

breathless

by v.j. chambers

chapter seven

To: Hallam Wakefield <hwakefi@risingsun.org>

From: Alfred Norwich <anorwic@risingsun.org>

Subject: News?

Hallam,

You mentioned you might have news when you checked in by phone yesterday. What have you found? And where are you? We can't find a trace of you in New York. Have you left? Please contact me as soon as possible by any means necessary.

Yours in pursuit of the Purpose,

Alfred

Nobody knew where Jason was.

Sheriff Damon was in our dining room, talking to my parents. I had just missed the bus to school, and I hadn't heard from Toby since last night. I had no idea if he was going to pick me up or not. I didn't even know if I was going to make it school. My mom had sent the guys out the door this morning. She'd even fed them a balanced breakfast. I had stayed behind in case the sheriff wanted to ask me some questions. Right now, I was in the living room. I could hear my parents talking to Sheriff Damon. I didn't know if I was supposed to be listening to them or not.

"A few other people in town say they spoke to a British man with a picture of Jason," said Sheriff Damon. "They probably sent him here."

It all made sense now. Why Jason had given up so easily when he was talking to my dad last night. Jason had been planning on leaving. He wouldn't stay here if he knew he was endangering us. I knew that much about him. I just wished I understood why he was running and what kind of danger he was in.

"Do we have any idea who this man is?" asked my mom.

No sound.

"None?" asked my mother, sounding desperate. Maybe Sheriff Damon had shaken his head.

"I'm sorry, Jodi," said the sheriff. "I know how important this boy is. To all of us."

Important? Weird way to put it.

"For all we know, then," said my dad, "this man got into the house last night and took Jason away."

Oh. I hadn't even considered that. I was sure that Jason had run away. But my dad was right. Jason could have been captured. Taken against his will. I gaped in horror at the thought of it.

"It's possible," said Sheriff Damon. "But let's not sell Jason short. You didn't see the number he did on the Nelson boy. I don't think anyone could have gotten Jason out of here without waking you all up."

He was right. Jason would have put up a fight. And Jason could fight. I knew that. I'd seen it first hand.

"Then we think he ran away," said my mother.

"Yes," said Sheriff Damon.

"Oh no," said my mom.

But Jason could take care of himself, couldn't he? He wouldn't end up hurt or...worse. Would he? I couldn't stand this. I was suddenly very angry with Jason for leaving like this. Didn't he know how worried we'd all be? Didn't he think anyone else cared about him?

"Don't worry," said Sheriff Damon. "Finding Jason is my first priority. I've got all three of the deputies out there, and we're alerting the entire community by the radio and the internet to be on the look out for him."

"But Jim," said my mom, "this county is so big. He could slip out."

"We can't let him do that," said my dad. "We can't let him escape."

Escape? That was another strange way of putting things. Or maybe I was just distraught. I hoped that we could find Jason, but my mom was right. Jason could get away so easily. We didn't even know when he left or what kind of head start he had on us.

"We'll find him," said Sheriff Damon. "I'm doing everything in my power."

I wandered into the dining room. "I hope you do find him," I said. "I'm so worried."

"Azazel!" said my mother. "Have you been out there the whole time?"

"Yeah," I said.

"You missed the bus," she said.

"You told me to stay to talk to Sheriff Damon," I said.

"Oh," she said. "Right. Well, I guess I'll have to take you to school. Or is Toby coming?"

But she didn't ask me that. She asked the sheriff.

"Aren't you going to school, Dad?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I'm taking the day off to help search for Jason."

"I want to help!" I said. "Please?"

"No," said my dad. "You need to go to school. And maybe you've been spending too much time with Jason, anyway." He turned to the sheriff. "Get Toby here."

"Don't worry," said Sheriff Damon. "He's on his way."

So Toby and I weren't fighting anymore? I was so confused. I couldn't even remember why we'd been fighting last night. But I wasn't sure if I wanted to see Toby. For some reason, I didn't think he'd like it that I was so concerned about Jason. Maybe I should—

But right then, Toby appeared at the kitchen door, dangling his truck keys.

"Azazel!" he exclaimed. He threw open the door and ran to me, gathering me in his arms.

Wow. This was weird. Wasn't Toby mad at me for some reason?

"I can't believe I dropped you off here, and that man almost got to you!" he said, covering my face with kisses. "If anything had happened to you, I never would have forgiven myself."

Me? "I'm fine," I said. It was Jason who wasn't fine. But I didn't say that out loud.

I pushed out of Toby's arms. I gave my parents a pleading look. "I don't think I can concentrate on school today," I said. "Please let me help look for Jason."

Toby pulled me back. "No way. That's way too dangerous. I'm not letting you out my sight."

"My thoughts exactly," said my dad.

So I went to school. Toby fawned over me the whole way there. I tried to respond to Toby. He seemed genuinely concerned about me. And I was grateful, especially since Toby had seemed distant lately. But I couldn't appreciate it since I was so worried. I tried to pay attention in class, but I was too distracted. I kept thinking about Jason wandering around in the woods somewhere, running from the man who'd been in my house last night.

In my imagination, Jason looked exactly like he had the first night I'd seen him, desperate and terrified, running for his life. The man didn't seem polite or civil anymore at all. In my mind, his face was twisted into an evil sneer, and he was gaining on Jason.

Try as I might, I couldn't help but picture him catching Jason. I imagined all kinds of unspeakable horrors that he imposed on the boy. Gunshots riddling Jason's body. The man stabbing Jason over and over like in a horror movie. Jason tied up and bloody. The man beating him or burning him or cutting him. It was horrible.

Ms. Campbell asked me to read my journal prompt in first block. I hadn't even written one. I just shook my head, muttering that I couldn't. In French, we had twenty minutes at the end of class to work on a translation. I tried to complete it, but the words kept swimming in front of

my eyes, changing places with each other, sinking into the page. In history, my father's substitute put on a movie. Unfortunately, it was a documentary about the Holocaust. Watching those people be tortured and killed on the screen only fueled my macabre fantasies. I almost left the room three times, and towards the end of class, I broke down in tears.

The bell rang, and I just sat in my desk with my head down, my shoulders shaking as I sobbed.

Toby touched my back. "Was it that bad?" he asked. "Did that man scare you that bad?"

I lifted my tearstained face. "No, it's not me," I said. "I'm worried about Jason. I can't imagine what's happening to him right now."

Toby pulled his hand back like I'd burned him. "Oh," he said.

I didn't say anything else. But I didn't understand why Toby wasn't worried about Jason. Sure, he didn't seem to like him very much, but Jason was a human being. Surely Toby had to respect that much at least. Even if he didn't like Jason, he couldn't wish him pain, could he?

I mopped at my face and got up. We went to lunch. Lilith met me in the lunch line. She and Toby stared each other down. I knew Lilith wished Toby would leave me with her, and I also knew that Toby wasn't going to go anywhere without me. They were going to have to put up with each other if they wanted to be around me. They glared at each other, then both broke eye contact.

Lilith focused on me. "God, Zaza, are you okay? Have you been *crying*?"

"I'm fine," I said.

"It must have been awful," she said. "That weird man in your house. You must be so freaked out."

I nodded. She could think what she wanted.

"She's worried about Jason," said Toby in a flat voice.

Lilith met Toby's eyes, a look of concern on her face. "Really?" she asked.

Toby nodded.

Why weren't they at each other's throats? I hadn't heard them speak one civil word to each other in four years.

Lilith looked back at me. "Zaza," she said, "I thought I told you not to get attached to him."

"You did what?" demanded Toby.

Lilith looked back at him. "He saved her from Adam and Joe one day. She seemed... I didn't know what to say to her."

"Adam and Joe," repeated Toby, confused. He turned to me. "Why didn't you tell me about that?"

I shrugged. That seemed so long ago. Like another life. What did it matter now, anyway?

"You shouldn't have done that," Toby said.

I glared at him. "I didn't want you to get like this," I said.

"I meant Lilith," said Toby, shooting her a loaded gaze.

"I guess not," said Lilith. "Didn't make any difference anyway."

There was something about their conversation that was strange, but I couldn't think about it, because I was still too worried about Jason. Even as I watched them talk, a new horror occurred to me. Maybe the man wasn't alone. Maybe there was a group of them. Maybe they would capture Jason and torture him and then hang him by his neck in the woods somewhere, and no one would find his body but the birds—

I gasped, covering my mouth with my hand, banishing the image from my brain. If anything happened to Jason, I didn't know what I'd do. I couldn't handle it. I needed to know if he was okay. I needed to be *doing* something. I was going to sneak out of school and go look for him. I had to. I couldn't stay here any longer. I was going crazy.

"She's right, though, Azazel," Toby said.

What? Right about what? What was he talking about?

"You shouldn't get attached to him," Toby said.

"I'm not attached," I exploded. "I'm just worried. He's a human being, for God's sake. I don't think it's criminal that I want him to be okay."

"You're a mess," said Toby. "You can't concentrate on anything." As if to prove his point, he nudged me forward in the lunch line.

I walked forward, annoyed. "Look," I said, "if this was happening to any of the guys, I'd be worried like this. They might be foster kids, but they're like my brothers." Even as I said it, though, I wondered if it were true. Was I a mess? Was I unnaturally worried about Jason? I did care for him, very much. But were my feelings toward Jason really brotherly?

I didn't have time to contemplate it further, because our principal came into the cafeteria. He stood in the center of the room and motioned for quiet. It took several minutes, but eventually, a hush came over the cafeteria.

"I have an announcement," said the principal. "I know many of you have heard that one of our students, Jason Wodden, is missing. A team has been looking for him all morning. I'm pleased to announce that the search is over. Jason has been found and is currently in his foster parents' custody."

I started to cry again. I couldn't help it. I was so relieved.

The principal went on. "This means that all events cancelled by members of the search party are now back in session. Bus 56 will run as scheduled this evening on its regular route, since Mr. Gafferty won't be out on the search. Thank you."

They'd found Jason! They'd found Jason. I was so glad. All of that worry, and he was okay. He was at home. He wasn't dead. I'd never felt so grateful in my life. I closed my eyes, letting the tears rush out.

I realized I had to see him. "Toby," I said, "you have to take me home."

Toby didn't look pleased with my reaction to the news or my request. "It's the middle of the school day," he said.

"You're eighteen. You can sign yourself out," I said.

"But you're not eighteen. You can't sign yourself out," he countered.

"Who cares?" I said. "Let's just leave."

"If they catch us, we'll get ISS," he said.

"I don't care!" I said.

"No," he said. "I'm not taking you. Now, let's get lunch."

"Fine," I said. "Lilith, you take me."

Lilith bit her lip. "Zaza, I don't think that's a good idea," she said.

"Come on," I said. "Like you care about ISS."

She considered. "Usually, I'm all about skipping school, but I just don't think that you should rush home to see Jason. He's probably not in the mood for company, and—"

"I'll walk," I said. Both my boyfriend and my best friend were completely insane. Couldn't they see how important this was to me? And furthermore, didn't they care to see if Jason was okay? What was wrong with them?

"I'll take you," Toby said. He didn't sound happy about it though.

I hugged him hard. "Thank you," I said. "Thank you so much."

"And this is when you hug me," he muttered. "Great."

I stood on my tiptoes and kissed him. "You're the best boyfriend ever," I said.

"Because I'll help you ditch school to see another guy?"

I rolled my eyes. "You know it's not like that. I thought you were over this jealousy thing."

Lilith shook her head at him. "I can't believe you're doing this," she said to him.

"Shut up, Lilith," said Toby.

That was more like the Toby-Lilith exchanges I was used to. Jason was found and everything was back to normal. The world was perfect. I took Toby's hand. "Let's go," I said.

"Right now?" asked Toby. "But we haven't eaten lunch yet."

"I can't eat right now. I'm too excited," I said.

I was terrified teachers would stop us in the halls or in the parking lot. But both the halls and the parking lot were empty. Once we were in Toby's truck, the drive back to my house seemed to take hours and hours. I thought it would never end. On our way, I wondered how Jason was. Had he been hurt at all? Had he run away or had he been captured? If he'd been captured, had he gotten away? Would he look dirty and tired? Would he just want to sleep? Would he tell me everything?

Fat chance of that. Jason never told me *anything*.

Finally, however, we did make it back to my house. Toby didn't come in. "I'm going back to school," he grumbled. "Maybe if I go back, I won't get in as much trouble."

That was fine with me. Toby dropped me at the top of my driveway, and I ran all the way down the hill to the door. I burst inside.

My mother and father were in the kitchen with Sheriff Damon, two of the deputies, several members of the search party, and, yes, Jason. But Jason was handcuffed. There were scratches on his face. His clothes were a little worse for wear. And the expression on his face was not happy.

I didn't care. I was so happy to see him, I bounded across the room and flung my arms around him. He couldn't hug me back because his arms were handcuffed behind his back. But he did smile when he saw me.

"You're okay," I said. "I was so worried."

"I'm fine," he said.

I pulled back and looked into his eyes, shaking my head. "I'm so glad you're okay. You have no idea what I thought might have happened to you."

"Nothing happened," he said, and he grinned at me. His grin looked like the grin in the picture. A real grin, not like his usual brief one.

"What are you doing here?" asked my dad.

And both Jason's and my grins faded.

I turned on my father. "I had to see for myself," I said.

"You should be at school."

"Dad!" I said. "I risked ISS to get here. I'm willing accept the consequences of my actions, nonproductive as they may be."

"Your mother's taking you back to school," he said.

"No she's not!" I said. "I'm staying here. And why is Jason handcuffed?"

My father strode over to me, took my by the arm and led me out of the house. What was wrong with him? My dad never forced me to do things. My parents always wanted me to make my own decisions. And I'd made my own decision. They couldn't make me go back to school!

But they did.

* * *

Later that evening, I was sprawled on my bed in my room working on the French assignment I couldn't get done earlier. Someone knocked on my door.

"Come in," I called.

Jason came into my room. He sat down on the bed next to me. Startled, I sat up straight. He was very close to me, and my eyes settled on different areas of his body. His shoulders were broad. His forearms were covered in downy dark hair. His fingers were thick and powerful. I shook myself. Forced myself to look at his face. "Hi," I said.

"Azazel, you have to help me get out of here," he said.

"What?" I said. "No." After all of that, after I'd just gotten him back, there was no way I was helping him leave again. I wanted him as close as possible. I couldn't handle the worry.

"You don't understand," he said. "It's not safe for me to be here. If anything happened to you—to your family—I wouldn't ever be able to forgive myself."

I hadn't had any time to talk to Jason. Dinner had been a boisterous affair, full of the regular noise my large family made. Somehow, the subject of Jason's escape had been avoided over mounds of spaghetti and meatballs. We hadn't talked about my leaving school early to come see him either. Instead, my mother had dominated the conversation, asking the guys all about their schoolwork. Since that was the last thing they actually wanted to talk about, they'd tried to change the subject often, without much success. My mom was persistent. After dinner, I'd gone

back to my room to work on the huge pile of homework I had. Now I had Jason to myself. "What happened, Jason?" I asked. "Did you run away? Did that man take you away?"

"I left," he said. "I haven't seen Hallam since last night."

"Hallam?"

"That's his name," said Jason.

I nodded.

"Sheriff Damon says that no one else has seen him since yesterday either, but that doesn't mean anything," said Jason. "He's out there. And he's not going to give up until he finds me. That's why you have to help me get out of here."

"I'm not helping you run off so that man—Hallam—can get you," I said. "If I did that, and something happened to *you*, I wouldn't be able to forgive *myself*."

He sighed. "I can look after myself," he said. "I'd be fine. But here...I'm like a trapped rat."

It was true. Jason was practically on house arrest. He could go to school and come home. That was it. "Even if I wanted to," I said, "I couldn't." I gestured to Jason's ankle, where he wore an ankle monitor.

Jason glowered at the little black device. "Sheriff Damon was excited about putting this on me," he said. "Apparently, the department never gets to use it."

If Jason went anywhere besides school, the ankle monitor would send a signal to the police. It also transmitted his location, so that they could track him down.

"How would you get around the monitor?" I asked.

"I'd have to get it off," he said. "If I could do that, would you help me?"

"How would you get it off?"

"It's not indestructible. Of course, after I took it off, they'd know and come for me immediately." He ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "Maybe you're right. Maybe it's hopeless."

Another thought occurred to me. "Do you want to leave?" Maybe Jason just didn't like it here.

He turned to me. "No," he said. "I don't want to. I wish I could stay here forever."

So did I. "So, stay," I said.

"But Hallam—"

"Let the police deal with Hallam."

"They'd be no match for him," said Jason, shaking his head.

Really? I believed Jason when he said that Hallam was dangerous, but the idea of one guy overtaking numerous police officers? It seemed unreal. I caught Jason's eyes with my own. "I don't want you to leave," I said.

Jason gazed into my eyes. His lips parted slowly. Our faces were so close. I looked at his lips. I thought about—

And then I tore my gaze away from Jason. What was wrong with me? Frantically, I looked around the room for something else to talk about.

"We finished *1984* today in English," I said. "You missed it." I still didn't look at him.

"That's too bad," said Jason. "I really like that book. Orwell is brilliant."

"Yeah," I said. "He really is."

We were quiet. I still wasn't looking at Jason.

"Should I go?" Jason asked.

I swung my eyes back to him violently. "No! I don't want you to leave. I don't know how to make that clearer to you!"

"I meant your room," said Jason.

"Oh." I felt stupid. "No, you can stay. It's fine."

"Okay," he said.

And then we didn't say anything for a long time.

"Um..." I floundered. "Do you read stuff like Orwell for fun?"

"Sure," said Jason. "I guess. It's been a while since I read anything for fun. What about you?"

"I like Dan Brown," I said. "I think stuff like that—like secret societies and the Illuminati—is interesting."

"If you like the Illuminati, you should read Robert Anton Wilson," said Jason.

Book recommendations, huh? I liked Jason. There were so many layers to him. I just wanted to unpeel them all. He was so enigmatic, like a puzzle. I wanted to solve him. Understand him.

Jason looked serious again. "I can't stay, Azazel," he said.

"In my room? Sure you can. I mean, I do eventually have to get back to my French homework, but—"

"I mean here. I mean in your house. I can't be here."

"You have to," I said. "How are you going to leave?"

He made a face. "I know," he said. "And all of that is just strange. I'm not allowed to leave." He pointed at the ankle monitor. "This is overkill, don't you think?"

It did seem like everyone was trying very, very hard to keep Jason from going anywhere. I was grateful, but I did think they only gave ankle monitors to criminals.

Jason stood up. Faced me. "When Sheriff Damon found me hitchhiking, he handcuffed me and threw me in the back of his car."

"Well," I said. "You are my parents' foster child, legally. They have a responsibility to you. Technically, you're legally bound to be here."

"I guess," said Jason. "But there was a search party, and everyone was on red alert to find me. That doesn't make any sense."

Sure it did. We'd all been worried about Jason's safety. Well, I'd been worried about Jason's safety. I guess everyone else had too. Was he right? Was it too much? "Maybe you're just not used to what it's like for people to care about you," I said.

"Maybe," said Jason. "But I don't think so. Something weird is going on in this town."

* * *

As I was falling asleep that night, I couldn't help but think about what Jason had said. Was something weird going on in Bramford? Things had gotten strange after Jason arrived, but I couldn't put my finger on why exactly that was. For the most part, things were going on exactly the way they had been. Nothing was strange.

Nobody liked it when I spent time with Jason. Toby was jealous of him. Lilith had told me to stay away from him. My dad had made a comment that I'd been spending too much time with him. But maybe they were all just concerned about my safety. If Jason were tied to some dangerous group of people who were tracking him, it made sense that they wouldn't want me to be around him all the time.

There was also the fact that Lilith and Toby had both said something about not being allowed to tell me things or to do things with me. Who was telling them that? Who said they weren't allowed? And today in the lunch line, they'd been almost civil to each other for a second. Then they'd been talking about something they both understood, but I didn't understand. What was it that Toby and Lilith had in common? How could they have anything in common? They hated each other. They'd hated each other for years. I didn't understand. That was definitely weird.

But it didn't really mean anything, did it? There were lots of reasons why Lilith and Toby could say they weren't allowed to do something. It was probably unrelated. I was worried because I'd been talking to Jason. Jason was paranoid, with good reason. I could tell that he hadn't had an easy life. He probably saw conspiracies and danger under every rock. Talking to him was making me paranoid. That was all there was to it.

Then there was the mystery of Jason himself. He appeared out of nowhere, running for his life from an unseen person or group of people. He claimed the people after him were dangerous. That they were fanatics—Freemasons with guns. Jason was usually composed and unemotional, but he knew how to fight. I'd watched him incapacitate at least three guys who looked bigger and stronger than him. He was very well educated. He'd read all kinds of things. He was smart. He could out-argue my dad, and Ms. Campbell was dazzled by his brilliance.

Hallam—the man who'd come after him—had claimed Jason was his brother, and there'd been a certain sincerity to what he had to say. I'd almost wanted to believe him. In the picture he'd brought, Jason looked happy. Jason made his past sound like it had been horrible. Had it always been horrible? At one point, when that picture had been taken, he'd been happy. I had to consider the possibility that Jason wasn't telling the truth. What had happened to him? Why was

he running? And were we all in as much danger as he claimed? I didn't know the answer to any of those questions.

I did know something else, though. Something unsettling. There was something to Toby's accusations. Earlier that night, when Jason had been sitting on my bed, so close to me, I'd looked at his face, and I'd thought about kissing him. I'd been out of my mind with worry when I thought he was in danger. And I liked being around Jason. The thought of being around him for an indefinite period of time sounded like a wonderful idea to me.

It wasn't too serious. I still loved Toby. Toby and I had been through a lot together. He was the person who I wanted to lose my virginity to. I wanted us to be together for a very long time. I'd never do anything to hurt him. I knew that.

But Jason was beautiful and mysterious and kind of dangerous. He'd saved me. And when I was around him... But none of that meant anything. I didn't want to worry about it too much. I had a crush on Jason. That was all. I had to be careful, because I owed it to Toby, to the man I loved, to be faithful. These feelings I had for Jason would fade away eventually. But I did have to acknowledge they existed.