

THE VANQUISHERS

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BY KALYNN BAYRON

For younger readers

The Vanquishers

For older readers

Cinderella Is Dead

This Poison Heart

This Wicked Fate

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THE VANQUISHERS

KALYNN BAYRON

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CHAPTER 1

Vampires are extinct.

Everybody knows that. But some people just can't let the undead stay in their graves.

"It's been twenty years since the Reaping and our parents still won't buy store-brand vampire repellent. I don't get it. There's a whole aisle full of the stuff."

Cedrick is looking at me like I have two heads. I hand him the flyer I'd snatched from the mail before my mom had a chance to toss it. On one side is a picture of a plastic spray bottle filled with shimmering silver liquid and a label shaped like a garlic bulb. On the back are six or seven customer testimonials that say things like *As good as the recipe my grandmother used to make* and *I'll never use another brand as long as I live!*

"It's a Vanquisher-approved repellent," I say. "It's gotta be legit, right?"

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Cedrick rolls his eyes and leans back, his elbows in the grass, his face tilted to the sky. “Who is buying this stuff anymore? Vamps are dust. They’ve been dust for a long time. People need to get over it.” He flicks the pedal of his bike with the toe of his sneaker. “How could it be Vanquisher approved anyway? The Vanquishers don’t exist anymore either.”

“You know that’s not true,” says Jules. “They’re still out there. They just don’t vanquish anymore. They don’t need to.” They shrugged. “Even before the Reaping, vamps were almost completely extinct. And Vanquisher approved doesn’t really mean anything anyway. It’s just something these companies say to get people’s money.”

Cedrick huffs. “People out here sellin’ tap water with silver glitter in it. They’re lucky there aren’t any vampires around for real or they could get somebody killed with that fake stuff.” He sits up and looks at Jules. “You know what’s actually legit, though? The repellent Lita makes. If a vamp got some of that stuff on them—” He whistles and shakes his head. “It’d be over.”

Jules smiles wide. “Her recipe is the real deal. Store brand doesn’t even have actual silver in it.”

There are three kinds of people in San Antonio, people who buy their vampire repellent from the store, people who only make their own, and people who don’t use any at all because they’re confident the Vanquishers wiped out the last hive of the undead twenty years ago.



Most people are in that last category. They've moved on. They've let many of the old ways go. And Jules is right. Vampire populations had been shrinking for generations and there were barely any left when the Reaping happened. The San Antonio hive was the biggest one anybody alive had ever seen and it was only seven vamps strong. The Vanquishers crushed them in one epic battle that has since become the stuff of legend.

I take a bite of one of the snack bars Jules brought along. My mom's cooking tonight so I'm not supposed to be eating a bunch of junk before then but my stomach is making whale noises. I eat half the energy bar in two bites and look at the crumbled packaging, wondering if I accidentally ate some of the wrapper. It's awful.

"Is this dirt flavored?" The grit sticks in my mouth like sand. I toss the rest of it into the grass and a bird swoops down, pecks at it, then flies off. "Look. Even the birds don't want it."

"What's wrong with it?" Jules asks as they pick chunks of the snack bar out of their braces.

"Uh—it's just, you said you were gonna bring snacks and—"

"Protein bars *are* snacks. And they're healthy," Jules says. "Besides, my mom has a whole case of them in the basement and that means I can get as many as we want, for free."

Cedrick makes a retching noise. He quickly covers his mouth and looks back and forth between me and Jules. "I'll say it if Boog doesn't want to. Jules, these things taste like hot garbage juice."

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“Oh c’mon!” Jules crosses their arms hard over their chest. “What did you want? Chips? Soda?”

“Yes and yes,” Cedrick says. “You’re off snack duty, Jules. My taste buds can’t take it.”

Jules rolls their eyes. “Whatever. My ’Lita says healthy snacks keep you regular.”

Cedrick raises one thick, bushy eyebrow. “Regular?”

Jules grins. “They make you poop at least once a day.”

I’m too old to be laughing at poop jokes but I can’t help it. “I didn’t need to know that.” I give Jules a gentle nudge with my shoulder. “Are you mad?”

They smile a little. “Not really. I guess they do kinda taste like dirt.”

We’d met up to talk about our group project that’s due in a week. All the students at Victor Garcia Middle School have to make a poster for Vanquisher Appreciation Week. The anniversary of the Reaping kicks the whole thing off and it’s a solid week of parties and parades. People dress up like their favorite Vanquishers—the Mask of Red Death, Carmilla, Threshold, Sailor’s Knot, Argentium, Nightside, Dayside, and the Wrecking Crew. Travis Park gets lit up like Christmas and the city dyes the San Antonio River red—like blood. My mom thinks it’s a morbid but necessary reminder of the past. I just think it’s bad for the wildlife.

Our principal, Ms. Mason, said sixth graders could team up and make posters for the Northside Independent School

District float, which will be paraded through downtown on the final day of the festivities. I'm determined to make sure our poster stands out.

I got the poster board, Cedrick brought markers and glue, and Jules printed out pictures of wooden and silver stakes, garlic bulbs, and elaborately knotted pieces of string. I thought we could sit outside to work on it, but sweat is already beading on my forehead and I can feel the freshly greased scalp between my braids sizzling.

"We gotta put this project together but it's too freakin' hot," I say. "Let's go to my house and just get it done.."

We pick up our bikes and head back across the Green, a wide stretch of grass dotted with gigantic transmission towers that separates our subdivision from a strip mall full of restaurants, nail salons, and a beauty supply store. We slip through the fence that surrounds my backyard, leave our bikes in the grass, and go up to the back door of my house. From my yard I can see Jules's grandma watching from the upstairs window of Jules's house next door. I wave at her and she waves back, then disappears. We pile into my house and stack our shoes up in the corner.

"That you, Boog?" my mom calls from somewhere upstairs.

"Yes, ma'am!"

When I'm at school, I'm Malika. When I'm in trouble I'm Malika Shanice Wilson. But most days and to most people, I'm just Boog. I don't think I've ever heard Cedrick or Jules call me by my given name.

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“Wash your hands and don’t eat nothing in the fridge,” Mom calls back.

I look over at the fridge. I’d bet money there’s something extremely tasty in there.

“Aww, Mrs. Wilson!” Cedrick hollers. “I was gonna eat everything in the fridge!”

“Not if you know what’s good for you,” she says. Even though we’re in the kitchen and she’s somewhere upstairs, I can hear the edge in her voice. She isn’t playin’.

Jules laughs as they flip on the faucet and wash their hands. “I love your mom so much.”

The three of us live in the Stanton Run subdivision on the northwest side of San Antonio. Our families have been neighbors on Noble Knight Road our entire lives. We all take turns at one another’s houses for sleepovers and movie nights. My mom doesn’t let me sleep out at anyone else’s house, only Jules’s or Cedrick’s, and it doesn’t really count because our houses are lined up right at the end of the cul-de-sac.

Jules’s grandma, Lidia, or ‘Lita as we all call her, makes a big dinner for everybody once a month at her house and I’m always mad that I have to eat *regular* dinner for, like, a week after. Cedrick’s dads are both engineers so we always have the fastest go-karts, the best tree houses, the winningest science fair projects. My mom and dad work with Jules’s mom, Celia Torres, at the University of Texas in the medical research department. We’re tight. Not just neighbors and friends, we’re family.

I pull Jules and Cedrick into the basement and flip on the lights. It's supposed to be my dad's rec room, with his Green Bay Packers memorabilia up on the walls but I pretty much took over. I do my homework and watch movies down here. It's where we sleep when Cedrick and Jules stay the night.

We dump all the supplies onto the table and start cutting and pasting everything to the poster board. Cedrick presses cutouts of stakes and wreaths of garlic onto the poster as Jules colors in bubble letters that read Thank you, Vanquishers!

"We should've put a picture of Sailor's Knot right up front," Cedrick says.

I shake my head. "Nah. Carmilla should be in front or at least right next to the Mask of Red Death."

"Red Death up front, all day every day," says Jules.

Cedrick smirks. "You *would* say that."

Jules shrugs. "Am I wrong, though?"

"I have another idea," I say. My mom keeps a trash can full of garlic bulbs in the basement pantry and I run in and scoop up six or seven. "Let's stick these on with the hot glue gun."

"Good idea!" Jules says.

"My dad wants to have a barbecue Friday night," I say as we pull out the glue gun and hot glue sticks. "He bought some new sandals so I know it's gonna be fire."

"Wait," Jules says, bewildered. "He never grills without the ugly ones he's been wearing forever."

I glance toward the stairs, then lower my voice to barely a

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whisper. “Don’t tell nobody but my mom says that his old pair were so ancient and raggedy she thinks Jesus might have actually worn them at one point.”

Cedrick covers his mouth with both hands to keep from laughing but Jules cackles like a hyena until little tears roll out of the corners of their eyes.

“She put them right in the trash when my dad went on that business trip last month.” I turn the poster board around and glue garlic in a neat row across the bottom edge. “When he came home he was looking everywhere for them. He finally just gave up and bought new ones.”

“I’m ready,” Cedrick says, rubbing his hands together. He turns to Jules. “Change of subject, but Jules, you gotta ask your grandma to come visit our class,” Cedrick says. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed but we’re not exactly any closer to our goal of being popular.”

“That’s *your* goal Ced,” I say. “Not mine.”

“We’d be the most popular kids in school if she came up there for us,” Cedrick says.

Jules shakes their head. “She won’t do it. You know how she feels about all that.”

Jules’s grandma used to be a Vanquisher. Her code name was the Mask of Red Death and nobody knew who she was, just like all the other masked Vanquishers, until the year I was born. Somebody found out her true identity and splashed it all over the internet. She’s kind of a local celebrity now. She hates

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the extra attention, but every time I see an image of her mask—a gleaming crimson skull—I feel proud that I know her . . . a real-life former Vanquisher.

My mom comes downstairs carrying a bucket, her plastic yellow cleaning gloves pulled up to her elbows. She's got her head wrapped in a pink scarf and she's wearing a ratty old T-shirt that has a picture of Beyoncé on the front. I don't have to ask her what she's doing. I can smell the vampire repellent before she hits the last step. She sits the bucket down under the window and I pull my shirt up over my nose.

"Mom, that stuff reeks!"

She looks at me like she's confused. "And?"

"I don't wanna throw up on our class project."

She dips a sponge in the bucket, sloshing it around, then holds it in my direction. "You're welcome to do it yourself."

"No thanks. I'm good."

"That's what I thought," she says with a little smirk. She drags the sponge over the sills of the little rectangular windows at the top of the basement wall in a clockwise motion.

I look at Jules. They mouth the word "sorry" before quickly covering their nose again. 'Lita had given my mom the homemade recipe and now we all have to suffer. It's a mixture of crushed garlic—and I'm talkin' twenty full bulbs, skins and all—and real silver pieces steeped in spring water for a month in full sunlight. The recipe comes from a time when the first Vanquishers got together in the 1800s, and 'Lita got her hands

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on it when she joined their ranks. She insists that we all use it to vampire-proof our houses. I should be used to the smell after all these years but it feels like every batch is more pungent than the last. I groan and try to fan the fumes away from us.

My mom glances at me. “Oh stop.” She moves to the next window. “It gets the glass clean and when you use it on the sills, it keeps bugs out—among other things.”

Other things.

She means vampires but she won't say it out loud right at this moment. A part of me hopes she's finally beginning to realize how silly it is, or maybe she's tired of keeping up her defenses when she knows there's nothing to worry about anymore.

“That smell keeps people out, too,” I say. “It smells like musty armpits in here, Mom.”

“It smells like cleanliness and safety,” she says as she moves on to the last window. “You kids like to be funky and reckless. Not in my house.”

“I smell like roses,” I say. “And rules are meant to be broken sometimes, Mom.”

Mom smiles, but it's the smile she flashes when she has just heard something that makes zero sense. She smiles at my dad like that a lot. “Which one of your little friends told you that?” She chuckles. “Oh, they lied to you, baby.”

She finishes up her vamp-proofing that she swears isn't really vamp-proofing, then takes her bucket back upstairs.

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“Y’all wanna ride with me?” my mom calls down a few minutes later. “I need to take some supplies to Tasha and Eric downtown. They’re running a booth this year for Vanquisher Appreciation Week.”

“What kind of booth?” Cedrick asks. “A turkey leg booth?”

“Uh, no,” my mom says.

Cedrick looks extremely disappointed. “So no food?”

My mom chuckles from the top of the stairs. “No, but you’re staying for dinner, aren’t you? I got some baked mac-n-cheese with your name on it.”

Cedric is already out of his chair and heading up the stairs. “You ain’t got to tell me twice. All I heard was mac-n-cheese. You don’t have to say anything else.”

Me and Jules look at each other and shake our heads before we follow him upstairs.



Downtown San Antonio is decorated for the week-long festivities celebrating the Vanquishers’ final victory over the undead. Giant light-up stakes hang from lampposts and the trucks hauling red dye for the river are parked along the streets. Murals showing the Vanquishers as they appeared on the day of the Reaping—battle weary, roughed up, but determined to save the city from the last hoard of bloodsuckers—have gone up on the St. Mary’s Strip alongside paintings of Selena and the San Antonio Spurs. The Vanquishers are as much a part of

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San Antonio as anything else. Even the Tower of the Americas will turn all its interior lights red to celebrate.

We stop a few blocks over from Travis Park and help my mom haul out several bags of fake wooden stakes for her coworkers, Tasha and Eric. Jules falls in step with me as Cedrick bobs along next to my mom, talking her ear off.

“It’s a perfect replica of Carmilla’s crossbow,” Cedrick says. “I got the proportions down perfectly. It’s legit.”

“When you say legit do you mean not legit at all because your bow is made of wood and duct tape?” I ask.

“Well, I can’t make it out of real silver, Boog,” Cedrick says, rolling his eyes. “I had to improvise.”

“I’m sure it’s great, baby,” my mom says.

Travis Park is set up for all the festivities. Booths selling Vanquisher T-shirts and replica weapons line all four sides of the park, which takes up an entire city block. At the center of the greenspace is an octagonal platform topped with a silver dish holding a flame that is never extinguished. It’s a monument to Dayside—one of the Vanquishers who died during the Reaping. Inscribed wooden stakes and silver trinkets litter the ground around the memorial. People leave them as tribute to Dayside even all these years later.

A wooden platform has been erected on Navarro Street and performers are rehearsing some weird routine while dressed as Vanquishers. The person in front has a pretty good replica of Threshold’s signature tactical vest and one of the

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other performers is swinging a silver rope over her head but they're all dancing and lip-synching to Selena's "Baila Esta Cumbia."

"Woowooow," Jules says. "Tell me you're from Texas without actually telling me you're from Texas. Vanquishers, Selena—all they're missing is a backdrop of the Alamo."

"This is a good song, though. And Dollar Store Threshold is killin' it," I say as we spot Tasha's booth on the opposite side of the square.

We deliver the fake stakes to Tasha, who lets me, Jules, and Cedrick test out the games she's invented for the festival. The stakes are plastic and their centers are hollow. Darts are glued inside and we take turns throwing them at life-sized cardboard cutouts of vampires.

"Whoever made these targets did a really good job," I say, slinging a dart and hitting the paper vamp in the right eye.

"Eric understood the assignment," Tasha laughs. "He grabbed some photos from the archives—made it as realistic as possible."

The vamp's jaw is slung open wider than a human's and eye-teeth that look like a snake's curved fangs poke out from under its top lip. The eyes are painted black with red slits in the center. Looking at it sends a little chill up my back. I can't imagine what it must have been like to see a vampire in the flesh.

Cedrick throws a dart and hits the vampire cutout in the hand.

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“Ummm, I really need to work on my aim,” Cedrick says.

“Don’t worry, sugar,” Tasha says. “You’ll never have to worry about doing it for real, thanks to the Vanquishers.”

My mom smiles but she’s so bad at being fake it’s almost painful. Her eyes are narrow and she clenches and unclenches her jaw as Tasha goes on and on about the Vanquishers. Her favorite one is Sailor’s Knot. I know this because she brings it up every time I see her. She also claims to have a piece of one of his fabled silver-infused ropes but I’ve never actually seen it.

“Let’s roll,” my mom says. She gives Tasha a hug and we head back to the car.



Back at the house, I look at our poster. I’m a little concerned it’s not as flashy as it needs to be.

“What do we think?” I ask. “More glitter? More garlic?”

Jules sprinkles some red glitter on a line of glue at the top and holds the whole thing up. One of the garlic bulbs falls off and rolls across the floor. Me and Cedrick step back to get a good look at it. I snap a picture with my phone.

“Trash,” says Cedrick.

“It is not,” I say, picking up the rogue garlic bulb. “It’s gonna stand out.”

“How many points do you think we’re gonna get?” Jules asks.

Cedrick claps his hands together. “Negative fifty points.”

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Jules shoots him a dagger of a glance. “You got a better idea?”

He shrugs. “Put it in the trash?”

“Okay. Okay,” I say before they can start arguing. “I think it looks good and there isn’t room for anything else. It’s done. Let’s watch a movie.”

We put all our craft supplies away and Jules sits with me on the couch. Cedrick turns on the TV and we ro-sham-bo to decide what movie it’s gonna be. I win, and I pick *Black Panther* even though we’ve seen it twenty times. Mom calls us up for dinner around six.

“Let’s show my mom our poster,” I say.

Cedrick shakes his head. “Do we have to? I think we should show it to the least amount of people possible.”

I grab the poster and we scramble up the stairs. As Jules and Cedrick wash up, I present my mom with our project.

“What do you think?” I ask her.

She tilts her head to the side and looks it over. “How’d you get the garlic to stick on there?”

“Hot glue.”

“Did y’all clean up?”

“Yes, ma’am. But come on, Mom, tell me what you think of our project. It’s gonna be on the float downtown.”

Her eyebrows push together. “Is it?”

The sound of a key in the front door draws my attention away from the fact that my mom is avoiding my question, and

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my dad comes in with his workbag slung over his shoulder. He sits on the little bench in the entryway and takes off his shoes.

“Hey, family,” he calls. He comes into the kitchen and gives my mom a kiss.

“Did you have a chance to stop by the store?” Mom asks.

Dad pretends to be confused but I can see he’s got a plastic bag behind his back.

“Tre. Do not play with me,” Mom says. “I need to season that chicken tonight.”

He laughs and hands her the bag. “That’s why I’m running a little late. I was on the south side and decided to just stop at the store over there.”

Mom glances at her watch. “It’s, like, six o’clock.”

Dad shakes his head. “I always forget that they still do daylight hours only over there. I went to three different stores before I realized what time it was.”

The grocery stores on the south side of San Antonio close at 4:00 p.m. on the dot. Stores that work like that call them “daylight hours.” They open and close while the sun is still up—no exceptions. It’s another little remnant of the past when everybody was supposed to be inside way before the sun went down. Most places don’t do that anymore but some stores just decided to roll with it.

My dad gives me a hug. “How’s the project coming? You have everything you need?”

“We’re done. It looks good. See?” I hold up the poster and he smiles.

“She’s lying, Mr. Wilson,” Cedrick says from the doorway.

“What do you think?” I ask him.

“Y’all are creative,” my dad says. “Just—just so creative.”

He turns to my mom.

“Oh, so nobody is gonna say they like it?” I ask, looking at the poster again. Is it trash? I didn’t think so before but now I don’t know.

“It’s fine, baby,” Mom says.

“Should have put a picture of Carmilla on there, though,” Dad says.

Mom tilts her head to the side and mean mugs my dad.

He shrugs. “C’mon now, babe. You know Carmilla’s my fave.”

Mom rolls her eyes. “Then why don’t you go ask Carmilla to make dinner.”

Dad sweeps her into a hug. “Don’t be mad. She ain’t got nothin’ on you, babe.”

Mom tries to scowl at him but she can’t keep a straight face. She bursts out laughing, then shoos him away. “Put your poster up, Boog. You’re getting glitter everywhere.”

I set the poster on the counter and wash up.

My dad gives my mom another kiss. “Need any help in here?”

“Nah, I’m good,” Mom says. “You’re on dinner duty tomorrow.”

“Yes, ma’am,” my dad says as he nudges me out of the kitchen. His little half smile tells me we’re gonna get pizza

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tomorrow night and I'm already planning what toppings I want.

"My dads make dinner together almost every night and it's annoying," says Cedrick.

My dad laughs. "They get down in that kitchen, Ced. You can't deny that."

"They *think* they can," Cedrick says as he eyes the dish of mac-n-cheese my mom sits on the table. "But I don't wanna eat mushrooms every day."

"They back on their vegan kick?" Mom asks as she sets another serving dish on the table.

Cedrick nods like it's the worst thing that's ever happened to him. I pat him on the shoulder. "It can't be that bad."

He looks me dead in the face, his brows pushing together. "You ever bit into something thinking it was gonna be chicken and it turns out to be cauliflower? It's not right and I hate it."

I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. He looks so sad, but Mom always feeds us like we aren't going to eat for days and at the end of the meal Cedrick can hardly breathe he's stuffed himself so full.

Jules leans back in their chair. "That was so good, Mrs. Wilson."

"Thank you, baby," Mom says, smiling. She glances out the dining room window and her face changes just slightly. Nobody else is paying attention but I see it. Her jaw is set, she sighs. The sun is setting, turning the sky outside bright orange.

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“I can help with the dishes,” Jules says.

“While I have Boog right here?” Mom asks, shaking herself out of her thoughts. “She can load the dishwasher.”

Jules huffs. “Lita says the dishwasher is for decoration.”

My mom laughs and pats the back of Jules’s hand. “Don’t feel bad, Jules, baby, my mama was the same way. She didn’t *believe* in dishwashers. We had one in our house the whole time I was growing up and we only ever used it as a drying rack.”

I only have to do the dishes by hand when I’m washing the fancy plates during the holidays and neither of my parents ever let me forget how they didn’t have that option when they were kids.

My mom pushes away from the table and stands up. “Let’s get you all home.”

I walk Jules and Cedrick to the porch, where my dad rests his hand on my shoulder. The streetlights flicker on down the street. I’m not allowed off the porch after the streetlights come on.

Ever.

“See you tomorrow, Boog,” Jules says. “Don’t forget the poster.” They give me a big hug.

“I won’t. I promise.”

Cedrick waves and my mom ushers him down the driveway and out onto the sidewalk. They bob along behind the hedges and pop up in Cedrick’s driveway directly next door to

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the right, and his dad Mr. Ethan is waiting for him on the porch. He waves at my mom.

“Thanks, Samantha!” he says as Cedrick goes inside.

“No problem,” my mom calls back. “Tell Alex I said hi.” She turns and takes Jules to their house, which is directly on our left. Lita meets them at the door and she and my mom talk for a little bit before Jules gives me a wave and goes inside. My mom walks back to our house, glancing down the street before hurrying up the drive.

“Let’s go, Boog,” she says. She loops her arm under mine and pulls me toward the door.

My dad glances over his shoulder, down the street. He’s got the same faraway look on his face that my mom had at dinner.

They tell me there’s no reason to be afraid of the dark, that there are no monsters waiting for me in the shadows. But even still, I’m not allowed out after dark for any reason—not to run and grab something from the car, not to make sure my bike is locked up, not for anything. Vampires have been extinct for as long as I’ve been alive, but the monsters still live in the memory of people like my parents—people who grew up in a time when precautions were taken on the off chance that they’d come face-to-face with one of the terrifying creatures. I can’t blame them for looking over their shoulders a little more than most people but there’s nothing to be afraid of anymore, and we have the Vanquishers to thank for that.

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CHAPTER 2

A few minutes before the bell rings, I take my seat in the front of Mrs. Lambert’s homeroom class. Jules slides into the seat next to me and Cedrick sits right behind us. I pull a bright yellow folder stuffed with loose papers and worksheets out of my backpack. On the front is a mural of the Vanquishers, with their names in small print underneath—the Mask of Red Death, Carmilla, Threshold, Sailor’s Knot, Argentium, Nightside, Dayside, and the Wrecking Crew. I’ve traced over Carmilla’s crossbow so many times it doesn’t even look like a weapon anymore. On the inside flaps are a list of vampire repellents and a few of the vampire rhymes everybody learns in preschool. I read one of them to myself.

Bulbs of garlic, holly branches

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Silver shavings, sunlight dances

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*Don't invite them through the door
Keep me safe forever more*

They say vampires were confused by rhymes and that reciting one, no matter how simple, could distract them long enough to make a quick getaway. I just want to know what kind of undead monster could drain me of all my blood and turn into a swarm of bats and shadow but couldn't handle hearing nursery rhymes. Something never sat right with me about that.

I find my reading log and set it aside before pulling our carefully rolled poster from my backpack. Glitter and garlic skins litter the inside of my bag. I gently unroll it and set it on my desk.

"Is there, like, a prize for best poster?" Jules asks, beaming. "Because we deserve a prize."

"I hope we get a good grade," says Cedrick. "My dad keeps saying it's harder to bring a bad grade up than it is to just keep good grades and I'm not tryna be rude, but I think he's lying to me."

"We're gonna get a good grade," I say. "Don't worry. It looks great." I'm just going to keep telling myself that.

I look around our first period classroom. Nobody else has even brought their posters in yet. I smile to myself. We're ahead of the game. Cedrick pulls at the back of his neck and huffs loudly.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

“My dad tried to edge me up. You’d think somebody who designs robots could work a pair of clippers. I think he shaved off the back of my skull.”

I twist around in my seat. “Let me see.”

Cedrick turns around. A big red scratch runs across the back of his neck.

“Dang,” says Jules. “What did he use—an ax?”

Cedrick turns back around. “That’s what it felt like. A rusty one. Now I’m probably gonna get—what’s that called when you get cut by something rusty?—rabies?”

“Nope,” Jules says. “Tetanus.”

“Right!” Cedrick says, touching the back of his neck. “I’m gonna get tetanus.”

“It’s not too bad,” I lie. “But listen, are we doing a *Stranger Things* marathon this weekend after the BBQ? Whose house are we staying at?”

“It’s been a minute since y’all came to my place,” says Cedrick.

My dad was right about Cedrick’s parents, they can cook, and the more I think about his stepdad’s famous blueberry pancakes, the more staying at his house seems like a good idea.

“I’m good with that,” I say. “So we just link up after the BBQ?”

We all nod.

I hand our poster to Jules just as Mrs. Lambert comes into the classroom, a coffee cup in one hand, a bag full of books and

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papers slung over her shoulder. She's wearing jeans and a gray T-shirt, her hair cut in a sharp bob just above her shoulder.

"Well, well, well," she says, eyeing me. "The Squad got a jump on their project." I smile wide and she comes over and pats my shoulder. "Great job." She takes our poster and puts it on her desk, beaming.

Someone huffs loudly from the back of the class and while everybody else turns to look, I don't have to. I already know who it is.

"They got a jump on it because their parents never let them out the house," Adrianna grumbles.

I want to sink down in my seat and disappear. Adrianna can't stand me. I've never done anything to her, but she hates me just the same. I ignore her most of the time but sometimes she pushes things too far. Ever since she found out that me, Cedrick, and Jules have families that are a little stuck in their old ways when it comes to vampire-proofing our lives, she's made it her job to rub it in our faces. Adrianna didn't have to stay in after dark or even use vampire repellent on a regular basis. She thinks it's all ridiculous and the worst part is—she's not wrong. I just wish she wasn't so loud about it.

"Malika can't even check the mail alone," Adrianna says. "Her mommy's too scared a big bad vamp is gonna jump out and get her."

I turn to glare at her and she grins wide. Her blond hair is pulled back in a ponytail so tight it's making her five-head

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look like a piece of glass. She clicks her tongue between her teeth, and her sidekicks, Emma and Leighton, giggle and roll their eyes.

“Would you like detention today or tomorrow, Adrianna?” Mrs. Lambert asks.

Adrianna whips her head around. “Detention? For what?”

Mrs. Lambert turns her back and writes the date on the whiteboard along with Adrianna’s, Leighton’s, and Emma’s names. “For bullying. Keep it up and it’ll be in-school suspension.”

Mrs. Lambert angles her head so I can see her face. She winks at me, which sends Adrianna into a silent rage. Jules and Cedrick are doing everything they can to keep from laughing. This is why Mrs. Lambert is my favorite teacher. She’s stingy with homework and lets us retake tests and quizzes as many times as we need to. She calls me and my friends the Squad because we do everything together. I think she knows that our families seem to be the last ones in the school still hanging on to the old way of doing things and she feels bad.

“All right, class,” says Mrs. Lambert, moving on. “Take out your planners and let’s get organized for the week. Remember, if you need help, you have to ask because I can’t read minds.”

A fly buzzes near my ear and I swat it away. It lands on my desk and struts around on my papers like it belongs there. “Mrs. Lambert,” I say. “We gotta do something about these flies.” I flick the fly and it buzzes off.

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Ever since spring break our classroom has been swarmed by all kinds of gnats and flies. They're everywhere. Mrs. Lambert has a dozen sticky traps dangling from the ceiling and enough plastic fly swatters for everyone in class to have one.

"I've let the front office know," she says, setting a piece of paper over the mouth of her coffee cup so one of them doesn't find its way into her drink. "They need to hurry up and figure it out. Flies are disgusting and unsanitary." She's got a faraway look in her eyes, like dealing with the fly infestation on top of her regular teaching duties was just too much to ask.

The classroom door bounces open and our principal, Ms. Mason, comes in. She reminds me of my grandma. She's nice but her wig is always sitting back a little too far on her head and she always looks like she's sweating. A tall, older man in an ugly green sweater, his head so bald and shiny the classroom lights bounce off it, trails behind her.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Mrs. Lambert," says Ms. Mason as she shuffles into the room in her kitten heels and maroon skirt suit. "I'm giving our new guidance counselor, Mr. Rupert, a tour and I wanted to stop in and have him say hello."

"Whose granddaddy is this?" Cedrick whispers.

I look down into my lap to keep from laughing.

"Just wanted to show my face," Mr. Rupert says, smiling stiffly.

I look up as his gaze sweeps over the class and stops on me.

He narrows his eyes suspiciously and I glance at Jules, who just shrugs.

“If you need anything, you know where to find me,” he says. I think I hear him mumble something under his breath as he turns and walks out.

Ms. Mason exchanges confused looks with Mrs. Lambert.

“Did he mention which room he’ll be in?” Mrs. Lambert asks. She and Ms. Mason share a quick laugh and shake their heads.

“He’s in office twenty-seven,” Ms. Mason says. “Have a good day, students. And remember to make your posters really stand out. We want to have the best float in the city for Vanquisher Appreciation Week.” She turns and leaves and Mrs. Lambert sits down at her desk.

“Mrs. Lambert?” Cedrick asks. “Whose pawpaw was that and why was he wearing a sweater when it’s, like, ninety degrees outside?”

Mrs. Lambert takes a sip of her coffee, smiling. Everyone laughs and we get on with our morning meeting and planning for Vanquisher Appreciation Week.

I watch the clock, impatiently waiting for class to be over because I have gym next period, with Adrianna, and we’re supposed to be doing dodgeball. I picture myself *accidentally* beaming her with one of the red rubber balls.

As soon as the bell rings, I shove my folders in my backpack, wave to Jules and Cedrick, and head out the door. I run

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right into Mr. Rupert and he stumbles back, catching himself on the wall.

“Sorry!”

Jules and Cedrick rush over to see what happened. Mr. Rupert rights himself and scowls at me.

“You didn’t see me?” he asks, edge of annoyance in his voice.

“Uh, no,” I say. “Sorry.”

“Eyes up, Miss Wilson,” he says.

I’m confused. I bumped into him but he’s acting like I drop-kicked him across the hall.

Mrs. Lambert comes up behind me and rests her hand on my shoulder. “Everything okay out here, Malika?”

“Yeah, um, we’re good. I think.” I brush past Mr. Rupert and head down the hall with Cedrick and Jules at my heels.

“What’s his problem?” Jules asks. “And why does he already know your last name?”

I shrug. “No idea but he’s got anger management issues.”

“I gotta go all the way to B building,” Cedrick says. “Meet you guys at lunch?”

“Yup,” Jules says.

He hurries off and I wave bye to Jules. As I turn toward the gym I catch a glimpse of Mr. Rupert at the other end of the hall—he’s staring straight at me, the same expression of slight annoyance and suspicion stretched across his angular face. I turn my back and speed-walk to the gym.

In PE, I dress out and pull my braids up on top of my head,

securing them with an oversized hair tie. I jog onto the basketball court to walk-run laps, enough to get credit but not enough to get too sweaty.

“Keep going, Wilson!” Coach Acosta calls after me. All eyes on me today, I guess.

We finish our laps and pair off to do crunches and push-ups. I get stuck with Larenze, who always makes everything a competition even though nobody asked him to.

“Come on, Boog,” he says as he holds my feet. “You gotta do at least fifty.”

I lie back on the plastic mat that feels like it’s stuffed with concrete. “I’ve done four and don’t feel any new ab muscles so really, what’s the point?”

Larenze laughs as he lifts his arm to flex his nonexistent bicep. “We gotta stay in vampire-hunting shape.”

I sit up and stare at him. My dad makes similar comments about staying in vamp-slaying shape whenever I complain about PE. “Not you too.”

Larenze’s mouth turns down at the corners. “I’m joking, Boog. Nobody really thinks we need to be prepared like that anymore. Just weirdos who don’t know how to let all the vampire stuff go.”

I sigh and look away.

“Hey. Sorry,” Larenze says quietly. “I’m not tryna make you feel bad. I know your parents are—”

“Vampires are extinct,” I say, cutting him off before he

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has a chance to pity me too much. “The Vanquishers wiped them out. Nobody has seen a vampire since the Reaping and even back then, most of them were dead. I know all that stuff. Just because my parents are old school doesn’t mean I don’t know that.”

Larenze shrugs and shoots me a tight smile. “I heard somebody out in Converse was acting weird at his job so they put him in quarantine. They found two holes in his neck.”

“Who is *they*?” I’m irritated now. This kind of gossip is exactly why my parents never quite let go of all their little vamp-proofing habits and I hate that Larenze is helping spread it around. “What does acting weird even mean? And *who* exactly put him in quarantine? What’s this person’s name?”

Larenze throws his hands up. “I don’t know. I didn’t ask all that. It’s just what I heard.”

There is always some rumor about somebody being bitten, somebody who didn’t show up in a picture, or who couldn’t come into somebody’s house without an invite. None of that does anything to calm my parents’ anxiety.

“Maybe stop spreading rumors,” I say. “Especially when you don’t have any facts.”

“If I had facts it wouldn’t be a rumor, would it?” Larenze asks.

I scoot away from him and finish my sit-ups just as Coach announces that we’re skipping dodgeball to pick up litter on the softball field. I glance at Adrianna, who scowls at me. We might not be playing dodgeball but on the plus side, Coach

Acosta says we're learning the electric slide next week, and I know I'm gonna get the opportunity to aggressively dance across Adrianna's toes.

When the bell rings, I change back into my school clothes, reapply my deodorant, and head to the cafeteria. I grab a tray and as soon as I get my pizza and sit down, Jules falls into the seat next to me.

"Guess what kind of homework I have?" they ask. "Algebra. I hate it. Letters don't belong in the same equation as numbers."

Cedrick joins us and starts picking the pepperoni off his square-shaped pizza slices.

"I saw Mr. Rupert again in the hall when I was going to PE," I say. "He was staring into my eyes like he was tryna read my mind."

Cedrick takes a bite. "He poked his head in my class in B building. Said he was saying hi—again. I felt like he was looking right at me." He claps his hands together as his thick eyebrows shoot up. "Does he wanna fight me? Cuz I'll knock a old man out, no problem."

Jules rolls their eyes. "Ced, you have the softest baby hands I've ever seen. You aren't knockin' anybody out."

Cedrick looks down at his hands, then shakes his head. "Why is he so worried about us, anyway? He needs to mind his business."

I nod. "He needs to keep an eye on that one boy—what's his name—Jimothy?"

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“Jimothy?” Cedrick asks, milk dripping out of the side of his grin. “Please tell me that’s not his real name.”

“His name is Jim Allen or Jim John, somethin’ like that,” Jules says. “And yeah. I told Ms. Mason about him because he was askin’ way too many weird questions in chemistry. He wanted to know if blood will clot when it’s outside your body. Who asks that?”

I scrunch up my nose and pick at the end of one of my braids. “Yeah, see. He’s a serial killer for sure.”

“That’s who Mr. Rupert needs to be watching,” Jules says. They pull out a plastic container filled with homemade food. It smells so good it makes me want to throw my pizza in the trash. They spoon a scoop of rice and pigeon peas and fried plantain onto my plate.

“Did Lita give you that sauce to go with it?”

Jules fishes around inside their lunch bag and pulls out a little container with plastic wrap stretched across the top.

“I can’t believe it’s just mayo and ketchup,” Cedrick says. “Why is it so freakin’ tasty?”

“Mayoketchup is better than mayo or ketchup alone,” says Jules. “That’s just the facts.”

“So back to Mr. Rupert,” Cedrick says. “He’s a creep and he’s nosy. We don’t even go to the guidance counselor like that so we shouldn’t have to see him around too much.”

“True,” I say. “So, BBQ at my house on Friday. Don’t forget.”

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“I can’t wait,” says Cedrick. “My dad is bringing banana pudding.”

My mouth immediately starts watering. “Friday needs to hurry up and get here.”

At the end of every school day, me, Ced, and Jules meet up by the bike rack so we can ride home together. The sun has made my chain the temperature of lava and I fumble with the bike lock, trying not to burn myself.

Jules walks up, shaking their head and looking at a piece of paper like they can’t make sense of what’s printed on it. “I have to get started on this homework. I’m so bad at math.”

“I can help,” I say. “Let’s just go to my house. I bet there’s leftovers from last night.”

Cedrick meets us at the bike rack and we pedal around the side of the school and through the field out back, following a narrow path worn down by all the kids who take the shortcut to get back into the neighborhood. I spot someone standing by the gate. As we ride by, Cedrick and Jules laughing as they pretend to swerve into each other, I recognize who it is.

Mr. Rupert.

I put my head down and go by him as fast as I can, avoiding his gaze. For the one quick moment I look up, I meet his eyes, and he looks angry.

I leave him behind and focus on the only thing that really matters right now—the BBQ. We cook out on a regular basis during the spring and summer but this BBQ is special. We’re

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kicking off Vanquishers Appreciation Week in our own way. The party downtown is always a blast but it's lots of people with fake Vanquisher weapons and masks. It can get a little sketchy so we almost always plan a big BBQ at the house for just us. We'll play music and maybe convince my dad to break out some of his old dance moves, which he swears we don't know nothin' about. And the food? My mouth waters just thinking about it.

At my house, we leave our bikes in the driveway and pile inside.

"Shoes off and wash up," my mom calls before she even sees us.

Jules and Cedrick go to the sink as I step into my mom's office. It used to be a sunroom, but my parents and Jules's mom spent the summer converting it so that she could have her own space. The back wall is made entirely of glass. It's hot as an oven and my mom's got a fan going that's pushing around all her papers.

"Mom, can I talk to you?"

She glances up and I walk over to her desk. It's strewn with half-filled notebooks and colorful folders. The wide shelves against the wall are jam-packed, mostly with textbooks and titles that have to do with her job: anatomy, physical therapy, wound healing.

"What's going on?" my mom asks.

"Uh, so, we have this new counselor at school, Mr. Rupert and uh, he's—" I pause.

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My mom tilts her head. “What is it, Boog?”

“He’s kind of a creep.”

My mom crosses her arms and stares at me. “I’m going to need you to give me a little more information than that.”

I tell her what happened, how I felt like he’d been watching me and Cedrick and how he’d known my last name before he had any real reason to. I also told her he was mean muggin’ me as I rode home from school. Even as I say it, it sounds dumb.

Mom massaged her temple. “Boog, baby, it’s his job to know all the kids at school.” She shuffles some papers around in front of her. “I wouldn’t worry too much but if you want I can shoot your homeroom teacher an email. What’s her name again?”

“Mrs. Lambert,” I say.

“Right,” she says. “I missed her at the open house so I probably need to reach out and say hello anyways.”

“I mean, school’s already halfway over,” I say.

Mom blinks and then purses her lips. She’s so smart. She’s the person I look up to the most and I love her more than anything but she gets so focused on big things that sometimes the little stuff, like knowing my homeroom teacher’s name, falls through the cracks. I try not to let it bother me too much.

“I’ve been so busy at work,” she says quietly. “We’ve made some huge progress on our wound-healing serum. It can heal an open, oozing gash or abrasion in less than a day and—”

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“Mom! That’s gross!”

Mom is a research associate at the University of Texas. She’s a doctor and she works in a lab where she studies how vampires were able to heal from injuries that would have been deadly to humans. Her department is hoping they can use their knowledge to help regular people heal up quicker. They have samples of vampire flesh and bone and one time I even heard her say they had an intact, but headless, vampire corpse. I’m not supposed to know that, though. Her eyes light up when she’s talking about her research but sometimes it’s too gory to stomach.

“Sorry, Boog,” she says quickly. “Listen. I’ve been busy but that’s not an excuse.” Mom clicks around on her keyboard. “I’ll email Mrs. Lambert right now.”

“No,” I say, feeling a little silly. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Maybe Mr. Rupert’s an awkward kind of person,” she offers. “Some people are so smart but they’re not great with people, you know?”

“Maybe,” I say thoughtfully.

“I’m here if you need to talk about it or if something else comes up, okay?”

I nod as she pushes away from her desk and comes over to me. “I meant to tell you, I got you a little something.” She moves some papers on her desk around and uncovers a small package.

“What is it?” I ask.

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“Open it and see,” she says, smiling.

I pull open the packaging to find a special lens that attaches to my phone’s camera so that I can take better pictures.

“I can’t believe you got it!” I say, giving her a big hug.

“Try this one out,” she says. “If you like it, and if you can keep up with it for a little while, we can think about getting you a real camera.”

I’ve been trying to convince her to let me get a digital camera since the beginning of the school year. I love taking pictures with my phone and then making artwork out of them on my tablet. I add filters and animations to everyday things like flowers and trees and birds’ nests. Sometimes Mom lets me upload the pictures and I get a photo book in the mail a few days later. I made one for Cedrick’s dads for their last anniversary and they both cried.

I give my mom another hug and run to show Jules and Cedrick, who are on the couch in the basement. I grab my phone and clip on the little lens, setting the timer for ten seconds, then dive-bomb into the couch, holding the phone at arm’s length.

“Get close,” I say. “I want some pictures of us for my next photo book.”

Cedrick scrambles over and Jules puts their arms around us. I smile, trying to be as cute as possible. Cedrick rolls his eyes back until the only thing I can see is the white part. Jules pushes their long brown hair behind their shoulder and

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blows a kiss. The flash goes off and we crowd in to look at the screen. It's the best picture I've ever taken with my phone. Every detail is sharp and clear, right down to a booger in Cedrick's left nostril.

"Yikes," he says, covering his face.

"You might wanna handle that," Jules says.

Cedrick turns to me. "We're deleting it, right?"

I hold my phone away from him. "Nope."

"Oh c'mon, Boog! I got a whole booger in my nose!"

"It's perfect," I say.

Cedrick goes to the bathroom and comes back a few minutes later, booger free and still salty that I won't delete the picture. I help Jules with their math homework and they help me with my social studies assignment.

Cedrick quotes *Black Panther* lines until we're sick of him and then my dad orders pizza. After we're all stuffed, my dad walks everyone home while I wait on the porch and then he locks up because my mom is working late.

He kisses me good night and retreats to his man cave. After I brush my teeth, stretch a bonnet over my braids, and climb into bed, I lie awake looking at the ceiling. I'm not feeling sleepy at all so I grab my phone and scroll through my pictures until I get to the one of me, Jules, and Ced. One of the things we learn about vampires is that they don't show up in mirrors and since camera lenses are basically super-sophisticated mirrors, they don't show up in pictures either.

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A vamp could've been aggressively break-dancing right behind us and we never would've known.

It suddenly feels too hot to sleep. I set my phone on the bedside table and kick away the blankets to try and find a cool spot in the sheets. When that doesn't work, I slip on my fuzzy house shoes and tiptoe downstairs to get a glass of water.

It's quiet except for the hum of the AC and the never-ending cry of cicadas from outside. In the kitchen I pull a glass out of the cabinet. Just as I set it in the front of the fridge and switch on the little light over the water dispenser, I hear my dad's voice from the basement. He says my name in a way that makes me stop. He calls me Malika and that means whatever it is—it's serious. I put my glass on the counter and quietly creep to the top of the basement steps, leaning down just enough to hear him a little clearer.

"Sam, she's smart. She's just like you. If something comes up, and we have to tell her, I think she'll be able to handle it." I don't know what he's talking about but there's something in his voice that makes me a little worried. He almost sounds sad. "It's been so long since we've had to do that. We have to try harder to—"

My curiosity carries me forward and I ease onto the top step. It creaks under my weight.

"That you, Boog?" my dad calls.

I back away from the top of the stairs. "Just getting some water. It's hot upstairs."

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“I’ll put the AC up a little, okay, baby? Try to get some sleep.”

“Okay, Dad.” I hold as still as possible because I’m extremely nosy and I want him to continue his conversation.

He stays quiet. He’s clearly waiting for me to walk away and now that I’ve blown my cover, I guess I’ll take my behind to bed. I don’t hear his voice again as I climb the stairs and go back to my room.

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CHAPTER 3

Friday finally rolls around and in Mrs. Lambert's class, she dims the lights and puts on a video explaining the school dress code and other rules that we, according to Ms. Mason, need reminding of. Some girls have been showing off their shoulders a little too much for our district's liking and now we have to talk about how wearing a tank top and shorts above the knee in ninety-degree weather is somehow unacceptable. I make up my mind to organize a protest because first of all, not everybody is just a boy or a girl. You'd think people as ancient as Ms. Mason and her district buddies would learn something new every once in a while. Second, if guys can show off their ashy chicken legs and three armpit hairs when they wear basketball shorts and muscle shirts, everybody else should be able to, too.

The classroom door creaks open and the school secretary,

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Mr. Hansen, steps in with a kid wearing a bright orange backpack. The poor kid looks like he's being held hostage. It must be his first day.

Mrs. Lambert has a quiet conversation with Mr. Hansen before directing the kid to an empty seat right next to me and Jules. He sits and stares down at the desk like he's afraid to move.

Jules leans over to him. "Hi. Are you new?" Jules is the unofficial welcoming committee for homeroom. They're always the first person to say hi when new kids come in. This kid is lucky Jules didn't know they were coming ahead of time or there would have been a welcome poster.

The new kid nods. "I—I just moved here. It's my first day."

"You all will have plenty of time to chitchat after class," Mrs. Lambert says, throwing us a pointed glance that melts into a friendly smile. "We have to get through this terrible presentation so please pay attention."

The narrator rambles on and on about the dress code and I roll my eyes so many times I'm actually starting to get a headache.

When it's finally over, we gather up our stuff and head to our second period classes. The new kid stays behind, probably at Mrs. Lambert's request so she can get him up to speed on everything he needs to do.

I meet Jules and Cedrick in the lunchroom after PE. "The gym smells terrible," I say as we sit down with our trays.

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“Somebody threw up while we were running laps and Coach told us to just go around.”

“Thanks,” says Cedrick, looking down at his chili. “Now I can’t eat.”

“Sorry,” I say.

Jules nudges me and I follow their gaze. The new kid is standing off to the side of the lunchroom with his tray in his hands, scanning the crowd. He still looks nervous. Jules is up and zigzagging their way through the crowd before I can say anything. They go over to him and steer him toward our table.

“This is Aaron,” says Jules. “Him and his mom just moved here from Colorado and guess where they live? Right at the end of our street!”

“What are you? A detective?” Cedrick asks. “You got all that information in the ten seconds it took you to walk over here.”

Jules, with their mouth full of braces and eyes full of kindness, grins. “I’m just friendly. You should try it, Ced.”

Aaron sits down. He looks a little less nervous now. I can’t imagine what it’s like to have to be in a new place with new people, and right in the middle of the year, too. I’ve had Cedrick and Jules with me since kindergarten and can’t imagine going through the school year without them.

“I’m Malika,” I say. “Everybody calls me Boog.”

“Except when she’s in trouble,” Jules cuts in.

“They’re right. I’m all seven syllables of my full name when I mess up but I’m mostly a good kid, I swear.”

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Aaron laughs a little. He's a few inches taller than Jules, big brown eyes, a dimple in his left cheek. It's his quiet demeanor that throws me a little. The last new kid we got had a speech and an entire interpretive dance prepared on their first day. I almost died of secondhand embarrassment.

"You met Jules," I say. "They're the welcoming committee. And this is Cedrick. He's the rude one."

"I'm not rude," says Cedrick, sulking.

Maybe rude isn't the right word. He's protective of our little group and sometimes that comes across as him having an attitude. I tease him about it but I know there isn't anything he wouldn't do for me or Jules and I love him like a brother for it.

"Thanks for letting me sit with you," Aaron says. He stares straight down at his tray. "I don't know anybody here."

"Well, now you know us," says Jules. "We're not so bad."

Aaron is so quiet, and I can't tell if that's the way he always is, or if he just needs some time to warm up but he cracks a toothy smile as Cedrick and Jules joke about Mr. Rupert's gleaming bald head and permanent scowl.

"Speaking of Mr. Rupert," Jules says, glancing past me, their eyes narrow.

I turn to see him standing in the cafeteria doorway. When he spots me, he makes a beeline straight toward our table. I duck down, trying to somehow make myself invisible.

"Why is he coming over here?" Aaron asks.

Cedrick shrugs and Aaron looks back and forth between

me and Jules but we don't have an answer either. Mr. Rupert walks up to our table and stares down at me, his eyebrows pushed together.

"Good afternoon." He glances at Aaron. "You're new."

"So are you," I say.

Jules giggles but Mr. Rupert huffs.

"Did we do something wrong?" Cedrick asks. "Not tryna be rude, but you've been following us around."

"That's true," Mr. Rupert admits. "It's my job to know about you all."

He's making the same point as my mom and I guess he's right. Maybe.

"I'm the guidance counselor," Mr. Rupert says to Aaron. "If you need anything, you know where to find me. Moving to a new school can be hard. I'm here if you need to talk."

Mr. Rupert is smiling but I'm 100 percent sure it's fake. He looks like he has to force himself to do it and I'm even more confused about what his problem is. He walks away and as he leaves the cafeteria, Mrs. Lambert smiles politely at him, then finds me in the crowd. She rolls her eyes and points at Mr. Rupert when he turns his back, shaking her head. Even she thinks he's kind of annoying.

"What's his deal?" Aaron asks.

"I think Ms. Mason told him how I like to organize protests against stuff like this," I say, holding up my bowl of chili that smells way too much like dog food for me to eat it. I think

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about my notes on the dress code video. Now that I think about it, that actually might be the reason Mr. Rupert is sticking his nose in my business. Ms. Mason probably told Mr. Rupert to keep an eye on me. To her, I'm a troublemaker, but almost always good trouble. Mr. Rupert isn't going to stop me from asking questions about our school's outdated rules and he isn't going to keep me from demanding to know the nutritional value of dog-food-flavored chili.

I turn to Aaron, trying to put my thoughts elsewhere. "So, my parents are having a BBQ tonight. Wanna come?"

"We're all going," says Jules.

"You like banana pudding?" Cedrick asks as if it's the only thing that really matters.

Aaron nods. "I have to ask my mom but I don't think we're doing anything anyways."

"Okay," I say, smiling. "Want to give me your phone number so I can text you the address? If you live on Noble Knight, we're right at the end of the cul-de-sac."

I try to think of the last time we had anybody our age come to one of our cookouts. It's always just been me, Jules, and Cedrick, and all our families. It feels kind of nice to invite somebody new over.

The bell rings. I quickly put Aaron's number in my phone and me and Jules go to our afternoon classes in A building while Cedrick and Aaron head to building B. The rest of the day drags on and on until finally, the last bell rings. I practically run

out of the building and meet everyone at the bike rack, including Aaron.

“It’s the weekend!” Cedrick shouts as he straps on his helmet. “I can’t wait to eat, sleep, and watch *Spider-Man*.”

“The Miles Morales one?” Aaron asks.

Cedrick’s face lights up. He loves that movie more than *Black Panther* and that’s sayin’ something. “Is there any other version that counts?” he asks, beaming.

Aaron shakes his head. “Not really.”

The way they look at each other lets me know things are about to get real nerdy, real fast. Cedrick has fifty-seven theories about the MCU multiverse and while me and Jules love those movies, we’re not as into it as he is. But the way him and Aaron start going back and forth tells me he just found someone he can pour his little superhero loving heart out to and I love that for him.

“Let’s go to my house and help get ready for the BBQ,” I say. I glance at Aaron. “Do you have a bike?”

“I do, but the movers haven’t brought all our stuff yet.”

“That’s okay,” says Jules. “Hop on the back.” They stand on their petals, leaving the seat open for Aaron.

“You sure?” he asks skeptically.

Jules smiles wide and then looks at me. “Y’all better tell him. I can carry any one of you.”

“I mean, they can carry you,” I say. “But they can also drop you. I got a scar on my knee to prove it.”

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“Hey!” Jules shouts. “Don’t tell him that. You’re gonna scare him.” They turn to Aaron. “She fell off because we were goin’ way too fast down a hill and there was gravel on the road and—you know what? Just hop on and try not to move around too much. I won’t let you fall. Promise.”

Aaron hesitates for a moment, then gets on the bike and wraps his arms firmly around Jules’s waist.

“If we fall over just remember to tuck and roll,” says Jules. “Protect your head and neck.”

A strangled yelp escapes Aaron’s lips as Jules takes off, Aaron clinging to their waist for dear life.

I hop on my bike and me and Cedrick follow Jules across the field behind the school, taking the shortcut. Once again, Mr. Rupert is standing by the gate. Jules quickly pedals past him but as I follow Cedrick through, Mr. Rupert steps onto the narrow path in front of me. I have to grip my brakes—hard—and drag my feet on the ground to keep from running into him.

“You should be more careful,” Mr. Rupert says.

“I should be more careful?” I ask, my heart thudding in my chest. “You stepped right in front of me.”

“Shortcuts are off the beaten path,” Mr. Rupert says, his gaze wandering to the gate. “You should stick to the main sidewalks where there are lots of other people.”

I want to tell him to mind his business but choose my words a little more carefully.

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“You don’t need to worry about me. My parents know I go this way.”

His eyebrows shoot up like he’s shocked. “Do they now?”

Cedrick and Jules—with Aaron teetering on the seat of the bike—stop on the other side of the gate.

“Come on, Boog,” Cedrick calls. “No talking to strangers, remember?”

Mr. Rupert shoots Cedrick an angry glance. He steps aside and I peddle past him.

“He’s such a creep,” Jules says as we hurry down the side street.

“I don’t get it,” I say. I’m thinking about bringing it up to my mom again as we turn onto Noble Knight Road.

“Right here,” Aaron says.

His house is the big gray one with the white trim right at the beginning of our street. I didn’t know the people who lived there before and the place has been empty for a while. There are just six houses between Aaron’s and mine and I take that as a little bit of a sign that we’re supposed to be friends.

“You can come in,” Aaron says. “We don’t have much, like I said, the movers haven’t brought all our stuff yet. We’re sleeping on air mattresses and living off pizza and Whataburger right now.”

“Oh man, Whataburger,” Cedrick says like he can almost taste it. “It’s been so long . . .”

“Oh my god, Cedrick,” Jules says. “Please get it together.

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You're about to start drooling and then Aaron's not gonna want to be friends with you."

Cedrick straightens up and smooths out his shirt. "I could eat a whole cow right now."

We leave our bikes on the sidewalk and trudge up the walkway. Aaron's front lawn is a mess and I know that as soon as my mom and Jules's mom get a look at it, they'll be over here offering to fix it up like they had for Cedrick's dads. It'll be mostly Jules's mom, though. My mom has a tendency to kill plants on contact.

Aaron walks up to the front door and takes out his house key but before he gets a chance to put it in the lock, the door swings open and a tall woman in gray sweats, her braids piled on top of her head, a yellow headscarf securing them in place, stands in the doorway.

"Hey, Mom," Aaron says.

The woman wraps him up and kisses the top of his head. "Making friends already?" she asks as she looks us over.

"Hi!" Jules says, pushing their way between me and Cedrick. "I'm Jules. It's nice to meet you."

"Hi, baby," Aaron's mom says warmly. She's got the same gentle personality as Aaron. They look just alike, too.

"Mom, this is Malika but we all call her Boog," says Aaron, smiling at me. "That's Cedrick and you met Jules already."

"Wonderful," Aaron's mom says, smiling. "I'm Kim. I'm so happy Aaron's got some friends already. Come on in and make yourselves at home."

“This house is so nice, Miss Kim,” says Jules as they look around. “It’s been empty for a little while, right?”

“It has,” says Miss Kim. “Probably because they wanted way too much money for it but my negotiating skills came in pretty handy.” She walks into the big open kitchen and looks around inside the fridge. “I’ve got some junk y’all can have. My only rule is that you clean up after yourselves.”

Cedrick smiles wide. “Yes, ma’am.”

Miss Kim sets a bunch of sodas and chips and a stack of ramen on the counter. “Help yourselves. When the movers bring the rest of the kitchen stuff I’ll have y’all over for a real dinner.”

We all grab noodles and Aaron’s mom heats up a pot of water on the stove, apologizing for not having a microwave yet. I nudge Aaron’s shoulder and mouth the word “BBQ” to him.

“Oh right,” he says quietly. “Hey, Mom, Boog’s parents are having a BBQ tonight. Can we go?”

Miss Kim turns and gives him a look. It’s the don’t-ask-me-for-stuff-in-front-of-people look. Like when I want Jules or Cedrick to stay over and I ask my mom right in front of them, there’s a better chance she’ll say yes because she loves my friends but she presses her lips together real tight and narrows her eyes at me while she’s saying yes.

“We don’t have plans so I guess that’d be fine,” she says. “Are you sure it’s okay with your parents?”

“Oh yes, ma’am.” As I say the words, I’m actually not 100 percent sure.

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We celebrated Jules's mom's birthday in their backyard and Lita cooked and we all sang karaoke. We had a huge thing for Cedrick's dad when he got promoted and I think some of his coworkers were there, too, but I can't remember for sure. It's rarely anyone other than just us and our families but Aaron and his mom are new around here. Inviting them is the polite thing to do.

"I'll bring a fruit tray," Miss Kim says. "What time should we head over?"

"Five," I say a little nervously. Aaron and I are going to be friends. I can already tell. And the way him and Cedrick were excitedly discussing Miles Morales makes me happy in a way I didn't know I could be. I never needed anybody besides Jules and Ced. But maybe that was because it has always been just us. My parents can't be mad that I want to let new people into our circle, especially people as nice as Aaron and his mom.

I picture my mom giving me that same look Miss Kim had just given Aaron. I need to let her know that we'll have extra guests and I hope she won't be too mad that I invited them.

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