advice on how to handle a student with a crush. When Jane figures out who the student is, she's concerned that, by taking Jesse to Chicago and lending him gay plays from his personal collection, Matt has been encouraging the boy.

As rehearsals for the nuclear reactor play continue, Jane's daughter Halley expresses concern over her lack of acting talent, until Matt discovers where her real abilities lie and makes her head writer on the project. As this onetime wallflower starts to come out of her shell, Jesse (after insistent prompting from Carl) invites her to the Homecoming Dance. To her mother's consternation, she accepts.

Under pressure from Jesse, who is trying to decide whether to pursue acting in New York after he finishes school, Matt finally, and reluctantly, tells him the sordid story of why he left the city and gave up his own career. The memories prove painful, and as Jesse embraces Matt to comfort him, Alicia barges into the room unexpectedly and misinterprets what she sees. Already an enemy of Matt's, she reports him to her counselor (Jane), and Matt finds himself fighting for his job against an accusation of inappropriate relations with a student. Can he convince Carl Wade, or even his friend Jane, that he's innocent? The choices he makes, and their effects on his and Jesse's lives, comprise the concluding scenes of the play.