

Rally star Plath faces ruin after his team falls apart, forcing him to choose career or revenge. Devereaux leaves fame to seek “night,” but must choose between his dream or helping a community. Both must decide what they’re willing to lose.

The End of the Road

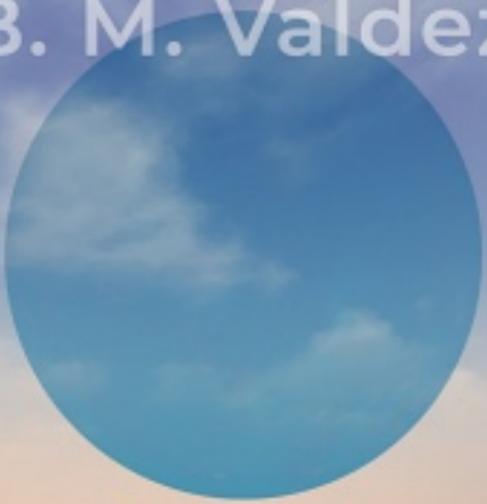
By B. M. Valdez

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B. M. Valdez



THE END OF THE ROAD

...is where night begins.



Also by B. M. Valdez

Relapse

Faceless

Daisukidayo, Honey-Senpai!

Green (The Pitstop Articles, book 1)

Countenance of a Hero

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Print ISBN: 978-1-961265-87-5

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-253-9

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

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2026

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Valdez, B. M.
The End of the Road by B. M. Valdez
Library of Congress Control Number: 2026900536

Chapter One

Plath Kauffman

Article dated six months ago by Garth Burdan, The Globe

Dazzle! Dazzle! Dazzle! Crowd favorite team becomes the first in the history of the rally circuit to win a perfect season.

Team Dazzle subverter Plath Kauffman has crossed the finish line in first place for the team's tenth Closing Run. This first place victory has made Team Dazzle the only team in the rally circuit's history to achieve first place in all 85 events of the season. This unprecedented event came as a shock to all rally sponsors, but fans are clamoring for more. "I always knew Plath was something special," the subverter's wrecker, Kenzie, told reporters. "Dazzle certainly is a team to keep your eyes on going forward. Can we get a perfect season next year? Well, you'll have to wait and see."

T*eam Dazzle is among the first on the skytrack this season, following the team's unprecedented perfect victory last season.* The headline scrolled through Plath's mind, the words painting an image in the darkness within his skull. His pulse beat a steady rhythm through his skin, pounding like the slow cheer of a hopeful crowd.

Silence on the track surrounded Plath. The blue sky stretched out around the tube, suspending it in the air. Only a few puffy clouds marred its perfection. Plath sat in the middle lane, MOB rumbling in quiet anticipation. Plath tightened his grip on the steering wheel and tapped his toes

against the accelerator. The instruments served to coach the MOB forward and in the right direction but, at this stage in their relationship, Silva needed no such coaching. The other four MOBs in line with Plath, each separated by a lane of space between them, were completely silent. It would take more than a little coaxing to convince those beasts to get up and go.

It wouldn't matter to Plath if Devereaux didn't come around the corner of the track first. He didn't need a head start to rocket into first place at the end of the skytrack. The rally barely began, and Plath could see the progress of the starters on his handheld PDA. The starters completed the first twenty-five percent of the skytrack, relying on quick speed to sort out an order. Then they would pass their team's banner over to the stabilizer, who would race the next fifty percent of the track. Subverters like Plath covered the final twenty-five percent of the skytrack.

Somewhere far below them, a stadium of spectators watched the progress of the starters up on a giant animatronic screen. Smaller satellite screens would be projecting images of the stabilizers and the subverters, silently waiting. These same images were being broadcasted to home stations all across society. Everyone loved a good rally, even better when Plath dominated the skytrack.

Plath opened Silva's door and stepped out onto the track. He tilted his head back to shoot the bot hovering nearby one of his legendary smiles. Ten years before, the smile had christened his team as Dazzle.

Somewhere far below, Plath knew the crowd cheered wildly.

The growl of Silva's engine changed, turning deeper and throatier. Plath took it to be the MOB's dissatisfaction with his conceit. "Hush," Plath told the creature, placing the palm of his non-regulation velvet gloved hand on the hood.

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Plath's rally suit, stark white with a single dark blue stripe going from the left side of his neck all the way down to his left pant leg, did not scream with the tackiness of company logos. They were the only team brazen enough not to require corporate sponsorship, though not for lack of interest. Plath just didn't want their loudness obstructing the view of his face.

"Yo, Kauffman," a male voice called across the skytrack.

Plath turned to the red MOB in the lane next to him. Its paint was decorated with small black hearts and the letter Q all over. A much larger number was painted on each side, almost like a unit number that would've been used in the old world. The number read ten over six. The driver door hung open, and the man's torso poked out, waving his logo encrusted arm at Plath.

"What is it?" Plath asked. He pressed his dusty blond hair back, running his fingers through it in simulation of wind which never graced the skytrack's tube.

"You going to finish this rally on foot?" Rozendaal asked, blinking wide red eyes at Plath. He had a matching black heart tattooed on his left cheek just underneath.

"I thought I'd give the crowd a taste of what they came for," Plath said. He stroked his hand through his flowing hair again, turned to the bot, and flashed another smile. "You don't get voted the ring's most eligible bachelor by staying in the MOB."

Rozendaal spat.

"Pretentious, isn't he?" a woman asked on Plath's other side. She swung her wide hips fluidly from within her own MOB and tossed her head to make her hair cascade around her face.

"I noticed," Rozendaal said. "And who are you?"

“She’s a newcomer,” Plath said. He swept his eyes up and down the length of the woman’s form. Her pale yellow, fire-retardant suit bore only a few patches, announcing her entry year into the ring. “Lori Danos, is it? You’re registered with a team called Waves of Grain this year.”

“I see you’ve done your homework,” Lori said. She folded her arms underneath her chest, pushing her bust up.

“As reigning victor, it’s my job,” Plath said. Not just a reigning victor. Dazzle claimed reigning victor most years. This year, they were returning to the rally circuit as the only team in history to win a perfect season.

The bot hovering above them flashed a strobe of lights in time with a random series of beeps and jostles. “Team subverters,” a voice boomed. “Please return to your vehicles. It is dangerous to be standing on the skytrack.”

“It’s been a pleasure,” Lori said before sashaying back into her MOB, which boasted a more petite figure than Lori herself. The body style consisted of only two doors, a short hood, and very little by way of trunk area. Plath’s research indicated Lori owned a female. How a first time rally team acquired such a rarity didn’t register in Plath’s understanding.

“Best do what it says,” Rozendaal said, drawing Plath’s attention back the leader of Team Paperboys.

“Why? Are you afraid of the projection bot?” Plath asked. He flashed a third smile in the bot’s direction. The crowd watching them wouldn’t be picking up the bot’s audio feed. The bot following the action projected audio to the crowd.

“No, but I have a feeling the stabilizers will be here soon,” Rozendaal said. “I don’t intend to lose the first rally of the season.”

“Have it your way,” Plath said as Rozendaal ducked back into his own unfamiliar MOB, a new creature for a new season. Most rally drivers opted to wreck their MOB at the end of a season, especially a losing one. The creature would be destroyed for scrap, parts sold back to the four MOB companies to reuse and improve upon the technology, and the corporate sponsors would pick up the bill on replacing the MOB for the team. This rally marked the start of Plath’s eleventh season with Silva as his partner.

Silva’s headlights flashed and the engine growled deep again. Plath smiled, this time a small private smile for his partner, and climbed back in. He checked the screen of his PDA. Sure enough, the starters conquered most of the first stretch of the skytrack. The positioning on the screen indicated they’d be rounding the final bend before charging straight for the stabilizers.

Plath tapped twice on the round communicator device nestled in his left ear. “Make sure the handoff is rapid,” he told his team.

“Always,” came Ozai’s response.

Devereaux didn’t respond but, once a rally began, Plath often found him to be in a zone.

Only a few minutes passed before Ozai spoke again. “Plath,” he said and his elevated voice cued Plath into the problem.

“What?” Plath asked. His grip tightened on the PDA. Ozai’s icon displayed him in second place among the starters. Ozai liked to sacrifice a few moments of speed to prepare the banner for the most rapid handoff possible. That way, Devereaux gained the few moments back when he took off first.

“It’s Devereaux,” Ozai said. His icon drew even with the stabilizer’s starting line on the screen. The other

icons started to move around him as the other teams' stabilizers took off with their team banners. "He's gone."

"What do you mean, he's gone?" Plath demanded. The cabin of his MOB went dark instantly as Silva picked up on his distress.

"I mean, he's not here. I still have our banner," Ozai said. "There's no one for me to hand it off to."

The PDA went limp in Plath's hand. As the first rally of the season, nothing wild upturned this simple start to finish run, the only competition being speed and teamwork offering a chance for the teams to show off in front of the whole society and garner support for the rest of the season. Dazzle dominated the skytrack no matter which teams they were up against.

Dazzle rose to the starting line together, Plath and Devereaux leaving Ozai behind. They drove their MOBs down the skytrack until they reached the stabilizers' staging area where Plath left Devereaux to continue on to his own staging area. The entire skytrack soared high above the rest of society enclosed by a large clear tube that purified the air for its occupants and protected them from the harsh sunlight. No one could escape the skytrack.

So how did Devereaux vanish?

"I'm sorry, Plath," Ozai said, but numbness crept throughout Plath's body and he made no response.

The first rally of the season didn't necessarily make or break a team. But it certainly made or broke Plath. How could Devereaux just disappear in the middle of a rally that had the potential to kick off their second perfect season? While he didn't have corporate sponsors, Plath relied on under the table investors. Under the table investors who were sure to spook at the first sign of trouble and send the dirty money scattering. Plath only wished the trouble didn't slam into him headfirst. Devereaux gave no prior indication

of trouble. The trouble couldn't have been with Devereaux. A member of Dazzle since the start, Devereaux clicked with Ozai and Plath like a triplet fallen from the sky. Something else made Devereaux disappear for him to miss the handoff.

Plath dropped the PDA to the metallic basin occupying the space between Silva's two front seats. MOB's contained no plastic elements, these having been replaced by the biological component of the MOB in the design of a car. Plath's other arm dropped between the seat and the door, and his face stared blankly out of the front windshield. The cabin filled with a soft blue glow, Plath's favorite color and Silva's attempt at soothing him.

An eternity passed while Plath waited for the other teams' stabilizers to reach them. The banners were handed off and the team subverters shot forward, MOB's growling in rampant protest as their drivers slammed down on the pedals. No stabilizer came for Plath with no banner to hand off. Numbness still radiated through him, not wholly believing Devereaux wouldn't come until only the blue sun's light accompanied him on the skytrack.

His PDA screen flashed brightly as a voice came over his communicator, a global announcement to all participants. "And the victory goes to the newcomer Waves of Grain driver, Lori Danos!" the announcer's voice called. The rally was over. "In second place is veteran driver Rozendaal Ozark of the Paperboys."

"Plath," Ozai's voice sounded in his ear muting the announcements. Plath looked up as Ozai's MOB slowed to a stop alongside him. "We should go."

"He didn't choose to leave," Plath said. "The rally means as much to Devereaux as it does to you and me."

Plath could hear the smile in Ozai's voice when he said, "I don't think that's true. The rally means more to you than both of us combined."

Plath allowed a small smile onto his numb cheeks again, not entirely certain his lips obeyed. “Let’s go,” he said. “We should meet up with Kenzie and figure this thing out.”

“Right,” Ozai said.

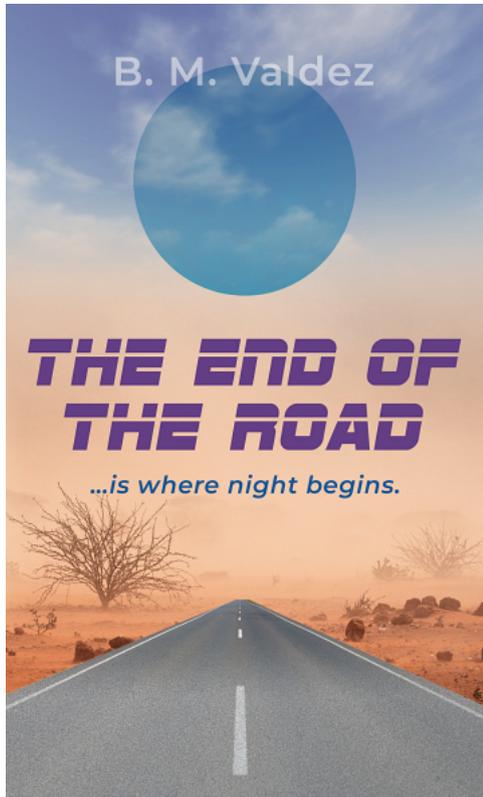
About the Author

B. M. Valdez has been writing since he was a child in elementary school. Though he writes a broad range of genres, including everything from dark fantasy to science fiction and even contemporary romance, Valdez considers himself an author of queer stories above all else. As a gay, panromantic transman, Valdez is passionate about the LGBTQIA+ community, and his work always features a diverse cast of characters representing this community. *Relapse* is his first published novel.

When he isn't writing, Valdez enjoys spending time with his sibling playing video games, watching movies, or just generally having a good time. He can often be found covered in pet hair from his two dogs and two cats. He lives 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 his stories! He would love to connect with readers and can be found on the various sites below. You can find exclusive rough excerpts of other projects, short stories and chapbooks, character concept art, and more through these channels. Please also consider leaving a review for this book on Goodreads, Amazon, or any other platform.

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