

breathless

by v.j. chambers

chapter fourteen

To: Alfred Norwich <anorwic@risingsun.org>

From: Richard Durham <rurha@risingsun.org>

Subject: Re: West Virginia

Alfred,

We've been monitoring the situation in West Virginia, tapping the phones of the Jones family. It's our feeling that if the family should come in contact with Jason again, they would be an immediate threat to his person. For now, we've just got them under surveillance, but if they should make any moves, we would recommend termination.

It's also my personal feeling that since Hallam was so adamant we stay away from West Virginia, he knew Jason was there the entire time. That means any place he said Jason wouldn't be is probably where Jason is.

Yours in the pursuit of the Purpose,

Richard

It wasn't as hard to find Aunt Stephanie as I feared. Jason and I just found an internet café and used the computers to look her up on anywho.com. We got a phone number and an address. Aunt Stephanie lived in Alpine, NJ, which Jason said was good, because it was relatively close. We were already in New Jersey, having gotten off the ferry. We weren't sure if we should call Aunt Stephanie first. I'd told Jason that my aunt hadn't really kept in touch with my family and that she and my grandmother had disowned my mother for marrying below her station.

Jason wasn't sure it was a good idea for us to go to my aunt's house. I had to admit that my last idea of going somewhere for help (Ms. Campbell) had backfired completely. But he admitted that Alpine, NJ was the last place the Sons would look for him and that he didn't have any better ideas.

Apparently, Alpine was a community of really, really rich people. I hadn't known this. But all the houses there were worth millions of dollars.

"Your mother really did marry down," said Jason.

We decided to call her, because we were going to have to take a bus to Alpine, and if she didn't want us to be there, we'd have wasted all that money. I had to admit there were definite advantages to this whole metropolitan area thing. Public transportation was a marvelous thing. It was really cool getting around without a car. One less thing to worry about.

I dialed my aunt's number on a payphone (which was extremely hard to find in this day of cell phones. Neither Jason nor I had one). It rang and rang. I chewed on my lip nervously.

Finally, someone answered the phone. "Hoyt residence." That was my mother's maiden name. Aunt Stephanie had never married.

"Um," I said, "may I speak to Stephanie Hoyt?"

"May I ask who's calling?"

"It's her niece, Azazel," I said.

"Hold on," said the voice, but whoever it was sounded a little startled. I wondered who was answering the phone at Aunt Stephanie's house. Did she have servants or something?

I waited. Finally, someone picked up the phone. "Azazel?"

"Hi Aunt Stephanie," I said.

"Is your mother with you?" she asked.

"Um . . . I've kind of run away from home," I said.

"Of course you have. How could you live there with that woman?" said Aunt Stephanie. "Where are you?"

"In Hoboken," I said. That wasn't the response I was expecting.

"Oh my God," said Aunt Stephanie. "Alone?"

"N-no, I have a friend."

"Well, thank Heaven for that. I wouldn't want you all alone out there," she said.

"I'm sending a car. Tell me exactly where you are."

After giving her a detailed location, I hung up the phone. "She's sending a car," I said to Jason. "She didn't seem upset that I ran away."

"Good sign," said Jason.

* * *

Aunt Stephanie's house was enormous. It had wings. It sprawled over an immaculately landscaped lawn. It looked too big for a family of ten. And Aunt Stephanie lived there alone? I was floored.

We pulled up in the car that she'd sent for us. Apparently, Aunt Stephanie had a chauffeur. She also had a brand new black BMW. I felt out of place in it, as if I was afraid I might break something or spill something or that my very presence might somehow destroy it.

Aunt Stephanie met us at the door. I recognized her from pictures my mother had shown me, but she was definitely older now. She was a somewhat plump woman with short, brown hair. She wore a lot of makeup. But she had a big smile and a New

Jersey accent, which I kind of liked. Vaguely, I wondered why my mother didn't have an accent.

"Oh my God," she said as we approached. "Look at you, Azazel. The last time I saw you, you barely came up to my knees. You are beautiful."

"Uh, thanks," I said.

She was sort of brash, but I liked it.

"Who's your friend?"

"This is Jason," I said. "He was a foster kid at my parents' house for a few months."

"So you ran away together, then," she said, ushering us into her house.

Inside it was even more breathtaking than outside. She led us into a foyer, tiled in white marble. There was a small table in the center, on which a large bouquet of white roses sat. Behind it was a massive expanse of space. The far wall was composed entirely of windows. Through them I could see a garden. It was fall, so not much was growing, but there were several very pretty evergreen trees and bushes.

"You poor things," Aunt Stephanie continued. "You have bags?"

"No," I said.

"Heavens! Just the clothes on your backs then?"

Jason and I nodded. I was glad to see that even Jason was a little taken aback with the surroundings and Aunt Stephanie. It was good not to be the only overwhelmed one.

Aunt Stephanie threw back her head and bellowed, "Marci!"

A tiny woman darted out into the foyer.

"Ms. Hoyt?" she said. Even her voice was tiny.

Aunt Stephanie waved her hands at us. "They need clothes," she said. "Marci, measure them. Get them something."

Marci pulled measuring tape out of her pocket and began measuring us. Jason and I exchanged glances over Marci's head. What was going on?

"Honestly," said Aunt Stephanie. "You look awful. Just awful. And you must be starving. I think Lydia's whipping up something for lunch in the kitchen, so at least you'll have something to eat, but my God, when was the last time you had a shower?"

"Um . . ." I tried to think. It had been awhile. "Friday?" I said.

"No," said Aunt Stephanie, looking terrorized. "That's horrible. Just horrible. Well, don't worry, I've got bathrooms. Come with me."

She started walking away. Marci was still measuring us. We didn't move.

Aunt Stephanie looked back at us. "Well?" she said. "What are you waiting for?" Then she noticed Marci. "Oh, enough already, Marci. My God, you and I both know you can look at someone and tell what size they are. Just get some clothes. Have them delivered. I don't care. But I want something here by the time both of them are done bathing."

Marci bobbed her head and darted out of the room.

Jason and I followed Aunt Stephanie.

She deposited us both in separate bathrooms on the same wing. Once inside, I didn't do anything for a few minutes. I just stood staring at the bathroom, gaping. This

was a *guest* bathroom, and it was the size of my bedroom at home. It was all white like the foyer. It was too white. I was afraid to get clean in a bathroom like this. What if I got it dirty?

Before I'd even had a chance to undress, Aunt Stephanie knocked on my door with some clothes. "Marci's getting more," she assured me. "This is just a start. I don't know if you like them or not, or if they're in style. I don't keep up with that kind of thing, but Marci has impeccable taste, and I'm sure we can trust her to have picked out something nice."

She ducked back out of the bathroom without another word. I looked at the clothes. They were very nice. There was a pair of jeans and a peasant top. They still had price tags on them. I looked at the price tags. I gagged.

After showering, Jason and I joined Aunt Stephanie in her kitchen "nook" (if this was what she called a nook, I'd hate to see what a cranny was) for lunch. Jason also had new clothes. Our clothes did seem to fit us very well. Apparently, Marci was talented.

For lunch, we all sat down to eat enormous chef salads. Aunt Stephanie barely had a bite swallowed before she began talking. "Now," she said, "you have got to tell me, Azazel, what happened? Why did you leave?"

I was hesitant. The last time I'd told this story – to Ms. Campbell – it really hadn't turned out well.

"Don't be shy," she said. "There are reasons why I don't speak to your mother anymore. And I told her that if she continued down the path she was on, she would lose

her children. I warned her, but she did not listen. And so I just want to know exactly what happened, so that if I ever do see her again, I can say I told you so."

"Well," I said, still not reassured. This story was really weird. "My parents kind of surprised me on Halloween."

"Oh my God," said Aunt Stephanie, "she made you participate in a Black Mass, didn't she?"

"You know about that?" I asked.

"Well, why do you think we disowned her?" Aunt Stephanie asked.

I was shocked. "I always thought it was because dad was poor," I said.

"No, no. That was fine." Aunt Stephanie took another bite of her salad. "Everything was fine. Well, Mother was not exactly thrilled, but we dealt with that. I even tried to send your mother money, and, of course, she's stubborn, and she wouldn't take it. But when she found out she couldn't get pregnant, well, she just went nuts."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "My mother didn't get disowned until after she and Dad were married?"

"No. It wasn't until she started doing all those weird spell things to try to get pregnant," said Aunt Stephanie.

My hand went to my neck. I was still wearing the necklace my mother had given me on Friday. What had she said? Something about getting the pendant before she found out she was pregnant with me? From Mrs. Cantele, the woman who everyone said was a witch.

"And I guess they worked," said Aunt Stephanie. "I mean here you are, a medical miracle. But the price, I'm telling you. To lose my sister to the worship of Satan. My God. It just . . ." For once, Aunt Stephanie seemed to be at a loss for words.

"So," I said, more to myself than anyone, "all of it was just to have me."

Aunt Stephanie nodded. "Yes." She turned to Jason. "So were you there when this Black Mass happened?" she asked him.

"Yeah," he said. "They, um, tried to kill me."

"Oh my God," said Aunt Stephanie. "You poor things. Well, look. Neither of you worry about anything. I am so happy you got away from that woman, from that place. You'll be safe here. Just consider yourselves at home."

* * *

It was a dream. It was a beautiful, wonderful dream. I couldn't believe it. I wished I'd thought of Aunt Stephanie earlier. We wouldn't have had to spend that terrible night in New York, sleeping on a pullout couch and running from the Sons. For the first time in my escape with Jason, I'd actually had a good idea. Finally.

The rest of the day, Jason and I lounged in Aunt Stephanie's den on lush, overstuffed couches, watching television and eating snacks.

I felt so relieved. Everything was going to be okay now. I relaxed. I luxuriated in our surroundings and soaked up the atmosphere. During a commercial break, I looked over at Jason, who was sitting very close to me on the couch. We'd started off sitting far away from each other, unsure if our touching would be rude to Aunt Stephanie. But as

the afternoon wore on, we'd gotten closer and closer. Now our heads were inches from each other, resting on the back of the couch.

"If you could live anywhere," I asked, "where would you live?"

"The Sons wouldn't be chasing me?" he asked.

"Of course not," I said.

Jason considered. "I don't know," he said. "I never really thought about it."

"Never?" I asked.

"Where would you live?" he asked.

"Um . . . by the ocean," I said. "Somewhere warm."

"Sounds nice," he said. "I don't know. All I've ever wanted is to be normal. I wanted to go to school and play video games and think about things like girls and sports. Now, I only ever think about one girl."

I smiled, feeling my heart leap.

"So, I guess, if I could live anywhere, I'd want to live where you live," he said.

I couldn't help it. That was too sweet. My heart swelled, and I reached over and kissed him. "I want that too," I said. "I want to be with you."

He smiled and put his arm around me. He rested his chin on top of my head. "So, we'd live by the beach. In the evening, we'd walk on the sand barefoot, holding hands. And when we woke up, it wouldn't be because something was after us, and we had to run." Jason mused. "I could take you on dates. To the movies or to restaurants. Would you go on a date with me if I asked you?"

"Of course I would." He had his arms wrapped around me, and he had to ask?

I moved out of his embrace for a second so I could look at him. "You know, Jason," I said. "If things hadn't worked out the way they did in Bramford, if everything hadn't gone insane, I still would have ended up with you."

"You can't be sure of that," he said. "It's okay, you don't have to —"

"No," I said. "I mean it. When I kissed you at the dance, it was like everything lit up for the first time. Even if I'd never heard that conversation between Toby and Lilith, I never would have gone with him that night."

"Really?" Jason asked.

"What I feel for you is so much different than what I felt for Toby," I said. "I just feel . . . drawn to you."

"Yeah," he said, recognition in his voice. "Like I can't look away, even if I want to."

I nodded. "Yes. When you're around, you're all I think about."

"When you're not around, you're all I think about," he said.

I settled back into his arms. "Mmm," I said. "I don't like it when you're not around."

"I don't like it either."

"We're together now," I said. "That's all that matters."

Then, of course, Jason had to ruin everything.

"You know I can't stay here, right?" he said.

I didn't know that. I had thought that everything was fixed. I had thought that we could stay here forever and that the nightmare was over. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's only a matter of time before the Sons track me down," he said. "I can't stay anywhere."

"But you said they'd never look for you here," I said.

"Maybe not for a while. But even in Bramford, they found me."

I remembered Hallam's hand on my throat. Remembered his cruel voice telling me to run away. Oh. I really didn't want to leave here. I liked it here. It was awesome here. "I don't want to go," I moaned.

"You don't have to," he said. "You should stay. She's your aunt. You've got family. You'll be safe if I'm gone. I'll know you're all right. You should stay."

I pushed myself away from him. I gaped at him. "After what I just said, how could you think that I could do that?"

Jason looked away. "Maybe . . ." he said, " . . . maybe if things ever changed, I could come back."

"Jason, if you leave, I'm coming with you," I said. "I won't lose you. You don't know what it was like for me when you ran away in Bramford. I couldn't eat or think or concentrate. All I could think about was whether or not you were hurt or dead. You can't do that to me again. I won't let you."

"It won't be right away," he said. "I can stay here for a while. Let's not talk about it now."

"I want you to take it back," I said. "I want you to say you won't leave me."

"I can't say that," he said. "Azazel, I love you. I can't put you in danger. Not when there's some better alternative."

He loved me? I was shocked. My mouth hung open. Everything else he'd said was blotted out for now. "I love you too," I said. I knew it was true. Jason and I may not have had the longest courtship. We hadn't been traditionally together for more than a day or two, really. But there was something between us that transcended all of that. There was something about what we had that was too big for traditions. We were something incredible. We belonged together.

* * *

Late that night, I awoke to find someone in my room with me, on my bed, tying my hands to the bedpost. My legs were tied too. At first, I was too disoriented to completely understand what was going on, but as I woke up, I recognized my attacker.

I screamed. I screamed and screamed.

And Toby balled up the sheets on the bed and thrust them in my mouth. His face was bruised and purple. His nose was twice the size that it usually was. But I would have screamed anyway, even if he'd looked like the cherub he used to resemble. I had hoped never to see Toby again.

"Listen," he whispered. "It didn't work. The Invocation didn't work because you didn't join the Circle. We have to complete the ritual."

How had he gotten in here? Where had he come from? And what the hell did he think he was going to do to me? I spit the bed sheets out of my mouth.

"Toby, you are not going to complete any kind of ritual with me, okay?" I said.

He looked apologetic. "I don't really want to do this either, Azazel. I don't want you to be all struggling and screaming and . . . It makes me feel really bad. But we have to do this. It's important."

"How did you find me?" I demanded.

"Your aunt called your mom to gloat," said Toby.

What?! Aunt Stephanie had betrayed us? She clearly didn't understand the seriousness of the situation.

"We drove all night. All of us," said Toby.

"All?" I said.

"Yeah. Me, your mom, your dad, my dad, my mom, some other people."

"And you're all here? In this house?"

"Yes."

"And Jason?"

"Will be waiting for you to complete the ritual as soon as we're done here," said Toby.

Oh my God. This was awful. Going to Aunt Stephanie's house had not been a great idea. It was not a beautiful dream. It was just another chapter in the nightmare that had become my life.

And now Toby was going to . . . I felt sick just thinking about it.

"Look, Azazel, I know you don't want to do this with me anymore," said Toby, "but if you lay still and don't . . . well, I think it'll be better. Just don't fight me."

Don't fight him? How could I? My arms and legs were tied down. Couldn't fight physically. And they already had Jason. There was no one to hear me scream. What was I going to do? I could beg Toby not to, but I didn't think that would work. I could . . . God what could I do?

Toby began pushing my nightgown up, over my legs.

I could tell Toby I had AIDS. Except he'd know that was a lie, because he knew I was a . . . Wait.

I had an idea. "Toby?" I said.

"Yes," he said.

"For the ritual to work, didn't I have to be a virgin?" I asked.

He looked at me. "Yeah, you did, but why would that matter?" He made a face.

"Why did you say 'did?' Past tense?"

"I'm not a virgin anymore," I said.

"What?" he said. "Of course you are."

"Not," I said. "I totally did it with Jason last night."

"No way."

"Yes way," I said. "Twice, even."

"You're lying," he said. "You're just trying to keep me from doing this."

God. He could see through me so easily. I told myself to stay strong. "I'm not lying," I said. "Ask Jason."

"Well, he's not in here, and if I leave you, you'll figure out some way to get untied, and you'll run off," he said. "I'm just gonna have to do it anyway."

No! "What if I'm right though?" I blurted out. "You already said you didn't want to do it. Think how much effort and discomfort you'll have to go through for nothing."

He considered. He started to untie me. "Fine," he said. "We're gonna go downstairs and talk to your dad about this. And when he finds out that you had sex with that . . . thing, he'll probably kill Jason himself and save you the trouble."

Oh please God, no. Maybe this had been a bad idea.

Everyone was in Aunt Stephanie's massive dining room. They sat at the long, long polished wooden table, still decorated with a bouquet of white roses. Behind them, a huge picture window looked out onto Aunt Stephanie's elaborate gardens. Aunt Stephanie, Jason, her cook Lydia, and Marci were all tied to chairs and gagged. My mother, father, Sheriff Damon, his wife, and several other members of the community were all seated in chairs around the table.

"That was fast," said Sheriff Damon when Toby and I appeared.

"I didn't do it," said Toby. "She says she had sex with Jason. And the ritual won't work if she's not a virgin. I didn't know what to do."

As Toby predicted, my dad was angry. He got up and ripped the gag out of Jason's mouth.

"Is that true?" he demanded of Jason.

Jason was trying hard not to laugh. "Yes," he said. "That is true." He winked at me. "Twice."

I grinned at him. It was like we could read each other's minds! He was never allowed to leave me. I wouldn't let him.

My dad backhanded Jason.

"She might be lying," said Toby.

"Might be," said Sheriff Damon, "but how do we know?"

My mother spoke up. "Zaza, baby, just be truthful with us. Tell what really happened."

"Why should I tell you anything?" I said to her. "You turned to Satanism so you could get pregnant with me."

"Oh sweetheart, did Stephanie tell you that?" my mother asked.

I nodded.

"I wanted you so badly," she said. "And the coven needed a vessel. And it was the only way."

This just got worse and worse. "So you had me specifically to be a vessel for a demon which you then named me after?" I demanded.

"Satanism is about the individual," she said. "I already believed that. Your father and I both already believed that. You were born with a specific purpose. We raised you to end the suffering that Jason will cause. Why can't you see what he is?"

"I do see what he is," I said. I gazed at Jason. "He's amazing."

Jason smiled at me.

"Stop trying to reason with her, Jodi," said my dad. He turned to Toby. "Toby," he said. "Didn't you have gym class with Jason?"

"We all had gym together," said Toby.

"Ever see him in the shower?" asked my dad.

Oh God. Where was this going?

"Azazel," said my dad, "is Jason circumcised?"

Damn it! And how disgusting was it for my dad to ask me something like that? My parents were horrible, horrible people. Well, I had no idea.

I looked at Jason. He looked at me. I tried to find some clue in his eyes. I sifted through everything I knew about him. The Sons of the Rising Son were religious and religious people got circumcised, so, "Yes," I said.

Jason winced. He shook his head.

Damn it. So much for reading each other's minds.

"No," said Toby. "He's not. I *knew* she was lying."

I felt my heart sink. What were we going to do? I could see that Jason was struggling against the ropes that held him to his chair, but he wasn't having any luck. There wasn't any hope for it then. What I'd thought I'd escaped in Bramford had come for me in Alpine, New Jersey. And here in this lush house, I wasn't going to be able to stop Toby from doing what he came to do.

Toby grasped my arm and turned my body around. I stiffened. I wasn't going to walk with him. If he was going to try to do this, I was going to struggle every step of the way. There was no way I was making it easy for him.

I looked at his face, those blue eyes I used to think were so beautiful. Now there was only a twisted expression on his face, something hovering between disgust and hatred. Toby had become a monster.

Unexpectedly, the picture window behind everyone shattered. Pieces of glass rained down, clattering against the marble floor. And Aunt Stephanie's throat blossomed with blood. She gargled through her gag, her eyes wide. Then her head slumped down.

I was stunned and scared. What?

I heard them then. They sounded like muffled missiles, tearing through the air. Gun shots. From guns fitted with silencers. They were swift. Efficient. There was no time to think. No time to evaluate. Just the images, one after another, burned into my brain. My mother—blood trickling between her eyebrows. My father—his left ear exploding in gore. Toby—his face going blank, blood seeping out of his mouth—dropping to the ground next to me. All of them—Sheriff Damon, his wife, my aunt's servants, the rest of the coven.

All dead. In a matter of seconds.

And then they were swarming in through the window. Five men dressed in black, carrying guns. They stepped over the bodies like they were old pieces of furniture. One knelt behind Jason to untie his bonds.

"What about the girl?" asked one of the men, who had a British accent.

And then I understood. The Sons of the Rising Sun. They were here.

The man came for me, his gun raised, waving it in my face. Maybe I should have run. I was frozen.

Jason was free from his ropes. He moved so fast, he looked blurred. He elbowed the man who had freed him in the face. Kneaded him in the groin. Wrested the gun from the man's hands. And pointed it at the man who had pointed a gun at me.

During all this, another man was answering the first man's question about me. "Waste her," he said.

And Jason shot the man who was pointing his gun at me.

His shot was eerily similar to the shots the Sons had inflicted on my family. The man's temple erupted, blood pouring out. He crumpled to the ground.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to be horrified. But . . . maybe it had just been too much. Maybe there was nothing left inside me to horrify. Or maybe I was in shock.

"Get his gun, Azazel," said Jason.

And it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to reach down over the body of a dead man and take the gun out of his hand.

I held it up, staring at it. I didn't know how to use one.

The other four men were on guard now, shifting their guns back and forth between Jason and me. My brain was still working somehow. I didn't know how. It should have turned off a long time ago, but it hadn't. I was thinking that I was in more danger than Jason because they wouldn't seriously hurt the Rising Sun. They needed him. I was, however, expendable. It was important that I figure out how to use the gun.

Jason was still shooting. I wasn't paying attention. I was looking at the gun.

Since the man had been shooting before I'd taken it from him, that must mean the safety wasn't on, so I shouldn't have to worry about that. It should be as easy as pointing and shooting.

I held it in both hands. It was a little heavy. I leveled it at the man in front of me. I rubbed the trigger with my forefinger.

And Jason shot him.

Jason had shot all of them.

Jason had *killed* all of them.

I surveyed the dining room, now littered with bodies. Jason came over to me. "You all right?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. I felt very, very calm oddly.

Jason also seemed calm. "Good," he said. "Go back to our rooms and pack us some clothes. I'm going to find some cash and the keys to a car."

I guess it wasn't really stealing since my aunt was dead.

"Meet back here in five minutes?" I asked.

"Seven," he said.

We parted. I changed out of my nightgown. I didn't think about how sad I was to be leaving this huge closet full of clothes. I definitely didn't think about how Aunt Stephanie couldn't ever get any more clothes. Or how I'd never even talk to Aunt Stephanie again. I didn't think at all. I just pulled clothes out of my closet and then out of Jason's. I couldn't find anything to put them in, so I shoved them in an empty garbage bag that I found in a trashcan.

Jason was waited for me when I returned. We didn't look at the bodies. Instead, we went directly to the garage and slid into the Beamer we'd come into the house in earlier that day. Jason pulled out, and we drove. I watched the huge, million dollar houses go by our windows. Alpine was a beautiful place. The homes were absolutely gorgeous.

When we were finally out of Alpine, I stared straight ahead. Neither Jason nor I spoke.