Mario Chronicles #4:

The Phantom Racer

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**Chapter 1**

 The sound of engines revving up always made Dev feel at home. Ever since he was a little kid he loved cars. His dad owned his own shop and would spend all his time there fixing up car for rich assholes who couldn’t even be bothered to remember his name. Whenever he wasn’t at work he was in the front yard working on beat up old classics for himself.

 Any chance Dev could find, he’d make his way outside to try and help his dad. For the longest time, all he was allowed to do was watch from afar or bring him tools, or the occasional beer but never much more than that. He was 10 the first time his dad let him help out. It was small stuff at first but by time Dev was in high school he knew more about cars than his shop teacher.

 At 14 his dad gave him a rusted out 1956 Chevy Corvette. It didn’t run, and truth be told it didn’t look like much, but Dev loved it. He spent all his time working on it, fixing it up. By his 16th birthday he had it up and running. It wasn’t long before he was racing, and more importantly, winning. Drag racing was his forte. He lived for the adrenaline that pulsed through his veins. It was a high that made life worth living.

 He drove through the cheering crowds to the starting lines. Cars lined up both sides of him. A great deal of them from the late 60’s or early 70’s. Not a one of them as old as his baby. When he first started racing people mocked him for it, but a few victories changed all that. He was well respected around these parts now.

 “Dev, good to see you.” Peter said, pulling Dev into a tight embrace as he got out of his car. “Thought we were going to have to start without you tonight.” Peter O’Toole was one of the only people Dev called a friend. He was a bit older than Dev, but quickly took him under his wing after watching him race. He ran the racing circuit in Halts Glee, not that there was much of one.

 “Never going to happen.” Dev said as he pulled back. A bright smile on his face. This was what he lived for. “Who’s my victim today?”

 “No idea.” Peter said. The response struck Dev as odd, Peter knew everyone who raced, or even thought about racing for that matter. Not to mention that he organized all the events single handily. If he didn’t know who Dev was racing than who did? Dev was about to point that out when Peter nodded his head at the car behind them.

 It was a beauty, a 1954 Cadillac Eldorado, restored to its original glory. Dev would never admit it out loud, but part of him was jealous. He was the one known for racing in classics from the 50’s, and here this newbie was here with an older model than his own. Dev couldn’t let him win, he’d never live that down.

 “He got a name?” Dev asked, looking at his opponent. He didn’t recognize him. He was a teenager, maybe a year or so older than Dev. He had dark black hair and stern eyes that stared ahead unblinking. He was pasty, almost too white. Peter shook his head.

 “No clue. You scared?” Peter asked. A wicked smile on his face.

 “Am I ever?” Dev asked, trying to appear more confident than he felt. He pushed past Peter and walked up to his rival. He held out his hand. “Name’s Dev. I’ll be the one beating you today.” The driver looked up at him, almost through him. He had a darkness in his eyes, the like of which Dev had never seen before. It frightened him to his core.

 “He isn’t much of a talker.” Peter said from behind him. Dev turned to look at his friend and shrugged.

 “That’s fine. He wants his driving to do the talking for him, two can play at that.” Dev said as he got back into his car and started up his engine. The new driver looked over at him and smiled. It was the scariest thing he had ever seen.

 Peter moved in front of them and waved them off, starting the race. Dev switched into gear and took off like a bullet down the strip. He risked a glance to his right, expecting to see his fellow racer at his side. Instead he was surprised to see it clear. He was winning, and by a distance. He turned his focus back to the road in front of him. Feeling pretty good about himself.

 BANG!

 Without warning his beloved car spun out, he tried to regain control. His foot slamming on the break as he fought with the steering wheel. He finally got his car to stop, his breathing rapid. So that’s how the new racer won his battles. By cheating. He looked out the window at the finish line, expecting to see the new racer speeding past it but no such luck. Off to the side he heard an engine revving up. He looked out his window, just in time to see the new racer speeding towards him. Aiming right for him. Dev tried to throw open his door, but it was stuck.

 The driver seemed to vanish as the car collided with his own. It was the last thing Dev ever saw.

**Chapter 2**

 Mornings were never Mario’s favorite part of the day. They didn’t really seem to serve any purpose, at least as far as he was concerned. Even less so now that he was spending so much of his time in the library. He would sneak out of the house after his parents went to sleep and head straight there.

 He had to ride his bike there and back every night since he couldn’t take his car. The engine would wake his parents. It was a sacrifice he was more than willing to make, but it left him tired in the morning. More and more school was becoming a place he had less and less use for. The only thing that kept him coming was not wanting to disappoint his parents. He knew they were going through a hard time, what with the shop struggling to stay afloat and everything. He knew he should start helping out at the store, but his mother kept telling him that his job was school every time he asked. It made him feel guilty for not giving it more attention.

 Not guilty enough to change, but just guilty enough to avoid any Ma-Key demons for a while. It had been a few weeks since the whole ordeal and things had more or less settled down around Halts Glee. Amy had finally left the hospital but had yet to return to school. Sal had warmed up to Mario a bit, but he was still on the outs with Tommy V. Something that he was okay with. He never wanted to be a part of that world and he didn’t have time for his constant sells pitches anymore. Ralph was giving Mario a wide birth when it came to the supernatural, instead trying to get Mario to focus on school and dating. Not that either one of them ever had much luck with the fairer sex. Truth be told, Mario hadn’t really thought about dating at all since he found out that Alyssa was dead. Whenever he would mention her, Ralph would point out that the whole night happened because of Cynthia. As if that would make him more inclined to put himself out there again.

 The hallways were surprisingly quiet, normally when he came to school late he would find one or two stragglers making their way to class just as he was now. Perhaps if he wasn’t so tired he would have thought it a bit odd, but as it was, he just wanted to get to his seat and pretend to listen, so he could get some rest.

 Mario came to a stop in front his classroom door and listened in a beat. It was silent inside, too silent. He slowly pulled open the door, to his surprise the room was empty. Not a soul inside.

 “Is it the weekend already?” He asked himself, feeling completely lost.

 “No, you’re just late.” Raul said from behind him. He turned around to find his friend waiting for him. “Come on man, everyone is in the assembly hall. Principal Leal called the whole school together.”

 “So why aren’t you there?” Mario asked.

 “I knew you’d be late and wondering the hall like an idiot. Thought I’d come and retrieve you.” Ralph answered.

 “You know me so well!” Mario said, with a laugh.

 “Hey, it’s what friends are for.” Ralph said, leading the way towards the auditorium.

 “So, any ideas why our old trusted leader is having this big get together?” Mario asked, not really caring but trying to make conversation. Despite Ralph’s best efforts, things had been kind of rough between the two of them for the past few weeks.

 “As if he’d share anything with us. You know he just sees us as vermin getting in the way of his beautiful school. I swear I’ve heard him say more than once that this would be the perfect school if it wasn’t for the students.” Ralph replied opening the door to the auditorium.

 “So, if it was just a building?” Mario asked, looking around for an empty seat.

 “Pretty much.” Ralph said as they sat near the back. Trying to go unnoticed. Principle Leal was already at the podium, he cleared his throat loudly.

 “Now that our stragglers have decided to grace us with their presence, we can get down to the issues at hand.” He started, looking right at Mario and Ralph.

 “Think he’s talking about us?” Ralph asked Mario under his breath. Mario just laughed.

 “As some of you may have heard, there was a horrible accident late last night involving one of our own.” Principle Leal went on. Students throughout the hallway started to mumble to one another. Mario looked over at Ralph, who just shrugged. “Dev Ramirez, a Senior here at Eblis High, was run off the road while driving down Altman Drive.” Principle Leal paused, allowing his words to sink in. “The Sheriff’s department believe he was involved in illegal street racing and his death was caused in the midst of such actions. I implore you all, if you have any knowledge of what happened last night, or any information on these races, to come forward. Mr. Ramirez was a promising student with his whole life ahead of him and it was painfully cut short because of the actions of these hooligans.”

 “Street racing?” Mario asked Ralph. He couldn’t believe something that exciting was happening here in this backwater town. Nothing ever happened here, well, but for the occasional supernatural haunting.

 “You thinking of taking your Ford Falcon into some action?” Ralph said with a laugh as the auditorium started to clear out.

 “I mean, they race for money, right? Could stand to make a few bucks.” Mario said, only half kidding.

 “Well if it gets you out of the library and away from summoning demons, I’m all for it.” Ralph said.

 “One time. I did it one time, and even then, it was only to prove to you that all this shit was real.” Mario said.

 “One time? That’s your excuse for summoning a demon? That you only did it one time.” Ralph said, shaking his head. Mario pushed him playfully through their classroom door.

 “Shut up man.” He said with a laugh.

**Chapter 3**

 The rest of the day was uneventful as far as Mario was concerned. More and more he became disillusioned with school. The stuff that he was learning about during his late-night trips to the library were far more interesting than anything these teachers had to teach him. He started to fantasize about roaming around the country hunting the unknown, like Scooby-doo or something, but real. He had no farther need of school, all he really needed was his car. Well, he supposed he needed money for food and gas, but he could always pick up odd jobs here and there to make money.

 As amazing as the day dreams were, part of him felt guilty. His parents shop was having real issues and they needed him to start helping out. How was he going to help if he took off? It was a tough choice for him to make, did he follow his dreams or help out his family at a shop that he couldn’t stand. It always smelled in there. Not that you would expect anything else from a small shop filled with old junk that no one wanted. The only comforting thought was that it wasn’t a decision that he needed to make any time soon. Before he could leave he had to prove once and for all that Sheriff Simon was behind Alyssa’s death.

 Whenever he wasn’t studying up on the occult he was trying to dig up more research on the Sheriff. So far he hadn’t come up with anything that made him look guilty. The only clue he had to go on was Alyssa telling him that she was with her boyfriend when they got into a fight. He discovered on his own that her boyfriend was one, Cole Simon, the current Sheriff of Halts Glee. But he couldn’t exactly use the word of a dead girl to convict the Sheriff of a murder from a decade ago. He needed something, anything to collaborate it. To him, that was far more important than any of the bullshit being taught at school.

 Too bad his parents wouldn’t understand any of that. As it was his dad was threating to take his car if his grades didn’t start coming up. If that wasn’t bad enough, he had Ralph lecturing him no less than three times a day. It almost made him dread seeing his best friend.

 That was how he was feeling as the final bell of the day rang and he made his way out the front hall. He knew that Ralph would be out there waiting for him by his car, with yet another attempt to get Mario to skip the library and put all of this behind him. Pretend he never met Alyssa and that the world was still sane and normal. Ralph just couldn’t understand what it was like for Mario. Ralph couldn’t understand the sense of purpose this all gave him.

 Sure enough, Ralph was in the parking lot, leaning against Mario’s car, a smug look on his face. “Took you long enough, I’m starting to think you love school.” Ralph said with a laugh, Mario shook his head and unlocked the car.

 “Just get in.” Mario said. The car sprang to life as he turned the key. Ralph rolled down his window, the grin never once leaving his face. Mario could see the wheels turning in his head. “So what genius plan do you have for me this time?”

 “What are you talking about Mario?” Ralph asked, playing innocent. He was a horrible actor.

 “Ralph, every day, as soon as school gets out, you come up with some new hair brain scheme to try and get me to stop chasing after the Sherriff and everything else that goes bump in the night.” Mario said, losing patience with his friend.

 “Oh, that plan.” Ralph said, enjoying every moment of this. Whatever plan he had cooking this time must be a real doozy. “I might have come up with something.”

 “Get it over with. The sooner you pitch it, the sooner I’ll shoot it down and we can move on with our lives.” Mario said. Ralph smiled as he shifted in his seat to face Mario. It had been a long time since Mario had seen him so excited.

 “If you insist.” Ralph said, he took a long deep breath, dragging out the moment. Mario couldn’t help but chuckle at his friends attempt at showmanship. “I found where the drag racers meet. Tonight, instead of sitting in a dusty old library, reading books long since forgotten, you are going to take this beauty,” he pats the car as he spoke. “And race her. You want adrenaline, you want to feel ‘Alive’, well here is a way you can without having to face off against shit that man was never meant to face. This is it Mario.” Ralph, said, clearly proud of himself.

 “Drag racing?” Mario asked. He wasn’t sure what he was expecting Ralph to say, but it sure wasn’t that.

 “Yeah. Come on man. It’ll be a rush.” Ralph said.

 “You want me to race?”

 “Yes!” Ralph said. “You want a rush, this is it. This is how normal people get off. Not. . .not hunting ghosts.”

 “How did you find out where they meet up? Isn’t Principle Leal and the Sherriff department trying to hunt them down?” Mario asked, trying to change the subject before it turned to yet another fight between the two friends.

 “My resources are a bit more formidable than Principle Leal and your good old buddy the Sherriff.” Ralph said in a way that told Mario he was hiding something.

 “Do I even want to ask?” Mario asked. Already knowing the answer.

 “Just trust me. This will be good for you!” Ralph said. Mario looked at him, trying to figure out what Ralph could be hiding. There was only one way to figure it out.

 “When and where?” He asked, resigned to defeat. Ralph gave him a smile that made Mario regret ever asking.

 Less than an hour later they pulled to the stop in front of an old warehouse. No sooner did Mario open his car door than he was hit in the face with a stench that could only come from a large pile up of trash. Sure enough, a quick scan around the outside of the warehouse confirmed that no one had been around for a while to clean up. Where ever Ralph had taken him, it was clearly abandoned.

 “You sure this is the place?” Mario asked, seeing no sign of any other cars. Not really a good sign that a group of drag racers were nearby.

 “Of course, I’m sure!” Ralph said, his tone suggesting that he was anything but.

 “So where is everybody?” Mario asked, already regretting coming.

 “Just trust me.” Ralph said, leading Mario towards the front door. It was ajar, but instead of making Mario feel reassured that they could get inside, it filled him with a healthy level of fear that they could get in and what they would find once inside. He was sure that it was nothing good. He was almost positive that they would find a crazy homeless person just on the other side of the door.

 Ralph, a few steps ahead of him, looked just as uncertain. Unlike Mario however, Ralph seemed determined to make this work. The thought made Mario smile, it was good to know he had a friend who cared enough about him that he would walk into an abandoned death trap just to try and help get Mario off of what he viewed as a dangerous path.

 Ralph pushed the door open, it made a low squeaking sound as it swung open. Mario took a low steadying breath as he followed his friend inside. He didn’t know what to expect when he got inside, but he was pretty sure the drag racers weren’t inside. Sure enough he was right. The inside was just as deserted as the outside. A single source of light coming from the middle of the room in the form of a dying light bulb that was pulsating. The effect was giving Mario a bit of a headache as they started down the hallway.

 A few of the doors on either side of them were jarred open. One of the windows on the left side appeared to have a rock tossed through it. It was becoming clearer and clearer that this wasn’t the type of place they should hang out at.

 “So where are these racers of yours?” Mario asked, his tone a bit on the mocking side. Ralph looked around before starting forward, choosing not to answer Mario, who just shook his head and followed after.

 They reached the end of the hall and Ralph pushed open a door on the right-hand side, a nervous look on his face. He had no idea where he was going. That fact was clear as day to Mario.

 “Just admit you don’t know where you’re going. We can leave, pick up a few burgers at Jimmy’s and call it a night.” Mario said, more than ready to leave. Just then Mario heard it. At first, he couldn’t make out what it was he was hearing but as Ralph’s face split into a grin he became sure. It was voices, one of which was familiar to him.

 The two friends made it to a doorway in the middle of the room, the door itself was missing. Just inside the room Mario spotted a man he had never seen before in deep conversation with an unhappy Tommy V.

 “That’s your bright idea Peter? Get everybody out on the streets playing batman? You think this is going to end well?” Tommy V snapped. Mario knew that anger only too well, it was the rage that Tommy V showed him after finding out that he was the one who summoned the Ka’Lee demon.

 “What would you have us do? Leave it to the police? Dev was one of us, in case you forgot.” The man called Peter snapped. Tommy V’s nostrils flared up, he took a step closer to Peter. Mario was sure that Tommy V was going to hit him, if Peter felt the same way he didn’t show it. In fact, he didn’t even flinch.

 “He was my friend too, don’t ever imply otherwise. I’m not saying we don’t do anything, I’m just saying, getting a bunch of idiot street racers speeding around town looking for a murderer while we are public enemy number one, might not be the best idea. But hey, that’s just me.” Tommy V said, his fist clinched so tightly that Mario was sure he could see blood.

 “So what, you going to find this freak all on your own?” Peter asked, not the least bit intimidated by Tommy V. Whoever this guy was, he left an impression on Mario.

 “Maybe I will!” Tommy V snapped.

 “Maybe these clowns can help.” A voice came from behind them. Mario and Ralph both jumped, neither one of them had heard anyone walk up behind them. Tommy V and Peter both turned to look at them. Who was more pissed off at being spied on was anyone’s guess. Mario took a deep breath, waiting for Tommy V to blow up at him. He felt Sal, whose voice had sold them out, pat him on the back.

 “Sal, Tommy V.” Mario said, trying to hide how uncomfortable he felt. Peter’s eyes darted between all four of them before landing on Tommy V.

 “You know these two?” Peter asked, clearly worried.

 “Yeah, I wish I could say otherwise.” He stormed out of the room, bumping into Mario as he stormed past. “Keep your people in check!” Tommy V called back to Peter as he left the room. Sal shrugged and spared a moment for Mario.

 “Don’t sweat it, he’ll get over it. He just doesn’t like not being in control.” He nodded at Peter. “As you can see.” With that he turned and walked out, leaving Mario and Ralph with a panicked looking Peter.

 “What did you hear?” Peter demanded. Mario and Ralph exchanged glances.

 “Hear? I didn’t hear anything. You hear anything?” Ralph asked.

 “You say something?” Mario asked, playing along. Peter didn’t buy it, but he also didn’t seem to have the time to waste with them.

 “Just stay out of our way.” Peter said, his voice firm as he rushed out of the room, following in the wake of Sal and Tommy V.

 “The man seems stressed.” Ralph said, already bracing himself for Mario’s onslaught.

 “Talk.” Mario demanded. Ralph nodded, biting his lower lip.

 “About what? See any good movies lately?” Ralph asked, knowing full well what Mario wanted to ask.

 “How did you find out about this? Did you know Tommy V was going to be here?” Mario asked, afraid of the answer. Ralph nodded.

 “I may have overheard him talking about some guy named O’Toole calling together all the street racers. I figured we could just kind of crash the meeting and no one would notice.” Ralph confessed.

 “Meeting. Well no one was here, just him and Tommy V. You know the man hates me. Why would you bring me here?” Mario asked, not sure he wanted the answer.

 “Because you’re scaring me man! You spend all your time digging into this… this shit that is going to get you killed!” Ralph said, his voice cracking as he talked.

 “I didn’t ask you to look out for me Ralph! You don’t want any part of what I’m doing, and I get that! I’m fine with that. I’m not asking you to help me, but I’m tired of you judging me!” Mario snapped, storming out of the room, leaving Ralph behind him.

 “Mario! Man, you my ride!” Ralph called out to him. Mario stopped, letting out a sigh. Sometimes he couldn’t help but hate Ralph.

**Chapter 4**

 The walk back to the car was filled with awkward silence. Mario had gone out of his way to avoid Tommy V the last few weeks. Every time he ran into him in the hallways or the restroom, he would shoot Mario a look of utter disgust. It was as if Mario had taken away the very foundation of Tommy V’s world. Maybe he did in a way. He opened his eyes to a hard truth that most people went their whole lives never learning. The fact that Ralph, who knew that full well, would drag him here and force him into confrontation with the man bothered Mario more than he would thought possible.

 Mario got in his car, leaving the passenger door locked as Ralph stopped in front of it, waiting to be allowed in. He contemplated leaving it locked and just driving off, but no matter how much Ralph pissed him off, he was still his best friend. He leaned over and popped the lock up, allowing Ralph to open the door and get inside the car.

 “Thanks, I was starting to think I’d have to walk.” Ralph said.

 “I was giving you walking home serious thought.” Mario shot back.

 “Well, lucky me that your just an old softy.” Ralph said, a nervous smile crossing his lips. Mario wasn’t ready to let his anger go just yet. He was about to say something snappy back to his friend when he first heard. The sound was unmistakable, cars zooming past them. Coming from behind the warehouse, fanning out in different directions once they hit the parking lot proper.

 “So, we were in the right spot.” Ralph said, more to himself than to Mario. Mario spotted Tommy V’s Trans Am parting from the rest of the crowd. Mario started his car and started after him as quickly as he could. “Mario! What are you doing?” Ralph asked, already knowing the answer.

 “Making sure Tommy V and Sal stay out of trouble.” Mario said, not even glancing at Ralph as he spoke.

 “They don’t need our help!” Ralph whined.

 “Let’s hope.” Mario said. He laughed to himself. “Hey, think of it this way, at least I won’t be in the library tonight reading up on demons and what not.”

 “No, you’ll just be racing around town with Halts Glee’s most wanted while they hunt down a murderer.” Ralph said bitterly.

 “True, I guess you just suck at keeping me out of trouble.” Mario said as he pulled his car out onto the highway. Tommy V didn’t make it easy to keep up with him, he had a heavy foot. He seemed to speed up on turns rather than slow down. More than once Mario almost lost control of his car and only managed to regain control at the last minute.

 “Is he trying to kill us?” Mario asked, not for the first time. Ralph shot him a dirty glance but didn’t say a word. He was not happy about speeding around town chasing after people who were actively looking for trouble. “You going to talk to me at all tonight?”

 “You going to take me home?” Ralph snapped back.

 “Eventually.” Mario replied honestly as he spun the wheel left, trying to keep up with Tommy V.

 “Than, I’ll talk to you eventually.” Ralph replied. Mario couldn’t help but smile, but it was a short-lived smile.

 “Fuck!” He yelled as he slowed down.

 “What?” Ralph asked, his voice suddenly alarmed.

 “He’s gone.” Mario said, more to himself than to Ralph. He waved at the street in front of them. “I’ve lost him!” Mario snapped.

 “Good! Let’s go home.” Ralph whined.

 “No! We need to find him!” Mario snapped, lurching the car forward.

 “He could be anywhere!” Ralph pointed out. “We might never find him.”

 “Not with that attitude.” Mario said. Turned out Ralph was right. They spent all night driving around Halts Glee with nothing to show for it. They never saw head nor tail light of Tommy V the rest of the night. By time Mario dropped Ralph off at home it was already early morning, with the sun just starting to creep up. School was going to be hell in a few hours.

 Mario crawled into bed, wanting nothing more than to sleep all day. Unfortunately for him, his mom was waking him up not two hours later. The morning was a blur, all he could think about was getting back to sleep. He walked through the halls in a daze, completely missing his classroom just as the first period bell went off. He looked around groggy for a few seconds before realizing he was in the wrong hallway. He turned around and started heading back as the room cleared out, everyone rushing to their classes. He saw Ralph head into class, he must have overslept this morning as well. No doubt Mario was going to get shit about that.

 He let out a low sigh as he resolved to head into class and get it over with. However, he only made it a few feet before a pair of hands grabbed him from behind and threw him into the lockers. Mario’s heart started racing, he had no idea what was going. That’s when he saw Tommy V’s face.

 “You have fun last night?” Tommy V said through his teeth. He was pissed.

 “Not after you lost me.” Mario said with what he hoped looked like a confident smile, despite that fact that he was scared out of his mind. Tommy V had never forgiven him for summoning the Ka’Lee demon, if he really wanted to hurt Mario he could, and he would have every reason to.

 Tommy V hit the locker by Mario’s head, missing Mario by inches. “You think I’m playing with you?”

 “Not even a little.” Mario said, trying not to show just how scared he was.

 “Stay out of my business. Do you understand me?” Tommy V demanded. Mario nodded.

 “Loud and clear.” He said, his voice cracking. Tommy V dropped him to the ground and stormed off, leaving Mario to collect his thoughts. Tommy V was at wits end, that much was clear. If Mario had any sense he would tell someone that Tommy V was losing his mind and was most likely going to do something reckless and dangerous. Barring that, he should just stay out of his way.

 Mario got to his feet, knowing that he wasn’t going to do either of those things. He was going to help Tommy V, whether he wanted the help or not. He liked the man, not that he would ever admit it.

**Chapter 5**

 Try as he might, Mario couldn’t shake the look of sheer disgust on Tommy V’s face when he yelled at him. It wasn’t too long ago that Tommy V was actively trying to make Mario apart of his gang. The shift bothered Mario more than he cared to admit. The day went by in a blur, no matter how hard Mario tried, he couldn’t focus on any of his classwork. Ralph tried once or twice to pull him into some conversation, but Mario kept steering the conversation back towards the drag racers and the mysterious killer. A subject that Ralph wanted nothing to do with.

 “You’re the one that dragged me out last night to meet with them!” Mario pointed out, not for the first time that day.

 “Yeah, but not for this. Not so you can play Nancy Drew!” Ralph snapped.
 “Why would I play Nancy Drew? Can’t I at least be the Hardy Boys? I’ll be Joe and you can be Frank.” Mario said, in an attempt to make Ralph laugh and get him to warm up to the idea. It only short of worked, what with Ralph replying that he never read the books and had no idea what that meant, but he let a smile cross his lips as he said it.

 When the final bell rang and freed them from the hell that can only be high school, Mario rushed out to his car. Keeping an eye out for Tommy V and Ralph. He found neither one on his way. Which could only mean one thing in regard to Ralph, he didn’t want to get dragged into this mess. If truth be told, Mario couldn’t blame him. The lack of sleep was starting to get to him, but he couldn’t let anything happen to Tommy V and the others. Although that wasn’t the whole truth, he knew it as well as Ralph. This wasn’t like the other times over the past few weeks, where he actually knew something no one else did. This was just Mario wanting to put himself in danger for the shake of danger. He was starting to fall in love with the sense of adrenaline that came with it. Ralph was right, not that he would ever admit it. He kept telling himself that his real motivation was wanting to keep Tommy V alive and out of prison, and that was part of it, to be sure.

 As Mario entered the parking lot he had given up hope of running into either one. Tommy V had clearly already taken off and Ralph was avoiding Mario. He was on his own tonight, and he had a lot of catching up to do. He didn’t even know what kind of car he was looking for. All the reports were vague, all they said was that the model was from the 50’s. Mario knew very little about cars, so that wasn’t much help to him.

 He had all but given up hope on Ralph joining him when he heard him call out to him from behind. “So, I really can’t talk you out of this?” A giant grin crossed his face, he had to quickly hide it before turning around. Ralph was as good as signed on for this little mission, he just didn’t know it yet. Mario turned around, trying to look as crestfallen and defeated as he could.

 “No, no you can’t. I. . .I let Tommy V, let all of you down. I have to do something to make it right. You… you keep telling me that I should leave the supernatural alone, that what I’m doing will get me killed. Well, what about Tommy V? If… if we don’t help him, he will get himself killed. Look, this… this killer, fuck him. Leave him to the cops. Let’s just find Tommy V and… and talk some sense into him!” Mario said, in his best poor me voice. He wasn’t sure how believable he came across, at least until he saw Ralph’s resolve melt away. He had him, hook, line and sinker, now all he needed to do was reel him in. “If you don’t want to come, I. . .I can’t blame you. This isn’t your problem. I just can’t leave him out there *alone.*”

 It worked, no sooner were the words out of Mario’s mouth than Ralph started protesting that he wasn’t going to leave Mario to deal with this alone. Moments later they pulled out of the parking lot, heading back towards the warehouse that they saw Tommy V at the night before.

 The warehouse was deserted. No sign of anyone having been there since the night before. Ralph opened his mouth to complain but thought better of it. Instead he just looked out the window, as if in thought.

 “Where would you go if you wanted to kill drag racers?” Mario asked, as much to himself as to Ralph.

 “Eastchase?” Ralph threw out, more of a question than a statement. “It’s a long road that has a sharp turn, and it’s a cliff.” He added, quickly, trying to defend his guess. It made sense to Mario, the only problem was Eastchase was on the other side of town. Even if they were there now, there was no reason to believe they would stay there. But they had nothing else to go on.

 Without missing a beat, Mario spun the wheel, turning the car around so fast that he could almost feel the right side come up off the ground, if only for a moment. Ralph could feel it too, his hands jerked up, bracing against the roof of the car in an attempt to hold himself in place. Mario tried to surprise a grin as he sped down the street. As he made it farther and farther into the city proper he started to keep an eye out for any sign of the sheriff. He was in a hurry and the last thing he needed was to get pulled over. It would be all the worst if Sheriff Simon was the one to pull them over.

 Mario had stopped talking about it to Ralph, but he was still sure that Cole Simon had something to do with Alyssa’s death all those years ago. He just needed to find a way to prove it. Not that that would be an easy task, but as his dad always reminded him, nothing in life worth having was easy. He would just have to keep looking till he found the proof he needed.

 “Will you slow down!” Ralph snapped, as Mario drove through town square. Passing by an elderly couple attempting to cross the street as they left O’Leary’s. The local grocery store, bags still in hands.

 “We’re in a hurry remember?” Mario asked.

 “I recall, it would seem to me that ending up in a bloody car crash wouldn’t do much but slow us down!” Ralph said, with his normal tint of sarcasm.

 “What, you don’t trust my driving? I’m hurt.” Mario said with a laugh.

 “Not in the least.” Ralph said, as they turned down the deserted street that housed his father’s store. An Antique shop that sold a bunch of useless shit that Mario never understood the use of. But his father seemed to love it. He would spend hours upon hours studying the history of each and every item in the store. As if some customer was moments away from storming into the store to purchase something of historical significance. And even if they were, it was extremely unlikely that anything in there was really worth anything.

 “So why don’t you drive?” Mario said, letting go of the steering wheel as they passed by the store. The car started to tilt a little towards the left and Ralph’s eyes went wide, he jerked forward, grabbing the wheel in an attempt to straighten the car out.

 “What the hell are you doing?” Ralph demanded, fear coming through his voice. Mario took the steering wheel back from him. Feeling a bit foolish for letting his home troubles seep through into harmless fun with his only real friend.

 “Giving you a chance to drive, you know since I’m so reckless.” Mario said with a forced laugh. In a poor attempt to cover for his earlier moodiness.

 “You know I hate you right?” Ralph said, clearly joking but shaken none the less. He looked out the window as Mario turned onto Eastchase, just in time to have their hunch proven right. A crowd of people were standing outside their cars, cheering on as two additional cars were at what could only be the starting line. The man that Tommy V was arguing with the night before stood in the middle of the two cars.

 “Guess we found the right spot.” Mario said, his eyes scanning the crowd for any sign of Tommy V. There was no sign on him.

 “No Tommy V.” Ralph said, coming to the same conclusion. Before Mario had a chance to respond the man waved his hands forward and the two cars rushed forward, their engines drowning out the sounds of the crowd.

 The crowd cheered on the racing cars, in the darkness Mario could hardly tell them apart as they raced down the street, neck and neck. Mario couldn’t help but feel impressed as he watched on. Maybe Ralph’s notion of Mario street racing wasn’t as insane as he first thought. Although it wasn’t enough to get him to forget about Alyssa and his desire to help her.

 “Mario!” Ralph hissed, his voice verging on panic. Mario was pulled out of his day-dream at the sound of his friend. He was about to inquire what was wrong when the answer appeared in front of him. An old fashion car raced down the mountain side, seeming to slip through the trees as opposed to around them.

 It all happened so fast, Mario knew what was about to happen mere moments before the horrible sight came to pass. The older car rammed into the nearest of the racers, causing him to spin out and rammed the front of his car into the back of the other car. Both cars spun out, flying off the edge of the road, down into the darkness of the night.

 The crowd lost their minds, everyone started rushing towards their cars as the old car turned sharply and raced down the street away from the crowd. In the distance Mario could hear the two cars land and continue to roll down the hill. There was no doubt in his mind that those racers were dead, and this mystery driver was the reason.

 Before Mario even knew what he was doing, his foot was pressed down hard on the gas pedal, lurching his car forward. Ralph was screaming at him to stop but Mario drone him out. He was determined to stop this guy before anyone else was hurt. Mario couldn’t shake what he saw, the car drove through a tree, not around it, but through it.

 In the distance behind him, he could hear other cars zooming after him, but he had a nice lead on them. He was hot on the tail of the mystery driver as they made their way down the mountain side and back into town. The mystery driver turned down a side alley in an attempt to lose Mario, but Mario wasn’t ready to give up. He spun the wheel, turning his car down the side alley as Ralph screamed at him all the louder.

 They made it to the end of the alley and Mario thought he had the car trapped, only to witness it speed through the wall and vanish. Mario slammed on the breaks, stopping inches from the wall.

 “What was that?” Ralph asked himself. Behind them Mario could hear the other racers show up. They were going to have a lot of explaining to do.

**Chapter 6**

 It took Ralph and Mario far longer than he would have thought possible to make it out of the alley. They quickly learned the man who spoke with Tommy V the other day, and announced the start of the race, was named Peter O’Toole, he ran the races. He set up the race they just witnessed in an attempt to lure out the killer. He never would have dreamed that the killer car would just show up out of nowhere and take them out so quickly. He seemed to be really shaken and kept demanding to know who they were and why they were here. Mario tried to answer as best he could without giving out too much details. It wasn’t an easy task with all the racers circled around them. All eyes locked on him, questioning him. They could tell he was holding something back and he wanted nothing more than to turn and run.

 Ralph eventually got the two of them out there by making up the story that the killer car ran them into the alley and kept going down the street. It was mere moments before everyone was back in their cars zooming after the lie that Ralph fed them. Saving them.

 “Thanks for that.” Mario said, his palms sweaty from his nerves.

 “You’re normally more together than that Mario. What happened?” Ralph asked, he seemed generally concerned.

 “Did you see what happened with the car?” Mario demanded, changing the conversation away from the conversation they just escaped.

 “You mean, the whole driving through the wall thing? Yeah, I saw it.” Ralph said, heading back towards the car. Mario couldn’t bring himself to move, he found himself glued to the spot in the middle of the dark alleyway, his eyes locked onto the spot on the wall that the car drove through. “You coming?” Ralph demanded, entering the car before Mario had a chance to respond. Another ghost, something that Mario hadn’t seen since the night he met Alyssa, it had his mind racing. He wanted to, needed to, know more.

 The drive home was a blur, he couldn’t think about anything other than Alyssa and how this case might help him figure out a way to see her again. To help her. He dropped Ralph off, it took a bit longer than he expected, since Ralph felt the need to give him a lecture before getting out of the car. Mario only half listened. Not really in the mood to deal with Ralph’s fears and concerns. No sooner was Ralph out of the car, than Mario turned around and headed straight for the library. Before long he was nose deep into a mountain of books in the restricted section. Reading up everything he could on ghosts.

 All the information started to blur together. There was so much lure on the subject, a great deal of it contradictory. There was no way for Mario to know which information was real and which was just fiction that someone threw together to make a quick buck. By time the morning sun started to rise outside the window, Mario was no better off than he was when he arrived hours before. Begrudgingly he headed home, praying that he would make it home before his mother went to wake him up. That was all he needed, to get in trouble on top of everything else. Luckily, he was through his window and under the covers a whole two minutes before his mom called out to him. Today was going to be hell.

 No sooner had he walked into school, than Ralph made his night retroactively worse. He came up with a newspaper that he had gotten from the archives in the school library. It was a story about a man named Alex Johnson, who died in a racing accident. He was drag racing down Eastchase, much as the racers were doing the night before, when his breaks went out. He won the race, but it cost him his life. There was a picture of the car from last night, a 1954 Cadillac Eldorado. It looked brand new, there was no way that there were two different cars like that in the world.

 “That’s our guy.” Mario said. As much to himself as to Ralph. Ralph agreed, but much less excited about the prospect.

 “So, we leave it alone?” Ralph said, already knowing the answer. Mario gave him a sad smile that told him everything. They were going out again tonight, and this time they were looking for a ghost car.

 Ralph used every free moment he found throughout the day to try and talk Mario out of going after the ghost car. They both knew that there was no way Mario would be talked out of it, but non-the-less Ralph kept trying. Even as they took off that night, now looking for a ghost car, rather than the other racers.

 The sky glowed a brilliant shade of orange as the sun started to set over Halts Glee. Hours had passed since Mario and Ralph left the school in search of the car, with still no sign of the ghost car. The busy streets of rush hour gave way to the deserted streets of night, with only a few cars moving about town. Mario knew the racers would be out soon, luring the ghost car out of the ether once more. If they didn’t find and stop the ghost car soon, it would be too late.

 “How are we going to stop it?” Ralph asked, breaking the silence that had filled the car. It startled Mario out of his thoughts. Ralph had given voice to the very question that Mario had been wrestling with himself.

 “Stop?” Mario asked. Ralph did not look happy.

 “You don’t know how to stop it? What did you do last night?” Ralph demanded.

 “Research?” Mario replied, knowing that it wasn’t a good enough answer. His research had resulted in nothing, he wasted his time. Something he had been doing a lot lately.

 “What were you planning on doing if we found the damn thing?” Ralph asked, not at all happy. Mario took a deep breath, preparing himself for the fight. The issue wasn’t that he couldn’t find any information on how to get rid of ghosts. The issue was that he found too many ways to get rid of a ghost, but no way to know which ones worked and which ones didn’t.

 “Well, I have some ideas. We can burn the corpse?” Mario said, the look on Ralph’s face told him that wasn’t an option. “We can help them ‘move on’?”

 “Move on? Like ascend?” Ralph asked, clearly as confused as Mario felt.

 “Most ghosts are here because they didn’t finish something. They left something on Earth unfinished. If we help them finish it, they move on.” Mario said, feeling like a fool as he did so.

 “Great, so we help him finish whatever goals he had damn near 20 years ago. Walk in the park. Any other bright ideas?” Ralph asked, turning his fear into hostility against Mario. Mario tried to keep that in mind, it wouldn’t do him any good to fire back at his friend.

 “Or. . . we could make him relive his death? I don’t know if that will work, but I read a few reports that said it might.” Mario said.

 “Might? Might? He drove off a cliff! How do we make him drive off a cliff again? And what if it doesn’t work? He’ll just be all the more pissed. Fuck Mario!” Ralph screamed at him. Mario was about to reply when he saw Sal exit the corner store, drink in hand. If they couldn’t find the ghost, maybe they could find the racers.

 “Over there! It’s Sal!” Mario said, changing the subject away from Ralph’s anger. With a sigh Ralph turned to look. Ralph letting the fight drop, wasn’t so much a win for Mario as it was a short reprieve. It was only a matter of time before Ralph went back to it. It was the same fight they seemed to be having more and more lately. Ralph was of the impression that Mario was reckless, that he was in such a rush to face the supernatural that he was jumping head first into every situation he could find, even making some of his own. He was putting not only himself, but everyone else in danger. Ralph had never gone so far as to say the words out loud, but Mario could tell that Ralph not only understood Tommy V’s anger but agreed with it. It made Mario feel like shit. What made him feel all the worst was that he knew he was right. There was nothing he could say in his own defence.

 “Great, think he’ll help us?” Ralph said, not sounding convinced.

 “Only one way to find out.” Mario said, turning into the parking lot. Ralph let out a sigh and motioned for Mario to head out. Telling him in no uncertain terms that Mario was on his own with this one. Just because Mario’s relationship with Sal had soften a bit, didn’t mean that Ralph’s had.

 “Mario, why am I not surprised.” Sal said, not unfriendly. It was still odd for Mario to see Sal being friendly towards him.

 “What can I say, I’m predictable.” Mario said, trying to put on his confidence voice.

 “I don’t know where Tommy V is. Can’t help you.” Sal said, Mario was about to respond but Sal cut him off before he got the chance. “Actually, I can help you. If you’ll just listen, give Tommy V some space. He likes you, he does, but everything… everything just freaked him out. Stop trying so hard.” Mario felt his face flood. He wasn’t trying so hard, he was just trying to save his life. He never wanted anything to do with either one of these guys, they kept pulling him in and now they keep acting like he’s some pesky school girl with a crush.

 “The car is a ghost! A phantom. Tommy V, you know, your best friend, is out there right now, hunting this thing down! He has no idea, what he is up against! He can’t handle this on his own. If you care about him at all, you’ll help us.” Mario said, barely keeping his anger in check.

 “Guilt. Just like a Catholic. I might know where he is. If. . .if I take you there, and this. . . this phantom of yours is there, can you stop it?” Sal asked. Mario’s mind raced back to the fight he just got out of with Ralph, there was no way the truth was going to help him in this conversation.

 “I got this. I just need your help.” Mario said, not really lying but not really answering Sal’s question either. He just got on Sal’s good side, if this went bad, he’d be back in the dog house. But that was something he had to risk. A man’s life was on the line.

**Chapter 7**

 Sal gave Mario directions a street at a time, each one a chore. Almost as if he was fighting with himself each time as to whether or not he wanted to help them. To make matters worse, Ralph sat in the back seat, in the middle of the two of them, leaning forward in an attempt to interject himself in a conversation that was all but nonexistent.

 “Are we close?” Ralph asked, for the umpteenth time. Sal let out a sigh, clearly starting to get annoyed. A feat that earned him some of Mario’s respect. He had long since lost his patience with Ralph. The only thing that kept him from snapping was his worry that they would be too late to stop the Phantom Racer.

 “Do you see anyone? Does it look like we are close?” Sal demanded.

 “No.” Ralph said, leaning back. Mario knew that he wasn’t asking to be annoying, or anything along those lines. He was nervous, afraid of what they would face when they got there. He wasn’t asking because he was impatient, he was asking because he was dreading the moment when they would arrive.

 A moment that was far closer than Mario was ready for. Sal had him turn left onto Oak Dr. a lone street that headed up the hillside. Mario had a sinking feeling as he drove along the long-deserted road that they were on a suicide mission. He still had no idea what he was going to do when they caught up to Alex Johnson and his phantom car. In the distance, Mario could just start to make out the sounds of engines revving up.

 “Does that answer your question.” Sal said, sinking down into his chair, as if he just locked himself into a horrendous act.

 “You know what to do, right?” Ralph asked, looking at Mario through the rearview mirror.

 “Of course he knows what to do.” Sal said, his tone rising as he turned his attention from Ralph to Mario. “You do, right? You said you did!” Sal said, figuring everything out as he spoke. Mario didn’t respond, he knew nothing he said would make any of this better.

 They made it back to Eastchase, it was a much different sight than the night before. The side of the street that was once packed with cars, now laid bare. In fact, the whole street was empty but for one low car, that was revving it’s engine, getting ready to race. Only Mario couldn’t find any sign of his opponent.

 “Isn’t that Tommy V?” Mario asked Sal, already knowing the answer. Sal nodded, his eyes darting around, presumably looking for any sign of the Phantom Racer.

 “Where is everybody else?” Ralph asked, pulling attention to the same thing that was worrying Mario.

 “Good question.” Mario said, not taking his eyes off of Tommy V. His car took off, speeding down the street towards the edge of the cliff. Mario’s heart started racing as he quickly glanced around for any sign of the Phantom Racer. Time seemed to slow down as he watched Tommy V, only the sound of Sal’s voice pulled him out of his daze.

 “Peter called off all the races till the mystery car was off the streets. He felt it wasn’t worth any more people dying.” Sal said, answering the question that was all but forgotten.

 “Little late for that.” Ralph said, not looking back at Sal. Any reply that Sal might have had was drowned out by the sound of Tommy V’s breaks slamming on down the street. The car turned sharply to the left, sliding towards the edge. For a moment Mario was sure he was going to slid right off the edge, but at the last possible second the car lurched forward and raced back towards them. Mario hated to admit it, but he was impressed. He had never seen driving like that. As he closed in on his starting point, he slammed on the breaks and spun the car back around. It was almost as if he never left the starting line.

 “Wow.” Ralph said, his voice filled with the same disbelief that Mario felt.

 “That’s our Tommy V. Let’s go talk to him. Let him know what we found out.” Sal said, as he exited the car. Ralph moved to follow him.

 “You coming?” Ralph asked. Mario shook his head.

 “I think it might be safer to sit this one out. Not exactly his favorite person you know?” Mario asked, Ralph nodded. They all knew that Mario was the last person Tommy V wanted to see, and once he found out that the mystery car was a phantom, well that would just be one more thing for him to blame on Mario.

 He watched Ralph and Sal walk towards Tommy V’s car. As they closed in on the car it’s engine started up and zoomed down the street, leaving the two of them standing there looking stupid. Mario was about to get out of the car when he saw the phantom car appear out of nowhere on the hillside, speeding towards Tommy V.

 Without even thinking, Mario slammed his foot onto the gas and started after Tommy V. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Phantom Racer speeding down the hillside right towards a rock formation. For half a heartbeat, that Mario thought would go on forever, he thought the Phantom Racer was going to crash and all his worries would be over. It was too much to hope for. Just as it was about to impact with the rocks it used them to propel itself into the air, landing with a bang in front of Mario. Just behind Tommy V.

 Mario knew that if he didn’t do something and do it fast, than Tommy V. was as good as dead. He forced his car forward, pouring on as much speed as he could. The car rumbled underneath him as he started to catch up to the phantom. Up ahead Tommy V was nearing the end of the road. If he didn’t stop soon he would fly right off the edge.

 Mario managed to get along side of the Phantom Racer, his front bumper almost hitting the back of Tommy V’s. He could hear his friends screaming at him from behind. Ralph knew what he was about to do. It didn’t matter, Mario had no other choice. He said a silent prayer as he rammed his car sideways into the phantom car. He half expected to hear the sound of a car on car collision, instead he heard nothing. Just felt a chilling coldness as his car fused with the phantom car. As the two cars became one, Mario felt the ghost of Alex Johnson enter his body. In that moment he almost lost control of the car. It was a feeling unlike anything he ever felt. A coldness that overwhelmed him. He could almost hear Johnson’s thoughts. It was an odd feeling, one that Mario wasn’t in a hurry to relive, if he made it out of this.

 He shook his head, trying to reassert his own will over his body. He couldn’t be sure how long it took him, but when he came through, Tommy V’s car was gone, and the edge of the road was fast approaching. Panic started to sink in, if he didn’t act fast he was going to die. He could feel Alex Johnson inside him, encouraging him to turn. Seems the two of them had something in common.

 He held the wheel firmly in his hands, bracing for a quick turn when he remembered something. One way to be rid of a Phantom was to force it to relive its death. Ralph had told him that Alex Johnson died, while drag racing. He went right off the cliff. He could feel his hands starting to turn on their own, he fought against it. Forcing them to keep the wheel straight. His brain started screaming. He had never felt such pain, but he fought through it. He pressed down harder on the gas.

 He watched the end of the road come and go. Didn’t dare let go of the wheel till his front tires were off the road. He threw open the door, but before he could jump out he felt Alex Johnson take control of his body, forcing him to stay inside the car. Gritting his teeth, he tried to fight him off, he couldn’t tell who was winning or what was happening. The whole world had gone black.

**Chapter 8**

 “Mario! Mario! Wake up!” the voice pierced through the darkness. Slowly feeling started to come back to Mario. Unfortunately, it was all pain. He forced open his eyes, the world was blurry. He couldn’t make anything out, other than a few blobs that could only be people.

 “You okay Mario?” One of the blobs asked him. He attempted to speak, instead he just started coughing uncontrollably.

 “Relax. Breath.” Another blob told him.

 “What the hell is wrong with you Mario!” the blob that had to be Ralph said. Mario rubbed his eyes and opened them again. The world started to come back into focus. Sure enough Ralph was sitting next to him, not looking too happy. Sal and Tommy V. were standing behind him. Looking worried.

 “I had to do something.” Mario said, trying to sound like he was okay. A hard feat when your whole body felt like it was on fire.

 “I thought you were going to go right off the edge.” Sal said, a sly smile on his face.

 “I thought I had.” Mario said. Shuddering as the words left his mouth. He almost died.

 “Thanks.” Tommy V. said. His eyes cast downwards, avoiding making contact with Mario.

 “I owed you.” Mario said, not knowing what else to say.

 “You fucked up, this doesn’t make up for it.” Tommy V. said, looking up, locking eyes with Mario.

 “I did.” Mario admitted.

 “Tommy.” Sal said, not unkindly.

 “But. . .but maybe this is a start.” Tommy V. said, holding out his hand for Mario. Mario took it and allowed him to help him up.

 “A start?” Mario asked.

 “You brought this, this unnatural shit into our city. You fix it. However long it takes. That’ll make up for it.” Tommy V. said.

 “I don’t know. . .” he started till he spotted Ralph shaking his head no. Mario shook his head. “I’ll do my best.” Tommy V. patted him on the back.

 “It’s all you can do. Who knows, maybe me and Sal can help out from time to time.” Tommy V smiled.

 “Don’t drag me into this.” Sal demanded, good heartily. Tommy V. laughed as the two of them walked away leaving Mario and Ralph alone.

 “You almost died man.” Ralph demanded. Mario nodded as he looked over the cliff at the burning remains of his car. His parents were going to kill him. “You think the Phantom is gone?”

 “I hope.” Mario answered, trying and failing to stand up. Ralph caught him before he fell.

 “I got you.”

 “Thanks.” Mario said as the friends turned away from the edge. “This is going to be a killer walk.” Mario said unhappily.

 “Enjoy it.” Ralph said.

 “Enjoy it? You have no idea how much pain I’m in.” Mario grumbled.

 “Not half so much pain as you’ll be in once your parents find out about your car.” Ralph said. Mario stopped dead in his tracks. If only he could have died. It would have been more pleasant than dealing with his parents.

THE END