

breathless

by v. j. chambers

chapter eight

morningstar68 (06:24:16): we almost lost him. it's been a terrifying 24 hours. sorry I haven't been in touch.

michaela666 (06:24:57): it's understandable. but you're certain he won't be escaping again.

morningstar68: (06:25:08): Impossible. we've got him under lock and key.

michaela666 (06:25:35): and the man who seems to be pursuing him? is there a chance of rescue?

morningstar68: (06:26:12): he seems more scared of them than he is of us. or, more accurately, he isn't frightened of us at all. he has no idea what we're planning for him.

michaela666 (06:26:45): Good.

morningstar68: (06:27:10): samhain is days away. It's almost over.

After being so honest with myself, I didn't know how to be around Jason anymore. At breakfast, our hands brushed when we reached for the same cereal box. I recoiled as if he'd stung me. He shot me a strange glance, but I avoided his eyes. When Toby arrived to pick me up, I felt strange around him too. I felt guilty when I got into his truck. Here was Toby, a gorgeous boy, like an angel or something. He was blonde and tan and strong. He was a Ken doll. How could I be finding another boy attractive when I had this? He leaned across and kissed me, and I felt horrible.

In English, I found myself staring at Jason across the classroom. He talked so much that it seemed normal to watch him. Even after missing a day of school, he was caught up on the reading. He offered his viewpoint on the poem by Robert Herrick we were discussing.

Ms. Campbell said, "It's hard to explain the word 'coy,'" she said. "I think the best modern equivalent is that it means a girl is being a tease."

Jason raised his hand. "I don't think so," he said.

Ms. Campbell spread her hands. "Okay, Jason. What do you think it means?" she asked.

"If the virgins in the poem were being a tease, then it would mean that they truly wanted to get married as Herrick urges, but they were just playing hard to get." Jason was so dark. His hair fell into his huge dark eyes. His face was shaped like a heart.

Ms. Campbell nodded. "I've always read it that way," she admitted.

"Don't you think that implies a little bit of cynicism on Herrick's part?" Jason asked. "If they're all just teasing these guys, then they're sort of...well, they're more world wise than innocent."

"If Herrick didn't think the virgins wanted to get married, would he be telling them to do it?" Ms. Campbell asked.

"It's a didactic poem," said Jason. "Herrick is giving fatherly advice. He's telling the virgins what he thinks would be good for them, because he doesn't think that they know what it is."

I looked from Jason, who was animated and engaged with Ms. Campbell, completely invested in the meaning of a poem from hundreds of years ago, to Toby, who was flipping idly through the textbook as if he were too bored to be bothered. Toby was the all-American boyfriend. He was what every girl should want. Jason was odd. He was the antihero. He was the guy in the movie that pined over the popular girl, but never got her. Why did I find him so appealing? What was wrong with me?

"If what you're saying is true," said Ms. Campbell, "then the poem takes on dirty-old-man overtones. Now, Herrick is telling a bunch of teenage girls who haven't given marriage a second thought to get married?"

"No!" said Jason. "No way. I just think everyone's motives are pure in the poem. I don't think the girls are trying to lead anyone on."

And then our eyes met. Damn it. Was that some sort of hidden message? Was Jason saying that I was leading him on? Anguished, I turned away from him. I gazed at Toby.

"What do you think, Azazel?" asked Ms. Campbell.

"What?" I said.

"Your expression," she said. "I thought you had a thought."

"I think..." I trailed off. "I think that the virgins do want to get married, in some way. But that they also recognize that the alternative is what they know. And they're used to that. So maybe they don't want to seize the day just yet."

Ms. Campbell nodded. She paused. "Azazel, would you mind talking to me at the end of class? It's nothing bad, I promise."

"Okay," I said, terrified, even though she'd said it wasn't anything bad.

Ms. Campbell addressed the class. "Come on, people, don't let Jason take over the conversation. What do you think?" No one said anything. "Thinking is cool, I swear," she said. "I'm not going to stop trying to convince you guys of this."

At the end of class, I approached Ms. Campbell's desk. It was covered with stacks of papers, and she was going through them, as usual. She looked up and saw me. "Oh Azazel," she said. "Thanks for staying. This will only take a minute."

"Okay," I said.

"Don't look so scared," she said. "I told you it wasn't anything bad. I, um, I've noticed you've been a little distracted lately."

She said it wasn't bad! "I'm sorry," I said. "I'll try to do better."

"No, that's not what I mean," she said. "Since Jason got here, I know things have been kind of tumultuous in your home life. It's understandable. I'm not a counselor, so I'm not qualified to give advice or anything like that. But I just want you to know that I am here, if you need someone to talk to. Someone that's outside of the whole situation."

"Really?"

"Really." She smiled. "You're a bright kid, Azazel. And there are other things in life besides English that are important." She considered. "Well, not many. But a few."

"Thanks, Ms. Campbell," I said.

French class was easier because Jason wasn't there. I tried not to let my thoughts wander, but I felt like I couldn't help it. The worst thing about all of it was that I might hurt Toby. I didn't want to do that. I cared so deeply about Toby. I didn't want him to be hurt. And I didn't want him to hate me. For the first time, I wondered if it wouldn't be easier if Jason just wasn't there. But I knew that wasn't true. I couldn't sacrifice Jason's safety, because I was confused about my love life.

Still, after French, I just couldn't bear the thought of facing him in history class. I knew my dad would notice if I wasn't there. I knew I was going to get in trouble. But I didn't care. I told Toby I was going to the bathroom, and then I just left the school.

Bramford High was situated on a hill that looked down over Route 50. Behind the school, there was a wooded area. There was a path through it. We'd gone walking on it in tenth-grade science when we were learning to type trees from their leaves. I walked out the doors by the gym, crossed the parking lot, and went into the woods. I just needed to be alone. I needed to think. There had to be some way that I could just erase the feelings I had for Jason.

I couldn't have them! They were ruining everything. I tried to think of ways that I could stop thinking about Jason. Maybe I didn't have a crush on him anyway. Maybe I just needed to know who he was and where he came from. Maybe I couldn't get him out of my head because he was a mystery that I couldn't solve. Maybe if I figured it out, all of these weird, annoying feelings would just dissolve.

But I didn't know how I was going to do that. I wandered aimlessly down the path, staring at the trees. It was a gray day. The sky hung oppressively over the woods. The trees were losing their leaves. Just a few weeks ago, they'd been alive with brilliant reds and yellows. Now the few that were left were mostly brown. The atmosphere mirrored my mood. Bleak. Colorless.

I couldn't get Jason to just tell me about his past. He was way too tightlipped for that. And I didn't know of anyone else who could fill in the missing pieces for me. Even if understanding Jason would banish the feelings, I probably would never be able to understand him.

And what was worse, I didn't even know if that would work. Jason was entrenched in my subconscious now. I didn't know if I'd ever be able to stop thinking about him.

I was so engrossed in my thoughts that I didn't even hear him approach. I didn't see him.

He was just behind me suddenly, one arm around my waist, his hand over my mouth. "Don't scream," he whispered in my ear.

I knew his voice. The British accent. It was Hallam. The man from my house. The man who'd showed me the picture of Jason. I tried to scream anyway, but his hand muffled my voice. I bit his hand.

He yanked it away, letting go of me for a split second. I tried to scream then, tried to run, but he was too fast for me. Lightning fast, he pinned me against a tree, his hand at my throat.

"Don't scream," he said again, and there was menace in his voice now.

My mouth went dry. What was Hallam going to do to me? Maybe Jason was right about his being here being dangerous. Then again, maybe I was an idiot for wandering around in the woods by myself. Was I crazy?

"Okay?" Hallam asked.

His hand barely let me breathe. I nodded.

Slowly, Hallam removed his hand. I didn't scream. I didn't move. I hoped he would not hurt me.

Hallam stared me down. He looked very similar to the last time I'd seen him. He was wearing the same clothes. But he still looked very proper and tailored. Every inch an English gentleman. His appearance clashed with the way Jason reacted to him. Jason said that Hallam had committed such atrocities that Jason couldn't speak about them. Which was real? The clean-cut, well-dressed man or the terrifying, dangerous tracker?

"I'm not going to hurt you," said Hallam.

I didn't know if I believed him.

"I've been watching Jason. I've been watching him with you. He seems happy here."

I didn't know what to say.

"Do you think he's happy?"

"He's—he's afraid. Of you," I said. But maybe I shouldn't have admitted that. Maybe it made Jason look weak. Oh God, what was Hallam going to do?

"But that's the only thing that's making him unhappy? Me?"

"I-I guess so."

"I want you to give him a message," said Hallam. "From me. Will you do that?"

So he was going to let me go? Good. "Yes," I choked out. As long as he wasn't going to hurt me or torture me or kill me or—

"Tell him that from now on, as long as I can help it, he's got a clean slate. He'll know what that means. Will you do that?"

I nodded.

"All right, then," he said. "You can go." He stepped back from me.

I was stupid. I was crazy. I was begging to be flayed alive. But I couldn't help it. The question ripped out of me. "Is he really your brother?"

Hallam laughed. "In a way," he said.

That had gone okay. "What way? Who are you? Who's after him?"

Hallam didn't laugh again. Instead he leaned close to me. His voice was deep and rumbling, with a tinge of threat, "Run away, little girl. You don't want to spend any more time with me than you already have."

I didn't have to be told twice. I flew out of the woods, over the parking lot, and back into the school.

Once inside, I didn't know what to do. I'd skipped history, but I'd only been gone for fifteen minutes. What was I going to do now? Should I go back to class? I didn't know if I'd feel safe anywhere else. I stood inside the door, breathing heavily, totally undecided about my next course of action. In a flash of inspiration, it came to me.

I went to the nurse. "I've been throwing up in the bathroom," I said, "but I feel better now. Can I have a pass to class?"

She eyed me a little suspiciously, but she did what I said.

Clutching my pass, I slid into history class and handed my father the slip of paper the nurse had written for me. He gave me a concerned look, but didn't make an issue out of it.

At lunch, I found Jason immediately. He was sitting alone at a table, the way he usually did. I sat down with him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked me. I never sat with Jason at lunch.

I told him about meeting Hallam in the woods and what Hallam had said. I left out why I'd skipped history in the first place. I didn't want Jason to know I had a crush on him. Jason probably didn't think of me in that way anyhow. I was sure that Jason would want to be with a girl who was deeper and smarter than me. He deserved someone of the same caliber as himself.

Jason reacted angrily when he found out that I'd seen Hallam, but after I told him what Hallam had said, he got quiet.

"What does that mean, a clean slate?" I asked.

"He's telling me that they're going to leave me alone," Jason said. "I don't know if I believe him."

* * *

Jason asked me not to say anything about meeting Hallam in the woods. He said it might worry other people, and he said it might make it more difficult for him to do anything. According to Jason, if it came down to a fight, he was the only one who stood a chance at winning against Hallam. He needed to be free to do what he needed to do. I asked him if he was planning on leaving. He said he was going to give it some time. He needed to see what happened before he could be sure.

"But," he said, and there was so much hope in his eyes, it hurt, "if he's serious, then I could stay."

We didn't talk about why Hallam might leave Jason alone. I didn't ask, even though I was dying to understand. I knew that Jason wouldn't tell me anyway.

The Homecoming Dance was Friday, only two days away. Halloween. In a strange twist of events, the school had decided to schedule the Homecoming game for Saturday, the day after the dance. Students speculated this might an attempt on the part of the administration to keep

football players from getting into too much trouble at the dance. If they wanted to play well the next day, they couldn't be hung over. I thought it was a good theory. I'd never heard of having the dance before the game though. It wasn't the typical way of doing things—that was for sure.

I had my costume ready, thanks to my shopping day with Lilith. Toby was still set on being Michael Myers, which was fine with me, as far as that went. The only thing that I didn't like about the costume was that he'd be wearing a mask. It was going to make it difficult to steal kisses on the dance floor.

There was some debate at home about whether Jason should be allowed to go to the dance. He said he didn't care one way or another. In the end, my parents ended up having to chaperone, and so they wouldn't be home. There was no way they were leaving Jason at home alone, so he had to go to the dance, and so did the guys. There was some grumbling about that. Cameron thought Homecoming Dances were "gay." But they were all going, and they all had to scrounge up costumes at the last second.

In the whirlwind of preparation, it would have been tough for me to think much about either my feelings for Jason or my confusion about what was happening with Hallam and Jason's safety. But something happened on Thursday night that wiped everything from my mind. Toby was driving me home from school, and we were quiet, as usual. I still felt a little guilty about my stupid crush on Jason. And with all the tension between Toby and me lately, it had been hard for us to have a conversation about anything. Most of the time when we were together anymore, we didn't talk. I was getting used to the silence.

When Toby pulled up to my house to drop me off, I leaned over to kiss him goodbye and then started to open the door of the truck to get out.

"Wait," said Toby.

I looked at him. "What's up?" I asked.

Toby looked nervous. "My parents are going to a Halloween party tomorrow night," he said. "They told me today that they're going to be out all night."

That was cool, as far as that went. "Lucky you," I said.

"You don't have a curfew anymore, right?" he asked me.

"No," I said. "Are you gonna have a party?"

"No," he said. "Of course not. I have the game."

"Right," I said.

"I thought maybe...you could...we could..." he trailed off.

Toby was turning into Jason. He wasn't finishing his sentences, and he wasn't telling me everything. "What?" I asked.

"Do you want to stay with me tomorrow?" he asked. "All night?"

My jaw dropped. Did he mean...? "Are you saying what I think you're saying?" I asked.

He nodded. "I'm ready."

"Oh my God," I breathed. "Of course. Absolutely."

And then we kissed. It was a heavenly kiss, full of promise and excitement. It felt like orchestras and fireworks underscored it. When we pulled away, our faces lingered close to each other.

"I love you," Toby whispered.

"I love you too," I told him.

I walked back into my house dreamily, in a cloud of love. I was going to lose my virginity. And it was going to be to the most perfect guy ever. And we were in love. And it was perfect. And how many other girls my age could say the same thing?

Of course, I immediately called Lilith.

"Hello?" she said when she picked up.

I squealed. "Toby and I are gonna do it!" I said.

"Wow," she said, "that's great. When?"

"Tomorrow!" I said.

"Cool," she said. "I'm happy for you, Zaza."

But she didn't sound as excited as a best friend should be.

"Look," she said. "I'm swamped with homework. I'm really sorry, but can we talk tomorrow?"

"Sure," I said. But I didn't want her to hang up. She was my best friend. She was supposed to ask me to go over the details of how he'd told me. She was supposed to help me figure out what kind of underwear to wear. She was supposed to give me tips, considering she was wiser than me in the ways of sex, and had already done it a zillion times. Besides, it wasn't like Lilith to be overly concerned with homework.

I felt confused and a little hurt, but overall, I was too excited to dwell on it. I had so much grooming to do. I had to shave. I had to figure out what to do with my hair. I'd planned something for the dance, but now that it was going to be such a significant night of my life, I had to do something completely different. This was epic. This was the only time this could ever happen to me.

God. It was forever until Friday night, wasn't it?

I started my search for the perfect hairdo on the family computer. After searching through pages of different pictures, I had about ten different ideas, all of which I'd printed out. The next step was going to be locking myself in the bathroom and attempting to duplicate all of them. I

would take a picture of each, then look at them to decide which one I'd do tomorrow. I wasn't going to be able to help my mom with dinner, but this was really, really important. Really important.

I thought about Toby, and I sighed, a silly grin taking over my entire face. I was so lucky to be dating him. I wondered what he was doing right now. Sometimes he was online in the early evening. I pulled up aol instant messenger, but somebody else was already logged in. Huh? Who in my family called themselves morningstar68? That was a weird name.

I couldn't imagine any of the guys in the house used it, and my parents were hopeless about computers. I didn't think they even know what instant messenger was. Did they?

Whatever. I logged morningstar off and logged myself in. Toby wasn't online. Oh. Well. That was fine. I'd be seeing a lot of him tomorrow. Then I giggled as I thought about the full implications of that statement. I was going to have sex! I couldn't believe it.

I bumped into Jason in the hall after finishing the last of my hairstyle choices. I wasn't looking where I was going because I was flipping through the pictures on our digital camera. I couldn't decide which hairstyle I liked the best.

"Sorry," I said to Jason.

"You've been in the bathroom for a really long time," he said.

I showed him the pictures. "I'm trying to figure out my hair for tomorrow."

He took the camera from me and flipped through the pictures himself. "They all look the same to me," he said, handing it back.

Boys! They were completely and totally different hairstyles. There was nothing about them that was even remotely similar. "So which I one do you think I should do?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Like I said, I can't tell the difference."

"Well thanks for nothing," I said, sidestepping him to go to my room.

"But if you really want my opinion," he said.

"I do," I said.

"Then I think you should wear your hair down," he said. "It's, um, pretty like that."

"Oh," I said. "Thanks."

He half-smiled at me, and I made the mistake of looking into his big, brown eyes. Bad idea.

Toby, I reminded myself. My boyfriend. Who I was going to have sex with. "I have to go," I said to Jason, and hurried off, aware that I sounded ridiculous.

* * *

Friday afternoon, I was surprised when I got home from school and my two big brothers, Noah and Gordon, were there. I hadn't seen them since sometime over the summer. They didn't come home too often, and I was really happy to see them.

"What are you doing here?" I asked them, after I'd given both of them enormous hugs.

"It's Homecoming," said Gordon. "We came home."

"Besides," said Noah, "we wouldn't miss your big night for the world, Zaza."

My big night? My brothers didn't know I was going to have sex with Toby, did they?

My mother decided to order in Chinese food, since we all had to get into costumes and get ready. That way, none of us had to worry about cooking or cleaning up. My dad and Chance went to pick up our enormous Chinese order. When they came back, they needed help to cart all the food back inside.

Spreading all the food out on the dining room table, I was reminded of how wonderful my family was. We were loud. There were a lot of us. And we weren't your traditional family.

But there was so much love and laughter in my house. Noah and Chance were fighting over egg rolls. Cameron and Nick were making bets on who could eat the most rice. Jason and I helped my mom pour iced tea for everyone. My father roared at everyone to sit down.

We did. Everyone grabbed for the Chinese carton containers and began opening them up. It was pandemonium.

"Who got orange chicken?"

"That's mine!"

"No, it's not. It's mine."

"Here's another orange chicken. Calm down."

"Where's my crab rangoon? Don't tell me you forgot the crab rangoon."

"No, I ordered it. It's in here somewhere."

"Where?"

"I don't want to eat with chopsticks!"

"So get yourself a fork!"

"I need rice."

"Who ordered this? What is this?"

"Here's your crab rangoon. Hope you're happy."

And on and on it went. We traded food. We chattered happily. I realized that I might be angry with my parents sometimes, but that I really and truly loved them, and I loved my home. We were so happy together. Everything we did was part of our own little ritual. Our own way of doing things. I felt like I was contained in bubble full of happiness.

As I ate my pork fried rice, I thought about how wonderful our family was, and I thought about why my parents had decided to be foster parents. My mother hadn't thought she'd be able

to have children. She and my dad started out their relationship on their own, just the two of them. My dad's parents had died when he was in his early twenties. My mother's family hadn't approved of dad, and my grandmother had resolved not to have anything to do with my mother after that. My grandparents had a lot of money, and dad was too poor for them. They'd told my mom that if she continued to date my father, they'd cut her off. She'd chosen my dad over her family. She had one older sister, my Aunt Stephanie, who had tried to keep in touch with mom. I remembered seeing her once when I was very young, and we sometimes got Christmas cards from her. But Aunt Stephanie wasn't much of a force in my mom's life, either.

So there they were, a young couple, all alone, and probably going to be childless. They'd decided to adopt. After adopting Noah and my other older brother Gordon, my mother had gotten pregnant with me. She said I was her little miracle. But even though their home had now been full of children, my parents hadn't stopped. They'd wanted to open their home to as many children as they could. And that was why we were the way we were.

It might be annoying sometimes. It might mean that people teased me at school. But in the end, it was a great way to live. I loved my family. I sat at our dining room table, watching everyone interact. Watching the teasing. Watching the good-natured arguing over food. Even listening to the deafening noise. It was all amazing. I wouldn't have it any other way.

After dinner, we tossed the empty containers and stored the leftovers in the refrigerator. Then we went to put on our costumes. Last night, I'd decided on a complicated up do, my hair twisted into an intricate bun on the top of my head. But as I stared at myself in the mirror, I thought about Jason had said, and changed my mind. Instead, I just pulled up a few strands at the front of my head. I left the rest of it down. If Jason thought my hair was pretty down, then maybe

Toby would too. I curled the ends of my hair a little bit, so that it floated around my shoulders. I put on the dress I'd gotten from Goodwill. I applied makeup.

Surveying myself in the mirror, I decided I looked fresh and innocent, which was how a Vestal virgin should look. I hoped I looked good enough for what was about to be the most important night of my young life. I couldn't believe I was actually going to lose my virginity to Toby that night. I was too excited for words.

As I preened, my mother knocked on the door. I let her in. "Oh," she said when she saw me. "Azazel, you look beautiful."

"Thanks," I said, grinning. "I'm excited for the dance."

"Yeah," she said. "It's a big night."

Why was everyone calling this my big night? I hadn't told my mother about my plans with Toby.

"I brought you something," she said. "For your costume." She held up a necklace. Dangling from a silver chain was circular pendant. On the front, engraved in the silver, was a star, only the top point of it faced downwards.

"I don't know if it's period, mom," I said. "I'm supposed to be from ancient Rome."

"Just try it on," she said, moving behind me to clasp it behind my neck. I held my hair up for her. She was right. The necklace was the perfect length for the costume. It settled just above my cleavage—which wasn't overstated. There was a dress code for this dance, after all.

I touched it. "It's pretty," I said.

"It's very old," she said. "I received it right before I got pregnant with you, from Mrs. Cattle. You remember her?"

"Kind of," I said. Mrs. Cattle had died a few years back. She'd been really old, over a hundred. She'd lived in Bramford her entire life. Everyone thought she was kind of strange. I remember that in kindergarten, a few of the kids said that she was a witch.

"Well, she gave this to me, and she told me to wear it, and a few weeks later, I found out I was going to have you."

"Neat," I said. I liked the necklace more and more.

"It's good luck," she told me. "And I think tonight is a good night for you."

What *did* my mom know?

My mother hugged me. "Oh, Zaza, you look so grown up," she said. "I can't believe that you're already seventeen. I feel like I was holding you in my arms just days ago."

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Didn't adults know this kind of thing was totally cliché? Why did they say the same things over and over, anyway?

"Listen," she said. "You're ready."

Ready for what?

"I know you're going to do a wonderful job. I might not feel ready to let you go. You're my little girl. But I know you can do it. I know you won't let anyone down."

"Mom," I said, confused, "what are you talking about?"

She laughed. "I'm sorry, sweetie. You'll find out soon. I love you so much."