

Mario Chronicles

#1: The Girl in White

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Chapter 1

 The warm night air slowly brushed past Mario as he laid back on his roof staring up at the stars. His mind racing beyond his control, more thoughts than he would ever care to admit. Most of them aimed at Cynthia, the girl next door. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever laid eyes on in his sixteen years. He let out a sigh, he didn’t kid himself into thinking she even knew he existed.

 That is something he was going to change. His best friend Ralph got them an invitation to a party up in the mountains. It was being thrown by the football team captain, James Burkle, it was almost certain that as head cheerleader, Cynthia would be there. Tonight was the night he was going to make his move. He had played it out in his head over and over. Him walking up to her, in his beat suit and telling her how beautiful she looked under the night sky. She was taken with him right away and he pulled her in tight for a kiss.

 That kiss would change his life forever. They would start going steady and get married after college. Knock out a few kids and live happily ever after. A bright smile crossed his face as he looked at the night sky, playing out his life with her in his mind.

 Mario had never been a popular guy, he had always been a bit of an outsider. His parents didn’t have a lot of money, they owned a small shop on the outskirts of town and made just enough money to get by. Going to a school where most the students had money to throw around made it even harder being poor.

 Halts Glee was a mostly private community where almost everyone came from money. Mario’s family moved there five years prior, after his father lost his factory job. He was in an accident and lost the use of his left arm. He was forced to leave the factory and used the money he won in the settlement to open this new shop.

Mario was against moving here, but as he was only 11 at the time and he didn’t really have a say in the matter. He was miserable his first few months in this nowhere town. Truth be told he had never even heard of Halts Glee, Denver before moving here and the people who lived here didn’t much care for outsiders. He wasn’t sure how his parents dealt with it, but for him it was unbearable. Even in school it was made clear he wasn’t welcome. That was until he met Ralph. He was the only person around who didn’t treat him like an unwelcome guest. To be fear Ralph wasn’t born here either. His dad was a marine and retired in this out of the way town to try and find some peace and quiet.

The two friends became inseparable ever since they first met. When Ralph stood up for Mario in class. It didn’t help Ralph, who had just started to become accepted himself, but he didn’t care. He hated this place and made no secret about it. As the two grew older and entered high school the fact that they were outsiders was pointed out less and less. They started to become accepted but still weren’t well liked by the “in crowd”.

Mario knew that the same couldn’t be said for his parents. They were still looked upon with scorn and Mario always wondered why they stayed here. But he knew it wasn’t his place to ask. This was where they lived and where they were going to stay. It was all they ever told him when he was young and kept asking them. He learned to let it rest, but that didn’t mean he was planning on staying once he hit eighteen. The second that day came to pass he was out of this town and starting his life proper.

As he laid there, with these thoughts racing through his mind and the cool night breeze blowing past him, he started to feel his conciseness leave him. The sweet embrace of sleep was slowly over taking him and he was content to let it have him.

“Mario! Hey Mario!” The voice came from behind him. Mario let out a low grumble that was meant to be a reply but fell short. The window slid farther open as Ralph crawled through it. He was dressed up, looking much wealthier than he really was. His dark hair slicked back. “You better not be sleeping man.”

He slowly got to his feet. “Ahh” he almost slipped and fell off the roof, but he caught his balance. He had never understood why Mario was so fond of hanging out up here. It was dangerous, but then again Mario always seemed to love danger. He would never admit it, but given the chance to do something reckless, Mario would always be first in line.

Steading himself, Ralph kicked Mario in the side, hard. Mario shot up holding his side. “What?” he looked around before spotting Ralph. “Ralph? What was that for?” Ralph lowered himself to sit next to his friend.

“What are doing asleep?” Ralph asked Mario.

“I wasn’t sleeping, just resting my eyes. Waiting on you.” Mario said as he slowly got to his feet and stretched out. Ralph couldn’t help but laugh at his friend.

“Resting your eyes? So that’s what you’re wearing to the party?” Ralph asked, slowly backing up towards the window. He didn’t want to risk standing again. Mario looked down at his clothes. He was wearing a nice dress shirt and a pair of slacks. It would have been a nice outfit if not for the fact that his little nap made them wrinkled.

“Maybe I should change?” Mario asked, running his hand through his hair. “And I should brush my hair too.” He started to walk towards the window as Ralph reentered the bedroom.

 “I think that might be a good idea. At least if you want to make a good impression with Cynthia.” Ralph loved watching Mario turn red. The Irish in him always spilled the beans on when he was embarrassed. It was one of the best parts of being friends with Mario.

 Mario tore off his shirt and started digging through his closet to find a replacement. Ralph leaned over to look inside, it had dozens of empty hangers and piles and piles of clothes on the floor. Mario was digging through the piles looking for a shirt. Smelling them as he goes.

 “Is this really how you pick out what to wear?” Ralph asked, disbelief in his voice. Mario looked back confused.

 “Yeah, isn’t this how everyone does it?” Mario asked, no sarcasm in his voice. Ralph just shook his head, he leaned into the closet and picked out the only dress shirt on a hanger.

 “Just wear this one.” Mario looked at the shirt being handed to him. It was a blue shirt with a cowboy design on it. Mario just shook his head and backed away from the shirt.

 “You’re joking right? I can’t wear that.” Mario spit out. The very thought of the shirt touching him filled him with fear. Ralph looked at the shirt confused.

 “What’s wrong with it?” Ralph asked, not getting what the big deal was.

 “It’s lame. Cynthia would never talk to me in that. I need something with class.” Mario said, pulling himself up right acting like he was a professional. Ralph tossed him the shirt as he started laughing.

 “Dress the part all you want,” Ralph said as Mario caught the shirt, he was caught off guard by the shirt flying at him. “She will still see right through you.”

 “Please, one look at me in the right shirt and she will be putty in my hands.” Mario said with his trademarked grin. Ralph turned and started out the room. Picking up Mario’s keys as he went.

 “One smell of your other shirts and she’ll be putty alright. The smell alone would knock her out.” Ralph didn’t even slow down as he walked. Mario watched Ralph leave, he looked from the cowboy shirt in his hand to the pile of dirty clothes on the floor. He finally let out a sigh.

 “Wait up Ralph!” he ran from the room as he put on his shirt. Tonight was going to be the first night of the rest of his life. Cowboy shirt or not, nothing was going to stand in his way of getting the girl!

Chapter 2

 Mario pulled his Ford Falcon into the drive way. His face blushed red as he parked the car and it gave a loud yell. It was an older car, early 60’s. His dad sank his savings into buying Mario a car and he appreciated it a great deal, but it was old and run down. His most prized possession and it looked like garbage next to his classmate’s cars. They all had brand new cars that run like angels. Ralph didn’t seem to mind the old fashion car as he exited it with a grin on his face. But Mario chalked that up to the fact that Ralph didn’t even own a car.

 “Let’s get a move on!” the excitement was radiating off of Ralph as he walked. Mario slowly exited the car and took a look at all the happy go lucky people. Men and women who seemed to be having the time of their lives. They had no idea how important tonight was. Even Ralph seemed to think tonight was just about some party.

 Ralph stopped a few feet ahead of Mario and looked back at him. “You alright man?” Ralph asked, concern showing through. Mario nodded, picking up his leather jacket and taking a few steps towards his friend as he put it on.

 “I’m fine. I’m just thinking about how to make my move.” Mario said trying to hide behind a false sense of bravery that he didn’t truly feel. Ralph patted Mario on the back as they entered the house.

 “Just keep that confidence and you’ll do fine.” Ralph reassured his friend. They entered the house and found the party already under way. Mario watched the drunks playing games and dancing. He had never tried drinking before, he always kind of wondered what all the fuss was about. He looked to Ralph.

 “Think we should try something to drink?” He didn’t wait for a reply before leading Ralph towards the kitchen. Ralph was trying to hold him back.

 “I don’t know if this is a good idea Mario.” Ralph tried to walk away, but Mario dragged him along with him.

 “Come on, I need some courage and I don’t want to try it the first time alone.” Mario pleaded with him. Ralph let out a sigh and motioned for Mario to lead the way.

 “Fine, but just one drink.” Ralph didn’t even get a chance to finish talking before Mario already got two drinks from the party’s bartender. Mario came back over to Ralph with a giant grin on his face.

 “Ready?” Mario asked as he handed Ralph his cup. Mario eyed the beer hungrily. Mixed parts nervous and excited. But he had the hope that this would give him the needed boost to go talk to Cynthia. Ralph took the cup from him and eyed it uncertainly. He really didn’t want to drink it. Even the smell of it made Ralph feel sick.

 “As I’ll ever be.” Mario tossed the drink back, his face told it all as he gagged but forced it down. Seeing the disgust on Mario’s face made Ralph want to drink it even less than he already did. But he knew deep down that Mario would never let him live it down if he didn’t finish it. He slowly lifted the glass up to his mouth and drank it. The taste was even worse than he thought. He spit some of it back out, he never wanted to taste it again. He looked up at Mario who had big grin on his face.

 “That was good! What did you think?” Mario asked. Ralph knew that Mario was lying. He was only saying he liked it because it was what was expected of him. Ralph forced himself to smile as he looked at his friend.

 “Uh yeah. That was good. We should get some more. Later. For now, let’s find your girl.” He said as he put his half full cup down on the counter and walked back into the living room. His new goal for the night was to avoid another beer.

 “Let’s do this!” Mario said with more bravado than he felt. He stepped back to glance in the cup Ralph put down, he spotted the half full cup and smiled to himself as he followed Ralph out of the room. He knew Ralph wasn’t ready to start drinking, but hey at least he tried.

 The party seemed to be getting lively. Couples making out in the corner and people’s private conversations getting louder and louder as they got drunker and drunker. Ralph seemed to be getting more and more uneasy as the night went on, but Mario was just soaking it all up. He always wanted to be part of the in crowd. Go to parties and always have something to do. He loved Ralph and wouldn’t trade their friendship for anything in this world, but he really wished that he had more friends. When Ralph was busy the loneliness ate away at Mario.

 It wasn’t just the not wanting to be alone. It was this town. This was nothing to do here, so being popular, it would be a nice distraction. Deep down Mario knew that was all it would be, a distraction. He needed to do more with his life and he knew it. He felt it deep in his gut that he was meant for something big, something amazing and this mediocre life he was living now wouldn’t even be a footnote in the stories told about him. He just had to make it to that point in time.

 Which was easier said than done. The two friends spotted Cynthia not long after leaving the kitchen but never moved any closer. They spent most of the night standing around, leaning back against the wall watching Cynthia talk to her friends and a few guys, including James. Mario tried to joke it off, like he was just waiting for the right moment to make his play, but Ralph knew better. Mario was a good guy, but he wasn’t bold. Ralph knew that the only way Mario would make a move was if he forced him to.

 Cynthia and James seemed to be hitting it off, she was laughing at all his jokes and finding excuses to touch his arm. Every time she touched him, Mario felt a ping of jealousy. The only reason he came to this party was to see her. To spend time with her and make her his girl. It damn sure wasn’t to stand here talking with Ralph while watching her throw herself at some other guy. If he wanted to talk to Ralph, he could have just stayed home and saved himself gas and time.

 James leaned in and whispered something to Cynthia causing her to blush as she responded. Mario clutched his fist in sync with her smile. He needed to go over there and set things right, she didn’t belong with that over grown jock. Mario just had to prove it to her. This was it, every man had a defining moment in their life where they go from being a boy to being a man. He took a deep breath to try and steady his nerves. With every breath he took the rest of the world faded away and Cynthia and James came into sharper focus. Till the whole world was gone and only the three of them existed.

 Mario felt his nerves give way to his confidence. He knew that what happened next was going to change his his life forever. It was just a feeling he had that he couldn’t explain. He let that knowledge wash over him as he took a step forward, everything was going to go perfectly.

 Mario held his head high as he took his second step towards his goal, a strong, firm hand on his arm pulled him out of his narrow focus. The rest of the world came spinning back into focus, and with it his nerves and lack of confidence. The weight of the world came crashing down onto Mario. He didn’t know how he could have ever thought he was smooth enough to steal her away. He wasn’t good enough for her. James was a star athlete, what was he? Nothing, just a wallflower.

 “Mario! Mario! Are you listening to me?” Ralph was shaking Mario and all but yelling in his face. Mario shook his head and turned to look at him. How long had he been talking? Mario had no idea, nor did he care. He needed to get that confidence back and make his move. He wasn’t leaving this house without at least trying.

 “Seriously, Mario are you even in there?” Ralph just wouldn’t stop. Did he always talk this much? Mario’s frustration was reaching an all-time high.

 “Where else would I be?” He said a lot more sharply than he meant. It wasn’t Ralph’s fault that today was going to hell. He didn’t deserve to have Mario take his anger out on him. He took another breath and looked at his friend. “Sorry, what were you saying?”

 Ralph burst out laughing and shook his head. The anger swelled up inside Mario again at the laughter. Ralph kept bugging him with his nonstop talking and now when Mario was trying to listen he just laughed. What the hell was that about? To make matters worse Cynthia looked over at them. Mario’s face burned red as he noticed her. This was just what he needed, to make a fool out of himself in front of her.

 “Never mind. Look why don’t you just go talk to her?” Ralph told him. Mario wished it was that easy, but he knew it wasn’t.

 “I can’t.” Ralph looked at him with that condescending look he got whenever he thought he knew what was best for Mario. Mario hated it when Ralph got like that. “I couldn’t just ditch you like that.”

 Ralph laughed at him and Mario turned even brighter red. Ok that was a weak excuses and Mario knew it even before he said it.

 “I won’t mind. In fact, I insist.” Ralph told him. He stepped back and started pushing Mario forward. Mario started to stumble forward. Turned out this was his moment, and this wasn’t the way he thought it would go. Ralph robbed him of his moment of clarity right before he made his move and then forced him to make it anyways. Damn him!

 Cynthia was deep in conversation with James, they seemed to be hitting it off very well, so well in fact that their friends had moved off into their own conversations and left them alone, just the way they wanted it. Their body language screamed “leave us be”. Mario knew this, he could see it clear as day and his fear of rejection swelled inside him stronger than ever before. He wanted to turn back towards Ralph, or even just run from the building and pretend this night never happened. He wanted to do anything but talk to her. Anything but make an ass of himself in front of the woman of his dreams.

 Cynthia looked more beautiful tonight than Mario had ever seen her. She had her hair curled loosely down her face, her bright lips turned up in the most amazing smile Mario had ever seen. Her red dress hugging her short tight frame in all the right ways. Mario’s mind went blank as he took in her beauty up close. As good as she looked from afar it was nothing to her up close.

 He found himself starting to sweat as he neared her. James annoying voice grew louder and louder, only interrupted by the angelic sound of Cynthia’s laughter. The smell of her perfume drifted his already distracted mind farther way into fantasies of the two of them off alone together. A stupid grin dawns across his face as his mind drifts.

 Mario grabbed Cynthia’s hand and ran out of the house with her, they ran till the house and everyone else was long behind them. They locked eyes, and, in that look, he knew that they would spend the rest of their lives together. The darkness of the woods, which during any other time would be creepy or downright scary, was now only adding to the romance of the moment.

 “Thank you, Mario, for getting me out of that dreadful party. If I ever have to put up with talking to them again I would just die” Cynthia told him, she moved closer to him. Her lips, so full and inviting, kept calling his name. He wanted, no he needed to kiss her.

 “You don’t have to worry about them. From now on it’s just me and you.” He told her, all the charm he could muster coming out. She smiled and moved even closer. Her lips all but touching his own.

 “Just the way I want it.” Her hot breath brushing against him. He couldn’t take his eyes of her lips, they just kept calling out his name. He glanced up into her bright blue eyes, they invited him in. He would be hard pressed not to get lost in them. He didn’t remember consciously making the choice, it was almost as if his body was acting on its own accord and he didn’t fault it. How could anyone do anything but, when she was so close, and those lips were just screaming your name.

 Their lips touch for the first time and it was even better than he had ever thought possible. Mario couldn’t believe how lucky he was. This was just how he wanted tonight to go. The two of them alone, hitting it off. His hands found themselves on her body. He let himself get lost in the passion of the kiss, enjoying every second of it.

 “Uh can we help you?” James voice broke through the ecstasy. Mario didn’t want to open his eyes. The reality of the moment came crashing down on him. He never left the house. Cynthia never ran off with him and worst of all, he never kissed her. He opened his eyes and his worst fears were brought to bear.

 He was standing right in front of James and Cynthia making out with thin air. The two of them look on him with disgust. Mario felt the red spring forth on his face, harder than ever before in his life. Everything he wanted had just been flushed down the toilet. Even if he did somehow have a shot with her it was gone now. Why would she want anything to do with the creepy weirdo who just walks up and pretended to kiss her?

 He could feel the eyes of everyone in the party resting on him. It added to the horror he felt. Added to the dread he felt as he looked into those most beautiful of eyes. The moment seemed to drag on and on, he knew everyone was just waiting for him to reply.

 “Are you ok?” Cynthia asked, her voice as breathtaking as her looks. She looked at him with pity and that was a look that would haunt Mario for the rest of his days. He could hear Ralph laughing, silently behind him. He didn’t dare look or risk looking like an even bigger fool.

 The way he saw it was that he had two options put in front of him. He could turn and run out of here. Never show his face to any of these people again. Which would make school hell on earth. The second choice, he makes his move. He knew full well that she would shoot him down and he would look foolish but at least he tried. At least he could comfort himself with the knowledge that he accomplished what he had set out to do. Either way school was going to suck from now on.

 Mario shallowed hard and looked Cynthia dead in the eyes. He turned ever so slightly to block James from his view. If he was going to do this, there was no reason to make it even harder on himself. She gave him a small smile, more out of fear and unease than any affection she might have felt.

 “Uh, hi, uh I was, uh, just like, kind of.” Every word he spit out made him hate himself even more. What was wrong with him? Why couldn’t he talk? Just spit it out Mario. Be a man and go for what you want!

 “Spit it out man. What the hell is wrong with you?” James demanded, pushing Mario back a step so that he was now standing between Mario and Cynthia. Cynthia pushed James back a step.

 “Be nice. I think something is wrong with him.” She moved closer to Mario and looked right in his eyes. A kindness there that he always knew had to belong with those soulful eyes. “Are you ok?” she asked gently. Mario nodded a lot more eagerly than he had meant to.

 “I’m fine! Um look uh, Cynthia.” He looked down at the ground, he couldn’t look at her while he talked. It was too hard. “I was just wanting to know um, well you see.” *Please god just kill me now.* He thought to himself as he stumbled through his request. This was insane. *Just look her in the eyes and ask*. *No more uh or um or beating around the bush. Be a man and be one now!*

 He looked up and locked eyes with Cynthia. It was so sudden and out of nowhere that she fell back a step. He stood up nice and tall and tried to radiate a confidence that he didn’t have. He took a deep breath to readied himself to speak.

 “I want to ask you to dance, and to see if maybe we could go out sometime?” he got out, a lot faster than he had meant to, but hey at least he said it. The shock on her face was clear as day. The rest of the people at the party started laughing and talking to each other. James burst up laughing. He clearly wanted to say something but couldn’t stop laughing long enough to get anything out.

 Cynthia face showed the war going on just beneath the surface. Mario’s heart stopped, he knew it wouldn’t beat again until she said something. Good or bad at least this god-awful moment would be over soon. Mario started to pray that it would just end. After what felt like a million years her face gave him his answer.

 Her eyes wrinkled and a sorrow he had never seen before showed up inside them. Her lips curved into a fake smile that only purpose was to soften the blow.

 “Uh I’m sorry, but I’m not in the mood right now. I’m kind of in the middle of a conversation. Maybe some other time.” She said far sweeter than he had any right to expect. Mario bit his lip and just nodded his head. Slowly backing away from her.

 “It’s ok. I understand. Sorry.” He said defeated. He turned and walked away from her quickly. Out of the corner of his eyes he could see people pointing and laughing at him. It killed him inside. *I should never have walked up to her, but at least I tried*, he thought to himself bitterly. *And she was really kind about it. So that’s something right?*

 “Can you believe him? Like he really had a shot at being with you.” As fast as Mario tried to walk away, it turned out he wasn’t fast enough to avoid hearing James and Cynthia’s reaction to his actions. Cynthia broke into a silent giggle, all sweetness gone from her. Replaced with contempt.

 “I don’t know, but it was so embarrassing. I can’t believe he talked to me. You know how much damage control I’m going have to do now? Every loser at school is going to think its okay to talk to me. Ew like I would be caught dead dating a freak like him.” Every word out of her mouth was like a dagger to his heart. He couldn’t handle it. All the kind feelings he felt towards her just one second ago were suddenly gone.

 Ralph walked up to him, a look of deep pity on his face. Mario knew that Ralph was his true friend and that he really cared for him. He knew deep down that Ralph would never make fun of him and do whatever he could to make him feel better. The thing was, he didn’t want to feel better.

 “You okay man?” Ralph asked, carefully. He knew Mario was hurting and he was trying to take his feelings into account. That was the last thing he wanted right now.

 “Fine.” Mario stormed past Ralph, not even slowing down. All Mario could hear was the sound of the party goers having fun in the background. It was too much for him to handle. He powered his way towards the front door.

 “Where are you going?” Ralph asked. Worry starting to shine through his voice. Mario couldn’t deal with this right now. He hated himself for what he was about to do and hoped that Ralph could forgive him.

 “Home. Find your own ride out of this dumb.” Mario throw open the front door and started towards his car.

Taking off at a run. People new to the party eyed him, questioning his weird behavior. He didn’t care, they would soon learn the truth anyways. He heard Ralph calling his name, but he didsn’t stop or turn around or let off any sign that he heard him.

 Mario pulled open his car door and hopped inside. He needed to get home. That was all he cared about. Go home, sleep and pretend this night never happened. Maybe this was a good time to drop out of high school. 10 years of school was more than enough for anyone.

 His car started right up as Mario broke down and started to cry, just sitting there in the parking lot. He gave himself a few minutes of self-pity before shaking his head and reversing. This was going to be the longest hour drive of his life.

 At first, he was forced through necessity to drive slowly and carefully. There were so many cars blocking his exit that he didn’t really have a choice. His humiliation mounted as he replayed his actions over and over in his head. He couldn’t believe what a fool he made of himself in front of her. All he had been thinking about for the past week was that moment. That one second when he would make his move and win her heart once and for all. The moment came and went. He failed horribly. He could never forgive himself. He practiced that conversation time and again, he knew every word that he was going to say ahead of time. How did he let it go so wrong?

 After what felt like an eternity to him, he finally made it past the endless rows of parked cars and pulled out onto the narrow path leading down the mountain side. On the drive up this path he was terrified that he would go too fast and fly off the edge, now all fear was gone. Perhaps part of him even hoped that he would drive off the edge. His foot started to press harder and harder on the gas petal till he was pushing 80 down a road that was barely wide enough to fit his car. He was almost begging for death.

 The thoughts of facing his classmates filled him with a dread he had never known. How could he show his face again after that? He shook his head as he turned a sharp corner, His car almost spun out of control. His first thought was to let the car go over and just let it end. But that thought only lasted a second before his survival instincts kicked in. He struggled with the steering wheel, giving it everything he had to keep the car on the road. The car titled on the edge, but he managed to keep it on the road. The car, now back on all four wheels continued its descent down the hill side. A bit slower than before. Maybe Mario wanted to live after all.

 He started to drive a bit slower, reconfiguring the conversation in his mind so that it became something that he could live with. It wasn’t working, but he knew that there was nothing else he could do. He wanted to live and couldn’t hide in his room for the rest of his life. Things were going to suck for a while, but he would make it through to the other side.

 The farther he got down the mountainside the thicker the trees got. After a ways it got so bad that you could mistake this for the rain forest instead of a mountain. For the life of him he couldn’t imagine why anyone would live all the way up here. How could you live so far from civilization? Just the thought of it made Mario feel so alone. It gave him chills. He always thought of himself as a city boy, so much so in fact that even living in Halts Glee felt like a prison sentence to him. The second he turned 18 he was going to run as far away from this town as he could. There was nothing here for him, and even less on this god forsaking mountain.

 A tight turn up ahead pulled him out of his self-pity and future plans and brought him fully into the present. He slammed on the breaks and made a sharp turn, the back edge of the car rolled off the side of the cliff, Mario felt the car start to pull him back off. He slammed on the gas and willed the car forward. He started to slide back, his life flashing before his eyes.

 “Please God, don’t let me die.” He screamed to the heavens above. The car lurched forward as the fourth wheel found its footing on the road. “Thank god.” Mario let out a huge sigh of relief as he got the car back under control. No more speeding, at least till he was down this hill.

 He looked around and saw nothing but trees. No houses or street lights as far as he could see. If the car had been stuck here he would have had to walk all the way down the hill. Or back up to the house party. And there was no way he could go back there. He really needed to be more careful.

 Mario rounds another corner and for a second, he doubted his eyes. The headlights shone on what appeared to be a girl, barefoot in a small white dress. He didn’t even notice that he stopped driving and was just watching her walk. Something about her spoke to Mario, he needed to talk to her. He shook his head and started driving again. He drove slowly as he passed her. She turned to look at him and his heart skipped a beat as he saw her face. She was by far the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

 He took a deep, calming breath and pulled over next to her. She stopped and looked at him questioningly. He got out of the car and smiled at her, trying to keep his cool and not make the same mistake he made with Cynthia.

 “Hi, I was just wondering if you need a ride?” he looked ahead of them and saw only darkness. “It’s a long way to civilization.” He said, feeling awkward. She didn’t say anything. “And you are barefoot.” He added trying not to sound creepy. She smiled at him and nodded her head.

 “I’d like that. Thank you.” She opened the passenger door and got in. Mario’s heart started beating faster and faster as he got back into the car. He couldn’t believe his luck. This girl was so beautiful, and she was sitting right next to him. And the best part was he could have a conversation with her. Maybe tonight wasn’t a total loss.

 “I’m Mario.” he said in what he hoped was a cool type of way. He kept trying to keep his cool as he talked to her.

 “Nice to meet you.” She said simply. Her smile warming up the car all on its own. Mario knew his face was blushing bright red but for once he didn’t care.

 “What’s your name?” he pressed, hoping he didn’t push too hard. She looked away at the trees that they passed by.

 “My name is Alyssa.” She said, looking back at him. “Mario, I like that name.” Mario giggled uncontrollably and looked straight ahead trying not to look a fool.

 “So. . . What are you doing all the way up here?” he asked, then glancing down at her bare feet. “Barefoot no less.” He added. She looked away again. Great, he hit a sore subject. He needed to learn when to hold his tongue.

 “I was on a date with my boyfriend.” Mario’s heart dropped, all the hope and excitement he had felt since picking her up drained from him as those words left her lips. “Or I guess my ex.” She continued. The hope sprang back into Mario. “We got into a big fight and he kicked me out of the car.” She said shaking her head. “Made me walk home. I’ve been walking down the mountain for over an hour in the freezing cold.” She finished up.

 It hit Mario, he couldn’t believe he didn’t think of it sooner. It was really cold outside. His foul mood at being so coldly rejected back at the party had made him so focused only on getting home that he had never even noticed how cold it was. Now that he thought about it, it was really cold and that’s even with his heavy leather jacket on. She must be freezing in that tiny white dress. Sure enough, her arms were covered in Goosebumps.

 “I’m really sorry to hear that.” He stopped the car and she looked over at him, concern flashing across her face. He quickly took his jacket off and the concern on her face grew. “He sounds like a jerk”

 “Why are we stopping?” she asked, fear clearly coming through in her voice*. Great Mario, way to freak her out*. He handed her his jacket.

 “I just wanted to let you use my jacket. To fight off the cold, you know?” She smiled at him.

 “Oh.” She leaned forward, and he helped her put it on. “That’s very sweet of you.”

 “It’s no problem. You just looked very cold.” He told her as he started the car back up. He glanced over at her. She looked even more beautiful sitting there in his jacket. Halts Glee was such a small town. How was it that he had never seen her before?

 “I was, I can’t remember it being this cold before.” Her voice was so sweet and innocent sounding. Mario could listen to her talk all day.

 “It is unnaturally cold. But then again I don’t really spend a lot of time up in the mountains.” He confessed. She smiled as she looked out the window, taking in the dark trees being illuminated by the car’s headlights.

 “Really? I love it up here. I couldn’t imagine living anywhere else.” She said with such sincerity that it made Mario question his disdain for the place.

 “You live up here?” he asked, trying hard to remember any more houses down this direction.

 “About half way down the hill. There are a few houses off the beaten path. I’ll show you.” She smiled at him. That smile just had a way of melting his heart.

 “Sounds good. So why haven’t I seen you around before?” the drive was going far too fast for his liking. He started to drive slower in hopes of dragging out this conversation as long as possible.

 “I stay mostly to myself. My family has a farm up here and most of my free time is spent there.” She replied simply. He nodded, a farm girl. Never in his life would he have thought that he would fall for a farm girl and yet here he was falling for a farm girl.

 He started to ask her about life on the farm and what it was like growing up here out of the main city. It seemed he finally found her topic of choice. Her personality started to come streaming out as she talked about life up here. She told him all about raising chickens and waking up at dawn for chores. He told her about life down in the city. She in return talked all about playing in the dense jungle just outside the edge of her farm and he tossed out stories about breaking into construction sites and getting into pointless trouble.

 His car turned another bend and his heart dropped, right in the middle of the greatest conversation of his life. He knew this fork in the road led to her farm. His conversation was coming to an end.

 “Take this turn right here.” She told him gently. He didn’t want to comply, but he knew he had to. This side street was even darker and narrower than the main one. The sounds of random animals broke up their conversation from time to time. He saw a farm up ahead. It was huge but seemed to be in disrepair. The few animals were far and few between inside the fences. The house itself was in desperate need of a paint job and the barn was missing a door. It was hard to believe anyone lived here, much less devoted all of their time in its upkeep.

 “This is nice.” He lied as he parked in front of the house. The drive way was starting to over grow with grass and weeds. Mario hoped that Alyssa didn’t notice the look of judgement that crossed his face momentarily.

 “Thanks! I love my home.” It was clear by looking at the expression on her face that when she looked at the run-down farm she didn’t see the chipped paint or broken doors. She saw the memories that she had there. She saw the warmth that only came from being home. He couldn’t help but smile, wishing that he could see it through her eyes.

 “It was every bit as amazing as you said it was.” He said, not thinking about the farm for even a second. She laughed, a bit of redness coming to her cheeks as well. Their conversation started back up, with more intensity than ever before. The two of them talked about everything under the sun, and they talked until the very same sun started to come up over their heads.

 “It’s already morning.” Alyssa said, surprised that the night had gotten away from them. Mario looked out of the window and couldn’t believe his eyes at the sight of the day light started creeping across the woods in front of them.

 “So, it is. Time flies.” He said with a chuckle. She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek.

 “I should go.” She opened the car door and started to get out. Mario watched her go. She started to walk to her house, every step she took created a hollowness inside him. He couldn’t wait to see her again. But she never left her farm, he would have to come back here in order to ever see her again. He rushed out of the car.

 “Alyssa!” he called out, panic starting to rise in his stomach. *Don’t mess this up*, *Mario* he thought to himself. She turned back to look at him, looking even more amazing under the morning sun in his leather jacket.

 “Yes?” She asked, he wanted to ask her if he could go inside, or if she wanted to come with him for breakfast. Any number of things just to keep her around.

 “I uh, I was wondering if I could see you again?” he spit out. He hoped he didn’t come across as desperate. Truth is, he kind of was. He had never been in love before, but he was almost sure that this was love. Her face broke into a giant smile. A smile that was brighter than even the sun itself.

 “Come by on Monday.” She turned back to her house. “Around 8, you can take me out to dinner.” She entered her home and Mario leaned back against the car, all the happiness he felt last night while talking to her washing over him a new. When he left the party, he thought that life was going to suck, that he would never know happiness. It was amazing how fast things change. He had never been this happy in his life. He slowly got into his car and looked out at the farm, it was not nearly as dark and run down as he had first thought it to be. Looking out across the land once more he saw how beautiful it truly was.

 Monday couldn’t come soon enough! He couldn’t wait to get home and tell Ralph all about his night.

Chapter 3

 Mario yawned and stretched out, putting his feet up on Ralph’s desk. He couldn’t remember the last time he was this tired, but he really didn’t care. He was too hyped up to even think about sleeping. He drove right over to Ralph’s house after leaving Alyssa’s house. It was still the early hours of the morning and he didn’t want to wake up Ralph’s parents, so he climbed up the side of the house and started knocking on the window till Ralph woke up.

 Needless to say he wasn’t too happy to see Mario. He had to bug a few different people to get him home. He left the party about an hour after Mario and bummed a ride with a couple of guys who were going to get some beer back in town, from there he had to bum a ride to the high school and walked home from there. He had barely gotten into bed when Mario started banging on the window to wake him up.

 The whole time Ralph told Mario his story Mario just let it in one ear and out the other. It wasn’t that he didn’t feel bad for his friend because he did. It was just that he had too much else on his mind. He came here to tell Ralph all about Alyssa and while he did want to know what happened at the party after he left, it just didn’t feel important anymore.

 “So, I’m sorry if I’m not jumping with joy at seeing you but yeah. I’m tired.” Mario almost missed the fact that Ralph was finished whining about his trip home. It was just about time for him to tell Ralph about his night. “And get your feet off my desk!” he knocked Mario’s feet off of his desk. Mario couldn’t help but laugh.

 “Sorry, I’ve just been dying to tell you what happened after I left the party.” Mario said with a big grin on his face. Ralph didn’t even look at him. He had already walked back to his bed.

 “Don’t forget to close the window on your way-out Mario.” Ralph snapped at him. Mario jumped up and hit the bed hard. Ralph let out a growl and turned towards Mario.

 “I’m talking here!” Mario snapped. He sat down on the end of the bed as Ralph started to sit up.

 “Fine, what happened?” Ralph gave in.

 “So, I was making my way down the hill, and there, right in front of me. The most beautiful woman I have ever seen.” Mario jumped up and started pacing back and forth as he recounted his story. “She had long dark hair and ruby red lips. The most hypnotic eyes you have ever seen. I swear Ralph” he kneeled in front of Ralph. “She’s an angel.”

 Ralph started to laugh and it annoyed Mario more than he would have wanted to admit. What was so funny? Was the thought that Mario could find someone so farfetched?

 “What?” for the first time since meeting Alyssa, the joy in Mario’s heart was replaced with anger. Ralph was supposed to be his best friend, he was supposed to support him and not mock him.

 “Sorry, I’m just glad you bounced back so fast. After what Cynthia said I thought you wouldn’t get over it for quite a while.” Ralph said with a smile. Mario couldn’t help but smile. That was fair, he was pretty upset when he had left the party.

 “I guess I did at that. I don’t know. I always liked Cynthia, but she has nothing on Alyssa.” Mario said with complete honestly. Ralph stretched and got up, taking a seat on his chair.

 “Ok, I’ll bite. Tell me about her.” Ralph said with a snide smirk. Mario fell back onto the bed and went into a spill about Alyssa. He told him all about the night and their conversation. Ralph smiled as listened to Mario talk all about her. The two friends exhausted the topic, till everything that could be said had been said. But as far as Mario was concerned the topic hadn’t even started yet.

 “I just never felt that connection with someone before, I mean who knew that there was someone out there who was just so amazing?” Mario asked. Ralph just laughed as he started to get dressed.

 “I’m glad you had so much fun talking to her Mario. You going to go see her tomorrow?” Ralph asked. What kind of question was that? Of course he was going to go see her tomorrow! Nothing was going to stop him from seeing her.

 “It’s all I can think about man. As soon as school gets out I’m going to head up there.” School couldn’t get out fast enough as far as Mario was concerned. The smile on Ralph’s face faltered for a minute.

 “That’s good. Just hold onto that thought.” Ralph said far more cryptic than he should have. Mario didn’t get what Ralph was hinting at.

 “What is it?” Mario asked, he didn’t like surprises. He would rather just have Ralph tell him what he was talking about, all this beating around the bush was too much for him.

 “Well, the reason I left so early was, well I was tired of what they were saying about you.” Ralph said, glancing up at Mario. Mario felt the happiness drain out of him once more. *Great, what happened?*

 “Do I want to know?” Mario asked cautiously. Ralph just shook his head no. Mario nodded, this was kind of what he expected. “Tell me anyway.”

 Ralph took a deep breath, clearly he didn’t want to tell Mario. As far as Mario was concerned that was a bad sign. If Ralph didn’t even want to tell him, it must have been pretty bad.

 “Nothing really, it’s just, lots of snide remarks. It was kind of the big joke of the party, every time someone wanted a laugh they would do an impression of you. It got to be too much. I got in a fight with some freshman who thought he could get some brownie points by poking fun of you.” Ralph’s words brought back all the stress Mario had felt while leaving the party last night. Suddenly Monday no longer seemed like such a great thing.

 Mario got to his feet. If he could get through the hell that was the school day than he would be rewarded with a night out with Alyssa. He was just going to need to keep reminding himself of that.

 “You ok?” Ralph asked, concern for his friend seeping into every word. Mario just nodded and started for the door.

 “I’m great. I’m just tired. I think I’ll head home and get some rest.” He started heading for the door without even waiting for Ralph to reply.

 “See you tomorrow man. And don’t worry about those losers at school.” Ralph called after Mario as he headed down the hall. It was easy for Ralph to say, he wasn’t the one who was going to be the butt of everyone’s jokes.

It was with a heavy heart that Mario walked into school the next day. He flirted with the idea of skipping all the way until he made it to the front door. It was very tempting, but he knew that he had to face these people sooner or later and what good was putting it off. All it would do was give them more ammunition to use against him. He decided to treat this like a Band-Aid, best to just pull it off fast and get it over with rather than drag it out and extend the torment.

 Once inside the school his first stop was the restroom. He had to make sure he was looking good. He had his hair slicked back and was wearing the nicest button up shirt and church pants that he owned. He was planning on going right to Alyssa’s house once the last bell rang so he came to school dressed to impress her.

 The main men’s restroom was a common rest spot for the kids who wanted to blow off school and get high. Mario had lucked out when coming in and beat them to their hang out spot. He wasn’t really in the mood to mess with them because they tended to charge a tax for people who used their facilities.

 He knew that he shouldn’t take his good fortune for granted. He washed his hands and threw water on his face, he couldn’t help but smile at himself. With a happy heart he turned and made his way to the bathroom door. He had to hurry out of there before the dealers showed up. Maybe if he was lucky he could find Ralph before class. That way he wouldn’t have to be alone when the insults started flying in his direction.

 The door to the restroom started to open, Mario’s heart skipped a beat. He couldn’t help but wonder if he waited too long? Sure enough, the local dealers pushed their way into the room, laughing amongst themselves without a care in the world. They all sported the same black leather jackets, it was their “look”. Mario and Ralph always cracked jokes about it, but only amongst themselves, they weren’t bold enough to say it to their faces.

 Mario took a deep breath; the dealers hadn’t seen him yet. He could try and duck into a stall and hide but who knew how long they would be in there. His only hope was to keep walking towards the exit and pretend that nothing was wrong. Maybe the dealers would be so wrapped up in their own conversation and forget about their tax.

 Mario walked calmly and determinedly toward the door, right towards the dealers. Mario was never much for prayers but whenever he was scared, truly scared he would pray nonstop. This was one of those times. The four dealers were right in front of the door and Mario was going to have to squeeze past them to get out. He had never been so scared in his life but there was no other choice but to just go for it.

 He tried his best to sneak past them but the nearest dealer, Tommy V as he was known around school put his hand on Mario’s chest. Mario cursed under his breath, he was so close. Now the little money he had for his date with Alyssa was going to be stolen by these goons.

 “Not so fast.” Tommy V said as the other dealers turned to look at him. They all had stupid grins on their faces. Mario’s heart sank. He was so stupid to waste time in here. He should have just went to class, but he just had to stop and check out how he looked.

 “I think you almost forgot our fee.” Sal said, his snide tone hitting a nerve in Mario. These jackasses didn’t do anything but push people around and no one ever did anything to stop them.

 “We know you would never mean to do that, don’t worry Mario, we’ll let it slide this time. Just add a $5 convince fee to the normal rate.” Tommy V said, almost as if he was doing Mario a favor. Mario let out a sigh, he could give them the money he had and be short a few dollars and as a result take a beating or he could refuse, get a beating and have the money taken from him, then get another beating for being short. Talk about a win/win.

 “We are waiting.” Sal said with his hands out, waiting to be paid. This was not how Mario wanted today to go. This was supposed to be his day. This was his day, he was taking Alyssa out tonight and he wasn’t about to let these clowns stop him.

 Mario stand tall and strengthens himself up. He held his head up to try and look as tall as he could. He was going to take a beating like a man. If he wanted to take Alyssa out, than he was going to have to earn it.

 “I’m good.” The words came out of his mouth, and they even sounded as if they were full of confidence. Mario couldn’t believe what he just said. *I’m good? What the hell does that even mean?* The dealers seemed just as put off by it, they exchanged looks with each other.

 “You’re good?” Sal asked, the two goons in the back started laughing. Mario felt the fear entering his heart but he tried his best not to show it.

 “I don’t think you understand, friend. The fee is not an option. And you are not good until you pay it.” Tommy V said. The humor gone from his voice. Mario knew this was going to go bad and do so rapidly. It wasn’t too late to pay up, he should just bite the loss and pay them.

 “I don’t think you understand, *Friend.* I’m not paying you a damn dime, not now, not ever. You think you can just chill in your little cave and I’m supposed to run scared? Think again.” Mario said as he stepped forward, as if he meant to fight them. What the hell was he doing? He couldn’t take one of these guys on, let alone all four of them. He just couldn’t stop himself, it wasn’t that he wasn’t scared, he just didn’t seem to care anymore. For the first time in his life he was happy, and he wasn’t about to let these goons, or anyone else for that matter, take it away from him. “So, do your worse.” Maybe that last part was a bit much.

 The two goons in the back look to Sal and Tommy V, waiting for their reaction. They were never really known for their brains. Sal’s anger could be seen clear as day bubbling up, but Tommy V was harder to read. The wait for a response seemed to go on forever. Mario felt as if years went by waiting for them to say something. Tommy V started laughing, and not even a pissed off laugh. It was a happy laugh. Mario almost fell back, he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

 “You got guts my friend.” Tommy V said. The two goons started laughing as well, Sal just grunted and moved back to lean on the wall. He wasn’t happy about Tommy V’s reaction.

 “I know.” Mario was so confused, he didn’t know what to make of the reaction.

 “I’m impressed, didn’t expect that from you.” He moved out of Mario’s way and motioned for the door. “You got an all access pass.” Sal rolled his eyes, Mario may have made a friend, but he made an enemy as well. There was no time to worry about that now. He needed to get out of here before Tommy V changed his mind. Mario nodded to him and started towards the door. He started to push it open, thanking God for his good fortune. “Oh and Mario.”

 Mario stopped, he knew this was too good to be too. “Yeah?” he asked, not wanting to look back.

 “You should come by some time. Get to know the crew.” Mario looked back, Tommy V didn’t seem to be joking. Was this really an invite to hang out with these losers? No way was he going to take them up on that offer.

 “Sure.” He said as he slipped out of the restroom, with his money intact. Ralph was never going to believe this story. He took off down the hall in search of his friend.

 The school was packed, full of kids running late for class. The warning bell rang, and Mario shifted his course. Seemed that finding Ralph was going to have to wait till later, he couldn’t afford to be late again. Besides he had third period with him anyways. The hallways of Eblis high all looked alike but with slight differences, it confused Mario for the first couple weeks of school back in his freshman year but now he was a seasoned Sophomore and knew his way by heart.

 He turned onto the hallway right outside his first period Math class, a class that he hated with a passion. Nothing good ever came from math, that was something he was willing to bet his life on. He was halfway down the hall when he spotted James and some of his football friends making their way to their classes. *Great! Just what I needed, to run into the guy I made an ass of myself in front of.* He started to walk faster, he just needed to slip into class before they noticed him.

 “Look who it is.” James said just as Mario made it to the door. He stopped and turned to face the jock and his lackeys. James moved closer to Mario. “Didn’t think we’d be seeing you around after your big exit last night.” The condescending tone in his voice was just eating Mario up inside. He felt his blood starting to boil inside him, every instinct in him telling him to strike. To hit James right in the face, it took every ounce of self-control he possessed to not hit him.

 “I don’t know what you are talking about. Last night was amazing. Great party man, thanks for the invite.” He ducked into the class before James had a chance to reply. The look of complete and utter confusion on James face made it all worth it. That look filled him with a greater sense of satisfaction than any hit to the face would have. Hit a man like James and all that would lead to was getting your ass beat, wouldn’t even phase him but hit him in his pride, take away his power to humiliate you and you could hurt him where it counted.

 Mario was the last one to enter the class, everyone else was in their seats and Mr. Jones was already in the middle of his lecture. Mario didn’t know he was this late. He just made his way quickly to his desk in the back of the room and sat down.

 “Thank you for joining us Mr. Russo.” Mr. Jones, a middle-aged blading man who looked as if he spent his whole life buried beneath a pile of books, told him with a dry humorless tone that had been perfected over countless years of tearing down students much like Mario.

 “It’s no problem sir. Wouldn’t miss one of your lectures for the world.” Mario said with his trade mark grin, Mr. Jones gave him an annoyed smile and went back to his lesson. Mario didn’t hear a word of it, he instead spent the whole class planning his date with Alyssa. After all that was all he really cared about.

 He quickly got lost in visions of the two of them laying under the stars looking upward into the heavens above and enjoying each other’s company. They told each other secrets and he had never been so happy in his life. Her soft smooth skin, her bright red lips, her dark black hair, he loved all of it. He felt her hand take his, his heart skipping a beat. He leaned over to kiss her and it all came crashing down.

 “Mr. Russo! If you are done snoring, we are waiting for an answer.” The classroom came spinning back into view. Mario cursed his luck as the fantasy faded. It didn’t sting as much as it could have, after all, he reminded himself, he was going to see her in a few hours.

 “The answer is 37.” He threw out the answer as if he was sure. *I mean it is a math class, that is a possible answer.* He thought to himself. He found out the truth quickly enough. The rest of the class started laughing at him and shaking their heads. Mr. Jones was clearly not happy.

 “37? And how did you come to that answer?” Mr. Jones asked in a controlled way that told Mario he had better answer that carefully if he didn’t want to get in deep trouble. He racked his brain as hard as he could, trying to recall what Mr. Jones was talking about. The eyes of the whole class bore into him, it was almost too much for him to take.

 “It’s the only possible answer, if I have to explain it to you, then maybe you shouldn’t be the teacher.” Mario said with a grin. If you couldn’t stay out of trouble you should at least win some points with your classmates. It was a philosophy that had served him well over the years.

 “To the principal’s office now!” Mr. Jones demanded without missing a beat. The class burst into laughter. Mario stood up and bowed to his classmates. “Now, Mr. Russo.” Mario laughed as he left the room, Mr. Jones jumped right back into the lecture without missing a beat. Things could be worse, math had always been Mario’s least favorite class.

 He made his way through the halls to the principal’s office, a place he knew well. There was already a waiting room full of people in line to speak with him. Mario didn’t feel like waiting so he just took off. He would deal with the fall out tomorrow, today he was going to spend getting ready for his date.

 He wasted no time in getting out of school and heading home. His dad was still at work and his mother was out with one of her friends doing who knows what. Mario didn’t really care, it made it easier for him to get in the house and relax. He made his way up to his room and put on the radio, falling back on his bed. It felt good to be free, nothing to do but wait for time to past.

Chapter 4

 Mario let out a loud yawn as he got out of bed, he had a good nap. He didn’t even realize that he had fallen asleep. He looked over at his clock and his heart stopped. He jumped up off the bed and let out a scream. It was already 8:30, he was supposed to be there at 8. He couldn’t believe he fell asleep for so long. He ran downstairs. His mom called out to him, but he didn’t hear what she said. He was out the door and in his car before he even registered that she spoke to him.

 He would deal with it when he got home, just another thing on his list for later. He took off, speeding the whole way to her house. He kept praying he didn’t get pulled over, but he also didn’t want her to think that he stood her up.

 This date was too important for him to let anything stand in the way. He didn’t even slow down as he started driving up the mountainside, although he knew he should have. His heart started racing even more the higher up the hill he went. He wasn’t sure if it was nerves from seeing her or nerves from driving off the side of the mountain and dying in a giant fireball.

 After what seemed like forever he made it to her farm. It was even worse than he remembered. The fence was falling apart, the barn’s paint was all but faded to the point of being unrecognizable. The house had a few broken windows and an old pickup truck in the front of it. He tried to recall if it looked this bad when he was here last, he didn’t think so.

 Oh well, he didn’t care how her place looked, all he cared about was seeing her. He got out of his truck and made his way to the door. He couldn’t believe he forgot her flowers. He should have stayed at school, skipping out just messed everything up for himself.

 As he closed in on her door his heart started racing more and more. He didn’t know what he was going to say to her. He spent all day talking to her inside his head and now that the time was here, he was drawing a blank. It didn’t matter, he would figure it out as he went along. No power in the verse was going to mess this up for him.

 “You got this Mario, she likes you.” He whispered to himself. He took a calming breath and knocked on the door. One knock, two knock, three knock, the door opened, and Mario’s heart skipped a beat. With it went his breath, he gasped to catch it and with its return his heart began to race so fast that it felt as if it was going to burst out of his chest. He had never felt so scared and excited at the same time.

 A million things were racing through his mind as he looked at the lady who answered the door. All the excitement and nerves faded just as fast when he noticed it wasn’t her. The lady who answered the door looked a lot like Alyssa, only older. She had the same eyes, the same soulful look about her, just with a lot of extra years.

 “Can I help you?” The lady asked, she even sounded a bit like Alyssa, but with a stronger accent. She must have been Alyssa’s mother. Mario never once thought about having to deal with her parents, it was a whole new reason to be nervous.

 “Hi, um my name is Mario. I was wondering if I could talk to Alyssa.” He heard his own voice crack as he asked. He knew his face must have been bright red, but he tried not to think about it. He always wondered what it would be like to deal with the grilling of a parent before a date, it would seem he was finally going to have to deal with it.

 It wasn’t what he expected, instead of a smile, or a judging look, or even a rude door slam, what he got was tears. The lady started crying and hard. Mario’s nerves evaporated and were replaced with confusion. What did he do? Was Alyssa not allowed to date? Did he get her in trouble? Not a great way to start off a first date. He needed to figure out what to do and fast.

 Mario reached out and placed his hand on her arm. “Are you ok?” she shrugged his hand off and looked at him with a hatred that he had never seen before and it was directed right at him.

 “Is this some kind of sick joke?” She asked, her voice breaking as she asked the question. Mario took a step back as he put his hand back to his side. Was he that bad looking? Could she really be that mad that he would try to go out with her daughter?

 “No, I met her the other day and asked if I could see her again. Is she home? Could I see her?” He asked, hope fading, it seemed maybe something could ruin this date after all. He never thought her mom would be the one to mess things up for him. She moved so fast he didn’t even see her hand as she slapped him across the face. He recoiled from the hit.

 “You’re a bad man! A bad man!” She retreated back into her home, Mario watched her go and for the first time looked into the house, hanging on the wall was a picture of the lady, a lot younger standing next to Alyssa, just as she looked the other night. How could that be?

 “I don’t understand, where is she? Why can’t I see her?” Mario demanded, he didn’t mean to ask so forceful, he just wanted answers and he really wanted to see her. None of this made any sense. The lady stopped just inside her house and spun around to face him, she braced herself on the door with her right hand.

 “She’s at the same place she has been for the past 10 years,” she all but spit the words at him. Mario couldn’t help but sink back from the hate in her voice, which was only matched by the disgust in her eyes.

 “Where is that?” Mario asked, he knew he shouldn’t have asked but he just had to know. Where could she have been for the past 10 years? And if she had been away that long, why was she here the other day? This was quickly becoming a mystery, and Mario wasn’t a fan of mysteries.

 “The Halts Glee cemetery!” She slammed the door in Mario’s face. Cemetery? What was going on here? He knew in his gut what she meant, it was the only thing that made sense, but it didn’t make sense. Although the lady was so much younger in that picture, at least a decade younger and Alyssa was the same age.

 The short walk to the car was the longest walk in his life. Today didn’t go at all as planned. It had to be the worst day of his life. He started his car and made his descent down the hill, fully intending to go home. He just wanted to get home and forget all of this. He already knew Ralph would never let him live this down, he was probably already wondering why Mario skipped school today.

 All the stupid choices he made today started to weigh on him, he was so focused on tonight and this date he never cared about blowing off school, ignoring his mom. Now he was going to have to face all that, and he didn’t even get anything out of it.

 He had to be missing something, she couldn’t be dead. Dead? He had spent the whole car ride thinking around the thought but never let himself think the word for fear it would make it true. He didn’t see a ghost, he knew that. Ghosts weren’t real, he was a Catholic but didn’t really believe. It was something his parents were and raised him to be, but he had seen nothing that proved to him beyond a shadow of doubt that anything else existed outside of what he saw around him.

 He spotted the cemetery in front of him, he didn’t even notice that he was driving there. It was clear on the other side of town from his house. He must have drove here subconsciously. He knew he should turn around and drive home, but he just couldn’t bring himself to do it. He pulled into the parking lot, only to find that the place was closed. It was a sign, a sign that he should start the car back up and head home. That’s what he is going to do!

 Mario kept telling himself he was going to go home and not check, he already knew it was a trick and she wasn’t really dead. He kept telling himself that as he jumped onto the wall, it took all his strength to pull himself up. He didn’t know he was this out of shape. He really needed to start working out.

 He finally made it up the wall and looked out over the cemetery, it was a lot bigger than he thought and far darker. There was no way he was going to be able to see down there. Luckily his dad was a bit paranoid and made him keep a bunch of safety gear in his trunk, including a flashlight.

 Mario wasted no time in going back to the car and getting his flashlight. He was back in the graveyard before he even knew it. The flash light brightened up the place a great deal. Mario had never been in a cemetery before, let alone at night. It was a lot creepier than he ever would have thought.

 After searching for close to an hour he decided he was right. She wasn’t dead, her mother just didn’t like him and the girl in the picture was the other daughter who just looked a lot like the mother. That’s all it was. This was good, he could go back and try again, hopefully the mom wasn’t there to mess things up again.

 He turned to head back to the car when he saw it, at first he didn’t believe his eyes. They had to playing a trick on him. It just had to just be due to him being so tired, that’s all it was. He went out of his way not to look in that direction and hurried back to his car. As he ran the curiosity ate away at him. A nagging voice in the back of his mind kept begging him to go back and check it out. He just had to know.

 He couldn’t help but feel ashamed as he headed back to check out the tombstone he saw. As he closed in on it his worst fears were confirmed. Hanging on the tombstone was his jacket, the same one he let Alyssa wear. This didn’t make any sense, he held his breath as he lowered the flashlight onto the tombstone, it read:

Alyssa Torres

1948-1964

 Mario’s heart stopped, it couldn’t be the same Alyssa, it just wasn’t possible. He snatched up his jacket and ran off, he wasted no time in getting over the wall and back into his car. He didn’t see what he saw, she wasn’t dead. This was all just a big misunderstanding and he wasn’t going to rest until he got to the bottom of it!

THE END