

breathless

by v.j. chambers

chapter eleven

To: Hallam Wakefield <hwakefi@risingsun.org>

From: Alfred Norwich <anorwic@risingsun.org>

Subject: (none)

We've tried to reach you repeatedly since we discovered that you weren't in New York. You were never in New York. All we can determine is that you were lying for some reason unknown to us. Since we cannot be sure of your motives, and we cannot get in touch with you, you

should consider yourself excommunicated from the Sons of the Rising Son, effective immediately. I do not need to remind you of the consequences of a decision like this.

On a more personal note, I wish to say that if you showed good faith and turned yourself in, I would argue to the Council on your behalf. Until this little stunt, you have been an asset to the Order. I am saddened to be writing this.

Alfred

A high-speed chase through the back roads of West Virginia is nothing like a high-speed chase on the movies. For one thing, all the roads only have two lanes, and there aren't very many passing zones. Jason wasn't used to driving in the mountains, and though he tried to go as fast as he could, the Satanists behind us were gaining on us. We got stuck behind a really slow car on Route 50, and they were right on our tail.

I was screaming. Jason was swearing. The car was ramming into the back of our stolen Nissan. Overall, everything looked bleak.

Then Jason passed the car in a no passing zone. Another car appeared around a blind curve.

We were in their lane.

If it were possible, I screamed harder. I just knew we were going to have a head-on collision.

But the car swerved into the guardrail on the side of the road, and Jason jerked us back into our lane, nearly grazing the car we'd just passed.

I looked over my shoulder out the back window. The car that had swerved lost control and rammed into one of the Satanist's cars.

Lucky us, again. There was a four-car pile up, blocking any pursuit of us.

I stopped screaming and stared forward. "I hope no one died," I said.

But we weren't too lucky. After all, they could still find Jason with his ankle monitor. And we had nowhere to go. No one to help us.

"I have to get this monitor off," said Jason. "I'm going to pull over."

It made me nervous to be stopped, but Jason was right. Wherever we went with that thing on him, we'd have a homing beacon.

Jason pulled the car over onto the shoulder and switched on the overhead light.

"How are you going to take it off?" I asked.

"I could do it with scissors," he said. "How likely is it that there are scissors in this car?"

I searched the glove compartment. "There's a nail file," I said.

"Give it to me."

Jason struggled with the monitor for a long time, but only succeeded in breaking the nail file.

"I need something stronger," he said, looking around the car. "What's in the glove compartment?"

"Tissues. Owner's manual. Ice scraper."

"How big is the ice scraper?"

I showed it to him. It was one of those plastic hand-held kinds. It said "World's Greatest Dad" on it. It was maybe eight inches long.

"I'll try it," he said. He took the ice scraper and wedged it between the monitor and his leg. "See, I think if I could just apply enough pressure, I could snap it off," he said.

Instead, the ice scraper snapped in two. "Damn it!" said Jason. "There anything else in there?"

"A mini-maglite," I said.

"Yes," he said. "That."

At first Jason couldn't get the maglite flashlight between the monitor and his ankle. But then he forced it in, and when he did, the monitor's rivets popped away from the bracelet and the monitor fell off his leg. "Success!" said Jason, high-fiving me.

I grinned.

Jason got out of the car and placed the monitor under one of the wheels. Then he got back in and ran over the thing. We heard it crunch as we pulled away.

"Now," said Jason. "You need clothes, and we'll eventually run out of gas, and then we won't have a car. So...basically we need money."

Suddenly, I knew where we could go. "I have an idea," I told Jason.

\* \* \*

When we pulled into Ms. Campbell's driveway all the lights in her apartment were off.

"I can't believe you know where she lives," said Jason.

"It's downtown Bramford," I said. "Everybody knows where she lives."

"I still think this is weird."

"She said I could come to her," I said. "And she wasn't at the crazy ritual-thing tonight, so we know she's not a Satanist. She can get us help."

"I think we should just hold up a convenience store for cash," Jason said.

"That will get us arrested," I said. "Let's not break the law, okay?"

"I just crushed an ankle bracelet in case you don't remember," he said. "I'm pretty sure that's gonna get us arrested."

"Whatever," I said, getting out of the car.

Jason followed suit. We climbed the steps up to Ms. Campbell's front door and rang the doorbell. For a long time, nothing happened.

Then a man opened the door. He wasn't wearing a shirt, just a pair of jeans with holes in them.

Jason looked at me, as if to say, "Are you sure we have the right house?"

I didn't know either. As far as I knew, Ms. Campbell didn't have a husband. "Um," I said, "we're looking for Ms. Campbell."

"Jenna!" called the man over his shoulder. "I think some of your students are here."

Ms. Campbell appeared at the top of a staircase, which was visible from the door. She was wearing a long t-shirt that came to her knees. It said in upside down letters, "If you can read this, put me back on the bar stool." Ugh. Ms. Campbell drank? I guessed she really wasn't that old. "Azazel? Jason?" she said. "What are you doing here?"

She hurried down the steps, pushing the man out of the way. "Well, come in," she said. "Jesus, Azazel, what are you wearing?"

She ushered us inside and pulled the door closed after us.

"We're sorry we woke you up," I said.

"Oh no," she said. "We were awake. We were—no, we were asleep. We were very asleep." She looked flustered. "This had better not be some sort of Halloween prank. I will flunk you both, don't think I won't."

"Not a prank," I said. "We're really sorry."

"Well, it's okay. I guess. Are you two okay?"

"Not really," said Jason.

"No, huh?" She nodded. "Let's sit down."

She flicked on some lights and led us into her living room, which was a total mess. There were clothes strewn over the couches, dirty dishes piled on the coffee table, a bag of chips sitting on the floor. Ms. Campbell started picking things up off the couches so that we could sit down.

"I wasn't really expecting company," she said.

"It's okay," I said.

"Sit down," she told us. "I'm gonna go put on some pants."

She disappeared out of the living room for a second.

We were left with the shirtless guy. "I'm gonna go with her," he said.

Alone, I made an apologetic face at Jason. "Maybe this wasn't a good idea," I said.

"Why, because we probably interrupted Ms. Campbell and her boyfriend?" he asked.

"You didn't think she was a nun, did you?"

"Ugh." I shuddered. "I just don't want to think about anybody else having any sex tonight at all."

"Noted," said Jason.

Ms. Campbell reappeared. She was wearing a different shirt and a pair of jeans. The man was wearing the shirt she'd been wearing. They sat down on the opposite couch from us.

"So," said Ms. Campbell. "What's up?"

"Everyone in town is a Satanist," I said.

"You said this wasn't a Halloween prank," she said.

"It's not," I said. "They forced me to wear this robe and made me drink weird stuff out of a chalice and tried to force me to ritualistically kill Jason."

Ms. Campbell sat back on the couch. She turned to her boyfriend. "Kevin?" she said. "Can you get me another beer?" She looked at us. "You guys want...? No, wait. You're underage. I shouldn't be drinking in front of you."

"It's okay," I said.

"Really," said Jason. "This whole night has been too weird for anything to shake us."

"Well," she said. "Since I'm already kind of drunk anyway..."

Ms. Campbell was drunk? Was nothing sacred?

Kevin went into the kitchen and came back with two open beer bottles. Ms. Campbell took a long swig. "Okay, then," she said. "So, you were captured by Satanists."

"I didn't know they were Satanists," said Jason. "And they were trying to kill me? Really?"

I started at the beginning. Told them all the whole story, including the fact that I'd found out Lilith and Toby were screwing around behind my back. When I was finished, Ms. Campbell was on her second beer.

Jason looked appalled, and Kevin was staring at me like I was from another planet.

Ms. Campbell stood up. "Okay," she said. "Okay. Um, first, Azazel, I'm gonna get you some clothes. They'll probably be big on you, but they'll be better than that robe thing."

While I changed in Ms. Campbell's bathroom, I could hear her talking in the living room.

"What am I gonna do?" she was saying. "I don't know what to do. I mean, who do I call? I can't call her parents. They're the ones who are doing this crap."

I emerged from the bathroom in a slightly baggy pair of jeans and t-shirt. Ms. Campbell had given me a sports bra, which fit me okay. I felt much better now that I was clothed.

"I'm sorry," I said to her. "We never should have come here." In the classroom, Ms. Campbell had seemed like an authority figure, with power. Now, I realized she was just a person, and that she was only six or seven years older than us. She was just as floored by all of this as we were.

"No," said Ms. Campbell, "you did the right thing. I'm a teacher. You trusted me. You came to me for help. That's good. It means I'm doing my job, I'm just..." She trailed off. "You mean your dad, Daniel Jones, and the principal, and like the entire administration, they're all Satanists?"

I nodded.

"Actually," she said, "that explains a lot." She shook her head in amazement. "Okay," she said. "I'm gonna make some calls. You guys sit tight. Um, I think I have some stale chips somewhere if you're hungry." And she disappeared into the kitchen.

Finally, she returned. "It's okay," she said. "Some people are coming. Authority-type people who deal with this kind of thing. We'll get this figured out."

Maybe it hadn't been a horrible idea coming here. Maybe everything was going to work out.

"I should get rid of the beer bottles," said Ms. Campbell, gathering them up.

"So," said Kevin to me, "you've lived in West Virginia your whole life?"

I nodded.

"People really are whack-jobs, here, huh?" he asked.

Jason shrugged. "Well, they seemed very nice at first."

"Right," said Kevin.



Ms. Campbell came back into the living room. "God," she said. "My apartment's a wreck. This is so embarrassing." She peered out her window. "Oh, I think a police car's pulling up already. That was fast."

"Police?" I said. "*Local* police?"

"I guess so if they responded so quickly," she said.

"Who exactly did you call?" Jason asked.

"Um, I called Cora. Cora Ridgely, the counselor at our school," she said.

"Oh no," I said. "She was there, tonight. She's one of them."

Ms. Campbell shrugged. "Well, we weren't all there tonight, Azazel," she said. "I hadn't seen Kevin in weeks, and it was Halloween."

"We?" I said, a sinking feeling developing in my stomach.

Kevin spread his hands. "Hail Satan, kids," he said, grinning.

No. No, this was not happening.

I looked at Jason. His face was strained. I had to be the stupidest person on earth.

"It's everyone in town, isn't it?" I said.

"Yeah," said Ms. Campbell. "Hey, for what it's worth, you've probably had so much luck so far because you're imbued with the spirit of Azazel. You may not think that ritual worked, but—"

"Shut up," said Jason. "And Robert Herrick was not a dirty old man, okay?" He grabbed my hand. "Back door," he said.

And we were running.

We burst through the back door of Ms. Campbell's apartment and into the alley behind it. Jason gripped my hand as our feet pounded against the pavement. Jason ran fast. I struggled to keep up.

They were pursuing us. Though I didn't look back, I could hear the screen door of Ms. Campbell's back door slamming and the footsteps behind us.

Jason darted down streets, taking turns at random, still holding onto my hand tightly. He was trying to lose them. Trying to take so many turns that they couldn't follow. But they were right behind us, and it wasn't working. I was out of breath. Jason was in much better shape than I was. I felt like an iron fist was closing over my lungs. I didn't know how much longer I could keep this up.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" called a voice behind us.

Shoot? Would they really shoot us? I was the vessel, wasn't I? That had to count for something.

Jason abruptly turned onto a side street, pulling me with him. However, instead of continuing to run, he flattened us against the side of a house. Jason stood at the corner, his face trained on the street.

What was he going to do?

I tried not to breathe too loudly, but I couldn't help it. Jason didn't seem to notice my noisy panting. He was too busy watching the street.

Within a few moments, one of the deputies rounded the corner.

Jason dashed towards him. The deputy was startled to see Jason coming at him. He'd thought we were still running up the street. Jason tackled him. The deputy went down. There was a frenzied struggle, a tangle of limbs—Jason's and the deputy's.

Then Jason got to his feet, holding the deputy's gun. He leveled the gun at the man.

"Jason!" I said.

Jason pulled the trigger anyway.

The deputy screamed.

I covered my mouth in horror.

Jason came for me again. "I just shot his leg," he said in answer to my expression, tucking the gun into the waist of his pants.

And we were running again.

A police car raced by on the street perpendicular to us, its sirens wailing. Another car screeched to a halt at the end of the street we were running down, blocking our exit.

Jason turned left, down a different street, but there was a car blocking the end of that street too.

We stopped.

They were blocking us in!

We ran back up the street and back the way we came, but there was the police car I'd seen racing by us.

Jason's eyes swept the area. I could tell he was searching for a way out, the way he always did. He didn't see one. Cars blocked off all of the streets around us. "Damn it," said Jason.

He pulled out the gun he'd stolen from the deputy.

"Jason, what are you going to—"

"They're trying to kill me," he said. "At this point, it's all self-defense."

"Don't," I said. I didn't like the idea of Jason with a gun, even though he seemed to know what he was doing with one. He looked comfortable with a gun in his hand, as if he'd held guns tons of times before.

Jason kept me close. One hand held mine. The other held the gun. We stood in the intersection of two streets, and watched as people got out of each of the cars that were parked at the end of all of our exits.

They were coming at us from four directions. Jason pivoted, leveling his gun at first one direction and then another.

"Don't shoot anyone," I begged him. I didn't know why. These people were clearly crazy. But they used to be my family and friends. And shooting people was...

"Azazel, do you want to get out of here alive?" asked Jason.

"Yes," I said.

"Okay, then," he said. And he shot someone.

Down one of the streets, I saw a figure crumple.

"Oh my God," I whispered.

"All of you stop," yelled Jason, aiming his gun at another approaching figure.

They kept coming.

"Did you...kill him?" I managed.

"No," he said to me in irritation. "I've been shooting guns since I was five. Give me some credit."

Five?

"I'll shoot someone else," Jason threatened in a loud voice.

The man who Jason had his gun trained on stopped.

The other two figures were closer now. I could see that one was Sheriff Damon. The other was my dad.

Sheriff Damon had his gun out as he approached.

Jason pulled the trigger again. The figure who had stopped cried out and fell.

I couldn't help it. I screamed.

Sheriff Damon and my dad stopped.

"Jason," called my dad, "let's talk about this."

Sheriff Damon was aiming his gun at both of us.

Jason pointed his gun at my dad.

"Jason!" I cried. I didn't want him to shoot my dad. My dad might be a crazy Satanist, but I didn't want anyone to shoot him.

Jason ignored me. "You could try shooting, Sheriff," said Jason. "But can you be sure you won't hit the girl?"

What was he doing? Why was he taunting the sheriff like that? And would Sheriff Damon shoot me? I hadn't exactly been cooperative.

"Tell him to lower his gun, Daniel," said Jason to my dad.

My dad's voice was hoarse. "He doesn't answer to me," he said.

"He might shoot your daughter," said Jason. "You better make him answer to you."

"Jim," said my dad, his voice still hoarse.

I glanced back and forth between the sheriff and my dad. The sheriff still had his gun on us. My dad's face was twisted in fear. So, he still cared about me. Weird. He had a funny way of showing it.

"I won't hit her, Daniel," said Sheriff Damon, not taking his eyes off Jason and me.

"You can't shoot him," said my dad. "The ritual has to be performed by the vessel, or it won't work."

Did they really still think they could convince me to kill Jason?

Sheriff Damon's hand wavered, as if he were hesitating. Then he seemed to get hold of himself, tighten his grip on the gun. "She's not going to do it, Daniel," he said. "We have to take him out."

This wasn't going well at all. Now, right in front of my eyes, Sheriff Damon was going to kill Jason. None of my plans to save him—to save us—had worked out very well. Maybe Jason was right to be shooting people.

Jason looked at Sheriff Damon, his gun still pointed at my dad. "I didn't want to have to do this," he said.

Oh God, what was he going to do?

In one fluid movement, Jason pulled me into his arms, so that his stomach was against my back. One arm pinned me against him. The other snapped the gun against my temple.

I whimpered in surprise.

"Trust me," Jason breathed in my ear. To Sheriff Damon, "Put the gun *down!*"

Sheriff Damon lowered his gun immediately.

"On the ground," said Jason. "Carefully, slowly, put it on the ground."

Sheriff Damon hesitated.

"For Chaos' sake, do what he says!" screamed my father.

Sheriff Damon knelt and placed his gun on the ground.

"Slide it to me," Jason ordered.

Sheriff Damon complied. The gun skittered across the pavement and rested at my feet.

"Pick it up," Jason told me. I knelt down to get it, Jason still holding his gun against my head. Jason took the gun from me and put it in the waist of his pants. His arm wrapped around me again, pulling me tight against him.

I wasn't afraid of Jason, but I was really thinking this strategy was going to backfire if they called his bluff. Certainly they knew that Jason wouldn't hurt me. Of course, I guess they also thought he was an agent of Order who was going to enslave the entire human race. Maybe they thought he was pretty much capable of anything.

And, as frightened as I was, I kind of liked the way it felt to be this close to Jason.

"Okay," said Jason. "Here's what's going to happen. I'm going to take Azazel, and we're going to get in a car. We're going to drive away. If I hear or see anyone following us, I will put a bullet in your precious vessel's skull, got that?"

God. His voice sounded so hard and cruel. He was good at this.

"We understand," said my dad. He was gazing at me helplessly, like he desperately wanted to help me and didn't know how.

But he'd betrayed me. They all had. Everyone had. Everyone I trusted. I was alone now. And the only person I did trust had a gun to my head.

"Good," said Jason. "Somebody bring me some keys."

My father stepped forward, pulling his keys from my pocket. "You can take my car," he said.

But Jason didn't have a hand to take the keys.

"Azazel, take the keys," he told me.

I held out my hand and my dad placed his keys in it.

"Zaza, baby," said my dad. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't talk to her," Jason ordered.

But what was he sorry for? Sorry that he wasn't saving me from Jason? Sorry he and his goons had pursued me all over town, trying to take me somewhere against my will? Sorry that he'd arranged the way his own daughter would lose her virginity, like he was my pimp not my father? What was he sorry for? Could he ever be sorry enough? Somehow, I doubted it.

I didn't look at him.

Jason and I inched down the street to the waiting car. He shoved me in the driver's side door. I had to climb across into the passenger seat. Jason got in after me. He pulled the driver's side door shut.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. Even though I wasn't. My entire world had been shattered over the course of several hours. I didn't know if I'd ever be okay again.

"Good," he said, starting the car.

As we pulled out onto the streets of Bramford, heading for Route 50, Jason shot a glance in his rearview mirror to make sure no one was following us. No one was. "Well," he said sardonically. "So much for a normal life."