

AZURE DYING



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BY

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Strategic Book Group

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This work is dedicated to wonderful wife Joy and my father Ronnie.
I love you both.

Thanks to my brother Gary whose help was invaluable.
You're the best bro.

A very special acknowledgement to the rock band Slayer,
Whose music inspired the dark journey I had to make
In creating this work.
The world needs you guys, keep doing what you do.
Peace.

*Walk the streets beneath the shadows
Searching for a cryptic bride
Eat alive the conscience I hate
Without pain I watch you die
I will live through this forever
I have done the things you grieve
As you kneel before its evil
My face is the last you'll see.*

—Slayer, “Deviance”

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Austin, Texas April

Amy was walking as fast as she could, but she seemed to be moving in slow motion. She wished her legs were long like her sister's so she could walk the distance in half the time. But genetics only allowed one of the girls to have long legs like their dad's, so she was stuck hustling her ass off to get home to the phone before her mother answered her call from Tony. Because of her tardiness the past Saturday night, her mom had taken away her cell phone, stranding her from civilization like a Gilligan castaway.

Humiliating!

To add to the disgrace, she was forced to ride the bus to and from school because her best friend, Megan, was out with a flu. Megan was her only lifeline to the enlightened world since she was without both transportation and cellular communication. The bitch got sick with no consideration of the one person who was counting on her. Amy needed her for support and conveyance. Without her, she was subject to her fascist mother's beck and call. It was bad enough she took away her cell and grounded her for a month, but she had to double-time it home to help with the household chores that belittled her even more. Things like clearing the dinner table and loading—then unloading—the dishwasher, folding the laundry, and vacuuming the entire house. It was times like this she was glad she wasn't a boy; or she'd have her out cutting the grass or, worse yet, hauling the trash to the curb.

Yuck!

Tony would be calling during his break at the HEB at around three forty-five. Her watch read three thirty-four—she had time. If she timed it right, she could be in and answer the phone before her mom. She could squeeze in a couple of minutes before she caught on, making her end the call. She could pass it off as Megan for a little while, but sooner or later, her eavesdropping mother would piece it together and the saga would end abruptly. Any other day, her mom didn't get home from work until four fifteen or four thirty. But today was Thursday, her mom's day off. If she wanted to hear Tony at all, it would be for just a few precious minutes. That was okay with her just as long as she got to hear his voice for another day.

Teenage angst can be soothed by the simplest things at times.

As she drew closer to her street, she thought about how they had met. She and Megan were cruising west Austin around the Arboretum in Meg's Toyota convertible with the top down. The hot Texas sun turning their exposed skin to darker shades of bronze as they sipped cherry lemonade and listened to Beyoncé. Megan eased her car through a strip mall parking lot, looking for friends, when a tall, athletic-looking surfer type caught Amy's eye.

"Stop," she told her buddy.

"Why?"

"Just stop, dummy. Stop and look at what I'm looking at," she told her, pointing to the guy in cutoffs and flip-flops. He wore a cool blue T-shirt and a shell necklace and had sun-bleached hair and a perfect tan. He walked into Best Buy, coolly slipping his sunglasses to the top of his head.

"Oh my god," Meg breathed aloud.

"Told you."

"No shit."

"Park this thing. I'm going in," Amy announced. "I have to see him closer."

Without another word, Megan found a spot, and soon the two girls were walking as fast as they could across the lot, without looking as though they were walking as fast as they could. It would be terrible if a friend saw them in such a state of *uncool*.

“My god, Amy, he’s gorgeous,” Megan said, entering the store. They each removed their sunglasses, letting their eyes adjust to the inside lighting as the cool blast of refrigerated air slapped their skin.

“I totally have to talk to him,” Amy told her. “I have to know his name before we leave this stinking place. We have to find him.”

It didn’t take long. He was browsing the new Linkin Park CD, standing alone, weight on one leg with a hand on his hip. Amy’s heart skipped as they approached. She was afraid in equal parts that he’d be either a jerk or a gentleman. A real creep or some miserable choirboy. She just wanted him to be as cool as he looked. She stopped beside him and cleared her throat with her perky blonde friend close enough behind her she could feel her heavy breathing on her neck.

It was like an explosion when he looked at her. He smiled, and she melted like the ice in the lemonade they left in the sun. Big broad smile, white teeth, a hint of stubble on his chin, and deep dark brown eyes that a girl could fall into and never find her way out of.

“Hi, I’m Tony,” he offered. “What’s up with you guys?”

The next thing she knew, she was neck-deep in love with the nineteen-year-old from Westlake; and for his part, Tony was head over heels for the little brunette with the killer dimples. Amy looked every bit the part of a high school cheerleader that she wasn’t, and Tony was the perfect California boy who’d never been west of Lubbock. They struck the image of teenage royalty. However, Amy was just a junior; and the recently graduated Tony was working as a dairy stocker at a local HEB supermarket and going to school at night, majoring in computer drafting.

That’s where Mom comes in again. Amy’s mother, Sharon, was extremely protective of her two daughters. Since their father’s death eight years earlier in a boating accident on Lake Travis, she’d been both a mother and a father to the two girls. Ginger, the oldest, had moved out and was going to school on a grant in San Antonio while Amy finished her last two years of high school. Sharon was proud of her two girls who both turned out beautiful and smart. Conversely, she was not looking forward to living in her house alone whenever Amy’s assured departure came about. Living with only one of the girls was bad enough. The thought of living without either of them was mind-numbing. So when

she met the handsome and charming Tony Miller from Westlake, she heard the inevitable approach of solitude gaining speed as it rushed toward her like a rising tsunami.

The conversations always started the same way.

“You’re only seventeen, baby. All I ask is that you slow down. You’ve got your entire life in front of you.”

“You met Dad when you were eighteen.”

“Yes, and I loved your father till the day he died, and today I love him even more,” she defended. “But I also got pregnant at nineteen with Ginger and never made it back to school. I missed out on so many things.”

“Because of us.”

And of course, it always ended the same way.

Guilt.

Robert Crowder was a good man. He loved and provided for his wife and children. Trying to live up to his absence was draining on Sharon. She understood her girls in a way her husband never could. As women. As a woman, she knew what Amy felt; and she was the last person who’d want to stand in the way of her girl’s happiness, especially after meeting such a wonderful young man. Tony reminded her so much of her husband, and that’s what scared her even more. She saw Amy making the same mistakes for the same reasons. She just hoped that the two kids would take it slow unlike her and Robert. She hated the thought of her baby getting caught up in the undertow of love then being sucked away in the tide, missing out on who *she* was. Missing out on the chance of fulfilling her dreams and settling for being a wife and a mother and nothing else. It was honorable to live that way, but a mature woman should have that choice and not squander it with the childish dreams and desires of youth.

She was only a mother now; it was all she had.

Amy made it to West Haven at 3:40 p.m. She was a mere block away, knowing she would make it in time. The stress she had been under melted away as the warm spring air blew through her long raven curls. She nestled her books to her chest, calming now as she saw her house at the end of the block.

She also spotted something else.

A black H2 Hummer was parked on the curb midway on the desolate block. It seemed out of place in the middle-class neighborhood, like one of those newspaper puzzles that ask you to spot the *thing* that doesn't belong in the picture. The H2 definitely did not belong on her street. It was parked in front of the Rondos' house, which was empty until Mr. Rondo got home from work at around six. Mrs. Rondo worked late and would be gone until the wee hours of the next morning, so she had no idea who the slick, expensive SUV belonged to. Amy stopped to examine the vehicle. It was new, no more than a year old, and the owner took great care of it. Black chrome wheels and bumper, windows tinted limousine style so you had no way of seeing inside. She stepped off the curb behind the Hummer and noticed very small writing on the left side of the back hatch between the spare tire and the left taillight. There, painted on the metal in a font she recognized from her computer as Bradley Hand, were three lines written in white:

Think
of
Your Mother

"What the hell?" she asked herself. It was the oddest thing to put on such a great car. She paused and thought of the day she and Tony would be able to afford such a wonderful vehicle. They would drive through Austin in luxury. Tony a successful businessman and she---

It was her last thought before searing pain ripped through her body, and she blacked out.

Indeed, she was not thinking of her mother.

The phone rang at precisely three forty-five. Sharon Crowder answered, and when the caller began to stammer, the jig was up.

"Hello, Tony," she said, allowing herself an inward smile.

"Hello, Ms. Crowder," he answered sheepishly.

"Tony, you know the drill."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm out of line."

"And so is Amy." She leaned against the wall, expecting her daughter

to burst through the door at any minute and react in horror at the site of her mom on the phone. “Look, Tony, you’re a fine young man, and nothing would make me happier than seeing you two grow old and gray together and sprout me a grandchild or three.”

“But—”

“But”—she smiled again—“rules are rules, and she broke one and she has to do the time. I did the same with Ginger, and I have to be fair. You understand, yes?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Besides, she’ll talk with you tomorrow on a friend’s phone like she always does, and she’ll talk to you before I get home from work tomorrow. Like she always does. Right?”

Tony answered yes after a nervous laugh.

“Now get back to work before Mr. Alvarez fires you.”

“Okay, you’re right. Sorry, Mrs. Crowder.”

“That’s okay, son.” She started to hang up when she thought to add, “Oh, and uh . . . I’ll tell her you *did* call.”

“Okay, thanks, Mrs. C,” he laughed.

“Don’t mention it,” she replied, hanging up the phone. “Now, missy, where are you?”

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