

breathless

by v.j. chambers

chapter thirteen

From: Renegade Son <settingsun007@yahoo.com>

To: Gerald Masterson <geraldm@christisking.org>

Subject: Headed your way

Father Gerald,

I'm headed your way, and I think J is too. Unfortunately, without the resources of the Sons, I've lost tabs on him. He seems to have run out of West Virginia, where I thought he'd be safe. We're both on the run, but I sincerely believe J will be heading back south. I hate to do this to you, but I'm calling in a favor, and I need you to hide me.

Send word to this new email address if there's some reason you can't.

-H

Marlena called to tell us that she would be back late, but that we should make ourselves comfortable. There was food in the refrigerator, there were blankets in the hall closets, and the couch in the living room pulled out into a bed. She said not to wait up. She had no idea how long she'd be gone.

Jason and I raided the refrigerator. There were some vegetables and eggs, so I made us omelets, even though it was dinnertime. Jason pronounced them delicious. Since my mom had done most of the cooking in my house, I realized I really didn't know much about cooking. The omelets were edible, however.

After Jason's story, we didn't talk much. I tried a few times, but Jason didn't really seem in the mood for conversation. Instead, we watched some television until we were both yawning. The only sleep we'd really gotten had been on the bus to New York, and we were tired.

As we got the blankets from the closet, Jason suggested that I sleep on the pullout couch and he sleep on the other couch. The other couch was a loveseat. There was no way he would fit. I told him not to be ridiculous. There wasn't any reason we couldn't both sleep in the same bed. Then, of course, I blushed to the roots of my hair.

Jason didn't argue with me. We made the bed. We switched out the lights. And then we both got on opposite sides of the bed. We were very careful to stay on our own side, each of us curling up on our sides with our backs to each other.

"Jason?" I whispered in the darkness.

"Yes?" he said.

"Are we going to be okay?"

He didn't answer for a minute. Then he said, "You can trust me."

And I did. I knew Jason could take care of himself. But what if I ruined everything? What if I was just too slow? Too clumsy? What if . . .

In horror, I realized that I could get Jason hurt. "Jason?" I said again.

But Jason was asleep. I could tell because he started to snore gently. It wasn't so loud that it disturbed me. It was actually kind of cute. Knowing he was asleep, I rolled over on my back and stared at the ceiling. I was exhausted, but I didn't feel like I could sleep. My mind was churning with all of the things that I'd found out over the past two days.

First of all, there was the story Jason had told me. I hadn't imagined the depth of his life before he'd come to Bramford. Compared to my life, Jason's had been so difficult. I could tell that he'd loved Anton. That he'd been crushed when Anton was killed. When I thought of him, basically all alone in the world, trying to deal with something like that, my heart broke for him. Jason had been through too much to have to go through any more pain, but it seemed like his life just wouldn't let up. All things being equal, the rest of his life should be easy, normal, and sane. But it didn't seem like that was in the cards for Jason.

The worst thing was, though, even though I felt sorry for Jason, my sympathy for him didn't compare to the aching hole I felt for my own losses. Just last night, I'd been sitting around the table with my family, laughing and talking. We'd been sharing our Chinese food. I remembered how happy and complete I'd felt. I remembered that I'd thought to myself that I wouldn't trade my family for anything. I remembered thinking how lucky I was.

But it had all turned to ashes. My family had been nothing like what they'd pretended to be. In the end, they'd wanted me to fulfill a role for them, not to simply love me. And they'd wanted me to do something unspeakable. They were all insane. Everything they'd taught me, everything I'd thought they were, it was a lie. I had been betrayed, and I had lost everything and everyone I loved.

I remembered my mother, stroking my hair in the basement, asking me to be her "strong girl." My mother had wanted me to be strong so that I could participate in ritual sex and then so that I could take someone else's life. The mother that I knew, that I thought that I knew, would never have asked me to do that. She would never have condoned such atrocities. My parents had always taught me to think for myself, to make my own way in the world. I couldn't believe that they had bought into that strange set of beliefs, so appalling and violent.

In some ways, I could hardly believe I'd managed to stay standing throughout last night. I had been driven by my desire to save Jason. That was all that had kept me upright. Because I had nothing left. All my hopes and dreams were shattered. I had no idea what to expect from the future. I had no idea where I was going or what I was doing. I was lost.

And I knew that in many ways, in every way, Jason's life had been so much harder than mine. But Jason was used to being adrift, to being cut free from ties, used to having no one to count on but himself. I didn't know how to handle it. I had no experience with feeling this way. So was it so wrong that I felt so sorry for myself?

And was it okay that I felt completely and totally terrified? I trusted Jason, but I didn't feel like I could lean on him in the way I wanted to lean on someone. I was used to having the structure and support of a loving family. Now, what did I have? I had Jason.

Sort of. Did I have Jason? How long was this arrangement between us going to last? Was he going to show me the ropes of running from place to place and then leave me on my own?

Simply because he'd thought I was attractive in Bramford didn't mean he still did. I was a different girl, then. I was in my element. In Bramford, I was strong and sure of myself. Now I was floundering. I was pathetic and needy. What boy, especially a boy who was sure of himself like Jason, wanted to have a girl like that around?

But I realized that I wasn't just worried that he would find my lack of abilities unattractive. I was worried that I would hold him back. I knew Jason felt obligations deeply. I could tell from the way that he'd taken me along with him to New York that he wanted to make sure I was safe. But Jason was dealing with very dangerous men who were trailing him everywhere he went. Adding me to the mix just made everything harder for him. I felt sorry for myself and worried about what would happen to me. But when I thought about something bad happening to Jason, it felt like my intestines were being ripped out. I didn't think I be alive and know I was responsible for harm coming to Jason.

I rolled back over onto my side, prepared for my thoughts to continue chasing themselves back and forth in my brain, but sleep suddenly dragged me under, and I was mercifully lost in the blackness of dreamlessness for hours.

I awoke to the sound of a door slam. Marlana's living room was suddenly flooded with light.

Sleepily, I raised my head. Marlana was standing in at the door, her face sweaty, her eyes wide and alert. "Jason, wake up," she said.

Jason sat straight up in bed. He rubbed his eyes. "What?" he said, and I was startled that he sounded so awake, even know we'd both been roused from a deep sleep.

Marlana knelt in front of him, pressing several cards into his hands. The IDs, I guessed. "I was followed," she said.

"Followed?" Jason asked.

I sat up, trying to shake the sleep from my brain. I still felt very, very tired.

"Several men in suits," she said. "Short hair cuts. Reminded me of Anton. They didn't think I saw them, but I did. You've got to get out of here. They're right behind me."

Jason leapt to his feet, shoving the cards she'd given him in his pocket and collecting the two guns he'd stolen from Bramford. "Come with us," said Jason. "I don't want to leave you here if they're coming after me."

Marlena ducked behind her beaded curtain. "Jason Wodden," she said, reappearing with a rifle, which she was loading, "in all the years you've known me, have you ever had any reason to suspect I couldn't take care of myself?"

I wished I could take care of myself. I was like a damsel in distress, needing Jason to protect me all the time. I wouldn't even have been able to get out of Bramford without him.

"These aren't your typical thugs, you know," Jason said.

And someone knocked on the door. "NYPD," said a voice, but the accent wasn't quite right. It sounded sort of . . . British.

"You're wasting time talking to me, when you should be going out the fire escape," said Marlena. "It's cute that you're being so gallant, but save it for your little girlfriend here."

God. I was just getting in the way of everything, wasn't I?

"Azazel's brave," said Jason. "And you be careful, Marlena."

The knock came again. "Open up, or we're breaking down the door," said the voice outside.

"Out!" said Marlena, pushing us through the beaded curtain and into her bedroom.

Jason opened the window. "You first," he told me.

I climbed out the window and onto the rickety metal fire escape. Jason followed me. Outside, the night air was cold. I shivered.

"Go, Azazel," Jason urged. "Down the steps."

And down I went, fast as I could, which apparently wasn't fast enough, because Jason was right on my heels. At the bottom of the steps, we had to jump about eight feet. I hesitated, only for a second, but Jason growled behind me, "Jump!"

I jumped. I stumbled when I hit the ground, catching myself with my hand and scraping up my palm. It hurt, but I didn't say anything. I didn't want to be a huge baby. I couldn't keep slowing Jason down so much. Jason landed beside me. He took my hand the way he had in Bramford, and we started running. Was it wrong that I really liked how his hand felt holding mine? Was this completely the wrong time to have thoughts like that?

"Come on," said Jason. "There's a church just up the block."

Church? What did a church have to do with anything?

We rushed up the street, and sure enough, there was a beautiful building wedged between the rectangular apartment buildings. It had towering spires, which were dwarfed by the buildings around it. The doors were twice the size of regular doors, huge and wooden with iron hinges. Jason and I hurried up the steps and through the doors.

Inside, the church was silent, but all the lights were on. There were rows of wooden pews, which opened onto an ornate altar at the front of the church. Rows and rows of lit candles sat in front of an enormous statue of a crucified Christ. I felt a little awed by the atmosphere. I'd never actually been inside a church. I'd seen pictures, seen them in movies and television, but church wasn't something my family had ever done. Obviously, I guess, considering they were Satanists.

I shoved aside my reverence, and turned to Jason. "I don't get it," I said. "Why are we in here?" After all, the doors were unlocked. They sure as heck weren't going to stop some crazy agents of the Sons from getting in.

"Sanctuary," he said. "The Sons respect any place of worship as a place that should be free of violence. Any church, temple, mosque, sweat lodge, whatever. If it's a place of worship, the Sons see it as consecrated to the All-Father."

"All-Father?"

"God," said Jason. "Whatever you want to call him. The Sons believe in God."

"Really?" I said.

"Absolutely. They just don't think that humans have the capacity to truly describe him, so they don't believe in any one incarnation of God."

"And they call him the All-Father?"

"That's what Anton called him. It's what Odin is called in Norse mythology."

"Huh," I said. Weird. "So we're safe in this church?"

"As long as we're inside, we're safe," said Jason.

I realized Jason was still holding my hand. Cool. We walked up the center of the church, between the pews, hand in hand. At the front of the church, we craned our necks up at the statue of Christ.

"How did they find us?" I asked.

Jason sighed. "I don't know. Maybe they've been keeping tabs on Marlana. Maybe Hallam followed us from Bramford." His eyes looked hollow, trained on the large crucifix.

"They always find me."

"I made it harder, didn't I? Harder for you to get away?"

Jason's eyes fell away from the statue. "It's always hard," he murmured.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"It's not your fault," he said. "When I think about what almost happened to you back in Bramford —" He broke off, shivering. "I was right there, in the basement. And I couldn't stop it. I thought I'd have to watch . . . I couldn't have taken that. I wanted to protect you."

Because I was delicate. Because I was weak. Because I needed protection. I made things dangerous for Jason. Even more dangerous than they already were. I didn't want to, but I pulled my hand out of his.

Jason looked down at his empty hand and then up at me, his eyes large and luminous. Then he folded his arms over his chest.

It would be easier for him without me. I knew that. I had to let him go. For his own sake.

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When a priest discovered us the next morning at dawn, huddled up asleep on separate pews, he politely asked us to leave, telling us the church sponsored a shelter just a few blocks away, where we could get food and blankets. Jason was cautious as we left the church, as if he were afraid that the Sons were waiting just outside the door to ambush us. But no one was there. The sun was just stealing into the sky, and above the buildings we could see the rosy fingers of dawn. As we walked out onto the streets of the city, for the first time since leaving Bramford, I felt free and buoyant. Maybe it was sky. Maybe it was the brisk air, which chilled my nose. But I simply felt happy and grateful to be alive.

Jason and I went into a little restaurant for breakfast. We drank orange juice and coffee, and I felt very cosmopolitan and mature. While I was in the bathroom, Jason used a payphone to call Marlana. "She's okay," he reported to me. "They left her apartment a mess and figured out we'd gone out the fire escape but had no idea where we'd gone."

It was good that Marlana was okay.

"We need to get out of the city, though," Jason said. "Luckily, Marlena came through with the IDs and credit card."

The waitress brought our food then. I'd got pancakes. Jason had got eggs and bacon. We ate without speaking for some time. The pancakes were very good. I was hungry.

"So," said Jason eventually, his mouth full of bacon. "We should figure where we're going to go."

We. The buoyant feeling I had came crashing down. I didn't think "we" were going anywhere.

I took a deep breath. I didn't want to say this, because I was afraid for myself, but I felt like it needed to be said. I was slowing Jason down. I was in the way. He was in real danger from the Sons. I didn't want to make it easier for them to catch him. "Jason," I said, "I'm not sure if I should stay with you."

"What?" he said. "Where would you go?"

"That's not the point," I said. "The point is that I'm slowing you down. I literally can't run as fast as you. And it's got to be harder to hide two people than it is to hide one. If the Sons got to you because of me, then I'd feel horrible."

"Where would you go?" Jason asked.

He was concerned about me. That was sweet. I had to reassure him not to worry about me, so that he'd be able to take care of himself. "I'd figure something out," I said. "You wouldn't have to worry about me."

"Like what would you figure out?"

God, he was stubborn. "I would . . ." I shrugged. "I don't know exactly."

Jason looked stunned. He sat back in his seat. "I can understand why you'd want to get away from me," he said in a quiet voice.

Of course he understood. He knew that I was weighing him down. My presence endangered him. "Good," I said. "So after breakfast, you should get out of the city, and I'll —"

"Wait," he said. "Okay, I know that it's dangerous for you being around me. And I appreciate your wanting to go someplace away from that and away from me. But I can't leave you in the city by yourself. There are other dangers besides the Sons, you know. You're just a girl."

Just a girl. That was it exactly. He even thought of me as something hard to protect and take care of. "No, Jason, I don't want you to have to try to take care of me anymore. That's the whole point. If you stay here and try to help me get safe, then the Sons will find you. We can't waste time."

"You want to get away from me that badly?"

What? Had he been listening to me at all? "It's not about me wanting to get away from you, Jason," I said.

"That's what you just said," he said.

"No," I said. "I want to stay with you. I'm scared to be without you. But that's selfish of me, and I can't put you in danger."

Jason looked confused. He didn't say anything for several minutes. The waitress came back and asked if there was anything else we needed. "Just the check," said Jason. He shook his head at me, still looking confused. "You don't put me in danger," he said. "I'm always in danger. It's the way things are. You can't add to that in any way."

"I slow you down," I said. "I'm just a girl. I can't . . . shoot guns or beat people up."

"Sure you can," he said. "You just don't know how yet."

The waitress brought back the check. Jason threw several bills on top of it and stood up. I stood up with him.

"So, let me get this straight," he said. "You do want to stay with me."

"Yes," I said. Maybe I shouldn't have admitted it. Even though Jason said I couldn't put him in any worse danger, I didn't know if I really believed him.

"And you aren't worried about what kind of danger I'm putting you in, you're just worried about me?"

"Yes," I said.

We left the restaurant. The sun had climbed a little higher into the sky. It was reflecting off the tall buildings that surrounded us, like it was splintered by thousands and thousands of mirrors.

"Azazel," said Jason, "as long as you want to be around me, I want you to be around me. Okay?"

I nodded.

Impulsively, Jason closed the distance between us in one quick step. His arms went around me, and he pulled me against his chest. His eyes searched mine questioningly, waiting for me to tell him to stop. When I didn't, he crushed his lips against mine.

We stood in the brilliant New York sunlight, cars honking on the street around us, people swerving around us on the sidewalk, ignoring us completely, and we kissed for a very long time.

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Jason didn't let go of my hand as we walked to the subway station. He didn't let go of my hand while we bought our metro cards. And he didn't let go of my hand while we sat down in the subway car.

We grinned at each other as we sat next to each other. I watched the stone walls of the underground tunnels fly past us. Being with Jason like this, our hands entwined, so close, it just

felt right. I'd never felt anything like this before. And I knew that from the first time I'd seen Jason, I'd begun to feel it. I pictured him, running out the woods, sweating and panting. He'd been so alive then. When he'd burst into my life, he'd kick-started something in me that hadn't ever woken up before. He'd brought me to life. Real life. All of the things I'd thought I'd felt for Toby had been adolescent and immature. They were products of living life with the mute button on, in black and white. Jason turned the volume up to eleven. He let the colors in.

Jason squeezed my hand. He leaned close. "So," he said, "this is what we'll do. We'll take the subway, and then we'll take the ferry over the Hudson into New Jersey. You ever been on a ferry?"

"No," I said.

"So that will be cool," he said.

New Jersey? I had a thought suddenly. "You know," I said, "my Aunt Stephanie lives in New Jersey."