Mario Chronicles #5:

The Show Must Go On

By Jonathan Gutheinz





Twitter: @gutheinz

First Printing: USA 3/31/2020

Other Books in WarZone

Dawn of War

Warzone

Tales

Relics

Chronicles

**Chapter 1**

The cool night's breeze blew past Enzo as he walked down Heinz Parkway. One of the seedier parts of Halts Glee. He never liked coming to this part of town, but it wasn't something he could avoid. Not if he needed his meds. He could already feel the shakes kicking in. His hand wouldn't stop shaking, no matter how hard he tried to steady it. It had been only a few hours since his last fix and it was already affecting him. This new shit that the Milano gang was selling was the real deal. The highs were higher, but the lows, the lows were torture. He couldn't handle it.

He slowly pulled open the squeaky gate to the Milano house. An old beat down house, with boarded up windows and a steel door with a tiny sliding latch to look out of. If you didn't know better, you would swear that no one had lived there for decades, just like the rest of the houses on the street. And you'd be right. No one lived at this house, not really. But people worked there. Each and every night. Feeding people what they needed most. What Enzo had come for.

He banged on the door, waiting for a response. He could feel his nerves growing with each passing second as he waited for someone to answer. He could feel his stomach turning as seconds turned into minutes. At last he couldn't hold on anymore, he ran to the bushes and threw up the little food he had managed to eat back at home. His father kept grilling him, demanding to know what was going on with him, but Enzo wouldn't answer. He wasn't exactly close with him. He was a washed-up football player who came just shy of going pro. He ended up working at the factory at the edge of town and spent more often than not at the local pub, drinking himself stupid. The number of times he came home in a drunken rage, Enzo lost count.

His mother passed up a spot on the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders to stay with him. It was after all, true love. Or so she thought. Enzo didn't know much, but he knew that didn't exist. There was no such thing as love. His mother had spent the last twenty years as a broken woman. His father had slowly taken away everything that had made her, her. Enzo remembered when he was young, she had a group of friends who worshiped her. One by one, his father had chased them away. He then forced her to quit her job. He isolated her and killed every part of her that was independent of him. Needless to say, Enzo didn't much care for being at home.

He was twelve when he started parting with the older kids. Drinking, smoking, doing whatever they offered him as long as it kept him out of the house. Was it any wonder that he was here? Sixteen years old, in the worst part of town, slinking up to the door of a trap house at 2 in the morning.

Once again, he knocked. The shaking in his hands growing worst by the second and there was still no answer. He banged on the door, harder this time. Finally, the slot in the door opened, a pair of dark brown eyes looked out at him.

“What do you want?” The voice asked. It didn't take long for Enzo to place it. It belonged to Johnson. One of the Milano's main enforcers. He was an intimating guy, more muscles than brains.

“I need. . .I need some more of Denix. Please.” He begged. He pulled out what little money he had managed to steal from his father's wallet before sneaking out of the house.

The door opened and Johnson was standing there, in a wife beater and jeans. He was bigger than Enzo remembered. He glared down at him with a level of content that made Enzo feel even worse.

“Take it.” Johnson snatched the money from his hand and tossed the baggie down the stairs. Enzo dived for it, not giving any concern to his own well-being as he landed hard on the ground. At last he had his prize. And that was all that mattered.

**Chapter 2**

“Tell me again, how did your car go off the cliff at Eastchase?” Sherriff Cole asked. Mario sat uneasy on the edge of his sofa. The Sherriff stood in front of Mario, his arms crossed in an attempt to intimidate Mario. Out of the corner of his eyes he spotted his parents standing against the wall, watching on. His father rubbing his dead left arm with his good right hand. A tick that he had picked up over the years when he was worried and attempting to hide it.

No sooner had he arrived home than he was ambushed by the sheriff, who had pulled up right behind him. He had just come from a call at Eastchase about a drag racer who had gone off the road. The drag racer was Mario, he had driven his beloved Ford Falcon off the cliff in an attempt to stop the Phantom Racer. The ghost of a drag racer who had returned to kill other racers.

He knew he was going to have to deal with his father sooner or later. There was no way he was getting out of this without getting in trouble. After all, he had totaled his car, but he didn’t expect it to be tonight and he didn’t expect the Sheriff to show up himself. The same sheriff that Mario had spent the past few months investigating. The same sheriff who, when he was in high school had left his girlfriend, Alyssa, to die. Something that Mario was determined to prove.

“Answer him Mario!” His father demanded. His voice raising. It was an oddity. Mario never knew his father to get upset. He was a calm man who tended to go out of his way to avoid conflict. No matter what. Even in homelife. Mario’s mother was the strict one. She never let Mario get away with anything, and yet, now, when he was in real trouble, she stood by, not saying a word. It made it all the more unsettling.

“I was. . .” Mario started, not knowing how to answer. He couldn’t tell them the truth, but if he didn’t come up with a good lie, they would think he was drag racing. And after all the deaths, the punishment for that had become downright obsessive.

“Go on.” The Sheriff said, moving closer to Mario. It took every ounce of self-control he had not to lash out at the man. Mario dreamt over and over again about taking the sheriff on. Part of him felt like this was his chance. Might be his only real chance. ‘Tell me why you crashed your car, on a street well known for drag racing.”

“God Mario.” His mother said, sounding worried and upset at the same time. It was trademark of hers. Mario’s father on the other hand just seemed nervous.

“I was on my way to visit my friend, when out of nowhere, these two cars raced right at me. In a panic I turned out of the way, not realizing how close I was to the edge. I jumped out at the last second. Honestly, I’m just glad to be alive.” Mario said, trying his best to sound shaken up. It wasn’t hard, what with the sheriff standing over him.

“Oh god!” He could hear the worry in his mother’s voice. The rage in his father’s eyes. It was gone as quickly as it appeared. He was after all, a timid man. Never one to speak out for himself.

“So, dragsters forced you off the road. Is that your story?” The sheriff asked, making it clear that he didn’t believe him.

“It’s not a story, it’s the truth.” Mario said. He could tell the sheriff wasn’t buying it.

“So, what’s the name of this ‘friend’?” The Sheriff demanded. Mario spared a glance at his parents; his mother was concerned and his father uneasy. He hated putting them through all of this. He knew that he should try to end this as quickly as possible. Just tell the sheriff what he wanted to hear without digging himself into a hole. The easy answer was to say Ralph. No one would question it and his best friend would of course back him up.

“Alyssa Torres.” Mario said, knowing even as he said it that it was a risky move. He was playing all of his cards at once. He had no idea what the sheriff’s reaction was going to be. He braced himself for the worst.

The last thing he expected was what he got. The sheriff’s face went bright red as he heard the name. Mario wanted desperately to know what was running through his mind. The sheriff took a step back, as if the words truly shook him to his core.

“Alyssa?” He said, having trouble getting the word out. As if it caused him a great deal of pain. The sheriff looked around, like he was a caged animal trying desperately for a way of the room. “I see. Well. . . I have all I need.”

“Do you know her?” His father asked. The sheriff shot him a dirty look.

“Of course not! I don’t know every child that lives in Halts Glee.” He looks back at Mario. “But I will be looking into it.”

“Please do.” Mario said, all but spitting the words at the sheriff.

“Now if you will all excuse me. I have to go.” He said, speeding out of the room. Mario watched him go, a sick sense of excitement growing in him as he watched him go.

“You could have been killed!” His mother screamed at him as she got to her feet. The worry seeming to fade from her all at once as his father took a seat. It seemed things were starting to get back to normal in the Russo household.

“I’m sorry mom.” Mario said, looking at the floor. “I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.”

“You need to be more careful!” She demanded. Mario looked up at her, nodding. His father locked eyes with him.

“I’ve never been so disappointed in you.” He said, his voice low. Filled with hurt. Mario had never heard him that way before. It broke his heart.

-WZ-

“He said that?” Ralph asked, closing his locker. Mario leaned back against his, still tired from having to walk to school. He had forgotten how far a walk it was. The only response he gave Ralph was a tiny nod. Not knowing what to say. His father’s words still hung in his ears.

“I’m really sorry man.” Ralph said.

“It’s my own fault.” Mario said, his mind flashing back over all the times that Ralph tried to talk him out of his obsession. “I should have listened to you.”

“Well, yeah, but than that wouldn’t be you. And this wasn’t your fault! You had nothing to do with that Phantom Racer. If it wasn’t for you, others would be dead. Tommy V. would be dead. You saved people. You’re a hero man.” Ralph said. Mario didn’t feel like a hero. He felt like a failure.

“What about everything else? Everything that has happened since I met Alyssa?” Mario asked. Thinking about all the pain he has caused not just his parents, but Tommy V. and Sal.

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t know.” Mario said, as the bell went off.

“Well, I might have an idea.” Ralph said, he seemed a bit to happy. Almost unRalph like.

“What?” Mario asked as the two of them started walking towards their English clas, a sinking feeling he wasn’t going to like the answer.

“The school play.” Ralph said. He sounded nervous, it was almost enough to make Mario laugh.

“You’re joking right?” Mario asked.

“No. Come on. It’ll be fun. An adventure. An adventure that wouldn’t put our lives at risk.” Ralph said.

“We’re not theatre people Ralph.” Mario said, not sure where this was coming from. “Besides, I’m grounded. Not like my parents are going to let me, even if I wanted to.”

“You could ask” Ralph said. “I’ll ask for you.” He said, almost too eager.

“Why is this so important to you?”

“It’s not. I just think. . .I just think it could help you.” Ralph replied. Mario could tell he was lying. He just couldn’t figure out why.

“Hey Ralph.” Carla called out, she was in their grade, but Mario had never really gotten to know her. Despite having a few classes with her over the years. She was short, with long black hair and a pretty face. In short, she was Ralph’s type. Made all the more clear by how red his face turned when she spoke to him.

“Hey Carla!” he all but shouted back her, waving a bit too much. Mario had to bite his lower lip to keep from laughing. That would kill his friend’s confidence.

“You going to make it to the auditions tonight?” She asked as she walked passed with her friends.

“I’llbethere!” He said, the words coming so fast that if Mario didn’t know what he was saying, he doubt he would have understood it. She giggled before responding.

“Good.” She said, waving at him as she kept on her way to class. The second she was gone Mario busted out laughing, no longer able to contain himself.

“What?” Ralph demanded.

“Now it all makes sense.” Mario said as they entered Mr. Needs class.

“What does?”

“You want to try out to spend time with Carla.” Mario said, taking his seat. Ralph’s face went bright red again as he sat next to him.

“No! I’m. . . this is for you.” He insisted. I’m being a good friend.

“Sure, sure.” Mario said with a laugh. It felt good to laugh. To have the most pressing matter in his life be his friends love life.

“I am!”

“Well let me return the favor.” Mario said. “I’ll go. I’m sure I’ll get hell for it tonight but fuck it. You need this.”

**Chapter 3**

For once school flew by for Mario. The one time he dreaded the end of day bell was the one time it seemed to go off on time. As he exited his class, he half expected to find his father waiting in the hallways to drag him down to the shop. He could feel the blood rushing to his cheeks at just the thought of it. Luckily, no such thing happened. The hallways were filled with nothing but excited kids ready to be free of the classrooms which had imprisoned them all day and worn out teacher ready to rid themselves of the mindless masses who never seemed to appreciate them.

Ralph’s final class for the day was on the 3rd floor, while Mario’s was on the first, two hallways from the exit. He still had time to go and be a good son. At least make an attempt to get back in his father’s good graces. After all, he owed his father for everything he had done for the family. But in doing so, he would leave Ralph to fend for himself. That was no way to repay his best friend, not after the literal hell he had put him through the past couple of months. He owed him better than that.

Mario stood in the hall, feet from class, his mind racing down the two roads that lay before him, when it dawned on him. For the first time since Cynthia’s party, he wasn’t focused on Alyssa. It was an oddly comforting thought. Maybe he could finally do what Ralph wanted and let everything get back to normal. Stop chasing after the unknown. Stop endangering everyone around them.

Without even realizing it he had started down the hall. Not towards the entrance but towards the stairs. It seems his mind had been made up; he just hadn’t realized it yet. He barely made it to the foot of the stairs when Ralph called out to him.

“You made it!” Ralph said, Mario could tell how relieved he was.

“What, you thought I was just going to take off?” Mario asked, attempting a joke.

“A little, yeah.

“The thought did cross my mind.” Mario admitted. Ralph laughed, hitting his friend on his arm.

“I know it did, but hey, you came through. That’s what matters.” Ralph said, as they started down the crowded hallways towards the theater department.

“So, what do we have to do?” Mario asked, his nerves starting to get the better of him. He had never much cared for being the center of attention. Halts Glee had never been a place where Mario felt welcome and Elbis High was the worst of all. The thought of getting on stage in front of everyone sent chills down his spine in a way that facing a demon or spirit never could.

“Tonight, nothing.” Ralph said. “It’s an introduction, letting everyone know what show we are doing, and I think open auditions.” He sounded unsure.

“You think?” Mario demanded as they walked into an auditorium full of people. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest. He was nervous. No, nervous wasn’t the right word. He was terrified.

“Honestly?” Ralph said, taking the whole room in, his voice cracking. “Carla told me, and. . .and I was listening, I was. I mean remember looking at her lips, and hearing her voice. Such a pretty voice. And she was telling me all about tonight. She was so excited, and when she gets excited, she starts talking fast. It was cute, and oh god! Her laugh.” Ralph said, getting lost in memories.

“And yet you don’t remember a thing she said?” Mario asked.

“I remember her saying I was funny.” Ralph said, touching his arm where she must have.

“You’re hopeless.” Mario said as Ralph nodded.

“I have problems.” He said as they filed in behind a group of other students. The theater teacher got on staged and called for everyone to quiet down.

“Thank you everyone for showing interest in our little production. As you know, we here at Elbis High have a long-standing tradition of doing original works, created by you, the student body. This year will be no different!” The drama teacher said. Mario knew her name, but for the life of him couldn’t recall it at the moment. He avoided that subsection of school as much as he could.

The crowd cheered at her words, it made Mario uncomfortable. He tried to move back a bit, but Ralph didn’t notice. He was too busy searching for any sign of Carla. Mario started to regret his choice to not just go to his dad’s shop.

“This year we had a difficult choice between two of our more accomplished students. Penny Newman, with her play about redemption and finding your way back from the brink of despair. And Rod Larson with his story about love and temptation. It wasn’t an easy choice, but in the end, we decided on Mr. Larson’s script. We look forward to bringing it to life for the whole school!”

Mario looked around for any sign of Ralph, it took him a while to spot him. He was closer to the front of than when Mario had last saw him. While Mario had been trying to escape, Ralph had been embracing the mood of the place. The thought brough a smile to Mario’s face. It was good to see Ralph happy.

“Mr. Larson, would you like to come and address the future cast and crew of your show?” As she spoke a nervous looking guy, with long unkept hair and clothes that looked to be stolen from his father’s closet, made his way to the stage. He adjusted his glasses as he looked over the crowd, he seemed most pleased with himself.

“I am, Roddrick Larson. Author, playwright, director, Producer as well thespian. You all have the great honor of being a part of my first staged play. Let’s make it a memorable one.” He said. Speaking in a grandiose fashion. His words didn’t incite the same excitement as when the head of the department spoke. Some of the students even seemed upset by the choice.

“We picked his?” Amber, a girl in Mario's math class, whispered to her friend, who seemed just as put off by the choice.

“Did you read his script? He’s a hack. Penny’s was so much better!” Her friend, Simone, said.

“It was! I was so looking forward to working on hers.” The first girl replied.

“If only her dad didn’t get sick. Have you spoke to her?” The friend asked. The first girl just shook her head.

“Mario!” His head turned at the sound of Ralph’s voice. He was rushing over to him.

“Where you disappear off to?” Mario asked.

“Sorry, I was trying to spot Carla.” Ralph said, his checks flushing red as he said her name.

“Any luck?” Mario asked.

“None yet, but I know she’s here.” Ralph said, looking around again. Standing on his tippy toes as he does, so as to get a better view. He drops back down to the balls of his feet as he turns his attention back to Mario. “So, I was asking around. If we want to be cast, we have to audition with a prepared monologue.”

“You have one?” Mario asked, already knowing the answer.

“I don’t even know what that is. I need to get in that cast, but. . .fuck!” Ralph said. Mario patted him on the back.

“You could always work crew.” Mario pointed out. Ralph looked at him.

“We! And no. I need to get in the cast. That way I can get close to her. If she just gets to know me. . . You have to help me?” Ralph said, pleading with his friend.

“How?” Mario demanded.

“I don’t know. You stopped the Phantom Racer; you can figure this out.” Ralph said, looking back to the stage as the teacher started to talk again.

“Anyone who wants a part in the show will have a chance to audition tonight. Please form a line on the side of the stage. Everyone else, who wishes to work crew, be sure to sign the sheet on your way out. Thank you.” She said, moving to take a seat in the third row with Mr. Larson.

“Hurry Mario!” Ralph said. The other students in the theater started moving, forming lines in front of the stage as well as the sign-in sheet. Mario racked his brain trying to think of someway for Ralph to get casted, but he had nothing. This wasn’t his world.

“You could work crew?” Mario suggested again.

“We!” Ralph interrupted.

“You! I love you man, I do, but this is not for me. I’m going to the shop. Even that’s better than this.” Mario said with a laugh. Ralph let out a sigh and headed towards the sign-in sheet.

“Coward.” Ralph said under his breath.

“You know it!” Mario said, hitting his friend on the arm. “I’mma try to make it to work before my dad comes looking for me.” He said as he headed for the door. “Good luck.”

“Same.” Ralph said, as he looked at the line in front of him. He was going to be there for a while. He couldn’t blame Mario for not wanting to get into more trouble with his parents, and he knew he should just be happy that he came at all, but he couldn’t help but feel a bit abandoned.

The lines moved slowly, the people in front of him spending more time watching the kids auditioning than focusing on signing the form. Ralph couldn’t blame them. Most of the people up there were killing it. They really knew their craft. It caused a skinning feeling in his gut. He had still head out hope that he could figure something out. Maybe make some kind of monologue up on the fly. The only problem with that was he wasn’t good under pressure. The first time he had to give a report in front of the class he threw up.

It was one of the most embarrassing things he had ever experienced. Ever since, he had gone out of his way to avoid speaking in public. Getting up on that stage chilled him to the bone, but at the same time, he wasn’t sure there was another way to get close to Carla. She was a star, he had to be one too, but watching the people on stage made it clear that would never happen.

While a few of them were bad, one guy even froze on stage and had to have his friends drag him off the stage. The rest of the people in attendance were very polite, there were a few laughs, but by and large, they supported one another. It was almost enough to make risk it.

Almost. The thought that he could embarrass himself in front of Carla was debilitating. He would never be able to face her again if he made a fool of himself in front of all her friends. Or even worse, if he offended her. What if he went up there and did so bad that Carla thought he was mocking her? It wasn’t unprecedented. About ten minutes after Mario left, Enzo took the stage. He was a tall good-looking guy, who tended to cause trouble he got the chance. While other performers were doing their best on stage, he waited in line with Dante. The two of them would laugh and mock those on stage, just loud enough to be overheard, but not loud enough to cause any real interruption. Ralph had a feeling that most people in the theater were like him, surprised that they would be there. He chalked it up to them just wanting attention.

That was until they got on stage. That was when it became clear while they were really there. Enzo walked on stage, doing his best to seem serious. He *walked* right to the center of the stage and cleared his throat.

“I am Enzo Marston.” He projected his voice so everyone in the room could hear. When the teacher and Roddrick nodded he continued. “To be, or not to be. That is the question.” His voice resonated off the walls. For a moment, Ralph was sure that not only was he serious, but that he was going to get the part. That was, until he grinned. “Or is the real question.” He turned around, pulled down his pants and mooned everyone in the room. “To moon, not to moon.”

A few people, Ralph included started laughing, but it quickly became clear who was a real theater student and who wasn’t. The vast majority of the students didn’t laugh. They just glared, not only at Enzo and Dante, but at anyone who laughed. Ralph quickly forced himself to stop. Feeling stupid. A few of those who laughed left the room. It was made clear that this wasn’t a joke and anyone who treated it like one wouldn’t be tolerated.

It took a few minutes for things to get back on track, but it hammered home for Ralph, that if he was going to go up there, he had to do a really good job. He couldn’t mess up. It was enough to make anyone nervous. He couldn’t help wishing that Mario had stayed.

After what felt like an eternity, he made it to the sign-up sheet. He filled out the paper and turned to leave. Feeling a pang of regret that he didn’t at least try to audition. He was inches from the door when a voice stopped him in his tracks.

“I’m Carla Garcia.”

Ralph turned and saw her on stage. She seemed both confident and nervous at the same time. He stood, transfixed by her beauty. All he wanted to do was watch her.

-WZ-

Mario stopped in front of Russo’s Relics. His families store. He tried to catch his breath. He had run all the way from school, attempting to get here before it got too late. The sun was already starting to go down. He took one last deep breath before righting himself. He knew he was going to get hell for being so late, he just had to get through it.

He opened the door; the little chime went off. The store was lined with old artifacts, some of which were pretty cool. Old chairs, tables, art pieces. Anything that was new and cool 20 years ago, was there for the taking. Only no one was taking. The store was empty. As it was almost every time Mario had come to visit his father. No one in town seemed to like their store. Or them, if truth be told. Halts Glee wasn’t welcoming to newcomers.

Which explained why the store was empty. There wasn’t a soul insight. Mario felt a pang of guilt. This store was his father’s dream. His legacy as he called it, and here it was, dying. A slow painful death.

Mario was surprised that his father wasn’t standing in the doorway ready to bite his head off. He was sure when he showed up late that he was going to hear about it, but his father was nowhere to be seen. Which in and of itself was an odd occurrence. His father was always cleaning and reorganizing the store. It was almost as if he believed that if he positioned the chairs just right, it would bring in a wave of new customers.

The only reason his father wouldn’t be in the front fussing with goods, was if he was in the back going over new inventory or God forbid, he was on his way to drag Mario back here. If that was the case, Mario was as good as dead when he returned. But the store being unlocked made that unlikely.

He started to make his way through the store, heading for the office in the back. He wasn’t sure what he was hoping for. That his father was there, so he could get yelled at now, or that he was gone, so that Mario could have a few minutes of peace before his father tore him a new one.

The floor creaked under his feet. It was a problem the shop had ever since his father bought the place. Old floorboards that needed replacing. It was to be the first improvement made when the money started coming in. Needless to say, the money never did.

“Mario?” His father’s voice called from the other room. His heart skipped a beat. He was almost positive he was here alone. The fact that he didn’t go out in search of Mario meant that the berating he was about to take wasn’t going to be as bad as it could have been.

“It’s me.” Mario called back. His father came out from the back room looking haggard, as if he had just crawled through hell.

“You came.” He said, avoiding his son’s eyes.

“You told me to.”

“I was starting to think that didn’t matter.” His father said as he moved behind the cash register, pretending to check the inventory in the glass below. Mario had never seen him look so defeated. He was about to ask him if he was alright when a second man came out of the back room. He was tall and angry looking.

“I’ll be back, see that my next trip isn’t wasted.” The man said, his voice dripping with content. He stormed out of the store, almost knocking Mario over as he pushed his way passed.

“What was that about?” Mario asked.

“Never you mind.”

“Who was he?” He asked. His father’s reluctance to answer making him all the more curious.

“I said never you mind!” His father shouted, still not looking at his son. “If you were going to be this late, why did you even bother to come in?”

“I’m sorry. . . I just” Mario started to answer when his father cut him off.

“Just go home Mario. You don’t want to be here. You don’t give a damn about me or this family.”

“That’s not true.”

“Go home Mario!” His father screamed at him. His face turning bright red, as tears filled his eyes. Not knowing how to respond, Mario just backed away a few feet, taking in the sight of his dad, both angry and heartbroken. He wanted to say something, to reach out and comfort him, but he didn’t know what to say. His father was one of the strongest, proudest men Mario knew. If he was this upset, it had to be something bad. Far worse than Mario just showing up late. Something else was going on and he was going to find out what.

He turned and made for the exit. Bracing himself for his father to call him back any minute. It never came. He left the store and his father behind, his mind racing with thoughts. He needed to talk to Ralph. He would know what to do.

**Chapter 4**

By time Mario made it back to Elbis High, the auditions had let out. The students were filing out of the school in a large crowd. A few students were off in pairs or alone. He scanned those groupings first, hoping that Ralph was among them. There was no guarantee that he was still here. After all, he wasn’t auditioning, he was just signing up to help out.

Even through the dark he could tell that none of the people leaving the school were Ralph. He must have left not long after Mario, which meant he was at home by now and asking him for help would have to wait till morning. A thought that did little to lighten Mario’s mood. The last thing he wanted to do was go home and face his father. Or answer his mother’s million questions about where he was and why he was late.

He had thought for sure that deciding to give up his obsession with the occult would go a long way towards setting his life right, but all it did was change one set of problems for another. Maybe the occult wasn’t the problem. Maybe he was.

“You came back.” A voice from behind him said, with some shock. Mario recognized it at once.

“Ralph!” He said as he spun around to find his best friend standing there. “I thought I had missed you.”

“You almost did. I stayed and watched Carla audition and then took off.” He said, his hands in his pockets, his eyes looking anywhere but at Mario.

“So why are you still here?” Mario asked.

“I just needed to walk around, clear my head.”

“Why?” There was something Ralph was telling Mario. He was hiding something.

“Well, um.” Ralph said, looking at his feet with an intensity that normally reserved only for the most interesting of sights.

“What’s wrong?” Mario asked. Ralph let out a sigh and took a seat on the curb near them.

“She saw me.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Mario asked, taking a seat next to his friend. “I mean, that’s the whole reason you went.”

Ralph looked up at him and Mario could see the shame in his eyes. Something bad had at happened after he left. The realization hit him like a ton of bricks. Whatever happened, was his fault. Ralph had asked him to go with him to make sure nothing went wrong and Mario had bailed right when he needed him most. In his attempt to be there for both, Ralph and his father he had let them both down.

“What happened?” Mario asked.

“She came and talked to me.” Ralph said, he was petrified.

“And that’s bad?” Mario asked, Ralph nodded. “Why?”

“She asked if I was there to audition.” Ralph blurted out. He quickly averted his eyes towards the ground and covering them with his hands.

“So what?” Mario asked, but no sooner were the words out of his month than he put it together. “No.”

“Yes.” Ralph said, letting out a whimper.

“How bad was it?” Mario asked, imagining his friend stumbling over his words.

“I just stood there.” Ralph said, turning to look at Mario once again. “I had spent the whole night watching other people, so I knew what to do. They had lines for you to read if you didn’t have anything prepared. I took a copy and went on stage. Stepped into the light, opened by mouth to introduce myself and just. . .just kind of made this sound.”

“Made a sound?”

Ralph opened his mouth and let out a tiny squeak. It sounded almost as if he had been kicked somewhere unpleasant.

“I don’t know why I did that. Or even how long I did it for. I just. . .I just remember them asking me to stop, and that’s when things got worse.” He said, his face blushing bright red as his eyes filled with tears.

“How worse?” Mario asked, fearing the worse.

“Worse, worse.” Ralph said. Mario waited for Ralph to go on, but the moment just seemed to stretch out. Finally, Mario asked him again what had happened. “I tried to speak, but my throat became so dry, it hurt to even try. I tried to leave the stage, but my feet wouldn’t seem to work. I just stood there, while everyone watched me. The teacher asked me if I was okay, some of the kids started to laugh and I finally regained by ability to talk.” Ralph said in a way that made it seem like that wasn’t a good thing.

“I started laughing/crying at the same time. I tried to tell them that I was fine and that my name was Ralph. That I was there to audition. Instead what came out was, ‘I’m an audition, here to Ralph’ and then. . .and then. . .oh god.”

“What happened?” Mario asked, trying to sound sympathy, despite the fact that picturing Ralph on stage, laughing and crying at the same time while saying my name is audition and I’m here to Ralph was one of the funniest things he had ever heard.

“I ralphed.” That was the finally straw. Mario burst out laughing. It was the best laugh he had gotten in years. “It’s not funny!”

“It kind of is! You. . .” Mario said, breaking off as another fit of laughter took hold of him. Ralph just watched him with contempt. “You went on stage, screeched at them and then said, ‘My name is audition and I’m here to ralph’ and then you ralphed. That’s the funniest shit I’ve ever heard. God, I wish I had saw that.” Ralph did not look as amused.

“You should have been there. If you had, it never would have happened. But you left me! This is all your fault!”

“My fault? I told you not to audition. I told you just sign the paper and leave!” Mario reminded him.

“You should have been there! I’m always there for you, but you can’t help me out one time?” Ralph demanded. The situation stopped being funny. His words cut like daggers to the heart. He was right.

“I’m sorry.” Was all Mario could think to say.

“What are you even doing here? I thought you had to work till closing.” Ralph said.

“I. . .” Mario started, he couldn’t ask Ralph for advice, couldn’t burden him with his problems after the night he had just had. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is, are you okay?”

“What do you think?”

“I think we have some damage control to do. But we can do it. We can fix this.” Mario told him.

“Bullshit.”

“Trust me, I got this.” Mario said, getting to his feet and holding out his hand for Ralph, who begrudgingly took it, allowing him to help him up.

“You really think you can fix this?”

“I know I can!”

-WZ-

Three blocks from Elbis high was an abandoned park. Parents never wanted to take their kids there anymore, since they were as likely to come across a needle or broken beer bottles as get cut from the rusted playground equipment. The city didn’t put any money into the upkeep of the playground and the police didn’t bother to keep the bad element away.

Sheriff Cole could be heard on more than one occasion stating that boys will be boys. What good was it to chase off teenagers who were just trying to have a good time? There were more important crimes for him and deputies to be taking care of. What those crimes were, no one in town really knew, nor did many seem to question it. Crime was relatively low for a town this size. A fact that the sheriff always took credit for, ignoring the fact that crime had never really been all that high in Halts Glee.

The park was littered with broken beer bottles and needles. There were fast food wrappers everywhere. Used condom wrappers and more than one torn purse laid discarded on the ground. The sound of laughter echoed through the empty park as Enzo ran and jumped onto the swing, letting his momentum push him forward. Dante made to follow him, but chickened out at the last second, taking a seat on the swing next to him instead.

“Did you see their faces?” Enzo laughed as he hopped off the swing. It had been a long time since Dante had seen him so happy.

“They were in shock. I bet no one had ever fucked with them like that before.” Dante said, laughing as he recalled how pissed the director kid had looked.

“Serves them right! I mean who the fuck volunteers to stay at school longer than they have to?”

“Losers!” Dante replied, taking out a joint he had made in English class and lighting it.

“We should fuck up the show too!” Enzo said, running up the slide.

“How?” Dante asked, as Enzo made his way to the stairs, leading up to the playground.

“I don’t know, but it has to be big. Memorable!” With those words he did a flip off the equipment. Dante watched on in fear. He was positive that Enzo wouldn’t be able to land on his feet. He was never an athletic kid growing up. He was much more likely to get high and pig out on chips than go to PE, even on a test day. So, when Enzo landed on his feet, Dante’s jaw fell open, and his joint fell to the floor.

He quickly brushed it off as Enzo walked back towards him. His eyes had a twinkle in them that sent a chill down Dante’s spine. He had never seen him like this before.

“So, you in?” Enzo asked. Dante tried to act cool, he didn’t want Enzo to think he was a loser.

“Yeah.” He said, overcompensating for how nervous he was. He held the joint out for his friend. “You want a hit?”

“I’m good.” Enzo said, sitting in the swing he was standing in moments ago. The answer shocked Dante more than anything else had that night. Enzo never passed up a chance to get high. Half the school mocked him, saying that he kept Tommy V in business all on his own. Dante knew it wasn’t true. Most of the school bought from Tommy V. If not drugs than other services that he and his gang provided. Dante went into their restroom once at school and tried to talk to them, maybe befriend them. He ended up with his head in the toilet and his money gone. The worst part was that Tommy V’s lackeys made sure he went to every class. The teachers knew what happened but didn’t say anything. They kept the goons outside the classroom but didn’t force them to leave. They let them stay there. Forcing Dante to spend the rest of the day with his hair went from the nasty water. It was humiliating.

It was halfway through his freshmen year and he was a nobody. He thought if he could become friends with Tommy V and his crew, he would be a somebody, instead he went from being invisible to being mocked by everyone in the school. Everyone but Enzo, who took him under his wing and showed him the ropes. He fought anyone who mocked Dante, making sure he always felt welcome. Well, almost anyone. Tommy V and his boys still fucked with him every chance they got, but nobody, not even Enzo was going to cross Tommy V. That wasn’t something you walked away from.

“Okay.” Dante said, taking another hit. Enzo pulled a bag out of his pocket. The contents were a weird purplish color. Dante had never seen anything like it. “Oh, so you got your own.” He said with a laugh. Whatever that purple weed was, Dante bet it was a lot better than his.

“Oh, this ain’t weed my friend.” Enzo said as he rolled it up. “This is so much better.”

**Chapter 5**

The courtyard where the students ate lunch was always packed at the end of the day. It was stationed near the front of the school and the students would inevitably make their way there to find their friends and plan their afternoon misadventures. As school let out for the day, Ralph made for the courtyard, hoping that he could catch Carla before she found her circle of friends.

He had tried throughout the school day to talk to her, to explain how his nerves had gotten the best of him. How he didn't mean to insult the production or the troupe, but he never got the chance. She was nowhere to be seen. He made his way to all the spots where they would normally run into one another, he was even late to class more than once after swinging by her classrooms to try and catch her before she went inside. No such luck.

As the clock ticked by, he felt more and more anxious. His mind just kept replaying the night over and over. Each time he thought about it, it would end with Carla confronting him. Each confrontation was worse than the one before. By time school let out for the day, he was convinced that she hated his guts. There was no way she didn't. Truth was, he couldn't blame her. He hated his guts as well. He messed things up horribly.

After walking the courtyard for a while, avoiding any of his friends who might try to drag him into conversation, he found her. She was with a group of her theater friends talking. They all seemed to be having a good time. Carla was laughing at a joke that Amber told her. Ralph loved her laugh. It was so sweet sounding. It always seemed to brighten up his day, no matter how sour a mood he was in.

He watched them for a few minutes, trying to get up the courage to go over there. It wasn't easy. Even before he made an ass of himself in front of the entire theater department, he always felt unworthy of her attention. A feeling that her friends always went out of their way to foster. As much as he liked her, he loathed her friends.

“You know what you're going to say?” Mario asked from behind him. Ralph didn't bother to turn around. The truth was, as much as he had been trying to track down Carla all day, he had also been trying to avoid Mario. He knew he shouldn't blame him for what happened, but part of him did. He couldn't help it.

“What do you think?” He said, far more coldly than he had intended. He wasn't trying to be rude, he knew Mario was just trying to help. Just trying to be his friend, but he didn't want his help. He just wanted. . .truthfully, he didn't know what he wanted. He couldn't help wondering when life had gotten so complicated.

“I think you should just tell her what happened.” Mario said, Ralph could hear the eggshells that Mario was trying to avoid cracking as he spoke. Which did nothing but make Ralph feel worse for making his friend feel so uneasy. “You can't be the first person who had nerves get the better of them. I bet she's seen that a million times.”

Ralph knew the words were meant to cheer him up, but they didn't. Being compared to a million other people wasn't the boost in confidence that he was looking for. He wanted to be unique. Special. Someone that Carla would remember. Although, he would prefer it if she forgot the night before. That would make everything so much easier.

“Hell, I bet she's even been the victim of stage-fright once or twice. It's nothing to be embarrassed by.” Mario continued when the silence had gone on too long for his comfort.

“Easy for you to say!” Ralph said, spinning around to face his friend for the first time since he showed up. He didn't mean to get so angry, he just couldn't help it. It sprung out of him like a corkscrew from a hasty opened bottle of wine. “You weren't the one up there, making an ass out of himself in front of all those people. Everyone's eyes on you. Watching you, judging you. You! Don't! Know! So acting like you. Stop acting like you care.” He all but screamed the last part.

Mario sank back from his friend. The guilt radiated off of him in waves, adding to the stress and self loathing that Ralph was feeling for himself. He shouldn't have taken it out on Mario, but it was too late to take it back now. It was out there. All he could do was brace himself for Mario's reaction.

“I'm sorry.” The words were barely audible and so full of remorse that Ralph was sure he was going to be sick. He wanted to stop making his friend feel worse, because all that did was make him feel worse, but he couldn't help it. He needed a way to vent his frustrations and Mario was there. A willing punching bag. “If there was anything I could do, you know I would.”

It was all over his face, he meant it. He wanted to make things right with Ralph, no matter the cost. And Ralph knew just the thing to make it right. He knew deep down that he should ask this of Mario, it was wrong on so many levels. He just couldn't live with the shame of what happened anymore.

“Erase it.” Two words that Ralph knew would alter their friendship moving forward. Ever since Mario met Alyssa and fell into the world of the occult, Ralph had tried to pull him free of it. A task that he had finally succeed in, and yet here he was, the first time he needed that world, pushing Mario back towards it. He hated himself more in that moment than he ever had before. But he wanted this, and he didn't care what it cost him.

“What?” Mario asked, the confusion clear as day on his face.

“Magic. Make them forget. Make her forget.” Ralph said, doubling down on the request. Mario said nothing, his eyes locked onto Ralph's. As if he was trying to see if it was really him.

“Mario!” A voice called out from across the yard. It took Ralph a moment to recognize it, not so for Mario. His face turned bloodshot red the second he heard it. “What the hell are you doing?”

His father demanded as he marched towards them. Ralph couldn't help but notice all their fellow students turning to watch. Mario's father grabbed him by the arm and started pulling him away, screaming at him for wasting time. Mario looked for him for help as he was dragged away, a moment that was far worse than the one Ralph had just gone through. He knew he should say something to cheer his friend up. To show solidarity. Instead, he said something that would haunt him till the end of his days.

“Please!”

-WZ-

The word rang in his ears as he was pulled across the courtyard. Somehow the single word, whispered by his best friend seemed a thousand times louder than all the laughter and mocking of his fellow classmates.

Ralph, the man who kept begging him to stop playing around with the forces of darkness, just asked him to do something that would require him to go all out in the occult. Just the thought of it sent chills down his spine. It would mean playing with forces stronger than any he had messed with thus far.

It also meant going back on his vow to leave it all behind. He swore to himself that he was done with it. That the cost of living in that world was too high and he was tired of paying it. But in order to give Ralph what he wanted, he would have to dive back in. Then of course there was the ethical dilemma that it raised. Who was he to alter people's memories.

He had always been of the belief that we are creatures of our experiences. If that was true and he altered those experiences, than in a sense, wasn't he altering who they were? What right did he have to do that?

It couldn't have been easy for Ralph to ask him that, which meant that it must mean a lot to him. After everything that they had been through together, how could he refuse him? He had no choice but to try. He just hoped he could live with himself afterwards.

**Chapter 6**

“Okay, I know how things are *normally* done around here.” Roddrick said, his words dripping with contempt as he stood on stage, facing the cast and crew for his new play, Tempted. He was an awkward guy who most people in the theater department went out of their way to avoid. Carla couldn't help but wonder why his play was picked. It wasn't the worst play she ever read, but it was far from good. “But I want to do things differently. I want to do things right!”

There was a rush of murmuring throughout the crowd at his words. He was insulting Ms. Diaz and the rest of the department. Everyone loved her, she had been running the program since most of their parents were in school. The notion that a nobody like Roddrick Larson would have the gall to get on stage and insult her was beyond the pale.

Carla liked to think of herself as a people person. She liked and was in turn, liked, by just about everybody, but there had always been something about Roddrick that she couldn't stand. He was just also so rude. He liked to act like he was better than everybody. She knew a lot of it had to do with the fact that his grandfather was the Grand Deacon at the local church. His family was at the center of almost everything in Halts Glee.

“I expect nothing less than perfection from each and everyone of you. This play is not just some mindless entertainment for the masses, no, it is so much more. It is a tribute to the one true god and all he has graced us with. Anyone who doesn't preform to my standards, will ***not*** be tolerated. Am I understood?” He asked, eyeing the crowd, almost as if he dared someone to question him.

Throughout his speech, Ms. Diaz said nothing. It was department policy that anyone who wanted to take part in the play would be allowed to. No one was turned away. Yet, here Roddrick was, threatening to have people removed and Ms. Diaz sat by and said nothing. It was so unlike her. It made Carla feel a bit uneasy as she shifted in her chair.

“Over the next few days I'll be meeting with each and everyone of you to go over what I expect from you during this show. Don't let me down!”

-WZ-

Mario said nothing to his father the entire car ride to the shop. He didn't know what to say. His father had kicked him out of the shop last time, accusing Mario of not caring about the store or the family. He basically fired him, or so Mario had thought and yet here he was. Embarrassing Mario in front of the entire school. Making a scene in front of everybody just to punish Mario.

It wasn't like his father. For as long as Mario could remember, his father had been laid back. Almost carefree. Even when he was stressing about bills or money, he never really let it get to him. Or at least he did his best to hide it from Mario. The only clue he would ever give off, was an odd tick he had where he would rub his dead arm with his good hand. Mario suspected that his father wasn't even aware that he was doing it. So the fact that he openly freaked out so badly when Mario had come by the day before was extremely off putting.

It took everything he had not to ask about the mystery guest again, but there was no reason to believe the question would be better received today than it was yesterday. After all his father had showed up at school, screaming at him. Every time Mario stole a look at him as they drove he could see him radiating with anger. It was clear that he wasn't in the mood to be interrogated.

So instead, Mario spent the car ride thinking over Ralph's request. It was very unlike his friend to ask him to use magic. It didn't feel right to Mario, but at the same time, he was so worried about alienating Ralph that he felt like he didn't have any choice in the matter. He had to find a way to erase what had happened. It wasn't going to be easy.

The car pulled to a stop in the parking lot of Russo's Relics, but his father didn't get out of the car. He just sat there, his eyes glued to his store. His legacy. Mario, in turn, sat there watching his father. Wishing he knew what was going on with him. Wishing that he would just open up for once. That they could have the normal father/son relationship that most families had. That he swore he would have with his son one day. But he knew that was a pipe dream. His father wasn't a talker. He was a worker. He didn't even let the fact that his left arm was little more than dead weight slow him down. He spent all day, everyday at the shop. Fixing things up so that he could attempt to sell it. He wanted nothing more than to provide for his family. Mario just wished that that included emotionally.

“This store.” His father started, his voice sounding as if it was fighting every word he said. “Means everything to me. Ever since I was a child and watched my father waste away in the factories, I knew that wasn't the life I wanted.” The anger seemed to fade as he spoke, his voice becoming more wistful, almost as if he was remembering something painful. “There was a man who owned a small deli at the end of our street. Mr. Jackson. He was a kind old man, who never seemed to have a care in the world. I wanted his life.” Mario could see tears starting to form in his father's eyes. It broke his heart to see. He had never seen his father cry before.

“Instead, when I was your age, my father had be drop out of school and come work with him at the factory. Mom, your grandma, was sick and we needed the money for the mounting medical bills. I hated every moment of it. The job was soul crushing.” he starts rubbing his dead arm. “I use to plan my escape. Every night I would stay up late and think of all the places I would go once I was free from the factory. But then. . .then I had a family of my own.”

Mario waited for his father to continue but he just sat there in silence. Each moment seeming to stretch on and on for an eternity. Mario wasn't sure if he should say anything or just wait for his father to start talking again. Luckily his father solved that dilemma for him.

“It was the first time in my life that I was thankful for the factory job. Having a family is expensive and the factory let me put a roof over your head. Helped me keep your mom happy. Which was all I cared about. I love her more than you could ever know. And for a while, that was enough.”

Mario had never heard his father talk like this before. He was never one to open up. To share his hopes and dreams. He was much too private for all of that. It was kind of nice, even if the story was a bit of a downer.

“At least that's what I told myself. The truth was, I never gave up on my dream of leaving the nowhere town and opening up my own shop somewhere new. I tried to save away money, but one emergency after another would always seem to come up and drain me dry. It felt as if I was drowning. I couldn't keep my head above water, no matter how hard I tried. That's when the accident happened. I was at work, dreaming of my better life when. . .when. . .” he stops talking, instead he just lifts his dead arm and lets it drop. Allowing the arm to make the point for him.

“The settlement gave me the means to make my dreams come true. I gathered up you and your mom and we moved here, where at long last I opened my little shop.” His eyes were once again glued on the store's sign. “It hasn't turned out like I would have hoped. The people here, they don't like outsiders. But I have to believe, if I just keep trying. If I make this store a physical representation of my dreams, than things would turn around.” His voice was shaking as he spoke, as was his body. Mario wanted to hug him, but wasn't sure if it would be welcomed.

“I always hoped that I would be able to get the store off the ground and use it to send you to collage. Let you get the schooling I never could. Give you the life I always wished I could.” He pulled his eyes away from the store and looked at his son. Mario shifted uneasily in his seat under his father's gaze. “I want to make you proud of me son, the way that I'm proud of you.” His father's voice falters for a moment before he starts again. “I should never have said what I said. I'm never disappointed in you, and I know you care about this family. You made a mistake, we all do, but that was no excuse for me to lash out at you the way I did. You're a good kid, and I love you son.”

Mario sat there stunned. It wasn't at all what he had been expecting when his father showed up at the school and dragged him towards the car. He was sure that he was in a world of trouble. He almost wished he was, this was far more uncomfortable. He had no idea what to say, or how to react.

“I know me and your mother used working at the shop as a punishment, but I don't want you to see it that way. I don't want to force you into my life, the way my father forced me into his.” Mario knew he should respond, but everything he could think to say sounded hollow in his head.

“I would love it if you helped out around the shop.” he started rubbing his dead arm again. “God knows I could use the help. But only if you want to. Not as punishment. Not because I'm forcing you into it. Only if you want to. I would love to get to know my son a bit better. See the man he is growing into.” It was Mario's turn to cry. It was the nicest thing his father had ever told him.

“I would love to.”

**Chapter 7**

The cool night breeze forced Al to zip up his jacket as he made his way down the back alley behind the string of bars in the less savory part of town. It was his go to spot when he needed some extra cash. There was always a few people looking to score. Mostly college kids who were already drunk and wanted to experiment. Tonight he wasn't having much luck. Which was a bigger blow than it should have been, but school had been dead as well. It was as if all of Halts Glee had suddenly become drug free. It was a major blow to business.

Tommy V. was not happy. By time school let out he was in one of moods. Sal had to save some freshmen from getting his face knocked in simply for walking into the wrong restroom. Al couldn't blame him for being pissed, they all were. The demand for their services had all but dried up over the last few days. Tommy V. was sure that someone else must have been moving into their territory. He was gearing up for war, something that had Sal on edge. Things were going to get a lot worse before they got better.

Which is why Al was out here tonight. Doing his best to move some product before they hit the breaking point, but it seemed school wasn't the only place where they were no longer needed.

Al was just about to give up hope when he finally found some guys standing out back of a local dive bar named, The Old Globe, they kept looking around nervously. Al smiled to himself as he moved towards the three guys.

“Hey.” he said, keeping his eyes locked on them, attempting to give off an air of confidence. “You in the market?” The three men looked at each other and spoke in hushed tones, attempting to keep Al out of their conversation. Finally one of them, a tall blond man with a bit too much ego, walked towards him.

“You supplying the Denix? How much?”

“The what?” Al asked. Genuinely confused. He had never heard of that before.

“He don't got none.” His friend said.

“I got plenty of other stuff. Stuff you want, trust me.” Al said.

“We're good.” The lead guy said as he turned back towards his friends.

“I'm telling you, I have a hook up, we just gotta go to them.” The third friend said.

“Alright fine, let's go.” The lead friend said as they headed back inside the bar, leaving Al standing there feeling even more useless.

“Ouch, that didn't go so well did it?” A voice from behind Al called out. He turned around to find one of the losers from their school standing there. He racked his brain trying to remember his name.

“Dante, what the fuck are you doing here?” Al asked once he finally recalled his name.

“Would you believe looking for you?” Dante said with the most unsettling smile. It took Al back for a moment, but just a moment, before he remembered all the times he pushed Dante around. He was a walking punching bag, one that normally brought Al a great deal of fun, but not tonight. Tonight he didn't have the time to worry about someone so insignificant.

“Get lost, will ya. I'm busy.” Al said, turning away from his classmate as he spoke. He wasn't a threat. He was more pathetic than anything else. Always following Al and the others around, wanting so badly to be apart of Tommy V.'s gang. Knowing full well that it would never happen.

It all happened so fast that Al couldn't even process it. One second he was walking away from Dante, the next he was knocked head first into the brick wall of the bar. His head felt like it had split open, and the blood on his hands proved it. His hair was sticky with it, which could only mean he was bleeding a lot. He tried to get to his feet, but he just fell back to the ground.

He felt a pair of hands flip him over, standing over him was Dante. He had murder in his eyes. Al had never seen him look so deranged.

-WZ-

Dante soaked in the fear that was radiating off of Al like a sponge. It was intoxicating. Almost as much so as the Denix that Enzo had given him. It had made him feel alive in a way that he never would have dreamed possible. He was more awake, more himself than he had been his whole life.

Enzo had big plans for ruining the school play. He was just bored and wanted to have some fun, not Dante. Dante had big plans for this new found power. He wanted to hurt those who had hurt him. Starting with Tommy V.'s crew. They had humiliated him far too often. Never stopping to think about how their actions affected him. Well, now he was going to show them first hand.

“Ple. . .ple. . .” Al tried to talk, his head was bleeding pretty badly. Any other time, any other person and Dante would have been overcome with grief. Might have even gotten sick just from the sight of that much blood. Not today, and not with Al. He was enjoying it. Relishing in it.

“Pl. . . pl. . .please.” Dante taunted. His mocking tone turning into a full on laugh. “Are you really begging me for mercy? Me! After everything you did to me!”

One second he was yelling, the next he was looking at his hand, covered in blood. Both his and Al's. He had hit him the face, one time, but it was enough. His fist went right through Al's head and hit the wall behind him, cracking the wall. When he pulled his hand back it came with an outpouring of blood and gray-matter. He had killed him.

That wasn't the part that upset him. He had come looking for Al with the intent of killing him. No, what bothered him was that it was over so quickly. He wanted to savor it.

-WZ-

Mario wiped away the sweat from his face. He worked in the back of Russo's Relics, fixing up old chairs and tables for the past few hours. Sanding them down and replacing broken legs. It was hard, tiring work, but he was doing it with his father. It was the first time that his dad had sat him down and really showed him what he did all day. It wasn't just sitting in the front of the store waiting for people who never came. It wasn't just moving stuff around. He was creating and repairing furniture as well. His father took such pride in his work. Mario was just glad to be apart of it.

He put aside the chair that he had been repairing and looked over at his father who was sanding down an old table that had seen better days. Mario couldn't help but watch in awe as his father, with only one good arm, worked his way through one repair after another. It was a sight to behold.

“How's the chair coming along?” His father asked as he left the table he was working on behind.

“I think I finished it.” Mario said, looking it over, unsure of his work. His father looked over the chair, examining it over, looking for any flaws or imperfections.

“Looks good so far.” His father said, Mario couldn't help but smile as he was filled with pride. “Only one thing left to do.” He felt his new found pride quickly evaporate as his fear that he messed up returned full force. He waited with baited breath to see what the final test was.

His father seemed to sense his unease as he took his time getting around to the test. Allowing Mario to sweat. After what felt like an eternity, he finally sat down in the chair. Testing it against his weight to see if the new leg Mario put on it would hold. Mario held his breath, preparing himself for the worst. But the chair held. His father smiled brightly at his son as he got to his feet.

“You did good!” His father said as he hugged Mario. His father's praise felt like a greater achievement than any spell or demon take down ever had.

“Thank you.” Was all he could say in return.

“Let's say we call it a night?” His father asked. Mario nodded, feeling good about his hard work and more importantly, the time he spent getting to know his father. He had known him his whole life, but he had never really gotten to know him. Not the way he had over the last few hours working with him. He had seen a whole new side of his father and he couldn't wait to get to know him better.

**Chapter 8**

“Have you heard Roddrick's pitch yet?” Amber asked Carla and Simone, sounding a bit more cheerful than Carla had expected. After all, Amber had been one of the more vocal detractors to Roddrick's play being picked. A stance that Carla was 100% behind.

They were sitting at the far table in the back of the lunch court, talking over the up coming play and the one on one meetings that Roddrick had demanded of the cast and crew. Amber had shown up late for lunch because she was finishing her meeting with him.

“Not yet.” Simone said, a bit of disgust in her voice. “I've been avoiding that weasel as best I can.”

“Same here.” Carla added. Thinking back to all the near misses she had in just the first half of the day as Roddrick rounded up the theatre department one by one. She wanted no part of a one on one conversation with him. A fact that she planned to tell to Ms. Diaz the first chance she got.

“I don't know where the fuck he gets off interrogating us. Acting like he has the right to decide who can and can't work on the play. Who the fuck does he think he is?” Simone demanded.

“The writer and director. This play is his vision and it's genius.” Amber said. She was speaking with a reverence towards Roddrick that was unsettling to Carla. “He wants this play to be perfect. We just have to pray that we are worthy enough to be chosen for it.”

“What?” Simone asked, trying not to laugh.

“Talk to him. You'll understand everything. I doubted that he was good enough too. I did. But. . .but once he sat me down and laid it all out for me, well, I saw the brilliance of it. I truly understood what it is he's trying to do and I want to be apart of it. I need to be apart of it.”

“You're fucking with us, right?” Simone demanded, the amusement starting to fade from her voice.

“I read the script, it's not that good.” Carla said, thinking back to the subpar script she had reread once she knew it was what they were putting on. For the life of her, she couldn't figure out why it was chosen. She understood that Penny had a family emergency, but why not just do a play that was already written. Anything by Shakespeare would have been fine.

“You just don't understand it. You don't see the brilliance in front of you. But you will. Trust me.” Amber said, smiling brightly. Carla had never seen her this happy before and she had known her for years.

“Sure, that must be it.” Simone said. She turned to Carla. “Let's get out of here.” Carla just nodded as they left Amber at the lunch table alone.

“Go find him. You won't be sorry.” Amber called after them.

“What the fuck is wrong with her?” Simone asked.

“I have no idea. I've never seen her that happy.” Carla answered, sparing a glance back at their friend who was sitting at the table alone eating her food. She looked to be having the time of her life.

“That's not Amber.” Simone said.

“What do you mean?” Carla asked.

“I mean that's not her. She's my best friend. I know her and that, that wasn't her.”

“It was a bit odd.” Carla said, not really knowing how to respond to that.

“Odd? Odd! That was downright disturbing.” Simone snapped. “I'm going to get to the bottom of this!”

Without another word she stormed off down the hall, leaving Carla alone to process everything that had just happened.

-WZ-

Mario worked his way through yet another spell book he had dug out of the local library. After he had gotten home from Russo Relics the night before, he had gone out and used the loose window to break into the library and look for any books that might have the spell that would help Ralph. He stayed up half the night thumbing through them and had yet to find anything of use.

He brought a few of the books to school and spent his first couple of periods thumbing through them in class. He was starting to grow frustrated. He needed a more varied pool of books to go through. Whatever weird turn of events that had led to the local library having books on the occult had only done so much to help him. He knew there was so much more out there that he didn't know.

The only problem is, he didn't know what he didn't know. And as long as that was true, he would never be able to rectify that. Not that he was sure he wanted to. After all, he had sworn off the occult in all it's forms. He was just doing this to help out Ralph. This wasn't him getting back into that world. Or at least that's what he kept telling himself. The truth was, he missed it. He missed it all.

The bell rang and his classmates started emptying out of the classroom. He pushed his book back into his bag and no sooner was he in the hallway than he ran into Tommy V., who looked the worse for wear.

“There you are! Come with me.” He demanded, taking Mario by the arm and dragging him through the halls. Not giving Mario any chance to protest. Not that he would. It wasn't that long ago that Tommy V. hated his guts. He was just glad to be off of his enemy list.

“Where are we going?” Mario asked, his arm starting to hurt.

“Somewhere we can talk.” Tommy V. said as he pushed Mario into his restroom. Inside Sal and Mike were waiting for him. Not unusual. Tommy V. had a small personal gang that ran the school. Sal, Mike and Al, who was missing from this impromptu meeting, tended to be the ring leaders.

“The gang's all here.” Mario said, trying to sound braver than he felt.

“He's who you got to help us? Him? What the fuck is he going to do?” Mike demanded.

“A lot. Just shut it.” Sal snapped. It was odd having Sal being the one to defend him. Their relationship had certainty shifted over the past few weeks.

“What's going on?” Mario asked, growing concerned.

“Al was found murdered this morning.” Tommy V. said. The words hit Mario like a ton of bricks. He had never liked Al. While he had had his up and downs with Tommy V. and Sal, Mike and Al remained the bullies who had terrorized him for years.

“What?” Was all Mario could manage.

“The sheriff questioned us all this morning.” Sal said.

“One at a time. He was convinced we had something to do with it.” Mike said, hitting the wall as he spoke. Mario's heart went out to him. The two of them were best friends. Spent all their time together, as far as Mario could tell.

“I'm so sorry.” Mario said, the words sounding hollow even to him.

“Save your pity.” Mike said.

“That's not why you're here.” Sal said, looking past Mario to Tommy V. who said nothing. Which was very unlike him. He normally took charge in every situation he was in, yet here he was, standing idly by, not saying a word.

“Why am I here?” Mario asked, directing the question to the silent Tommy V. who had dragged him here. Tommy V. took a steadying breath before looking up and locking eyes with Mario.

“He was murdered by something supernatural.” Tommy V. said.

“Right, supernatural. This is bullshit!” Mike snapped.

“Shut up.” Sal ordered, paving the way for Tommy V. to go on.

“I need you to help us figure out what killed him. And kill it back.” Tommy V. said, his voice firm.

“How do you know it was supernatural?” Mario asked, knowing that he shouldn't care. Knowing that he should just get out of the restroom and forget this whole thing, but also knowing that he couldn't do that. He owed Tommy V. and Sal for all the pain he has caused them.

“Whatever killed him, punched right through his head.” Tommy V. said.

“Even cracked the wall behind him.” Sal added in.

“Nothing human could do that.” Tommy V. finished. Mario couldn't help but agree.

“If it wasn't human, than what was it?” Mike demanded.

“That's what Mario here is going to figure out.” Tommy V. said. Making it clear it wasn't a question. So much for retirement.

**Chapter 9**

“That's what Mario here is going to figure out.” Tommy V's words kept replaying in his ears as he walked through the halls of Elbis High. When he had left the restroom he had meant to go to class, instead he just kept walking. Before long he found himself on the roof of the school, overlooking the courtyard.

All he wanted to do was go back to normal. Go back to before that fateful night with Alyssa. Back when he was just a nobody and nothing exciting ever happened to him. But it seemed the world couldn't have that. Between Ralph's request and the mysterious death of Al, he kept getting dragged back into the world of the unknown.

“What am I going to do?” He asked himself aloud. Hoping beyond hope that the universe would provide an answer.

“Figuring out how to make them forget would be a good start.” Ralph said from behind him. Mario turned around to find his best friend walking towards him. “You know, like you promised me.”

“I'm working on it. It's not as easy as you might think.” Mario said, only half lying. Before Tommy V. dragged him into a murder investigation, he was spending all his free time looking for a way to do what Ralph asked. Well, when he wasn't working at the store trying to salvage what he could of his relationship with his father. When did life become so complicated?

“You are?” Ralph asked, he started looking around. “Am I missing something? Because it looks to me like you're just standing up here, taking in the sights. I never ask you for anything, I asked you for this. Please Mario. I can't face them. Not without your help.” His friend's voice was shaky. It made Mario feel like shit for not having already found a way for helping his friend. For even thinking about putting it on the back burner yet again.

But he would be putting it on the back burner to solve a murder, wasn't that a good reason? The look in Ralph's eyes told him the answer. There was no good reason, at least none that Ralph would accept.

“I'm on it. You'll have it by tonight.” Mario promised, having no idea how he was going to live up to that.

“I won't hold my breath.” Ralph said, turning and leaving Mario standing there alone.

-WZ-

Carla hardly paid attention in any of her classes. It was very unlike her. She always made sure to take detailed notes. Her father would only let her take part in the school plays if she kept her marks up, and theater was everything for her. But today, today she just couldn't focus. Her mind kept drifting off, wondering what Simone was doing? What she had figured out about why Amber was acting so odd. The same with Ms. Diaz for that matter.

The bell rang as Carla was staring off into space, it pulled her out of her thoughts and back into the classroom where her teacher Mr. Needs was giving them their English homework for the night. She had no idea what homework was assigned and the truth was, she couldn't really care. Not until she knew what was going on.

Instead of heading for her next class, she went looking for Simone. She had to find out what she knew. It wasn't easy, the school was vast and she had no idea what class Simone had for her last period of the day.

After looking all over she decided to check the theater room one last time before giving up and heading to her next class. The room was empty, as she half expected it to be. There was no class in here this period. That way as they got closer to the start of the play, the cast could use it to rehearse when they had free periods.

Just as she was about to leave she heard Ms. Diaz's door open. She may not have come here looking for her, but she still needed to talk to her. To tell her that she doesn't want to meet alone with Roddrick. That he creeps her out. She just hoped it wouldn't force her out of the play.

As she turned around, it wasn't Ms. Diaz she saw leaving her office, it was Simone and Roddrick. They weren't fighting or arguing. They were laughing. If Carla didn't know better, she would have sworn they were having a good time.

“Carla!” Simone called out to her when they finally spotted her. “Oh my god, this play is going to be so amazing! I just can't wait!” She said, radiating pure unaltered joy. It was unnerving to say the least.

“You can't?” Carla asked, eyeing Roddrick who just stood behind her.

“Not at all. I've never been so excited for anything in my life!” She turns and gives Roddrick a giant hug. “Thank you so much for letting me be apart of all this.”

“It's my pleasure.” He replies with a smile that sends chills down Carla's spine. He pulled away from the hug and took a few steps towards Carla, his eyes locking onto her. “Are you here for our one on one meeting?”

“It's the best. He's so great at explaining it.” Simone said, beaming at Roddrick as if he was the greatest thing she had ever seen. “I feel like our conversation changed my life.”

“Not right now. I. . .” Carla started to say as she took a few steps back. “I just came to tell Ms. Diaz I wasn't feeling well. Coul. . .could we meet tomorrow?” His smile vanished, being replaced with a look of utter annoyance.

“First thing. I don't have time to chase you all around the campus.” he said, pushing past her as if she was nothing. “That or you can just drop out of my show.” She watched him walk down the hall, her heart pounding in her chest. Every instinct in her body telling her that she just dodged a huge bullet.

“I can't wait for you to meet with him. He's such a genius! Amber was right.” Simone said. Carla could do nothing but nod. Something was wrong. Seriously wrong, and if she was going to find out what, she would need help. The only problem was, all of her friends were in the theater department and they were all suddenly in love with Roddrick. She needed to turn to someone who was outside of that circle. There was only one person she could think of, and she wasn't happy about it. Not after he mocked them all during auditions. She had to find Ralph.

**Chapter 10**

“You ready to go to the shop?” Mario's father asked, he was waiting at the entrance to the school in front of his car as Mario exited the school. His heart dropped. He didn't have time to go work at the shop. Not with Ralph and Tommy V. both waiting on him to deliver.

“Let's go.” Mario said, forcing himself to smile. The ride to the store was filled with awkward conversation. Mario's father kept trying to find common ground with him, something that Mario knew he should reciprocate, but he was too preoccupied. Something that didn't change his whole shift at work.

He worked on one chair after another, doing his best to live up to his father's standards. Not an easy task when your father worked nonstop and made pieces of art, while only having one good arm. It didn't help that Mario kept looking at the clock on the wall. He was running out of time if he wanted to keep his word to Ralph, not to mention that the trail on Al's murder was going cold. Being trapped in the shop wasn't helping anyone.

“Mario, could you get my tool box from the car?” His father asked, while he finished polishing an old bookcase that he had just finished repairing.

“Of course.” Mario said. He made his way out to the car, the sun was already going down. He needed to get out of there and get out of there quickly. For a moment he thought about just taking off, right then and there, but he couldn't do that to his father. Not after all the pain he had already caused him.

He picked up the tool box and headed back inside, knowing he was letting Ralph and Tommy V. down in doing so.

“Here you go.” Mario said, as he handed his father the tools.

“Thanks.” His father said, flashing him a smile. “I'm glad you're here, with me.”

“So am I!” Mario said, looking back up at the clock on the wall. “So am I.”

-WZ-

The sun was starting to set as Mike watched Mario head back inside Russo's Relics with an old tool box. As soon as school got out Mike watched as Mario got into his father's car. It didn't take long for Mike to figure out where they were headed. He knew that Mario couldn't be trusted, that he wouldn't do anything to find justice for Al.

“Asshole.” Mike said, turning away from the store. He tried to warn Tommy V. that Mario wasn't reliable, but he wouldn't listen. He and Sal seemed to have taken a shinning to the kid that was lost on Mike. He was a loser, and worst than that, he was an outsider. He wasn't from here. He didn't grow up in the slums while the rich church kids looked down on them.

That was the worst part. That his friends turned to someone who didn't live through the shit they did. Didn't grow up watching their parents get kicked around by the wealthy elite in town, treating them like they were little more than specks of dirt on their shoes.

Just thinking about it made Mike's blood boil. He and his friends came together because they had no one else. It was them against the world. Just the four of them. Making their own way in the world. As they got older, and they started making money, they started folding others into their gang, but it was always people from the neighborhood. People who knew what it was like. Who struggled like their parents before them. Not some rich outsider whose parents just moved here and bought up land like it was nothing. Who spent all his time hanging out with the son of some of those elites. Alright, maybe the Veneruzzo's weren't the elite elite, but they were certainty better off than Mike and the others. They moved here from God knows where and started throwing their money around, buying a house. Acting like they were better than everyone else. Ralph wasn't going to sleep hungry as a kid. He was rich, or at least close enough.

Mike's first thought was to head to the scene of his friend's murder. Just thinking about it chilled him to his core. Al grew up in the apartment next to him. He had known him his whole life. They went through everything together. When Al's father used to beat him, Mike's mother took him in. They were more like brothers than friends. He didn't know if he could handle seeing the spot he died. Maybe that was why he decided to skip going there. It's not the reason he told himself. He told himself that heading to the scene of the death would be dangerous. The sheriff and his deputies would be all over the crime scene.

So if going there was out, where should Mike start? How do you find out how someone died without seeing where it happened? Well, you have to know what they were doing there. That wasn't hard. Al wasn't one for hanging out behind bars, unless he was trying to make some quick cash. Which meant he was selling.

So he had to figure out why no one was buying. It was a problem they have all been having the last few days. No one seemed to be buying and yet no one seemed short on access. That could only mean one thing, Tommy V. was right. Someone else was moving in on their turf. If Mike could find out who that was, he could find out who killed Al.

His first stop was their home turf. He started going around the apartments, talking to anyone who normally buys from them. No surprise, no one needed anything. The time for asking questions was past. It was time he demanded answers.

Mike circled back to Dillian, the first person Mike attempted to sell to when looking for answers. He was chilling with some friends of his, smoking. Of course he was. Mike cracked his knuckles. He was going to enjoy this.

“Dillian! I need to speak with you.” Mike said, walking right into their circle. Showing them that he wasn't afraid.

“So speak.” Dillian said, it was a level of boldness that was new for him. He normally backed down the second you looked at him. He wasn't one to speak up. To lash out.

“Where are you getting this shit?” Mike demanded as he snatched the joint out of Dillian's mouth. His friends jumped to their feet, but Dillian just laughed and motioned for them to sit back down.

“What's it to you?”

Mike lets out a laugh, he couldn't help it. Dillian was a push over, watching him step to him as if he was a man was amusing. Mike didn't think he would have a chance to kick his ass today, he had to admit that he was glad he was wrong.

“You better watch yourself. Just because you have your little friends here, doesn't mean I won't knock you on your ass.” Mike said, taking a step forward so that his face was inches from Dillian's.

“I'd like to see you try.” Dillian said, making his friend's laugh. They were mocking Mike. Dillian never mocked anyone, he was always much too afraid. This was a new level of confidence for him. Mike almost felt bad that he was about to take it away from him.

“Suit yourself.” Mike said, pushing Dillian to the floor, or at least he had tried to. Dillian didn't budge, he just smiled and said it was his turn. Before Mike even knew what was happening, Dillian tapped Mike with nothing more than his index finger and sent Mike stumbling backwards, landing hard on the ground. Dillian's friend's laughed. Mike's face flushed with anger as he jumped to his feet, pulling out a blade.

“You think that's funny?” Mike demanded! He lunged forward, stabbing Dillian in the gut. He just looked down at the blood pouring out of him as Mike pulled the knife out.

“Wow, you stabbed me.” Dillian said, he sounded shocked. For a moment Mike thought that he was in shock but that belief only lasted a second. Dillian's fist came out of nowhere, hitting Mike hard in the jaw.

He heard it crack as went down. He had never felt such pain in his life. Well, up until the point. In moments that pain was surpassed as Dillian and his friend's started to jump him. Hitting and kicking him. Beating him till he couldn't handle the pain anymore.

And it was all for nothing. Or at least it was almost for nothing. Just before Mike passed out he found what he needed. A small baggie fell out of one of the punks pockets. It was empty, but that didn't matter. No, what mattered was the M on the bag. It was the mark of the Milano family. They were the big players in Halts Glee. Moving hard core drugs, guns, you name it. Whatever the church didn't own, they owned. What they were doing moving into the weed game, Mike had no idea. Nor was he given much time to think about it before the world went dark.

**Chapter 11**

It was late by time Mario and his father got home from the shop. He was tired from a long day of work and stress. Truth be told, the stress was more of a strain on him than the actual labor. He had promised Ralph that he would get him the spell by tonight, the night was already half-finished and he was no closer to finding one that accomplished what Ralph wanted, at least not without serious moral repercussions.

He wasted no time when they got home, he excused himself to his room to 'turn in early' before changing out of his clothes into something a little less bright. The whole time he flipped through the books he snuck out of the library. The closest he could find was a memory wipe spell, but it came with warnings. If done wrong it could cause permanent damage to her memory, wiping out her short term memory for good.

Mario wasn't sure if he could live with that. Destroying someone else's life just to fix things with Ralph. It was selfish, more so than even he was comfortable with. He marked the page before sneaking out of his window. Hopefully he could use that spell to help lead him to an alternative. Something less risky.

Once free of his house he started towards the only place he knew where to start. The scene of the crime. Tommy V. had told him that the murder happened behind a bar named The Old Globe, so that was where he was going to start.

By time he got there the bar was still open for business but the back was blocked off by caution tape, telling Mario that was indeed at the right place. This was the spot. He ducked under the tape blocking his entry and started looking around. There was only one problem and it was one he should have solved before coming out here.

He had no idea what he was looking for. He could assume the pool of dread blood on the ground was Al's, so that must have been where he died, but how was he supposed to figure out anything else? There were no clues, at least not that he could see. The truth was, even if there were clues there, the police would have already gathered it up. This was a waste of time, he was out of his league. The best thing for him to do would be to go home and go to bed. Forget all about this and Ralph's spell, but he knew he couldn't do that. He couldn't stand the thought of letting them down.

“Well, well. If it isn't Mr. Russo.” A cold calculating voice said from behind Mario, sending chills down his spine. He recognized the voice the second he heard it, it belonged to the Sheriff. “At yet another crime scene.”

Slowly Mario turned around to see Cole standing before him in full uniform with his hand on his gun. The night just got worse.

-WZ-

Elbis High was abuzz of activity in the preclass morning. A fact that Ralph had never before discovered in all his years of school. He tried to think back, and the truth was, he had never been early. At least not this early. He wasn't a fan of school. He only showed up because he had to. His parents and well, the law, made him. But he wasn't happy about it. He much rather sleep in. A trait he thought he shared with many of his fellow teenagers, but as he looked around the school he began to question that. Everywhere he looked groups of his classmates hung out and had fun. In the morning. . .before school. It was unnatural. Ralph wanted no part in it. Yet he desperately wanted to be apart of it.

His whole life he had never really fit in. He wasn't rich, his family wasn't really religious. Nor were they poor. They just weren't part of the community. They weren't as cut off from everyone as the Russo's, but it still wasn't fun. It was one of the reasons that he had become so close to Mario. They understood each other. They were the outsiders. The outsiders that even the other outsiders didn't accept.

That was part of what was making this so hard for Ralph. Mario was his best friend. His only real friend, and he had stuck by him through everything. Ralph was there for him even against literal demons and never asked anything in return. This. . . this was the only real thing he had ever asked for and Mario made him a promise. A promise that he broke.

Ralph had stayed up most of the night waiting for Mario to show up with the spell, but he never came. No call, no nothing. It was a betrayal that hit Ralph hard. Far harder than he would have liked to admit.

That was the reason he had done the unthinkable, shown up for school early. He shuddered to think about what it would do for his reputation if anyone he knew saw him here, but only for a moment before remembering that no one ever gave him much thought. Other than Mario.

He scanned around the schoolyard for any sign of him. Hoping that maybe Mario already did the spell and just didn't have a chance to tell him yet. He woke up early and drove to Mario's house, hoping to find out as soon as possible, but Mrs. Russo informed him that Mario had already left the house. Apparently he had taken off before they even woke up. Which was odd for Mario. He was normally a late sleeper. Rather than causing Ralph to lose heart, it filled him with renewed hope. Why would Mario leave for school early if not to deliver on his promise?

Ralph drove the path Mario was most likely to take to reach Elbis High. Keeping his eyes open for any sign of his friend. He found none. Not to be disheartened, he started searching the school. Still no sign of him. Mario wasn't here. Ralph drove back to his own house and still no sign of his 'friend'. He went to the library before returning to the school and searching it once more.

That's what brought him to the front of the school with his fellow students. He was waiting for Mario to arrive. Yet, time was running short before the school day began and there was still no sign of him. Mario was avoiding him. After everything they had been through together, this was how he repaid him.

“Ralph?” the sound of his own name made him jump. He was so in his own head that he was oblivious to the world around him. The last thing he expected was for someone to call out to him. Least of all Carla.

He turned around and greeted her with a smile. Praying that Mario came through at the last minute and performed the spell. The look on her face ruined that hope. What she said next proved it to be false.

“I need your help.” She said, but as soon as Ralph started to smile she added “But don't think this means I have forgiven you for mocking us.” His heart fell. Mario had let him down, and Carla hated him.

“I wasn't. I promise.” He replied.

“I don't want to hear it. This is already hard enough, without you lying to me.” She snapped.

“What's wrong?” He asked, attempting to change the subject. She looked around, as if worried she would be overheard. She then grabbed his hand, a feat which caused his heart to speed up to a degree that he was sure she could hear. If she did, she paid it no mind. Instead she dragged him away from the crowds gathering in front of the school, till they were alone in an empty classroom.

Once the door was shut she started her story. Telling him about how odd Roddrick had been during the led up to the selection of his play. How Ms. Diaz was a totally different person. How much Amber and Simone had changed, each one right after they had their one on ones with Roddrick. How the rest of the department was acting much the same. She was growing more and more concerned that something weird was happening.

She was sure that she was going crazy and yet she knew she was right. This was all wrong. Everything was off.

“Don't worry. I can fix this.” Ralph said, not knowing how he would go about it. “Just avoid that one on one. No matter what.”

“Not to worry. That's the last thing I want to do.” She shuddered at the thought. “Just thinking about being alone in a room with him creeps me out.”

“Good. Because I'll need a little time. When is the first meeting for the play?” He asked, hoping he had some time to find Mario. This was going to have to take priority over the other spell. This was possibly a real supernatural threat. Maybe Roddrick was a demon, or possessed by one. Or a witch. Or who knows what. Mario would have to help. He couldn't let Ralph down a second time.

“Tonight.” She answered. “Right after school.” All his hopes were dashed. What if he couldn't find Mario in time? What if he did and they couldn't figure out what was wrong? This was his last chance to salvage things with Carla, he couldn't fail.

“Great, I'll meet you back here.” He said, forcing what he hoped to be a reassuring smile. The second she left the room he went into full on panic mode. He had to find Mario and do so quickly. Otherwise he was screwed.

**Chapter 12**

The school day seemed to drag on and on for Tommy V. No one was buying, yet again. Mario never showed up with any answers and Mike was a no-show. Tommy V.'s first instinct was to go looking for him, but Sal talked him out of it. Last thing they needed was two of their number to be missing from school. That would draw the attention of the sheriff faster than anything else, and while there was a logic to it, it didn't make it any easier.

Tommy V. had always been a man of action. If something was wrong, he fixed it. It's what he does. It's what he's always done. It had always kept him alive, kept him sane. Sitting around and waiting on others to figure it out for him, it was killing him.

The week before, Mario had come through and stopped the Phantom Racer who was killing people in the racing community. Something that Tommy V. had tried and failed to do. It made sense for him to reach out to him this time. At least that's what he kept telling himself as he caught a glance at the clock.

But if it made so much sense, where was he? Why hadn't Mario shown up and told him what he found out? Even if it was nothing. Even if he failed, he could have reached out. And where was Mike? Tommy V. knew that Mike didn't trust Mario, but would he really be stupid enough to go looking for answers himself?

The sheriff had already questioned all of them. They were suspects, no matter what they were told. The last thing they needed was to be caught snooping around. Sal was right about that. Mike was going to get them all in trouble. Tommy V. couldn't help but be a little jealous as he sat in Math class, attempting to work out problems involving X and Y, as if they would have any impact on his life. He glanced out the window and made up his mind. After class, he was taking off. He was going to find Mike and figure this all out with him. Mario be damned.

-WZ-

Time had lost all meaning while Mario sat in the interrogation room. After getting caught at the scene of Al's murder, he was handcuffed and brought back to the station. Sheriff Simon hadn't said a word to him the entire ride to the station. Didn't even have the radio on. Mario kept telling him how it was a misunderstanding, but he got no indication that the sheriff was even listening.

Once they got to the station Mario was just tossed in this room, handcuffed to the table and left alone. Hours had to have gone by. He even slept for a bit while waiting. A tiny bit. It seemed that every time he started to doze off the door would open, the Sheriff would look at him and then leave.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out. The Sheriff was trying to break Mario. Stress him out so that he would be easier to break. And it was working. All Mario wanted to do was go home.

His stomach let out a growl, demanding food. Yet another tactic to be used against him. Starvation. This was going to be a long night, or was it already day? Mario had no way of knowing.

-WZ-

Tommy V. wasted no time leaving the school behind after he got out of his math class. He needed to find Mike and solve Al's death himself. He just had to make sure to avoid getting caught by the sheriff while he was at it. The last thing he needed was to get arrested.

His first thought was to go to the scene of the crime, but logic and common sense put that idea out of his mind quickly. If he went there he was likely to get caught. No one could be that stupid. So where did that leave him to start? He had to figure out what Al was doing there.

The answer was obvious. Al was trying to deal. With things being slow, money was tight all around. So than how would Al try to solve that problem? He would go to his regulars. The bars where his father hung out, made sense. But so did the apartments where Al and Mike grew up and if Tommy V. had to guess where Mike would have started looking, that had to be it.

The apartments were more or less empty at this time of day. All the children were at school and the parents were at work. Almost nobody was here, it made looking around simple. Tommy V. made a few rounds around the apartments, looking for any sign of Mike or his druggy friends.

It didn't take long. Near the back of the apartments there was a group of kids getting high. They couldn't have been a few years younger than Tommy V. himself. Near their feet was a pool of blood. Something happened here, within the past day.

The blood led to a dumpster against the back fence of the apartments. The lid was shut with a padlock on it. Tommy V.'s heart dropped. He finally figured out where Mike was, he just didn't like the answer.

His blood was boiling, he wanted to go over and smash some skulls. No one hurt one of his friends and got away with it. He cracked his knuckles, readying himself for a brawl when he heard Sal's words in his head. They were already under scrutiny from the police. The last thing he needed to do was draw more attention to himself, but at the same time he couldn't just leave Mike trapped in there. He had to save him.

It took all the self-control he had to walk away. To leave the people he knew were responsible for Mike's pain alone. Or at least he tried too. He made it not ten feet before he spotted a plank of wood broken off of the fence. He stood there, watching it for who knows how long.

-WZ-

Dillian took another hit of the Denix before passing it to his homeboy. Life was good. For once they were kings. They ran shit. No one would mess with them. If anyone tried, they would feel their wrath. At long last, Dillian ran shit.

But alas, all good things come to an end, his rule being just another example. No sooner did his homeboy take a puff of the joint before flinging forward, blood gushing out of the back of his head. Tommy V. was standing there with a now broken piece of wood. He turned to Dillian, but in the same moment he elbowed another one of Dillian's friends in the face.

Dillian's kingdom was coming crashing down around him and there was nothing he could do about it.

-WZ-

Tommy V. stood over the druggies bodies. None of them were dead, but they would all be feeling the beating they took for some time. He couldn't help but smile. It was a weight off his shoulders. But only a tiny one. There was still work to be done. He still had a friend to rescue and another one to avenge.

It didn't take long for Tommy V. to break the padlock on the dumpster. He lifted the lid to find a bloody and beaten Mike laying in a pool of his own blood. He looked up at him, through his swollen eye and attempted to speak. He was much too weak to spit anything out, but it didn't matter. Tommy V. could read his lips well enough to know what he was saying.

Milano.

**Chapter 13**

Ralph had no luck tracking down Mario. He wasn't at school. Which made no sense to Ralph. He wasn't at home, he wasn't at school. So where was he? Ralph couldn't help but worry about him, while still being pissed that he didn't come through with the spell.

He spent far too much of the day stressing out about Mario that it didn't give him a lot of time to worry about Carla and how he was going to help her. When she caught up to him after class and asked for his plan, he cursed himself. She was expecting him to save her. To play the hero and he had no idea what to do.

“You want to go to the rehearsal?” Carla asked, her eyes wide. “You can't be serious!” It was a fair response to what Ralph had suggested. The only thing he could think of suggesting was that they go to the rehearsal so he could see it all for himself. It was a stupid idea, he knew it. He just didn't have any other ideas.

“I know it seems out there, I do, but I need to know what it is I'm dealing with.” Ralph said, doubling down on his insane idea, for no other reason than he was afraid to look stupid in front of her. “Trust me.”

“I don't know. Everyone, everyone's acting so weird. What if. . .what if that happens to me?” She asked, the fear clear as day in her voice. Ralph took her hand, and gave her what he hoped to be a reassuring smile.

“It won't. I won't let it.”

-WZ-

“You ready to talk?” Sheriff Simon had finally come into the interrogation room. Mario was beyond exhausted, his mind was foggy, his eye lids had never been heavier. He hadn't slept since before school yesterday. He was sure that he had been sitting in this room for hours, but time stopped having meaning some time ago. Sitting alone in a room with nothing to look at but stone walls and a giant glass mirror.

Every time Mario had started to drift off to sleep, the door would open, he would be yelled at and told to wait. When the Sheriff finally came in, Mario was sure it was just to yell and leave, instead he walked in and sat across from Mario. Locking eyes with him, as if he was looking through him.

“It's like I tried to tell you, I heard that my friend died. I had to see it for myself.” Mario said, repeating the lie he had been trying to tell any deputy that came in to yell at him.

“You think I'm an idiot?” the Sheriff asked. Mario bit his tongue. It wouldn't do for him to make a smart ass remark with the amount of trouble he was already in.

“No, of course not.” he lied.

“So tell me the truth. You've been at the scene of two crimes in the span of three days. That's not a coincidence.”

“I explained what happened to my car, and now I have explained about the visiting the spot where my friend died. I know I shouldn't have crossed the caution tape, but I was overcome with emotion. Surely you have experienced the loss of a loved one.” Mario said, his tone conveying that it was anything but a question. More an accusation than anything else.

The Sheriff's face told Mario that he took it as such. His eyes narrowed as his nostrils flared. Mario braced himself for the coming onslaught, but none came. The Sheriff regained control of himself and just nodded, pulling out a notepad and a pen.

“Where were you at the time of the murder?” The Sheriff asked.

“I don't know.” Mario answered.

“You don't know where you were at the time of the murder? How would you not know?”

“I don't know when the murder happened. I just heard about it at school during my last period.” Mario answered, truthfully. He figured staying as close to the truth as he could was his best bet to get out of this.

“Who told you?” The Sheriff asked.

“Tommy V.” Mario replied, not missing a beat. He needed to be seen as telling the truth. Of having nothing to hide.

“Tommy V. You mean Tommy Veno?” The Sheriff asked. Mario nodded. “And how did he find out about the murder?”

“He said you told him.” Mario answered, suddenly feeling the ground fall out from under him. What if Tommy V. had lied about the Sheriff questioning them? Did Mario just implicate them? This just got so much worse.

“So I did.” The Sheriff said, writing down some notes. The fact that the Sheriff admitted to telling them only made Mario feel slightly better. Everything about this was wrong. “The murder happened the night before. Late at night. It's clear you have no problem sneaking out of your house without your parent's knowing. So I'll ask you again, where were you?”

“Two nights ago?” Mario asked, feeling a huge sense of relief. “I was with Ralph, helping him memorize lines for the school play. Or well, to audition for the school play.”

The Sheriff nodded, as he looked over his notes. Mario couldn't help but feel lighter knowing he had an alibi for the time of the murder. The Sheriff didn't look too pleased, until he did. He looked up at Mario and smiled, it was a blood chilling smile that made Mario feel as if he had just walked into a trap.

“Ralph Veneruzzo?” The Sheriff asked. Mario nodded. “Great, I'll be having a talk with him. You make yourself comfortable.” Without another word, or even looking back, he left Mario alone, once more, in the interrogation room. Only this time with a little hope.

-WZ-

The auditorium was alive with excitement as a nervous Ralph and a frantic Carla closed in on the entrance. Ralph could already tell that Carla hadn't been exaggerating, everyone seemed to love Roddrick all the sudden. He could hear it clear down the hall. It was unnerving to say the least.

“Are you sure we have to do this?” Carla asked him, forcing them to stop a few feet from the door. It was a valid question. One that Ralph had been asking himself. Every instinct he had was screaming at him to turn and run. He just wished the thought of letting her down wasn't even more powerful. She was so beautiful. So smart, so talented. He wanted to be a hero in her eyes. Hell, he wanted her to see him as something other than a fuck up.

“I know what I'm doing.” he said as reassuring as he could. And it was true. He knew what he was doing. Making the biggest mistake of his life. A mistake that would undoubtedly end horribly bad for him. But that didn't mean he didn't have a plan. He had one. He had a great plan. One of the best plans ever invented. He was going to go in there and make everything up as he went along. It's what Mario always did and it seemed to work out just fine for him. If Mario could do it, why couldn't he?

“I trust you.” Carla said, squeezing Ralph's hand. He felt his heart skip a beat. He could feel his blood rush to his cheeks, forcing him to quickly look away.

“Let's go.” he ordered, hoping that he could live up to her trust. The last thing he wanted to do was let her down.

They walked into the auditorium, where Roddrick was holding court. He was standing on stage while the cast and crew knelt before him, looks of admiration on their faces. Simone and Amber were in the front. Ms. Diaz stood in the back, beaming with pride at Roddrick. It was unsettling to Ralph and he hardly knew these people. He could only imagine how terrifying this must all be to Carla. Sure enough, when he looked over at her, she was pale, as if all the color had been drained from her face.

Ralph thought for a moment of turning and running. Bringing Carla with him of course. What was he even doing here? He had no way of knowing what was going on or how to stop it. He just had a feeling something supernatural was going on, but now that he was here, in this room, he knew for a fact something was. Nothing about this felt right.

“Carla!” Roddrick spit out her name as he turned to look at them. “You were supposed to come see me this morning for our one on one talk.”

“I uh. . .” Carla said, turning to look to Ralph for guidance. He felt his heart dropped, he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do. He thought the answers would just come to him in the moment, like they did for Mario, but he had nothing. No ideas, no answers. He was out of his depth.

“She isn't here to talk to you.” Ralph said, taking a step in front of Carla. Making it clear to all watching that he was doing the talking, not her.

“Well this is my show, and anyone who wants to be apart of it. They talk to me.” Roddrick said. The cast and crew all but shouted their agreement. “You got that right!” Simone called out. “Show him the respect he deserves!” Amber added. One or two students even yelled at them to get lost.

“I need to speak with Ms. Diaz.” Ralph said.

“For what?” Roddrick demanded.

“I have complete faith in Roddrick. He's my very best student, anything you need to know about the show, he can answer better than I.” Ms. Diaz said, taking a step towards them.

“Maybe we should just go?” Carla asked, trying to pull Ralph back with her. He shook her off. He wasn't about to be made a fool in front of her.

“It's not about the show. Am I wrong in assuming you still run the department? Is Roddrick in charge now?” Ralph demanded. He didn't know what he was hoping to gain by talking to Ms. Diaz, but he figured if he could talk to her alone, maybe he could figure out how strong a hold Roddrick had on them.

“I do, but I'm training Roddrick to take it over. So again, anything you wish to say to me, you can say to him.” She said, her eyes fierce. Their was a loyalty there that knocked Ralph back. He wasn't expecting it.

“Maybe I should just go to Mr. Sinclair.” Ralph said, hoping that invoking the principal might get him the time alone with her he needed. “Ask him my questions.”

Ms. Diaz turned to look to Roddrick for answers. It was an odd sight to see. Roddrick looked ready to burst, a giant vein on his forehead was throbbing. He forced himself to smile, making Ralph doubt his plan of action.

“By all means Ms. Diaz. See to Mr. Veneruzzo needs.” Roddrick said. Ralph couldn't believed it worked. He wasn't sure where to go from here, but he hoped talking to her would provide some clues. “While I conduct my conversation with Ms. Garcia.”

“What?” Carla said, panic in her voice.

“No!” Ralph demanded. “She's coming with me.” He added, trying to sound forceful.

“Surely you both aren't needed for a simple conversation?” Roddrick asked, as the cast and crew got to their feet and started off the stage towards them. Carla grabbed onto Ralph, as if he was all that stood between her and certain doom. Which, judging by the way her friends were looking at them, might not have been far off.

“We are.” Ralph said. He wasn't about to let them hurt her. Not if he could help it. Roddrick merely smile and gave him a tiny nod.

“If that's how you feel, far be it for me to stand in the way.” Roddrick said. He motioned for Ms. Diaz's office. “Would you like to speak in Ms. Diaz's office?”

“Yeah, yeah we would.” Ralph said.

“Very well.” Ms. Diaz said, heading towards her office. Ralph looked back at Carla, who nodded. They slowly started after the teacher, bracing themselves for whatever trick Roddrick had up his sleeve.

“You see how strange she's acting?” Carla whispered in his ear. Ralph just nodded, not trusting himself to speak. His heart was pounding so loudly that it was deafening. For once it wasn't due to Carla being so close to him. He was scared. Nothing about this sat right with him and yet he kept moving forward. Walking right into the loin's den. As if he was asking for death.

His eyes kept scanning the room, waiting for them to lunge at him, but they didn't. Nor did they return to their admiration of Roddrick. Instead they just slowly moved in closer and closer to Ralph and Carla. Uncomfortably close.

Ms. Diaz opened her office door and walked inside, holding the door open for Ralph and Carla. Ralph took a deep breath and waited a moment before entering the office, Carla still holding onto his arm.

In an instant everything changed, Ms. Diaz lunged forward, forcing herself in between Ralph and Carla. Before Ralph could react, Simone and Amber pulled Carla from the room as two men forced the door closed and locked it from the outside.

Ralph pushed passed a laughing Ms. Diaz and tried in vein to force the door open. He rammed against it time and again to no avail. Through the window on the door he could see Carla being held in front of Roddrick, struggling to get away, but the more he talked the less she seemed to struggle.

“Don't struggle dear. It's pointless. Roddrick is the answer to all of our questions. He's better than you in every way and our dear sweet Carla is much better off with him than the likes of you.” Ms. Diaz said, in an almost sweet caring way. Making the whole thing that much more unsettling.

Ralph gritted his teeth and swung his fist as hard as he could, smashing through the glass on the door, or at least trying to. All that really happened was he let out a scream and stumbled back a few steps.

“Sweetie, I could have told you that wouldn't work. You aren't strong enough. Aren't good enough.” Ms. Diaz said. Ralph did everything he could to tune her out. He had to save Carla. He got her into this mess and he was going to be damned if he didn't save her.

He took his shirt off and tied it around his fist. He took a few breaths as Ms. Diaz assured him that it wasn't going to be enough. He ignored her and swung with all of his might, this time breaking through the glass. He knew his hand should be hurting something fierce but the adrenaline was enough to block that out.

Without wasting anytime he unlocked the door from the outside and was about to rush to Carla's rescue when he stopped and looked down at himself. Even the adrenaline wasn't enough to override his unease with his own physique. He quickly threw on his now bloody and torn shirt.

“You're too late, just as I told you you would be.” Ms. Diaz said from behind him, and sure enough, no sooner did he pull the shirt over his head than he saw Roddrick facing him with Carla hanging onto his arm. The rest of the cast and crew standing around them, making it clear, it was Ralph vs all of them.

“Aw, Mr. Veneruzzo, you needed have worried. I haven't forgotten about you.” Roddrick said, causing an uproar of laughter from those around him.

“Oh Ralph, I was so wrong. Roddrick is just the best. His play is amazing. It's so incredible. Just wait till you hear all about his vision. I've never meet anyone like him.” Carla said, she was so happy, so overjoyed when talking about Roddrick. She had warned Ralph what happened when people talked to him alone. He even suspected witchcraft, for this could only be the work of a spell, but seeing it in person was so much worse than he thought. He could feel the goosebumps go up and down his arms. He was frightened.

“Why don't we have a conversation Ralph? I think you'll find you might like what I have to say.” Roddrick said, his voice was not unsoothing and Ralph couldn't help agreeing. He found that he could envision a world where he did take pleasure from what Roddrick had to say. He had no problem believing he could listen to him talk all day, in fact, he believed he should listen to him talk all day. That was the best use of his time.

But there was another voice. A tiny voice, that could hardly be heard over the all encompassing voice of Roddrick's, but something inside Ralph told him to listen to it. It wasn't hard, it just kept telling him the same thing over and over. Run.

In an instant he was darting for the door, as he did, his sense of self came back to him and he knew if he didn't get out of there and fast, he never would.

“After him!” Roddrick yelled from behind him as Ralph started down the hall, leaving the auditorium behind. He could hear the cast and crew rushing after him. He had to get out of there and fast, it was the only chance he had to not only save himself but save Carla as well. He owed her.

-WZ-

The door opened and the Sheriff walked back into the room, a grin across his face. Mario couldn't understand it, he had an alibi. What could the Sheriff be so excited about?

“I just got off the phone with one of my deputies who happened to be near Elbis High. Any idea what I just learned?” The Sheriff asked, turning the chair backwards and sitting on it in an attempt to look cool, or intimating? Mario didn't know, nor did he much care. He was just ready to go home.

“That I'm innocent? Great, can I go now?” Mario said, getting to his feet, his hand straining against the cuffs holding him to the table.

“Oh, my dear boy, just the opposite. Sit your ass down!” The Sheriff said, Mario did as he was told, a cold sense of dread welling up inside him.

“What?” Mario asked when the Sheriff didn't immediately say anything.

“I tell you what, I'll give you one chance to come clean before I tell you what I just learned.” The Sheriff said in what Mario assumed was an attempt to play good cop, but came across more as a cat playing with it's food.

“Come clean with the fact that I'm innocent? Sure. I'm innocent.” Mario said again. He was tired of playing these games.

“Don't ever say I didn't give you a chance. Your friend, he sold you out. Said not only did he not see you the night of the murder, but that you were acting real cagey the next day at school. As if you were hiding something.” The Sheriff said with a smile. “Anything you'd like to tell me now?”

“He never said that.” Mario said, he refused to believe that. Even if Ralph was pissed at him, he wouldn't lie to get him in trouble.

“'Fraid so.” The Sheriff said. “Also got more than one witness from that little school of yours telling me all kinds of tales of you swearing revenge on Al just days before his death. I have all I need. Your mine.” The Sheriff said with a laugh as he got up and headed for the door. “I'll be back in a bit, in case you want to go ahead and confess, maybe get yourself a deal. For the record I hope you don't.”

Mario's heart sank. He was innocent but how could he prove it when even his best friend turned against him? He had no way out.

**Chapter 14**

Tommy V. pulled a blade out from the back of his dad's old workbench. Before his father died he used to use the garage as his private workspace. He would be in here all the time fixing up cars and building things for the house. Tommy V. would just sit and watch him work. Always in awe of all the things his father could do. That was until he died. His mother never came out here. It was too painful for her, so Tommy V. took to hiding stuff out here.

Stuff he hoped he would never need, but with Al dead and Mike in the hospital, he had to do something. He gathered up the troops to go to war. A war that Sal was convinced they would lose, seeing as the Milano family had a few dozen people on their payroll and Tommy V. was down to five if you didn't count Mike, who could barely breath. Jason, Tommy V.'s cousin was sitting on a bench near the garage door. He looked to be on the verge of a panic attack. Aaron and Devonte were looking over Tommy V.'s weapon supplies, treating the whole thing like a joke. Acting as if two of their numbers were already taken out. There was a reason Tommy V. kept them out of the core group. They all still children. They weren't ready for what was coming.

Sal stood off to the side watching everything. Not getting ready, just taking everything in, as if he couldn't believe they were going forward with this. Over the past month or so he had changed. Tommy V. understood it, finding out what they had about the world was bound to change you, but not like this. Not enough to turn your back on family, or bury your head in the sand. They needed to do something before word got out that they were weak.

Or worse, before the Milano's came for the rest of them. Tommy V. feared for Jason worst of all. He wouldn't know how to fight back. He would just collapse. Tommy V. wasn't about to let that happen. Not if he could help it.

“This is crazy.” Sal said, not for the first time. Aaron and Devonte started laughing and Jason looked as if he was about to cry. Tommy V. cursed under his breath. Sal knew better than damaging the moral of the group before going into battle. That was a cardinal sin.

“Noted, doesn't change what we have to do.” Tommy V. said, in as calm and measured a voice as he could master. He wasn't going to let Sal get to him, not when there was so much on the line.

“Don't be scaaaareeed, Sally. It'll be alright.” Devonte said with a laugh, spinning a blade in his hand while Arron played with hammer, banging it on Tommy V.'s dad's old work station. It filled him with a sense of rage that he bit down on for the greater good.

“Hide behind Jason, he'll keep you safe.” Aaron added, they both broke into laughter, as if they were the greatest comedic duo of all time. Tommy V. was rapidly losing control of his gang.

Before he had a chance to react, Sal took matters into his own hands. In a flash of movement he knocked the blade from Devonte's hand, caught it in his own and had it at Devonte's throat, whose eyes went wide in fear. Aaron dropped the hammer he had been playing with, backing up so as to escape the danger zone around Sal.

“But who'll keep you safe?” Sal said, venom in his voice. His eyes narrowed, as he locked eyes with a Devonte who looked as if he was about to piss himself.

“Sal.” Tommy V. said. Sal turn to look at him, shrugged and tossed the blade at the ground, where it stuck into the ground and stayed standing.

“Whatever.” Was all Sal said as turned away from Devonte and Arron. Near the front of the garage someone started clapping. Jason screamed and jumped to his feet as everyone turned to look. Standing at the door was a kid from school. Tommy V. had seen him once or twice, always hanging out with that loser Enzo.

“What a show.” The man whose name Tommy V. couldn't place said.

“Dante? What the fuck are you doing here?” Aaron said, giving a name to the face.

“I came to finish what I started with Al.” he said, his eyes locked onto Tommy V.

“You started?” Sal said, he turned to look at Tommy V. “You said it was the Milano family.”

“That's what Mike said.” Tommy V. not understanding how Mike could have got it so wrong.

“Oh they helped. Denix is a hell of a drug. But I put him in the ground.”

“Stupid move, coming here.” Aaron said, pulling Devonte's blade from the ground. His actions were smooth, he pulled the knife out mid stroll towards Dante, bringing the blade up to use as a weapon in the same motion. He lunged right towards Dante's eye, but in a blur of motion Danta caught the blade by allowing it to stab through his hand. Blood started gushing out, but Dante just laughed and caught Aaron's shirt with his other hand. He pulled him closer to him so that they were face to face with one another.

“Say goodbye.” Dante said, seconds before smacking him on the side of the hand with the blade that was sticking through his hand. He pulled the blade out and let Aaron drop to the floor. He looked up at everyone else in the room. “Whose next?”

Without wasting a second, Jason ran for the exit, Dante caught him and snapped his neck. The thing Tommy V. feared the most had just come to pass.

-WZ-

The empty hallways of the school was terrifying. There was something about walking, or well, running, through a normally crowded place that was now empty that gave you a sense of dread. Add to that the fact that there were a group of crazy people running after him attempting to steal his freewill and well, who could blame him for panicking.

He stopped to catch his breath at the end of a hall. Which hall, he had no idea. He had been just running nonstop for. . . well he didn't know that either. He just knew he was out of breath. He was exhausted.

He could hear shouting coming from behind him. They were catching up to him and he was no closer to finding an exit to this labyrinth. His heart was pounding so hard that it was deafening. Larry, a stage hand who also ran track rounded the corner. He spotted Ralph and let out a growl. An honest to god growl. It was enough to make Ralph pause. A mistake he paid for when Albert, a heavy set kid with a bit too much hair rammed him from the side, knocking Ralph to the floor hard.

As Ralph struggled to catch his breath the rest of the cast and crew showed up. Surrounding him. There was no way out, at least not one he could see. Carla forced her way to the front of the group. She looked almost concerned for him.

“Why are you doing this Ralph?” She asked it as if he was doing something to hurt her. He was only in this mess to try and help her, because she asked him too.

“I just want to go home.” He said as he got to his feet, putting his hands out in front of him in a sign of surrender. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay, and look, here you are, with all your friends, not at all scaring the living hell out of me. So you're good, I'm good. I'mma just go. Cool?”

“If that's what you want, and what Roddrick wants. Yeah, but, I thought you wanted to be here with me?” Carla said, reaching out and taking his hand. It was all Ralph had been wanting. To be with Carla, to have her notice him and want him around. But not like this. Not as part of some crazy scary cult.

“I did, now I don't.. . .so uh, bye.” Ralph said, pulling his hand free and attempting to push his way through the crowd of theater kids. They refused to let him pass and one of them grabbed him from behind and all but threw him on the floor.

“It's not up to you.” Amber said.

“Roddrick wants to talk to you. You don't ignore Roddrick.” Simone added.

“It's really rude Ralph. He just wants to help you. If you let him.” Carla pleaded with him. The change in her was terrifying. He just knew that was what was about to happen to him. He was already starting to feel it back in the auditorium. He didn't want to feel it again. Why couldn't Mario have just come to school!

“What the hell is this shit?” Someone behind the theater kids called out. The voice was one that Ralph had heard before. It took him a few seconds to place it. It was Enzo, from the night of the auditions.

The theater kids turned to look at him, staying in a tight circle around Ralph so as to not let him escape. Enzo started walking towards them, a crazed look in his eyes. Ralph wasn't sure if him showing up was a blessing or a curse, but he was okay with finding out. At least it got the attention off of him.

“What are you doing here?” Larry demanded.

“Yeah, no one wants you here. Not after you tried to humiliate Roddrick!” Albert screamed.

“As if he could.” Simone snapped. Enzo started laughing for a few seconds before he realized they were serious. Ralph could already see that this was going to end badly. He needed to find a way out of there and quickly before they dragged him and Enzo for a two on one meeting with their glorious leader.

“Are you all very stoned?” Enzo asked, looking around. “Since when do any of you care about that loser?” No sooner were the words out of his mouth than the theater kids screamed and fury and charged at him.

-WZ-

The police station was dead. There was no one in the lobby and only one or two cops that Tony Russo could see. He had tried more than once to get their attention since he walked in but they seemed to be activity avoiding him.

“I need to talk to someone about my son!” He shouted at the nearest cop. He had shown up at Elbis high to pick Mario up for work but he was nowhere to be found. He started inside the school when Mr. Needs, Mario's English teacher asked him if Mario was okay and was going to be back at school tomorrow. It turned out that Mario had never gone to school that morning.

He was gone from the house before Tony and Liz woke up this morning, but he didn't go to school. Ralph had stopped by to give him a ride and was surprised he wasn't home, so he had no idea where he was either. Mario was a good kid, he wouldn't just vanish like that. Something had to have happened to him. He could just feel it.

“Mr. Russo?”

Tony turned around to find the Sheriff walking towards him. He had the same smug look on his face as he did the other day when he questioned his son about the accident. He was the last cop that Tony wanted to talk to, but at least he was finally going to get to talk to someone about getting some answers.

“Sheriff, my son is missing. He was gone from his bed this morning, he didn't go to school. We need to find him.” Tony said, he could hear how shaky his voice was, but he didn't care. His son was missing, he had every right to be scared.

“He's not missing.”

“What?”

“I found him at the scene of a murder in the early hours of the morning.” The Sheriff said, Tony's head was spinning. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. “I'm questioning him now. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you. Your son is a murderer.”

**Chapter 15**

“Ahhhh!!!” Devonte yelled as he flew across the garage and hit the far wall, his head slamming back. He dropped to the ground with a loud thump. Tommy V. had no faith that he would be getting up again.

Dante let out a laugh, it was a hallow empty laugh, but it was still a laugh. Tommy V. tore his eyes off of the fallen form of Devonte to watch Dante's latest action. He kicked an already beaten Sal, knocking him onto his back. Sal let out a low groan.

Tommy V.'s eyes saw red, he was going to make Dante pay. He wasn't just going to kill him, although that would be the end result, but it wasn't going to be fast and it damn sure wasn't going to be painless. Not if he could help it.

“You'll pay!” Devonte shouted as he started to get to his feet. Dante turned towards him, smiling. Tommy V. stepped in front of Devonte, who was still on the floor.

“That's far enough!” Tommy V. demanded, Dante smile. In one quick motion he knocked Tommy V. aside. He hit the wall hard, landing on the ground hard. He started to get to his feet, just in time to see Dante pick Devonte up and throw him back down on the ground, hard. The sound was deafening.

“We have to go!” Sal hissed in his ear, as he attempted to pull him out of the room. The pain clear as day in his voice. Tommy V. couldn't help but feel a bit of pride in his friend for getting back up. Tommy V. pulled himself free.

“You go. I have business here.” Tommy V. ordered. Dante turned away from a still breathing Devonte on the ground.

“As do I.” Dante said, taking a step towards Tommy V. “You're friends were fun, but you're why I'm here.”

“We have to go!” Sal screamed.

“Oh don't worry Sally, I have plans for you too!” Dante mocked.

-WZ-

“I demand to see my son!” Tony screamed at the deputy behind the desk, not for the first time.

“I'm sorry sir. He's a suspect in a murder investigation. You're not allowed back there.” The Deputy said, his tone condescending, as if Tony was a pesky fly that just wouldn't leave.

“That's unacceptable! He's a minor!”

“I'll talk to the Sheriff again, I promise, but sir, just sit down. It won't do your son any good to get yourself arrested too.” The Deputy said, giving Tony a look that told him the conversation was over. Something that Tony wasn't okay with.

“I could give a good god damn what the sheriff says. Give me my son now!” Tony screamed.

-WZ-

“You'll regret this!” Simone yelled as she ran down the hall with a few of the other theater kids. Enzo wasted no time in making their lives hell. He broke Albert's arm before tossing him to the lockers. Albert was a big guy, yet Enzo just picked him up and tossed him around like a rag doll. Larry managed to get a few hits in before Enzo hit him back. It was almost like Enzo was toying with him. Letting Larry hit him for shits and giggles. When he was done he flicked him, sending him flying across the room.

It didn't take long for the rest of the theater kids to run off scared. It seemed even their unconditional love for Roddrick wasn't strong enough to get them to risk their lives. Ralph stood and watched the whole fight unfold. It didn't take long for Ralph to figure out that there was more here than some wannabe witch who made people love him. Enzo wasn't normal. He wasn't human, or if he was, there was something going on with him. Something that Ralph could hopefully use against Roddrick.

“Why aren't you running?” Enzo asked, turning towards Ralph. “You got some kind of death wish?”

“Just the opposite.” Ralph said, taking a step towards Enzo. Part of him worried that Enzo wouldn't care what he had to say and just kill him, but if he wanted to save Carla, he would have to risk it. After all, she was only in this mess because of him.

Ezno didn't respond, he just watched him, as if he was unsure what to make of him. Now that he was up close and not going on a rampage, Ralph got a chance to look at his eyes. They were bloodshot, he was clearly high. It could ruin Ralph's plan, but it was a risk he had to take.

“I want to help you take down this play.” Ralph said, he kept his eyes glued on Enzo's face, he catches just a hint of a smile. It's enough for him to press his luck. “And I know just how to do it!”

-WZ-

Dante's fist went through the side of the garage, just over Tommy V.'s head. He had ducked down just in time. He looked over at Sal, laying on the ground, unmoving. He couldn't help but hold out some hope that his best friend was still alive.

“Ahh!” Dante screamed as he pulled his hand back. Just looking at Dante told Tommy V. that the scream had nothing to do with hurting his hand and everything to do with frustration. There was something wrong with him, something seriously wrong.

Tommy V. jumped out of the way as Dante hit the ground, cracking the cement where he had been standing moments before. He only had a few seconds to recover, Tommy V. meant to use that time wisely. He quickly got to his feet and ran over to Sal, who was breathing. Shallowly, but breathing none the less.

Tommy V. picked him up, which was not easy. Sal was almost as big as Tommy V. was, but he wasn't about to leave him to die. Not like everyone was he brought into this. He had to save Sal. He just had to.

“Where do you think you're going?” Dante snapped from behind him. Tommy V. didn't look back, he just ran, as fast as he could with Sal dragging him down.

-WZ-

Ralph waited until all eyes in the auditorium were on Enzo before entering the room. The plan was simple, it was a two part masterpiece. Mario would have been proud. The first part, the only part he told Enzo, involved Enzo walking into the auditorium and demanding Roddrick shut down the play. If he didn't, Enzo could destroy some shit and scare the shit out of him. Needless to say, Enzo loved the plan. He lived for destroying shit, and there was something about this play that seemed to have gotten under his skin. A fact that Ralph intended to exploit.

Then there was the second part of the plan. The part that he kept to himself. While Enzo was acting a fool, being the center of attention, Ralph would sneak in and grab Carla. Once he got her away from here he would figure out how to break the spell and free her.

So far the first part of the plan worked like a charm. Enzo came in and all hell broke lose. Roddrick and the women ran towards the back of the room while the men tried once again to take on Enzo. Once more failing. Enzo plowed through them as if they were paper. Ralph could see the fear in Roddrick's eyes even from his hiding spot in the stands.

As Enzo marched across the stage, Ralph snuck through the seats. Roddrick was keeping Carla right next to him as he attempted his escape into Ms. Diaz's office, leaving the other women outside the door to protect him. Ralph couldn't help but despise him for the coward he was.

For a moment Ralph feared that Enzo would start hitting the women, but he just pushed them aside before tearing the door off the hinges. HE TORE THE DOOR OFF OF THE HINGES. Ralph knew he was strong, but he had no idea he was this strong. He wanted Roddrick stopped, not killed.

Ralph moved closer to the stage. He needed in that room, but didn't want to get in Roddrick's way. He needed another plan and he needed it quickly, he thought as Enzo walked into the office. Simone and Amber started crying to each other. Ralph needed to act now. He made a dash for the stage, no sooner did he climb onto the stage then Roddrick flew out of the office and landed hard on the ground.

Ralph dropped back down, quickly making his way along the side, staying out of sight as he made his way towards the office. Up above he could hear Enzo walking towards Roddrick, who from the sounds of it was crawling away.

He tried to listen to what was being said, but the women crying was drowning it out. It didn't matter, Roddrick was going to get what was coming for him. Ralph climbed up onto the stage, prepared to make a mad dash for the office, when he saw her. Carla was standing in the doorway, watching the events unfold.

Seeing her standing there, looking terrified, broke Ralph's heart. All he wanted to do was protect her. Keep her safe. She cried out for Roddrick, causing Ralph to turn and look. Enzo closed in on Roddrick, clearly intent on hurting him. Roddrick kept talking, what he was saying, Ralph couldn't overhear. But he didn't need to. The words weren't as important as the affect they were having on Enzo. He stopped closing in on Roddrick and instead turned to look at Ralph, murder in his eyes. Roddrick had gotten to him.

**Chapter 16**

Ralph wasted no time, he ran towards the edge of the stage and jumped off, landing in the stands in a most uncomfortable way. “Fuck!” he cried out as he got to his feet. He didn't dare look behind him, afraid of what he would find.

He could hear the theater students screaming at him, cheering Enzo on. Ralph was truly alone. There was no more last minute rescues. He had long ago given up hope that Mario would return. His best friend had abandoned him, left him to his own devices while he was off doing who knows what.

“Where do you think you're going?” Enzo demanded as he grabbed the back of Ralph's shirt and threw him back. Ralph hit the stage hard. He let out a cry of pain as he tried to get back to his feet. Before he could react Enzo was once again upon him. He moved fast, too fast for Ralph to react.

“Just let me go!” Ralph cried out.

“Why would I do that?” Enzo asked as he picked Ralph up by his neck, slowly choking the life out of him. “When I could choke the life out of you, and watch the light go out in your eyes.”

“Enough!” Roddrick cried out. Enzo turned to look at his new master, Ralph did everything he could to pull Enzo's hand off his neck. He wasn't near strong enough. “Bring him to me.”

-WZ-

“Come out, come out, where ever you are!” Dante called, as Tommy V. ducked behind his mom's old beat up car. It hadn't worked in over a year, which was why his mother took the bus to work every morning.

He could hear Dante get closer and closer to him. He wasn't sure where he could go, or if he even wanted to. After all, Devonte and Sal were still alive. He couldn't just leave them. He was responsible for them. He had to think of a plan and fast, otherwise it would be too late, for all of them.

Suddenly the car he was leaning against started to move, first slowly and then with incredible speed. It was lifted right off the ground and flipped through the air, landing on it's roof in the middle of the street.

“Found you.” Dante said with a laugh. He was standing where the car had been, he flipped the car one handed, as if it was nothing more than a paperweight. Tommy V. was screwed.

-WZ-

“Why would you run from me, Ralph?” Roddrick said, his voice was strange. Ralph heard it, but he also *heard* it. It was in his head. “I'm not here to hurt you, to cause you pain.” Ralph knew he was telling the truth. He wasn't sure how he knew it, he just did. He could feel it in his bones. Roddrick didn't want to hurt him. “I want to help you.” He wanted to help Ralph.

He knew that to be true on a fundamental level, as much as he knew anything else. He was more sure of Roddrick's motivations than he was of his own name. Roddrick just wanted to help him, if only he would stop getting in his own way and preventing him from doing so.

“All I ask is your trust.” Roddrick said. It was a fair trade, for all that Roddrick had to offer. All Ralph had to do in return was to stop questioning his motives. Stop fighting him at every turn. “Can you trust me, Ralph? Can you put your faith in me?” It was a fair question. A fair question from a good man. An honest man. A man that Ralph was lucky to know. Lucky just to be around.

“You ca. . .” Ralph started to respond when Enzo let out a scream, dropping Ralph to the floor. It pulled him out of his daze, suddenly his senses returned to him. He remembered where he was, who he was. Roddrick seemed shaken as he looked back at Enzo, who was on his knees, holding his head. He was in honest to god pain.

Was this a reaction to Roddrick's control? Ralph looked over at the theater kids, lingering a few extra seconds on Carla's face. None of the other's seemed to be in pain. Whatever was happening to Enzo was different.

“What are you doing?” Roddrick demanded. Enzo looked up at him, his eyes had a weird glaze over them. “On your feet!” Ralph crawled away from the center of attention. Whatever was about to happen, he didn't want to be in the center of it all. No one seemed to notice, they were all distracted by Enzo, who was still screaming on the ground.

“I demand you get on your feet immediately!” Roddrick yelled, his face turning red. Enzo nodded, gritting his teeth as he got to his feet. “What is wrong with you?”

Enzo looked up at Roddrick, as he got to his feet. He held out his hands to Roddrick, who took his hands. “Wha. . .” Enzo tried to talk, his voice was rough.

“I asked you a question!” Roddrick snapped, he wasn't amused.

“What did you do to me?” Enzo asked, Roddrick let go of Enzo in shock, attempting to take a step back, but Enzo reached out and grabbed him, pulling him back in. “What the fuck did you do to me?” For the first time, Roddrick looked scared. Truly scared.

“How are you doing this?” Roddrick asked, his voice cracking. The theater kids all seemed to be freaking out. Ralph slowly got to his feet, he needed to be ready for anything. There was no telling what was about to happen. Even knowing that, he wasn't ready for what came next.

Without warning, Enzo's arm shoot forward, stabbing into Roddrick. He pulled his arm back revealing a blade that seemed to have come from nowhere. Roddrick's eyes were wide in surprise. The theater kids broke into screams, a few of the guys started running towards their dying leader.

“What the fuck did you to me!” Enzo screamed, stabbing Roddrick again and again, as the blood poured out of him, the theater kids stopped screaming. The guys rushing towards Enzo stopped in their tracks. They were coming out of their trances. Regaining their sense of selves.

“Oh god!” Carla cried out. Ralph's heart broke as he saw the fear on her face. He wanted to do something to help her, but he had no idea what he was supposed to do. How do you help someone who just had their whole live violated in such a profound way?

Enzo watched Roddrick fall to the floor, a weird sense of pride emulating off of him, which was quickly replaced with a sense of dread as he looked at the bloody blade in his hand. He took a step back, dropping it to the floor. He looked around at everyone else in the room, it was as if he just realized what he had done.

He took a few steps back, turned and ran. Leaving the scene of the crime behind him. Ralph just stood, rooted to the spot, not sure of what he should do.

-WZ-

“What?” Dante said, dropping Tommy V. to the ground as he stumbled back a few steps. He seemed to be out of it, as if he was finally coming down off of whatever he was on. Tommy V. rubbed his neck, which was still sore from where Dante had been choking him.

“Dante?” Tommy V. said, his voice harsh. His throat was in a great deal of pain. He knew he was just moments from death. Fate seemed to have given him a reprieve.

“What did I do?” Dante asked, looking around. He seemed to be more terrified of his own actions than anything else.

“You killed people.” Tommy V. said, getting to his feet. He didn't care if Dante was high, that didn't absolve him of his crimes.

“I remember.” Dante said, his voice falling.

“You're going to pay. I'm going to make you.” Tommy V. said, taking a step forward before falling to the ground. He was a lot more beat up than he cared to admit. Dante watched him for a moment before turning and running off, leaving Tommy V. to the mess that had been made of his home. His mother was going to kill him when she got home.

-WZ-

“I slept with him.” Amber said, sitting on the edge of the stage. She was disgusted with herself. Everyone there had similar stories. Ralph couldn't help but feel grateful that he never fell under his sway, at least not all the way.

“How could he do that to us?” Carla asked, her voice hollow, as if the happy-go-lucky spirit that was normally her trademark was crushed. Ralph didn't know what to say. How do you make someone feel better after something like that? “I trusted him, I loved him. I would have done anything for him. How could he do that?” She asked again, this time Ralph got the impression he wasn't meant to answer. It wasn't a question.

“How did he do it?” Albert asked. Ralph knew the answer, but he didn't know how to tell them. How do you tell someone about magic and expect them to believe it? He knew it was true and still had a hard time buying it.

“He drugged us.” Simone said. Her voice was shaking, but not out of fear or sadness. She was pissed. Not that Ralph could blame her. He was just starting to fall under Roddrick's control and he felt horribly violated himself, how much worse must it have been for people who were completely under his control. Some of them for days on end.

“What do we do?” Larry said, his eyes locked on the dead body of Roddrick. Ms. Diaz was crying in the stands. As soon as her mind was her own again, she just broke down. A few of the students were sitting next to her, trying to cheer her up, to no avail. Larry was attempting to step up and take charge, but he was clearly in over his head. As were they all.

“We call the cops.” Carla said.

“And tell them what?” Larry demanded. It was a fair question. The police wouldn't believe everything that had just happened.

“We tell them the truth.” Ralph said, getting to his feet.

“And end up locked in a rubber room?” Simone snapped.

“To a point.” Ralph said. “We were here to rehearse for the play when Enzo showed up and killed Roddrick.”

“And let Roddrick off the hook?” Amber demanded.

“He's dead. Can't do anything to him now.” Albert said.

“People need to know what he was.” Amber said.

“No one would believe us.” Carla said, defeat in her voice.

“We use Ralph's plan.” Larry said, his voice firm. “It's the only way to get out of this.” His eyes never left the dead body. Nobody was happy with the decision but everyone agreed.

-WZ-

“There is no point in dragging this out.” Sheriff Simon said. He was standing on the other side of the table, glaring down at Mario. “I have all the evidence I need, but if you make me drag this out in court, I'll make you pay!”

“I'm telling you the truth.” Mario snapped. “I didn't do anything!”

“Are you sure this is how you want to play it?” The Sheriff asked. Before Mario could answer the door opened and in walked a deputy. The Sheriff's head snapped to look at him, he was not pleased. “What are you doing in here?

“I need to speak with you out here.” The deputy said.

“Not now.”

“But sir, it's important!” He said, he seemed shaken up. Mario couldn't help but wonder what was going on. It was a mild curiosity, after all he had his own issues to worry about.

“It can wait.” The Sheriff said, turning back towards Mario. “Until after I get the confession.” He said, locking eyes with Mario. “However long that takes.”

“It's about the case sir.” The Deputy said, his voice cracking. The Sheriff didn't strike Mario as someone who handled disappointed well.

“Fine.” The Sheriff snapped. He turned to look at Mario one last time before leaving, telling him “This isn't done!”

The Sheriff and Deputy stopped just outside the door and started talking. Mario couldn't overhear what they were saying but the conversation started to get heated.

“I told you my son was innocent!” Mario could hear his father's voice from down the hall. The Sheriff and Deputy turned to look at him as Mr. Russo came into view.

“What are you doing back here?” The Sheriff demanded. He did not look pleased, but Mario's father looked even less so.

“You have your killer, now I want my son!”

“There is no reason to believe that your son wasn't involved!” The Sheriff argued.

“Sir, Dante confessed to everything. He knew details that we didn't even know, and what's more, he confessed to more murders at the Veno's residents.”

“What? Why didn't you tell me!” The Sheriff demanded, he made to leave but was stopped by Mario's father.

“What of my son?” Tony demanded. The Sheriff looked back at Mario, a look of disgust in his eyes.

“Take him.” He answered as he pushed past him.

**Chapter 17**

“So he just let you go?” Ralph asked, after Mario had told him about getting arrested while investigating Al's murder. The two friends were sitting at the park, after Mario called Ralph and asked him to meet him. Ralph wasn't sure if he wanted to, but in the end he decided to hear him out. He was glad he did.

“He didn't have much choice after Dante confessed to everything.” Mario said.

“I can't believe what he did to Tommy V.'s gang.” Ralph said.

“I saw Tommy V. at the hospital, he was pretty beat up himself.” Mario said, reflecting on his conversation with Tommy V. earlier in the evening. Tommy V. almost took his head off the second he saw him, but once Mario explained what happened Tommy V. lost the will to be angry and just fell back into his seat. He told Mario all about everything that happened. How Sal, Mike and Devonte were in crucial condition, while Aaron and Jason were dead. It was heartbreaking to see Tommy V. so defeated.

“Enzo was on the same shit as Dante.” Ralph said, recounting the night he had. “Him coming down off it, was the only thing that saved me.”

“I can't believe that Roddrick had that kind of power.” Mario said.

“I didn't know power like that existed.” Ralph said. “It was horrible.”

“I'm sorry I couldn't help you.” Mario said, feeling useless.

“It's okay. I did okay.” Ralph said. “I see why you get so invested in all this. It's crazy what's happening out there, without us ever knowing.” Ralph put words to what Mario had been feeling. He wanted to walk away from the occult, but it had been nagging at him. How could he just turn a blind eye to everything he knew was out there.

“It's a lot.” Mario said. Not meeting his friend's glaze.

“I want in.” Ralph said. Mario turned to look at his friend, sure that he heard him wrong. “You heard me right.”

“You sure?” Mario asked. “I honestly don't even know if I'm still in.”

“We both know you are, and now I am too.” Ralph said, Mario nodded.

“Thanks.” Mario said, not knowing what else to say. Ralph patted him on the back as he jumped to his feet.

“Don't mention it. Now let's get home and get some sleep.” Ralph said. Mario got up and then remembered the spell in his pocket. He pulled it out.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” He handed Ralph the spell. “I found your spell, just before the whole arrested thing.”

Ralph looked down at the spell, his mind playing over everything that happened. All he had wanted was Mario to come through for him and now that he had, he wasn't sure what to do with it. At least not at first. He tore the paper up and tossed into the wind.

“What are you doing?” Mario asked.

“I had my mind fucked with. I would never do that to someone else.” Ralph said, shuddering as he remembered everything that happened. “I never should have asked you.”

“Thank god.” Mario said, a weight off his shoulders. “I really didn't feel good with that spell. Messing with people's mind just seemed. . .”

“Wrong.” Ralph finished for him. Mario nodded.