

breathless

by v.j. chambers

chapter ten

I don't usually share my visions in this forum, considering I feel that visions are a personal experience, generated mostly for my own spiritual growth and edification. However, since there has been so much talk about the vision I received years ago, especially recently, I want to detail it here.

In my vision, I saw a teenage boy who had been raised by the agents of Order to take over the world. I saw this boy rise to power. I saw him take away the rights of choice and decision from countless numbers of people. Then I saw a girl, filled with the spirit of Azazel, come from the depths of the woods. She carried with her a spear of fire. And she smote the agent of order, and Chaos reigned again in the world.

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Trees streamed by outside the window of Toby's truck as I struggled against the rope he'd tied my hands with. Toby drove recklessly fast, his mask still on. I didn't think he could see with it over his eyes. I strained, yanking my wrists away from each other as hard as I could. But the rope held. I wasn't doing anything except giving myself rug burn.

I glared at Toby. "Where are we going?" I asked. Was this some kind of practical joke? If it was, it wasn't funny. I really wasn't enjoying it.

Toby just laughed from behind his mask. He didn't answer.

"What are you doing with Jason?" I asked.

Nothing from Toby.

I was flabbergasted when Toby pulled his truck into my driveway. He was taking me to *my* house? Why were we here? Toby got out of the truck and came around to my side. Roughly, he pulled me out. I stumbled as I tried to keep my balance while he yanked me forward. Behind us, I could see the car that Jason was in. He was getting similar treatment. The football players, still wearing their masks, were dragging Jason along with them.

"Toby, what is going on?" I demanded.

Toby cocked his head at me. From behind the mask, he looked so blank. "Oh, come on, Zaza," he said. "We're going to consummate our relationship. Isn't that what you've wanted all this time?"

I winced at the ugliness of his voice. And what the hell was he talking about? If Toby thought I still wanted to have sex with him after what had happened, he was a mental patient. I didn't want to look at Toby ever again, let alone touch him.

He dug his fingers into my arm and tugged me forward. I had to go with him. If I resisted, I'd just fall down.

The lights in my house were all off, but the kitchen door was open. We all went inside. Toby led the group of masked madmen through my dining room and living room, to the door to the basement. He opened it.

The soft light of candles greeted us. Our basement wasn't much. It wasn't finished. It was just a concrete hole in the ground. It always smelled musty down there, and no one went into it except to get our washer and dryer.

But someone had been in the basement recently. A tea light candle blazed on each step of the stairs leading down into its depths. Toby forced me onto the first step. I tried to resist, but he was strong. Carefully, we descended into the gaping mouth of the basement, one step at a time. As I got lower and lower, I could see that the entire basement was covered in candles. They were clustered in every corner. They sat on tables, which surrounded the room. Each table was covered in a black velvet tablecloth. The washer and dryer had been similarly covered in black velvet, and candles of various heights and widths placed on them.

All of the candles were black.

On one of the tables, many silver chalices sat next to a decanter of wine. There was also a loaf of bread next to them. It sat on a silver platter. In the center of the basement, there was a bed. It was covered in black silk sheets. From the steps to the bed was a trail of black rose petals.

I nearly gagged. What was this? What had Toby planned? It was like an inversion of everything he'd ever said to me. Black rose petals? A bed with silk sheets? Me tied up? Half of the football team?

I was started to feel very, very frightened.

"We're a little early," said Toby to the rest of them. He pulled some rope from his pocket and tossed it to his friends. "Tie Jason to that pole," he ordered, gesturing with his head.

The football players dragged Jason to the pole and began lashing him to it. His arms. His feet. His neck. Jason caught my eyes. I looked back at him. I could tell he was trying to figure out a way out of this.

"I'll get Azazel ready," said Toby, his voice cruel and determined.

Toby took me to the bed. He made me sit down. I realized that not everything silk on the bed was a sheet. There were also two black silk hooded robes sitting next to us. They looked like something off the cover of a death metal album. What was this? What was going on? My heart beat in my chest loudly. It pumped blood against my temple. I was freaking out.

I tried to smile at Toby. "Okay," I said. "This was funny. I'm laughing. You can stop now, though. Really."

Toby sighed. "It wasn't supposed to be like this Azazel. I didn't want to have to tie you up. But after you heard Lilith and me, I didn't know what else to do. The ritual has to go on as scheduled, whether you're willing or not."

Ritual? What ritual? I was terrified.

"I'm going to have to untie you for a minute," said Toby. "But you can't try to run away or anything, or else I'm going to have to get some of the guys over here to hold you down. And I really don't want to do that."

Okay. Maybe I wouldn't run.

Toby fumbled in his back pocket for a pocketknife. I shied away from it as he opened the blade. But he just cut the rope holding my wrists together.

Toby surveyed the marks on my wrists that I'd made trying to get free from the rope. He touched them almost tenderly. "You shouldn't have struggled," he said. "You're just hurting yourself." He looked into my eyes. "This is really an honor, you know. You're going to become so powerful."

Powerful? Honor? Hadn't Toby said something about an honor in the restroom earlier? Oh God. There was more to everything than just Toby and Lilith having sex. They'd said all kinds of weird things. And they both had said things about not being allowed. This was connected to that, somehow. Somehow.

But how?

Toby reached around me and put his hands on the zipper of my dress. He started to unzip it. He was going to take my dress off?! In front of everyone?!

"No!" I said. I put both of my hands on his chest and pushed him as hard as I could. He grabbed my wrists, irritated.

"Don't struggle," he said. "I'm just trying to put the robe on you."

"Toby, don't," I begged suddenly. "Don't." I looked deep into his eyes, and shook my head, trying to find some piece of the boy I thought I knew in there.

"Don't look at me like that," he yelled. He dropped my hands and took a step back, disgust all over his face.

I pressed my advantage. "Toby, you can let me go," I said. "You can just let me go. I won't tell anyone. I'll just walk away, and I'll—"

"It's not supposed to be like this," he said.

"Please Toby," I said.

He reached over and balled up one of the robes in his hands. He shoved it at me. "Put on the robe," he said, his voice shaking. "Just take everything off and put on the robe."

A little sound escaped my mouth. Take everything off? I didn't want to—I *couldn't* think about what was going to happen to me.

Jason looked at me from where he was tied to the pole. His face was unreadable.

"Do it!" Toby screamed.

I couldn't. I couldn't just take off my clothes.

Toby turned around. He glanced over his shoulder. "Don't try to run," he warned me.

The other guys on the football team were standing around Jason, watching Toby and I.

"Turn around," Toby ordered them.

Silently, they did.

"And Jason," said Toby. "Close your eyes."

Jason closed his eyes.

But I couldn't move. I looked at the crumpled robe in my lap, and I couldn't move.

"Hurry up," growled Toby.

And because I didn't know what else to do, I did it. I unzipped my dress. It fell off me, pooled around my feet. There I was in the lingerie I had put on for Toby to see. I nearly gagged

in revulsion. But I took it off. And I put on the robe. It buttoned up, and I buttoned every button, but I still felt very, very exposed.

"I'm done," I whispered.

Toby turned around. He looked me up and down. "Good," he said. Then he tied my hands again. He walked me over to the football players, threw me into one of their arms. "Hold her," he said. "I'll be back with the rest of the coven to do the Invocation."

Toby swept up the stairs. One of the football players had me in a bear hug. There was nothing between my skin and his body except the stupid, flimsy robe. I started to think about what was happening to me, to speculate about the near future. Then I decided it was a bad idea, and so I stopped. I just concentrated on breathing.

In a few minutes, the door at the top of the steps opened and a long line of people in black robes like mine came down the steps. Their hoods were over their heads and they stared at the floor. I couldn't see their faces in the scant candlelight.

They formed a circle. One of them came for me, pulled me into the center of the circle.

Now that he was close, I could see it was Toby.

"Why are her hands tied?" asked one of the hooded people. The voice sounded familiar, but I was sick of identifying voices tonight. I knew who it was, but I didn't want to know, so I just tried not to.

"Complication," said Toby. "Let's just get on with it."

"Untie her," ordered another hooded person. I knew that voice too.

No. No. No.

No.

I struggled for other thoughts, and there was only one. No.

Toby fumbled with the knot at my wrist. I had started to shake. My teeth were chattering. I couldn't believe this was happening to me. I couldn't believe it. Maybe, if I tried hard enough, I'd just faint. Couldn't I just faint? Couldn't I just make this not real, somehow?

One of the hooded people advanced to help Toby. I could tell from her hands that she was a woman as she deftly untied the knot at my wrist. I purposefully didn't look at her face. I tried so hard not to, but...

She cupped my chin in her hands. "Zaza, it's okay," she said.

And then I lost it. I started sobbing. And I said the only word I knew to identify the woman with. The only thing that sprang to mind. My voice broke with the betrayal of it. "Mommy," I sobbed.

My mother gathered me into her arms. "Why are you crying, sweetie?" she asked me.

Why was I crying? Was she insane? My own parents had set me up to be in some sort of cult ritual where my boyfriend...raped me, and she wanted to know why I was crying?

Still, I clung to her as my body was wracked with sobs that I thought would tear me apart. She was the only ghost of comfort left in a world that had been completely and utterly turned upside down, ripped apart, ruined.

My mother clutched me, stroking my hair. She turned to another hooded person. "Daniel, I told you she wasn't ready," she said.

My father lowered his hood. He looked at us sympathetically. "It has to be tonight," he said helplessly. "The next night of power isn't until the solstice. We can't wait that long."

My mother nodded. She turned back to me, wiping at my tears, brushing my hair out of my face. "Okay, then, Zaza," she said. "You're just going to have to be strong, okay? Can you do that for me? Can you be my strong girl?"

No, I couldn't be strong! What did she want from me? I just shook my head violently, back and forth. I couldn't do this. I couldn't do this.

Around me, all of the hooded people were lowering their hoods. Lilith. Sheriff Damon. His wife. The principal of my high school. Mrs. Clem, the dean of students. Mrs. Zimmerman, my French teacher. Sherry Astor. My older brothers, Noah and Gordon. I knew them all. I gazed around the circle, and I saw the pillars of society in our town. I saw people from my high school. They were all part of this. Whatever this was. I didn't know. And I didn't think I wanted to know.

"This is all going wrong," said Sheriff Damon. "What did you do, Toby?"

Lilith stepped forward. "It's not Toby's fault, it's mine," she said. "Let me talk to her." She walked up to me and took my hand. "Upstairs, Zaza," she said.

Confused, I let Lilith drag me upstairs.

Once through the basement door, she shut it after us. She looked down at herself. "God, these robes are so unflattering," she said. "You'd think they'd at least let you wear a bra under them, you know? But it's all, 'The host has be defiled through sexuality, blah, blah, blah.'"

What was she talking about?

"You're probably wondering what's going on," she said.

That was an understatement.

"It's weird, I know," she said. "When it happened to me, I was totally freaked out, too."

"This happened to you?" I asked in a small voice.

"Well, sort of," she said. "It's supposed to happen on your eighteenth birthday, and there's supposed to be a little more lead up to the whole thing, like a couple hints and a test."

"A test?"

"Not like on paper, but someone from the coven like grills you on choice and chaos and junk. You didn't get that because you've been chosen from birth to be the vessel or whatever, and they had to rush the whole thing, because Jason showed up, so they have to do the Invocation and the Entering of the Circle all on one night. Which incidentally is almost over. We've got like fifteen minutes until midnight, so I've got to talk fast."

"What?" I said. But I was starting to calm down. Sort of. At least Lilith seemed like herself still.

"We're Satanists, Azazel," said Lilith.

Satanists?! I considered bolting for the door right then. But I was only wearing a flimsy black robe, and practically everyone I knew and would ask for help was already in my basement. Besides I couldn't leave Jason down there with them.

"I mean, kind of," said Lilith. "We worship Azazel. The demon you're named after."

"Oh God," I moaned.

"Yeah, don't say that. That's like blasphemy," she said. "Okay, so, see Azazel is an incarnation of what most people would identify with Satan. But we worship Satan, or Azazel, because he symbolizes the ability of people to have free will and to be individuals. We worship Chaos because it isn't stifling, and it doesn't assume that people need order enforced upon them to function properly in society."

She sounded like she was reciting something.

"So we reject the incarnations of order, including Christianity and other organized religions, because they impose a set of rules and values onto people which is...stifling. You following me?"

"Kind of," I said.

"Okay, so, when you're eighteen, you Enter the Circle by participating in a Black Mass. Which is like a perversion of a traditional Mass. So we take the host—or communion or whatever—and then everybody has sex."

"Eew," I said.

"Not in front of each other. And usually with their husbands or wives or boyfriends. Usually. And the initiate—in this case you—has sex with someone in the room with it all set up like it is."

"Why?" I said.

"It's just a ritual. I don't know. I think because everyone in town is horny," she said.

"And the initiate is a virgin?" I asked.

"Not usually. I mean, I wasn't. Most eighteen-year-olds have gotten it on, you know what I mean. But you like had to be, because you're the vessel. And so, they made Toby date you and not have sex with you, so that you'd be pure."

"But you said that you and Toby started dating after eighth grade," I said. "I thought you didn't find out about this stuff until you were eighteen."

"Our parents bribed us," said Lilith. "They gave Toby that truck so he'd date you. And my parents gave me my computer. It was important that you didn't have sex."

"This is gross," I said.

"When you think about it, it's not really that much grosser than thinking communion wafers turn into someone's body in your mouth," she said.

That *was* gross. "But what do mean, I'm the vessel?" I asked.

"Oh," she said. "That. Well, see this other Satanist chick who runs this online forum or something had a vision of Jason, like seventeen years ago, before he was born. And in her vision,

a girl filled with the power of Azazel vanquished him. I'm not sure how they know this, but she confirmed that was you, after you were conceived. So, they're gonna do an invocation to Azazel, and the spirit of Azazel will fill your body, and then...you'll kill Jason."

"What?!" the words exploded out of me.

"I know," said Lilith. "I mean, I'm kind of on board with the whole let's-be-free-and-have-lots-of-sex thing. And the black robes aren't even all that bad. But this is kind of...I don't know. I mean, they say that Jason really isn't a person, because he's an agent of Order or whatever, and he's destined to like enslave the entire human race, but...I mean, didn't they say that about Jews during the Holocaust or black people when they were lynching them?" She looked very thoughtful. "I don't want to go against the coven, but I just kind of feel like it would be...wrong to kill someone."

I covered my face with my hands. Lilith was stupid, I realized. I had no idea how we'd been friends for as long as we had. Had I never noticed what an idiot she was? But I had to get Jason and me out of here. Somehow. Because there was no way I was killing him. "So," I said, "what order is this going to happen in? I mean, Invocation first or Entering the Circle first?"

"Invocation," she said. "We have to. It's practically midnight. So, I figure, they'll invoke Azazel, then everybody will get it on, and then we'll all get back together so that you can kill Jason."

"Okay," I said. I could work with that. So they were going to invoke the spirit of Azazel into my body, huh? I could handle that. Especially since I didn't believe Azazel existed. While they were doing that, I was going to have to come up with a plan that didn't involve my getting it on with anyone and also involved my getting both Jason and I out of here alive. "Let's get this over with."

"Really?" said Lilith. "I didn't think you'd want to kill Jason."

I shrugged. "I'm the vessel," I said. "I guess some part of me's always known this is what I was born to do."

Lilith shrugged back. "Cool." She smiled. "That didn't take nearly as long as I thought it would." She paused. "Oh, and Zaza, I'm really sorry about sleeping with Toby. I really am."

"Save it," I snapped. "We'll talk about that later." If I'd actually been planning to stick around, I would never have forgiven her for that.

Lilith led me back down the steps triumphantly.

"I'm ready," I said.

My mother put her hand to her chest and breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh thank Chaos," she said. "I was so guilty, Zaza. I really didn't want to push this on you."

"It's fine, Mom," I said. I'd think about the fact that my mom was a demon worshipper later. Right now, I had to save Jason.

He was still tied to the pole. Hoping no one would notice, I winked at him. If Jason saw, he didn't acknowledge it with his face.

I rejoined Toby in the center of the circle. They all raised their hoods again, so I did too. Toby took my hand. Oh yuck. I did not want to hold Toby's hand. But I had to play along, at least for a little while.

Suddenly, everyone in the circle began intoning some kind of chant in a language I didn't understand. I peered out from under the edge of my hood. Weird. Creepy.

My father stepped forward. He approached me and lifted his hands up to the ceiling. "Great God of Chaos, Azazel, I invoke thee," his voice rang out, echoing off the walls.

He nodded at me. "Repeat that," he said.

Sure, whatever. I raised my hands questioningly. My dad nodded. "Great God of Chaos, Azazel, I invoke thee," I said and really hoped my voice didn't sound sarcastic.

My mother approached, holding an ornate silver chalice. She handed it to my father. He held it in front of me. "Fill your vessel as this liquid fills her body." His voice still had that ringing quality. It was kind of scary.

My father handed me the chalice. I took it. "Repeat," he said.

I hesitated for a second. What if I was wrong, and Azazel really was real? What if I really did get filled with the spirit of a demon?

I chewed on my lip, undecided.

No. There was no way that demons were real.

"Fill this vessel, as this liquid fills my body," I said. This time, there was definitely a cocky edge to my voice.

"Drink," said my father.

I put the chalice to my lips. I drank.

"Finish it," said my dad.

I didn't really know what I was drinking. It tasted alcoholic, but it wasn't beer. Was it wine? I chugged it, grimacing from the taste.

Silence.

Well. Nothing was happening. Maybe they'd done it wrong.

But everyone seemed satisfied. A hooded person, I couldn't tell whom, was gathering the less ornate silver chalices I'd seen on the way in and handing them to each person. Behind them, another robed person offered them the loaf of bread. Each person silently ripped off a hunk of

bread. Once they had bread and wine, they started up the steps in pairs. I guess this was the defiling of the host part of the Black Mass. All in all, I was finding it pretty anti-climactic.

Finally, there was no one left but Toby and me. We were each handed a wine glass, and we each took our bread. Then the people who'd given it to us also went up the steps. Toby and I were alone, except for Jason, who was still tied to the pole.

Toby stuffed the bread into his mouth and chewed. I did the same thing. Then he drank his wine in one gulp. I drank mine too. That was definitely not the same stuff that had been in the chalice. What had I drunk? I desperately hoped it wasn't something disgusting like animal blood.

Now, here was the problem. We'd done the Invocation, and were somewhere in the middle of the Entering the Circle, and I still hadn't come up with a plan to save Jason.

Toby advanced on me.

Great. What was I going to do? What was I going to do? I glanced around the basement, hoping for inspiration. All I saw were candles and Jason.

I made a face at Toby. "Do we have to do this with him watching?" I asked.

Toby looked over at Jason.

I didn't think. I just acted. I grabbed onto Toby's shoulders and kned him as hard as I could in the crotch.

Toby howled, doubling over in pain.

I ran to Jason, fumbling with the knots behind his hands. I couldn't get them undone! What was I going to do?

Toby was still bent over, moaning.

I dashed over to the washer and dryer and grabbed a candle. Back behind Jason, I used the flame to burn the rope.

Jason made a noise when I burned him.

"Sorry," I said.

But he snapped the rope that held his hands.

Toby was gagging on the other side of the basement.

"My neck," said Jason. "Get the one at my neck!"

I held the candle higher. Jason held the rope away from his skin so that it was easier for me to burn it. The smell of burning rope filled the room. Jason pulled at the rope. It snapped too.

Toby was getting up and lumbering towards us. Apparently, he'd recovered from the kick I'd given his balls.

Panicking, I knelt down to get the rope at Jason's feet.

Toby advanced.

Jason knelt down too, holding the rope in the same manner as he had before.

Toby came closer. He reached for Jason.

Jason balled up a fist and punched up into Toby, catching him in the stomach.

Toby stumbled backwards.

Jason yanked hard on the rope at his feet, and it broke as well. He was free.

But Toby was on his feet again and coming for Jason.

Like the time in the alcove, Jason moved fast. He punched Toby's face twice, hard—one-two. Toby's nose started to bleed, but he kept coming. He threw a punch at Jason, which Jason easily sidestepped.

Toby's punch left his midsection open. Jason's fists collided with Toby's stomach again. Toby fell back again, and tried to grab at Jason, use his momentum to topple both of them.

Instead, Jason kicked Toby's feet out from under him. Toby hit the floor hard. Jason didn't stop, even though Toby was down. He kicked him in the face. Once. Twice. Three times. He kicked until Toby stopped moving.

Then he looked at me. "You're okay?" he asked.

I nodded. "Mostly," I said. "You?"

"Never better," he said tightly. He looked around the basement. "Where'd the others go?"

"They're busy," I said. I didn't even want to *think* about it. Yuck. "Come on," I said, reaching for his hand.

I pulled us up the steps and out into the living room. There were robed people lying horizontal on the couch. I didn't look. I didn't want to know who it was.

We raced through the dining room. There were robed people on the dining room table. Oh, gross, gross, gross!

They noticed us flying past. "Hey," said a male voice.

We darted through the kitchen and outside. We ran up the driveway. Then I realized the hole in my plan. How were we going to get away? And where were we going to go?

I stopped, but Jason dragged me forward. There were tons of cars in the driveway, all belonging to people who were inside, I guessed. Jason started trying door handles. They were locked.

"Help me," he said.

I went to the first car I saw and yanked on the door handle. Locked. Second car next to it. Locked.

"Got one!" Jason called. I looked up. He was several cars down from me, standing next to the open door of a glossy black Nissan. I ran to him, opening the passenger's side door.

"You know how hotwire a car?" I asked.

"I do," he said, "but lucky us, the keys are in the ignition." And he started the car.

As Jason backed the car out of the driveway, robed people began filtering out of the house, running towards their cars.

We pulled onto the road, and Jason sped away from my house, going as fast as he could around the curves. I reached for my seatbelt. I hoped we weren't going to die in a car wreck.

"They're going to follow us," I said to him.

"Yep," he said. "And that's not our only problem."

"What?" I said.

"I'm still wearing the goddamned ankle monitor," he said.

"Fuck!" I exclaimed.