

breathless

by v. j. chambers

chapter three

To: Alfred Norwich <anorwic@risingsun.org>

From: Hallam Wakefield <hwakefi@risingsun.org>

Subject: South is no go

Alfred,

Sorry, no can do. I just got a lead that someone matching Jason's description has been sighted in upstate New York. I've got to go check it out. I don't think Jason is going south, no matter what Intel says. He knows better than that. He was born in the south. He was raised in the south. He knows we'll look for him there.

I'll let you know how this lead pans out. Oh, and tell Richard that West Virginia is a dead end.

There's nothing there but woods and rednecks. Jason wouldn't have anywhere to hide.

Yours in pursuit of the Purpose,

Hallam

The figure was a guy. He wore pants that were a little bit too short for him--

It was Jason.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one sneaking out of my house tonight.

I ran to catch up with Jason. He heard me approaching and stopped.

"Azazel," he said.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He looked away from me. I could hardly make out his features in the scant light, but he seemed even more desperate than before. "I wanted to believe that I could stay here," he said.

"All I've ever wanted..."

"You're not leaving, are you?"

"I have to," he said. "I can't put you and your family in danger."

I didn't know what to say. Moments before, I'd been frightened out of my wits of the people chasing Jason. Was he right? Was he a danger to us? To me?

Well, it didn't matter, did it? Because, if there were danger, I couldn't let Jason go running back into it, could I? No, I'd found him. I'd rescued him once. I couldn't let anything bad happen to him.

"I'm not letting you go," I said.

"I didn't think anyone heard me leave," he said. "I can't believe you followed me."

"I didn't," I said. "I'm sneaking out to go to a party."

"Oh," he said, stunned.

I guess parties weren't something Jason thought about very much. Well. Maybe we should change that.

"You should come with me," I said. "It'll be fun."

"To a...party?" he said. It was like he had trouble saying the word.

"Yeah," I said. "You know, parties? They're all the rage these days. Kids sneak out, drink beer, get away from their parents... Have fun. It's what all normal teenagers are just dying to do."

"Normal," Jason repeated. Then he grinned at me. It was a brief grin again. It barely touched his eyes. "Okay," he said.

"Great," I said, excited now. "Come on, Toby's picking me up at the top of the driveway."

"Wait," said Jason. "Toby? I don't know if--"

But he was interrupted because Toby's truck pulled up at the top of the driveway. I grabbed Jason and dragged him up to the truck. Toby had leaned across to open the door for me. When he saw Jason, he looked less than happy.

"Oh," he said. "You brought Jason."

I didn't know what was wrong with Toby. He was being totally rude. Jason needed people to take him under their wing. He had nowhere to go, and he seemed to have lived a sheltered, dangerous life. We owed him some fun.

I stood aside from the door. "Get in," I told Jason.

"Uh..." said Jason, "maybe you want to sit next to your boyfriend?"

Oh. I guess that did make sense. "Don't run off while I'm getting into the truck," I warned Jason.

He smiled again.

I liked it when he smiled.

I climbed into the truck, and Jason got in after me, pulling the door shut after him. Toby took off.

It was quiet.

We drove for miles and miles without speaking. I kept trying to think of something to say, but I couldn't. I wanted to ask Jason about his dead mother and the possibility of his being raised by a cult, but that seemed rude, so I kept my mouth shut.

Toby was silent. It had been his idea to go to this party in the first place. I couldn't figure out why he was in such a bad mood.

Finally, I said, "I'm excited about the party. Lilith said it's going to be absolutely nuts."

"Oh, well, that's great," said Toby sarcastically.

Wrong thing to say. Toby and Lilith didn't get along. Back in middle school, eons ago, they got along fine. Lilith even had a crush on Toby during our seventh grade year. But after I started dating Toby, they got in some huge fight about something, and now they hated each other's guts. It was awkward, considering Lilith was my best friend, but at least I didn't have to worry about them hooking up behind my back. They couldn't stand each other.

"Who's Lilith?" said Jason.

"My best friend," I said. Lilith was dying to meet Jason. I'd told her all about him on the phone. She'd be excited he was at the party.

"I don't want you to drink too much," said Toby.

"I won't," I said. "I never do. You never give me a chance."

"I'm just looking out for you," said Toby. "You know that. I care about you."

"I know," I said.

"And if anyone finds out Jason's here, I'm going to deny bringing him," said Toby.

"Okay," I said.

"Sure," said Jason. "I don't want to get you in trouble."

Which was pretty decent of Jason, I thought. After all, I had talked him into coming to this party in the first place.

But Toby just rolled his eyes. "Don't worry about me," he said. "Just watch yourself, Jason."

I looked sidelong at Toby. Did he hate Jason for some reason? I was going to have to have a talk with him. Toby needed to learn some manners. Poor Jason didn't know anyone except us, and Toby was being a total dick.

We arrived at the Nelson farm not too long after that. Toby pulled his car up onto the field and into the circle of cars. Lots of people were already there. It was after one in the morning. The party was just starting to rage.

I hopped out of the truck behind Jason, my excitement buzzing inside my head like a swarm of bumblebees. I couldn't wait, couldn't wait. Lilith saw me across the car circle. She waved and sprinted over to meet me. We hugged.

Lilith was tall, with long red hair. She had, as I already mentioned, huge boobs and a tiny waist. I so envied her figure.

"Oh my God, I thought you'd never get here," she said. She turned to Toby. "Hi Toby," she said, grinning at him.

Toby glared at her. "Don't get her drunk," he said.

Lilith flipped him off.

"I'll catch up with you later," Toby said to me, leaning down to give me a kiss.

"Bye," I told him.

"I don't understand why you guys can't just get along," I said to Lilith.

"Because your boyfriend is a dumbfuck," she said.

"Lilith," I sighed. "Never mind. Look who I brought."

Lilith's eyes fell on Jason. They widened. "Well, hello," she said, clearly liking what she saw. "And who might you be?"

"Uh..." Jason was intimidated by Lilith. Or maybe he was intimidated by the circle of brilliant headlights in the middle of a cornfield. Or the blaring, bass-heavy music. Or maybe he was just shy. I didn't know him very well. "I'm Jason."

Lilith's jaw dropped. "This is Jason? Geez, Zaza, you didn't tell me he was hot."

Jason looked at me, the same terror on his face as I'd seen when he couldn't find a channel on the TV.

"It's okay," I said. "She's less scary than she seems."

Jason tried to smile, but he still looked pretty freaked out.

"How is it scary for me to think you're utterly gorgeous?" Lilith asked Jason. She was a little drunk already.

"I'm not scared," said Jason. He was totally scared. "Um. Thanks. I guess."

Lilith brushed Jason's nose with her forefinger. "You are *precious!*" she said.

"Lilith, don't," I said. Was it me, or was everyone just being completely weird to Jason?

"Oh my God!" Lilith exclaimed. "You guys are beerless! Let's hit the keg." She linked arms with me and started leading me away.

I looked over my shoulder to make sure Jason was coming. He trailed behind us, looking lost. I felt bad. Maybe I shouldn't have made him come to this party.

"Fuck me, Zaza," Lilith whispered to me, "he is *beautiful*. I want to do him. Can I do him?"

"No!" I said. For some reason, Lilith's overstated attraction to Jason was bugging me. Sometimes, I thought Lilith was a nympho. And with a nympho for a best friend, was it any wonder I wanted to have sex with Toby? All she talked about was sex. I just wanted to be able to relate for God's sake.

Lilith rolled her eyes. "Fine," she said. "You're too protective of your foster kids, you know that?"

"You just want to have sex with every boy in sight," I said.

"Not *every* boy," she said. She dropped my arm and reached back to yank Jason up between us. "It's okay," she told him. "Azazel has proclaimed you off limits. I promise to be good."

Jason laughed disbelievingly.

"Did I mention this was my best friend Lilith?" I asked him. I was a little embarrassed.

"I gathered," he said.

We'd reached the keg. Lilith pumped, and I poured us two very foamy plastic cups of beer. I handed one to Jason and took the other.

He held up his cup, studying it. "So..." he said. "Beer, huh?"

"Beer," I said.

"I've never actually..." he said. Jason trailed off a lot.

"No way," said Lilith. "You're a beer virgin?"

"Leave him alone!" I scolded her. The way things were going, Jason really was going to run away. But it wasn't going to be because he was worried about anybody's safety. It was going to be because he wanted to get far, far away from all my crazy, rude friends.

I clinked plastic cups with Jason. "Cheers," I said. And we both drank. I made a face. I didn't like the taste of beer. To my amusement and delight, Jason made one too.

"It doesn't taste very good, does it?" I asked.

"Alcohol rarely does," he said.

So, he'd drunk alcohol? Just not beer? I wanted to ask, but I wasn't sure how to phrase it without sounding like I was accusing him of lying or something.

"I've mostly drunk wine," he told me, as if he could see the questions on my face.

"Oh," I said. "Do you like wine?"

"Not really," he said, laughing. He took another drink of his beer and surveyed the party.

Several girls were dancing in the middle of the circle, the headlights reflecting off their hair and curves. They twisted and writhed to the beat of the music, thrusting their hips in gyrating circles. Kids stood in groups, clutching their cups of beer--laughing and talking. Someone had brought his dog and was attempting to get him drunk by offering him beer. The dog was lapping it up. The guys surrounding the dog were jeering.

"So," said Jason, "this is a keg party?"

I nodded. "Yeah." It seemed so stupid. So tame. I didn't know why I'd brought him here. Someone like Jason probably had more sophisticated tastes. He seemed so old. Like he'd seen the entire world.

"I like it," he said, surprising me. He took a long swig of beer.

"Well, that's good," said Lilith. "Cause we're all gonna get fucked up."

"Not me," I muttered. "Toby doesn't want me to get plastered."

"Fuck Toby," said Lilith. She turned to Jason. "Don't you think her boyfriend is an utter jackass?"

Jason laughed another surprised laugh. "Um. I..."

"Lilith!" I said.

"It's okay," said Jason. He looked at Lilith, raising his eyebrows. "I don't know him real well," he said. "But I don't think Azazel needs someone to treat her like a kid. I think she can take care of herself."

"Thanks," I said. I thought Jason was pretty cool. I had to get him to stay. I just had to.

I looked back out over the party and was stunned to see another familiar face. Cameron!

I didn't say anything to Lilith or Jason. I just marched over to Cameron and took him by the arm. Then I jerked him over to where I was standing with Lilith and Jason. How was this possible? Had everyone in my entire house snuck out tonight?

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"Partying," said Cameron.

"If my parents found out you were here--" I started.

"If they found out you were here," he interrupted, "you'd be in deep crap too."

I narrowed my eyes. "Cameron, you can't be here."

"I'm here," he said. "Deal with it." He recognized Jason. "Hey, Jason, man! Good to see you."

"Hi Cameron," said Jason.

"Come meet some people," said Cameron to Jason.

"You can't just--"

Cameron silenced me with a look. Damn it. He had me. I'd have to keep his secret if he wanted me to keep his. I wondered how often Cameron snuck out. Cameron used to have a big problem with drinking before he came to live with us. He was my age, and he'd already been through AA. I did not think a keg party was a good place for a reformed alcoholic. But I guess he didn't have a beer in his hand, so that was saying something. I was the one who was drinking. Not Cameron.

Cameron led Jason off to meet some of his friends. I was left with Lilith.

Lilith came out to parties like this more than I did. "Do you see Cameron out a lot?" I asked her.

She shrugged. "I can't keep track of all your parents' foster urchins," she said.

"Does he drink?" I asked.

"Maybe," she said. Clearly, Lilith didn't want to talk about Cameron. "So, why'd you bring Jason?"

"He was trying to run away. I stopped him."

"Good!" said Lilith. "He can't leave."

"I know. He's like the most exciting thing that's ever happened in Bramford," I said.

Lilith took a drink of her beer, raising her eyebrows. "That's more true than you know."

What did that mean? "Anyway," I said, "I want him to have a good time, so he won't try to leave again. So, lay off him, okay, Lil? Sometimes you're a little much to take."

"Don't worry," said Lilith. "I'll leave him alone. I have to. I'm not allowed not to."

"What do you mean?" Lilith was sounding cryptic and weird. Maybe she was drunker than I thought.

"I mean, you said I'm not allowed," she said.

But I didn't think that was what she meant. "He's really interesting, don't you think?"

"Fucking gorgeous is what he is," said Lilith.

"Yeah," I said. "I guess." I hadn't really considered whether or not Jason was attractive. I'd been too busy trying to figure out who he was. Plus, I was in love with Toby. It wasn't like I was scoping out other guys.

"Speaking of gorgeous," said Lilith, "Did you see Eric Nelson tonight without his shirt on? That boy is like a golden god."

I laughed. "But he's such a jerk."

"Who cares?" said Lilith. "As long as he's not talking, I could spend like an eternity with him."

"Is Eric your latest conquest then?" I teased. Lilith didn't really date boys. She sort of steamrolled them. But she might have met her match in Eric Nelson. He was pretty much a dick. He used girls like toilet paper.

"Maybe," said Lilith. "But, you know, it wouldn't be much of a challenge to bang Eric. He'd fuck anything in a skirt. If I go after Eric, I have to make him fall in love with me."

I laughed. "Good luck! I don't think that word is in Eric's vocabulary. And besides, since when was it in yours?"

Lilith shrugged dramatically. "I'm getting older," she said. "I'm a senior now. I'm developing mature feelings."

"Oh whatever," I said.

"Seriously," she said. "Besides, Eric would look so good in my prom pictures. He's beautiful. And those things will end up on my grandmother's refrigerator for like a thousand

years. I want to be able to look at them when I'm old and fat with seven babies and say, 'I was beautiful in high school, and I had a beautiful boyfriend.'"

"Since when are you planning on having seven babies?" I asked. But I was thinking about my own grandmother--the one who was still alive. She disowned my mother. She didn't speak to our family. I'd never known her. Where would my prom pictures go? When I moved out, my mom was sure to turn my bedroom into a haven for two or three foster kids.

"Maybe not seven," said Lilith, "but I'll definitely have kids. Everyone ends up doing it, even if they say they won't." She held up an empty beer cup. "I need more beer," she announced. "You?"

I didn't, but I chugged the rest of mine and followed her back to the keg.

"I know you dream about birthing Toby's blonde brats," she said.

"I don't," I said. "I don't want kids." Lilith was leaping pretty far into the future, wasn't she? Just because Toby was my high school boyfriend didn't mean we'd start...breeding. If it worked out that way, I guess it wouldn't be so bad, but--

My thoughts were interrupted by a loud yell behind us. "Fight!"

Great. I rolled my eyes. Lilith and I turned to watch as nearly everyone in the party rushed towards the struggling figures of two guys, illuminated from behind by the headlights. We moved forward too, carried by the tide of bodies.

Why did guys have to resort to violence all the time? Civilization might have been created by a male-dominated society, but it sometimes boggled my mind to figure out how. I groaned, wondering if this meant the party was going to get broken up. I'd just gotten here!

Next to me, I heard two girls talking.

"Who is that guy?" one asked.

"I don't know. One of the Jones' foster kids, I think."

Oh God! Cameron! I knew it had been a bad idea for him to be here.

Spurred on by the thought of dragging a beaten, bloody Cameron into the house, I pushed through the bodies that had formed a tight circle around the fighting guys. I shoved people out of the way. Ducked under their elbows. Finally, I cleared the mass of bodies, and I could see.

But it wasn't Cameron.

It was Jason.

Jason was fighting with Eric Nelson.

There wasn't much to see. Limbs flailed, occasionally making contact. They grasped at each other, one grabbing the other in what looked like a bear hug. Then the other would slip from his grasp and grab the other guy in a similar hold. I could hardly tell who was who. They moved so quickly. I yelled, but it didn't matter. Everyone was yelling.

It seemed to go on an agonizingly long time. I didn't understand why no one was breaking this up. Didn't fights usually get broken up in just a few seconds? This one seemed to be dragging on and on.

Eric leaned over and drove himself into Jason's midsection, head first. His arms wrapped around Jason's waist. Jason went down, but he held onto Eric's arms and Eric went down with him, collapsing on top of Jason.

Eric was struggling to extricate himself, but somehow Jason flipped Eric over, turning the tables, so that now he was on top of Eric.

Pinning Eric, Jason let loose on him, raining punches onto Eric's face.

I could see now that Jason's face was bleeding, but so was Eric's now.

Blood spattered the grass. Jason's fist connected with Eric's nose, and there was a sickening crunching sound.

Now, suddenly, Toby rushed forward, pulling Jason off Eric and throwing him on the ground.

"Break it up!" Toby said, and several other football team members, who echoed his words, soon flanked him.

I ran up to Jason. He was half sitting, half reclining on the grass. He rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand. I collapsed on my knees next to Jason.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "What happened?"

Jason just shook his head, too out-of-breath to speak.

I glared up at Toby. "What were you thinking? How did you let this go on so long?"

Toby looked at me darkly. "Oh, of course," he said. "You're worried about him. What about Eric? I think your precious Jason broke his nose."

"What happened?" I asked Jason again.

Cameron appeared behind Jason. "It wasn't his fault," he said. "It was me."

"You?" I said. "It was Eric." I had no problem believing Eric had started this fiasco.

Cameron smirked. "Well...yeah. But Eric was ragging on me. You know, typical orphan stuff."

The guys at school picked on the foster guys sometimes. Eric tended to lead the pack. Like I said, he was a jerk.

"So Jason attacked him?" Toby demanded. He was holding Eric's chin in his hand, surveying the damage to Eric's ruined face.

"No," said Cameron. "No, I told him to shove it, and he said we should make him. Me and Jason. I told Jason to ignore him, but Eric came over and pushed me. Jason told Eric to get lost. Eric pushed Jason. And then...well, you saw what happened."

"Is that what happened Jason?" I asked him.

He'd caught his breath enough to nod and say, "Pretty much."

"Sure," sneered Toby. "Of course he'd say that. It makes him look innocent and pure like the driven snow."

"Why would Jason pick a fight?" I asked Toby. "He's new here. He wouldn't want to make trouble."

Toby dropped Eric's chin and stood up straight. "What do we even know about Jason anyway?"

I stood up to face him. "Well, we know enough about Eric to know he's a dick, don't we?"

"A bleeding dick with a broken nose," said Toby.

"So, you're on Eric's side?" I wanted to know. Toby and Eric got along okay, but they were not exactly close friends.

"So, you're on Jason's?"

"Why are you so pissed?"

Toby didn't answer for a second. He looked down at his hand, which he balled into a fist and then released. "Maybe I'm just not crazy about watching my girlfriend kneeling over some other guy, okay?"

"What?"

"You rushed over to him, didn't you?" Toby said. "Oh, poor Jason," he mocked me.

What? Jason was hurt. Why was Toby being like this? I hadn't done anything wrong. I'd just wanted to make sure Jason was okay. That was all. Why was Toby bent out of shape about it? I looked up at him. I felt hurt. I didn't deserve this. "Go to hell," I said softly.

I turned away from Toby and offered Jason my hand to help him to his feet.

"Are you okay?" I asked him again.

"I'm fine," said Jason. He looked at my hand, but didn't take it. Instead, he pushed himself to his feet. "I'm sorry about this. I shouldn't have fought that guy."

"You were defending yourself," I said. "You were defending Cameron."

Jason shot a glance over my shoulder. "Maybe you should talk to Toby," he said.

I shook my head. "I don't have anything to say to him." I looked at Jason. "Come on. We'll find another ride home."