

*Former serial killer Brian is a monster at heart; Man-eating spider Azure is a monster by definition. Azure is targeted by a deadlier monster and Brian succumbs to his past. The truth might cost them their friendship as well as their lives.*

## **Relapse**

By B. M. Valdez

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The background is a dark, teal-tinted space filled with intricate spider webs. The webs are illuminated from behind, creating a glowing, ethereal effect. In the center, a human skull is depicted with a dark, metallic or stone-like texture. The skull's eyes are replaced by two bright, glowing spheres of light, one red and one blue, which give it a menacing, otherworldly appearance. The overall mood is dark, mysterious, and slightly macabre.

# RELAPSE

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## Chapter One

### Brian Dubisar

One more cup of coffee never hurt anyone. Brian tapped his foot in time with the hot water dripping into the pot on the staff lounge counter. Brewing the whole container was ridiculous since he was certain he was the last teacher using the staff buildings on campus, but no way would he get through grading the last set of exams—unit tests for his fifth period—without more caffeine. He rubbed algebraic equations from his eye as the machine finished up. Brian could mentor troubled teens in other ways, but nothing compared to watching his students grow and achieve by the end of the term.

He yanked the pot from the machine and filled his mug about halfway. The door opened behind Brian as he pulled the milk from the fridge. Brian resisted the urge to turn around, proceeding to the counter to add a splash of white to his mug. The room remained silent behind him while he returned the jug. The hair crept up on the back of his neck. It was Tuesday evening, so Brian's friend Azure wasn't scheduled to visit until the following day.

When Brian grabbed his cup and turned to leave, he came face to face with his least favorite literature teacher. Coffee sloshed over the rim of his cup and on to his hand. "Shit," Brian cursed, shaking the scorching dark liquid from his skin. More splashed from the mug and splattered onto the floor.

"Good evening, Dubisar," Matsudaira said, pushing past Brian to open a cupboard above the sink.

“Geez, you scared me.” Heat touched Brian’s face as he replaced his cup on the counter and pulled a paper towel off the rack to sop up the spill.

At least it was only Matsudaira and not a spinner like Azure. Brian had never known another one to enter a building willingly.

Brian had never known another spinner period.

“I just submitted midterm grades.” Matsudaira poured his cup of coffee before leaning his hip against the counter. “Chop, chop, the registrar wants to go home.”

Brian inched toward the door. “I know, I know,” he said. “But I like to take my time with the exams and award my students credit for their hard work.”

“It’s math.” Matsudaira sipped from his cup, undeterred by the steam wafting from its black surface. “The answer is right, or it is wrong. There is no gray.”

Literature was more fluid. Literature left more for interpretation. Literature had gray.

Brian scooted toward the door, not wanting to argue with Matsudaira. He never won. “You can do the right kind of work and still arrive at the wrong answer,” he said. “But I have one class to finish grading. You have a good night.”

Never mind the fact that the unit tests *weren’t* impacting midterm grades. Brian had already submitted those to the registrar earlier that day. The permanent sneer on Matsudaira’s face scared the words back down Brian’s throat.

Matsudaira closed the distance between them, tipping his head so his face was close to Brian’s. “Multiple-choice questions are your friend.”

Brian grabbed the doorknob and tried to open the door. Matsudaira slammed his palm against it, swatting it away from Brian.

“I use them...sometimes,” Brian said.

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“Can I ask you something, Dubisar?”

Brian didn't want to know what Matsudaira was thinking, but it seemed to be the only way to escape. “Shoot.”

“Have you ever noticed how eerie Lava Springs gets after dark?” Matsudaira asked.

Sighing, Brian nodded. “Yeah, it does.”

Brian didn't talk about Azure. He didn't think other people knew about Azure or his kind. His pulse thudded in his neck. What could Brian say if someone like Matsudaira ever asked him directly about it?

When Matsudaira took a step back toward the counter and his coffee, Brian swiftly slipped through the door. He power-walked down the hallway and glanced over his shoulder. The door remained closed, so Brian darted outside.

He crossed campus to the math building, nursing his coffee to avoid losing any more of the precious liquid. A flash of bright colors flitted across the front of Sitkum Hall, slithering around the corner and out of sight. Brian paused and sipped at his coffee, wondering if there had truly been another person around. After a quick scan of his surroundings, he followed the pastel apparition around the building.

Brightness fluttered in the warm, swirling island breeze. Despite another mouthful of coffee, the last of Brian's energy seeped from his limbs. Darkness gripped the evening, and the campus stood empty in the face of student curfew. The wind picked up, waving luminescent ribbons in his peripheral like a flag. Twinkling on the edge of his vision, he wasn't sure he had seen anything at all.

He stared up the length of the building, certain that nothing had been there at all, and tried to concentrate on the tangible. Midterms were taken care of for the semester. He could focus on grading the last set of unit tests before

planning the next lessons. The yellow light flared when Brian stared at it head-on, creating starburst patterns behind his eyelids when he blinked. The intensity was mesmerizing. He couldn't tell what caused the glow, but he wanted to see more of it, and he wanted to see it up close.

Forgetting the late it hour, and his work in the morning, Brian hurried toward the glowing yellow beacon. The breeze dropped. The yellow vanished. Brian blinked at where it had been, wondering if he had imaged it.

*Too many all-nighters. I'm getting too old for this.*

The breeze kicked up again, and the yellow sheen returned, flapping frantically a few feet in front of Brian. The yellow clung to the manicured, pink snowbush bordering the base of the building's wall. He stepped closer, narrowing his eyes, hoping to see more of it.

Silence settled around him. Only the gentle whistling of the wind brushed against Brian's eardrums, its chill caressing the back of his neck. One more step. His extended hand slipped through the net-like yellow glow. Its fibers were thin and translucent, radiating with cold near to his forearm. A sickly sweet aroma coated his tongue and throat. Brian only remembered to breathe so he could douse his senses with more of the scent. He didn't move. His eyes locked onto the intricate lines created by the gummy net. A stronger ocean gust thrust more of the scent up his nose, but the warmth it carried pulled him back from his star-struck daze. He jerked his hand backwards and ran right into the fiber.

First, it was sticky, and then Brian's whole hand surged with searing pain. It burned up his arm and behind his eyelids. He couldn't see anything beyond whiteness, but he heard a high-pitched scream—*his* high-pitched scream. He couldn't move, couldn't do anything but accept the pain and

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release a terrible howl, backdropped by the sound of his coffee mug shattering in the gravel underfoot.

Death loomed over Brian, numbness drowning the acidic scald, and threatening to filch his progress toward redemption. He wasn't ready to die. Brian hadn't done enough to atone for his crimes.

Death swirled closer, a mocking jaybird cry of that past.

His mother's bloody face dripped into his vision, replacing his voice with the last breaths rasping through her lips. The handle of the knife in his small hands was warm from where he'd gripped it too hard and slippery from where his mother's blood slid down the blade.

The memory of his mother's mangled body dropped away. Whiteness fizzled in front of Brian's eyes again, and his scream threatened to shatter his eardrums. He blinked and pulled on his hand, but it wouldn't come free. The haze faded into the administrative building of Lava Springs Academy, and Brian sagged against the snowbush.

A well-dressed man stood a few feet away from the windows in a pool of moonlight. Yellow light pulsed under his skin like veins, highlighting his pale flesh from his temples into the collar of his suit jacket and over his wrists through the backs of his hands. He lifted one hand in front of his chest with his fingers curled in a paw pose as he contemplated his fingernails.

Sweat broke out in the palm of Brian's free hand, and the hair stood on the back of his neck. The whiteness returned, and the pain surged through him, searing life through his numb nerves just under the skin. He struggled against the paralysis in his arm and the sticky netted fingers gripping his hand. Brian didn't hear the scream he felt in his throat. Instead, the loud wails of a little girl fighting for life terrorized his eardrums. Her pink-and-yellow sundress was torn and smeared with blood. A large lock of hair was



missing from the side of her head like she had gum cut out of her dusty brown ringlets. The cool metal of a pistol rested in his palm, its muzzle barking to silence the girl.

Someone called his name, and he blindly turned toward the familiar voice.

“It is highly unbecoming of you to interrupt my catch,” a strange man said.

Brian’s sister vanished, replaced once more by the brilliance. The pain no longer throbbed through Brian’s numb hand. His throat was raw, but that didn’t stop the shriek from tearing out of his mouth. The yellow fiber caused Brian to lose control of body and mind.

“*Mister Dubisar*,” sounded inside his head as the image twisted into the face of one of his students, her presence washing away years from the first memories clawing through his subconscious. The face continued twisting around until it became the lightly sun-wrinkled face of Brian’s ex-girlfriend, the one he had been certain would marry him before she walked out. Her soft lips frowned right before she parted them in a wordless hiccup of Brian’s name.

The whiteness crashed fully into him once more, shredding the image.

When Brian’s vision cleared, a struggle unfolded in front of him between his longtime friend Azure and the well-dressed man. Skin glowing from deep blue-lighted veins, Azure was shorter than the stranger, but his teeth were no less sharp as they gleamed in the moonlight, pointed and deadly. The murderous glint in Azure’s deep blue eyes triggered Brian’s need to flee, but the paralysis from his hand had spread throughout most of his body, and he kept shouting.

Black fog embraced Brian, nearly suffocating him. Desire pulsed through his veins, and he curled the stiff

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fingers of his free hand around an imaginary knife handle. Warmth spread through his sweaty palm as he gasped for air, dropping to his knees but not feeling the impact of the ground. Both of his arms went limp at his sides, knuckles dragging through the gravel. His right hand pulsed, heavy with swelling.

“Brian?” Azure’s voice asked, sounding closer than it had the first time.

His eyelids created the darkness. Brian groaned and managed to peel them open. His vision blurred, streaking the blue light under Azure’s skin and painting his face into a masked monster. Brian blinked rapidly, clawing through the rock. Brian’s old desire oozed through his veins, sluggish, like molasses streaming up a hill, but definitely there. When his vision cleared, Azure’s concern-creased face sharpened, bioluminescent channels resolving into swooping swirl patterns around his eyes and down his cheeks. Brian tamped down the sensation of a blood-slicked knife into the darkest depths of the old Brian at the sight of Azure’s face, though the action was a lot tougher than it used to be.

“I’m...okay,” Brian croaked. “What was that?”

Azure shook his head, human-like hair whipping to either side of his face. One hand hovered in the air above Brian’s shoulder, but he didn’t try to touch it. “You grabbed Amarillo’s web. He’s gone now, but you were almost his dinner.”

The notion made Brian want to dry heave. “I’ve never seen a spinner’s web before.” That was his fault. Brian had been friends with Azure for fifteen years, and he had never asked to see one of Azure’s webs.

The swirls around Azure’s eyes drooped as he frowned. “I’m sorry.” His hand tensed where it continued to hover over Brian.

“You have no reason to be.” Exhaustion settled heavily into Brian’s limbs, though his hand still throbbed where the webbing had wrapped around it. A large, red, egg-shaped welt swelled it into stiffness. He didn’t know what time it was anymore, only that tomorrow was Wednesday. There were still classes to teach, and Brian was still Brian. He shivered despite the island warmth of Jovial. “I thought I was going to die.”

“The web does that to humans,” Azure said. “I’ve heard the Riveter say it causes your life to flash before your eyes.” Azure’s blue eyes rounded with deeper concern as he took in Brian’s hand and trembling form. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Brian nodded and dragged himself to his feet, pulling backwards so he wouldn’t accidentally bump against Azure. He was too tired and in too much pain to be annoyed by Azure having to ask to touch him. “I just need to rest.”

“I’ll walk you to your housing,” Azure said.

Brian wasn’t going to argue. He turned away from Sitkum Hall, thankful Matsudaira hadn’t followed him so no other human had been around to hear him, and began toward the staff housing unit. “The web,” he said.

“Don’t worry,” Azure said. “I’ll come back for it so no one else will become stuck.”

“Thanks.” Brian closed his eyes and was nearly asleep on his feet before entering the housing building. The darkness in his bedroom fought the sleep back as visions swam above him. His mother, his sister, and the pile of bodies buried within his soul.

## Chapter Two

### Azure

The last thing Azure remembered about any prey was the wide, dead look in its eyes. He saved the head for last. To savor the brief moments of terror as his venom paralyzed the body. After three bites, the prey could no longer move. By the time he reached five, his victim was already dead. Panic stricken eyes left wide open.

These eyes were orange.

The smooth white skull glinted up at him. Cranial sutures not even fully closed yet. A younger spinner then. Azure licked blue blood and flesh from his mouth. Turned his back on those orange eyes. Walked toward the back wall surrounding the school. Wiped his face with the long black sleeve of his shirt before scaling it. The eyes weren't an organ he could bring himself to eat. Besides, this way the authorities could identify which arch the victim belonged to. The Riveter would be able to match the remains up to an identity.

It wasn't a job Azure wanted. Luckily, he hadn't needed to suffer with it. Yet.

Approaching Sitkum Hall made thoughts of the Riveter fade. But every time he blinked. Those dead orange eyes stared at him. Azure looked over his shoulder as he pulled the door open. As though he expected to see his latest victim trailing in his shadow. Nothing was there but a warm island breeze to tickle his face.

Azure stepped into the dimness inside of Sitkum Hall. Brian had told him it was the school's math building. Classroom doors lining each side of the long, straight hallway were closed as Azure walked by. Behind the glass

of each door, bored-faced students sat in their neat rows and columns. All wearing the same outfit. An older person directed their attention to a board at the front of the room.

The second to last door on his right was cracked open. It was Wednesday during period three, so Brian expected him. Even after last night. Azure stepped up to the door and pushed it open wide enough to lean against the doorframe allowing an unobstructed view into the classroom. Brian was one of the few teachers in Sitkum Hall who had his classroom arranged with student desks facing the wall with the door. Other teachers, he explained, found it distracting if students could watch who walked by.

Brian looked over from where he lectured at the whiteboard, but he continued speaking to the class. “Let’s try a few of the examples from the book,” he said. Dark circles ringed the skin underneath his eyes. “Kirstin, can you read the first problem?”

Azure’s gaze flicked over to Kirstin. He’d never said anything to her. Or any of the other students. But Brian always spoke passionately about them. Kirstin rose from her chair. Pleated gray skirt billowed around her. She held the math text open in her arms. Her eyes locked with Azure’s before dropping to the pages to read.

Brian started recording the details of the math problem on the whiteboard. His hand had been wrapped in a crinkled beige bandage.

When Kirstin finished, she sat back down. Drawing Azure’s attention to the boy next to her. He was new. Brand new. Azure had never seen or scented him before. His gray school uniform still pressed with out-of-the-box impossibly crisp lines. He had a distinctly arctic look about him in his darker skin, black hair, and pronounced jaw. He lacked the size of arctic people and their bottom tusks. A hybrid perhaps?

And he watched Azure with sharp green eyes.

None of Azure's victims had green eyes. It was impossible. But humans. Humans had green eyes all the time.

"So what is the first thing we do when solving this problem?" Brian asked. His voice carried its usual upbeat tone. Seemed as though he had forgotten all about his near-death experience.

Azure tore his gaze away from the new boy's to look at the triangle picture Brian had drawn on the board. He had said his main class was geometry, but Azure didn't know what more humans needed to know about the image on the board other than that it was a triangle.

As always, none of the students were eager to respond. Azure found this painful to watch. No student who went to Lava Springs Academy was a willing participant in the classes. Brian always put way too much effort in trying to teach them. It was a shame, really.

Azure preferred the juvenile delinquents of Lava Springs Academy more than any of his own kind.

"Gia, why don't you walk the class through this problem?" Brian asked when it became obvious no one was going to say anything.

A girl farther back in the room reluctantly stood up. She started to describe some convoluted process to find the measure of a particular angle in the triangle. Brian followed along her instructions with his blue marker. Always a blue marker. Like he couldn't stop thinking about Azure.

Or maybe the blue marker was all he had available.

Feeling a pair of unsettling eyes on him, Azure brought his attention back to the new boy. Without taking those green eyes off of Azure, the new boy leaned over to Kirstin and said something too low for even Azure to hear. She followed his gaze then quickly looked away with a frown

before responding. It was instinct. The hair on the backs of their necks would stand. Their palms would drench in sweat. They'd want to look anywhere else but at him. And fidget. The fidgeting was bad. It came from the self-preservation center of their brains. The one that instructed them to choose flight over fight when they encountered him.

The predator.

Azure hated it. The way humans behaved. Even though it wasn't their fault. It was his.

The new boy kept watching him. With those sharp green eyes. Kirstin said something else to him and those eyes moved to Brian's back before returning to Azure. The boy, who looked to be around sixteen or seventeen, leaned closer to Kirstin to whisper something else.

Brian turned around. "Kirstin, Riku, please pay attention," he said.

"I am sorry, sir," the boy, Riku, said. A clear voice. The edges touched by an accent. Continental wasn't his first language.

"Will someone check the back of the book and see if we arrived at the correct answer?" Brian asked. He looked over at Azure again and mouthed the words, *a few more minutes*.

Azure shrugged his shoulders up to his ears in acknowledgement before settling his arms across his chest. Pages ruffled as a few students turned to the back of the book. But not Riku. His focus remained on Azure.

It made the hair on the back of Azure's neck stand. And he swore his palms were going sweaty. He closed his eyes. If only to bring the reflection of death in orange pools back to his mind. But now the orange eyes were green. He looked back at Brian as he addressed the class again. Without hearing the words, Azure stepped back into the hallway and kicked the classroom door shut.

Sitkum Hall reverberated with the sound.

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“You know. It isn’t nice to disrupt class,” an irritating voice said behind Azure.

Riku’s gaze pierced into Azure through the window’s glass. So he turned around to face the man who had addressed him instead. “The bell rings in five minutes,” he said.

The hallway was dimly lit. But Amarillo’s hair shined bright golden yellow, the same color as the weblines rippling beneath his skin. Luminous enough to make Azure want sunglasses. The man wore a pastel suit made of the finest silks. As fine as his hair. Even the soles of his shoes had to cost more than Azure was worth.

Someone needed to tell him peach wasn’t his color.

“I suppose that’s why you’re here,” Azure said before Amarillo spoke again.

The man took a moment to examine his perfectly manicured fingernails. “Are you going to stop me?” Amarillo asked. Daring Azure. Without even having to say, *like last night*. He brushed the pad of his thumb across the other four nails before looking up at Azure with gold eyes. “I haven’t collected prey in this wing of the school recently.”

Azure traced his eyes up and down the hallway. From the exit door close to his right to the one all the way on the other end where he had come in. There was no trace of shimmering yellow fiber. Amarillo was blasé enough to lure humans to his web with words. “You won’t,” Azure said. Inclined his head toward the classroom. “I was here first.”

“Bah, don’t make me laugh, useless widow,” Amarillo said. “I heard an orange spinner turned up dead—eaten—earlier this morning.”

Azure lifted an eyebrow. At least Amarillo hadn’t mentioned their fight. Or the limp in Azure’s leg. “So there’s another widow among us,” he said. “Emphasis on the *us*.”



Amarillo stroked his pencil thin mustache. Perfectly trimmed. Well-coiffed. The man screamed *refined*. “It’s pathetic how you always feel you need to bring me down with you,” he said. “It is so unbecoming of one would-be Riveter.”

The bell rang. All along the hallway classroom doors began to open. Uniformed high schoolers poured into the space around them. Azure stepped to the side. Placing his back against the wall to avoid brushing one of the humans. Amarillo remained in the middle of the hallway. Taking no such precaution himself. A predatory gleam entered his eyes as he approached a young lady who had been one of the first to emerge from Brian’s class.

She looked right. Left. With wide eyes. Rubbed her free hand on her skirt. Amarillo leaned close. Said something to her. Gia shook her head. Amarillo said something else.

Azure had to dig his fingernails into his arms to prevent himself from attacking Amarillo over it. Brian’s class. The yellow spinner had to know that hurt Azure. Everything Amarillo did. It had to be intentional. But Amarillo already knew too much about Azure’s habits. It would only stack more evidence against him if he attacked Amarillo while the other spinner fished for prey.

Especially after last night.

The girl started laughing at something Amarillo said. The yellow spinner slipped his arm around her shoulders and guided her to the nearest exit. They walked right past Azure. Amarillo shot him a smirk over the girl’s head. Brian was never going to see Gia in class again.

It made Azure’s heart hurt.

“Come on, what’s your next class?” Kirstin’s voice asked to Azure’s left.

The door closed behind Gia and Amarillo. Azure glanced back toward Brian’s classroom. Kirstin had

emerged into the hallway. Math textbook and binder pressed to her chest. With the new kid Riku at her side. His hands were empty. They paused for a moment and Azure watched those green eyes search the hallway until they landed on him. Not five feet away.

“It’s literature,” Riku said.

Kirstin glanced in Azure’s direction before shifting her books around to grab Riku by the arm. “Come on, I’ll take you over to the language arts building,” she said and dragged him away. “I’m going toward it anyway.”

Azure stepped away from the wall as Riku cast one last glance at him over his shoulder. The hallway began to clear out and no one else came out of Brian’s classroom. Azure stepped inside. Tried to suppress the fidgety feeling those green eyes roused in him.

Brian had his back to the room again as he swept an eraser over the problems on the whiteboard. He looked over at Azure at the sound of the classroom door closing. “I didn’t think you were coming back,” Brian said.

“I needed to cool off,” Azure said. He walked over to the first row of desks and sat on top of the one in the middle.

Brian paused in what he was doing before attacking the whiteboard even more ferociously with the eraser. “No,” he said. “I meant after last night.”

Azure wanted to grab Brian’s arms and pin them to his sides. He was afraid the frantic jerking would rip Brian’s shoulders out of their sockets. “What about it? Amarillo’s an ass,” he said. Decided not to mention he had seen the yellow spinner again in the hallway. He remained seated. Fought the urge to physically calm Brian down.

Sighing, Brian dropped the eraser to the tray and faced Azure for the first time. “I thought maybe you shouldn’t risk coming back, after that,” he said. “You know, for the safety of the students?”

A growl bubbled up the back of Azure's throat. Brian flinched before Azure could suppress it. Terror flashed through Brian's eyes. It wasn't his fault. In his mind, he had to know Azure would never hurt him. But Azure was still a predator. Even if he didn't want to be. Azure slid off the desktop and closed the distance between them. "I'm sorry," he said. His hands hovered in the air half a foot above Brian's shoulders. "But it doesn't matter where I do and don't go. None of the students at this school will ever be safe from them. Us. I'd rather stick by here to make sure you're safe."

Brian swung his head left and right. Examined the proximity of Azure's hands. "You aren't one of them," he said. "Not like that."

Azure flexed his fingers. Dead orange eyes. In a clean white skull. It could've been smiling. "Gia...she isn't coming back," he said.

Brian's face turned to stone. His shoulders pulled back as his whole body grew tense.

"May I touch you?" Azure asked.

The request was met by silence. Azure thought Brian would refuse for the first time ever since they'd met. Maybe he shouldn't have mentioned Gia. Maybe he should've waited until Brian asked. But Brian never asked. If a student stopped showing up to his class. Brian would assume the worst. Azure always saw it in his face. And when he would sneak a peek at Brian's class rosters. He'd see yet another name had been stricken through with a bold black marker.

He started to retract his hands when Brian said, "Yes."

Azure placed his hands on Brian's shoulders and squeezed. Tried to squeeze the image of Amarillo with his arm around Gia's shoulders from his mind. Amarillo was quick. In thirty seconds, he had managed to convince the prey it was a good idea for him to touch her. And to lead her

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away. Azure tried not to imagine the sound of Gia's dying cries. She would be screaming and struggling long after Amarillo took the first three bites. And she'd be alive well after five bites. Yellow spinners had no venom. Azure hoped for Gia's sake. And any of the other humans Amarillo had ever preyed on. That Amarillo was merciful and started with the throat. So she wouldn't have to feel herself being eaten alive.

"I'm sorry," Azure said. Because Gia's imagined screams were hard for him to bear.

Brian's shoulders went slack. "It isn't your fault."

"It is," Azure admitted. "I should've stopped him. Just now."

The hard look returned to Brian's face. He raised an arm like he was going to swat Azure's hands off. But he dropped it before taking any action. "You already ate," he said. It wasn't a question.

"An orange spinner," Azure said. Those orange eyes. "But that's why I couldn't stop him. The Riveter already knows about the orange spinner's untimely end. That he was eaten. If I tried to stop Amarillo—"

"The ass," Brian said.

"—he would've had many more reasons to believe I'm the one cannibalizing our own," Azure said. Especially after last night. But Azure didn't say that. Amarillo already knew they were friends.

"Not if you ate him too," Brian said. Stepped free of Azure's grasp. He walked over to the teacher's desk in the corner of the classroom opposite the door.

Azure watched Brian pick up a black marker and draw a new line on his period three class roster. Gia. "He's a widow, too," Azure said. "We're two of the only widows on this island. If I eat him, the suspect pool will be even smaller. I'll be caught."

He wouldn't be able to eat Amarillo. The man was too smart to walk face first into one of Azure's translucent blue webs. Azure wouldn't stand a chance against him. Amarillo claimed to cannibalize his mate out of convenience but Azure wouldn't put it past him to indulge in another spinner. Especially if it was only a useless widow like Azure.

Brian sighed and sat down at the desk. He shuffled papers around for a moment before looking up at Azure again. Blue eyes. Brian's eyes were blue. Like his. Maybe that was one of the reasons why Azure had become so attached to this particular human. "I'm sorry to cut this short," Brian said. Tense. Stiff. Like he wanted to cry. "But I need to finish grading the unit tests my fifth period class took yesterday. I was hoping to hand them back next period."

"It's okay," Azure said. He turned back to the desk he had sat on before to watch Brian grade papers. Even if they sat in silence.

Brian sighed again. "No, I meant, can you please go?" Brian asked. "I'll see you next week, if not before."

Azure pivoted on his heel with his next step to walk back to the doorway. He looked at Brian again before stepping into the hallway. "Yeah, sure," he said. Swung the classroom door shut once more.

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Indigo waited for him. At the gate of the school. "Amarillo said I could find you here," he said as Azure blew out.

Azure huffed passed Indigo. Continuing away from the school while his heart started beating faster. There was only one reason why Indigo would be looking for him. Amarillo had even mentioned it.

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The Riveter blamed him for the orange spinner's untimely end.

She wasn't wrong. There would be no evidence. Had been no evidence. He never left evidence behind.

What if he had this morning?

"The Riveter wants to see you immediately," Indigo said. He rushed to keep up.

"Has she grown tired of being the Riveter and realized it's pointless to look for the green spinner?" Azure asked.

"Of course not," Indigo said.

"I see no reason why I should see her," Azure said.

Indigo snatched him by the arm. Forced Azure to come to a stop on the sidewalk. It was the middle of the day so the street was vacant. Only a few cars lazily drove around. No pedestrians. Everything about Jovial was lazy. "I think you more than know what this is about," Indigo said. He dug his fingernails into Azure's biceps. If it was his teeth. Azure would be in danger. But it was only his hand.

"I don't," Azure said. Flat. Hard. He hadn't seen a lie in his life.

The wrinkles on Indigo's face grew darker. Thicker as he frowned. "Let me be clear," he said. "She is not *requesting* your presence. She is *demanding* it."

It would only raise further suspicion if Azure refused to go with Indigo now. Even though the Riveter hadn't *demand*ed Amarillo's presence. Azure clamped his mouth shut on the response and ripped his arm free of Indigo's grasp. "Fine," he said. "Let's go."

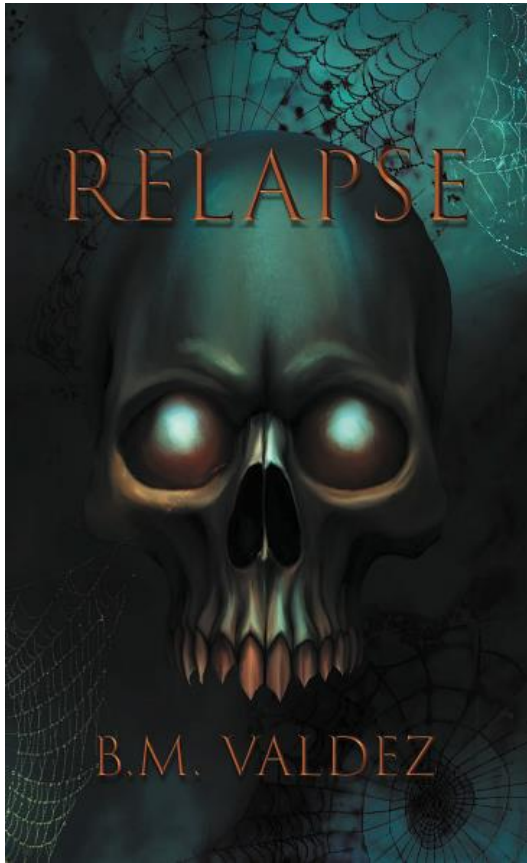
## About the Author

B. M. Valdez has been writing since they were a child in elementary school. They write a broad range of genres, including everything from dark fantasy to science fiction and even contemporary romance. B. M. is passionate about the LGBTQIA+ community and often features queer characters in their work. *Relapse* is their first published novel, but it certainly won't be their last.

When they aren't writing, B. M. enjoys spending time with their sibling playing video games, watching movies, or just generally having a good time. They can often be found covered in pet hair from their two dogs and two cats. They live in the Washington D. C. region of the east coast, though will always remember growing up on the Oregon Coast.

Without readers, B. M. Valdez would not have the opportunity to continue sharing their stories! They would love to connect with readers and can be found on the various sites below. You can find exclusive rough excerpts of other projects, character concept art, and more through these channels.

- [bmvaldez.com](http://bmvaldez.com)
- [@B\\_M\\_Valdez](#) on X.com
- B. M. Valdez on Goodreads.com
- B. M. Valdez on vocal.media
- BMValdez on toyhou.se



*Former serial killer Brian is a monster at heart; Man-eating spider Azure is a monster by definition. Azure is targeted by a deadlier monster and Brian succumbs to his past. The truth might cost them their friendship as well as their lives.*

## **Relapse**

By B. M. Valdez

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