

# breathless

by v. j. chambers

## chapter two

michaela666 (12:02:43 AM): got your message. what's the alert?

morningstar68 (12:02:46 AM): He's arrived. as predicted.

michaela666 (12:03:02 AM): is he contained?

morningstar68 (12:03:30 AM): for the moment.

michaela666 (12:04:14 AM): good. your job is to keep him there, then. what about the vessel? is she ready to perform her part of the ritual?

morningstar68 (12:05:04): I had hoped to give her a bit more time. but she can be ready. soon. what's our next move?

michaela666 (12:05:54): for now? We wait. don't let him out of your sight. and prepare the vessel.

My mother furrowed her brow in concern. "Like terrorists?" she asked Jason.

Jason shook his head. "Like Freemasons," he said. "But with guns."

"Freemasons?" I asked. I'd read up on this stuff. I thought it was very interesting. I'd read my copy of *The Da Vinci Code* so many times it was falling apart. "Why do they want you?" I asked, wide-eyed.

"They're crazy," he said. He looked at my father again. "Like I said, I don't want to put your family in danger."

"We should go to the authorities," said my dad.

"No," said Jason. "Trust me. The police can't do anything about this. They wouldn't stand a chance."

"You can't expect us just to let you go back out there," said my mother.

"Where are your parents?" asked my dad.

"Dead," said Jason. "I guess. I never knew them. The people who are chasing me killed the man who raised me. That's when I started running. It was...I don't know, maybe four months ago."

"And you've been on the run ever since?" asked my mother. "That's horrible. Jason, you have to stay with us." She turned to my dad. "Daniel, we can't let him leave."

My dad considered. "Listen, son, if you are in trouble with the law, you can tell us. We can help."

"They are actually pretty good about that stuff," said Nick.

"I'm not in trouble with the law," said Jason. "I swear."

I believed him.

"Why are these people after you?" asked my father.

"They think I'm something I'm not," said Jason. "It's complicated. It's not important."

"I just don't know," said my dad. "I can't really believe that there are--"

"Dad," I interrupted, "do I have to go and get a dollar bill and point out all the Masonic imagery on it again?"

"No, Zaza, that's okay," said my dad. He considered. "Well, Jason, you're not going anywhere tonight. You'll sleep here. Tomorrow, we'll talk more. We can get this sorted out."

\* \* \*

When I woke up on Saturday, my father and Jason were on a drive together, discussing Jason's situation. I asked my mother if she'd talked to Dad. Would Jason be staying? I wanted him to stay. I didn't know much about him, but I felt protective of him, probably because I was the one who'd found him. My mother said she wanted Jason to stay and she thought my dad did too. After he talked to Jason, it was just a matter of getting everything legally settled. There would be papers to sign and things like that.

I helped my mother clean the dishes after the boys' breakfast. They had demolished a box of frozen waffles. I skipped breakfast. I usually did. Besides, it was already eleven o'clock. I'd slept so late that it was going to be time for lunch soon anyway.

Chance and the guys were out somewhere, probably eating up all the food at one of their friend's houses. I basked in the idea of having the television to myself, and settled down to watch something girly. Twenty minutes into something on E! about fashion, Jason and my dad came back.

My dad and my mom talked in the kitchen. Jason came into the living room and glanced around like he usually did, checking every corner for near danger.

"You want to sit down?" I asked.

He shrugged. Then he sat down on the other couch. He glanced at the television, then back at me.

"We can watch something else," I said.

"This is fine," he said. He looked back at the television. But he didn't relax. He sat up straight on the couch. It looked like he might jump up and make a run for it any minute. He was like a scared rabbit or something. I wondered what had happened to him.

We watched TV without speaking for a while. The E! show ended. I walked over to Jason and gave him the remote control. "You can pick something to watch if you want," I said.

He looked at the remote like it was an artifact from ancient Egypt or something. "It's okay," he said. He set the remote down on the couch next to him.

I felt awkward. I sat down next to him. "Are you going to stay?" I asked.

"I'd like to," said Jason. "Your dad is nice. So's your mom."

"I told you," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "Your dad wants to check on some things. If it's legal. If it can be done, he wants me to stay."

"But what about the people after you?" I asked.

Jason laughed his short laugh again. "Uh, I think your dad thinks I'm crazy."

"Crazy?"

"I think he thinks I imagined it." Jason picked up the remote control. Stared at it.

"Maybe..." he trailed off. "Maybe I did."

"What?"

"Maybe nobody was chasing me last night," said Jason.

"But you were running like Freddy Krueger was after you," I said.

Jason nodded. "I know." He aimed the remote control at the TV and started flipping through the channels. "I've been running for a long time," he said. "Last night, it was dark. Maybe there wasn't anybody there. Or maybe it was an animal or something. I'd really like to stay here."

Huh. Jason had seemed so sure of himself last night. Maybe my dad was right. Maybe he *had* made the whole thing up. Lots of the guys who stayed here told impossible stories. Apparently, it was a defense mechanism. My mom had a degree in psychology, but she didn't practice anymore. Instead she stayed home to take care of us kids. And she worked as a self-employed medical transcriptionist to help out with bills. Her psychology background helped her deal with the foster kids. It was also why I knew about defense mechanisms.

I didn't know what I believed about Jason. Whatever had happened to him, last night he'd believed that something was chasing him. I did know that I wanted him to stay. Finding Jason was pretty much the most exciting thing that had happened to me, well, ever. Plus, I was interested in these people who were chasing him. People that he described like Freemasons with guns. What did that mean?

"What do you want to watch?" Jason asked me.

I hadn't even been paying attention to the channels he was flipping through. "Um, you pick," I said.

"There's so many," he said. He looked a little overwhelmed. "It's been a long time since I watched TV." Jason flicked the channel up, paused, stared at the screen and then repeated the process. His dark hair was a little long in the front. It kept falling in his eyes, so he kept reaching up to push it out of the way. He had a look on his face of deep concentration, as if he wanted to make sure he got this right. He was the most interesting boy I'd ever seen. He was quiet, which

was so different than the guys I knew, both the ones who came to us for foster care and the guys I went to school with. There was something very serious about him. Something...mature. I couldn't get enough of it. He was like someone from a foreign country. I wanted to lock him in a room and study him.

"Am I doing this wrong?" Jason asked.

I realized I'd been staring at him. I was embarrassed. I blushed. "No, you're fine," I said. I forced myself to look at the television screen.

Jason was flipping through the ESPN channels, barely stopping on any of them.

"You don't like sports?" I asked.

"I, uh, don't know," he said. "I guess I've never really watched them."

How strange. Had he been living in a bubble or something? Maybe he had amnesia.

We were back around to E!. Jason stopping flipping through the channels. He looked at me, sheer terror on his face. "I don't...I mean, I..."

"It's okay," I said.

"Can you pick something to watch?" he asked.

I nodded. "Sure." I reached for the remote from Jason, when Toby walked into the living room.

"Toby," I said. "What are you doing here?" I bounced over to him and threw my arms around his neck. He encircled my waist with one arm, and we kissed quickly.

"I'm here with my dad," he said.

I backed away, angry. "Toby!" I said. "You said you wouldn't say anything to him."

"Your dad called him," said Toby. "I just came along for the ride."

"Oh," I said. I looked at Jason. "Did my dad tell you he was going to do that?"

"He said he wanted to see if my background checks out," said Jason. "He wanted to know where I was born and stuff like that."

I hoped that wasn't dangerous for Jason. "And that's okay?" I asked Jason.

He shrugged. "I don't know. I hope so." He was staring intently at the show on E!

It was good that Jason seemed a little more laid back this morning. Last night, he'd been so intense. But I hoped everything was okay. I didn't want anything bad to happen to Jason. I didn't want the people who were chasing him to find him.

"Well," I said. "Cool, then, I guess. Um, I'm going to get some iced tea. Either of you guys want?"

"Totally," said Toby.

I looked at Jason.

"Um...if it's not too much trouble," he said.

"No big," I told him.

I scampered out of the living room, through the dining room towards the kitchen. My parents and Toby's dad, Sheriff Damon, were in the kitchen talking. Instead of entering, I flattened myself against the wall, so that I could hear them talk, but they couldn't see me.

"...didn't find anything," Sheriff Damon was saying.

"So, he's lying?" asked my mom.

Were they talking about Jason? They had to be talking about Jason.

"Actually, it doesn't prove anything," said my dad. "The story he told me is impossible to verify. He was born in a home in Shiloh, Georgia. He said the Shiloh in Harris County, but I think there are three Shilohs in Georgia."

"I checked 'em all. No birth records for a Jason Wodden," said Sheriff Damon.

He didn't have birth records? What did that mean? Who was Jason?

"Yeah, but if he's telling the truth, he doesn't have a birth certificate," said my dad.

"Well, what else did you find, Jim?" asked my mother.

"I didn't find *anything*," Sheriff Damon repeated. "It's like this kid doesn't exist. No social security number. No medical records. No fingerprints. No priors. He doesn't have a driver's license or own a car."

Like he didn't exist. Weird. Like he'd popped into existence in the woods outside of Toby's truck. Jason was definitely strange. He was interesting, but he was strange.

"And the mother?"

"Marianne Wodden?" asked Sheriff Damon. "Yeah, I found a death certificate. She died in '91, right after the kid says he was born."

"So that checks out," said my dad.

"Yeah, kind of," said the sheriff.

"Kind of?" asked my mother.

"Well, the kid said she died in childbirth, right?" asked the sheriff.

"Yeah," said my dad.

"Marianne Wodden was shot to death by her husband. Then he committed suicide. There's no record of a baby."

"But had she given birth?" asked my mother.

"I don't know," said Sheriff Damon.

So, Jason's mother had been murdered? I couldn't believe this. Jason was getting more and more interesting with every passing moment.

"What about the people that Jason claims raised him? The man who he says they killed?" my father asked.

"Yeah, there's no record of an Anton Welsh, either," said Sheriff Damon.

"Are these people like a cult or something?" my mother asked.

My dad sighed. "He won't talk about them. So we don't have a lot to go on. But I think we all know what they are."

"You think this is *him*, then?" asked Sheriff Damon.

What were they talking about? How did they all know what the people who raised Jason were? And why had Sheriff Damon placed such an emphasis on the word "him?" I was so engrossed in the conversation, I didn't see Toby approaching.

"Azazel," he called.

"Shh!" I said.

But it was too late.

My mother called from the kitchen, "Zaza, you out there?"

I glared at Toby but entered the kitchen. "Hey, Mom," I said. "I was just getting some iced tea for Toby and Jason."

"Oh, that's sweet, honey," said my mom. "But why don't you go back to the living room? I'll get it."

I left the kitchen, fuming. When I caught up to Toby, I said to him in a pointed whisper, "Why did you *do* that? I was listening to them."

"You were eavesdropping on them, you mean," he whispered back.

"Well, how else am I supposed to find anything out?"

"Maybe you don't need to know."

But we were back at the living room at that point. Toby had changed the channel to ESPN, and there was a cheerleading competition on. Jason was gaping at the TV, his mouth slightly open. Great. Toby was already corrupting him.

"Ugh," I groaned. "Do we have to watch this?"

"You're jealous of cheerleaders on TV?" Toby asked, settling down on the couch.

I plopped down next to him. "Why wouldn't I be? You're clearly attracted to them, and it's doubtful you're even attracted to your own girlfriend."

"I'm not even going to respond to that," said Toby. But he picked up the remote and started changing the channels. "There's a party at the Nelson farm tonight," he said to me. "You wanna go?"

"I don't know," I said. "Those things never get good until after my curfew."

"So sneak out," said Toby. "It'll be fun."

\* \* \*

My house was dark and quiet as I tiptoed through the kitchen towards the front door. I didn't sneak out of my house much. My parents were pretty cool and let me stay out late on weekends--until one o'clock. Still, I was seventeen years old, and a lot of the parties my friends threw went on much later than that. I didn't always want to party until dawn, but sometimes I did. The parties at the Nelson farm were infamous.

Nelson was an old family in Bramford. Their farm covered acres and acres of land, and they owned fields that weren't being used for anything. Fields far from any houses. The Nelson kids, who always threw the parties, were twin guys. Derek was on the football team with Toby. He was a nice guy. Eric was on the wrestling team. He was an absolute jerk. They always managed to snag several kegs, and they would set up on one of the abandoned fields. Half of

Bramford High would show up, pulling their cars onto the field, creating a circle of shining headlights. People would blast music on their car stereos. People would dance.

Once, at a Nelson farm party in the summer, my best friend Lilith and I got roped into a wet t-shirt contest. We were both kind of drunk. Generally, I found that sort of thing pretty sexist and stupid, but at the time it seemed like a good idea. Lilith won. She was much better endowed than I am. Plus, Lilith was no virgin. Not like me. Lilith hadn't been a virgin since the tenth grade. In fact, Lilith lost her virginity at a Nelson farm party. To some guy named Jack, who moved away last year. Lilith was a lot crazier than I was. I would have liked to be a little crazy, but it was like everybody had somehow decided for me that I was supposed to be this goody two-shoes. Even if I wanted to do something crazy, someone was always there to stop me. Like Toby not having sex with me or cutting me off after five beers. "I don't want you to get sick," he would say. Maybe I was insane not to be grateful for such a considerate boyfriend, but just once, I wanted to do something completely outrageous without anyone "looking out for my best interests."

Other people did all kinds of crazy things at Nelson farm parties. Like drugs. And chicken contests in their cars. And beer pong. And, for God's sake, pre-marital damned sex. Which I might never, never have.

Tonight, I was going to the Nelson farm party. I took careful steps towards the front door. Several times already, the floor had creaked so loud I was sure my parents were going to wake up and ask what exactly I thought I was doing. But so far, I was safe.

I placed my hand on the doorknob and turned--slowly, slowly. The doorknob turning didn't make any noise. But as I eased the front door open, the door moaned on its hinges. To me,

the sound was deafening. I paused, holding my breath, waiting for the sound of my parents wandering downstairs to investigate the noise. But no one came.

I slid out the front door, carefully closing it behind me, and started across the lawn. Toby was going to pick me up in his truck at the end of my driveway, which twisted up and around a hill so that it was out of sight of the house. Once I crossed the lawn and got on the driveway, I only had a few feet to go before I was out-of-sight and home free. I tried not to make noise as I hurried. It didn't take long until I was on the driveway.

The gravel crunched under my feet, but I was pretty sure that I was too far away from the house for anyone to hear. Still, I tried to tread as quietly as possible. Then I noticed something.

I could still hear the sound of gravel under feet.

But it wasn't coming from my feet.

It was a different rhythm than my footsteps. There was someone else walking on the driveway!

Damn it! I knew someone had heard me. I whirled, looking behind me. I could still see my house, still and dark in the night. There was no one there.

But I could still hear the footsteps.

Were they ahead of me?

I stepped forward, then thought about what Jason had said. He'd said that his staying with us would make it dangerous for our family. Were the people after Jason walking down my driveway? Were they coming for Jason? For us?

For a brief moment, I was ready to run back to my house and crawl into my bed. Tendrils of fear had knotted themselves around my spine, and I wanted to hide under my pillows.

Then I shook myself. I was going to a party, damn it. I was not going to let anything get in the way of that. I stepped forward again, squaring my shoulders. If I had to meet these crazy people that were after Jason, then so be it. If they were as dangerous as Jason said, I wouldn't be safe in my bed anyway.

As I walked, I could still hear the footsteps. They sounded close. My heart started to speed up. I rounded the bend in my driveway, and my hands were shaking.

Ahead of me, I could see a shadowy figure walking away from me.