

breathless

by v. j. chambers

part one

"Re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul; and your very flesh shall be a great poem."

-Walt Whitman, Preface to Leaves of Grass

chapter one

To: Hallam Wakefield <hwakefi@risingsun.org>

From: Alfred Norwich <anorwic@risingsun.org>

Subject: Re: New England

Hallam,

Clearly, Jason has left the region where he was sighted last. You must pursue him south, where our Intel has determined he is heading.

Keep me in the loop regarding any new developments in this situation.

Yours in pursuit of the Purpose,

Alfred

It was a typical Friday night in Bramford, West Virginia, and I was spending it in a typical way, making out with my boyfriend Toby in his Ford pick-up truck. As usual, I was trying to fondle his crotch. He was pushing my hands out of the way.

Yes, that's right. While the situation was typical for Toby and me, we were the reverse of the standard American teenage couple. I wanted us to have sex. Toby wanted to wait so that it could be special.

Seriously. In all other ways, he appeared to be a normal, red-blooded teenage boy. He played football for Bramford High. He was addicted to video games. He and his friends even went to great lengths to snag cheap beer in order to fuel parties they held when their parents went out of town. Most guys Toby's age would die to date a girl who wanted to go all the way. Not Toby.

"Azazel," Toby sighed, grabbing my wrist and forcing it away from his pants' zipper.

"Not tonight, okay?"

It was an old argument. I was getting sick of it. Toby and I had been dating since freshman year. We were seniors now, both of us seventeen. Everyone else was doing it. Sometimes, I felt like we were the oldest virgins in our school. No. In the world.

I sat back in the seat, gazing out of the windshield at the shadowy trees surrounding the truck in the darkness. We were parked somewhere off a dirt road in the middle of the woods. I crossed my arms over my chest. "What's wrong with me?" I asked the trees, not looking at Toby.

"Azazel, please," said Toby.

I turned on him. "Am I ugly? Aren't you attracted to me?"

"You know I think you're beautiful," he said.

"Then what is it?" I asked. Why wouldn't any teenage guy in his right mind jump at the chance to have sex with his girlfriend?

"I just want it to happen when it's...you know, right."

"I don't know," I said, sulking.

"And I don't want it to be in this truck," he said.

"Right," I muttered. "You want music and candles and rose petals and champagne."

"Don't make fun of me," said Toby. He shook his head and looked out the window, looking pissed.

Toby was hot. He had blonde hair and blue eyes, and his shoulders were huge and muscled, because he lifted a lot of weights. He was a nice guy, too. He volunteered at the animal shelter in town. He was polite to my parents and respectful to authority figures. He made good grades at school. In most respects, he was the perfect boyfriend.

"When is it going to be right?" I asked. I felt like I was always asking this. I didn't know why I bothered anymore. I guess I just kept thinking that if I got beyond his zipper, I might be able to get him so turned on that he wouldn't be able to stop himself. Not that I really knew how to get a guy turned on. It was supposed to be easy. I was just supposed to be willing, and he was supposed to jump my bones.

"I don't know. But we'll know when it is. Can't we just kiss?" Toby asked, looking frustrated.

"I don't feel like kissing you anymore," I said.

"God," said Toby.

"It's just...you're always rejecting me," I said. "After a while, it tends to wear on a girl's self-esteem."

"Look," said Toby, "you can't just try to make me have sex with you all the time. I'm the guy. It's my job to set this stuff up. You're...you're just rushing things."

I glowered at him. Sometimes, he was just so damned annoying. "I love you, Toby," I said. "I know that. And I want to lose my virginity to you. I want to be with you. I want to be as close to you as I can possibly get. And I want it all the time."

"I love you too," said Toby, leaning across the truck to kiss me again.

His kiss was sweet and soft, and he stroked my cheek with the back of his fingers. I let myself get lost in his kisses. Let my hands roam over his back, barely caressing the hard muscle of him. His body was gorgeous. Every time I saw him, I felt a little stirring between my legs, as if something there was waking up. Seeing Toby, being with him, made me feel like I was slave to this strange desire. I stroked his back, my hands going a little lower to cup the curve of his ass.

Toby pulled my hand off.

"You've got to be kidding!" I exclaimed.

"Please," he said. "Let's just kiss."

"Screw you," I said, pushing him away. "Are you gay?"

He glared at me. "You want me to take you home?"

Ooh. Maybe saying that was hitting below the belt. "What time is it?" I asked.

Toby looked at his watch. "Ten-thirty," he told me. "We've still got a few hours before your curfew."

"You wanna go get a milkshake or something?" I asked. The McDonald's drive-thru was open late. Sometimes kids in town got food and then sat on the picnic tables behind the restaurant. Some of our friends might be there. Somebody might even have beer. Not that I really liked beer. It tasted awful.

"Well," said Toby.

But he never finished, because we both suddenly heard a thrashing sound, as if something were running through the woods.

Our heads both snapped towards the sound.

"Probably a deer," I said, craning my neck to see.

Toby turned the key in the ignition. Flipped on his headlights.

But instead of a deer, what we saw was a boy--a man--a guy--racing into the clearing we were parked in. He ran like something was chasing him. His dark hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat. His clothes were dirty and torn.

"Jesus Christ," I said, flinging open the door to the truck.

"Azazel, wait," said Toby.

But I was already out of the truck, hurrying to intercept the stranger. I rushed to him, throwing my arms out to stop him.

He couldn't stop in time. He collided with me.

Up close, I could smell him. He smelled like sweat and earth and fear. His eyes were deep and dark. His breath came in gasps.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

The guy shot a glance over his shoulder, still breathing hard. "Get me out of here," he said.

I grabbed his hand. Pulled him towards the truck.

Toby had gotten out too and was making his way towards us.

"Toby, let's go," I said, pushing the boy into the truck ahead of me and squeezing in beside him. I slammed the door shut.

Toby got back in the car too. He looked at me and at the guy, his eyes full of questions.

The guy's eyes never left the woods, as if he expected someone or something to burst out at any second. "Go," said the guy. "Drive! Just drive."

Toby put the car in reverse. His tires squealed as he pulled out and back onto the road.

My name is Azazel Pandora Jones. My parents named me after a Jewish demon and the girl in Greek mythology who's responsible for bringing evil into the world. Azazel himself was sort of the Jewish Prometheus. Instead of bringing fire to the people, however, he led the rebellious Nephilim before the flood and taught the people the art of warfare. Like Prometheus, he was chained to a rock somewhere for eternity as punishment. Unlike Prometheus, no eagles ate out his guts every day. My mother said she thought the name was pretty. But...my parents

were both sort of second-generation hippies, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't think they didn't think the names were significant. My parents didn't believe in evil.

Really. When I was a little girl, instead of being told that hoarding my toys was bad, my parents sat down with me and said, "Now, Azazel, if you don't share your toys, your friends won't want to play with you."

If I replied, "I don't want to play with them anyway," then my parents would shrug apologetically at my friends and my friends' parents, and say, "She doesn't want to share."

Once, when I was in elementary school, I dug my fingernails into the forearm of a boy who was picking on me. I got punished at school, but when I got home, my parents asked me, "Did he stop bothering you after you did that?"

"Yes," I said.

"You might try asking him to stop in the future before you resort to violence."

And that was it. My parents viewed the world in terms of actions and consequences. There were productive consequences. There were nonproductive ones. They didn't believe any action was wrong. They evaluated it in terms of its consequences. The most productive consequences were the ones which made the world better for as many people as possible.

That all being said, I don't want you to get the idea that my parents were neglectful or anything like that. To the contrary, everyone in town considered my parents swell people. My parents were foster parents. I was their only biological child, but I had three adopted brothers (two of whom were older than me and didn't live at home anymore), and there were always at least two or three other kids temporarily placed at our house. My parents often gave a home to adolescent boys. The more troubled, the better.

Adolescent foster boys often didn't find permanent living situations, and my parents wanted to make a difference. Often, these guys came to us when they were sixteen and stayed with us until they outgrew the system. While my parents weren't rich enough to send all of their foster kids to college, they did the best they could to help all of them out in some way, shape, or form, even if that meant being a character witness in their grand theft auto trials. Hey--my parents gave these guys a loving home. That didn't mean that they saved them from whatever path they were already on.

My home was always filled with people. There was rarely anything in the refrigerator. Teenage boys ate. A lot. I had to deal with the fact that usually there were at least four guys crowded around the television, watching sports or playing video games. The toilet seat was very rarely left down. But overall, my home was a warm, happy place. It was a place where people felt like they belonged.

And so I didn't think twice before I told Toby that we should take the stranger to my parents' house. He kind of fit their profile, if you know what I mean.

Sitting in the truck with him, wedged between Toby and me, I wondered who he was. Even though we'd driven away from the woods, had put miles between us and the site we'd picked him up from, he kept looking over his shoulder out the back of the truck, as if he expected something to be following us.

Toby seemed a little annoyed. "You want me to take you home then?" he asked me. "Leave you there with him?"

Did Toby still think I wanted to go the McDonald's drive-thru? After something this exciting had happened? I just said, "Yeah."

I looked at the guy again. He looked like he was about our age. Maybe a little older or younger. It was difficult to tell. He had dark hair and dark eyes. His face was dirty, and he had few days' growth of stubble on his chin. He looked desperate and frightened and harrowed. I was intrigued.

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

His breathing was starting to slow. He looked at me. "Yeah," he said breathlessly. "Yeah. Um, thanks. Thanks for getting me out of there." He looked at Toby, including him in his statement.

"Was someone chasing you?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. He rubbed his face and looked behind us again. He swallowed. His Adam's apple bobbed.

"Was it the police?" I asked. "Are you in some kind of trouble?" I sounded like my dad. He was always asking things like that of the foster kids we took in. My dad was also a high school history teacher, and he coached football. He spent a lot of time talking to teenage boys.

"Not the police," said the guy.

"So who?" I asked.

The guy shook his head. "Doesn't matter," he said.

We were quiet. Toby leaned forward and switched on the radio. Music filled the truck, loud. I reached over and turned the music down, annoyed with Toby. Wasn't he curious about this guy?

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Jason," he said.

"I'm Azazel," I said. "And this is Toby."

"Nice to meet you," said Jason. "Both of you. And thank you. Again." He stole another glance behind us. "Look, you two can just drop me off along the main road."

"No," I said. "I'm taking you back to my house. My parents are foster parents, and they take in a lot of teenage boys. It'll be safe there, and you can, you know, get some food and get cleaned up and--"

"No," he said. "I can't. It won't be safe."

"I swear, it will. Even if you're on the run from the police, my parents will work with you. They're not gonna just turn you in."

"I'm not running from the police," said Jason. "And I didn't mean safe for me. I meant it won't be safe for your family."

"Where do you want to me drop you off?" asked Toby. He was pulling his truck onto Route 50, which was as much the main road as anything is in Bramford.

"You're not dropping him off!" I exclaimed. Why was Toby being like this? To Jason, "You're coming back to my house."

"Azazel," said Toby, "he doesn't want to go there."

"We can't just leave him on the side of the road," I said to Toby.

"I'll be fine," said Jason.

"He says he'll be fine," said Toby.

"Who's after you?" I asked Jason. "Are they dangerous?"

"The less you know about that, the better," Jason said. To Toby, "Anywhere along here is fine."

"Toby," I said, "we aren't dropping him off. We're taking him back to my place. What if something horrible happens to him, and we could have stopped it?"

Toby sighed. "She's right," he said to Jason. "I can't just drop you off. We should take you to the Jones' house." Finally, he was acting like a rational person.

"That's a bad idea," said Jason.

"Well you're not talking me out of it," I said. "I'm pretty stubborn."

Jason looked at me and laughed. It was a short laugh, and it almost sounded as if he were out of practice. Like he didn't laugh very often. "You are, huh?" he asked.

"She is," said Toby.

Jason looked away from me. "Just for a while," he said finally. "I can't stay too long."

My mother was in her nightgown and robe in the kitchen when we got home. My brother, Chance, and the two foster kids who were living with us at the time (Cameron and Nick) were in the family room playing Diablo. My dad wasn't home. He played poker with his friends on Friday nights. My mom and the guys all dropped whatever they were doing when I brought Jason into the house.

My mom went into mothering mode. She stuck Jason in the bathroom with fresh towels and a change of clothes. While Jason was showering, she heated up some frozen pizza. She shooed the guys and me into Chance's bedroom to put new sheets on the extra bed. Chance was always complaining because I was the only one in the house who got her own bedroom. He always had to share. Our house had four bedrooms. At times, we had as many as three guys in one bedroom, and at Christmas, the house became a crowded madhouse. My older brothers came home. Many of my parents' previous foster children came home. There were guys sleeping everywhere. On the couches. On air mattresses. On the floors in bedrooms. And the bathrooms

were a mess. They were covered with shaving cream and hair gel and bottles of cologne. Guys have just as many grooming products as girls these days.

I was used to the frenetic atmosphere of my house. After we made up a bed for Jason, and the other guys donated various articles of clothing to him, which we piled next to his bed, we all went back to the living room. Toby had stuck around for a little bit, helping my mother in the kitchen to make hot chocolate and set the dining room table. He joined us too.

The guys couldn't shut up. Chance made Toby and I retell the story of how we picked up Jason at least four times. Nick was convinced that Jason had escaped from prison. Cameron thought he was a drug dealer and had sold someone bad stuff.

"He says he's not on the run from the police," said Cameron.

"He's lying," said Chance. "Nobody runs like that unless they're on the run from the police."

"Oh, like you'd know," said Nick, shoving Chance playfully. My parents adopted Chance when he was five. He'd lived a pretty normal life, unlike Nick, who had rattled around in the foster system for years. Nick was fifteen, like Chance.

"Whatever," said Chance. "Like you've ever run from the police."

"I have," volunteered Cameron.

"Yeah, but you did it in a car," I pointed out.

"I think he's running from the authorities," said Toby. "I think that Jason guy is bad news."

I glared at him. "Yeah, you wanted to leave him on the side of the road."

"He wanted to be left on the side of the road," said Toby.

"Because the police are after him," said Nick. "That's the only reason he wouldn't want to come back here. If he was running from some guy who bought drugs from him, he wouldn't want us to turn him in."

"I don't think he's a drug dealer," I said.

"Why not?" asked Nick.

"If he dealt drugs around here, why wouldn't we know him? Why wouldn't he go to our school?" I said.

"He doesn't need to go to school, because he makes bank selling drugs," said Cameron.

"No way," I said. "Something bad was after him. He was terrified."

"It was the police," said Toby. "I should just call my dad and ask if there's an APB out on this guy." Toby's dad was the local sheriff.

"Don't you dare," I said to Toby. "I promised him he'd be safe here."

"And for all you know, you're protecting a criminal," said Toby.

"Oh," said Chance pointedly, "hi, Jason."

Jason was standing in the doorway to the living room, wearing a pair of Chance's pants--they were too short--and a t-shirt. His hair was still wet from the shower. He'd shaved. He looked better now that he wasn't dirty, but he still looked flighty, like he might run at any second. His eyes darted around the room, like he was checking for the exit if he needed it.

Toby looked embarrassed. "Hey," he said. "I didn't mean..." He trailed off.

I bounded up from the couch. "My mom's making pizza," I said. "You hungry?" I took Jason's arm and lead him into the dining room.

I gestured to a seat at the table. It had been set with paper plates and napkins. There was a steaming pot of hot chocolate in the center of the table and a cluster of mugs.

Jason stared at the table. "Look, I should go," he said. "I really shouldn't--"

"Sit down," I interrupted him.

He hesitated for another second, but then he sat down.

I smiled at him. "Everything's gonna be fine. You'll see. You want some hot chocolate?"

"Okay," said Jason.

I poured two mugs full of hot chocolate and handed one to Jason. I took the other one and sat down across the table from him.

"So, um, Toby is your boyfriend?" asked Jason.

"Yeah," I said.

"And he thinks I'm a criminal?"

I rolled my eyes. "He'll come around. Don't worry about it."

"I-I'm not," said Jason. "You know. A criminal." His eyes nervously searched the room again. Did he think something was going to jump out and get him at any second?

"It's okay," I said. "It's safe here."

Jason put down his hot chocolate. "No," he said. "It's not."

At that moment, my mother swept into the room, carrying a pizza. Using her amazing mothering skills, she slid the pot holder off her hand and set the pizza on top of it in one fluid movement, all without burning herself. "Jason," she said. "You're out of the shower."

He nodded.

My mother surveyed him. "Chance's clothes are a little too small for you, but he's the biggest of the boys we've got in the house. We'll have to see if Noah left anything in the closet. I think Noah's about your size." Noah was one of my adopted brothers.

"This is really fine," said Jason. "Thank you."

"Oh, please," said my mother. "Anyone who found you would have done the same thing." She turned to me. "Zaza, there's another pizza on the counter. Can you bring it into the dining room for me?"

I nodded and ducked into the kitchen, listening as my mother called, "Boys! Pizza!"

By the time I got back into the dining room with the second pizza, the first one had already been divvied up between the boys at the table. I set the second pizza down amid scabbling amongst the guys for hot chocolate. Mom and I each took a piece of pizza from the second pie in a civilized fashion.

I sat down and looked across the table at Jason. There were two pieces of pizza on his plate, but he was just staring at them.

"Don't you like pizza?" I asked him.

He gazed around the table, watching the other guys shove pizza into their mouths and tease each other. "I've just never..." he trailed off. "I love pizza." And he smiled. Like the time he laughed, it looked kind of like he wasn't used to smiling. It was a tentative smile. It flashed across his face for a second, lighting him up. Then it was gone. And he dug into the pizza.

My dad came home around then, and my mom took him into the living room to explain the situation. Toby decided to leave. He had his own curfew to make, and he said eating the pizza had made him tired. So finally, all the pizza was gone, and we sat around the table: my parents, Chance, the guys, Jason, and me.

"So, Jason," said my dad, "are you in some kind of trouble?"

Everyone at the table gazed at Jason expectantly.

Jason looked at my dad. "I tried to tell Azazel that I don't think it's safe for your family for me to be here. She insisted I come back here anyway."

"Why don't you think it's safe?" asked my dad.

"The people who are after me are... They can be dangerous. I don't want to lead them here."

"Who's after you?" asked my dad.

"It's someone you sold bad drugs to, isn't it?" asked Cameron.

"Cameron," warned my dad.

"Sorry," said Cameron. Then, as if he couldn't help himself, "Do you sell drugs, though? I mean, Nick and I have a bet."

"That isn't very polite, Cameron," said my mother. "What kind of consequences do you think a comment like that is going to have?"

"Probably unproductive," Cameron sighed.

"Probably," said my mother.

"It's okay," said Jason. "I don't sell drugs." He took a deep breath. "I don't want to give you too many details. That could put you in further danger. But the people who are chasing me, they're...fanatics. They believe what they believe entirely. They're ready to die for it. They're ready to kill for it. And they think I'm in the way."