

# **Love, Lies & Azure Eyes**

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LOVE, LIES, AND AZURE EYES

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JANIS THORNTON

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## Chapter 1

### *25 Years Ago*

Johnny Lange dug his fingertips into the Cadillac's padded leather dash and gaped squinty-eyed into the post-midnight fog that wrapped like a hermetic seal around the lonely stretch of Indiana Highway 280. As the vintage Coupe de Ville whipped through the white curtain of mist, Johnny looked for a little tear in the wispy wall that might reveal some sort of familiar landmark—a billboard, a crossroad, the pavement itself—anything that could help him determine his proximity to The Curve. But it was futile. He couldn't even see the fancy, Flying Goddess ornament anchored to the hood five feet in front of his nose.

Turning to his classmate behind the wheel, Johnny's anxiety spiked. Carter McKuen, the darling of Logan Point High, was slogged to the gills and driving way too fast toward The Curve—the dreaded, cursed Curve. Grinning stupidly, Carter took a long pull of his imported beer and thrust the can back between his thighs.

"I was thinking," Johnny said, "you might want to ease up on the gas." He spoke with exaggerated deference, choosing his words with care. Nothing good could come from barking orders to a drunk.

"I'm pretty sure The Curve is coming up."

If Carter heard, he didn't show it. He only gawked at Johnny through droopy, hooded slits, then

calmly slurred his intention. "I'm gonna take it."

Johnny's heart rate quickened. "Excuse me?"

"I'm gonna take that sucker at a *hunerd ... a f'kin' hunerd.*"

Adrenaline fired through Johnny's veins. His survival instinct locked into gear. He eyed the speedometer. Ninety-five! What were the odds he could reason with Carter, convince him to stop this insanity?

Convince him to stop!

From nowhere, a prayer he'd heard once as a child echoed through his head: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no ..." He flashed Carter a sideways glance. "...evil."

Johnny reckoned if he wanted to see another tomorrow, he had two chances for a peaceful solution: slim and none. Yet, he'd always heard that the Lord helps those who help themselves. Believing this was so, he figured he'd best help himself to a piece of Carter McKuen. And fast. He took one last glance at the reckless, self-centered daddy's boy, steadied his nerves with a deep breath, and hurled himself into Carter, knocking him aside, grabbing the steering wheel with both hands as he wrestled for control. Carter, surprisingly strong despite his drunken stupor, held tight and fought back hard, jerking the car side-to-side as it careened down the road helter-skelter. Kicking Carter's right foot off the accelerator, Johnny mashed the brake pedal to the floor, sending the car skidding across the rain-soaked highway at an ungodly speed. Quickly realizing his miscalculation, Johnny speared Carter with a sharp elbow to the jaw. With Carter temporarily disabled, Johnny had room to pump the brake and slow the car gradually until the tires finally regained traction. It was then that the vehicle emerged from the murky fog into clear, clean night air lit by a million twinkling stars. Johnny nearly smiled, but relief was premature. The outer limits of the headlights' beam spilled onto the edge of the woods, revealing that the car was on its final approach to The Curve; but worse, an even more frightening terror had manifested. Someone was straddling the highway's center line. Johnny's confusion reeled. It looked like Shelayne Goodnight, but that was impossible. Shelayne had been dead nearly six months, murdered last fall.

But there she stood. Her soiled, shredded clothing hung about her wasted body and billowed in the breeze, exposing decomposing flesh and bones. Her eyes, empty of emotion, bored into him. Her rotted lips stretched to a mocking sneer.

Suddenly sober, Carter screamed and thrust Johnny aside, spinning the wheel and plowing the vehicle straight through the apparition. The abrupt change of direction neutralized the tires' grip on the wet pavement, causing the car to fishtail to the right, then left, then right, and then spiral wildly into the lap of The Curve. Stomping the brake with both feet, Carter steered into the spin but overcompensated, throwing the vehicle into a series of uncontrollable revolutions. The velocity propelled Carter across the seat and slammed him into Johnny, fusing them together against the passenger door, while the driverless deathtrap whirled mercilessly toward the immovable cluster of trees.

The ordained impact belched metallic thunder and shook the ground, while virgin wood splintered into a hundred giant toothpicks that exploded skyward like Chinese fireworks. The car flipped and rolled once, sculpting its sleek body-by-Fisher styling into an almost unrecognizable heap of twisted, mangled steel even before it crashed into a stubborn, deep-rooted oak. The mutilated Caddy settled onto its right side, groaning, sputtering, and hocking up sizzling billows of steam.

Miraculously, a pocket of the passenger side of the front seat survived the crash in near-pristine condition. Within that spare space, Carter lay unscathed and out cold, bearing down on Johnny, who hadn't fared as well. Crushed beneath Carter's dead weight, Johnny groped the walls of his mangled cocoon for a way out. The effort was hindered, however, by the fancy hood ornament embedded in his belly.

With each beat of Johnny's heart, blood gushed from the wound, saturating his white shirt and jeans, spilling onto the leather seat, and pooling around him. Blood

rose in his throat as the young teen gurgled and coughed with each gasp for air, intensifying his agony.

Tattered vignettes of his failed life flickered across his mind-screen. His future was history, unless he did something fast. He wedged his forearms against his oppressor and shoved with everything he had, but Carter's suffocating hulk would not budge. He might as well have been a freight train.

Johnny had never been a quitter. His will to live was as potent as a Pentecostal revival, but exhaustion and excruciating pain zapped his ability to fight. His heartbeat was slowing, and each intake of air was shallower than the one before. He was spent, and he knew it. There would be no more tomorrows.

Yielding to the inevitable, Johnny surrendered, whispering his final prayer to the only deity he truly worshipped. "Annie."

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