

breathless

by v.j. chambers

chapter sixteen

To: Joseph Andrews <jandre@risingsun.org>
From: Alfred Norwich <anorwic@risingsun.org>
Subject: Go with God

Joseph,

After the tragic loss of Richard Durham, it is even more imperative that you and your team are successful in recovering Jason. He is stronger and more capable than we have realized, and this dalliance of his has gone on quite long enough. Richard seemed to believe that there was evidence indicating Jason was heading south. We feel this is the best course for you to take in your search for him.

Yours in the pursuit of the Purpose,

Alfred

Jason and I checked into a hotel room a few miles outside of Shiloh, in another small town (which was still bigger than Shiloh), where we would spend the next several days. For the first time in days, we had a stretch of time in which we were not bothered, not threatened, and felt relatively safe. Jason and Hallam kept puzzling over the strange set of connections that we'd uncovered, but neither of them came up with many ideas.

Jason and I spent time with Hallam, but we also had ample time alone. We ate in restaurants. We went for walks in the woods. It was much warmer in Georgia than it had been up north, even though the residents of Shiloh seemed to think it was very cold. At night, we slept in the same bed and tried to work on perfecting our lovemaking technique. The second time, it was much less awkward, and much nicer. Still. There was something about it that was . . . disappointing. It wasn't that having sex with Jason was bad. It was very nice. I really liked being close to him. And it felt . . . Well, that was the problem, really. It felt good, but I had a sneaking suspicion that it felt way better for Jason than it did for me. Of course, we didn't really talk about it. I didn't know how to bring it up.

Overall, it was the most pleasant time that Jason and I had been able to spend together. I felt happy. I even felt content. If it weren't for the fact we were holding our breaths, waiting for the Sons to show up at any minute, it might have been idyllic. Might have been. But there were other things. Jason and I had baggage. Sometimes, out of nowhere, it hit me that my parents were dead. I remembered them the way they had been, before Friday night. I had thoughts sometimes, like when I saw a book in a bookstore that my father might have liked. I thought that I should pick it up for his birthday in December. Then I remembered that he was dead. I started to cry. I couldn't believe it. It just seemed so unreal.

Then I remembered the last night I'd seen my father. I remembered him backhanding Jason in Aunt Stephanie's dining room. Thinking about that was so hard. I couldn't reconcile the man I'd seen in that dark room, ready to let me be raped by Toby, with the

man who I'd grown up in the same house with. How had my father hidden that side of himself from me? How had I only seen the gentle, good parts of him? Sometimes it hurt too much for me to bear.

I didn't feel like I could talk to Jason about it. Jason had been through much worse things than I had. He didn't need to listen to me talk about how much it had hurt to lose my family. Jason had never had a family to lose. Why couldn't I be thankful for what I'd had instead of bemoaning its loss?

Furthermore, I think we both knew that all of this was only temporary. We wouldn't be able to stay in Shiloh with Hallam forever. We would have to leave at some point. If Hallam didn't come up with some kind of breakthrough on the Marianne Wodden idea soon, we'd have to leave before figuring anything out, making our trip here mostly pointless.

Sometimes, lying next to Jason while he snored gently, I cried softly to myself. I didn't want him to hear. I was happy to be with him. I was lucky to have him. Even though I'd lost everything else, I at least had Jason. He was all I had left. The most important thing to me. I didn't want to live without him. And I didn't want him to think I wasn't happy with him or that I wasn't grateful that he existed.

So I cried quietly, hoping he wouldn't wake up and hear me. In the morning, when he woke me up with kisses, I never let on that there were times when I sobbed. And it went on like that for four days. Four days, we had. Four days before all hell broke loose.

It started when Hallam woke us up by pounding on our hotel room door early in the morning. Jason, who apparently always woke up completely alert, leaped out of bed, threw on his pants, and went to the door. I didn't appreciate this because I wasn't wearing any clothes, so the conversation that followed was conducted while I pulled the covers of the bed up to my chin.

Hallam swept into the room, his eyes bright. "I think I've got it," he said.

"Got what?" I said. "Can't it wait a couple of hours?" I could see that the sun was barely up. It was early. I wanted more sleep.

"Oh whatever, I'm awake," said Jason. "Tell me what's up."

"Okay," said Hallam. "I started thinking about this Michaela Weem, right? I decided she was the missing link. She was going to pull this whole thing together."

"Yeah?" said Jason, sitting down on the bed.

"So, I decided to do some research on her. Figure out who she is. Then I figured it out. It was because of something that you said, Azazel." He looked at me, huddled beneath the covers, and seemed to actually take us in. "You know, it occurs to me that I

might be more comfortable having this conversation if the two of you were actually clothed."

"What?" demanded Jason. "No, tell me now. You can't just build it up like that and then stop."

"Tell you what," said Hallam. "You two get dressed and come meet me back in Shiloh at the rectory. I'll tell you there."

"You've got to be kidding me," said Jason.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," I said.

"Good, then," said Hallam. He started towards the door, then stopped. "Look," he said, "just because I'm not insisting on anything else, and just because I'm no longer a member of the Sons doesn't mean . . . I just want you both to know that I don't condone the two of you living in sin like this."

And then he left the room, closing the door after him.

I had to work hard to keep from laughing until after he was gone. Then I burst out giggling. "Living in sin?" I guffawed.

Jason wasn't laughing.

"Come on," I said. "That's funny."

"To you it is," he said.

"What?" I said. "Are you feeling guilty?" I couldn't believe that.

"Of course not," said Jason. "But the Sons are pretty . . . conservative. And, you know, I was never supposed to . . ." He grinned. ". . . know the touch of woman at all. Supposedly, it would taint me."

I crawled out from under the covers, still giggling. I straddled him. "Oh yeah? Am I tainting you now?"

He kissed me. "Definitely. I'm very, very tainted."

He ran his hands over my shoulder blades, over the curves of my hips. He groaned. "You're distracting me."

"It's all part of the tainting, baby," I joked. "What can I say?"

"I want to know what Hallam found out," he said. "Don't you want to know?"

"I don't know," I said. "Hallam is going to be there for a long time." I arched an eyebrow suggestively.

He grinned. "Come on, Azazel. We have to go."

"Fine," I said, pouting. I climbed off of him and stood next to the bed, my eyes darting over the floor in search of my clothes.

"Wow," said Jason.

I glanced at him. I realized he was staring at me.

"Stop," I said, feeling self-conscious.

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?" he asked.

I blushed. Trying to recover, I teased, "We have to find out what Hallam wants to tell us, remember?"

Jason stood up. "Yeah, well, we should probably shower first, so we look presentable."

"I guess."

Jason leaned close, a smile twitching at his lips. "We'll have to do it together to save time."

* * *

Hallam was waiting in the rectory with breakfast. "I don't want to know why it took you so long," he said.

Jason and I just grinned at each other. We sat down at the table. Father Gerald wasn't there, so I couldn't help teasing Hallam a little bit.

"Now, Hallam," I said, "there's no need to be grouchy just because you're not getting any."

Hallam narrowed his eyes. "This one is a very bad influence on you, Jason."

"Don't make Hallam mad," Jason said to me.

Oh right. Hallam was dangerous and violent and all that. It was hard to remember. He just seemed so tight-laced and . . . British.

"I am not mad," said Hallam. "I just happen to believe that self-restraint is a virtue. Controlling one's urges isn't easy, certainly, but just because something's hard doesn't mean one should abandon it entirely."

I shrugged. "Some things are easy because you're supposed to do them," I said. "Like eating for example. It's hard not to do it and for a good reason. Otherwise, we'd all die."

"Oh," said Hallam. "Yes, and I do suppose reproduction is necessary for the advancement of the species. But then I rather imagine that's the last thing on either of your minds."

Reproduction? Right. As a public service announcement, I would like to say that Jason and I had always used condoms, even though the first time, the condom had been in Jason's wallet since probably the Crustacean Age, and I had my doubts about its total effectiveness.

"Let's not talk about this anymore," said Jason. "We came here for a reason. You were in the middle of revealing something, and I'm dying to hear what it is."

"Oh," said Hallam. "Of course. Well, as I was saying, I started thinking about what Azazel had said about the initials of Michaela Weem and Marianne Wodden being the

same. I'd done all this research on Marianne Wodden, but not on Michaela Weem. I thought Azazel had to be right. They were connected in some way, the two women."

Maybe Hallam didn't hate women after all. He was giving me credit for figuring something out, after all.

Hallam continued, "So I started researching Michaela Weem. I looked for a birth certificate. Couldn't find one."

"So it's another dead end?" asked Jason.

"No, not exactly. I started thinking about the oddness of your middle name being Edgar, and about Edgar Weem, and just on a whim, I decided to hunt for marriage certificates."

"Marriage certificates?" I said, not following.

"Yeah," said Jason. "Why?"

"Well, as we know, Council members don't get married. They've taken a vow of celibacy, just like the Brothers. And I looked through marriage certificates in England, and of course there wasn't anything for him.

"But then, I decided to look through marriage certificates in the states. In Georgia. And guess what I found?"

"A marriage certificate for Edgar Weem?" I asked.

He nodded. "And Michaela Aird." Hallam was excited. "And it all checks out. They got married in 1991. Edgar Weem was on an extended leave of absence at that time. He was in Georgia."

"So?" said Jason.

"Don't you see?" Hallam asked.

Jason shook his head. I didn't get it either.

Hallam began to gesture wildly in his excitement. "Azazel was the one who pointed out that Marianne Wodden and Michaela Weem had the same initials. That's because they're the *same person*. Jason, you did not *happen* to fulfill a number of prophecies about the Rising Sun. You were *made*. Edgar Weem *created* you. He waited until the right time—1991. He came to Shiloh, married a woman, impregnated her with you, and then the Sons paid her off—that enormous amount of money I saw in their ledgers. Edgar Weem is your father. And this Rising Sun thing is a hoax. Clearly the Sons engineered the entire thing to set up you up in a place of power. To give *them* more power."

Jason and I were both quiet.

"Well," said Hallam finally, "what do you think?"

"So . . ." said Jason, "Michaela Weem assumed the identity of Marianne Wodden. And then she faked her own death?"

"I don't know about Michaela Weem," said Hallam. "That's the part of the puzzle that I don't exactly understand. But it's not important, really. She was a tool. An incubator. The Sons paid her off to take away her baby to raise him—you—the way they wanted to. She disappeared. The important thing is that we have evidence here that proves that Edgar Weem tried to *engineer* a Rising Sun."

"Evidence?" I said. "We have a marriage certificate."

"It's enough," said Hallam. "The idea that Edgar Weem was married at all is enough to ruin him within the Sons. But the implications here, they could tear the entire establishment apart. This information, Jason, can buy us our freedom. They'll *have* to leave us alone."

"If they find out we know," said Jason, "they'll just kill us. Like they did Anton. How can we tell anyone?"

"That's where Father Gerald comes in," said Hallam. "I will compose an email message to multiple addresses, all important ones within the Sons of the Rising Sun. I will then contact Edgar Weem. I will tell him what I know. And I will tell him that unless he gives me what I want, I am prepared to tell everyone what he did. I will also tell him that if I do not check in within a certain period of time, I have someone—who will be Father Gerald, but Weem won't know that—who will send a message to everyone within the Sons."

"He might not believe you," said Jason. "He might just kill you anyway."

"Well, that's the beauty of it," said Hallam. "I will be telling the truth. So if I die, everyone in the organization will find out what happened. Then the entire organization will crumble."

"I don't get it," I said. "Why don't you just tell everyone anyway? I mean, the Sons are evil. Shouldn't their organization crumble?"

"Azazel," said Jason, "if the Sons self-destruct, they'll try to take us with them. It won't end things. It will just make things worse."

"Oh," I said, alarmed. The magnitude of what we were up against suddenly seemed overwhelming.

"So, then, it's a good plan, isn't it?" asked Hallam, looking very pleased with himself.

"No," said Jason.

"No?" said Hallam.

I didn't understand either. I thought it was an excellent plan.

"You're taking all the risk," said Jason. "I should approach Weem. They won't hurt me."

"They might, Jason," said Hallam. "If they know that you know you aren't really the Rising Sun, they might very easily silence you."

"I still can't let you be the only person putting your life on the line," said Jason.

Hallam smiled. "Well, there are two things working against you as the candidate to speak to Weem. The first is that you aren't in contact with Father Gerald. And the second is that . . ." Hallam paused. His smile faded. "The second is that if you were to die, it would affect more than just you." He looked at me. "I don't think it would be right for you to do that to Azazel."

I looked at Hallam, grateful.

"But—" Jason protested.

"No," said Hallam, "and listen to me please. There is more logic to celibacy than you may ever have given thought. There's a certain responsibility a man takes on when he begins a relationship with a woman. A responsibility to live. I have always known that it would be . . . foolhardy for me to attempt to take on such a responsibility. But the two of you. You could live, and you could be happy. And I could give you that clean slate that you asked for."

Jason was quiet for a few minutes. "Even so, Hallam. I don't like you taking risks like this for me."

"Well, it's for me too," said Hallam. "I don't like being pursued by the Sons anymore than you do."

"Eventually, they'd give up on you. They won't ever give up on me," Jason said. "You could just lay low. It would blow over."

"Maybe," said Hallam. "Maybe you're right. But maybe I owe you something. I think there was a night, the two of us together, when I watched something . . . break in you."

Jason looked away.

Hallam must be referring to the night with the college girls. That night had changed Jason, I knew. It was hard for him to talk about it.

"I stole your innocence, Jason," Hallam whispered. "Let me give you your life."

Maybe Hallam really was not such a bad guy after all. Maybe I'd seriously misjudged him.

"For me," Hallam said. "Let me do it for me. I sometimes feel the need to atone for the things that I've done."

Finally, Jason nodded. He offered his hand to Hallam and Hallam grasped it.

"Okay," said Jason, and when he spoke, his voice was hoarse, "when do we do this?"

"Pretty much now," said Hallam.

* * *

It took some time to get everything set up. Jason and I hung around the rectory while Hallam arranged things. Jason was quiet, and I didn't try to draw him out of his shell. What Hallam had said to Jason must have been difficult for Jason to hear. I knew that Jason felt a sense of honor deeply. He had very clear-cut ideas about right and wrong. Jason allowing Hallam to put himself in danger was hard for Jason. Especially because Hallam was doing it for Jason's sake. And it didn't matter to Jason that Hallam had influenced him in certain negative ways.

I also knew that Jason probably understood what Hallam meant about atoning. Though we hadn't spoken about it since that night in the hotel room, I knew that Jason still felt deeply guilty about killing the men in New Jersey. Sometimes, when I was sobbing silently in bed next him, I heard him mumble in his sleep, things like, "I didn't want to kill you." Since I wasn't revealing the fact that I was crying at night, I didn't think I should confront him about his dreams. For now, at any rate, we'd have to deal with our own demons in our own ways.

Sometime that afternoon, Jason and I gathered around while Hallam made the phone call to Weem. It took him a long time to get through to him. Weem apparently didn't take calls from just anyone. Finally, after what seemed like hours, Hallam had Weem on the phone.

There were pleasantries. Hallam said hello. He asked after Weem's health. I could tell that Hallam was enjoying this. Drawing it out. Finally, Hallam got down to business. He said he'd come across a very interesting document involving Weem, and he'd like to discuss it with Weem. It involved, Hallam said, someone named Michaela.

In a few minutes, Hallam hung up the phone. "I'm on the next plane to London," he told us, triumphant.

Hallam left within the hour.

On Hallam's advice, we weren't going to stay in the hotel room that night. If something happened to Hallam, the Sons might come directly after Jason and I. Because of the Sons arranging a plane ticket for Hallam, they knew his location. Hallam figured it would be safer if we stayed in the church, so it was going to be another uncomfortable night sleeping on church pews. Jason and I stuck around in Shiloh and went out to dinner at a local restaurant. We ordered at the counter, subs and French fries. Retiring to our table, we waited for one of the waitresses to bring us our order. Finally away from the rectory, I asked Jason how he was feeling.

"Nervous," he said.

"Me too," I said. "But I guess I meant about the other stuff. I mean, suddenly, you have a father. Who's alive."

Jason let out a breath. "I haven't even thought about that stuff," he said. He considered. "I mean, on the one hand, this guy's a jerk, right? He sort of created me, a means to an end."

"And on the other hand?"

"On the other hand, I wish I remembered more about him."

I nodded sympathetically. The waitress arrived with our drink orders, two sodas. I toyed with my straw. "Did you ever meet him?"

"Yes," said Jason. "When Anton and I were in England. A member of the Council came to visit me once or twice. I can't be sure, but I think it was Edgar Weem. I was a kid, and they were all old British men. They all looked the same to me."

"What was he like?"

"That's the weird thing," said Jason. "He was . . . very stiff. Anton was stiff. They were all stiff. But Weem. He always brought me something. Like a piece of fruit or a chocolate or something. And then . . . he would just grill me on subjects. Things like history or algebra or something. At the time, I just assumed it was all part of the battery of tests they were giving me to find out if I was really the Rising Sun. But now I wonder if it was his way of trying to get to know me."

"Maybe," I said. "If nothing else, he must have been curious about you. You're his son. He must have wondered."

"He must be a pretty arrogant guy," said Jason.

"Why?"

"The Sons of the Rising Son are an organization that exists entirely to wait for the coming of the Rising Sun and to prepare the way for him. They've existed since like the fifteenth century. To think that his genes were good enough to create a fake Rising Sun . . . He must think pretty highly of himself."

I smiled. "Well, now I know where you get that from."

"Hey," said Jason. "I'm not arrogant."

"Of course not," I said. "'I've been shooting guns since I was five,'" I mimicked.

Jason threw his straw wrapper at me.

The waitress brought us our subs then. They were enormous, and it was too much of a task just to try to fit them in our mouths to do much else. We didn't really talk until we were finished eating.

While we were eating, I started to think. Everything was all tied up now. Since Jason had appeared in my life, I'd wanted to know who he was and where he came from. And now I did. I even knew who his father was and why he'd been brought into the world. I knew everything about him except for one thing. I didn't know anything about his

mother. Michaela Weem. Who was she? Was Hallam right? Was she not important? Just an incubator? Somehow, I didn't think so. It was too strange that Michaela Weem ran a website dedicated to Azazel. No, there was something else there.

What had happened to Michaela Weem? Hallam had said that she and Edgar had been married in Georgia. And Jason had been born here. Hallam said he'd asked around about a Marianne Wodden, and no one had known anything about her. But he hadn't done any asking about Michaela Weem.

"Jason," I said. "Do you think Michaela Weem could still be in Shiloh?"

Jason had a fry in his hand, halfway to his mouth. He froze. Put down the fry. "Maybe," he said. "Who cares?"

It was weird that Jason was so nonchalant about his parentage. "She's your mother," I said. "Don't you care?"

"No," said Jason. He shoved the French fry into his mouth.

"Why not?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Jason. "It's not like I remember anything about her, but whenever I think about her, I just get a . . . weird feeling. A bad feeling."

"A feeling?" I repeated.

"I guess that's stupid," said Jason. "Maybe I'm just nervous. I guess she could live in town."

"I think we should try to find her," I said.

"How?"

"Well, nothing too complicated," I said. "But we could try to look her up in the phone book."

"She probably doesn't live here anymore," he said.

"Well, it couldn't hurt."

"Fine," said Jason, but he didn't sound happy about it.

We went up to the register to pay for our food. I asked the girl behind the counter if she had a phone book we could use. She knelt behind the counter and placed one in front of us.

I handed her our ticket. She punched buttons on her cash register and then gave me our total. I gave her the credit card we were using. It was the one Marlana had gotten us. Jason had said yesterday that when left Shiloh, we were going to have to get another credit card, because it was too risky to use the same one for too long. They could be tracked too easily. Cash was safer.

While I waited for the credit card to go through, I paged through the white pages, looking for Michaela Weem's name. It wasn't there. Disappointed, I closed the phone book. "She's not in the phone book," I told Jason.

"Told she didn't live here anymore," said Jason.

"Who are you looking for?" asked the girl behind the counter.

"A woman named Michaela Weem," I said.

"Crazy Lady Weem?" she said. "I know who that is. Everyone knows Crazy Lady Weem. She lives on Spring Street in the old house that's practically falling down. I can't believe somebody actually knows her."

"We don't know her," said Jason.

"She's Jason's long lost mother," I informed the girl.

Jason glared at me, so I shut up. I guess he didn't like my telling people about his personal business.

Outside the restaurant, Jason and I debated quickly. I thought we should go see her. She was Jason's mother! Jason didn't know if he wanted to see her, especially if she was crazy. I argued that we knew where she lived and that it wasn't that late. We should just go to her house. Maybe she wouldn't even be home. We were actually in the same town with Michaela Weem. It was kismet. It was meant to be. We had to go see her. Jason eventually caved.

It didn't take long to walk to Spring Street, which was on the other side of Highway 85. And once we got there, it wasn't difficult to tell which house belonged to her. It really did look like it was falling down. It was a two-story house with a veranda-style porch. Half of the porch had collapsed. The other half was dangling precariously, looking like it might fall down at any second. The house was painted white, but the paint was cracked and peeling.

Eyeing each other, Jason and I approached the front door and tentatively knocked. At first nothing happened.

"Well," said Jason. "We tried." He turned to walk away.

Then the door opened. A tall woman stood behind the screen door. She had long, dark hair, dusky skin, and a heart-shaped face. Jesus, she *looked* like Jason.

"Yes?" she said.

"Mrs. Weem?" I asked.

She opened the screen door. It creaked on its hinges. She was wearing a full-length black velvet dress. Her nails were very long and painted with dark fingernail polish. She looked at both of us. "You've come," she said, her voice eerily solemn.

Did she know us? "You don't know us," I said.

"I know you," she said in the same even tone. "You may enter my home."

Okay. This lady was seriously creepy. Jason must have been a little freaked out too, because he grabbed my hand. We walked over the threshold into Michaela Weem's house.

Inside, all the furniture was covered in a thin layer of dust. I looked around, half expecting to see spider webs in the corners. But instead, there was just antique furniture and several black and white portraits on the walls.

"I've been waiting," said Michaela Weem. "Please have a seat in the parlor." She gestured to a doorway to our right. Jason and I entered the room she'd suggested. There were several mismatched antique settees, the kind with high, upholstered backs and long curving wooden legs. Jason and I sat down on one. Michaela Weem sat down on another.

"Azazel," said Michaela, "when your father told me that he would wait until Samhain to conduct the ritual, I knew that things would go wrong. It isn't safe for the two of you to be so close."

Okay, how did she know my name? And why was she talking about my father? And Samhain was Halloween right? Did she mean the ritual to kill Jason? How did she know about that?

"Um," I said, "we actually wanted to talk to you about Edgar Weem. Your husband?"

Michaela made a face as if she's smelled something bad. "Vile man," she said. "Vile."

Right then. "So you did know him?" I asked. "You were married to him?"

"You already know this," she said. "Why question me about things you already know?"

A black cat wandered into the parlor. It jumped up onto Michaela's lap. She stroked it absently.

Jason finally spoke up. "What should we question you about then?"

Michaela looked at him. "You," she muttered. "You. I had forgotten what an abomination you are."

Jason sat back as if he'd been stung.

Geez. That wasn't exactly the greeting you'd want from your long lost mother. Michaela Weem sure didn't know much about manners, did she?

"I'll tell you what you want to know," said Michaela. "Then, perhaps Azazel, you will fulfill your purpose. Then, perhaps you will understand."

Okay. This was just getting gradually weirder and weirder by the second.

"I was raised in Oklahoma in the Muscogee Nation," said Michaela. "I grew up learning stories about Rabbit, the cunning trickster animal spirit of our people, whose power was more tremendous than any could possibly understand."

Great. Now we were going to have to sit here and listen to this woman's life story. I wondered if Jason and I should just bolt. But no. I had to admit, I was too curious. She'd said too many things that I didn't understand. That I wanted explained.

Michaela continued. "When I was older, my father, who was not Muscogee, sent me away to school abroad in Europe. There I studied comparative religions, and I learned that Rabbit was not confined only to our tribe. Oh no, he was present in nearly every religion, sometimes revered as was his right, sometimes denigrated and improperly categorized as evil. I became intrigued with my studies, and I stayed in Europe for quite some time, hunting down what information I could about the incarnations of Rabbit in the world.

"In my studies, and my searches, I quite accidentally became entangled with the Sons of the Rising Sun, with whom I know you are quite familiar. I did not know that the school I attended had ties to the Sons. And when I met Edgar Weem, I had no idea of the depths of his perversity.

"Since the abomination is sitting here, in front of us, you may have some idea of what he forced me to do. But whatever ideas you think you may know, you can't imagine the horrors. Edgar was obsessed with creating the Rising Sun. He believed it could be done, with the combination of the right rituals, the right herbs, the right substances. I drank blood for him. I drank cocktails of bull semen and psilocybic mushrooms. I allowed my body to be branded and cut. And when he was finally done, he'd created it. Oh, he had. I had the evil, squirming thing growing in my belly."

Michaela turned her huge dark eyes on me. They burned into my own. I shivered involuntarily.

"He set me up in America, then. It was important that the abominable spawn be brought into the world in Shiloh. He wanted it to be in Israel, but I convinced him to come to this Shiloh. I knew this was my people's ancestral home. I knew that I would have more power here. Many things were important to him. It was important that we be married. I hated him. I didn't want to marry him. But he insisted, so eventually, I gave in.

"That was when the visions started. I saw the abomination, older, more powerful. I saw that he had taken over the world, just as Edgar wanted him to. He had forced people to his will and the entire world was consumed with his darkness." Michaela paused and hissed at Jason.

Jason flattened himself against the settee. His face had gone pale.

Visions? She ran a Satanist website. Michaela Weem was the woman that Lilith had told me about. The woman who'd had the vision of Jason! Oh my God. It was Jason's mother who wanted him *dead*.

Michaela turned back to me. "I was too weak. I tried to dash its brains out when it was born. A thing conceived in all that horror could bring nothing but trouble into the world. I couldn't do it. It looked so helpless. It looked so small.

"They took it away of course. They gave me money. They told me live under that name. That name that Edgar had forced me to assume. I wouldn't. I refused. I made him make her disappear. She died. She was the representation of the woman I was before Edgar Weem used me to conduct his evil. I mourn her."

"That's why you put up the memorial website?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, smiling as if I understood.

"Why did you say you were killed by your husband? By someone named Ted?"

"Ted was Edgar's nickname. He told me to call him that. 'Teddy.'" She spit the name out like something that disgusting. "It was fitting. He all but put a gun to my head and killed me."

I guess that kind of made sense. If you were crazy. Which Michaela certainly seemed to be. She'd tried to kill her own child! "So, if you really hated Jason so much, why did you put his name on the memorial as well?" I asked.

"Because he should have died," she growled. "Because if I'd only been strong enough, he never would have breathed."

Okay. Perhaps it was better not to ask Crazy Lady Weem questions. I swallowed and tried to smile at her, to calm her. I couldn't quite manage it.

"Where was I? Oh, yes. The abomination was gone. I had failed. He was in the world. He was being raised by the Sons to do their evil work. But since I had been back in the United States, I had been getting in touch with other people who worshipped Rabbit. Oh, they didn't call him the same names. Different names. Satan. Azazel. Loki. But I had already studied this. I already they were one and the same. That was when I met your mother, Azazel. Pretty woman. So desperate for a child. Willing to do anything. And the night after I met her, I had a vision. I had a vision of you Azazel, rising up and crushing the abomination. Grinding him to dust.

"Then your mother became pregnant. And just a few months after they took away the abomination, you were born. And the visions stopped. I was relieved. Rabbit had prevailed. He had seen to it that his enemies would not enslave the human race.

"But weeks ago, weeks ago, the visions began again. And they began to change. Suddenly, you were not crushing the abomination, but copulating with it. Suddenly, Azazel, everything changed. The two of you. Together."

Michaela stood up then. The cat was disrupted. It jumped to the ground, shooting a look of reproach at Michaela. She crossed the room to me. She knelt next to me, taking both of my hands. Her voice was wheedling, pleading. "You don't understand. You have power. The power of Rabbit, filling your body. Your power feeds his. Together, the things you will do. The terrible, terrible things you will do. Do you know what he is capable of?"

Michaela paused. "Ah, I see that you do. I see that you have seen his face. His true face. Do you think it will stop, Azazel? No! It will only get worse. Soon it won't be a handful of men shot in the head. Soon it won't be his hand ripping at your undergarments, fury in his face. Soon, Azazel, soon, it will be thousands upon thousands of bodies heaped on a pyre. And you—" Her voice grew louder, rising to a fevered pitch, filling the room—"you will lie dead as he feasts on your guts!"

I pulled my hands away from hers. "We need to leave," I said, standing up. I reached for Jason. Jason looked white as a sheet. He took my hand gratefully, standing up on shaking feet.

We started towards the door.

Michaela reached for us, her hands like claws. "Mark my words, Azazel," called Michaela after us. "The power you have together. The power! It will *strike men mad!*"

She was still on her knees, clutching at the air, her eyes wide and fiery.

I started to run, yanking Jason along behind me. We stumbled through the door and into the November twilight. Her screen door clattered closed behind us.

Jason and I looked at each other. We dropped our hold on each other's hands. Silently, we trudged back to the church. Neither of us said a word.