WarZone Entertainment presents

**Chronicles**

**#3: Grave Robbers**

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**Baltimore**

1850 AD

**Chapter One**

 The snow was coming down thick and heavy as Chris Ortiz dug away at a freshly dug grave in the middle of the potter's field. Chris had no idea who the unlucky fellow was, only that he had died the previous night and had been dumped here.

 As the sweat trickled down Chris’s face, he couldn’t help but feel ashamed at what he was forced to do. He came from a strong Catholic family, a sense of right and wrong were drilled into his head going back as far as he could remember. If his mother had any idea what he was doing, she would beat him upside the head right now. She wouldn’t understand that he had no other choice. Not since his father had died. It wasn’t easy being Mexican in America. No one ever wanted to give you a chance. His father had moved them here chasing work, but as tension between the north and south started to rise, work started to grow scarce, at least for people who didn’t fit into the standard definition of a proper American. Yet somehow Chris’s father always managed to make it work. He brought money in, kept their bills paid and food on their table and never once complained. He was a man, the best example that Chris could ever ask for. That was until he was found dead outside his job. The law didn’t waste five seconds trying to figure out what happened to him. Just another dead worker, no loss. Not to them, but to the Ortiz family, there could not have been a bigger loss. Chris had no choice but to step up and start working. After all, he was already 14, long passed the age where he should have started working. His father wanted him to stay in school, to get an education. That all changed with his death. He had to find a job and quickly. He tried his hand at the different factories, but even with those jobs, he couldn’t keep up with the piling up bills.

 He was forced to turn to other means to keep a roof over his family’s head. After all, he had three little siblings and a heartbroken mother counting on him. Enter Cornel Rice and Darren Altman, two men in town who came from nothing and suddenly, over the last few years, seemed to have no shortage of money. Cornel was a tall, shifty looking man, who looked more at home at a card game than just about anywhere else, while Darren was short and stocky man with short dark hair and a cut just above his right eye. He looked very much like a man you wouldn’t want to cross, a fact hammered home by the reputation that both men had managed to obtain for themselves. Despite this, they had always been nice to Chris, much more so than a lot of other people in town. It was the only reason Chris got up the courage to reach out to them and ask if they had any work. He figured they had to have some kind of hustle, how else to explain their sudden increase in fortune. Chris wasn’t sure what he was expecting, not really, but it wasn’t this. They welcomed Chris into their home and took pity on his story. They told him if he really wanted to make money, then the only way, was to turn to science.

 Which brings us here, back to the middle of a potter’s field digging up some poor unknown, unmissed man’s body, as Cornel and Darren watched on, ‘supervising’. The plan was to sell the body to the Washington Medical College of Baltimore for the students to dissect and play around with. They explained it to Chris, about how it helped the future doctors learn how to treat people, but none of it sounded legit. Digging up bodies in the middle of the night so people can use them to learn didn’t seem like an ethical thing to do, but Chris didn’t have any choice in the matter. The amount of money that was being offered, was enough to get his family out of debt. If he managed to get hired on by these guys, he could give his family the life his father always dreamed of. He had no choice but to give it his all. He was going to make this work, even if he had to dig up a million bodies. Even if he had to sacrifice his soul in the process.

 His right hand gripped the crucifix around his neck, saying a quick prayer, asking for forgiveness. He made a mental note to go and visit the priest when he got back. He just knew that was going to be a stressful confession. How do you justify stealing someone’s corpse? Let alone ask for forgiveness for something that you were going to just turn around and do again and again? This job was going to cost him everything, he just knew it, but you can’t turn your back on family.

 “What’s the hold up?” Cornel screamed down at him. The two of them had been up their chatting away, not a care in the world, as if the snow didn’t even faze them.

 “I’m almost there!” Chris shouted back, doing his best not to lose his temper. He needed this to work.

 “Come on kid, we losing moon light here.” Darren said, glancing up at the moon. The way they told it, everyone knew this happened, so no one ever interfered with it, since it was in everyone’s best interest to have doctors who knew what they were doing. That being said, no one wanted to admit that they were okay with people stealing the dead. So, there was an unofficial agreement, you only took the unmissed, those from a potter’s field, and you made sure to do it in the dead of night where no one can see you. That way everyone can pretend that it wasn’t happening.

 “Sorry!” Chris said, attempting to dig faster. He wanted to prove to them that he could be useful to them. He needed them to know that he could give them what they wanted. That he could be a valued member of their team.

 After what felt like an eternity Chris’s shovel hit the wooden coffin. It was a giant weight off his shoulders, the hellish task of digging up this body was at last finished. He finished clearing off the top of the coffin. His back was sore, his arms even worse. He had never worked so hard in his life; the money better be as much as they promised.

 “What now?” Chris asked, looking up at his new employers. Neither one moved to help. They just stood there watching, as if they expected him to get the body out by himself.

 “It’s not going to load itself up onto the cart, now is it?” Darren said.

 “I expected better of you, son.” Cornel said.

 “How do I open it?” Chris asked, defeated. These two were going to make him do everything himself. He could already feel it. This night was only going to get worse before it got better. Cornel threw down a crowbar onto the coffin. Chris let out a low sigh as he picked it up and set in-between the lid and body of the coffin, using all of his weight to pry it open. The smell was the first thing to hit him. He let out a fit of coughing, which only led to Cornel and Darren letting out a burst of laughter.

 “The smell will get you every time.” Darren said.

 “And that’s a fresh body, just give it a few days.” Cornel added as the two men got down into the hole to help Chris pull the body out. “Not that we have a few days.”

 “The fresher the body, the more they pay.” Darren added. Together the three men moved the body onto the cart up above, filled in the hole and started on their journey to the school. They had a lot of ground to cover, and not a lot of time before the sun returned.

**Chapter Two**

 Chris pushed the cart back towards the wagon that was waiting for them, just outside the graveyard. His arms were aching, but he made sure to not show any discomfort. He wanted, no, needed to be asked back. His mother was going to be so proud of him when he returned with the money. He still had no idea what he was going to tell her when the inevitable question came; where did you get it? He would have to think of something. Something that she would believe, that she couldn’t check.

 “Careful now.” Cornel told him, as they stopped behind the wagon and got ready to load up the body. “You do any damage and it comes out of your cut.”

 “You do too much damage, and we replace it with you.” Darren said, he had a slight grin on his face. Chris gave a light chuckle, attempting to believe that he was joking, but not really knowing for sure. Darren had always been pleasant to him, but he couldn’t help thinking that he didn’t know him. Not really.

 “You’re going to scare the boy.” Cornel said, as they finished resting the body on the back of the wagon and covering it in the tarp they set aside for the job.

 “Good. This job aint for the faint of heart. In case you yet to notice, we not alone.” Darren said, nodding off into the distance. Cornel and Chris turned to look and sure enough, three figures out in the darkness were watching them. They were hidden in the darkness, so Chris couldn’t make out who they were, but his heart sank at the thought that it might be the sheriff. That this was all too good to be true, and even if they did let Cornel and Darren off the hook for this, the sheriff made it clear many times that Chris’s kind wasn’t welcome here. Remembering his last run in with him, it was about a month back. His mother had taken to spending all her time alone in her room. Chris and the other children could hear her crying, asking god why he had forsaken them. Chris did everything he could to keep them distracted and away from their mother’s door, but it was losing battle. They needed her, and she needed justice. She needed some kind of sense to be made of the horrible tragedy that had befallen them. Chris had gone to the sheriff’s office almost every day since the murder, asking for any updates, and had never been given anything other than a blanket statement that they were looking into it. The sheriff had let it slip more than once that the problem was there was no real motive to the killing, completely ignoring the theory that it was a mugging. He should have just gotten paid, to which the sheriff answered by suggesting that the money was blown on booze. Never mind the fact that his father’s ring, with the family crest, the face of a golden tiger with two ruby cat shape eyes, was also missing from his hand. It had belonged to his grandfather, there was no way his father would have taken it off, let alone sold it, which is what the sheriff suggested. He kept insisting that there were no leads, and it would just have to wait till more important crimes were solved. This wasn’t acceptable, not when not knowing was doing so much damage to the family he had left. He decided that he needed answers, and since no one could be bothered to look for them, he would have to look himself.

 He figured the best place to start his search was the scene of the crime. His father had been working that night cleaning up at a local bar, an unpleasant place if Chris had ever seen one. It was run down, part of the wall had clearly been used in a fight, resulting in it being dented in. One good hit and Chris could have knocked a hole right through it. At least that’s how it looked to him.

 There wasn’t much outside, a watering hole for horses and a place to tie them and an old tree on the side of the road that still sat guard over a spot of blood left behind from his father. Chris stood over the half-buried blood stain, his eyes welling up at the sight. It was a sign that his father had been here, that he had existed. Chris could have stayed in that spot all night, his eyes transfixed on the memory before him, but it wasn’t why he was there, so he pulled his eyes off of it and headed into the bar.

 Even before he made it inside, he could hear the noise. They were a rowdy bunch. His father used to talk about the many fights, mainly over cards that would break out over the course of the night. Chris braced himself as he entered the building. There were more than a few card games being played across the floor. A table or two of drunkards arguing about something or other. A few women mingling with the crowd, attempting to get the attention of some fellow or another. Chris had a feeling they were what his mother called working women, she always said it was a sneer and told Chris to stay as far away from them as he could. They would corrupt his soul if they didn’t steal it out right. The front of the bar was packed as well, people standing there ordering drinks from the bar maidan, Eliza. Chris had met her once, when he came to see his father on his way home from school. She seemed very nice in their last encounter, even giving him some food for his walk home. She was who he would start his questioning with.

 For a moment he was afraid he wouldn’t be able to get her attention, or that she wouldn’t remember him. Both of those concerns were quickly put to rest. No sooner had he walked up to the bar, had she shouted out in joy at the sight of him. She walked around the edge and pulled him into a hug, before immediately asking him the question he didn’t want to answer.

 “How are you holding up?” She asked tenderly. The sweetness with which she asked, didn’t make the question any easier to answer. The truth was that he wasn’t holding up. He was seconds away from collapse, in fact, the only reason that he hadn’t, was because his little brothers and sister needed him. He couldn’t fall apart, not while their mother was in a downward spiral. Not with the death of their father so recent in all their memories. He was holding himself together for them and it was killing him.

 “Fine.” He managed to say, he could tell by her expression that she didn’t believe him. She wouldn’t have been any better than Chris at any of the poker games being played around them, if her attempt to hide her pity was any indication.

 “Still, my condolences. I’ve been meaning to stop by and tell your mother how sorry I am, but, well I didn’t want to intrude.” She said weakly. “I thought I might get the chance at the funeral, but I never saw the notice. I take it was a small one? No notice in the paper.”

 “The sheriff never gave us his body.” Chris said, attempting to keep his emotions under control. The lack of a funeral was a sore subject for him. His father deserved to have one. To have his friends and family say goodbye. To be laid to rest. “He says the body is evidence and we’ll get it when the case is closed.”

 “What?” She said, it was question and yet it wasn’t. She didn’t seem to be expecting an answer at any rate. “That’s ridiculous. He can’t just hold onto the body.”

 “I don’t know, all I know is, he won’t release it to us, nor will he tell us if there are any leads.” Chris told her, coming to the reason he was there. “Can you tell me about anything that happened that night? Anything that might help me make sense of it?” he didn’t need to hear her answer, her face told everything he needed to know. She didn’t know anything.

 “I wish there was something I could tell you. Something that could help.” She said, she sounded sincere. He mumbled a reply of thanks before making an excuse to leave. It was all so overwhelming for him. Being this close to where he lost so much. When he thought that there might be a chance that he found answers out of it, it didn’t seem to faze him. He had almost got a kind of high off of it. It was all going to make sense, at long last. He would know what happened to his father, who had stolen him and ruined his family. Those hopes were now dashed and he was overcome with a whole new sense of dread that surpassed any that he had known before. He would never know what happened to his father.

 He started towards the door when a hand caught hold of his arm. He made to pull it free, but the man, an older gentleman with graying hair and yellowish teeth, at least the teeth he had managed to hold on to. He had a surprisingly strong grip for someone so far along in age.

 “I saw your pops.” The man said, his voice harsh, with a croak much reminiscent of a frog.

 “What?” Chris asked, no longer attempting to pull free.

 “The night he was murdered, I witnessed it.” The man said, pulling close, so as to not be overheard. “I can tell you what happened. . . for a price.”

 “What is it you ask?” Chris asked, his heart filling with dread as he awaited the answer. He had no money, no skills, no way of paying the cost, no matter how small it might be.

 “I had a night of misfortune.” The old man said, glancing back at a card game where a younger man, barely older than Chris, sat with a great mound of winnings. A few other upset losers, who still had the means to attempt to turn their fate around, sat at the table with him, preparing to once more try their hand at fate.

 “Not muh, I’ just an old man, down on my luck. I plan to depart this retched place, but I’m mighty thirsty. Get me one last drink for the road and I’ll tell you all I saw of your pops last moments.” Chris stood there, eyeing the old man, not sure if he believed him or not. There was no way to tell if he was telling the truth, or just trying to scam a free drink off a brokenhearted child, who longed for answers to the cruelty that is life. “Miguel was mighty kind to me, I long to return the favor to his boy.” The old man said, almost as if he could read the doubt on Chris’s face. The old man knew his father by name, it had to count for something.

 He bid him to wait, while he rushed back to the bar and explained everything to Eliza, who seemed sympathetic. She confirmed that the old man had indeed been there the day his father died, and had even left a few minutes before his father. There was every chance he witnessed what happened. She gave him the free drink he needed as payment and wished him luck. Requesting to be kept in the loop, Chris agreed and hurried off to find the old man. He was right where Chris left him. He accepted the drink with a smile and motioned for Chris to follow him outside.

 Apprehensively, Chris followed him outside. It wasn’t that he thought the old man was going to hurt him, at least not physically. It was more, that

he was scared about what he was about to hear. The story of how his father died. The way of his death. All the things that had kept him up night after night. The events that were, even now, causing his mother untold torment.

 “What happened?” He asked, his voice shaking, as they stopped not too far off from the tree which his father had died under. The old man took another sip of his beer. A deep sip, as if to muster the courage he would need to tell his tale.

 “I had a particularly bad night, lost most o’ me savings, if I’ being honest. Might had to do with the mighty buz I had gotten myself, drinkings no good.” As he said that he took another deep sip. "Tonight, was supposed to be me chance to earn it back.” He said, a wishful look upon his face.

 “What does this have to do with my father?” Chris asked, not meaning to be rude, but desperate for any news that might provide answers.

 “I’m getting to that son; I’m setting up the scene.” He snapped. Chris fell silent, not wanting to anger the old man for fear that he wouldn’t finish his story. “I stumbled out here from the bar, regurgitated some of my drink right over there in that there bush.” He pointed at some bushed planted alongside the bar. “That was when I heard it, a ruffle, then a command for money. I turned to look, mind you, my head was splitting, my stomach in a bit of a turn, but it was clear enough to see your father arguing with someone. A shorter man, bit of muscle on him. Your father turned to walk off and. . .I never even saw the knife, just heard your old man scream out as he grabbed his stomach and kneeled over. The other man felt inside his clothes, removed something and ran off just as others exited the bar.” He pointed off to the right, back towards the larger part of the city. “He ran off that away.” The old man finished, before finishing the beer which was bought in payment.

 “You. . you didn’t get a look at his face?” Chris asked, crestfallen.

 “No, but short, muscular, looked to have dark hair. Gruff voice. It’s a start is what it is. You’re welcome.” And with that he started down the street, leaving a deflated Chris behind. It may have been a start, but it wasn’t near enough to find the man who murdered his father. At least not on his own.

 He wasted no time in rushing to the sheriff’s station, where he was almost immediately sent away, being told that there was still no news on the murder of his father. They were used to him coming down here and begging for information daily by now. Chris threw away their dismissal and told them everything he had just learned. It was moments before the sheriff was out there, demanding to know where he learned this information and how he came about it. Once Chris was finished telling his story he was thrown back against the wall, the sheriff’s gun at his throat.

 “You think you can just interfere in my investigations and I’ll let it slide?” The sheriff demanded, pulling the gun back and smacking Chris across the head with it. Chris fell to the floor, he could feel the blood pouring down his face. “No one asked for your help, you filthy Greaser.” The sheriff picked him up by his shirt, Chris looked into his face and saw nothing but hate looking back. “I’ve tolerated your constant pestering, but I’ve had enough. You think I have nothing better to do than investigate the murder of some fucking Mexican who never did a damn bit of use?” His voice increased in volume as he shouted, spit flying all over Chris. “I felt pity for you, stupid little brat, and your shitty ass family. Figured I’d do my part and treat you like you belonged, look into the mercy killing of that failure of a man, and you repay me by trying to make me look bad. As if I need you to do my job for me!” he threw Chris to the floor, near the door. He cocked his gun as he leveled it at him. “Thanks to you, the case is closed. If I see you in my town again,” he fired the gun at the floor near Chris’s head. Chris got up and ran from the sheriff’s station, not daring to slow down or look back till he was nearly home.

 “You think it’s the sheriff?” Chris asked, his heart pounding in his chest, drowning out any reply that came to his question. Cornel and Darren finished loading up the wagon and moving towards the front.

 “You coming kid?” Darren snapped, pulling Chris out of his thoughts. He nodded weakly, climbing into the back of the wagon, his eyes scanning the distance for the figure of the sheriff, but he was gone. Somehow that didn’t make him feel any better.

**Chapter Three**

 The trip to the school was the most nerve wrecking journey of Chris’s life. The smell radiating off the body was worse than he could have ever imagined, added to that the rough terrain that they rode over, knocking him this way and that, but if all that wasn’t enough, every few yards he would catch sight of someone following them. Just for a moment, way out in the distance. They would vanish as quickly as they arrived, in the blink of an eye. The first time it happened, Chris crawled to the front of the wagon, not an easy feat, and told Cornel and Darren what he had just seen, but they dismissed it as his imagination. Even if he did see someone, it didn’t mean they were being followed. He was just being paranoid. It was with a heavy heart he went back to his spot next to the rapidly decaying corpse.

 Only the more he looked at it, the less decayed it really seemed. The smell was even lessened the further they traveled. He wrote this off as him just getting used to the smell, but he still found it odd. The queasy feeling that started to erupt in his gut stopped him from thinking about it anymore. Instead, he leaned over the back of the wagon and dispensed with his last meal in a most unsatisfying way. He leaned back and attempted to rest, ignoring the fact that he saw the figure following them once more, not far behind them.

 “Get up!” Darren snapped, slapping him in the back of the head. Chris awoke with a start; the wagon had come to a stop. Darren was standing at the edge of the wagon with a wheelbarrow in hand. “Help me move the body.

 “Okay.” Chris grunted, as he got to his knees and crawled towards the exit. Once he was on his feet, he pulled the body over to him and helped Darren lift it into the wheelbarrow. For a moment, just a moment, it looked as if the bodies eyes were open. But a second later they were once again closed.

 “Something wrong?” Darren snapped. He seemed a bit on edge as he led the way towards the entrance of the school.

 “No, nothing.” Chris said, pulling the sheet over the head of the corpse. That way he didn’t have to worry about the eyes opening again, last thing he needed was for Darren to see something was wrong and ask about it. Darren didn’t want to hear it when he told them that he saw someone following them, he wasn’t about to give him another reason to be annoyed. The thought of someone following them made Chris glance back out over the distance, just to make sure they were alone, he saw no one. It made him feel a bit better. “Where’s Cornel?”

 “He already inside, figuring out our pay.” Darren said, pulling open the door so that Chris could push the wheelbarrow through. One inside, he found himself in a narrow corridor that led underneath the school proper as if it was some kind of labyrinth. “Just keep going forward, it’s not that hard.” Chris did as he was bid. He couldn’t help feeling that Darren was cross with him. He had seemed fine back in the wagon on the journey here, but ever since he woke Chris up, he seemed to be on edge. For a moment Chris debated whether he should open up about his concern or not, but a quick glance back at Darren, his face set in an expression of utter annoyance, quickly put to bed that idea. Now was not the time to try and connect with the man.

 Without a word shared between the two of them, they traveled under the school in utter silence. The only communication was Darren shouting out a direction every time they came to a fork. This silence allowed Chris’s mind to wander, in his mind’s eye, he found himself up above, in the school proper, attending classes, doing homework, living the life that he had so long dreamed of before the passing of his father. Right now, he should be at home, safe and sound, asleep in his bed, waiting for the sun to come up and wake him for another day of school, where he had just a few years left before coming here to study. He was going to be the first member of his family to go to college. He would end up dissecting the bodies that Cornel and Darren brought down here, so that he could learn how it worked. Study the mysteries of life, learn new truths and save lives. He would leave Baltimore for good. Maybe make his way up to New York, where the rich and successful lived. The greatest city on the face of the planet, and he, Chris Ortiz, would own a mansion, far larger than any this city has ever seen.

 His mother and father would come and visit him every other week, as would his siblings. It wouldn’t be long before he started a family of his own. Raise his kids to work hard and build something for themselves. His shitty childhood in this shitty city, long since forgotten. It was the dream, the dream that died with his father, under that tree at the hands of a dark-haired short man. He felt a mixture of hatred and despair wash over him as he thought about his father’s death. Of all that it had cost him. Of his mother, still at home, crying herself to sleep, while her two youngest listened in at the door, powerless to do anything to help her.

 “Just up ahead on the right.” Darren said, his voice sharp, as if he was on edge. “Let’s just hope Cornel is finished with the transaction. Professor Detrix has an annoying tendency to talk until he’s blue in the face.” Darren pushed passed Chris, so that he could stop in front of the door. He readied himself to knock. “It’s the reason I always send him ahead to get everything ready, not that it usually works out that way.” With his warning, and possibly the answer to his sudden mood shift, out of the way, he bangs on the door.

 After a few tense moments, the door slowly pulls open. The sounds of laughter carries through the new opening. Cornel catches sight of them as he opens the door and waves them in. Sitting on a chair on the other side of the room is a middle-aged man, with graying hair and a light in his eyes that speaks of a good-humored man. At once, Chris felt some of his fear leave him. This was all going to turn out alright. It was the first time that he truly believed it.

 “Say nothing.” Darren whispered to Chris as they entered the room. Darren and Cornel walked over to Detrix, where they carried on a conversation in hushed voices.

 “Relax, Darren, you stress too much.” Detrix said, getting to his feet. He laughed as he spoke, as if everything he said was a joke. “I assure you, as long as I’m in charge of the program, we shall be in need of your services.”

 “And paying our fee.” Darren snapped back.

 “He paid.” Cornel said, holding out a packed hand bag to Darren, who took it from him and searched through it.

 “Sorry, if I seemed a bit on edge.” Darren said, although he didn’t sound sorry at all. “It’s just. . .”

 “You were seen.” Detrix said. “Cornel had been telling me. Most troubling. Who do you think it was?”

 “I suspect it was someone who thinks to move in on our business.” Darren said, his voice even. Almost too even, as if he was masking something else he wished to say.

 “You suspected me?” Detrix asked. “Perhaps, you think they were students, out to learn how you collect our study material so that they could do it in your stead. Maybe I’ll even forgive their tuition, if the bodies were

fresh enough?”

 Darren’s eyes narrowed, Cornel glanced nervously between the two of them, while Detrix had a smile that was anything but innocent. Chris couldn’t help but feel the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. The tension had returned with a vengeance.

 “Oh, he for sure thought about it.” A voice from beside Chris spoke out. Almost as if it was letting everyone in on a joke. Chris let out a gasp, glancing around. He didn’t know anyone else was in the room with them. Darren, Cornel and Detrix all turned to look at Chris, none of them looked happy.

 “What did I tell you about speaking?” Darren snapped. Chris’s head snapped around, they heard it too, it wasn’t just in his head. He scanned the room again, there was no one else there.

 “I didn’t say that.” Chris said, the fear leaking into his voice.

 “Maybe you should wait outside.” Cornel said, his voice firm, but not unkind.

 “No. I want to hear what your new associate is accusing me of.” Detrix said. The anger in his voice growing with each word.

 “He meant no disrespect.” Cornel said, moving himself in-between Detrix and Chris.

 “The boy can speak for himself.” Detrix snapped, all sense of humor gone from his voice. For the first time since seeing him, he seemed intimidating. A man not to be crossed.

 “The boy should have kept his mouth shut.” Darren snapped, shooting Chris a look that could kill before turning back to face Detrix. “But that doesn’t mean what he said was wrong. Why do I get the feeling, that you are trying to squeeze us out?”

 “Gentlemen, gentlemen, we have an amazing arrangement here.” Detrix said, once more sounding downright pleasant. “No need for us to turn on one another.” Chris ignored the conversation that was taking place on his behalf. He was determined to find the source of the confusion. The voice that spoke from thin air.

 His eyes were scanning the room, but it was the same as when they entered, no one was in the room except for the four of them. He attempted to keep his fear under control, but it wasn’t easy. He knew what he heard. He hadn’t imagined it.

 “Now that that’s settled, and I sincerely hope that it is.” Detrix started, but Darren cut him off.

 “I don’t seem to recall anything being settled.”

 “Darren!” Cornel snapped.

 “No! We risk our asses out there, getting him his bodies! I’m not going to be thrown aside.” Darren all but screamed. Detrix took a step back, hie eyes wide with panic.

 “No one is throwing you aside.” He stammered. “I enjoy our arrangement. I need bodies, but have no desire for scandal, you solve both of those problems.”

 “Let’s just go Darren.” Cornel said, turning to look at Detrix. “Same time next week?” The question hung in the air, the tension between the three of them growing thicker by the second.

 “But of course.” Detrix said after what felt like an eternity. “I see no reason to mess with a successful arraignment. Do you?” The last part directed at Darren.

 “I guess not.” Darren said, begrudgingly.

 “Perfect, so it’s all settled.” Cornel said, a forced cheerfulness in his voice.

 “Not quite.” The same voice from before said. Chris’s head snapped around; the voice came from right beside him. Once more, all eyes turned to him, as if were the cause.

 “What this time?” Detrix snapped, sounding as angry as Darren looked. Even Cornel looked as if he was about to lose his cool. Chris was about to protest, yet again, that the voice didn’t come from him, but before he had the chance, the source of the mysterious voice was answered for them all. The body in the cart started to move. The hand came up, pulling the tarp off himself. All eyes were transfixed on the scene unfolding before them. The corpse, which had seemed so very dead not long ago, now looked just alive as any of them.

 “I have some issues with the arraignment.” The nondead man said, getting to his feet. “Namely, that next week isn’t going to work for any of you.”

 “What is this, Cornel?” Detrix demanded.

 “I. . .I don’t know.”

 “You set me up!” Detrix screamed, charging at Cornel before anyone even realized what was happening. He knocked Cornel against the wall and was moments from striking him when Darren pulled him off. Getting hit himself as Detrix struggled to free himself from his grip.

 “Now this is a show.” The man said.

 “How. . .how are you alive?” Chris asked, as the others fought amongst themselves.

 “Oh, I’m not.” The dead man said, a smile on his lips. “I don’t know how it works, but I died, yet I live, and I hunger.” As he spoke his face shifted, it was no longer human. It had an almost bat quality to it.

 “The fuck?” Cornel said, getting to his feet.

 “What is that?” Detrix asked, pulling away from Darren, his eyes wide with horror.

 “Answer him!” Darren ordered, stepping forward to as confront the dead man. He seemed enraged. Chris used this moment to back away from the unfolding conflict. He had the very real sense that he was just saved from being eaten.

 “As I told your young friend, I don’t know what I am.” The undead man said, taking a step towards Darren. “I just know that I’m hungry.” In the blink of an eye, he darted forward, grabbing Darren, pulling him towards him and bit into his neck. Darren didn’t even scream, he just went limp, as if he was resigned to whatever fate their undead companion had in store for him.

 “Dear god.” Detrix said, sounded just as terrified as Chris felt. Cornel opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. At long last, the undead man pulled away and casually tossed Darren aside, wiping the blood from his mouth with a smile.

 “Just what the doctor ordered.” He said with a smile, his eyes locked on Detrix as he spoke.

 “Darren!” Cornel said, his voice sounded hallow and defeated. Chris was no longer paying attention, for when Darren fell, not far from where Chris stood, a tiny something fell out of his pocket and rolled. At first Chris couldn’t make out what it was, but it caught his eye. It was important, he knew that. The undead man started towards Detrix, who screamed and threatened, as Cornel hurried out of the way. Just as Chris bent down to pick up what was clearly a ring.

 Before he had a chance to look at it, Cornel grabbed him and ordered him to come with him. Detrix cried out for help, but Cornel and Chris never looked back, they ran from the room, through the halls, towards the front door. Ignoring the undead man’s taunt that they shouldn’t go far.

 “We have to get out of here!” Cornel all but cried, but Chris stopped in his tracks. As they made their way through the corridor, Chris had taken a second to glance at the ring, it had the face of a golden tiger with two ruby cat shape eyes on the top of the ring. Chris recognized it at once. It was his father’s ring, the same one that had gone missing from his hand after his death.

 “How?” Chris asked, Cornel stopped and turned back to look at him. Not noticing the ring in his hands. “How what? We have to go!” he pleaded, but Chris no longer cared. He had found his father’s murderer. He had spent all night with him and had just watched him get murdered himself. “How did Darren get this?” he demanded, holding up the ring.

 “How the hell should I know?” Cornel asked, not understanding what the ring meant.

 “This was my father’s. It was taken by the man who killed him.” Chris said, his voice filled more with shock than anything else. Understanding dawned on Cornel, who moved forward, to comfort him.

 “I’m so sorry, I had no idea.” He started, but Chris cut him off.

 “No idea, what? That you guys murdered my father?” Chris demanded. “That Darren did!” Cornel protested, taking a step back. “I had nothing to do with it. You have to believe me!”

 “Why! Why should I believe anything you say!” Chris screamed, all the rage he had felt since his father’s death had come pouring out of him all at once. Cornel seemed at a loss for words, as the weight of Chris’s fury washed over him. “I trusted you! Came to you, and all along, you knew!”

 “I didn’t!” Cornel pleaded. “I swear to you, I didn’t know.” Behind them they could hear footsteps off in the distance, the undead man was coming. They were running out of time if they wanted to escape with their lives. “We have to go. Please, Chris. We can figure this out late, but right now, right now we have to leave.”

 For a moment it looked as if Chris was about to scream again. He looked as likely to explode as he was to agree to Cornel’s request, but in the end he agreed. The desire to live, to see his family again outweighed anything else. He didn’t voice his agreement, rather he just put the ring in his pocket and nodded. Cornel opened his mouth to thank him, but thought better of it and instead just turned and started running down the hallways again. An unhappy Chris right behind him.

 At long last they reached the door that led to the outside world. Cornel flashed Chris a smile of relief, Chris halfhearted returned it. It was clear that he had not forgotten the troubling truth he had just uncovered. Withholding a pained sigh at the fight he knew was coming, Cornel pulled open the door, only to find their path blocked by three figures. In the front was a man in fine clothing, with an air of authority about him. He had dark black hair and a scowl that sent chills down Chris’ spin. On either side of him stood two beautiful women. One of Hispanic descent, the other of African. They both were beautifully crafted dresses and had an air of danger about them.

 “Aw, so we are in the right place.” The man said, and then before Cornel could reply the man’s face changed, it was demonic as the dead man who was chasing after them, in a flash he got a hold of Cornel and pulled him in, biting into his neck. The two women marched passed him, coming for Chris, who backed up, attempting to flee, only his legs weren’t listening to him. In fact, his whole body seemed to be rebelling against him. The once beautiful faces of his attackers were soon replaced with the same demonic ones as their male counterpart, it was only as their teeth sunk into his neck and a strange calmness overcame him, that he realized they were the figures he had seen off in the distance at the potter’s field.

 That was the last thought he had before death overcame him. Answering a question that his already heartbroken mother would ask many times over the coming years. What was my beloved son thinking when he was stolen from this world?

 However, that question wouldn’t be asked for many hours. The next question to be asked, came from the undead man who was dug out of his grave and brought here.

 “What are we?” He had arrived at the scene of Chris and Cornel’s murders right at the end and had seen the means of their deaths. They were killed by creatures he knew were like him, in much the same way he had just killed Darren and Detrix. He had also seen the three of them before, the day before. They had been at the pub that he was drinking at. Everyone in the place seemed to avoid them, but Eli, for that was the undead man’s name, had no reason to fear them. He was just passing through this town. He had gotten a job offer in New York and was off to change his destiny. He had no idea at the time, just how different his destiny was about to become. The Hispanic woman had asked him to accompany her on a walk and then had kissed him under the moonlight. It was pleasant, her lips on his. She then started kissing on his neck, he had never had much luck with the ladies, he couldn’t believe his good fortune when suddenly she bit him, only it didn’t hurt. Everything kind of just went numb. It was almost peaceful.

 The next thing he knew he was under a tarp in a wheelbarrow in a strange room with a hunger he had never known before. He wanted to feed and he wanted to feed on the men talking. He could feel it, as if it was instincts. He was no longer human, that much was for sure, but what was he? That was the question.

 “Vampires, my good man.” The man said with a smile and Eli knew he was telling the truth. He was a vampire, and his destiny had just changed forever.

The End