

breathless

by v. j. chambers

part two

"And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

-William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming"

chapter twelve

Missing Person Notice

Name: Jones, Azazel

Race: White, non-Hispanic

Age: 17

Height: 5'6"

Weight: 125 pounds

Hair: brown

Clothing: Grey short-sleeved t-shirt, light blue baggy jeans, and brown sandals.

Azazel was last seen in her hometown of Bramford, West Virginia, getting in a green Chevrolet Cobalt with a seventeen-year-old white male with dark hair and eyes. She may be traveling with him still.

Anyone with information should call the Bramford Police Department at (304)555-8392.

Jason and I drove through the night, out of Bramford and through the winding roads, tree branches like skeletal limbs hanging in our path. The moon was barely a sliver in the sky. I felt the darkness pressing around me from all directions. It was going into my mouth. It was going into my eyes, my nose. I was drowning in it. When dawn began to burn across the sky, it banished the darkness, but not the feeling I had. I could hardly breathe. It hurt to exist.

I didn't look back, not literally, but as we drove my father's car farther and farther away from my home and my family, I felt like that was all I did. I sifted through my memories of the past few weeks. It seemed so obvious now, how everything had fallen apart. The moment when Jason appeared in my life, my world had cracked. I

hadn't seen it, but with every moment since the first time I'd seen him, the crack had widened and splintered my foundations. It was no wonder everything had come crashing down. I felt almost stupid that I hadn't seen it before.

Jason's jaw twitched in the driver's seat. He gazed at the road. I wanted to be angry with him. I thought, "If Jason had never shown up, none of this would have happened." But when it came to Jason, I just didn't think clearly. I recognized that now. Looking at him made me dizzy. His dark, intense eyes. His powerful shoulders. I couldn't think clearly when I stared at him. How could I be angry? In fact, I was grateful. All I'd left in Bramford was dust. Jason was the one real, brilliant thing in the world right now. I had nothing left. Except Jason.

"You're quiet," Jason observed, after we'd been driving for over an hour.

I *was* quiet. It was hard to breathe. It was hard to think without running into jagged edges in my brain. All my thoughts hurt right now. Everything was wrong. How could I possibly speak when I wasn't even sure how to exist anymore? "Sorry," I mumbled.

"You don't have to talk," he said softly.

I nodded once, a lump forming in my throat. It was all I could do to stare forward.

"Sometimes," Jason said. "Sometimes it helps to just focus on surviving."

Surviving? Was I still alive? Did I exist in this world where nothing I knew was the way I thought it would be?

"For instance," he said. "We do need money. You wanna help me rob a convenience store?" He smiled at me.

I tried to smile back. The corners of my mouth felt too tight.

Somewhere between Winchester and Martinsburg, Jason took an exit off the interstate. It was nearly desolate, so early in the morning, just a country 7-11. Nothing else around but mountains and trees. I stayed in the car, unable to help. I remembered that some part of me thought that stealing from people at gunpoint was wrong. I wondered why I didn't feel guilty now. It took Jason less than five minutes, and he returned to the car with a handful of bills which he made me count.

We'd stolen a little over three hundred dollars.

"Now we're criminals," I said. Funny. It didn't upset me.

"Don't worry about it," said Jason. "The Sons cover up whatever I do. I'm their problem, really. Besides, officially, I don't exist."

I remembered that my family hadn't been able to find any record of Jason anywhere when he'd moved in with us. Then I remembered something. "You do!" I said. "My parents got you registered with the state so that you could be their foster kid." I winced. I hadn't wanted to talk about them. My parents.

Jason shook his head. "I don't buy that. They were planning on killing me, so they had me registered with the state? Besides, that whole process was way too easy. I signed some papers. It was a smokescreen. They were just trying to keep me from being suspicious. Damn it if it didn't work."

Devious people, my parents. Something else Jason had said, though. It was my way out. Something to focus on. The Sons. That was it. Who were the Sons? And how did they cover this stuff up? "What do you mean, the Sons?" I asked.

Jason just shook his head. "Nothing."

"Jason," I said. "I think I deserve some answers if I'm going to be helping you commit armed robbery."

He considered. "Okay," he said. "Okay. Soon. Just not now. I'm too exhausted to get into all of it now."

* * *

We ditched my dad's car in Baltimore and took a bus to New York City. We both napped on the four-hour bus ride. The bus let us off at Penn Station. We were in New York, because Jason claimed he had a contact there. It was where he'd been heading before he'd had what he called his "little pit stop" in Bramford.

I'd never been to New York City. I was so astonished by what I saw, it was easy to put aside thoughts of Bramford and gape at the sights. Jason laughed at me as I gazed up at the towering skyscrapers, my mouth hanging open. The city was tall and breathtaking, but it was also dirty, crowded, and small. The streets seemed narrow, the sidewalks hardly big enough for all the people who strode through them. Mostly, I was simply floored by the sheer number of people. I'd just never seen so many people all together in one place who had nothing in common. They weren't here for a sporting event or a rally. No, they were just going about their lives, walking to or from work, to

the store, to a restaurant. None of them paid each other any mind. I could hear them talking loudly on their cell phones. There were simply people everywhere.

Once off the bus, Jason found a payphone and called someone on it.

He stood at the payphone, one hand shoved his pocket, cradling the phone with one hand. He looked . . . nonchalant. Like he knew what he was doing. I realized Jason was more in his element here, on the run, than he had been back at home. He knew how to do this. He didn't know how to be a normal teenager and go to school.

"November One," he said into the phone. He paused, waiting as someone said something on the other side. "Yeah, it's me . . . Right . . . I'm going to need to double the order. I've got someone with me . . . Female." He looked at me as if he were sizing me up. "Uh . . . 5'5 or 5'6, maybe . . ." he covered the mouth piece with his hand. "How much do you weigh?"

"What?" I demanded. How rude!

"It's for an ID," he said.

Oh. "A hundred and twenty," I said, lying a little.

He relayed my weight. "Brown hair, green eyes," he continued. "When can we pick it up? . . . Great, then." He hung up the phone. "Let's go," he said.

Jason walked like a New Yorker. Like he knew where he was going. I followed him as close as I could. Now that we weren't running for our lives, he didn't hold my hand. I thought back on the dance, which seemed as if it had happened sometime in the 1700s, and wondered how he felt about the fact that we had kissed. I wondered how I felt about it. There were so many other things to consider right now, like the fact that I

was homeless, that worrying about whether Jason still liked me seemed petty and pointless.

We treaded over the sidewalks for blocks and blocks. Everything looked the same. Little shops, restaurants, pizza stands. There were hot dog vendors on every corner. I wanted to stop at one, because I never had, but I felt stupid asking Jason if we could. So I just trailed after him, trying to keep up as he walked with confidence through the big, big city.

I was getting breathless.

Jason noticed. "Sorry," he said. "I guess we could have taken the subway. I just like walking in New York."

"Yeah," I gasped. "It's great."

"Do you want to slow down?" he asked, laughing.

I nodded.

He slowed his pace. "Next time, say something," he said.

I didn't feel like I could say things like that to Jason. I didn't want to be in the way. I didn't want to bother him.

Even though I'd known Jason for nearly a month, my knowledge of him had expanded so much in the past twenty-four hours. Now Jason wasn't just some mysterious, smart boy who appeared in Bramford. He was a gun-wielding dangerous man who could shoot people without qualms and rob convenience stores. And while Jason had seemed brooding and silent in Bramford, he seemed to get happier and

noisier with every violent incident we lived through. Was this the kind of life Jason was used to?

And what had I gotten myself into? Not that I had a choice. It was either stay in Bramford with the crazy Satanists or run away with Jason. Still, I was beginning to feel that danger followed Jason around like a hungry wolf. From the moment he'd come into my life, it hadn't been the same. And now my life was turned completely upside down. I had run away from home. I was in New York City. I only had the clothes on my back and some cash we'd stolen. Who was I? What was happening to me?

"We're almost there," said Jason.

"Where is there?" I asked.

"My ID contact," said Jason. "I said I'd be in town within the next few months to pick one up. That was like three months ago. Anyway, I've been expected. Don't worry. It's safe."

Safe? Was anything safe anymore? I'd thought Bramford was safe. It showed how much I knew.

We rounded a corner, and Jason pointed to an apartment building a few buildings down. "That's where we're going," he said. All of the buildings on the street were brick and rectangular. They each had fire escape steps climbing up the sides. They were shoved against each other, like they were all one building. Air conditioners jutted out of some of the windows, even though it was late autumn. Mostly, the apartment buildings just looked a little . . . rundown.

We walked through the front door and into the elevator. Jason punched the button for the sixth floor. Once out of the elevator, he strode confidently down the hall, with me trailing behind him. He knocked on a door that had a welcome mat sitting out in front of it.

What was the point of a mat outside an apartment? Were one's feet really that dirty by the time one got up the elevator?

The door opened and standing inside was one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen. She was tall, with smooth, cappuccino-colored skin. Her hair fell around her shoulders in tiny braids. Her eyes were light brown and almond shaped.

"Jason Wodden," she exclaimed. She had a British accent.

"Hey Marlana," he said, grinning.

She looked him up and down appreciatively. "You've grown up," she said, her voice was a little too sultry for my tastes.

This was Jason's contact? He might have mentioned that she was a beautiful woman.

She gave Jason a huge hug. "Well," she said, "come in. Come in."

Jason and I went into her apartment. We entered a living room, decorated in reds and browns. Tapestries were thrown over the couches and the coffee table, which was decorated with candles. Incense was burning. The room was separated from the rest of the apartment by a beaded curtain.

"My God," said Marlana, "it's been ages. You were like twelve the last time I saw you."

"And that would have made you like thirteen?" said Jason, grinning.

"Joker," said Marlana, poking him. She shook her head at him. "Are you legal yet?"

He laughed. "I didn't think you much cared for legalities," he said. And then he grabbed my arm and pulled me close to him. "This is Azazel."

"Fine," said Marlana, laughing. "Point taken. Of course you'd want an age-appropriate girlfriend."

"Oh," I said. "I'm not—I mean—" I looked at Jason.

He dropped my arm.

Oops. This was awkward. I didn't know what I was supposed to say. I *wasn't* Jason's girlfriend. Was I supposed to lie? Did Jason want me to be his girlfriend? Before, he'd said . . . But a lot had happened since then.

"You guys have a seat," said Marlana, gesturing to her couches. We sat down.

"You want anything? Tea? Coffee? Marijuana?"

I shot Jason a horrified look, but he just laughed. "Coffee's fine. Azazel?"

"Um," I said. "Coffee. Sure."

Marlana disappeared through the beaded curtain.

"How do you *know* her?" I whispered to Jason.

"She was a friend of Anton's," he said. "Used to do favors for him. We can trust her."

If he said so. There wasn't much about Marlana that I thought was trustworthy. She had to be at least twenty-five, and she was totally flirting with Jason. And I didn't

like that. I didn't like it at all. Maybe that was stupid. After all, I had no claim on Jason. Still, the thought of it just made me feel a little uneasy.

Marlena reappeared with two cups of coffee, which she handed to us. Then she ducked back out of the room to return with cream and sugar, in little packets like you get at a restaurant.

"Still stealing from fast food restaurants, I see," said Jason.

"You have no idea how much money I save on ketchup packets alone," said Marlena, settling down on a chair that faced us. "So," she said, suddenly all business, "your ID is finished, Jason, but since I've had such short notice for Azazel, it's going to take me another day. And I should get a picture of her."

"Another day?" asked Jason. "I wasn't planning on sticking around that long."

"No?" Marlena looked disappointed. "Where are you planning to go?"

"You know I'm not going to tell you that," said Jason. "Okay, another day. We can do that. We'll find a hotel that will take cash or something. Unless—what about the credit cards I asked you about?"

"Oh," said Marlena, remembering. "Got you one." She held up her index finger. "Five thousand dollar limit."

"Great!" said Jason.

"But they track those easy. You know that."

"First they've got to connect it to me," said Jason. "They don't even know where I am."

"I don't think you should use the credit card in the city," said Marlana. "They might track it to me, and as much as I love you, Jason, I'm not going down for you."

Jason sighed. "Then I guess just don't worry about Azazel's ID. We'll leave tonight. No hotels."

"Don't be silly," said Marlana. "The two of you should stay here for tonight."

Stay here? I didn't want to stay with Marlana.

"I don't want to endanger you," said Jason.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Marlana. "You're perfectly safe here, if it's only for one night. And I can have Azazel's ID for you in the morning."

"Okay," said Jason. "But we're gone first thing tomorrow."

"Of course," she said.

* * *

Marlana went out for a few hours to "take care of things," as she put it. Jason and I were left alone in her apartment. Jason easily made himself at home, raiding Marlana's pantry for pretzel sticks and sprawling out on the couch in front of the television.

I just sat next to him, wondering at this new turn of events. We were staying at woman's house who made illegal IDs, could get Jason a credit card, and also probably smoked marijuana. It didn't seem like a particularly safe place to be. Plus, for some reason, I just didn't really like Marlana. She seemed a little too cavalier about what was happening to Jason. Of course, maybe she was used to interacting with Jason when he was in mortal danger. Maybe Jason was in mortal danger all the time.

Nothing was happening. When nothing was happening, it was too easy for me to think about the mess my life was. I didn't want to go back to the way I'd felt in the car, like I couldn't think or breathe. I began to panic, wishing I could distract myself easily the way Jason did. But I couldn't focus on the TV. What could I focus on? Then I remembered. Jason had promised to explain things to me. Now was as good a time as any.

"Jason," I said, "you promised to tell me who the Sons were later. It's later now."

"I guess I did," said Jason, and he shut off the TV. He took a deep breath. "I don't know where to start."

"How about with your mother?" I said. "Sheriff Damon said she was killed by her husband."

Jason looked confused. "When did he say that?" he asked.

"I overheard him talking to my parents once, right after you were found." Actually, now that I thought about it, Jason had apparently told my dad his mother had died in childbirth. Maybe I shouldn't have started with that little revelation.

"I never met her," said Jason. "Anton told me her name was Marianne Wodden and that she died right after I was born. That's all I ever knew." He looked thoughtful.

"Killed by her husband? So I guess that's a matter of public record?"

"I don't know," I said.

Jason disappeared behind Marlena's beaded curtain for a few moments and returned with her laptop.

"She doesn't care if you use that?" I asked.

"Marlena's like my big sister," said Jason. "Or as close as somebody like me gets anyway." He flipped open the laptop. He was quiet for a few minutes as he searched. Then he sat back.

"What?" I said.

"All this time," he said, "and I never even once thought to just google her name."

"It's true?"

"Yeah," he said. He turned the laptop screen so that I could see. The screen was filled with a graphic of two big golden angels holding a banner that said, "In Memory of . . ."

Underneath the text read, "Marianne Rachel Aird Wodden, 1973-1991. Our beloved sister and aunt. Shot to death at the hands of her husband, Ted Wodden, who then being the coward that he was, turned the gun on himself. Nothing can bring her back, but she is in our hearts and prayers forever."

I scrolled down the page.

There was another entry. "Jason Edgar Wodden," it read. "Unborn child of Marianne Wodden. Marianne was pregnant when she was killed."

"Oh my God, Jason," I said. "Look at this."

He moved the screen back.

"That's you," I said. "You're supposed to be dead."

"Well, I'm not," he said. "Weird." He shrugged, closing the laptop. "Well, anyway, about the Sons of the Rising Sun."

I wanted to know about the Sons, so I didn't want to stop him, but I couldn't help but wonder, "That's it? You aren't more concerned about your mother?"

"If she's even my mother," said Jason. "Maybe Anton pulled a name off some website like this to name me in the first place. Who knows where I came from."

"They didn't have websites in 1991," I reminded him.

"Whatever," he said.

Okay. He really wasn't concerned. "Jason, if this is true, your mother had a sibling and that sibling had kids. You have a family."

He was quiet for a second. Then he shook his head. "No, not really, I don't. Let's not talk about this part anymore. I can tell you about what I know. I don't know anything about my parents."

"Okay," I said. "Who are the Sons of the Rising Sun?"

"They're the people who raised me," said Jason. "They're a huge, huge group of men who have influence all over the world."

"Like the Illuminati," I said excitedly.

He grinned. "Yeah, you and your Illuminati. I guess sort of."

"You're the one who called them Freemasons with guns," I pointed out.

"Okay, it's true that the Sons have members high up in every major world government. It's true that they affect global policies and all kinds of stuff I don't understand. I know that much. I just don't know how they do it. Because there are members of the Sons who are out in the public like that, but there are also the Brothers, the other members of the Sons. Anton was a Brother."

"And you were raised by these Brothers?" I asked.

"I was raised by Anton. I saw other members. Sometimes. Not often, at least not when I was young. Anton was in communication with them. It was his job to keep me out of sight and safe. And to teach me and train me, in preparation for . . ." Jason trailed off.

"For what?"

"Well, you know, at first I didn't know what they thought I was," Jason said. "I didn't have any real idea of the way the rest of the world worked. My earliest memories are of Anton. I remember being a really little kid, maybe three or four, and Anton reading to me before I went to sleep. We always slept in hotel rooms. We were always moving. I remember things like Anton teaching me how to tie my shoes. I remember playing games with little men, which he had helped me make out of toothpicks. I remember eating in diners and fast food restaurants. I remember all kinds of little things like that. And at the time, I was too young to know that wasn't the way everyone lived. It's the only time I was ever really happy, I think. Because by the time I was just a little older, I began to realize that there was a whole other world out there that I didn't understand and wasn't part of. And that everybody else was part of it. And I hated that.

"But back then, I didn't know that things were weird, and so I didn't bother to ask why we did things the way we did. When I was older, when it started to become clear to me, I did ask Anton. I wanted to know why we didn't live in a house. And why we always traveled. And why I didn't have a mom and a dad like everybody else.

"Anton said that I certainly had a mother and father, but they were dead. He said that we traveled, because there were bad people who wanted to find me and hurt me, and we had to stay away from them."

"Did he tell you why people wanted to hurt you?" I asked.

"Well, back then, Anton just said I was special. And I was five years old, so I believed it. Who doesn't think they're special when they're five?"

"Five? And that was when you started shooting guns?"

"Yeah, definitely. Anton always had guns. We shot cans off railroad tracks in southern towns. We always traveled through the south when I was a kid. A couple times he took me to a shooting range. He taught me guns were tools. That they were powerful. That they could cause all kinds of damage. They weren't toys. Anton was very serious about everything. It made for a kind of solemn childhood."

"Was that one of the things that made you think your life was strange?" I asked.

"Not really. In a lot of ways, everything I knew about the world, I got from watching television shows in hotel rooms. Everybody had guns on TV. No, I thought guns were normal."

I shivered. What a way to grow up! "So you've spent your whole life traveling from place to place?"

"No, not my whole life. The first ten years of my life pretty much. We were always running from one place to the other. The first time I think I realized exactly why was maybe when I was seven. I think I was about that old. Anton and I were staying in a hotel somewhere in backwoods North Carolina. I woke up in the middle of the night

to the sound of gunfire. They were shooting into our hotel room. The window shattered. There was glass everywhere."

I covered my mouth with my hand, horrified. But Jason's face was composed and unemotional.

"Anton made me hide under the bed. I wanted to help him. I remember I wanted to shoot with him. But he wouldn't let me. I had to hide. Anton took care of them. And we left in the middle of the night without paying for our hotel room."

"Did that kind of thing happen to you a lot?"

"Maybe four or five times before I was ten," said Jason, thinking about it carefully.

I couldn't believe he was so unaffected by relating the story. That he couldn't specifically remember how many times he'd been shot at as a small boy. "Why were they shooting at you?"

"They were trying to kill me," said Jason.

"But why?"

"I didn't know at the time," said Jason. "Anton really wouldn't talk about it. He said that they were bad guys and that seemed to make sense in my way of viewing the world. There were bad guys on TV. The men were bad guys.

"Anyway, it started to get worse. The shootings were more and more frequent, so that was when Anton and I went to England. Anton was from England. And that was when I found out."

"You've been to England?" I said, astonished. I'd never been anywhere besides to Virginia Beach for vacation a few times. And my family didn't go on vacation too much. There were too many of us.

"Yeah," he said. "Not for long. We were maybe only there for a year. We went to visit the High Council of the Sons. At the time, Anton didn't tell me exactly why we were going. I was mostly excited because we got to ride a plane."

I'd never been on a plane! "Is that when you met Marlana?" I asked. "Is she British?"

"She is," said Jason, "but no. I met Marlana when I was really young. Um . . . I don't know, maybe six or so. Her father was a car thief, and I guess Marlana's mother wasn't in the picture anymore, so he just kind of dragged his daughter around with him, stealing cars. After her father died, Marlana started doing forgeries instead. She'd always helped her father with that kind of stuff, I guess. Titles to the cars and things. I don't know. Anyway, Anton and I were often in the need of untraceable transportation. Marlana's dad was one of his contacts."

"Oh," I said.

"So, Anton and I went to England," said Jason, picking up where he'd left off, "and when we got there, we went to stay in this strange old castle. It was really weird. The walls were made of stone. And it was drafty. There were all these very serious British men wandering around, and they were all really interested in me. They asked me all these questions all the time, and anyway, we had to go to these meetings, where

we sat in front of the Council, and they questioned Anton, and without anyone really explaining it to me, I sort of figured it all out.

"The Sons of the Rising Son, like I said, have these branches. So some of them are businessmen, and some of them are politicians, and I'll bet there's some feeder fraternity in some colleges somewhere, God knows. But like I said, Anton was a Brother. And the Council is made up of Brothers. And Brothers are kind of like monks or spies or something. They're like Jesuits mixed with James Bond." He grinned at me.

I laughed. "Okay."

"So, they're celibate. And they devote their lives to pursuing the Purpose."

"What's the Purpose?" I asked.

"Oh, come on, this should be easy for you, Miss Illuminati," he said.

I looked at him blankly.

"You even said that stuff to your dad about the dollar bill," he said.

"Novus Ordo Seclorum?!" I gasped out. No way!

He applauded. "And she comes out swinging. Exactly. New World Order. I guess, technically, they just want to establish a global government. More accurately, they want me to establish a global government."

"You?"

"Haven't you guessed?" Jason said, spreading his hands. "I'm the freaking messiah."

I snorted. "What?"

He laughed too. "No lie," he said. "That's totally what they basically said."

"I don't get it," I said.

"*You* don't get it? Think how I felt." He took a deep breath. "Basically – well, it's too complicated to explain basically, because they have pages and pages of stuff on all of this crap – but, the gist of it all is this: Many ancient religions talk about the return of a deity. Christianity obviously talks about the return of Jesus. Norse Mythology has the return of Balder after the earth has been recreated after Ragnorak. In Indian mythology, Vishnu is going to return in his final avatar. Then there's just the dying gods of the mystery religions, who die and return in cycles. Mithras. Dionysus. Osiris. Um, beyond religion, there's talk of the return of King Arthur, when England needs him most. So, the Sons of the Rising Sun believe that this super being of some kind is going to descend on the earth, and they scoured texts from various religious and mythological backgrounds to come up with a list of trillions of signs and wonders leading to the return of what they call the Rising Sun." He pointed at himself.

"You? But why you?"

"Well, when I went to England with Anton, they were not sure it was me. There were maybe two other contenders. And that was why we were getting shot at. Because proponents of the other possible Rising Suns didn't want me in the way of their guy. So, we went there because Anton was like, 'You guys asked me to keep this kid safe, and we're getting shot at by other members of the Sons. I want better protection.' Anyway, it turned out while we were there, one of the other contenders died in a car accident, so it was just me and this other guy.

"And the Sons decided that they'd call the other guy to England as well, and they'd just figure out which one of us it actually was."

"How'd they do that?"

"It was like a trial. We had to go sit in front of the Council and hear people bring evidence forward, most of which had to do with the list of trillions of signs and wonders leading to the return of the Rising Sun."

"So, you fulfilled these signs and wonders?" I asked. I was confused.

"Well, we both did," he said. "At least we both fulfilled some of them. A lot of them contradicted each other. This guy was older than me. He was maybe fifteen. And he hadn't been raised by a Brother like I had. He had a family, I think. I don't know what happened to him. Anyway, they picked me, because I was born in 1991, clearly an auspicious year since it's the same backwards and forwards." He made a face to show how silly he thought that was.

"I was born in 1991, too," I said.

"Yes, but you're a girl," he said. "And there are no women in the Sons of the Rising Sun. It's very sexist. Plus they'd have to change the name to Sons and Daughters or something."

I laughed. "Okay, so why else did they pick you?"

"I can't remember every reason," said Jason. "Um . . . I remember the biggest deal was this verse in the Bible, Genesis 49:10. It says something like the power of Judah won't be restored until Shiloh comes. And I was born in Shiloh. Of course, the verse might have meant Shiloh, Israel. Or it might have just meant the messiah. Anyway,

Shiloh, Georgia was good enough for them. And there were lists of lists of things besides that, all from different religious traditions. So, in the end, they decided it was me."

"That's crazy," I said.

He nodded. "Yeah. It is. And can you imagine what it was like, to come back to America, an eleven-year-old kid, thinking that you're like the savior of the world?" He laughed. "Do you have any idea how much pressure that is?"

I didn't.

"Everyone's careful of you. No one lets you experience anything, because they're afraid it will ruin you for your higher purpose. You live a half-life, not a real one."

Wait. That did kind of sound familiar. I shrugged. "I was groomed my whole life to be the vessel," I said.

He laughed. "Yeah. That's got to be why I like you so much. You kind of understand."

I had another thought. "Wait," I said. "You're supposed to impose a New World Order. Like . . . you're an agent of Order, sent to enslave the world?"

"What?"

"The language of the Satanist vision," I said. "It was kind of right about you."

"I'm not going to do any of that, Azazel," said Jason. "Why do you think I ran away?"

"But how did that woman who ran the online forum have a vision of you? And how was she right?" I asked.

"What are you saying?" Jason said, a grin breaking across his face. "Are you saying you're really filled with the spirit of an ancient demon?"

"No, of course not," I said. "It's just weird, don't you think?"

"It's a coincidence," said Jason. "I've spend my entire life around people who read stuff into coincidences. Things are what you make them. That's all there is to it."

And I agreed with him. But I still found that somewhat disconcerting. What if there was something to what the Satanists had to say? What if . . . I shrugged it off. "So you came back to America when you were eleven?" I asked.

"Yeah. And we went to live in a Society of Brothers of the Sons, which was located in Tennessee somewhere. It was an old building where a bunch of celibate men lived and tried to further the Purpose. There were some guys closer to my age there. It was the first time I really ever hung out with other kids. That was where I met Hallam."

"The guy who came to Bramford?"

"The very one. He's only a few years older than us. He was studying to become a Brother. In the Society, the High Council would send down orders to the Brothers telling them to carry out certain missions. That was how Anton had ended up being my guardian. It was his assignment. Anyway, these orders were sometimes kind of dangerous, and there was never any rationale given to them. So, the Brothers didn't know why they were doing it. They just did it, because they trusted the Council. As I got older, they started to give me orders to carry out as well. I always had to stay back. I never got to really be part of the action, because it was important to keep me safe.

"Sometimes, the orders made sense. Once I remember we infiltrated a suicide cult and took down the head of it before he could make all the people, you know, kill themselves. Sometimes, they just seemed really random. We got in the middle of a gang war once. We were supposed to protect one side, instead of the other. No one knew why. No one could tell a difference between the sides. It was bloody and scary and violent, but they were already fighting, so it didn't bother my conscience too much.

"But sometimes, the orders were not only just random, they seemed downright, well, wrong. Hallam and I were sent once to a . . ." Jason trailed off. He took a deep breath. "To a sorority house. The girls there were basically prostituting themselves for extra cash. It was a bad scene, for certain. It was illegal. But, um, they told us to go in and . . . kill everyone."

We were both quiet. I didn't know if I wanted to know this about Jason. I almost told him to stop, but I didn't. I couldn't speak. I just watched him.

Jason's Adam's apple bobbed. "I couldn't do it," he said, looking at his hands. "I tried, because I thought it was my duty, but . . . But Hallam. He . . . Sometimes I have nightmares about that night. I see Hallam's face. Blood's spattered all over it. And he's screaming. I can't tell if he's screaming because he's horrified, or because he's having a really good time. And I'm just standing there. Watching him. Not stopping him, just watching."

I reached over to touch Jason's shoulder, wanting to comfort him. Jason had been through so much. It made everything I'd seen him do make so much more sense. I didn't relate. I couldn't. But I ached for him. I wished I could make it better somehow.

Jason shook himself. "Anyway," he said. "It was stuff like that that made me want to leave. But in the end, I left because of what happened to Anton. Anton had always believed everything that the Sons said, hook, line, and sinker. He believed that I was the Rising Sun. He believed that the Sons had the best interests of the world in mind. He believed that there were prophecies. He believed in a right and wrong, and he wanted me to be on the side of right. So when stuff like that started happening, Anton got kind of confused. He had a code of ethics. Shooting college girls, whether or not they had turned into hookers, was not part of his code of ethics. He started doing some research and looking into what the Sons were asking us to do. And I don't know what exactly he found out, but I think it was that the Sons don't care anything about right and wrong or a peaceful New World Order. Basically they just care about making money and having power over people. I think Anton was going to tell all the Brothers and start a revolution of sorts.

"He asked me to come see him in his room one night. He said he had something he wanted to tell me. I went there, and by the time I got there, they'd already gotten to him. He was lying on the ground, bleeding from multiple gunshot wounds. He wasn't conscious, but he was breathing. And I just held him in my arms until his lungs filled up with blood, and he drowned on it. "

Jason stopped for a second, studying his fingers.

He looked up at me. "And then I took some guns and some money, and I just left. They followed me. I ran. I ran and ran until you found me."