

breathless

by v. j. chambers

chapter seventeen

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

Joseph,

Word has reached us that Hallam Wakefield has been located in Shiloh, GA. We have strong reasons to believe that Jason is with him, not least the email message which your team brought to our attention. The stage is set. We must not fail.

Yours in the pursuit of the Purpose,
Alfred

"She was crazy," I finally said.

Jason was sitting in one of the pews. He almost looked catatonic. He hadn't spoken. He'd barely moved. I was pacing in front of the altar, glancing over at him every once and a while to see if there was any change. We were alone in the church. When I wasn't looking at Jason, I was glancing around, my eyes resting on the statue of the Virgin

Mary at the front of the church, the ornate stained glass windows, the polished dark wood of the pews.

I didn't know what Jason was thinking. He just looked blank. I wanted him to say something, do something, anything. He was starting to freak me out.

"She was just crazy," I repeated. "All that stuff she said. The visions and stuff. She admitted that the Sons forced her to take drugs. After a while, too much of that stuff can just unhinge someone's brain."

But Jason wasn't talking. He was staring blankly into space, his eyes glassy. He was really freaking me out.

"Jason!" I said.

"She knew things," Jason said quietly. "How did she know those things?"

I stopped pacing. Shook my head violently. "She didn't know anything. Not really. She said things, but we attached significance to them. It's the way TV psychics work. They say something and wait for someone to acknowledge what they've said. We just read into it."

Jason stared straight ahead. "No," he said. "It was specific. She knew I'd shot people in the head. And she knew about the . . . the time in the hotel room. She *knew*. How did she know that?"

"She didn't. She knew that the Sons raised you. She assumed you'd shot people. She saw us hold hands when we walked in. She knew we were a couple. She assumed that there could have been an incident. It's nothing." And I turned away from him, because I was trying to convince myself as much as I was trying to convince him.

There were other things that Michaela Weem had said. Things I couldn't explain. How had my mother, who'd been told by doctors she'd never have a child, gotten pregnant? And why had it happened just after Michaela had a vision of me? And if there wasn't a connection between Jason and I, why had he run out of the woods into my life? Why that moment, that spot, just in time for me to see him? Toby and I had been ready to leave. A moment or two later, and he would have missed me. Were Jason and I connected in some unexplainable way? And if we were, was there something sinister about that connection?

"Do you really think that?" Jason asked.

I turned back to him. "Yes," I said. "I really do." I didn't know what to believe. I didn't want to think that what Michaela Weem had said was true, but she had frightened me with her strange accuracy and with her disturbing images. I didn't think there was anything dark or evil in Jason. I really didn't. I loved Jason.

But there was the nonchalance with which I'd seen him shoot people. Certainly, he felt deeply guilty for the men he killed, but what about the men in Bramford who he'd shot, but not killed? He'd never seemed to feel a shred of remorse over that. In some ways, Jason was casually violent.

And I still remembered the urgency in his hands the night in the hotel room. No restraint. No concern for me.

No. Jason was perfect. Jason was wonderful. Jason didn't want to hurt me. Jason didn't want to hurt anybody. I refused to let that awful, bitter woman poison me against him. Jason was the most important part of my life. No one could say anything that would make me turn against him. No one.

"Maybe you're right," said Jason.

Good. If I'd convinced Jason, half the battle was won. I just needed to convince myself.

"The rest of it, though," said Jason. "I didn't need to know that. I wouldn't have minded never finding out about my parents."

"I'm sorry," I said. It was my fault. I'd pushed us to go there.

"That's where I come from? My father was insane? He forced my mother to do horrible things? I come from rituals and rape and drugs?" Jason covered his eyes with his hand.

"Hey," I said. "My parents conceived me in order to kill you. Neither of us have exactly stellar parents."

He didn't uncover his eyes.

I went to him. I sat down beside him on the pew. I rubbed his back. I kissed his neck. I laid my head on his shoulder.

He didn't look at me.

"Jason," I said. "Look at me."

He didn't at first, but finally he swung his eyes up to meet mine.

"My parents were total whack-jobs," I said. "But they didn't always act like whack-jobs. And they taught me that my life isn't controlled by anyone except me. They taught me that my choices make my life. My life is made up of the consequences of those choices. So I'm going to make a choice right now. I'm going to chose not to listen to anything of the awful things that awful woman said to us. I'm going to chose to trust what I know about you, what I know about us. You are the best thing that ever happened to me. You're strong and moral and kind and wonderful. And nothing that some crazy woman said could ever diminish what you mean to me."

Jason pulled me into his lap. Kissed me. He whispered to me, "This is why I need you," he said. "You can always do that for me. Put things in perspective. Make me see the world the right way. Without you, I'd just wallow and drive myself crazy. You make me see things clearly. You make me better."

I cupped his beautiful face in my palms. Stared into his big, deep eyes. And I knew at that moment that I'd meant everything I'd just said. All the questions I'd just asked myself faded into the background, seeped out the stained glass windows into the evening air, and there was nothing but Jason. Jason was my reality. I trusted Jason more than anything else. Together we could do anything.

That was when the doors to the church burst open, and twelve members of the Sons of the Rising Sun stalked in.

chapter eighteen

International Text Message Transcript:

to 011-44-020-5555-7032 (6:20 p.m. EST): located jason in sanctuary.

to 00-1-617-555-4236 (6:24 p.m. EST): override sanctuary request is being made.

to 011-44-020-5555-7032 (6:26 p.m. EST): standing by.

Jason and I stood up, startled. Jason pushed me behind him, facing the men, who were wearing all black, and had guns in their hands. Their guns swung at their sides. They weren't aiming at us, but with their solemn expressions and squared shoulders, they were still quite threatening.

"I thought this was sanctuary," I whispered to Jason.

The man who led the Sons inside heard me. "Sanctuary means no violence on the grounds. It doesn't prevent us from entering."

"I'm not coming with you," said Jason. "Has Hallam Wakefield been able to conduct his negotiations?"

The man sneered. "Hallam Wakefield is probably dead by now. What would he have to negotiate with anyway?"

"That's a no," Jason muttered to me.

"So what do we do?" I asked Jason, peering over his shoulder at the men. They were spread out in a line at the opening of the church, standing in what looked like a military at-ease stance. They looked so formal.

"Nothing," said Jason, loud so they'd be sure to hear. "We're in sanctuary. We'll just wait them out. Either Hallam will get what he wants or his messages will go out."

The leader held up a cell phone. "I don't think so. I'm waiting on the response to a request to override sanctuary. Considering how important you are, I'm sure it'll go through."

"Can they do that?" I asked Jason.

"I don't know," said Jason. "I've never heard of such a thing." He went tense in front of me. I could tell he was thinking. Weighing our options, pondering escape routes. "How about a deal?" Jason asked.

A deal? Jason didn't make deals. What was he doing?

"I'll come with you," he said.

"No," I said.

"But you leave the girl alone. The girl walks, you understand?"

"Jason—" I said.

"Shut up, Azazel," he snapped at me.

The leader only chuckled. "I don't think you understand the situation, Jason. We were close to the Brothers you killed. Richard Durham was my mentor. Now . . . we know we can't kill you, but as long as we get you back alive, we don't think anyone will mind too much if you're a little . . . damaged." The leader smiled cruelly. "We'd all kind of like to damage you a little bit."

Oh, this wasn't good. This was very, very bad.

Jason reached back for my hand. I wondered what he was planning.

The leader's cell phone vibrated. He raised it to look at it. Almost simultaneously, Jason twisted, grabbing me by the waist and throwing us behind the statue of the Virgin Mary in the front of the church. At nearly the same moment, the Sons opened fire on us.

The statue exploded, blowing bits of colored cement all over the floor of the church. They skittered under pews. They soared through the air, breaking chunks in the stained glass windows.

Jason covered my body with his own as the plaster rained down on us.

On our bellies, we crawled along the floor to the altar, bullets blasting through the pews.

We sat with our backs against the altar, only the wooden box between the Sons' guns and us. A bullet splintered through the wood, right between our faces. I yelped.

Jason was pulling a gun out of his jeans. I hadn't realized he was carrying it. I didn't have a gun. He leaned around the altar, squeezed out several shots.

I wanted look to see if he'd hit anything, but I didn't dare. The sound of gunfire was ringing in my ears.

Jason leaned back against the altar, his eyes alert.

Now, I couldn't help but steal a look around the altar.

None of the Sons were down. They were approaching the altar, closing in on us, firing all the way.

Jason ducked back out to shoot again.

More bullets riddled the altar. One skidded past right next to my cheek. Too close for comfort.

Was this it? After everything we'd been through, after all the running, all the fighting, after discovering everything we'd discovered, was it going to end here? Just when Jason and I had realized exactly how much we meant to each other?

It didn't seem fair.

Jason's head thudded back against the altar. He turned to me desperately.

"There's no chance, is there?" I asked.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you," I said.

Our lips met hungrily behind the ruined altar. Behind us, the staccato beats of gunfire underscored our final moments together. They were going to kill me. They were going to take Jason. We kissed like it was the end of the world, because we knew that, for us, it was.

As our lips parted, I waited to see the Sons swarming around the altar, thrusting their guns in our faces.

They didn't come.

Actually, it was quiet.

Jason's eyes caught mine. We listened.

Nothing. Silence.

At once, we jerked our necks around, staring around the altar.

The Sons were still there. They were standing in the aisle of the church, looking bewildered. A few were staring at their guns, scratching their heads.

What was going on?

The leader's brow was furrowed. He glared out over the others. "The bathtub is full!" he announced to them determinedly.

One of the Sons started crying. Another dropped to a crouch, his hands raised in protection against an unseen attacker. One of the men ran screaming out of the church, yelling something about bees.

Jason and I slowly looked at each other. He looked just as confused and astonished as I felt.

Carefully, we moved out from behind the altar, stepping over the debris left from the gunfight. There were shards of stained glass littering the floor like shiny pieces of hard candy. All of the statues had huge holes in them. Jesus was missing an arm. Mary was gone from the waist up. The pews were covered in bullet holes.

We stepped in front of the Sons. They didn't seem to see us.

We took their guns from their hands. They didn't protest. One of them said to me, "Is it time for Cheerios yet?"

What was going on here? What had just happened?

I approached the leader last. I took his gun.

As if he were trying to be helpful, he handed me his cell phone. I took it. It was black and cold in my hands. Suddenly, it vibrated. I opened it. There was a text message. In all caps, it read: "RESCIND OVERRIDE. THIS IS FROM THE TOP. ABORT MISSION. REPEAT. ABORT. WEEM'S ORDERS."

I handed the cell phone to Jason. "I think Hallam got through to Weem," I said.

We stared at the now seemingly harmless members of the Sons of the Rising Sun, all of whom seemed to have gone crazy at the exact same moment. They milled about the church, gazing at the damage they'd caused. They seemed confused. Disoriented. Blank. What had happened?

Jason took my hand. I searched his deep, dark eyes for answers. His eyes were so similar to the eyes of the Michaela Weem. And I shivered as her words echoed back to me from earlier that evening.

The power. It will strike men mad.

epilogue

I shifted position on my beach chair, flipping the page of the Robert Anton Wilson novel I was reading. The Florida sun beat down on me. I luxuriated in it, feeling its warm rays caress my skin. It might be winter in the rest of the world, but here it was in the mid seventies and sunny. A shadow fell over me.

I looked up. A dripping Jason was standing at my feet. He bent down over me, nuzzling my neck. I shoved him out of the way, giggling. "Jason!" I protested, "you're getting my book wet."

Jason flopped onto a towel that was lying next to me. "Stop reading," he said. "Come in the water with me."

I shot him a disbelieving look. "It's too cold to get in the water."

"You're starting to sound like one of the natives," Jason muttered.

"Well," I said. "I'm planning on living here for a very, very long time. Might as well start acting like we're from here."

It had been a little over a month since we'd officially moved to Florida. It was exactly what Jason and I had imagined when we'd talked about our perfect place to live. Our house was a ten-minute drive from the ocean, and it was warm. We took walks on the powder-white sand in the evenings, watching the sun set over the blue, blue water.

"I'm bored," said Jason.

"Too bad," said Hallam, who was seated in his own beach chair on the other side of Jason's towel. "I had too much trouble finding a parking space. We're not going anywhere for quite some time." Hallam was our legal guardian these days. He'd been successful in making the deal with Weem. In exchange for Hallam keeping his mouth shut about Jason's origins, the Sons would leave both Jason and Hallam alone. After the deal had been made, we hadn't exactly known what to do with ourselves. Jason and I were both still minors, but neither of us had parents. Hallam had agreed to take responsibility for us, considering he was oh-so-much older than us. Twenty-two.

Mostly, Hallam was cool. He had his conditions, however. Jason and I were forbidden to share a room. By extension, Hallam meant that we weren't supposed to have sex either. "Not under my roof," he had thundered. Considering Jason and I both had part-time jobs to help out with rent and bills, it really wasn't just Hallam's roof anyway. Besides, what Hallam didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

"It's crowded because it's Saturday," I told Hallam. "We wouldn't have a problem if we came on a weekday."

"On weekdays," said Hallam sharply, "you and Jason are at school."

That was another of Hallam's conditions. He wanted us to finish high school. This didn't really bother me, because I didn't feel prepared to step out into the real world without an education. But I figured Jason already knew enough worthless knowledge to skip to his second year of college. Jason seemed to like the idea of going to school, however. I liked it too. We held hands as we walked together to classes. We complained

about the amount of homework we had. Overall, going to school wasn't so bad. It beat stealing cars and running from the Sons.

"The water is not that cold," Jason said, lying back on his towel and throwing his arm over his face.

"I'm fine on the beach," I told him.

I gazed at him, water glistening against the hard muscles of his body. As usual, his beauty left me breathless. I gazed at him, marveling that just the sight of him could turn my insides to jello, even now. Jason was amazing.

My cell phone rang from inside my beach bag. Now that I had my own cash flow, I was happy to have joined the twenty-first century and finally own one. I reached into the bag and got it out. It was Chance!

"Hey!" I said into the phone. "How's my little brother?"

Poor Chance. He really had no idea what had been going on in Bramford. No one knew about the coven until they were initiated when they were eighteen. He'd only known that I'd run away and that my parents had gone to look for me. He'd been nearly destroyed when he found out they were dead.

My parents' other foster children had been farmed out to other families. I hadn't been able to get in touch with any of them. I hoped they were okay.

"I'm fine," said Chance. "How are you?"

"I'm on the beach!" I gloated. "In a bathing suit!"

"You suck," Chance said. "It's snowing here."

I laughed. Chance was living with Grandma Hoyt in New Jersey. Though she'd offered to take me in as well, she'd seemed relieved when I'd told her Hallam had already started proceedings to take over my guardianship. According to Chance, Grandma was never around, and he had the run of an enormous house. I didn't feel too sorry for him, snow notwithstanding.

"Well, you've got to come visit," I said. "Soon!"

"Oh believe me, I'm planning on it. Maybe Christmas break," he said.

I hadn't seen Chance since our parents' funeral, which had been a pretty awful event. Grandma Hoyt had flown both Jason and I up to New Jersey. My parents' bodies had been cremated right after their death. That was the way they wanted things. Still, my grandmother insisted on having a memorial service for the family. At the request of my grandmother, no one from Bramford had been invited. That was just fine with me. I didn't have any desire to see any of them again, not even Lilith. Grandma, Chance, Jason, and I had huddled in the church as the pastor read my parents' eulogy. I'd listened, waiting to be wracked with sobs or even for a few tears to leak out of my eyes.

I hadn't cried. Chance had cried. I'd given him a huge hug, but Chance was taller than me, and it was hard for him to cry on my shoulder.

I didn't know why I couldn't cry. I ached for my parents' loss. But I was angry with them and disgusted by their actions. They'd always be my parents. I missed them. But maybe I'd done all the crying I could in that hotel room in Georgia those four nights. Maybe there just wasn't anything left for them.

No one had heard from my older brothers Noah and Gordon. The last I'd seen them was when they'd unexpectedly shown up at the ritual on Halloween. After that, they seemed to have disappeared. They hadn't come to the funeral.

"Let me talk to Chance," said Jason. I handed the phone to him.

I listened as Jason quizzed Chance about the level he was on in *Grand Theft Auto*. I chuckled to myself, thinking that Jason and I had been involved in the real thing. And Jason had been right. The Sons had covered up all of our criminal activities.

Gazing out at the horizon, at the aqua water glittering like turquoise in the sunlight, I couldn't help but feel like my life was nearly perfect.

I didn't think about the things Michaela Weem had said to me. I didn't think about her threats that Jason was violent or that he and I shared a terrible power. Or. At least, I didn't think about it much. After all, I'd made my choice. I had rejected ancient destinies and visions. I'd decided to make my own future. And my future was Jason.

breathless for more?

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