

The Gay Teen's Guide to Defeating a Siren

ONE

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Yep, I'm going to hell.

I mean, who in their right mind gets excited about a funeral? A funeral in Pamata, Texas, the world's redneckest hole-in-the-wall? Me, that's who. And I wasn't just excited, I was ecstatic. And terrified. Those are two emotions you're probably *not* supposed to feel. But sure enough, they were there, building until my legs river-danced in the backseat of my best friend Kyle's car.

I shook my head, gnawed at a fingernail, and glanced around. Kyle's dad gripped the sun-cracked steering wheel so hard, his knuckles whitened. Next to him, Kyle's mom had been staring straight ahead for what seemed like hours. Kyle kept adjusting the rear A/C vents and rolling his eyes. I couldn't blame him for being bored—neither of us knew his uncle, the guy who died. Unlike me, Kyle didn't have an ulterior motive.

"Get in the parking lot, you jackass!" Kyle's dad honked at a red four-door.

I jumped in surprise and banged my elbow on the window.

"That's my cousin!" Kyle's mom shrieked.

Kyle's dad gestured at the car, like it was evidence in a big court case.

"I think they have more important things to worry about than parking two seconds faster," Kyle's mom said.

I rubbed my arm and grinned. Whereas my family reeked of corny dad jokes, Kyle's was crude and entertaining.

Kyle's dad whipped into the Williams Funeral Home parking lot and jerked into a spot. The car lurched forward then settled back, like we were in a slingshot. I let out a huge breath, unbuckled my seatbelt, and opened the door. Suddenly, I was flying out of the car and crash landed on my hip. I yelled, already feeling the summer heat seeping through the asphalt into my slacks. I looked at Kyle, who lay on his back in the car, legs outstretched. He'd catapulted me out with his feet.

"Are you OK?" he said, faking sympathy. "What happened?"

"Blaize!" Kyle's mom peered over the car at me.

Alright, I have to stop for a second and admit that, yes, my name is Blaize Trales (pronounced "blaze trails"). I've had so many stupid nicknames. And it put all this undue pressure on me. "Don't be like everyone else," my parents would say. "Make your own path. It's in your name." OK, OK, I guess I did make my own crazy path that year, thanks to Sanctuary Prep, the Siren, and the Seeker. Little did I know, the insanity was all about to begin.

Kyle's mom yanked his door open and dragged him out by one of his gigantic ears.

"I didn't do anything!" he said.

She pushed a finger in his face. "I'm not in the mood today, you understand?"

Kyle faked his best apologetic look, but flipped me off behind his back.

I knew this game, and would normally be plotting hardcore revenge (cleats, anyone?). However, I wasn't in the mood, either. More than ever, I needed to come off as mature, and I went to unleash my feeble wrath. That's when my gaze shifted to a group of about fifteen people, all dressed in suits, and heading to the bleached, ranch-style funeral home. Every atom of irritation evaporated and the nerves returned, blasting straight up my spine.

Are they gay?

There it is, my big secret, the reason I was so freaking thrilled and petrified.

See, rumor had it Kyle's Uncle Brad was gay. That's no big deal today; I'm seventeen and have met tons of homos. But this was three years ago, right before my life exploded. Being stuck in the closet, I'd never seen another gay person. Everyone in Pamata was straight and two-stepped together. And I hoped beyond hope that Brad's gay friends had driven into town.

That's why I invited myself along: I was thrilled at the idea of seeing my first gay guy. And terrified at the idea of seeing my first gay guy. At a funeral.

Yep, definitely going to hell.

I shot to my feet and brushed off my slacks as a breath caught in my lungs. Instinctively, I grabbed at my chest and came away with a million feet of excess shirt. Stupid humongous suit. I was tall and gangly for my age, but the pants were so long, they bunched around my ankles like leg warmers. The blue coat sagged down my arms. Mom had said, "You'll grow into it, sweetie." Apparently, "growing" meant changing into The Incredible Hulk.

A man in the group turned and looked at me. His clothes fit perfectly and I swore I could smell a breath mint from twenty feet away. I panicked and tried puffing myself up in a lame attempt to fill out the suit. Panting, I imagined he was gay and invited me to sit with him. I once read you got a toaster for coming out. The image of sitting at the funeral while bread cooked on my lap made me tingle.

Kyle's mom snapped me out of my reverie.

"It's Zimmerman's Zealots." She balled her fists and took a protective step ahead of Kyle and me. "Don't look at them. Just keep going." Ducking her head, she walked faster, arms dead at her side.

Her shift from mouthy to withdrawn worried me. *What are Zimmerman's Zealots?*

Normally I might have ignored the situation, put on my blinders, and followed Kyle's mom in. However, because she'd just told me *not* to look, I had to take a peek.

Rows of well manicured waist-high green hedges surrounded the parking lot. Boring. Behind them, someone had set up wooden barricades. A huge group of men marched back and forth on the other side. Most of them looked like they'd just returned from the world's longest camping trip. Dirt and mud covered camouflage shirts, and I could see missing teeth from where I stood.

That was bad enough, but the signs they carried were so nasty, my knees died of shock and locked up.

Death to Fags.

He Deserved to Die.

Thank You for Cancer.

Bile rose in my throat. The energy around us changed. A tense fog settled over everyone walking to the funeral. Arms grabbed and clung to each other. I jammed my hands into my bottomless pockets.

"I can't believe they came," Kyle's mom hissed.

Kyle's dad shrugged. "I can. Wasn't Brad like some huge figure in Dallas?" His tone was flat and unsupportive. I found myself gripping my legs.

"They came all the way to the Panhandle?" she said, as if Pamata were the most insignificant place in the world.

Kyle's dad shrugged again.

I looked at Kyle, trying to read his expression. My heart ran a two-minute mile. We'd never talked about the gay thing. I didn't think he knew; he assumed I went to the funeral to keep him company. And our conversations usually revolved around Starcraft and farts. His face was bland, giving nothing away.

I stared at my feet, terrified and self-conscious. What if Kyle had gaydar going off like crazy? Or what would Zimmerman's Zealots do if they knew about me? I shivered, imagining myself being drowned or shot. They'd probably use pink bullets, like I was some kind of gay vampire.

A water bottle smashed into my head. I stumbled sideways, pain spreading across my face. Laughter erupted behind the barricades. I looked up to see a large, bald man pointing at me. He held up another bottle like a grenade.

"You bastards!" Kyle's mom snatched the bottle off the ground and hurled it back. It ricocheted helplessly off a tree near the hedges. The laughter grew louder.

I balled my fists and realized I was growling. A rock rested next to my shoe and, for a split second, I contemplated flinging it into the crowd. But the last thing I wanted was to compromise my security in the closet. I settled for the oh-so-brave act of kicking the rock in frustration.

Despite my wussiness, a static charge seemed to be building over the people heading to the doors. Kyle's mom stood staring at the protesters, challenging them. People on our side bunched together as if forming a makeshift army.

Sensing the mounting discomfort, the protesters got more rowdy. They began dancing in circles and toasting Uncle Brad's death. Suddenly, I heard a weird singing from their ranks. It was strangely beautiful and floated on air. Then I registered the lyrics and my bones wanted to jump out of my skin—someone was encouraging us to join them! *What kind of idiot would do that?*

Trying to shake off the anger, I turned and edged closer to Kyle's mom. She leaned down.

"You OK?"

I nodded. "Let's just go."

She grabbed my arm and, together, we took off. A few steps later, I turned back, expecting Kyle to be right there. Nope. He and his dad were way behind us, staring at the protesters.

"Ben?" Kyle's mom said.

“Kyle, let’s go,” I said.

They didn’t budge.

For a second, I wondered if Kyle was going to grab a rock and finish what I didn’t. Nope. He stood, swaying to the haunting song, and took a step toward the barricades. His dad followed.

“Ben!” Kyle’s mom said.

He ignored her and took a few more steps, as did Kyle.

What the hell is going on?

Kyle’s mom and I continued to yell after them, but they didn’t stop until they reached the barricade. In the moment, I hoped with every fiber of my being they were going to attack the protesters. I imagined Kyle’s dad rearing back and punching the fat guy so hard, he would fly through the air, landing on a car. I could practically hear its alarm going off.

Without raising so much as a finger, Kyle and his dad skirted a hedge and crouched under the barricade. On the other side, a man handed Kyle’s dad a sign, reading *One Fag Down*. Hugging myself, I willed Kyle to grab the sign and snap it in two. He didn’t. Grinning, Kyle thrust the sign into the air.

It was the worst moment of my life, oozing by in slow motion. My brain couldn’t process what I was seeing. Kyle hated gays enough where he’d protest his own uncle’s funeral? My chest ached. How long had they been planning this? I pictured scenarios—like Kyle pretending to sneak off to pee, and secretly whipping out a practice sign—but they didn’t make sense. This was insane.

Six years of memories whizzed by. Playing video games with Kyle, kicking each other out of chairs and cars, protecting each other from the jackasses at school. We were bonded by unpopularity. As each memory invaded, a black curtain crushed it. I was so hurt I couldn’t do anything but stand there, speechless.

I never thought much about the phrase, *When something can go wrong, it will go wrong*. Well, the saying grabbed my head and rammed my skull into a wall. Standing there, scorching on the funeral home parking lot, I turned to see Ryan Kirkpatrick and Justin Downs ambling over.

Ryan and Justin were football jocks in my grade. Both had perfect, evil smiles. Both were mega popular. Worst of all, both were on the other side of the barricade, a few feet from Kyle. They were standing with a guy I didn't know. He had a scar over his left eye that cut his eyebrow neatly in two. His hair was extremely messy, like he'd tossed and turned in bed to get it just so. I knew he was popular, too, because he wore their casual grin.

I whimpered and pretended to shield my face from the sun, hoping they hadn't seen me, when Justin spoke.

"Trales, I've got something for you."

I froze. Every inch of me screamed, *RUN!* Justin had thrown pencils at my back in English last year. One had stuck in my skin and jutted straight out like a third arm. It stung so bad, but I couldn't remove it; that was a sure sign of weakness. I'd sat there, trying not to cry, while he snickered behind me.

The memory should have been more than enough warning, but a funny thing happens to your brain when popular guys invite you over. I rationalized why it was a great idea. Maybe they were impressed by the biceps I was secretly flexing in my suit (although I had no muscles). Or maybe they confused me for someone else (although he'd just said my name). A million excuses hovered around, but the bottom line was this: being unpopular sucked. Part of me felt I needed to take every opportunity. Or maybe I was just too scared to say no.

Either way, I inched over to the barricade. Justin and his group wore innocent smiles as he held out a pamphlet.

"What is it?" I asked.

Justin smiled cheerfully. “Our bro Timothy gave it to us.”

He gestured to the strange guy, and they exchanged a fist bump.

Really?

“I think you need to enroll,” said Ryan. “Right now.”

I took the pamphlet and glanced down. It was sky blue with clouds floating across the background. The cover depicted boys and girls giving a thumbs-up. They wore insane, exaggerated smiles. A man stood behind them with an all-knowing look. Confused, I read the words at the top.

Sanctuary Preparatory Academy—A Healing Home for Gay Kids

A line of sweat oozed down my back as I glanced at the pamphlet again. Just below the title sat the words *Join us today and prepare your ~~gay~~ healing kids for tomorrow.*

My stomach churned. I didn’t think those places even existed anymore—groups of kids wishing the gay away? Disgusting. I told myself I’d never be caught dead at a place like that.

“I’m not gay,” I said, thrusting the brochure back at Justin. He wouldn’t take it.

“Then join us,” Ryan said. There it was, their trap. If I joined them, I was betraying myself. But by refusing, I was asking for hell. This jerk Timothy—whom I didn’t even know (Wow, I just used *whom*... thanks eighth-grade English)—just shoved me into a lose-lose situation.

Without thinking, I glared at Timothy. Instead of the sneer I expected, he studied me like mold under a microscope. I hated having my every movement judged. It was impossible for a person to be perfect—sooner or later we all trip or gleek—but the jocks pounced on every mistake.

Nervous, I turned to Kyle for help. Surely, his hatred of Justin and Ryan was more important than an effing protest. My eyes found his. His pupils were dilated, but I didn’t stop to question it. I waved him over with my head. He ignored me as if he were in a trance.

Justin and Ryan laughed.

“Looks like someone’s figured it out,” Ryan said.

My legs shook as an anvil plowed into my chest; our friendship was wrecked.

In any other circumstance, searching out a parent would have been social suicide. I could already hear the jokes about needing a Hello Kitty pacifier. But I was desperate and inched sideways to Kyle's mom.

"I know you didn't approve, but THIS?" she pleaded with her husband. Tears ran down her face as she gestured at a really nasty sign smeared with what looked like dog poop.

He didn't respond.

"Why?" she said.

It was as if she spoke to a black hole. Kyle's dad smiled and cheered as though she were telling him his new haircut looked amazing.

She stood taller than I'd ever seen her and slapped him. "We're done."

I flinched. *They're breaking up!?*

Her voice crumbled and her knees gave out. I grabbed her under an armpit, looking from her to Kyle. Even in the center of her pain, he grinned off at nothing as if he were having the time of his life. Kyle's dad didn't even react as her slap blossomed across his cheek.

"Well, gay boy?" Justin said.

His timing couldn't have been worse. Here I was, faced with the most gargantuan turmoil of my life, while the jocks screwed with me. An anger like I'd never felt welled up inside me and I did something I never thought I'd do: I spat in Justin's face. Yes, I hocked a loogie that almost hit his eye.

I don't know what spurred the action. I'd read about plantation owners spitting on slaves, police spitting on protesters, civilians spitting on soldiers. Those in power loved flaunting authority over us "losers". In this case, I reversed the situation: the lowly gay spit in the popular jock's face.

Shock clenched Justin in place. He reached up, in slow motion, and wiped at his face. Reality hit and he lunged into the barrier. I jumped back as he unleashed a tidal wave of threats. Retaliation would be brutal when school started back up. I didn't care. My anger wasn't really at him; it was at Kyle. I expected crap like this from Justin, not my best friend. Former best friend.

"We're done," I said to Kyle, with as much bravado as I could muster. Then, wadding up the brochure, I threw it at that idiot stranger Timothy. I admit I was scared. If I pushed the jocks enough, they might hurdle the barricade and come after me. Timothy smiled. Only it wasn't a gloating smile.

I didn't know what he was playing at, but I had to bolt before breaking down. Spinning around, I found Kyle's mom. She leaned against me for support. I grabbed her arm and held her up as we made our way to the funeral home.

I don't remember a single thing that happened inside. My plans had been decapitated. My thoughts swam all over the place. I pictured Kyle and his dad, those disgusting signs, and the sneers on their faces. I thought about my real reason for attending. I was no better than Zimmerman's Zealots, both of us here to celebrate. Sure, my motives were different, but I certainly wasn't thinking about Uncle Brad. Guilt pressed into my bones and, to punish myself, I didn't look at a single face.

Leaving the service, my thoughts returned to the present, and I suddenly wondered how we were going to get home. What if Kyle and his dad had already left? I had no desire to spend another second with them, but cringed at the thought of explaining this to my parents and asking for a ride.

As we walked through the parking lot, all those thoughts fled: Kyle and his dad were in the car motioning for us to hurry. They both smiled as if nothing had happened.

I jerked in surprise and looked at Kyle's mom. She stopped. Her eyes found the ground and she studied her feet. Brushing off her dress, she looked up, nodded, and climbed into the passenger seat.

I was stunned. Kyle's dad wore the pants in the family, but I never thought she'd cave like this.

The second she was situated, Kyle's mom looked at me with pleading eyes. She needed me there with her. Part of me felt her pain, but I couldn't do it. She wasn't gay. By getting in the car, I was betraying a huge piece of myself. For once, I wouldn't give in.

Saying, "Thanks for the ride," I headed around the car. Kyle caught my eye as I passed his window. I told myself not to look but couldn't help myself. He smiled and pointed at his feet like he was going to kick me again. Unbelievable. I made a rude gesture through the window.

Surprise lined his face and he mouthed, "What'd I do?"

"Amnesia? Really?" I spat.

He couldn't hear me, so I gestured again and a look passed between us. It's like we both knew our friendship was wrecked. His eyebrows furrowed in confusion and he yelled something else through the window. I ignored him and started the two mile trek home.

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A half hour later, I sped up the driveway, praying the door was unlocked. The idea of seeing my parents—or anyone else—made me sick. Besides, it was exactly seven million degrees out and I was sunburned and soaked.

When it came down to it, I just wanted to be alone. I was all messed up inside. Part of me was shaken by the Kyle incident. More than anything, though, I was frustrated at my weakness. Yes, I spat at the jocks, but that did nothing for Uncle Brad's family and friends. I could have demanded an explanation from Kyle or his dad. I could have told Zimmerman's Zealots what I thought of their signs. What did I do instead? I cowered in my closet and said, "I'm not gay."

Thinking, *Please be unlocked, please be unlocked*, I threw open the glass door and went for the wooden one behind it. The knob turned in my hand. *Hallelujah*. I sighed, went inside, pushed the door shut, and leaned back on it.

Freedom.

I looked at the mirror hanging on the wall opposite the door. My face glowed red and my suit was covered in sweat. I reached down and felt my shirt. Wet and gross. I didn't care. I'd made it.

Pushing myself off the door, I inched my way past the entrance into our living room. My room was past the living room and adjoining kitchen, and down a hallway. Already, I could picture myself lying on my bed, staring at the ceiling.

“SURPRISE!”

I shrieked, flying back, as Mom, Dad, and my little sister Molly jumped out from behind a couch. A sparkly banner reading *HAPPY BIRTHDAY!* hung from the popcorn-covered ceiling.

“You scared the cr . . . bejeezus out of me!” Even in my panic, I managed not to cuss. All swearing was a no-no in our house, punishable by death-by-nagging.

Mom ran over and pulled me into a hug. She was tall, like me, and dressed like a hobo, although she kept herself fit. Even now, she wore baggy sweats.

“Sorry, honey. We just wanted to help.”

I said the only thing that came to mind. “Huh?”

“We thought you might need some cheering up,” my dad said. He kept grinning and looking down. Giving in, I followed his gaze to his shirt. It depicted a mangy dog covered in bugs. Looming over its head sat the words *Fleas Navidad*. Christmas ribbon encircled the dog and it wore drooping antlers.

“It was your favorite. Remember?” He pretended to flick off one of the fleas and laughed at himself.

I had my nerdy side, but Dad took it to the extreme. He was a computer engineer, meaning he wore short-sleeve, button-up shirts and too-short khakis year round. That is, of course, when he wasn't wearing sweatshirts printed with holiday characters or Garfield.

I glanced at the sign. "My birthday was last month."

"That was Molly's idea," Mom whispered. "She was trying to make it festive."

I glanced at my little sister, who gazed at me, desperate for a compliment. Indulging her, I said, "Cool."

Molly grinned and babbled all about her idea to use the banner. I nodded at her like I was listening, but I'd already tuned her out. This little surprise party described my family: soooo awkward but well meaning.

Honestly, it was pretty amazing and, in another circumstance, I would have joined in on the weirdness. I might have even thrown on the *X-Mas isn't a word* shirt my grandma had given me years ago. Despite their efforts, though, I wasn't in the mood.

"This is really cool, you guys. But I'd really just like to be alone. Sorry. Is that OK? It was my first funeral." There, I milked the funeral aspect. Still going to hell.

Mom and Dad looked at each other. They probably had more stuff planned, maybe a board game night or dinner at my favorite Mexican restaurant. Dad nodded at Mom, reassuring her it was OK. She turned to me.

"OK, sweetie."

Grateful, I skittered to my room and locked myself away from the world.

Laying on the bed, staring at the ceiling, I pictured the day spinning around like a hurricane. I was tired of being walked on, of never standing up for myself. Images of hooking a firehose to the Williams Funeral Home hydrant hit me. We could have blasted Zimmerman's Zealots. They'd wash down the street like old turds.

I also thought of my friendship with Kyle. Why was he acting so weird at the protest? And what was I going to do next year against Justin and Ryan? Being unpopular sucked. Now I was unpopular and friendless. The emotional flood hit and I started crying. In the span of twelve hours, I'd lost my best friend . . . and myself.

As I lay there, a tiny well of purpose began building in my stomach. I needed to do something, something to redeem myself, something to make me feel better about me.

I bolted up on my bed with an idea. Rolling off the mattress, I went to my desk and tore open the drawers underneath. Dad had built the desk into the wall and it was huge, filling my room like a dumpster. The drawers could hold miles of papers. I rummaged around and grabbed a piece of poster board.

Setting it on my desk, I pulled a handful of markers from a tin. I uncapped some and set about making my own protest sign. It would be for gay rights and I would raise it proudly. Alone in my room, of course. Hey, at least it was something.

Blue looked like a good, peaceful color, and I made a fancy, swirly border. Then I moved in and began drawing flowers and other designs that represented peace.

An hour later, animals, spirals, yin yangs, and flowers covered my sign. Translation: it was a worthless pile of crap. I was too scared to write anything substantial. More thoughts of my cowardice hit me and, fuming, I uncapped the blue marker again, and wrote five letters:

I'm Gay.

I sat back. The words were small—filling a tiny spot in the center—but they were there. Closing my eyes, I starting crying again. That's embarrassing, but it was the first time I'd ever let the words out. For the first time, proof existed in the real world. Someone with a telescope could have been watching through my window.

Heaving, I tried locking myself in a special compartment in my brain. When things went particularly bad (like the time our preacher said how evil gays were and I looked over to see my dad nodding along with him), I'd hide in a place in my head that held the words, *Sexuality is a part of self*. It was a sentence I read once that made me realize being gay was permanent, like my blue eyes and (sometimes gross) toenails. Normally, saying it made me feel better.

This time, nothing helped—being gay felt so real and so scary.

I laid my head on the poster and imagined taking it to Uncle Brad's funeral. Just when the protesters got rowdy, I held it up. They sneered at me, but my gesture awakened something from our side. The breath mint guy with the perfect suit came over and raised me on his shoulders. My dumb little sign, with horses and tulips and curly Qs, inspired the funeral goers. Rallying behind my sign, they pushed into the protesters, who tried making nasty jokes. So many of their teeth were gone, though, they just sputtered and lisped. Embarrassed, they ran to their cardboard boxes and hid. Victory!

The next thing I knew, I heard knocking on my door.

“Blaize, it's library time.”

I flew up in my chair, a strand of drool connecting me to the desk. It was morning already? Groggy, I looked down at my sign, confused. The words registered and I jerked back so hard, I had to wave my arms to keep from toppling over in my chair.

No one can see this!

I grabbed the sign and shredded it. That wasn't enough. Filled with insane panic, I took the black marker and scribbled over every scrap. Gathering the remains, I tied them up in the plastic grocery bag lining my trashcan. I leapt up, inched open my door, and peeked out. Empty. Lowering my head like a bull, I ran down the hall to the kitchen. The huge white trash can was almost full, so I shoved my bag to the bottom.

Safe.

“Blaize, honey, are you about ready?”

I spun to my mom, who walked in, opened a cupboard, and grabbed a box of cereal.

“Almost,” I lied.

She turned and saw me still wearing my suit.

“Blaize, what are you doing in that . . .”

Her voice trailed off as her eyes rested on my face. Her jaw dropped and she took a step back, like I’d turned into an alien.

“What?” I asked.

Then it hit me: tears must have dried to my face. Mortified, I grabbed a metal bowl from the counter and stared at my reflection. My shaggy brown hair needed a cut, but I liked it that way. My complexion wasn’t great, but who cared? I noticed the tears were gone. The problem was something else, something so bad my stomach seized like an engine.

Smearred right in the middle of my forehead, in blue marker, sat the words, *I’m Gay*.

Actually, it read *yaG mI*, but Mom got the point. It was the absolute last thing I expected and, thinking back on the poster, my hands started shaking. I had worked so hard to shred the words, but there they were, plastered right to my face, mocking me.

“Blaize, are you . . . gay?” My mom whispered “gay” as if saying it too loud might bring a curse on the house.

Sometimes we find ourselves in moments so tense and scary we can’t reason our way out. They’re so sudden and huge, we blank and find ourselves unable to cover. In any other circumstance, I would have lied. It would have been so easy.

“No mom. Stupid Kyle must have played one of his stupid jokes.”

Or, “It’s for an embarrassing summer school project.”

Or simply, “Gotcha!”

I wasn’t prepared for this, for the words on my head. I couldn’t think clearly enough to lie and began shivering as my brain refused to work. I *so* wasn’t ready to come out. It wasn’t my time. But in that moment, nothing else came to me. I was unable to deny it.

Mom whimpered helplessly for my dad. Molly came in and, seeing the tension bouncing off the walls, started crying. She knew the situation must have been gargantuan.

Man, was she right.