

breathless

by v.j. chambers

chapter fifteen

To: Jason Wodden <jwodde@risingsun.org>
From: Renegade Son <settingsun007@yahoo.com>
Subject: Risky business

Jason,

You probably don't even check this email anymore, but I have no idea how to get in touch with you. And it's not safe for me to be exposing myself in this email to you. We're both on the outs, if you know what I mean. Listen, there are things you need to know. Things that I've figured out. I need to show them to you.

Bethlehem. As soon as you can.

P.S. Sorry about the lack of a clean slate. I tried.

We drove through the morning and the afternoon. Jason asked me once if I wanted to stop for food. I wasn't hungry. We didn't stop. As the sun began to grow heavy in the sky, we stopped at a hotel somewhere in Pennsylvania. The woman at the desk was chewing gum and had teased her unnaturally red hair to heights I didn't think possible. "We only have rooms with one bed open," she said.

"That's not a problem," I told her.

Jason was standing behind me, but he had apparently decided to leave the negotiation of a hotel room up to me.

"How old are you kids?" the woman asked.

Kids? We weren't kids. We were the vessel of Azazel and the Rising Sun respectively. We killed people. "I gave you my ID," I said to her.

"It says you're twenty-one," she said.

"That's right," I said.

The woman slid us our key. "Don't cause trouble," she said.

We'd sure try not to. But trouble seemed to follow us everywhere we went.

Inside our room, I dropped our garbage bag full of clothes on the floor. There were orange curtains drawn tight against the large window next to the door. The bedspread on the queen-sized bed was a loud geometric pattern of oranges and reds. It was stained. When I flicked on the light in the bathroom, a loud fan came on that rattled. It sounded like the fan was just going to fall out at any second.

I came out of the bathroom to find Jason standing in the middle of the room, his hands jammed in his pockets, staring blankly into space.

There was a ratty easy chair in a corner next to the bed. I sat down in it.

"The BMW's conspicuous," said Jason suddenly. "We should probably see about getting another car. Maybe tomorrow sometime."

"Okay," I said.

Jason didn't move. I didn't either.

Minutes ticked by. It was too early to go to sleep. I was tired, though, I realized. I hadn't had an uninterrupted night of sleep since Thursday night. What day was it now? Sunday? Three days? That was funny. It felt like longer. Much longer.

Jason abruptly walked to the bed and sat down stiffly. "So," he said. "I shot five people in the head." He looked at me.

"You saved my life," I said. "Again." It had happened. It was over. Thinking about it might make it seem too . . . "Besides, they killed my . . . They killed everybody else."

"I couldn't handle it if anything happened to you," he said.

He stood up again. He was doing everything in jerky movements, like he was a robot. He came to me on the chair. Held out his hand to me. I took it, and he pulled me to my feet. I stood next to him, facing him, our bodies inches apart. Jason swallowed. His eyes looked empty and hollow.

Then his arms were around me. He was kissing my forehead and my cheeks and my neck. His hands slid up my shoulders, tangling themselves in my hair. And between kisses, he was talking, his words tumbling out over top of each other, like he'd unleashed a torrent within himself. "When I knew you were with Toby, I thought . . . I was so worried. I thought—and if something had happened to you, I don't what I would have done. If you were—" He pulled back a second, looking into my eyes, his face so earnest.

"Jason," I whispered, putting my hand to his cheek.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry about your parents."

"Don't," I said. I didn't want to think about that. If I closed my eyes, I could still see their faces, their eyes unseeing and staring and . . . dead. And the images were all that I could process right now. I couldn't process words or emotions or thoughts. I kissed his lips, trying to wipe away the entire incident.

For a few minutes, it worked. Jason's lips and Jason's tongue were all I could think about. He was warm and soft and solid, and it was all I wanted.

Jason pulled back. He needed to talk, for some reason. I didn't want to talk! I'd be fine if we never talked about it, any of it, ever. "When I saw him pointing the gun at you, I didn't really think. It was like something took over. Something I learned somewhere. I just moved. I just pulled the trigger. I just . . ."

I knew what he meant. I'd felt it too. I remembered coldly assessing the gun, figuring I didn't have worry about a safety, leveling it with both hands, my finger tensed against its trigger. I'd been about to shoot someone. But Jason had beaten me to it. I knew that I should comfort Jason. I should tell him he was okay, that he'd done the right thing. The necessary thing.

But comfort wasn't something I could really do right now. It was too warm. There wasn't anything inside me except a cold, stiff hole. If I tried to let warmth in, I'd fall apart. I'd have to *feel* things. I didn't want to do that. I needed to stay in control.

So, instead I said, "You've never killed anyone before?"

"No," said Jason, his voice ragged.

I kissed him. I didn't know what else to do. I didn't have words to say. I didn't have anything for him.

When I kissed him, I realized his face was wet. Jason was crying.

The right thing to do when someone was crying was to comfort someone. I tried to remember things you said to comfort someone. "It's okay," I said.

And Jason started to sob. His body shook. His strong, huge shoulders, his muscular back. I held him. Rubbed his back gingerly. But I couldn't quite connect. I was there physically, but this outpouring of emotion was foreign, frightening to me.

Maybe Jason could tell that I was holding back. Maybe it made him angry. Maybe he wanted to force a reaction out of me. But he started kissing me then, kissing me through his tears, kissing me fiercely, as if he had to throw the force of his emotion into something else.

He threw me back on the hotel bed and he was on me like a wolf, his mouth on my mouth, on my neck, my throat. His hands were inside my clothes, thrusting them out of the way, exposing me. He ripped at the bra I was wearing. I heard the fabric tear. Felt the air against my bare skin. Felt Jason's hands on me, squeezing, twisting, and . . . it *hurt*.

It was the pain that woke up the human part in me. The pain forced me back into my body, forced the flood of feelings to wash over me. Tears sprang to my eyes, and I put my hands on either side of Jason's face and made him look at me. "Not like this," I said.

Jason flung himself away from me. We lay on our backs next to each other, not touching. I listened to Jason's rasping breath.

My parents were dead. They were gone. At the end, they'd been tyrannical. They'd put me in situations that I should never have had to face. They'd introduced terror into my life. But at one time, I'd loved them. And I think, in their own perverse way, they'd loved me too. And they were gone.

I reached for Jason. "You can cry," I whispered. "It's okay to cry."

He propped himself up on his elbow. Looked at me. "I'm sorry," he said.

"You did what you had to do," I said, not sure if I was talking about killing the men or the way he'd attacked my body. In some ways, I guess I meant both.

"The right thing to do was to —"

"Sometimes there isn't a right thing," I said. "Sometimes there are only wrong things, and you have to pick whichever one you think is the least wrong."

His eyes were filling back up. "You sound like your parents."

"They're dead," I said helplessly, feeling my own voice fill with tears.

And so we clutched each other and cried. We lay on the stained hotel mattress and stained it with our tears. And when we couldn't cry anymore, we both fell asleep, our limbs entangled, half on the bed, half off.

Sometime in the middle of the night, I woke up, uncomfortable because my legs were hanging off the bed. The lights were still on in the hotel room, and my clothes were in disarray. I rearranged my shirt and shook Jason awake.

He was alert immediately. "What happened?" he said, sitting up straight.

"Nothing," I said.

He let out a breath.

"I just thought we should get under the covers," I said. "Maybe put on pajamas."

He laughed. "Yeah. Okay. Pretend we're living actual human lives?"

I smiled. "Yeah."

I went to the garbage bag and began going through it, but it was difficult to find anything in it, so I just dumped the clothes on the floor, and sat on my knees, sorting through them. I looked at Jason apologetically. "I seem to have forgotten the pajamas," I said.

"It's fine," he said. "I can sleep in jeans."

"No," I said. And I took a deep breath. "But you could . . . take them off."

Jason raised his eyebrows. "After the way that I . . . After what happened earlier, I wouldn't think you'd really want to touch me again."

He was stupid. He was so stupid. I'd already forgiven him for that, or had he missed that? I got up and walked to where he sat on the bed. I kissed him. "I was sleeping in your arms, you idiot."

He touched my face. "Azazel, I don't know what I'm doing," he said.

"And neither do I," I said. "But look, Jason, this can't be the day that I lost my parents, and you killed someone for the first time. That can't be why we remember this day. So, let's make it the day that we . . . made love for the first time."

I kissed Jason again, lingering on his full lips.

"You're sure?" he breathed.

I nodded.

We fell back on the bed.

It wasn't like I imagined. It wasn't like two souls melding into each other. It wasn't like we were connected and had somehow become one being. But it wasn't like the horror I'd heard some of my friends tell either. There wasn't any blood. There wasn't any pain. If there was anything wrong with it, it was just that it was new and confusing and a little awkward. We giggled a lot. We bumped heads a couple times. But when it was done, and I was lying in Jason's arms, tucked under his chin, against his body, his smooth, smooth skin touching my own, it felt like . . . well, something had happened. It felt like we belonged to each other. Like we'd cemented a bond. Like a physical declaration of the feelings we already knew we had for each other.

As I drifted off to sleep for the second time, Jason murmured, "I love you."

I said it back, but he was already snoring.

* * *

When morning came, we ate the continental breakfast in the hotel lobby. In the corner, there was an internet-enabled computer, and so we both checked our email. I didn't know why I did. I didn't really know if I wanted to be reminded of my old life. There weren't any new messages in my inbox, but there was a message from Lilith on Myspace. She went on and on about how sorry she was. I couldn't finish it. I didn't care that Lilith was sorry. Toby was dead. It didn't matter anymore. She was going to have to deal with that, now. And besides, I was never going back to Bramford.

Jason checked email next. He said that before leaving Bramford, he'd been in touch with a guy somewhere in Texas, and maybe we could head there next. I let him go to the computer and began eating my Danish.

Jason called me over the computer. "Read this," he said.

It was an email message. I read it. It didn't make much sense. It was like it was written in code. But when I got to the last sentence, I gasped. "Hallam?" I said.

Jason nodded. "I don't usually check my email account with the Sons, but I did because I still think it was weird that they found us in New Jersey. And how did the Satanists get there?"

I told him that Aunt Stephanie had called my mom.

"Oh," said Jason. "You know, I bet the Sons followed your parents. That must be how they found us. But anyway, I thought maybe there'd be something in my account that would give me a clue. There wasn't. There was just this."

"What's it mean?" I asked.

"I don't know. He's not sending it from his email account with the Sons. And he doesn't use his name. And he says he's on the outs like I am. And none of that stuff in West Virginia ever made any sense. Like the clean slate comment."

"Didn't make sense?" I said. I wasn't following.

"If the Sons had found me in Bramford, they should have done basically what they did to us last night," said Jason. "So that was why I ran when I found out Hallam was around. I figured they'd break into your house and start shooting. But they didn't. Which never made any sense to me. It didn't make sense that Hallam said I had a clean slate."

"Yeah, what exactly does that mean, anyway?" I asked.

"It's a reference to a conversation we had once," said Jason. "After the incident with the sorority house, Hallam and I talked. I said that sometimes I wished I wasn't the Rising Sun. I said I wished I had a clean slate, that I could just walk away and be normal."

I nodded. "Okay. So he was saying that you had the chance to be normal when he talked to me in the woods in Bramford?"

"Yeah," said Jason. "And the only way he could have done that is if he were working against the Sons. So they must have figured out that he was doing that. And now he's on the run."

"Wait," I said. "Hallam was *helping* you?"

"I think so," he said.

"This is the guy who you said was screaming in joy while he was shooting college girls. This is the guy who nearly strangled me in the woods. And he's on our side?"

"He nearly strangled you? What?"

"Did I leave that part out before?"

Jason looked pissed. "Yes. You did." He sighed. "Well, I don't know about our side, but he seems to have gone renegade, hence the name on his email account."

"What about the rest of it?" I asked. "Wanting to show you things? Bethlehem?"

"I don't know," said Jason. "He wants me to go him."

"Where is he? In Bethlehem?" I considered. "Isn't there a Bethlehem, Pennsylvania?"

"He wouldn't put the actual name of where he was in the email. It's on the Sons server. They're probably reading all of my email messages." Jason shook his head. "Bethlehem? What could he mean?"

"Are we going to him?" I asked. "Is that safe?"

"Where else would we go?" he asked. "And is anywhere safe?"

He had a point.

"Okay," he said. "So what's Bethlehem? It's the place where Jesus was born, right?"

"Right," I said. "The birthplace of the messiah." I paused. "Oh."

Jason had figured it out just as I did. "He's in Georgia. He's in the town where I was born—Shiloh," he said.

"Are we going to Georgia?" I asked.

"Got any better ideas?" he asked.

I didn't.

* * *

The first order of business was ditching the car. We drove a few exits down on the interstate to a rest area, where we stole a Volkswagen Beetle. We left them the BMW. We even moved their luggage and CDs over into the Beamer. I figured it was a fair trade.

With a less flashy car, we switched off driving as we drove down Interstate 81. I drove for hours, until we were somewhere in Virginia. Then Jason took over. While we drove, we played road games to pass the time, finding the alphabet on road signs, trying to spot license plates from all fifty states. We were bored, and there were places that we drove through where we could barely get any radio stations besides country or gospel music.

Jason drove faster than I did. I glanced at the speedometer once, and we were going nearly 90 miles an hour. We were flying past all the other cars around us.

"Jason?" I asked. "Is it wise to be driving so fast in a stolen car?"

The words weren't out of my mouth before there were immediately sirens and flashing lights behind us. A police car.

Jason glared at me. "You jinxed me," he said, speeding up.

"What are you doing?" I demanded. "You're not going to pull over?"

"Azazel, we're in stolen car, and we've got guns on us. I'm not pulling over."

"Good point," I said, gripping my seat in terror as we got even faster. "So what are you gonna do?"

"Lose him," said Jason. He jerked the car into the right lane, right between two other cars. The police car slowed down, trying to get into the same lane as we were in.

Jason took an exit, racing the car down the deceleration ramp. Unfortunately, the cop had managed to take the exit too and was right behind us.

Jason weaved in and out of traffic, but the cop kept up. We ran a stoplight, nearly causing a head on collision. Somehow, the cop made it through the intersection as well.

We'd exited into a suburban area. The landscape was dotted with restaurants and chain stores. Ahead of us loomed a huge sign for a mall. Jason slammed on the brakes and turned into the mall, fishtailing as he barely made the turn.

I was going to be sick.

The cop wasn't as lucky as us. He missed the turn, but screeched to a stop. He had to back up to make the turn.

We lurched forward, rounding a corner. For the first time, we were out of sight of the police car, even it was only for a few minutes.

Jason didn't waste any time. He drove the VW straight up to the entrance of the mall and threw open his door.

We hurried out of the car. Sprinted into the mall. Immediately lost ourselves in the crowds of shoppers just as the police car pulled up right beside the Beetle.

"Damn it," I muttered as I watched the police officer get out of his car, run into the mall, and look around frantically.

"What?" asked Jason, tugging me into Bath and Body Works and pretending to be very interested in some scented body lotion.

"We had to leave the clothes," I said.

Jason rolled his eyes.

"They were very nice clothes," I said. "They were expensive. I *liked* those clothes."

"We'll get other clothes," said Jason.

I stuck out my lower lip. "But not those. We'll never get those clothes back ever again."

* * *

We wandered around the mall for an hour before stealing another car out of the parking lot. This time we didn't have a car to leave in exchange, but I found that car theft was really not bothering my conscience nearly as much as I thought it would. After all, Jason and I were running for our lives. Well. We were running for my life anyway. If the Sons caught Jason, they weren't going to kill him. But they were going to force him to be the Rising Sun, something he didn't want to do.

Unfortunately, we stole a car that didn't have much gas in it. Jason was angry with himself, saying he should have checked the gas tank before we took it. I told him it was okay. We were both under a lot of stress. We had to pull off at an exit to buy gas.

I teased him. "You sure you don't just want to rob the convenience store?"

"Our trail of crime should probably stop with stolen cars, don't you think?" he asked.

I shrugged. While Jason pumped gas, I used the bathroom in the convenience store and bought a few snacks for the ride. We hadn't eaten since breakfast, and I was feeling peckish.

At the register, the cashier eyed me. She rang up my pretzels and soda, but she didn't stop looking at me.

I paid, thanked her, and turned away.

"Azazel?" she said.

Without thinking, I turned around.

"I knew it!" the woman exclaimed. She waved a missing persons flier at me. There was my senior picture emblazoned on the front underneath huge letters reading: MISSING. Damn it. I hadn't expected to be reported missing!

I fairly flew out of the store. "We have to go, Jason!" I said. "I'm missing!"

We had to leave before Jason was completely finished pumping gas. I was sure the woman had called some kind of authorities. It wasn't good. She'd probably be able to give them a description of the car we were driving.

For the third time that day, we switched cars. We took a Ford Aspire from another rest stop. It had a full tank of gas.

Exhausted, we drove into the evening and the night. Virginia gave way to Tennessee, and eventually, Tennessee became Georgia. When we arrived in Shiloh, it was nearly four in the morning.

Shiloh wasn't a big town. It was about the size of Bramford, actually. A few streets. Several businesses and restaurants, all closed because it was so late at night.

"Well," I said, looking around. "Here we are."

"Yeah," said Jason.

Now where were we going to go? It seemed we'd have to go outside of town to even find a hotel to stay in. I hadn't seen any as we were driving in. Jason drove up and down the streets, searching. "If Hallam is here," he said, "there's only one place he'd go."

"Where's that?" I asked.

"Sanctuary," said Jason.

"A church?" I asked.

"A Catholic church," said Jason. "Keep your eyes open. This far south, there shouldn't be too many."

"Why Catholic?"

Jason shrugged. "Their doors are usually open at odd times."

And then we spotted it. A little outside town, all by itself, was a small Catholic church—Christ is King Catholic Church, read the sign outside. It too boasted some spires and ornate architecture. It was nothing like the church we'd gone into in New York City, but it was still very beautiful. I wondered why Catholic churches always looked . . . fancier than other ones. I mentioned it to Jason.

He gave me a funny look. "Did you ever pay attention to any of your father's history lectures?" he asked.

"What?" What did that have to do with anything?

"The entire Protestant Reformation had a lot to do with the fact that the Catholic church was spending money on ornate works of religious art. The Protestants thought the parishioners' tithes should go to more holy enterprises."

"Really?" I said.

Jason parked the car and got out. I followed suit.

We stared at the church. It didn't look open. But we moved forward anyway, walking up to the front doors. Jason put his hand on the door and tried the knob. It was locked.

"So now what?" I asked. "We try another church?"

Jason looked dead on his feet. "Maybe we could break in," he said.

"Seriously?"

"No," he said. He shook his head and yawned. "No, we'll sleep in the car."

"Will that be safe?"

Jason shrugged. We got back in the car. Cranked back the seats so that we were semi-reclined. There were some blankets in the backseat. We huddled under them. Jason gave me one of the guns. He showed me how to take the safety off.

"Don't shoot unless I tell you," he said.

I turned the gun over in my hands. It didn't make me feel much safer. But I clutched it in one hand and closed my eyes. Snuggling with the gun, I feel asleep.

* * *

I woke up slowly, the sound of voices close to me. I didn't move for a few moments, just listening. One voice was British, and I recognized it as Hallam's. The voices were muffled. They were coming from outside the car, but I could still understand what they were saying.

"Who is she?" asked Hallam.

"I thought you two had met," said the other voice, Jason's. "She said you tried to strangle her."

"I remember her," said Hallam. "I just meant why is she here?"

"Did you try to strangle her?"

"What is she, your girlfriend?"

"Yeah. I guess she is," said Jason. I tried not to smile when I heard that. "Did you try to strangle her?"

"She exaggerates," said Hallam. "The Sons know about her?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I killed five Brothers trying to protect her."

"Oh wonderful. I'm sure they love that. I'm sure this turn of events has them in ecstasy," said Hallam.

"I know. Killing their own."

"I meant the girl," said Hallam.

"Oh," said Jason. "Right."

"Honestly, Jason, they're not wrong about that, you know. Attachments, to women especially, tend to make one less focused."

"No," said Jason. "No, she focuses me. She gives me something to focus on."

Really? That was sweet. I loved Jason.

Hallam sighed. "I didn't know if you'd come."

"Your email got me curious," said Jason. "What do you need to show me?"

"Oh, we'll get to that," said Hallam. "We will. First, I think, we need breakfast. Wake up the girl."

"I should let her sleep," said Jason. "We haven't done a lot of sleeping lately."

"Really, Jason, I'd rather not hear details about that kind of thing," said Hallam.

"Because of danger," snapped Jason. "Not because of . . ." He cleared his throat.

"Oh, so then you haven't been intimate with her? The Sons will approve."

"No," said Jason. "We have." Why was he telling Hallam this? "But then, I didn't think you wanted to know about that."

"Wake her up," Hallam growled.

Jason opened the passenger side door. I had to pretend to wake up when he shook me. I think I might have overdone the stretching, but Jason didn't seem to notice. I sat up and rubbed my eyes, pretending to notice Hallam for the first time. "Hello, Hallam," I said.

He glared at me. I didn't think Hallam liked me very much.

We ate breakfast with Father Gerald, the parish priest, in his rectory, which was attached to the church. Father Gerald, Hallam explained, had knowledge of the Sons of the Rising Sun. Their paths had crossed in the past. At least that was how Hallam put it. He didn't elaborate. At any rate, Father Gerald had been kind enough to allow Hallam to stay there. Jason could apparently stay too, but I was a woman, so that meant it was improper for me to stay in the same place with the other three men. Jason promptly announced that we would get a hotel room. I was now totally convinced that Hallam hated me.

Father Gerald seemed nice enough. He didn't say much during breakfast, however. No one did. We ate quickly, and then Hallam took us back to the room he was staying in. It was apparently a room for visiting priests, and it was quite sparse, containing just a bed and a desk. However, Hallam did have a computer. He sat down in front of it at the desk. Jason and I sat down on the bed.

"So," Hallam said, "I know you're wondering what it was that I wanted to show you, Jason."

Jason nodded. "We came all the way from Pennsylvania."

"And you probably want to know why I'm in Shiloh," said Hallam.

"Yeah," said Jason.

"I'm guessing it's got something to do with Jason's birth," I said.

Hallam glared at me. "Well, obviously," he said.

Why was he such an ass? Maybe he just hated women. Maybe that was why he'd had no problem killing all of those sorority girls.

"So, spill," said Jason. "Why are we here?"

"Well," said Hallam, "it started right after you ran away. I got transferred back to England to a desk job at the Council. They transferred everyone who lived at our old Society house after Anton died and you ran away. I think they were afraid. They wanted to know if Anton had gotten to anyone."

"Gotten to anyone?" Jason asked.

"That's what this is about," said Hallam. "Why they killed Anton. What Anton knew."

"Really?" said Jason leaning forward, interested now. Huh. He didn't care about his birth, but he cared about Anton. "So what did he know?"

"I don't know," said Hallam.

Jason threw up his hands.

"Yet," said Hallam. "I don't know yet. I'm getting there. I could use your help actually."

"All right, all right. So what do you know?" asked Jason.

"I was getting to that," said Hallam. "So . . . where was I? Right, I got transferred back to England. And I didn't like that one bit. If they'd left me where I was, I maybe wouldn't have gotten suspicious. But because they shipped me off, I began to wonder if there was something to Anton's death and your disappearance, so I started digging into records, which I now had easy access to.

"I was working in payroll, believe it or not, so, on a whim one day, I looked at the payroll records from the year you were born. And I found that the Sons had paid out a significant amount of money to a woman named Marianne Wodden. That, of course, is your last name, Jason. So, I set about trying to find this woman."

"She's dead," said Jason.

"Dead?" said Hallam. "I don't know if she ever existed."

"What do you mean?" I said. "The Sheriff in my town found death records for her. She was murdered by her husband."

"Oh, I found those death records," said Hallam. "But I couldn't find any death records for the supposed husband, what was his name . . ."

"Ted," supplied Jason.

He remembered that, huh? Maybe he cared more than he let on.

"Right. This Ted Wodden. No death certificate. And he supposedly committed suicide after shooting his wife. So, I looked for a birth certificate for Ted Wodden. Nothing. Chagrined, I looked for a birth certificate for Marianne Wodden. Nothing."

"She doesn't have a birth certificate?" asked Jason.

"That's right," said Hallam. "Death certificate, no birth certificate."

"What does that mean?" asked Jason.

"Well, I always thought that name was just a little too perfect," said Hallam. "I mean almost cutesy in its rightness for the mother of the Rising Sun."

"Rightness?" I said.

Hallam shot me a withering look as if I couldn't possibly understand. "Marianne," he said. "Mary the Mother of God."

Oh. Duh.

"And Wodden. It's so close to Woden, isn't it?"

That I understood. Determined to show Hallam up, I said, "Like the day after tomorrow."

Jason and Hallam both furrowed their brows at me.

"It's Wednesday," I said. "Woden's day. Woden is the British name for Odin, from Norse mythology."

Hallam looked grudgingly impressed. "Right," he said. "And Odin is a dying god who's resurrected, which is what the sons believe the Rising Sun is, essentially."

"So, you don't think that she was real," said Jason. "Like I have no mother?"

"Well, I'm not sure," said Hallam. "The death certificate seemed real enough. I figured in a town this size, someone would remember something like that. A battered woman being shot to death? So I came here. I asked around. No one remembered anything like that."

"But, Jason and I saw a memorial on a website," I said. "Someone said she was a sister and an aunt."

"Right," said Hallam. "And they'd listed a maiden name of Aird. I looked into an Aird family. That turned out to be a dead end. Aird is a typical Muscogee surname, apparently, and, until about the late 1700s, this land belonged to the Muscogee."

"Muscogee?" Jason asked.

"The Creek Indians," said Hallam. "Most of them were sent away during several treaties, which eventually relegated them all to Oklahoma, but some had intermarried, and their families stayed in the area. The point is, there were too many Airds. Furthermore, there was no one in the area who had even heard of Marianne Wodden, let alone been related to her."

"And you think Anton knew this?" Jason asked.

"I think Anton knew something about your birth," said Hallam. "He said to me, before he died, that he'd found out something about your origins. He wouldn't say more. He wanted to tell you first. Then, of course, they killed him."

"What does it mean?" I asked.

"It doesn't mean anything yet," said Hallam. "But I tried one more lead. I emailed the person who runs the memorial website. Apparently, she takes information from people who email it to her, and she puts it on the website. I said that I was an old friend of Marianne's who had recently learned of her demise, and that I wanted to get in touch with her surviving family to pay my respects. I asked for the contact information of the person that posted Marianne's memorial information.

"The woman who runs the memorial website just got back to me this morning. All she gave me was an email: webmaster@thegreatgodazazel.com." Hallam looked at me pointedly. "Isn't that your name?"

"Yeah," I said. "Weird coincidence."

"I don't believe in coincidences," said Hallam.

"Jason does," I said, thinking about the vision the Satanist woman had had about me killing him.

Jason didn't respond to me. Instead, he said to Hallam, "We've got to go to that website, then."

"Of course," said Hallam, turning to his computer.

Jason and I both got off the bed and crowded behind Hallam. Hallam typed "thegreatgodazazel.com" into his address bar on the internet. He hit enter.

A black background filled the screen. In red letters, the website proclaimed "The Great God Azazel Network." Underneath, in smaller letters, there were links: Satanism, Philosophy, Azazel in Other Cultures, Blog, and Contact Me.

"Click on the contact link," said Jason.

Hallam did. It just brought up an email message addressed to webmaster@thegreatgodazazel.com.

"Um, click on the blog," I said.

Hallam did. The last entry was dated October 31st. It was entitled, "Samhain." "Should I read it?" Hallam asked.

"Okay," said Jason.

"On this very ancient and powerful day," Hallam read, "it is important for Satanists of all walks and beliefs to take stock of their lives. This is a day to celebrate—" Hallam broke off reading aloud and began skimming to himself. He scrolled down the page. Then he hit the back button. "Nothing there," he muttered.

Hallam clicked on the "Azazel in other Cultures" link. There was a list. It read, "Prometheus, Pan, Loki, Dionysus, Rabbit (Creek, Southern North America), Coyote (Western North America) . . ." The list went on, below the screen.

"Didn't you say something about the Creek Indians?" I asked.

"Yes," said Hallam, already clicking on the link.

"A Promethean and Azazelean figure, Rabbit steals fire to bring back to the people," read Hallam. "Interesting stuff, I guess. I didn't know Native Americans had myths so similar to Europeans." Hallam turned around. "This site is a dead end, though. There's nothing here."

"Except for the fact that the same person who put up a memorial website for my mother is also running a Satanist website," said Jason. "And Azazel's parents were Satanists. That's weird. There's some kind of connection, don't you think?"

"Maybe," said Hallam. "I don't think we're going to find it on this site, though."

"Just try to find a name," I said. "Who's the webmaster? Who puts up the page?"

Hallam hit the back button again. He scrolled to the bottom of the main page. "Here's a copyright," he said. "Michaela Weem," he said. He looked at Jason. "Now we know that last name, don't we?"

"Yeah," said Jason. "But that can't be connected. Right?"

"Someone clue me in here," I said.

"One of the High Council members has the last name Weem," said Jason.

"Edgar Weem," said Hallam.

"That's my middle name," said Jason. "Edgar."

"The initials match," I said. "Marianne Wodden. Michaela Weem."

"They do," said Hallam thoughtfully.

"Maybe there's a connection," I said.

We were all quiet for several minutes.

Finally, Hallam sighed. "No," he said. "I've got nothing."

"Me either," said Jason. "I mean, it doesn't add up to anything."

"I think it does," said Hallam. "We just don't what it is it adds up to."

Jason sat back down on Hallam's bed. "It doesn't matter anyway," he said. "Even if we could figure it out, it wouldn't change anything. The Sons are still tracking me across the U.S. I have to keep running. I guess I have to keep running forever."

"No, no, Jason," said Hallam. "That's where you're wrong. I wouldn't have asked you here if I thought it was as hopeless as all that. Listen, whatever the secret was that Anton knew, it was so powerful that the Council had him killed. They didn't want anyone to know. If we can figure it out, we'll have a weapon against the Sons."