

breathless

by v. j. chambers

chapter four

morningstar68 (02:33:05): it can't happen any earlier than samhain.

michaela666 (02:33:44): that's weeks away. he's got too much time between now and then.

morningstar68: (02:34:14): There's no way to prepare the vessel adequately before then. even
this is rushing things.

michaela666 (02:34:58): are you sure? time is of the essence in this, as I'm sure I don't have to
tell you.

morningstar68: (02:35:08): you don't. but I have to say, I'm not excited about this turn of events.
are we sure we have to use her? couldn't someone else be the vessel?

michaela666 (02:35:48): you've know this was her destiny since she before she even existed. I saw her in the vision, when I saw him.

morningstar68: (02:36:24): I know. I know. but it can't happen before samhain. can that work?

michaela666 (02:37:01): I guess it will have to. it's the best we can do.

Jason, Cameron, and I sat at the dining room table, facing my parents. Considering Eric's nose was broken, he'd had to go to the emergency room. And because of that, everyone had found out about the party at the Nelson farm, including my parents. They were less than happy about the fact that all three of us had snuck out.

I'd expected them both to be livid. I'd expected them to yell and possibly throw things. However, they just seemed very sad and disappointed. This was kind of worse than their anger. It made me feel guilty and ashamed. Plus, I was worried about Jason. If they punished Jason, he might just leave and never come back.

Because I didn't want to look at my parents, I looked at Cameron and Jason instead. They were on either side of me. Cameron was inspecting his fingernails, looking about as guilty as I felt. Jason however, held my parents' gaze, his face blank. He didn't look worried or guilty. Then, of course, he didn't know my parents. They were pretty good at making you feel the way they wanted you to feel. They didn't tell you how to feel or that you were wrong. Instead, they just laid out all the possible consequences of your actions. I hated that. It made me feel so... responsible.

I just wished they'd get it over with already. All this sitting in silence was getting to me. I knew my parents weren't talking because they wanted me to contemplate what I'd done wrong. It was working. I felt wretched.

Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore. "I was the one who made Jason come to the party," I blurted out.

My mother and father just looked at me.

"He wouldn't have even been there if it wasn't for me," I said. "I totally talked him into it."

Seeming to follow my lead, Cameron spoke up. "I'm the reason that Jason got in the fight with Eric. I kind of picked a fight with him. It's not Jason's fault."

"None of this is Jason's fault," I said.

Jason looked down the table at us, raising his eyebrows. "Well," he said, looking at my parents, "I did consent to go to the party. And I am the one who broke Eric's nose. So, I guess some it is my fault."

What was Jason's problem? Cameron and I were trying to take the fall for him. Couldn't he see that?

"I'll understand if you guys don't want me to stay here anymore," said Jason. "That might be the best thing for everyone."

"Jason," said my mother, "let's not get drastic."

"Of course we want you to stay," said my father. "Believe me, this isn't the first time one of our boys has gotten in a fight."

"Right," said Cameron. "And this one didn't even involve knives."

Aaron, a boy who'd lived with us a year ago, had gotten in a knife fight at school once. He'd gotten expelled. My parents fought to keep him, but the state took him away anyhow. He still kept in touch sometimes. We all visited him in jail last Christmas. Apparently, he got in a bad bar fight (amazing, since he wasn't even eighteen, let alone twenty-one) and the other guy

didn't survive. Aaron was serving time for manslaughter. Poor Aaron. If my parents had been able to keep him, maybe...

"Thanks for the perspective, Cameron," said my father.

"Listen," said my mother, "you all know—well, Cameron and Azazel know—that we want to encourage you to make your own decisions. We're not here to impose a rigid order on your lives. These are your lives, and it's your job to make them into whatever you want them to be. However, we do try to provide boundaries for you."

Oh, God. Not this speech. Please not this speech.

My mother continued, "We feel that these boundaries can help guide you. We feel that they can open you up to options that you might not consider otherwise. While it's a perfectly valid choice to live in the moment, and to live for fun, we feel that there are other valid choices, and we feel that since you're very young, you might not think of those choices."

"And," said my father, picking up where my mother left off, "once you've made a series of certain kinds of choices, it can be difficult to decide to make different ones. You can rack up all kinds of nonproductive consequences that get in the way of a productive life."

My head was swimming. Why couldn't they just be like normal parents and say that what we'd done was wrong and now we were going to get punished? It all amounted to the same thing anyway. This was just psychobabble. It was rationalization.

I stole a glance at Jason. His forehead was wrinkled as if he was trying very hard to concentrate, or if he was very, very confused. I didn't blame him. My parents' reasoning was complicated.

"I feel," I said, "that we've all seen what kind of nonproductive consequences happen when we sneak out. Jason got punched. I got in a fight with Toby. And we all had to ride home

with Lilith, and her car is very small. To that end, I don't think we need any more punishment. We've all learned our lesson."

"We're not going to punish you," said my mother.

What?

"All three of you are seventeen years old," said my father. "You are young adults. You're practically old enough to make your own decisions legally."

"We'd created the curfew as a boundary for you," said my mother. "We knew it was only a matter of time until you tested that boundary."

"Now that you have," said my dad, "it proves to us that you've outgrown it."

What?

"Um," said Jason. "I didn't have a curfew. And I was the one who broke someone's nose."

"And we want to talk to you about that," said my father. "But first, we want to let you all three know that we are going to allow you to make your own decisions about when you come home at night."

"Bear in mind," said my mother, "that those decisions will affect all manner of things. Your performance in school for instance. Your ability to get your chores done at home. Your relationships. These are all things you'll need to weigh as you make your choices."

Yuck. Leave it to my mom to make a privilege sound like a burden.

"Now," said my father, "Cameron and Jason, I want to talk to you about this fight with Eric."

Cameron and Jason looked at each other. They didn't look too excited about this chat. Jason was catching on to the way my parents worked. They made you feel so adult. The guilt

was almost too much to take. When you were around them, you just wanted to do...better. They totally sucked.

"Why did you choose to engage in an altercation with Eric, Cameron?" my dad asked.

"Alter-what?" asked Cameron.

"Argument," I said.

"Why didn't you just say argument, then?" Cameron wanted to know.

Neither of my parents answered.

Cameron sighed. "He was pissing me off. He said that he was sick of seeing all those motherfucking Jones orphans at his party. Then he said, 'Oh, wait. I forgot. They don't have mothers.'"

"And that comment was designed to make you react, wasn't it Cameron?" my mother asked.

"Yeah, I know. He was just trying to get under my skin," said Cameron.

"If he made you angry, he had power over you," my mother said.

"I know!" said Cameron. "And I tried to do what you said. I told him to shove it and shut up, and I started to walk away."

Jason spoke up. "I thought that guy needed to be taught a lesson."

"Oh?" said my dad.

"Yeah. People shouldn't say things like that."

"And if they do, they should have their noses broken?" my father asked.

"Well, something like that." Jason shrugged. "Weren't you just talking about consequences, Mr. Jones? Eric said some awful stuff. The consequence was that I beat him up."

Huh. Jason kind of had a point.

My father considered what Jason had said. "I don't agree with what Eric said either," he said. "But let me ask you this, Jason. What if it hadn't gone your way? What if Eric had broken your nose? Then what consequence would he have received?"

"Well, that wouldn't have happened," said Jason. "I wouldn't have gotten in the fight if I didn't know I could win."

Really?

"How could you have known that?" my father asked. "Eric's a lot...bigger than you. He's a strong boy. He works on his parents' farm. He's on the wrestling team at school."

"He was drunk," said Jason. "I could tell that his reaction time was pretty screwed up and that he could hardly stand straight."

"So you got into a calculated fight with Eric because you were sure you could beat him?" my father asked.

Oh. My father was backpedaling. When he started rephrasing people's statements, I knew it was so he had some time to think about what they'd said, so he could formulate a response. In addition, sometimes restating someone's argument caused them to start arguing with themselves or backing down.

Not Jason. "Yeah," he said. "I wasn't angry with him. It's pointless to get angry with people. They're the way they are. There are two options. You either accept what they're doing. Or you make them stop doing it."

Wow. My mother said something like that. But the end part was different. My mother didn't believe in making people stop doing whatever they were doing. She believed in asking them to change.

For maybe the first time ever, both my parents were speechless.

Finally, my mom said, "Jason, what gives you the right to determine whether someone else's actions are right or wrong? What gives you the right to decide that someone else shouldn't say or do what he's doing?"

Jason furrowed his brow. "I don't decide," he said. "Some things are right. Some things are wrong." He shrugged. "What Eric said to Cameron was just wrong. It was cruel. It was ignorant. And it was juvenile. He deserved what happened to him."

"And punching him in the nose? That wasn't wrong?" asked my mom.

"Punching him in the nose for no reason would have been wrong," said Jason. "But what I did..." He trailed off. "I guess I could have let it go. In the end, it probably won't make him stop saying that kind of stuff. But I guarantee he won't say anything like that in front of me again."

Jason looked so sure of himself. So certain. So convicted. I'd never seen a boy our age who knew so clearly what he thought. I was impressed.

And my parents weren't saying anything. They exchanged a look. This whole conversation had not gone the way they wanted it to. It was probably because Jason had said that some things were right and some things were wrong. I think I explained before that my parents didn't believe in evil. By extension, they didn't believe in right and wrong either. Jason was opposed to everything they believed. It was weird, because I'd always known there were people like that. But I'd never met someone who had as much conviction as Jason. And he could defend his beliefs too. Jason was pretty cool.

I wondered if this meant that my parents would reinstate our curfew now. After all, it seemed like they'd kind of lost an argument.

I waited for one of them to say something.

Finally, my mother did. "Jason," she said quietly, "how do you know what's right and wrong?"

Ooh. She went there. Right to the heart of things. I always thought this was the place where the opposite argument kind of fell apart, so I waited for Jason's answer.

He hesitated. "Um...I guess I'm not totally sure," he said. "I know I was taught right and wrong, but the people who taught me... Well, when I got older, I decided that some of the things that they said were right were actually wrong. And vice versa. But...I mean, if my only concept of right and wrong had come from them, then how did I evaluate their beliefs using their concepts? So, I guess I think that right and wrong must be sort of...like ideas that people just...know, somehow. Like...like Plato or something."

Plato? What was he talking about?

My father looked surprised too. "You've read Plato?"

"I think it's the 'Allegory of the Cave,'" said Jason. "You know that essay?"

"Of course," said my mother, who also seemed shocked.

"Well, so there's a world of ideas, right? And right and wrong are in the world of ideas. But we mess them up, because we live in the cave, and we can only see shadows of the world of ideas. I mean, something like that anyway."

Both of my parents stared at Jason, slack-jawed. They didn't say anything.

"I'm glad we all talked about this incident," my mother said abruptly. "I feel like it was very productive. Don't you, Daniel?"

"Sure," said my dad.

And we were dismissed. The score? Jason-1. My parents-0.

* * *

On Monday, we went to school. I usually caught a ride with Toby, but I was still pissed at him, so I rode the bus with the guys. Even though I had my driver's license, I didn't have a car. My parents were great, but they didn't have the money for another car. Not when they had to feed five teenagers. I didn't really mind. I liked riding with Toby. However, that Monday morning, waiting at the bus stop, I felt kind of stupid. Here I was, a senior in high school, riding the damned bus. My dad worked at the high school too, but we couldn't all fit in his car. Plus, my dad always got to school about an hour before class started so that he could make copies and get ready. Nobody wanted to get up that early.

Overall, it was good, because I would have felt bad about making Jason fend for himself on the first day. Sure the guys would have looked out for him, but all of them except Chance were strangers in Bramford. The town looked on them as outsiders. And Chance was only fifteen, so he was a lowly sophomore. He wouldn't have been much help.

I took Jason to the office first thing. My dad had set it up with the school so that Jason could get a schedule. They were used to it, since my family was always getting new foster kids. I sat with Jason in Mrs. Clem's office. Mrs. Clem was the Dean of Students, and she set up all the schedules. I liked Mrs. Clem, but when we arrived, it was obvious she'd already heard about what Jason had done to Eric over the weekend. Bramford was notoriously protective of its own. Jason didn't belong in Bramford and had already damaged a member of one its oldest families. That wasn't good in the minds of most of Bramford's inhabitants.

Mrs. Clem seemed a little cold. She pursed her lips.

"Are we going to get your transcripts, Jason?" she asked.

"I don't have any," he said.

Mrs. Clem raised her eyebrows in disbelief.

"I was kind of...home schooled before," he said.

"But he reads Plato," I said, feeling like I should defend him in some way.

Mrs. Clem didn't react to that. She just poured over her computer screen, lost in thought. Finally, she began punching keys. "Normally, with no transcript, I'd put you in General Education classes," she said to Jason. "But most of them are overcrowded, and it occurs to me that since you seem to be a little...volatile, it might be better to keep you away from...overexcitement."

She was referring to Jason's fight. She was so prejudiced! She'd never even met Jason, and she'd already judged him.

"So, I'm going to try you out in Honors classes," she said.

Really? Maybe I was the one who was judging Mrs. Clem. That was pretty decent of her.

She printed out Jason's schedule and handed it to him.

"Cool," I said, looking over his shoulder at it. "You've got three classes with me!"

Bramford was on a semester block schedule, which meant we only had four classes a day. I was going to be seeing a lot of Jason. Of course, it also meant that Jason was going to be seeing a lot of Toby. Toby and I had the exact same schedule.

Ugh. And we sat next to each other in every class. I didn't want to see Toby. I was still angry with him. But I was going to have to. In exactly five minutes, I noted as the opening bell rang.

I smiled at Jason. "I'll show you around," I said. "We've got the same first period."

Jason, Toby, and I began the day in Ms. Campbell's Advanced Placement English class. It was downstairs, directly under the main office. Jason followed me as I navigated the crowded

halls and staircase. As we approached the door, I wished as hard as I could that Toby wouldn't be there.

No such luck. He was sitting in his normal desk. Ms. Campbell was shuffling through some papers at her podium, not monitoring the hall like she was supposed to. She claimed she always forgot to do it, but once or twice the principal had ducked his head in the classroom and asked her to come into the hall. She'd said sweetly, "Sure. One sec!" And then she'd never gone into the hall.

Ms. Campbell was kind of a rebel, I thought. I liked her. She'd let us read *Lysistrata*, which was a pretty racy ancient Greek play about a group of women who withheld sex from the men so they would stop fighting a war. It had penis jokes! I couldn't believe we'd been allowed to read it in class.

I took Jason up to Ms. Campbell.

She looked up. "Hi, Azazel," she said. "What's up?"

"You've got a new student," I said. "Jason Wodden."

Ms. Campbell looked at him. "The kid who beat up Eric Nelson?"

God. Had everybody heard about this?

Ms. Campbell leaned forward conspiratorially. "Nice going," she whispered. She straightened back up and went back to her papers. "Of course," she said, "if you tell anyone I said that, I will deny it."

Ms. Campbell was cool.

"So, I guess I need to get you a textbook and a syllabus," she said to Jason. "You can sit—"

"Actually," I said. "I was hoping I could move my seat for today."

"Really?" said Ms. Campbell. "You and Toby—trouble in paradise?"

I didn't say anything.

"Sure, it's fine," she said. "Any open seat then. Both of you."

Toby turned around in his seat and saw me. I looked away, ushering Jason and I to some desks in the back of the room that I knew no one sat in. Jason and I sat down. Ms. Campbell's classroom was long and thin. The desks faced a whiteboard, but there were only three long rows. Toby and I usually sat in the front. There were several sets of seats between Toby and me now. Purposefully, I didn't look at him.

Ms. Campbell dropped off a textbook and syllabus at Jason's desk. Jason began flipping through it. It was *Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense*. I busied myself with beginning our journal prompt, which we had to do each day in class. As I got out my notebook, I pointed it out on the board to Jason. "We have to write a paragraph about whatever the question is every day," I told him.

Jason nodded.

Today's question was, "What is the purpose of rules?" Ms. Campbell always asked weird things.

"Azazel," said Jason.

"Yeah?" I said.

"Toby's staring at us," he said.

"I don't care," I said. I didn't have anything to say to Toby. I was still mad at him.

"I think maybe you should talk to him," said Jason.

"No way."

"It's just...you sitting with me like this... He might think..." Jason trailed off again.

His trailing off was maddening!

"He might think what?" I demanded.

Jason shook his head. "Nothing. Never mind."

"No! Tell me."

But the tardy bell rang, and Ms. Campbell said, "Okay, guys, get to work on your journals. No talking."

English class went by pretty quickly, as it usually did. There were some avid conversations going on from other students in the class, about the short story we'd read, "A Rose for Emily." I didn't join in. I usually didn't. I just liked to listen to what everyone else said. I watched Jason soak it all in. He hadn't read the story, but I could tell if he had, he'd throw in his two cents.

Second block was the one class Jason and I didn't have together. He had Biology. Toby and I had French. Mrs. Zimmerman, the French teacher, would not let me change seats, so I had to sit next to Toby.

I settled into my seat, sulking, and vowing not to speak to him.

"Azazel," said Toby, "we have to talk."

We most certainly did not. In fact, we weren't going to talk if I had anything to say about it. I buried my face in my French book and tried to ignore him.

"Listen, I'm sorry," he said. "I was rude to you for no reason at the party."

Damned right he was. But just because he was correctly describing his behavior didn't mean I was going to forgive him. He'd really hurt my feelings. He'd *mocked* me. In front of everyone. In that second, I'd had this flash that maybe Toby really saw me as ridiculous.

"Please look at me," he said.

I didn't.

Thankfully, class started right about then, and I had other things to pay attention to besides Toby.

After French, Jason rejoined us for history. That was my dad's class. It was weird having my dad for a teacher, but it was either do that or not take Honors History, which just wasn't an option. My dad didn't have a seating chart in his classroom. My dad didn't actually have rules in his classroom. He solved problems by classroom quorums, where we all sat in a circle and talked about how we felt about how the class was going. This worked fine in Honors classes, but I knew that some of the General kids took advantage of my dad. He didn't see it that way though. He thought it was important that the students had the ability to make their own decisions and to discover the consequences.

I was glad that there wasn't a seating chart. I usually did sit in the same seat by Toby, but I sat somewhere else today, and I waved Jason over to me when he came into the classroom.

"How was Biology?" I asked him.

Jason sat down, noting that Toby and I weren't sitting together. "You haven't made up with Toby, yet, huh?"

"No," I said. Maybe I wasn't going to make up with Toby at all.

"Biology was okay," said Jason. "I've done most of the stuff in there. Should be a breeze."

"So, were you really home schooled?"

"Kind of," said Jason and that was all. He never elaborated on anything! I was dying of curiosity. How was I going to get Jason to trust me with his secrets?

After history, we went to lunch. Usually, I sat with Toby. We ate at a table with a bunch of football players and their girlfriends. After I ate, I usually went into the gym to find Lilith. Lilith never ate lunch.

Today, however, for some reason, she was in the lunch line. She saw Jason and I and motioned for us to come stand with her.

"We'll be cutting the line," I called to her.

She rolled her eyes, but she left her spot in the line to come back and stand with us.

"There," she said. "Happy?"

I made a face at her. "What's up?" I said. "How come you're eating lunch?"

"I'm pregnant," she said. "Baby needs nutrition."

"Shut up!" I said, whacking her with my purse. "You are not!"

"No," she said. "I'm not." She smiled at Jason. "And how are you?"

"Uh...good," said Jason.

Every time Jason said something to Lilith, he started out with "uh" or "um." I wondered if Jason was attracted to Lilith. I considered the prospect of Jason and Lilith dating. For some reason, I didn't like the idea of it at all.

"You still pissed at Toby?" she asked me.

"Of course," I said. How could she ask me this? Last night, when I'd talked to her on the phone, I'd explained exactly how I felt about the situation in excruciating detail. We'd dissected everything he'd said, trying to figure out his motives.

"Maybe you should give the guy a break," said Lilith.

My jaw dropped. What was Lilith saying? "You hate Toby," I said.

"Yeah," she said. "I do. He's a total idiot. But, I don't know, the two of you are like the teen dream couple. You're good together, you know."

"Obviously, we're not if he makes fun of me in front of everyone at that party," I said. "Plus, he treats me like I'm twelve or something. He's so overprotective. And he won't have sex with me."

Jason cleared his throat.

Lilith and I both looked at him.

"The line moved forward," he said.

We shuffled forward in the lunch line.

"What do you think, Jason?" I asked.

"About?" he asked. He looked a little embarrassed. I realized I'd been talking about my sex life (or lack thereof) in front of him. Maybe that made him uncomfortable.

"Toby," I said. "You don't think I should forgive him, do you?"

Jason didn't say anything.

"You're gonna forgive him," said Lilith. "You guys never fight for long. You might as well just get it over with."

"Do you want to break up with him?" Jason asked me.

I thought about it. Did I? I was in love with Toby. I was mad at him right now, but did I want him out of my life forever? "Let's talk about something else," I said. "Like why are you really eating lunch, Lilith?"

Lilith rolled her eyes. "I'm hiding from Eric Nelson. He was a total jackass to me in the gym because I gave you guys a ride home."

I smiled. "I thought you were going to make Eric fall in love with you."

"Not in this lifetime," she said.

* * *

That evening, Toby called me four times. I wouldn't take any of his calls. I still didn't know what I wanted to do. Before, I hadn't thought of my anger in terms of ending our relationship. I'd just known that I was angry and hurt and that I didn't want to talk to Toby. But after Jason had asked me if I wanted to break up with Toby, I realized I wasn't sure. Was there something really, really wrong with my relationship with Toby? Maybe I only dated him because it was comfortable. We'd been dating since we were fourteen. The thought of not having Toby in my life seemed foreign and strange. But I couldn't just keep dating him because I was used to it. Could I?

The fifth time he called, I was in my bedroom working on my history homework. My mother knocked on my door, phone in hand. "It's Toby again," she said to me.

"I told you. I don't want to talk to him," I said.

My mother put the phone to her ear. "Let me talk to her, Toby."

Oh, great. Not another heart to heart with mom. I loved my mom, but she had this annoying habit of making me examine all my actions and realize how silly I was being. I didn't want that. I wanted to wallow in my anger towards Toby.

My mom came into my room and sat down on my bed. She set the phone down next to her.

Sighing, I closed my history book. "Mom, I just don't want to talk to him."

"Sweetie, I think he's sorry," she said. "He sounds pitiful on the phone. He misses you."

"Well, good," I said. "I hope he does. And he can just go right on missing me."

"Is that what you want?" my mom asked. "He's not going to miss you forever, you know."

"Geez, I didn't break up with him or anything. We're just having a fight." Why was everyone making this into such a big deal? And why was everyone, even Lilith, on Toby's side? *He'd made fun of me!*

"So you don't want to break up with him?"

"I don't know!"

My mom took my hand. "Zaza, have I ever told you about the time I almost broke up with your father?"

"No," I said.

"It was when we were dating in college," she said. "We got in a big fight one night about something silly. Funny, I can't even remember what it was anymore. But I was so angry with him. I didn't talk to him for weeks."

"What happened?"

"He started seeing someone else."

"Really?"

My mother nodded. "I was devastated. I saw them together at a restaurant one night, and I realized that no matter how angry I was with your father, I couldn't bear the thought of not being with him. So, I called him and told him that."

"And he dumped the other girl?"

Mom laughed. "Actually, it turned out that he wasn't even dating her. She was just a friend. I'd leapt to conclusions."

I laughed too.

"But the important thing, sweetie, was that I realized I didn't want to lose your dad. I couldn't face life without him."

"Right," I said. My mom wanted me to think about life without Toby. But I'd been doing that. Still. I wondered how I'd feel if I saw Toby with another girl. I didn't think I'd like that very much at all. Toby was mine. Even if sometimes he was a big jerk, he was my jerk. "Give me the phone."

My mom smiled and handed it to me.

I dialed Toby's number.

"Azazel?" he said, sounding very happy to hear from me.

"Hey," I said.

"Can we talk?"

"Yeah."

"Face to face," he said. "I'll pick you up?"

"Okay," I said.

Toby showed up in ten minutes. I climbed into his truck. It felt natural. It was the way things were supposed to be. We went back to Toby's house. Neither of his parents was home, so we had the place to ourselves. Still, we went to hang out in Toby's room, like usual. Some habits are hard to break.

I perched on Toby's bed. He sat in his desk chair.

"I'm so, so sorry," he said.

"Look, Toby—" I started. I was going to tell him about what my mother had said to me and about my epiphany about us.

But he interrupted me. "No," he said. "Let me say this." He took a deep breath. "I was an ass. I was...jealous."

"Jealous?" I said. What could he have been jealous of?

"Yeah. I mean, Jason shows up, and suddenly, he's all you talk about. And he's always around. And you're always with him. I couldn't handle it."

"You were jealous of Jason?" I asked. How could he think that? I mean, sure I thought Jason was interesting. But I didn't think of him like that. The idea was so ridiculous that I started laughing.

Toby looked worried. "Why are you laughing?" he asked.

I tried to stop. "Jason?" I said between giggles. "Really? Jason?"

"So that's funny?" said Toby. He looked confused.

My laughter started to subside. "Yes, it's funny. I don't have any feelings for Jason!"

"You sat beside him in every class today."

"Because he's new, and he doesn't know what's going on!"

"So, you're not going to start...dating him or something?"

"Don't be silly," I said. "I love you, Toby. We've been through so much together. I could never just leave you like that. Besides, Jason is...weird. He's strange and mysterious and nobody knows anything about him. And he's really strong, and he beats people up, and he never talks, and he doesn't know what he wants to watch on television."

"And those are bad things?"

"Not bad, exactly, just weird," I said. It was true. I found Jason intriguing, but that was as far as it went. Toby was my boyfriend.

Toby looked relieved. "Okay," he said. "Good."

"Good," I said.

"So, we're cool, then?" he asked.

I nodded. "We're cool."

He grinned. He got up from his desk chair and came over to the bed to sit next to me. I burrowed into his chest, and he put his arm around me.

"I thought I was losing you," he said.

"You can't get rid of me that easily," I said.

And he kissed me.

Toby was a very good kisser. And I loved how kissing him felt so familiar and safe. This was the boy I'd been kissing for years and years. Kissing Toby was like coming home. It felt like wrapping up in a worn, warm blanket. One that I'd had since I was a kid.

He pulled me close, and I lost myself in his strong arms.

We lay back on Toby's bed, wriggling around so that we could rest our heads on the pillows. Our lips met again and again. Our tongues darted in and out of each other's mouths. And we held onto each other so tightly. During times like this, I sometimes felt like Toby and I were becoming part of each other. Like we were one entity, and we were melding into each other. It was such a lovely feeling. It was what I imagined sex with Toby would be like. The two of us joined together, completing each other.

Toby's hands started to shift on my body. He traced the curve of my spine, my waist. I moved my hands too, caressing his arms, his chest. Toby rolled over, and suddenly, he was on top of me. His hips pinned mine to the bed. He kissed me. I wrapped my legs around his. He propped himself up so that he could look at me. I gazed into his blue, blue eyes. He was so beautiful. I reached up to touch his chin, his jaw. He stroked my cheek, my neck. His fingers

went lower, tracing the outline of my clavicle. They eased inside the collar of my shirt. My breath caught in my throat. His hands barely skimmed the surface of my skin. I had goose bumps. And he was inches, inches from my breast, which no one had ever touched before. I held my breath as his hand got closer and closer, inching over my skin—

And then he sat up.

He wasn't touching me at all. He buried his face in his hands.

"Toby?" I asked in a small voice. What had just happened?

"We can't," he said, and his voice sounded agonized.

"We can," I said.

"No," he said. "No, no. We're not allowed."

Not allowed? Someone else had something like that. Who was it?

"It's okay," I said, sitting up and touching his shoulder. "We're not in the truck. It's nice here. That was...that was special." And it had been. It had been like something out of a romantic movie. And now it was all ruined.

Toby appeared to get hold of himself. He looked up at me, dropping his hands. "I mean, I can't," he said. "Not now. This isn't...how I want it."

God! Wasn't anything good enough for Toby? "How do you want it?" I asked.

He sighed. "I'm sorry, Azazel. But it's got to be perfect."

I didn't buy it. He'd leaped off of me. Like he'd realized what he was doing, and he found me disgusting. I wasn't sure that Toby was even attracted to me. It had seemed like he was, but then... And on top of all of it, now I felt a strange sort of warmth between my legs. It demanded some sort of satisfaction, which it wasn't going to get, and I felt a brand of frustration I'd never felt in my life. I folded my arms over my chest, wanting to cry.

"Let's go somewhere," said Toby.

I looked up at him. "Okay," I said. But I didn't feel very excited about it.