YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO DIE TONIGHT

By Kalynn Bayron

FOR YOUNGER READERS

The Vanquishers

FOR OLDER READERS

Cinderella Is Dead

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This Poison Heart

This Wicked Fate

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Dedication TK

CHAPTER 1

My hands are smeared with blood. Dirt sticks under my nails. My jeans are ripped at the knee, and my T-shirt is stained because I had to claw my way out from my hiding spot under the supply cabin. He is too close, and I can't risk staying here.

Above me, the moon is just a sliver of silver hanging in the sky, but I'm thankful. I lost my flashlight, and the moon is now the only thing lighting the path in front of me as I push toward the main lodge.

The boathouse comes into view. I suck in a chest full of chilly nighttime air and let out a bloodcurdling scream. It carries in the clear, quiet dark. Three people burst from the boathouse. They're tripping all over one another, and the woman is screaming her face off. The two dudes with her look pretty shaken up.

"Help me!" I scream. I limp toward them, panting, clutching my side. "Please help me!"

The woman runs up to me and grabs me by the shoulders, digging her nails into my skin.

"I gotta get out of here!" she shrieks. "I didn't know it was going to be like this! I can't do this."

She has a raised welt on the side of her face, and her bottom lip is split open.

"It's just the three of you left?" I ask as I try to catch my breath.

"Yeah," says one of the other guys. His gaze darts from me to the lake, which is flat calm and looks like a giant black mirror reflecting the silvery sliver of moon in the sky.

Somewhere behind me, a branch snaps, like something heavy is crushing it underfoot. My heart slams in my chest. The woman leans over and puts her hands on her knees. She doesn't appear to have heard the sound. Her back is to the woods when suddenly, he's there. His dark-blue coveralls are smudged with dirt, making him almost impossible to see against the backdrop of towering pines. His six-foot-eight frame looms in the shadows like a ghost. His mask is horrifying in the dark. It's a dingy white color, smeared with red and mud. There's a crack running up the right side. His massive hand grips the handle of a machete, its blade slick with blood.

He stalks forward, and the woman doesn't even see him until it's too late. He grabs her from behind, lifting her up off the ground. He disappears with her kicking and screaming

into the Mason Lodge, a smaller cabin we mostly use for storage. I don't move. I can't.

One of the other guys makes a break for it and bolts toward the camp entrance. The other guy just stands there as a thin film of sweat blankets his forehead. I grab his arm, and he snaps out of whatever terror-induced trance he's in and starts hollering as loud as he can.

"Come on!" I yell.

The dirt road that leads to the camp's main entrance seems too long, and the screams of the terrified woman echo all around us as we race down it. The timbers of the giant sign that flank the entry gate materialize out of the dark. The other man is already there.

"Brandon!" he screams. "Get your ass over here! We gotta go!"

"What about Leslie?" Brandon asks. "We can't just leave her!"

"Leave her ass here!" the other man screams.

A body lies motionless on the ground in the main parking lot. Tasha. My friend, my coworker for the past summer, is lying on her stomach. The glinting handle of a large knife protrudes from her back. A dark stain seeps across her yellow uniform shirt.

Brandon sees her and staggers forward, clawing at the iron gate, which is padlocked shut.

I stagger to the gate and grab the metal bars. I push on them and scream as loud as I can.

"Help us! Please! Somebody help us!"

On the other side of the locked gate, the machete-wielding, masked figure appears.

"No!" I scream. "Leave us alone! What do you want?"

The two dudes cling to each other. Tears trail down Brandon's face.

The masked man stalks forward as I grip the metal entrance gate. I don't move, even though my gut is telling me to run. He walks up and grabs the front of my shirt through the bars. I struggle in his grip, clawing at him, kicking against the bars.

He glares down at me with eyes black as coal. I reach into the waistband of my jeans and pull out a butcher knife. I plunge it into the killer's chest, and blood flows from the wound. He lets go of my shirt and staggers back. As he cries out, he drops his machete, falls flat on his back, and goes completely limp.

It's over.

I slowly turn around and look the last two dudes directly in the eye.

I smile.

It's never easy at the end. I'm trying so hard to hold in my laughter, I can't help but chuckle a little as I make the announcement.

"I am the final girl," I say. The floodlights click on, washing the entrance in a bright white light. "And you two have survived a night at Camp Mirror Lake. You win!"

The men stare slack-jawed at me as people descend on the

scene. The other Camp Mirror Lake staff crowd around us, and the other guests who'd been eliminated earlier in the night reappear. Tasha resurrects herself and scrambles to her feet, the knife rig still attached to her body. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, and the sickly sweet corn syrup sticks to my lips. Someone cues the music; the Halloween theme song blasts through the camp.

Leslie, the chick who got snatched up by the Mason Lodge, pushes her way through the crowd, marches up to Brandon, and slaps him so hard that spit flies out of his mouth. The entire crowd goes silent.

"You left me!" she screams. "You ran away!"

Kyle, the masked killer who is actually a classmate of mine at Groton High School, reemerges sans mask holding a T-shirt that says, I Survived the Night at Camp Mirror Lake. It's the prize for "winning" the game, but when he hands it to Brandon, Leslie snatches it away and throws it on the ground, stomping on it until it's covered in mud. She breaks up with Brandon on the spot with the entire staff looking on.

Kyle leans in close to me, and I have to crane my neck to look up at him.

"Charity, we knocked this one out of the park."

I eye the dark-red stain on his chest. "I didn't hurt you, did I? I saw you wince. I'm so sorry."

He shakes his head and hands me back my retractable butcher knife. "It didn't collapse into the handle all the way. Thought you stabbed me for real for a minute." He chuckles.

"I'm good. I hope you never actually get mad at me, though." He rubs his chest and grins.

This is one of the top three nights of the season, hands down. I'm so proud of us. I feel bad for Brandon and his now-ex-girlfriend, but they knew what they signed up for. What matters in this moment is that the game was a raging success, and now I'm ready to shower, knock out in my cabin, and do it all over again the following night.

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After two summers—the first as fake-blood cleanup staff and the second as Staff Victim #3—I finally got promoted to the most coveted position in the entire park—Final Girl. *The* final girl to be exact.

Camp Mirror Lake is a full-contact terror-simulation experience. We run the whole thing on the location used during the filming of the 1983 cult classic *The Curse of Camp Mirror Lake*. As far as slasher films go, it's somewhere between Friday the 13th and *Scream*. A classic, but a little cheesy if I'm being honest. It chronicled the bloody rampage of inhuman serial killer Scott Addison as he slashed his way through an eighties summer camp full of campers and their inept teenage counselors. Now we re-create the events of the movie for groups of paid guests. They come to be scared, but they almost always underestimate what's about to happen to them.

The Camp Mirror Lake experience requires all guests to sign a thirty-three page waiver. Nobody ever reads the whole

thing, but it explicitly states that staff members are allowed to push, shove, and restrain the guests. We're cleared to terrify each and every person who signs on the dotted line. It's always funny to me to see people upset at the end of the night. You signed a waiver that said a man in a mask can stalk you through the woods, but all the sudden it's too real? But it never fails, and that's why Camp Mirror Lake has the reputation it does. We don't have a marketing budget. We don't have commercials or billboards—we have word of mouth and that's it. We have to dial the fear up to ten so the guests can run home and tell all their friends how scared they were. That's what keeps people, with what I'm convinced is some kind of masochistic streak, coming up here night after night.

As our season approaches its end, I'm left planning for the final Camp Mirror Lake experience—the biggest night of our season. We put everything into it, and this year is going to be the best send-off in Camp Mirror Lake history. I can feel it in my bones. We have brand-new squibs, a better recipe for more realistic-looking fake blood, and I'm way too excited to see Kyle use the newly renovated trapdoor in the main lodge to pop up on unsuspecting guests who always think it's a good idea to hide in the kitchen. Only three more days until the big show, and I'm so hyped I can hardly stand it.

Our checkout policy states that all guests must exit the camp as soon as the game officially ends, and that means seeing people off at nearly one in the morning. After I check everyone out, including Brandon and his now-ex-girlfriend,

Leslie, I do my final walk through of the main office and the western lodge; then I retreat to Lakeview Cabin #1, the place I call home for most of the summer.

Every time a game ends, its conclusion brings me one step closer to having to go home. I'd rather be out in these woods being chased by a fake serial killer than head home to Groton where my mom and her boyfriend, Rob, can pretend I don't exist. We live in Cedra Court, a motel that had been converted into apartments sometime in the late nineties. I think that might have been the worst idea anyone has ever had. It never really feels like home, just a place to stay.

In my mom's eyes, Rob can do no wrong even though Rob, at his big age, can't hold a job, and there's a permanent outline of his body on the couch because he sits in the same spot every single day. He drinks too much and spends my mom's money like she's not working two jobs just to stay afloat, but somehow *I'm* still the biggest problem he has. The best thing he's ever done for me is hand me the job listing for Camp Mirror Lake.

I shake myself, trying to somehow reverse the rot those memories have caused. I take out my earpiece to clean it off. Fake blood is caked around the little cord that connects the earpiece to the battery pack that clips on to the waist of my jeans. I pineapple my hair, tuck it under a plastic cap, grab my shower kit and a flashlight, and slip on my shower shoes. The cabins don't have private showers, so I have to make my way to the community stalls.

I can feel the fake blood sucking the moisture right out of

my skin. When I leave it on too long, it makes me break out, so I try to get it off before I go to sleep. I'm so tired I can barely keep my eyes open, but just because I'm in the middle of the woods in upstate New York, playing the final girl in a horror simulation, doesn't mean I should abandon my skin-care routine.

Pulling the door closed behind me, I step out onto the porch. The light outside my door is strong and steady. I stuck a hundred-watt bulb in the socket, and now it shines like a miniature sun and hums so loud, I low-key feel like it might explode at any moment. The air is wet and warm—summertime air—and that guarantees I'll have to keep my hair curly for the duration of the season because pressing it would be pointless. But there's always a little bit of a breeze coming off the lake, and that makes the heat bearable most of the time. It's so quiet after the guests have gone and the rest of the staff turn in for the night. There's an air of calm that stands in stark contrast to the frenzied chaos that had taken place only a little while before.

I jog down the steps, and they creak loudly. I hang a left and circle around the back of my cabin. The dirt path that leads to the showers is unlit. It's on this path that Victim #2 meets their grisly fate during our terror simulation. There are little bits of fake guts and dark patches of fake blood still on the ground. I'll have to lay down a fresh coat of dirt before the next group of guests arrives, but for now, I just step around it, trying not to get it on my shower shoes.

The moon isn't much help on the path due to the thick tree cover, so I flip on my flashlight and shine it in the direction of the showers. A branch breaks to my left, and I spin around. My heart stutters. Something small and furry creeps along the ground, eyes glinting in the glare of my flashlight. A raccoon. I push out a chest full of air and snap my fingers in its direction.

"Go on," I say. "Get out of here."

The raccoon looks at me like *I'm* the one in the wrong, then waddles off into the dark.

I try to get my heart to settle back into some kind of normal rhythm as I climb the steps to the community showers. I grab my key, but as I go to put it in the lock, I find that the main door is already unlocked and sitting slightly ajar. I shine my light through the cracked door.

"Do not play with me," I say aloud. I reach into my shower kit, pull out a can of Mace, and flip off the safety. "I will Mace you and I won't feel bad about it."

Silence.

The hair on the back of my neck stands straight up. My flashlight falters, blinking on and off twice.

"Don't you dare," I say, knocking it against the doorframe until the beam of light is continuous and steady.

Now, in this situation, horror films tell us that the final girl might go ahead and enter the community showers, disrobe, and then barely escape a masked killer as she slips around butt naked in the bathroom. However, I only play a final girl at

Camp Mirror Lake; I don't actually want to be one. I turn my Black ass right around and book it back to my cabin, where I close and lock the door. For now, my face full of fake blood is going to stay just the way it is.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand.

KYLE: Jordan and Heather were MIA earlier so I had to run the trapdoors myself. Annoying.

ME: Where'd they go?

KYLE: No idea. But if they don't come back it's just gonna be me, you, Tasha, Porter, and Javier. We'll have to shut everything down ourselves.

I roll my eyes. People either take this job way too seriously or not seriously enough. Me and Kyle have been the only consistent staff members since I started here. Everyone else from my first summer quit. Last season, my friend Tasha and a mutual friend of ours named Porter joined the crew, but some people we bring on are way too aggressive with guests and a little too comfortable pushing them around.

We're supposed to scare people, not grievously injure them, which has happened once or twice before. I really think we may have hired baby serial killers looking to get in some practice. Good thing they're easy to spot, always asking too many weird questions about the legality of what we do. Wanting to make sure that if they should just happen to slip up and really stab, maim, or kill somebody, they won't get in trouble. That's when I ask if they understand that murder is bad, illegal, and not permitted at all. Yes, we can push and shove and scream

and use props to scare people, but we don't actually hurt anybody on purpose. Scraped knees and twisted ankles kind of come with the territory, but I called the cops on a dude who came on board as a runner. His only job was to sprint down Path #3 and scream at the top of his lungs while trailing his fake severed arm behind him. He took it upon himself to grab one of the guests and tie her up in the boathouse. The Groton sheriff came out here and escorted him off the property right in the middle of a game.

I had one new hire earlier in the season tell me that "technically" if someone runs into his knife, it's not murder. I cut him loose immediately.

And then there's staff like Heather and Jordan. Too busy doing freak-nasty stuff in the old arts-and-crafts building to do their jobs, then just bailing whenever they feel like it. We've lost three full-time staff members this season alone.

ME: I'll call some friends in the morning and see if they can come up and help us out

KYLE: Should we call Mr. Lamont?

Mr. Lamont owns Camp Mirror Lake, and while he never bothers to come out here and do any actual work, he does like to micromanage things over the phone.

ME: No. We can handle the last few nights ourselves. I'll call him after the season's over and let him know we'll need to bring on some more people for next summer. No big deal.

KYLE: Ok. Cool.

I think for a moment.

ME: Hey. Were you trying to scare me in the showers just now? I went over there and it was already unlocked.

There is a long pause. I check the signal—two bars. Finally, my phone buzzes.

KYLE: Come on now. I'd never do that to you. This job getting to you, Charity?

ME: Shut up lol You think I'm scared?

KYLE: Me, you, and Tasha are the only Black folks here. Horror movies say we should be dead by now.

ME: I'm the final girl, boo. I will survive no matter what. It's my job.

Kyle texts me a series of butcher knife emojis and a meme of Michael Myers trying to grab Jamie Lee Curtis while she cowers in a closet.

ME: Jamie Lee is the ultimate final girl. Right behind Neve Campbell. Michael Myers can choke.

I've been a fan of horror movies and scary stories my whole life. I've read every Tananarive Due novel, seen every Jordan Peele film. I love horror movies even when everybody else thinks they're garbage. I will gladly debate anybody who got something to say about the masterpiece that is *Crimson Peak*. So when Rob shoved the job advertisement in my face and forced me to call the number for an interview, I jumped at the chance to be involved in the Camp Mirror Lake experience. I'm not scared of much, but I also know when not to press my

luck. This job isn't getting to me, but walking into the unlocked community showers, which are supposed to be locked, while my flashlight is acting up? No, ma'am. Absolutely not.

I say good night to Kyle and put my phone back on the charger. I double-check my door and the two windows on my cabin to make sure everything is locked up. As I cut out the light and slip into bed, I can't help but wonder how we're going to manage shutting everything down for the season with a bare-bones staff.

There's a gust of wind, and the single light on the outside of my cabin flickers. I grip my Mace and slide my flashlight closer to me on the bedside table. Another gust rattles the entire cabin, and I pull the covers up to my neck, sinking into the bed, hoping that the slight sway in my curtains is just the wind pushing through a crack in the siding.

I smile. That is exactly what the people in horror movies say right before a dude with a hook for a hand jumps out and tears them apart.

It's just the wind.

There's nobody in the closet.

There is no one under the bed.

It's just your imagination.