

breathless

by v. j. chambers

chapter six

michaela666 (10:24:05): this is getting out of control. he's got too high of a profile. people are going to notice if he disappears.

morningstar68 (10:24:43): we're trying to keep as much of a lid on it as we can. you of all people should understand this is a delicate matter we're dealing with. not all of the coven is even behind it.

michaela666 (10:25:12): screw the coven then. this has to be done. With or without their support. now I know I can count on you, can't I?

morningstar68 (10:26:30): I told you. samhain. it'll be done.

michaela666 (10:26:54): You're sure it can't be sooner?

morningstar68 (10:27:01): it's going to be next to impossible to pull off as it is.

Toby and I were parked in his truck again. It was getting colder outside. Almost too cold to make out in cars. We hadn't done much kissing since everyone at school had made fun of me. We'd barely talked about it. I didn't know what to say. It wasn't Toby's fault, but I still wished he'd been a little more sympathetic. He hadn't seemed to care that everyone in school had made so much fun of me. I hadn't pushed the issue, however. I couldn't be mad at Toby all the time. He was Toby, after all. I loved him. I couldn't expect him to be perfect.

So, I was glad to have some time alone with him in the car, even if we weren't kissing right now or talking. Instead we were sitting in awkward silence, neither sure of what to say or do.

Lately, I'd been wondering why Toby and I were dating at all. I couldn't figure out what it was we had in common. Sure our parents had been friends since we'd been kids. When we were younger, we'd played together. We'd always gone to same schools. But Toby played football. He'd always hung out with the jocks and cheerleaders. I was kind of a nerd. And I didn't have any close friends besides Lilith. While I'd never been unpopular, I kind of was beginning to think that most of the people who hung out with me only did because I was Toby's girlfriend.

I couldn't even figure out why we'd started dating. My last year in middle school, eighth grade, Toby and I had barely spoken. When we crossed each other in the halls, we didn't even smile at each other. And that summer, I hadn't seen much of him. Even when our parents got together, Toby hadn't been there. So it was weird that right after Halloween my freshman year, Toby had started calling me. At the time, I'd never even thought about Toby in that way. But he'd been so persistent. Like he was convinced we were destined to be together. I hadn't had the

energy to fight him. I hadn't even felt like I should. And now here we were, four years later. Still together. But what had we talked about for four years? Did Toby even know who my favorite author was? Did we even like to watch the same kinds of television shows? Did I even know him?

Especially after what Lilith had said to me in the Goodwill, I worried that I didn't know Toby. I worried that he was keeping something from me. So, I couldn't help it. I had to ask him. I knew I shouldn't. I knew that it wouldn't get me anywhere. But he was my boyfriend, and I loved him, and I couldn't bear the thought that he was keeping secrets from me.

"Toby?" I said.

"Yeah?" He sounded relieved that I was starting to talk. The silence between us had been palpable.

"What did you mean, that time we were making out and you said you weren't allowed to...?" I trailed off.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"In your room. After the fight we had. A couple of weeks ago."

He shook his head. "I didn't say that."

"But you did. You did." I paused, then plowed on. "Toby, who's telling you that you aren't allowed to do things with me?"

"Look, you're crazy. It's not like that. I told you already, we'll have sex when it's the right time. I don't feel like having this argument with you again."

"That's not even what this is about," I said. It wasn't. I was just trying to figure out what his cryptic statement had meant. What Lilith's statement had meant. What were they hiding? Were they connected?

Toby started the car. "If you're gonna be like this, I'm just taking you home."

"But..." I was surprised by the violence of his response. There was no reason for him to get upset. "I don't want to have the argument about sex either," I said. "I just want to know why you said that."

"I didn't say that. You heard me wrong."

"I know you said it," I said. "I remember. I remember distinctly."

"You heard me wrong," he insisted. He was backing up his truck.

"Toby, why won't you talk to me about this?" I asked.

"There's nothing to talk about," he said.

And he drove me home. And dropped me off. And it was eight o'clock in the evening. I wandered down the driveway to my house, noting that both my parents' cars were gone. It was Monday. Sometimes they went to dinner at the Tompkins' house on Mondays. I let myself in the front door. "Hello?" I called out.

No one answered.

They might have taken the guys to the Tompkins' house. Leroy Tompkins was about their age. He had a gamecube or something. Video games excited my foster brothers.

I turned on the light in the kitchen. The dishes were still in the sink, unwashed. Chance and Cameron had left a baseball bat, mitt and ball on the counter. They'd been hitting fly balls in the yard that afternoon. Yeah, no one was home. My mother wouldn't have allowed the boys to leave their sports' equipment around if she hadn't been planning on going out. I opened the refrigerator door. I wasn't really hungry, but I was kind of bored. There was some salsa on the refrigerator door. I got it out, poured some in a bowl, and found some chips in the cabinet. Idly, I took my food into the dining room and sat down at the table. I dipped a chip into the salsa and

took a bite. The chip crunched as I chewed. What the hell was wrong with Toby? I shook my head and thrust another chip into the salsa.

"Azazel," said a voice.

I started.

It was Jason. "Hey," he said. "I thought you were out with Toby."

"I was," I said. "Until he got pissed at me and dropped me off."

"Sorry," said Jason.

I gestured to the salsa. "You want some?"

Jason sat down next to me and got a chip. Dipping it in the salsa, he asked, "You and Toby had a fight?"

"Whatever," I said. "I feel like all we do is fight." And it didn't used to be like this. Did it? Had our relationship always been so...cold? Why had I ever fallen in love with him?

Jason pushed his chip into his mouth and chewed. He shrugged. "Dump him," he said.

I laughed. "Like I could do that," I said.

"It would be easy," said Jason. "Just send him a text message: 'Sorry. I'm not in love with you anymore. Have a nice life.'"

I rolled my eyes. "You're joking." Besides, I didn't even have a cell phone. My parents couldn't afford to give all of us kids one, so no one got one.

"Sort of," he said. "You don't seem happy when you're around him, Azazel."

"Don't I?" I asked.

"Well, sometimes you do. But not most of the time. Most of the time, he just seems to upset you."

Jason was kind of right, wasn't he? I munched on a chip thoughtfully. Lately, every time I'd been upset, Toby had had something to do with it. But could I break up with Toby? I still remembered the story my mother had told me about her and my dad. I didn't want Toby to move on. I did care about him. I couldn't break up with him. "I can't break up with him," I said to Jason. "I love him."

Jason nodded. "Guess that's a good reason not to break up, then," he said. He scooped up some more salsa with a chip. "I'm sure you'll figure out how to handle it. Maybe you two are just...I don't know, growing as people or something."

I laughed a little at the cliché. But maybe he was right. For someone who claimed never to have been in a relationship, Jason seemed to have some insight into relationships.

"You're a good guy, Jason," I said. "So, how come you've never had a girlfriend?"

Jason didn't answer for a minute. He looked a little surprised at the change of topic. "Well, for one thing, I guess I was just never really around girls."

"Because you were home schooled," I said.

"Yeah, kind of," he said.

"So you mostly just saw your family?" I asked, even though I knew both of Jason's parents were dead.

"Not my family, exactly. A man named Anton raised me. He was kind of like a father to me. And a teacher."

Jason was opening up. Neat. Curious, I pressed my advantage. "So he's the one who taught you all the stuff you know?"

"Yeah."

"So, why'd you run away from him?"

"I didn't. He died."

Oh. "I'm sorry," I said. Damn it, that was right! Jason had said something about that before. Why was I such an idiot? He'd probably just clam up now.

But Jason kept talking. "Anton knew a lot of things, and he taught me all about them. But he really didn't know much about...women. Or relationships or any of that."

I didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry," I said again.

"After he died, that's when I took off," said Jason. "And once I was on the run, I couldn't hang out with girls either."

"Is that why you ran? Because of Anton?"

"I can't talk about it," said Jason.

Damn it.

But then he continued. "I watched him die. He died in my arms."

Oh my God. That was horrible. I couldn't say I was sorry again, so I didn't speak.

Jason had a faraway look in his eyes. "They thought they could contain me after that, but they forgot that they trained me, and I know all their secrets."

"Who?" I asked. I couldn't help it.

Jason took a chip out of the bag and stared at it. He took a deep breath. I waited, anxious to know something, anything, more about him.

And there was a knock on the front door.

Augh. I couldn't believe we'd been interrupted just when Jason was on the brink of revealing something. Besides, who could be knocking on the door after eight o'clock on a Monday? "I wonder who that is," I said.

"It's probably Toby," said Jason.

"At the front door?" I said. Toby knew we almost always used the door in the kitchen. Why would he come to the front door?

Jason looked alarmed. "Doesn't anyone you know use the front door?"

"Not really," I said. "Maybe it's a salesman."

"At this time of night?" Jason said. "Maybe we should just get out of here."

The knock came again, a little more insistent.

"And go where?" I asked. "Why?"

Jason swallowed. His eyes darted around the room, looking for danger or an exit or whatever it was he looked for when he was scared. I hadn't seen him do that in a while.

"You're paranoid," I told him. "I'll get rid of whoever it is." I got up and started for the living room.

"Azazel, wait!" said Jason. "You don't know who that could be."

But I was already crossing the living room to the front door. I swung it open. On the other side was a young man. He looked to be somewhere in his early twenties. His hair was short cropped against his head. He wore an expensive-looking jacket. His smile was warm and unassuming.

"Hello?" I said.

"Sorry to bother you this late," he said, smiling. He had a British accent.

"Can I help you?" I asked, feeling suspicious of the man.

The man shrugged. "Well, maybe. I hope so." He rubbed his hands together briskly. "It's a little bit cold out here. Would you mind if I came in for a moment?"

"Uh..." I didn't want him to come in. "I'm here alone," I said.

"Really?" he said. "I thought I heard voices."

"It was the television," I said.

"Don't hear it now," he said. His voice sounded friendly, but there was something about this line of questioning. Something threatening.

"I switched it off." My suspiciousness about this man was growing.

"Well," he said. "I promise to be a gentleman." He held up his hands. "I'll keep both of these where you can see them at all times." He grinned at me again.

I didn't answer, but he pushed past me and into the house.

"What do you think you're doing?" I demanded. He was inside my house! How was I supposed to get him out?

"This will only take a moment," he said. I wanted to wipe that smug smile off his face.

"I think I want you to leave my house," I said.

"I just want to ask you a question," he said. He was looking around me at the living room.

"I didn't ask you to come in," I said. I was starting to feel scared. What if he didn't leave?

The man took several steps into the room. I tried to step in front of him, to block him. For some reason, I didn't want him going into the dining room where he might see Jason.

"Please leave," I said.

"I've lost my brother, you see," he said. "He's run away. I'm looking for him. I miss him very much."

"I haven't seen any British boys in this town ever," I said. "Now, please get out of my house." He wasn't leaving. He wasn't listening to me at all.

The man walked around me and into the dining room.

"I'm calling the police if you don't leave right now!" I nearly screamed, running after him.

But Jason wasn't in the dining room. My bag of chips and bowl of salsa sat at the table, all alone.

The man looked around. His shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry," he said to me. "I shouldn't have barged into your house. I just thought I heard..." He trailed off. "I guess I was mistaken."

"You *shouldn't* have barged in," I said. "And you need to leave."

"Okay, I will," he said. "Just...I have a picture, with my number? Might I leave it? If you see him, you could call me? I really do just want to help him."

"Get out," I said.

He took a picture out of his jacket pocket anyway and handed it to me. "And by the way, he's not British," he said. "He's my half-brother. He was raised in the States."

I took the picture and ushered him towards the door.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I'm really sorry."

I pushed him out and slammed the door after him. I locked it. And the deadbolt. And then I slumped against the door in relief. My heart was pounding away in my chest. I had been so scared.

Jason ducked out of the dining room, brandishing the baseball bat from the kitchen like a weapon. "He's gone?" he asked.

I nodded.

"This is bad," said Jason. "This is very, very bad."

I looked down at the picture the man had given me. It was of Jason. He was a little younger. His hair was shorter. And he was smiling. His smile was radiant and free as if he didn't have a care in the world. I'd never seen Jason smile like that. But it was definitely Jason in the picture.

"Do you know that man?" I asked.

Jason clutched the bat, looking furious. He was shaking, all over. I'd never seen him so out of control.

"Jason? Is he your brother?"

"I don't have any brothers," Jason bit out. He stalked to the window in the living room. Pulled the curtain back a little and peered outside. "Fuck," he said.

"Jason, who was that man?"

He lowered the bat. Rubbed his face with one hand. "He was a very dangerous man," he said. "A very, very dangerous..." He stopped and looked at me. "Call your parents. They need to come home *right now*."

Terrified, I did what he said. Within ten minutes, my mom and dad, both looking very worried, were standing inside the kitchen with the two of us.

My mother gathered me into her arms. "Azazel, what happened?" she asked, her voice high pitched. "I've never heard you sound so scared. Sweetie, what happened?"

Jason was pacing the floor, his face a mask of anger. He didn't look like a seventeen-year-old boy. He looked like a commanding officer in the army. "Someone showed up here," he said. "Just like I was afraid someone would. I can't believe I was so stupid. I can't believe I thought I could just live here like I was normal and that nothing would happen."

"Jason, slow down," said my father.

Jason stopped pacing and pointed a finger at my father. "You have to keep all the doors locked all the time," he ordered. "And you can't let Azazel out of your sight. Or your wife. Or the other guys. You have to keep them here, and you can't let anyone in."

"Wait a second," shouted my dad. I was stunned. I'd never heard my father yell before. My parents weren't exactly yelling kind of parents.

My mother released me and went to my father, touching his arm. "Daniel," she said.

He shrugged her off.

Jason lowered his hand. He took a shuddering breath. I could tell he was trying to pull himself together.

"Now," said my dad, "you're going to start at the beginning, and you're going to tell me what happened."

Jason didn't say anything.

I moved forward and handed my dad the picture the man had given me. "A man came here looking for Jason," I said. "He pushed his way into the house, and I was afraid he wouldn't leave. Jason said he's dangerous."

My dad studied the picture. "Did this man threaten you, Zaza?"

"No," I said. "He was polite."

"Did you know the man, Jason?" my dad asked.

Jason didn't say anything.

"Jason," said my father sharply.

Jason nodded. "I know him."

"Who is he?" asked my dad.

"That's not important," said Jason.

"You're telling me to lock up my family, and you say it's not important for me to know who he is? I think it's important," said my dad.

"Just trust me," said Jason. "I've seen what this man can do."

"*What* can he do?" my father asked. His voice was steadily rising again. I didn't think I'd ever seen my dad this angry.

"I—" Jason broke off. He hung his head. Stared at the tile floor of the kitchen. Quietly, "I don't want to talk about it."

My mother put her hand on my father's arm again. "Daniel," she said, "maybe we should all just calm down. Now, I know it's a little early, but we're all excited. Maybe we should go to bed. We can talk about this tomorrow after we've had some time to think."

"Jodi, I need to know who this man is," said my dad. "I don't think we should just sleep on it."

"You can't keep pushing Jason," said my mom. "Look at him. He's very upset."

"I'm fine," said Jason. He looked up at us, and his face was a carefully controlled mask. He looked calm, collected. "I think sleeping on it might be a good idea, though."

Really? Jason had been so angry. Why didn't he want to talk more? I didn't think he'd convinced my dad of the danger he seemed to think we were in. I'd expected him to push and push until he got his way. Why was he just giving up?

"See?" said my mom. "Let's just all calm down."

My father took a sharp breath. "Fine," he said. "But first thing tomorrow morning, before school, we're getting this straightened out."

Jason nodded. "Mr. Jones, I'm so sorry I brought this on your family. You've all been wonderful to me. I never meant for anything like this to happen. I promise we'll talk about it tomorrow."

But the next morning, Jason was gone.