THE VANQUISHERS

BY KALYNN BAYRON

For younger readers

The Vanquishers

For older readers

Cinderella Is Dead
This Poison Heart
This Wicked Fate

THE VANQUISHERS

KALYNN BAYRON

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Remember, do not invite them in.

THE VANQUISHERS

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?"

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 crumpled 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."

"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.

"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

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

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

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.

"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 horde 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

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

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

"Wooooow," 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.

"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."

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

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

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.

"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

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.