

breathless

by v.j. chambers

chapter nine

To: Alfred Norwich <anorwic@risingsun.org>

From: Hallam Wakefield <hwakefi@risingsun.org>

Subject: Checking in

Alfred,

Sorry it's taken me so long to be in touch. Guess I worried you. My lead in New York didn't pan out, and the news I thought I might have didn't turn out to be anything. I haven't got anything for you. I feel like Jason's just vanished.

I'm going further north. I'm going to see if I can follow what I'm beginning to think is a cold trail.

Sorry I haven't got anything to report.

Yours in the pursuit of the Purpose,

Hallam

Toby picked me up in his truck. His Michael Myers mask was on the seat next to him. When he saw me, his eyes lit up. "You look amazing," he said.

I wished I could say the same thing, but Toby was wearing an old blue jumpsuit, and he was carrying a fake knife as a prop. He hadn't felt the need to look nice for what was going to be the biggest night of our relationship. Still, he was gorgeous as always, and I was too excited to breathe.

We drove to the dance, both of us nervous and excited. We kept attempting to start conversations, talking over each other, then dissolving into laughter. In the parking lot at the school, he leaned over to kiss me. We started making out heavily. If it had been up to me, it probably would have happened right then and there. Toby started putting his hands places he'd never put them before, and he didn't fight my hands when I put them between his legs. We got a little sweaty and a little out of breath and were in danger of starting to lose our clothes. But Toby stopped me.

"Patience," he said to me.

"God," I groaned. "I've been having patience forever."

He laughed. "We've got a long night. We've got to go to the dance."

"Do we?" I asked. "Can't we just go to your house now?"

He chuckled. "It's the Homecoming Dance of our senior year. You really just want to miss it?"

So, I took a deep breath, composed myself, and reapplied my lipstick. Toby picked up his mask, but didn't put it on. He took my hand, and we walked to the dance together. The gym had been transformed for the Homecoming Dance. There were banners on the walls. One said, "Happy Homecoming." The other said, "Happy Halloween." Tables lined the walls, covered with black tablecloths. There were orange and black streamers covering the ceiling. The lights were off in the gym, and the entire room was lit by electric candelabras, which had been attached to the walls. The atmosphere was spooky and a little cheesy, but it had a certain charm.

Once inside the dance, I spotted Lilith. I couldn't tell what her costume was supposed to be. All I could tell was that it had a plunging neckline, and you could see half of her very ample breasts. I was amazed she hadn't been kicked out for violating the dress code. Once I saw her, I wanted to go and say hi, but I didn't want to leave Toby, so I just waved.

"Go talk to her," said Toby, nudging me.

"I don't want to leave you," I said, looking up into his eyes.

He smiled down at me. "I'm not going anywhere. Go on. Go say hi to Lilith."

"Okay," I said.

We kissed. "I love you," he said.

"I love you," I said.

I didn't drop his hand until we were too far away to hold on anymore. And when I walked away, Toby pulled his mask over his head.

Lilith hugged me when I got to her. "I'm sorry I was such a bitch last night on the phone," she said. "I'm getting my period, and I haven't gotten laid in forever, and I was a horrible best friend."

"It's okay," I said, forgiving her instantly.

"It's so not. You needed me last night, and I let you down," she said. "So...what kind of underwear are you wearing? Thong?"

"Eew," I said. "Like I want dental floss up my butt."

"Thongs are sexy," she said.

"I'm wearing lacy boy shorts," I said.

She considered. "With a matching bra?"

"Of course."

"Nice," she said.

"You think? It's not too...I don't know, girly and innocent?"

"Considering Toby's made you wait this long, he probably likes girly and innocent," she said.

"I hope so," I said. "I'm so nervous."

"It's gonna be great," she said. "You'll see. You're never going to forget this night as long as you live."

I took a shuddering breath. "I know. Oh my God!"

"Oh my God!" said Lilith, and we both squealed, hugging each other.

And I looked across the room, just in time to see the guys come into the dance. Chance and Nick had gone for easy costumes. They had on scary rubber masks with jeans and a t-shirt. Cameron hadn't done much better. He was dressed as a Jedi, which meant he was wearing a dark

bathrobe with a plastic lightsaber tucked into it. But Jason... Jason was dressed as a pirate. He had a huge flowing white shirt, which was open at the collar. His black breeches were tight against his legs. His hair was hidden under a bandana and he wore an eye patch. And...as usual...I couldn't stop staring at him. Dammit.

I resolved to pay no attention to Jason. Instead, I spotted Toby across the room, said goodbye to Lilith, and went over to him. I was going to be attached to Toby for the rest of the night. I wasn't even going to *think* about Jason.

And for the most part, I did a good job. I danced with Toby. I talked to our friends. I took particular pleasure in the moment when Eve and Sherry were looking over my costume. "What are you dressed as?" asked Sherry.

"A Vestal virgin," I retorted.

They actually looked ashamed. Good. Bitches.

And as midnight neared, when the dance would be over, I began to get more and more anxious and more and more excited. I knew that once the dance was done, Toby and I would go to his house. I wondered what it would be like. I wondered if Toby had made a trail of rose petals or something ridiculous like that. I wondered if it would hurt. I'd read romance novels. I knew that there was sometimes blood involved in this entire thing. But I also knew that most people didn't have hymens in this day of tampons, and I wasn't too worried. Still.

I thought about going to talk to Lilith. Asking her a zillion questions. But then, I didn't. I wasn't sure I wanted to know. What happened between Toby and me would be our thing. It wouldn't be what had happened to every other girl. It would be my story. My first time. And I loved Toby, and he loved me. So it would have to be perfect. Because too many things had gone wrong for this to be ruined. I deserved one perfect high school memory.

Even though I'd promised not to think about Jason or look at him, every so often, I'd caught sight of him as the dance wore on. He was always alone, sitting at a table by himself, the way he did at lunch. I felt bad about that. But I didn't know what to do. I couldn't leave Toby to hang out with Jason. Not on this night of all nights.

Around eleven o'clock, Toby and I were slow dancing. His mask was ridiculous and not a little creepy, and I wanted him to take it off. When I'd asked, though, he said he didn't have much of a costume without it, so I'd dropped it. Because I didn't feel like looking at a mutilated William Shatner face, I was looking over Toby's shoulder at the rest of the dance. And I saw that Eric Nelson had approached Jason.

"Uh oh," I said.

"What?" asked Toby.

I pointed.

Toby sighed. "God," he said. "It never fails, does it? Jason has to ruin everything."

"It's not his fault," I said.

"Spare me," said Toby. "You take Jason, I'll get Eric."

We hurried over to the two of them.

I could hear Eric talking as we approached. "I'm ready, anytime, anywhere," he was saying. "Just say the word, dumbfuck."

Toby and I intercepted them. Toby put his arm around Eric and led him away. I looked at Jason. "Sorry about Eric," I said.

He shrugged. "Guy's a jerk."

"Yeah," I said. Jason wasn't wrong.

"You don't have to hang out with me," said Jason. "You look like you're having a great time."

"You look like you're not," I said. "And Toby's going to be busy talking Eric down anyway."

"I'm fine," said Jason. "It's just cool to actually be at a high school dance. I never thought I'd get to do anything like this."

"But you're just sitting here alone," I said.

"You wanna go for a walk?" Jason asked.

"You mean leave the gym?" I said. "That would be against the rules."

Jason smirked. "Yeah," he said.

"Sure," I said.

We walked past the bathrooms. The hall was dark and empty. Jason rounded a corner and pulled me after him. Now we were alone in a different dark hallway. No one could see us, and we couldn't see anyone else. Occasionally, we heard chattering as girls left the bathroom or entered it, but other than that, we were alone.

Jason took off his eye patch. "Thing's annoying," he said by way of explanation.

We'd stopped walking. Instead, we stood facing each other. The wall was behind me. I backed up, trying to put some distance between Jason and me. Jason just moved closer. I swallowed. I was beginning to think this was a bad idea.

I could see Jason's dusky skin through the opening of his collar. It looked soft, like velvet. His dark eyes glowed intensely through the darkness of the hallway. And he was really, really close to me.

"Um, Jason?" I said.

"No," he said. "Don't say anything. I want to...talk to you."

I didn't say anything.

"Why are you with Toby?" he asked me.

Oh God. This was a bad conversation to have.

"And don't say it's because you love him," said Jason, "because I don't think you do."

"Of course I do!" I protested. Now more than ever, I did. "I love Toby."

"Do you really?" Jason asked, and he was closer now. I hadn't thought it was possible for him to be closer, but he was. We were practically touching.

"Why are you asking me this?" I said, trying to will myself to push Jason away. Unfortunately, I didn't really think I wanted him away. I liked being close to him like this.

"Cameron said you were really freaked out when I was gone," said Jason, his voice lower and deeper.

"I was worried," I said.

"When I got back, you hugged me in the kitchen." There was a husky edge to his voice.

My breath caught in my throat. "I was glad to see you," I said, hating how breathless my voice sounded.

"Were you?"

I fought with myself. Clenched my fists in determination. And with every shred of strength in my body, I squeaked out, "You're too close."

Immediately, Jason backed up. There was at least a foot of space between us.

I took a shaking breath. Good. That was good. Wasn't it?

"Maybe I'm wrong," said Jason. "But when I saw you in the kitchen, you put your arms around me, there was something in your eyes." He wasn't looking at me anymore. He was

looking at the floor, at the wall, everywhere except my eyes. "Believe me, Azazel, if I didn't think there was a chance that... If you hadn't told me what Hallam said, if I didn't think that there was a possibility that I'd be here for any period of time, I wouldn't be doing this."

He looked at my face again. "But I watched you tonight, with him. And I've heard people saying things, like you two are going to...tonight. And if I'm going to stay here, and I'm going to have to see you every day, I can't watch you with him knowing that I feel the way I do, and I never said anything."

Oh God. "Jason—"

"No, let me finish," he said. "Before you say whatever you're going to say, just let me finish. You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen in my life, Azazel. And you're so smart and determined and stubborn. And he's not good enough for you. He's a dumb jock. He doesn't see what he has. I'm not saying I'm good enough. I'm...there are so many things wrong with me that—"

"There's nothing wrong with you," I said, and my voice shook.

"Don't do it," he said. "Don't leave with him."

So Jason liked me, huh? This was bad.

"Listen, Jason," I said. "I think that you are really, really..."

Jason put his arm against the wall, leaning over me. "Yes?" he said, waiting.

I didn't finish. I looked up at him. His face dipped down, closer to mine. His eyes caught my own, and I felt like I was drowning in their depths. His lips were so near. And they were full—fuller than Toby's, but somehow more masculine. And before I knew what I was doing, I was cupping Jason's heart-shaped face in my hands, and I was pressing my lips against his.

My eyes squeezed shut, the world exploded like a bomb had gone off. His lips were electric. Tingles started at the top of my head and shivered their way through my limbs, out my fingers and toes.

I ripped my lips away from his, shoved him away from me.

And I ran out into the hallway and into the girl's bathroom.

Locking myself in a stall, I rested my forehead against the cement wall. I wanted to scream, but I didn't. Instead, I just grimaced as hard as I could.

What had I just done?

How could I face Toby?

How could we... how could we have sex after what I'd just done?

Well, the answer to that was simple. We couldn't. We wouldn't. I clearly didn't love Toby as much as I had thought. If I loved Toby, I wouldn't have kissed Jason like that. I was going to have to go to Toby. I was going to have to tell him what happened. I pictured the look on his face. He was going to be so hurt!

How could I have done this to him?

I sat down on the toilet, pulled my knees up to my chest, and wished I could cry. But my eyes were dry. I just sat there, horrified with myself.

Someone was entering the bathroom. I could hear voices.

"Lock the door," said one of them. A guy's voice.

A familiar voice.

"Wait," said a girl's voice, also familiar. "Let me make sure no one's in here."

Maybe she looked under the stalls. I couldn't tell. But she seemed satisfied. "We're safe," she said, and then I recognized her voice.

It was Lilith.

Oh God. I was going to have to listen to Lilith have sex with some guy in the girl's bathroom, wasn't I? Could this night get any worse? Maybe I should show myself? No. Lilith would never forgive me for ruining her moment. Of course, I could never tell her I'd been here, or I'd heard this.

"Why did you bring me here?" asked the guy. Who was it? I knew that voice.

"I just can't handle it," said Lilith. "It's been hard enough, pretending for all these years, but I did it, because it was asked of me. Now, though, with what's going to happen tonight, I just... I don't want you to."

This was a weird conversation to be having before getting it on. What was Lilith up to?

"We don't have a choice," said the guy. "You know that as well as I do."

"We always have a choice," said Lilith. "Isn't that what they tell us? Isn't that what we believe? Our choices make the world?"

"This is too important," said the guy.

"Don't do it."

"I have to."

"You don't, though. We could just leave. Both of us. We could go somewhere, and we could actually be together. I love you. I can't stand watching you with her anymore."

Lilith loved someone? Who was that? And this guy was dating someone else?

"I love you too," said the guy, "but you know we can't be together. I have a role to play. I'm honored to have been given that role. And I have to do this."

And then I recognized the guy's voice. I recognized it when he said, "I love you." And I'd been wrong. The night could easily get worse. And it just had.

I pushed out of the bathroom stall, glaring at Toby and Lilith.

Now, I could cry. Finally. "How long?" I asked them.

"Zaza," said Lilith.

"How long?" I repeated.

"Look," said Toby, "you don't understand. I don't know what you just heard, but—"

*"How long?"*

They were quiet.

"Summer after eighth grade," said Lilith. "We were dating before you guys started seeing each other."

I shook my head. "Then, why, Toby?"

"It's complicated," he said.

"Are you fucking her?" I asked.

"Azazel," he said miserably.

"Are you? Is that why you wouldn't have sex with me?"

"This is all going to be explained," said Toby. "Just please, calm down, and we'll figure it—"

"You are, aren't you?" I said. "You guys are having sex. You've been doing it all along. Haven't you?"

"Listen, Zaza," said Lilith. "I'm really sorry. You need to understand that—"

*"Haven't you?"* I demanded.

"Yes," Lilith whispered.

I shook my head, shaking in rage and crying all at the same time. "Fuck you both," I rasped. I tore out of the bathroom, slamming the door after me.

I strode down the hallway, back through the gym, and out the door into the night air. I didn't look at anyone. I didn't care if anyone looked at me. I just needed to get...away.

It all made sense now. Why Lilith and Toby didn't seem to like each other. It was their cover. So I wouldn't suspect them. It made sense why Lilith never really had a boyfriend and why she was so bitter about men in general. The guy she was in love with was dating another girl. No wonder she was so screwed up. And Toby. How had I been so blind to the fact that he was such an asshole? Why hadn't I been able to see it?

I felt sick. I wanted to vomit. To think I'd been about to have sex with him. Jason was right. Toby didn't deserve me. Lilith didn't deserve me either. I'd been a great girlfriend and an excellent best friend. They'd betrayed me. Both of them. Ugh. It was disgusting. To think of all the times I'd put my lips on Toby's lips. The same lips he used to kiss my best friend!

How horrible. How completely and totally screwed up. I hated them. I hated them both. I couldn't believe this had been happening for so long, and I'd never noticed.

I raced through the parking lot, not sure where I was going. I felt like if I ran far enough, maybe I could run away from this. From all of this.

"Azazel!" called a voice from behind me. "Wait!"

I didn't. I didn't even look back. I didn't know who it was, and I didn't care. I ran forward blindly, but my legs got caught in my skirt, and I tripped.

I fell. Huddled on the pavement, my dress dirty and torn, tears streaming out of my eyes, I couldn't find the will to get up.

Someone knelt next to me.

"I'm sorry."

It was Jason.

I looked at him dully. Why was he sorry? Did he know about Lilith and Toby? Had he heard? Did everyone know? Was everyone laughing at me behind my back?

"I should never have said those things to you," he said.

Oh. Right. I'd kissed Jason in the hallway. That seemed like light years ago. "That's fine," I managed. "That's fine now."

It was, I guess. I didn't have to feel guilty about kissing Jason anymore. Compared to what Toby had done to me, it was nothing. I laughed suddenly. Bitterly. Hysterically. I couldn't stop.

"Are you okay?" asked Jason.

"No," I said, between giggles. "I'm really not."

He pulled me to my feet. "What's wrong?" he asked.

I just shook my head, trying to stop laughing.

"It's cold out here," said Jason. "We should go back inside."

Oh, no way. I wasn't going back in there. You couldn't pay me enough money to do something that stupid. No, I was going to start walking, and I was going to walk until I fell down from exhaustion. There was just no way I could even take the thought of being alive right now. Everything was ruined. Everything was destroyed.

Jason put his arm around me, trying to pull me back towards the school. "Come on," he said.

I stopped laughing. "No," I said.

Other people were leaving the gym. A group of guys. One of them was Toby. He was wearing his Michael Myers mask again. He walked towards Jason and me, flanked by half of the

football team. Almost all of them wore monster masks too. It was like legions of the undead were descending on us or something. A pack of demons was advancing on us.

Why was Toby coming after me with half the football team? Did he think that was going to make anything better? He was delusional.

I looked at Jason. "I need to get out of here," I said.

But Jason didn't have a car. And neither did I. He'd come with my parents. I didn't know how I was going to leave.

Toby and his pack of jocks stopped in front of us. They folded their arms over their chests.

"You both are going to have to come with us," said Toby from inside his mask.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," I said.

"I'm afraid you don't have a choice," said Toby, and the football team swarmed us.

Five of them jumped Jason. They knocked him to the ground. Two of them stood on his back while he struggled. They tied his hands behind his back.

I looked at Toby with uncomprehending eyes. "What's going on?" I asked.

Toby reached for me. I backed away from him, but I backed into another football player's arms. He held me fast. Toby wrenched my hands forward, tied them together. He dragged me towards his truck.

The other players picked up Jason and forced him to walk forward. They shoved him into the back seat of a car. Toby pushed me into his truck. It occurred to me at this point that maybe I should scream.

So I did. As loud as I could.

Toby just chuckled. "Nobody's coming to save you, Azazel," he said. "Save your breath."

Toby started the car. He pulled out of the parking lot and the car containing Jason followed him. I stared at Toby, his face obscured by that stupid mask. What the hell was going on?