

# breathless

by v. j. chambers

## chapter five

To: Richard Durham <rdurham@risingsun.org>

From: Hallam Wakefield <hwakefi@risingsun.org>

Subject: Re: West Virginia

Richard,

No, I'm not in West Virginia. I'm in upstate New York. I emailed Alfred and told him this. I don't know why Intel hasn't seen me in New York. Answer me this: why are we wasting Intel confirming my whereabouts?

If we're going to find Jason, we have to work together, not against each other. I've told you exactly what I think about Georgia. There's no way Jason is there. I don't know why you insist on staying there. Why don't you go west?

Yours in the Purpose,

Hallam

Everything had gone back to normal. Sort of. Toby was picking me up for school again. I was sitting next to him in class. We were going out on dates and making out, but not going any further than that. The only thing that was different was Jason. He lived in my house. He was in three of my classes. He was around—a lot. My parents had submitted some paperwork to keep Jason as foster parents, but it was taking a long time to go through, because Jason wasn't in any of the foster systems. There was a long search going on. Everyone was trying to pin down Jason's birth records. It seemed impossible that a boy could have lived seventeen years and never left any evidence of his existence. But that seemed to be what Jason had done.

About his past, he was close-mouthed. He didn't like to talk about it. I could tell. But he protested at the thought of staying less and less. And he almost never talked about being a danger to our family anymore. My mom thought this was a good sign. I knew from eavesdropping on conversations she and my dad had. They often talked in their bedroom at night, after everyone had gone to bed. I would leave my room and stand in the dark hallway in my nightgown, my ear pressed against their door. I wanted to catch any bit of information about Jason I could.

But they didn't seem to know anything. And they rarely spoke about anything interesting. Generally, they talked about how their days had gone. They talked about Chance. They talked about the other foster kids. They never seemed to talk about me. They were planning something around Halloween. Probably a party or something. My parents liked to throw alternative, safe

parties for teens where there wasn't any alcohol or drugs. The parties were utterly lame, and I almost always had to show. I hated that. I kind of hoped they didn't throw a party at Halloween. I wanted to do something cool with Toby that night.

Jason wasn't volunteering any information about himself. My parents didn't know any. I was left with only one means of gathering data. Observation. I watched Jason. I saw how easily he fit into our Honors classes. He was very bright. He made insightful comments about whatever we were reading. He got in arguments with my father in history class. I could tell that my father found Jason's intelligence bothersome. In gym class, he also seemed to do well. He was strong and fit.

But even though Jason fit in academically, he seemed socially awkward. He sat alone at lunch. I wanted to sit with him, but after Toby had confessed he'd felt jealous of Jason, I didn't think I should. I didn't want to upset Toby again. Jason was friendly whenever people talked to him but distant. He rarely smiled, and when he did, it was his brief smile. The one that lit up his face for a second then disappeared into his brooding eyes. There was something about Jason that screamed untouchable. And I realized that I desperately wanted to penetrate the wall he'd built around himself and find out what was behind it.

I didn't have much luck. I couldn't spend much time with Jason. At school, I hung with Toby. Toby didn't seem to want to have anything to do with Jason, and I didn't know why. After school, I had homework. My parents gave me chores that never seemed to overlap with Jason's. I barely even saw him at dinner, because Toby was asking me out a lot, and we ate together most of the time. When I did have free time, Lilith called me on the phone, and we had to talk for hours, because that was what we did. In some ways, it was almost like the whole world was conspiring to keep me away from Jason. But I watched him. I watched him a lot.

One Sunday morning, I woke up earlier than usual. Everyone else was asleep, and so I padded downstairs in my pajamas to watch television in blissful silence. I was surprised to find Jason in the living room, watching a televangelist giving a sermon. He didn't look up when I came into the room, as if he hadn't heard me.

"Hi," I said.

He jumped.

"Sorry," I said.

"It's okay," he said.

I sat down on the couch. Stared at the screen. The man was preaching about the end of the world. "The bible tells us," he said, "that before the coming of the Antichrist, there will be many earthquakes. Now, I want to show you something." Behind him, a map appeared on a screen. As he spoke, spots on the map began to light up. "In February 1991, an earthquake hit Afghanistan and Pakistan. In April 1991, there was an earthquake in Georgia. Also in April, an earthquake struck Panama and Costa Rica. In June of 1991, there was an earthquake in southern California.

"The Gulf War ended in 1991," he continued. "The Warsaw Pact dissolved. The Dead Sea scrolls became public. Brothers and sisters, the Antichrist was born in 1991. He is living among us! The end times are here."

Jason *was* weird. Why was he watching this? "Are you religious?" I asked Jason.

He looked at me. "Do you want me to change this?"

"I don't care," I said. I wanted him to change it.

Jason changed the channel to MTV. "I guess I'm not," he said.

"Not what?"

"Religious," he said. "Your family isn't, are they? No one in this town is."

"People in town are," I said.

"Like who?"

"Well, no one I know," I admitted. "But I know people are."

"There aren't any churches in Bramford," said Jason.

"Sure there are," I said. But then I thought about it. There weren't.

"No," said Jason. "There aren't. I looked. I even checked the internet. Closest church is like 20 miles away."

"Really?" I said. Huh. Why had I never noticed this before? I guess I didn't think about churches much. Or religion. "How come you were looking for churches?" I asked.

He gazed at the TV screen. "Sanctuary," he breathed.

"What?"

He turned to me. "No reason," he said, smiling his quick smile. "Just curious, I guess."

I didn't believe him.

\* \* \*

Toby and I were sitting on one of the picnic tables outside McDonald's with several of our friends. It was dark outside. The wind was a little chilly, and I huddled in my sweatshirt as I sipped flat beer out of a travel mug. It was Wednesday night, and it was late, but I was taking advantage of my lack of curfew.

Sherry Astor stood up. She shivered. "I'm cold," she announced.

"Me too," I murmured.

"Let's walk," she said.

I got up and so did Eve Newcomb. We walked behind the McDonalds, away from the tables. There was an empty parking lot behind us, and we walked in circles, hunching our shoulders to try to stay warm.

"God," said Eve, "I'm so sick of hanging out outside McDonald's."

"Me too," said Sherry. "This town is so boring. I wish there was something to do."

I nodded my agreement. Having no curfew wasn't as exciting as it was cracked up to be. Bramford was not the most happening place on earth. I couldn't wait until I'd graduated, and Toby and I were in college at WVU. There'd be all kinds of things to do then.

"Darius asked me if I wanted to hang out at his place," said Eve. Darius was Eve's boyfriend.

"But you picked here?" I asked.

Eve sighed. "Whenever we go to Darius' place, all he wants to do is have sex."

Sherry groaned in sympathy. "I know what you mean. It's all Tom wants to do too."

I didn't say anything. I had nothing to say. I couldn't relate.

"God," said Eve, "it's like there's all this pressure, and they want you to let them do it forever, and finally you just can't handle anymore, so you give in, thinking that will be the end of it. But it never ends. It's like all that's on their minds."

"Well," said Sherry, "I wouldn't mind if we could do it at Tom's house. You're lucky that Darius' mom is never home. Tom always wants to get it on in the back seat of his car, in like broad daylight. Which is just...weird."

"Yeah," agreed Eve. "That is weird."

"So, what's the big deal?" asked Sherry. "How come you're not at Darius' place, getting busy? Does Darius just suck in bed or something?"

Eve considered. "No...yes. I don't know. I've never had sex with anyone besides Darius. How would I know if he sucks?"

"Well," said Sherry as if it were obvious, "do you like it?"

"Sex?"

"Yeah," said Sherry.

"Sure," said Eve. "I mean, I guess so."

"You guess so?" said Sherry. "He's definitely bad in bed. Don't you think so, Azazel?"

I shrugged. "I guess I wouldn't know," I said.

They both stopped short and looked at me.

"You mean you and Toby aren't doing it?" Sherry asked me.

I sighed. "No."

"You're a virgin?!" said Eve, her mouth open.

"Oh my God," said Sherry. "How come you're not doing it?"

"I don't know," I said. "Toby doesn't want to."

"Oh whatever," said Eve. "All guys want to."

"Toby doesn't," I said. "Or, I don't know. Maybe something's wrong with me."

The girls looked at each other and then back at me. "Like what?" asked Sherry.

"I don't know," I said. "But he hardly touches me, so there's got to be something."

"Yeah," said Eve. "Weird."

The conversation turned to other things, and I went home soon after that. Toby kissed me chastely when he dropped me off, and inwardly, I fumed. The look those girls had given me still was stuck in my head. It was like I was a leper or something. I hated feeling so weird. Why didn't Toby want to be with me? Why?

I didn't sleep well that night. I couldn't stop thinking about what might be wrong with me. I couldn't help but think that Toby was just being nice to spare my feelings, but there was something about me that was different than everyone else. I wished he'd just tell me what it was. How was I supposed to fix it if I didn't know?

The next morning at school, when Toby and I walked into the hallway, I suddenly felt all eyes on me. And everyone started whispering to each other. My heart dropped into my stomach. It was obvious that everyone was talking about us. What were they saying?

I made my way to English class. I tried to ignore the stares and whispers. What could I have done? Why was everyone talking about me? I looked at Toby, but Toby seemed oblivious. On my way to class, I looked everywhere for Lilith, knowing she'd give it to me straight. But I didn't see her anywhere.

Even in class, the stares and whispers continued. I tried to concentrate on writing my journal prompt. The question today was, "Is it wise to subvert popular culture?"

We were reading *1984*. Annoyingly, the hero and heroine of the book were rebelling against a fascist government by having sex. Everyone on earth had sex, it seemed. Everyone except me. And now I was apparently a circus freak, because everyone was talking about me.

I scribbled something ridiculous for my journal prompt. I couldn't concentrate on it. I hissed to Toby, "Everyone's staring at us."

Toby looked around as if he hadn't noticed. "No, they're not," he whispered back.

"Toby, Azazel," said Ms. Campbell, "please don't talk."

I could feel the gaze of everyone in the class on me as I wrote. I couldn't concentrate as we discussed the journal. I could hear that Jason was saying something. As always, Ms.

Campbell thought it was brilliant. I prayed that she would not call on me. I couldn't concentrate on anything.

Luckily, she decided to move the class along before she got to me. "Well," said Ms. Campbell, "as you guys probably guessed, I want to discuss this journal in terms of *1984*." She picked up her copy of the novel and leaned forward on her podium. "Winston says that sex is a rebellion. Desire, Winston thinks, is 'thoughtcrime.'"

No one said anything.

"Oh come on, guys," Ms. Campbell. "I know you're all teenagers, and it's weird to talk about sex, but you're seniors. This an AP class. What are your thoughts on that?"

Eve Newcomb tentatively raised her hand. "I guess he's right?" she asked. Eve had a way of answering every question with a question. "The Party doesn't want him to have sex with Julia? And when he does, he starts rebelling against everything?"

"Okay," said Ms. Campbell. "But is sex itself a rebellion? Or is it only a rebellion if society tells us that we shouldn't have sex?"

Jason raised his hand. "Obviously, you can't rebel against something by doing what it tells you to do," he said. "So it's got to be because society says so."

Ms. Campbell considered. "Everybody agree with Jason?" she asked.

Lisa Huron spoke up. Lisa was one of those know-it-all girls who seemed to like to argue with Jason just because he was Jason. She hated that Ms. Campbell seemed to think Jason was so brilliant. "I think sex is rebellion in general," she said. "It's Freudian. I mean it's the way the ego symbolically eradicates the shadow of the father figure. By symbolically copulating with a mother figure stand in."

Ms. Campbell nodded. "Well, no one's gonna deny that Freud was a brilliant man, Lisa. But let's all keep in mind that he did do a lot of cocaine."

Everyone laughed.

"What I'm getting at," said Ms. Campbell, "is that I'm again trying to see if we can find parallels between our society and the society Orwell predicted in *1984*."

According to Ms. Campbell, Orwell had predicted text messages. They were newspeak. Ms. Campbell was cool, but sometimes she just dug a little too deep.

"He was wrong about this," said Lisa, "because in our society, we aren't forbidden to have sex."

"No," said Jason, "but maybe it's just backwards. I mean, if you live in a society where you're sexually repressed, then having sex is an act of rebellion. But if you live in a society where sex is condoned and encouraged, then the opposite would be true."

"So not having sex would be an act of rebellion?" asked Ms. Campbell.

Half of the class snickered. I looked around. They were staring at me. Suddenly, I knew what this was all about. I should never have confided in Eve and Sherry. Those girls had big mouths. Everyone was laughing at me because Toby and I weren't having sex. I wanted the earth to open up and swallow me whole.

Ms. Campbell furrowed her brow. "Why is that funny?" she asked.

"I don't think it's funny at all," said Jason. "Actually, if someone did that in a permissive society like ours, I think it would be brave."

He was looking right at me. Jason was taking up for me. That was cool of him. I caught his eyes for a moment, trying to communicate that I was grateful.

"Am I hearing you right?" asked Ms. Campbell. "Jason, you're saying that in today's society, abstinence is a form of rebellion?"

"Kind of," said Jason.

Later on, in French class, I intercepted a note that was making its rounds across the class. It said, "Azazel Jones has a deformed pussy." I crumpled it up and stared straight ahead. This was awful.

I barely made it to lunch, and when I did, I exploded to Toby in the lunch line, "I can't take this!"

Toby seemed confused. "Take what? Why are you upset?"

I showed him the note.

He uncrumpled it. "This is kind of messed up," he said, finally sounding a little concerned.

"Kind of?" I said. "I happen to mention to Sherry and Eve last night that we aren't having sex, and now I'm *deformed*?!"

We took our trays off the rack and proceeded into the kitchen.

Toby looked confused as he slid his tray along in front of the cafeteria workers. "How are those things even related?" He looked across at one of the cooks. "No jello, okay?"

"They said that there was no way you wouldn't want to have sex with me unless something was wrong with me," I told him. "And now everyone thinks something's wrong with me."

"Jesus," said Toby. "I can't believe those girls." He shook his head, looking angry for a second. Then he stopped. "Why'd you tell them that anyway?"

"They were talking about having sex with their boyfriends," I said. "They asked me a question. I couldn't relate, what was I supposed to say?"

"Say it's private," said Toby. "Say it's none of their business."

"Is that what you say?" I demanded. We emerged from the kitchen, carrying our lunch trays.

We started across the cafeteria to our regular table. Several of the girls spotted us as we approached. They huddled together, speaking in voices too low to hear. Then they burst into laughter.

I stopped. "I can't eat at that table," I said.

"Oh geez, you don't even know if they were talking about you," said Toby.

"I do know," I said. "I'm not even hungry anyway."

I dumped my tray in the trashcan and tore out of the cafeteria and through the halls. There was a little alcove behind the gym that I knew about. Maybe nobody would see me if I just went there and cried.

There was no one in the alcove. I leaned against the wall. Rested my head against it. This had to be the worst day of my entire life. Why was everyone being so awful? When I'd thought that I was the oldest virgin on earth, I'd been exaggerating. Surely there were other girls in school who hadn't had sex. Surely I wasn't the only girl. And I couldn't be the only person who thought it was okay to be a virgin, could I? I slid down the wall and covered my face with my hands.

Someone rounded the corner, calling my name. I expected it to be Toby. I expected that he would have followed me. But it wasn't. It was Jason.

"Hey," I said, feeling dangerously close to tears.

"Hey," he said. "I, um, saw you run out of the cafeteria. I'm sorry everybody's being so awful."

"It's not your fault," I said. Jason was being nice to me, and that didn't do anything to stop the impending flood of tears. They started to leak out of my eyes. I brushed them away angrily. "It's just stupid," I said. "I hate it. I feel like everyone else has done it and that they're right. Something is wrong with me."

Jason sat down next to me. "Well, not everyone else has done it," he said.

"I know, but it just seems..." Then I realized he was admitting something to me. "Oh," I said.

He smiled at me. "I've never even had a girlfriend," he said.

"Really?" I said. "But you're so..."

"Weird," he said.

"No, you're not," I said. But hadn't I said about him, thought that about him, too many times to count? "That wasn't what I was going to say. You're...smart and brave and strong and you're...you know, very attractive."

Jason laughed. "Right," he said sarcastically. "Sure."

"I'm serious," I said.

"Stop. I came here to cheer *you* up, not the other way around."

I smiled. "Well, whatever you did, it kind of worked." I wasn't crying anymore.

"Cool," he said.

We were quiet for a couple minutes.

"You know, Azazel," he said, "I don't know if I ever really told you how grateful I am that you found me when you did. And that you took me back to your house and... This...all of

this, the school, your parents, everything. It's so...great. I always wanted to have a life like this. And it's because of you."

"What?" I said. "I just did what—"

"Who's back there?" interrupted a voice.

A teacher? Weren't we allowed back here at lunch?

But it was Adam Neels and Joe Anthony, the two worst troublemakers in our school. They practically lived in ISS. They stood in front of us, with their greasy hair and camouflaged jackets and pimply faces, and I could just tell this wasn't going to be good. How was I supposed to know this was their spot?

Jason and I both stood up.

"Oh," said Adam. "It's Azazel Jones with one of the foster fucks."

"We're going," I said.

"No, it's cool," said Joe. "You two can stay."

"Hey Azazel," said Adam. "I hear that you don't have a cunt, and that's why your dumbass boyfriend can't figure out how to fuck you."

"No," said Joe, "that's not what I heard. I heard she's actually a dude. Her mom just makes her dress up in girl clothes."

Jason folded his arms over his chest. "Don't talk to her like that," he said calmly.

"What are you gonna do about it?" asked Joe, advancing on Jason.

Joe was at least a head taller than Jason, and much wider. Standing next to Jason, Joe looked like an overgrown oaf.

"Yeah," said Adam, coming closer to me. "You packing a dick in those jeans, Azazel? Why don't you let us see?"

Adam took another step forward, and his face was right in my face, and his hands were on my waist. I flattened myself against the wall, terrified. What was he going to do? Should I scream?

"Don't touch her," said Jason's voice, still quiet and calm.

Adam whipped his head around to face Jason. "Her?" he mocked. "You sure that she's a her?"

It happened so fast. Jason drove his fist into Adam's face. Adam yelled and backed away, his hand going to his lip, which was gushing blood. Joe lumbered for Jason, but Jason nimbly ducked under Joe's outstretched arms. Behind Joe now, he gripped the back of Joe's neck and slammed Joe's forehead into the wall. Then Jason reached out, took my hand, and pulled me away from the alcove.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

We hurried out into the crowded gym. I looked behind us, expecting Adam and Joe to be hot in pursuit. But they weren't there. I stared at Jason, stunned.

It had been so matter-of-fact. So precise. He hadn't thought. He'd just acted. He'd quickly and neatly dispatched both of the boys. Jason hadn't even broken a sweat.

"Are you okay?" he asked me.

"Fine," I said, dazed. I couldn't believe he'd just done that.

"People are jerks," he muttered.

\* \* \*

Apparently, Joe and Adam were so embarrassed that they'd been bested by one guy half their size that they didn't tell anyone about the incident. Unsure of why, I didn't say anything either. Not even to Toby. Especially not to Toby. I wasn't sure why I didn't say anything to Toby.

It just seemed like it wouldn't be a good idea. He'd probably feel guilty for not being there to protect me. And it was weird that he hadn't come after me in the first place, wasn't it?

It took a week, but the rumors about my gender and deformed genitals eventually died down at school. People were starting to focus on Homecoming, which was only a week away. The dance happened to coincide with Halloween, and the girls that Toby and I ate with were buzzing with theme ideas. They wanted the Homecoming Dance to be a costume ball. It sounded okay, as far as I was concerned. I didn't know what I was going to dress up as. There was one clear silver lining in the whole set up. If there was a Homecoming Dance on Halloween, my parents couldn't force me to attend one of their lame parties.

Actually, I hadn't heard any talk about a party from my parents. Apparently, a party hadn't been their big plan for Halloween. Or, if it had, it was no longer on the table.

The big news at home was that the state was going to let us keep Jason. He was officially registered in their system now, and there was no chance of the arm of the law swooping down and sending him to a shelter or something. I hadn't really thought that would happen. Jason wouldn't stay in a shelter. There was just no way. He would just run off.

I still knew next to nothing about Jason. I'd started waking up early on Sundays, trying to catch him alone again. But he was never awake anymore, and there wasn't anything good on TV on Sunday morning. Sometimes, I formulated theories about Jason. He'd said he was running from a group of people who were like Freemasons with guns. I wondered if they were the Illuminati. The Illuminati was a secret society that controlled everything on earth. They had ties to numerous world governments. They pulled hidden strings.

But that didn't make sense. Why would the Illuminati be looking for Jason? I considered the facts. Jason was very, very smart. He was educated. Someone had taken pains to make sure

Jason was well read. That sounded like something the Illuminati might do, but again...why Jason? Jason also was skilled in hand-to-hand combat. He had excellent control over his emotions. I'd never seen him angry. None of that fit with the Illuminati.

Sometimes, I thought Jason was a robot, a secret prototype that the government had created to be a killing machine or something. I speculated that Jason maybe didn't know he was a robot. That was why he'd been told this story about his mother, who was dead, and all of that. He thought he was human, but actually he was a machine.

I didn't think that was really true.

But it bothered me. Who was this boy who lived in my house? Why couldn't I crack his secrets? And why didn't anyone else seem as concerned as I was with figuring out who he was and where he came from?

Jason had blended into my family. He ate like the rest of the Jones boys. He played video games with them, even participated in their good-natured teasing. He did his chores. He was respectful to my parents. To my knowledge, he hadn't gone out to any parties or been drinking since the incident at the Nelson farm. But even though he seemed like a regular kid—albeit an obedient, responsible one—there was something about him that just seemed, well, different. He was quiet a lot. He was separate. Even when he was laughing, he didn't seem...happy. He seemed haunted. I thought that something very bad had happened to Jason at some point in his life. I wanted to know what it was, but at the same time, if it had damaged Jason so deeply, maybe I didn't.

Halloween and the dance loomed. Lilith was excited about it, even though she didn't have a date. "I'll go solo if no one asks," she said. "Then I won't be stuck dancing with the same stupid boy all night." She wanted to find a costume, and she invited me to go shopping with her.

Since Bramford was in the middle of nowhere, we had drive forty-five minutes to Cumberland, Maryland to do any decent shopping. Lilith was excited on the way up, chattering about her various costume options.

"I'm thinking," she said, "slutty nurse, or maybe slutty cheerleader, or maybe just slut."

I laughed. "Lilith, you know there's a dress code for this dance."

She sighed. "I know. And it drives me nuts. Halloween is the one night of the year where you can get away with wearing next to nothing, and this dance is just raining on my parade."

I had no idea what I was going to dress up as. I'd tried to get some ideas from Toby. I thought it might be kind of cute if we had matching costumes. But Toby had decided to dress up as Michael Myers, and I was so not dressing up as a helpless victim. So that idea was out.

"I know exactly what you should dress up as," said Lilith. "The Virgin Mary."

"Lilith!" I exclaimed. "That's so mean. Why would you say that?"

"Oh, it's a joke! It'll show all those bitches at school that you don't care what they say about you. It would be hilarious."

"No way," I said. "But maybe a Vestal virgin."

Lilith laughed. "Really?"

I thought about it. "Vestal virgins are way sexier than the Virgin Mary," I said.

Lilith allowed me that.

Our first stop was the Goodwill store, in order to find cheap pieces that would make up the bulk of our costumes. We'd spend more money on accessories. All of this was Lilith's scheming. I didn't think about things like this. I hit the racks, looking for something that looked kind of like a toga. I didn't even know what Vestal virgins looked like. I figured it didn't matter.

No one else would know what they looked like either. After all, they hadn't been around for over a thousand years.

Lilith combed the store on her own. We met up twenty minutes later at the dressing rooms with our arms full of clothes. I had about four different options. Lilith maybe had ten. I finished before she did. I'd found a dress that I thought would work pretty well. It was white and gathered at an empire waist. It draped in several different layers. It didn't look exactly like a toga, but it was close enough. While I was evaluating each new dress that Lilith tried on, I talked to Lilith. And before I knew it, the whole story about Jason beating up Adam and Joe just came pouring out.

I hadn't meant to tell Lilith about it. Not because I usually kept things from her. It was just that the story was embarrassing. I didn't like to think about the things that Adam and Joe had said. I didn't like to think about the look in Adam's eyes when he was close to me or his hands on my waist. Or what might have happened if Jason wasn't there. But it felt weird keeping something like that from my best friend. I told Lilith everything.

When I got to the part about Jason punching Adam, Lilith threw open the door to the dressing room, half-dressed. "You are fucking kidding me!" she exclaimed.

Everyone in the entire Goodwill seemed to hear her. They looked up from the children's clothing section. From the furniture section. From the cashier's desk.

"Sorry," said Lilith. She smiled in embarrassment. To me, quieter, she said, "So, how come nobody heard about this?"

"Well, I guess no one said anything."

Lilith ducked back in the dressing room. When she emerged, she was back in her own clothes. "I'm gonna go with the first thing I tried on," she said.

Hmm. It wasn't like Lilith to decide so quickly. She hung up the other clothes she didn't want on the rack to be restocked. Then she took my hands. "Look, Zaza," she said, "I don't think it's a good idea for you to spend too much time with Jason."

She seemed so serious. When was Lilith ever this serious? I took my hands out of hers. "I don't spend much time with him," I said.

"Okay," she said. "But, you know, maybe you shouldn't get too attached."

"Attached?" Lilith was just acting weirder and weirder. I felt like I hardly knew my best friend. "What do you mean?"

"It just seems like you like him a lot, that's all," she said, surveying the dress she was about to purchase. It seemed like she was purposefully not looking at me.

"He's interesting," I said. "That's all."

"Well, he just might not be around forever, you know?"

"What do you mean?"

She dropped the dress to her side, heaving a huge sigh. "Oh, God, Zaza, I can't really talk about it, but you just have to trust me."

"Why can't you talk about it?"

"I'm not allowed," she said.

That was it! Lilith had said that before. She'd said she wasn't allowed to get it on with Jason. And then Toby had said he wasn't allowed to have sex with me. And now Lilith wasn't allowed to talk about something? What was going on here? "Who says you're not allowed?" I asked.

"God, I need to shut up," Lilith muttered.

"No, you need to explain yourself," I said. "You really, really do."

Lilith held up her dress again. She held it up against herself and looked in the mirror. "Trust me, okay? I know what I'm talking about."

"Well, I don't know what you're talking about," I said. I was getting frustrated. Were both Lilith and Toby being told what to do by the same authority? What was it? Or was I grasping at straws? Trying to put something together when there was nothing there at all?

Lilith looked at me. "Everything's gonna be better after Halloween, okay? This thing with Toby, everybody making fun of you, all of it. After Halloween, you'll see. None of it will matter."

"Why? What's going to happen at Halloween?"

"I can't," said Lilith. "I told you too much already. Just believe me." She looked around the store. "And don't tell anybody I said this to you."

And that was all. And try as I might, I couldn't force Lilith to even acknowledge she'd said what she'd said, let alone elaborate on it.