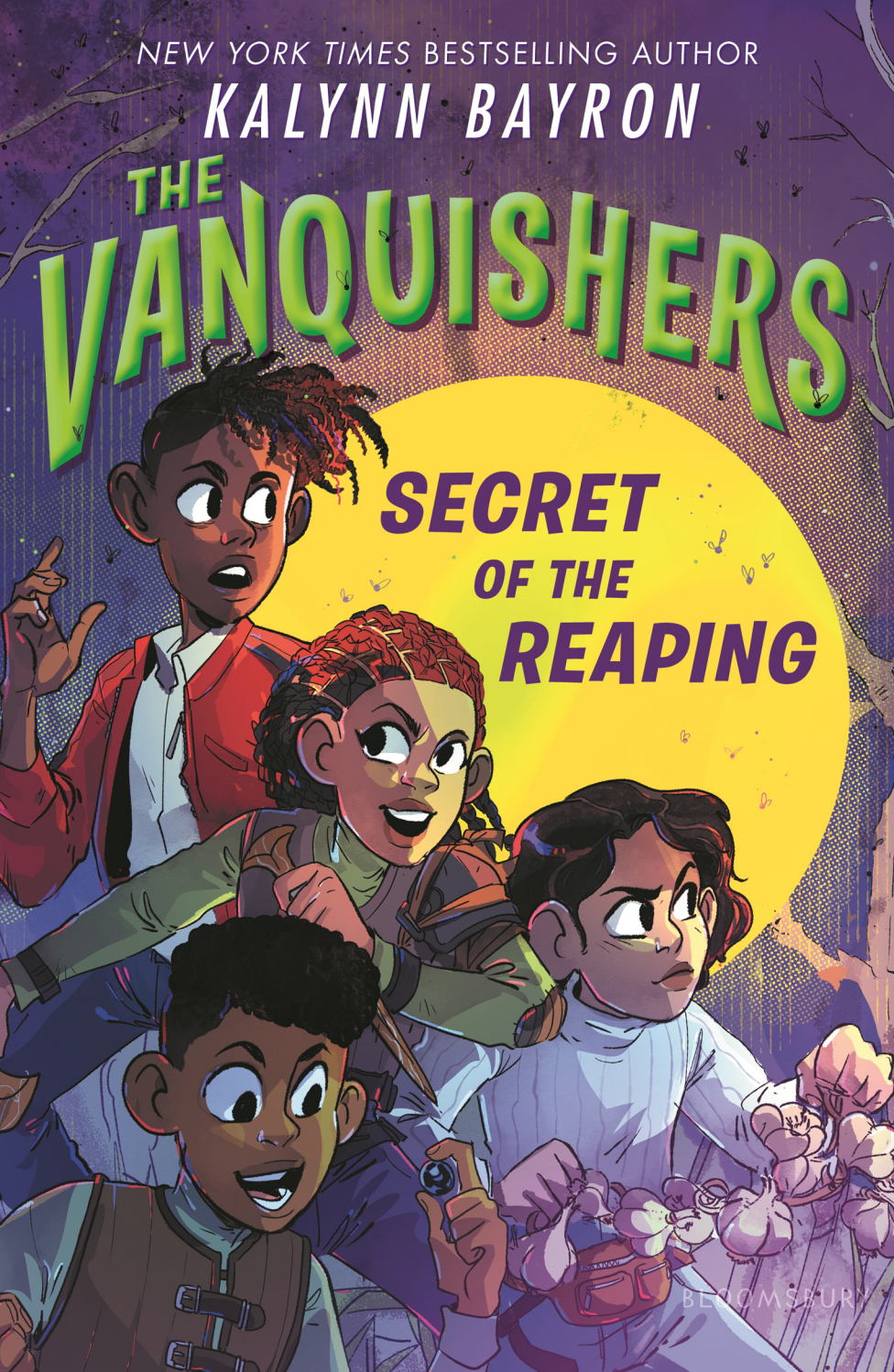

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KALYNN BAYRON
THE VANQUISHERS
SECRET OF THE REAPING
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THE VANQUISHERS

SECRET OF THE REAPING

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THE VANQUISHERS

SECRET OF THE REAPING

KALYNN BAYRON

BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in the United States of America in 2023 by Bloomsbury Children's Books
First published in Great Britain in 2024 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-6781-6; eBook: 978-1-5266-6780-9; ePDF: 978-1-5266-6779-3

Book design by Jeanette Levy
Typeset by Westchester Publishing Services

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Remember, vampires are confused by rhymes.
Recite one to keep the undead at bay.

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CHAPTER 1

Mr. Rupert is our resident Vanquisher historian and vampire history expert. The big whiteboard in my basement is filled with his chicken-scratch handwriting. There are timelines and squiggly arrows pointing to clusters of indecipherable words. He's mad that me, Cedrick, and Jules keep asking him to just tell us what he wants us to know instead of writing it on the board but he doesn't listen.

"You know," Cedrick says, leaning back in his chair and running his hand over the top of his head. "We have to take penmanship in school. Like, we get graded on it and everything. Did you take penmanship classes, Mr. Rupert?"

I look down into my lap, letting my braids fall across my face like a curtain. Jules pushes their shoulder into mine as we try really hard not to laugh.

"Do you know how old I am?" Mr. Rupert asks. He scowls so hard the lines on his forehead turn into deep, angry creases. "Do you know how long it's been since I was in grade school?"

I just shake my head. Mr. Rupert should know by now not to ask questions like that around Cedrick. It's an invitation for a roasting of epic proportions. I glance at Ced and he's grinning so hard he looks like his teeth are about to break. He's gonna go straight for the jugular. I just know it.

"Ooooh! Let me guess!" Ced runs his hand over his chin like a movie villain, then narrows his eyes at Mr. Rupert. "I'm gonna say . . . seventy. You're seventy years old. How close am I?"

If looks could kill, Cedrick would be dead and buried. Mr. Rupert presses his lips into a tight line and leans across the desk.

"I am fifty-three," he says flatly.

"Dang!" Cedrick says without missing a beat. "I was way off. But maybe you look older than you are? You know what they say."

"No," Mr. Rupert says. "What do they say?"

"Problematic people age like spoiled milk." Cedrick says it like it's a scientific fact and not something he probably heard online somewhere.

"So now I'm problematic?" Mr. Rupert asks. His voice is too high and his bald head is too sweaty for this to continue.

I swallow a laugh and clear my throat. "Mr. Rupert, are we done for the day?"

Mr. Rupert glances at his watch, then back to me. "Why? You have somewhere to be?"

I'm watching the clock, counting down the minutes until Aaron can safely come out and Mr. Rupert knows this. Aaron's a new vamp and we've learned that our theory about him being sensitive to the sun because he's a fledgling was correct. Mr. Rupert told us during a lesson that older vamps can walk around for hours in the daytime. I hate to admit it, but as much as Mr. Rupert annoys me, his lessons have a lot of helpful information. This little piece about vamps in the daylight is scary but I also hope that means that at some point Aaron can join us in the daytime. For now, I have to wait for him to wake up and climb out of the makeshift crypt his mom had made for him under the shed in their backyard.

"Focus, Miss Wilson, and put your attention here." Mr. Rupert points to something he's written in the corner of the whiteboard. "Make sure you are prepared."

"Is that an algebra equation?" Cedrick asks. "I see numbers and letters. Mr. Rupert, I don't want to learn math in here. I already have enough of that at school."

Mr. Rupert sighs.

I squint to make out the writing in the corner. "Does that say 'quiz'?" I ask.

Jules sits up straight. "A quiz, Mr. Rupert? Really?"

"You serious?" Cedrick asks. He slouches down in his seat. "See, problematic."

Mr. Rupert rolls his eyes and strums his fingers across his desk.

"This is way too much like regular school," Cedrick says. "When are we gonna learn to throw a stake into a vampire's neck?"

Mr. Rupert rubs his temple like he can't believe what he's hearing. "The heart, Cedrick. The stake goes in the heart."

Cedrick doesn't want any part of Mr. Rupert's lessons about Vanquisher history and vampire lore. He wants to fist-fight a vampire and it's honestly a little weird how eager he is to do that. The thought of being face-to-face with a vampire that isn't Aaron terrifies me. Not Ced. He's been hassling Mr. Rupert about teaching us some actual fighting skills but Mr. Rupert dismisses the suggestion every time.

"Question," Jules says. "My braces are silver. If I bite a vamp, will that kill them?" They click their teeth together, showing off their new black-and-purple rubber bands that connect to their shiny braces.

Mr. Rupert stands up and crosses his arms over his chest. "I wouldn't suggest it. Your braces are stainless steel, which is an alloy. It's mostly chromium and aluminum."

Jules looks disappointed. "That sucks."

"I find it comical that you think you could get close enough to a vamp to bite it without it biting you first," Mr. Rupert says.

"When something's funny, you're supposed to smile or laugh," Cedrick chimes in. "Just so you know."

Mr. Rupert's expression doesn't change at all. "Let's review for our quiz, shall we?" He shuffles some papers around on his desk. "The Reaping took place on April 28, 2002. The Vanquishers had hunted the undead to near extinction but the last hive had a foothold here in San Antonio. They were dug in, like ticks."

"Gross," I say.

"The last hive were chased from their hiding spot in the Natural Bridge Caverns just north of downtown San Antonio," Mr. Rupert says. "The Vanquishers pursued the hive into the city. The battle was fierce and the Vanquishers suffered heavy losses." Mr. Rupert clears his throat before continuing. "Dayside had already perished and as the final battle was fought, Nightside was killed in the Pearl district where the vampires made their last stand."

"You were there, too, right?" I ask. I'd never heard talk about him actually being there but if he'd been the official record keeper of the Vanquishers for as long as he says he has, he must have been involved.

"I was close by," he says. "I, of course, tried to do my part but as the three of you don't seem to understand, vampires are a formidable foe. They are ruthless. They don't hesitate to inflict pain and devastation everywhere they go. They have no regard for human life and they won't hesitate to end you and the people you love most." He's lost in his own thoughts for a second, then he takes three sheets of paper from his briefcase, and hands them to me, Ced, and Jules.

Cedrick groans and slumps down in his chair. "Really?"

"Really," Mr. Rupert says, furrowing his brow so hard I can barely see his eyes. "Flip the paper over when you're finished. Your time begins now."

I read over the first question.

In what year were the Vanquishers officially formed?

I pencil in the answer. *1850.*

Mr. Rupert doesn't waste any time. From day one of what me, Ced, and Jules are calling Vanquisher training academy, Mr. Rupert gets right down to it. The history and origin of the vampires themselves is murky but the history of the Vanquishers isn't as hard to pick apart. Basic stuff we've learned in school doesn't compare to the level of detail Mr. Rupert goes into and sometimes it makes my brain hurt. I continue my quiz.

In what publication were the slayers who served as precursors to the Vanquishers mentioned publicly for the first time?

I have to think hard. Maybe I'd been passing notes to Jules when Mr. Rupert had gone over this part but the answer wriggles its way to the front of my mind.

Freedom's Journal said a group of masked slayers killed a hive of three vamps in 1827.

Cedrick nudges the leg of my chair with his foot. I glance over at him as Mr. Rupert turns his back to us. Ced tips up his paper so I can see the hideous little sketch he's made of Mr. Rupert with wings and little pointy teeth.

Mr. Rupert suddenly spins around and snatches the paper from Cedrick's hand. He glares down at the sketch and when he returns his gaze to Cedrick, his eyes are narrow and angry.

"How dare you depict me as one of those—those monsters!" Mr. Rupert says angrily. He takes a red pen from his pocket and draws an F at the top of Cedrick's quiz.

"Good thing this isn't real school or I'd be upset," Cedrick says with an edge of annoyance in his voice.

"We'll see what your parents have to say," Mr. Rupert says through gritted teeth.

Cedrick crosses his arms hard over his chest and stares down at the table.

"Mr. Rupert," I say as I answer the final question. "We know you're taking all of this really seriously—"

"Because it *is* serious," he says, cutting me off. "It's not a joke. Not a game. Your knowledge of the Vanquishers and of vampire lore might save your life one day and if any of you have the courage to see this training through as your parents did before you, you will one day use this knowledge to protect the public at large. You need to think of that."

Despite what Mr. Rupert says, I *have* been thinking about that. Back in the day, the Vanquishers passed the monikers and the responsibilities down to someone close to them, usually a family member. Later, when that wasn't always possible, they formed the Wrecking Crew for the training of future Vanquishers. But our parents had made a choice—they didn't want this

life for us, and a part of me can understand why. Ever since we realized that vamps were back, it's been nonstop chaos.

Jules rolls their eyes and hands Mr. Rupert their quiz. "Are we done for the day?"

Mr. Rupert looks over Jules's paper and then collects mine.

"We're done for now," he says. He stares down at my paper as me, Ced, and Jules stand up and head for the stairs. "Miss Wilson, I need to speak with you before you go."

Cedrick doesn't even pretend like he's gonna wait for me. Jules lingers on the stairs but Mr. Rupert waves them away and they slowly head upstairs. I turn to face him. He's now seated behind a desk that's really just a plastic folding table.

"Something wrong with my quiz?" I ask.

He marks it with his pen, then holds it up so I can see it. A big A+ is written at the top in red. He hands me the paper.

"I got an A-plus?" I ask, a little surprised. "I thought something was wrong."

"Something *is* wrong," Mr. Rupert says as he leans forward on his desk. "Your friends don't seem to be taking this as seriously as they should."

I hold my hand up in front of me. "Just so you know, anything you tell me, I'm gonna go right back and tell Cedrick and Jules and probably my parents, so yeah. Just want to put that out there."

Mr. Rupert's face is a mask of annoyance. "Right." He leans

back in his chair. "You have a good handle on the lessons we've reviewed so far. You are smart, if not a little naive."

"I don't know what that means but I'm gonna assume you're being rude," I say. On the very rare occasions that Mr. Rupert has been nice to us, I don't let it fool me. There's no way this grumpy old man gets any points with me after everything that has happened since the beginning of the school year. He's always been rude. He thinks my friend Aaron is a monster and isn't afraid to tell us that every time he gets a chance. Even when my parents tell him to chill, it doesn't last long.

Mr. Rupert huffs. "You think I'm rude?"

"Yes," I say.

"You have no idea what I've been through. You have no idea what I've seen." He narrows his gaze at me. "I have my reasons for being firm. You'll come to accept it."

"Or not," I say quickly. "My mom says I don't ever have to accept people being rude to me for no reason."

Mr. Rupert almost says something but quiets himself. I bounce gently on the tips of my toes in anticipation.

Please say something about my mom. I'll run and tell her so fast it'll make your head spin.

"You could be a great slayer one day, Miss Wilson," Mr. Rupert says. "Your attention to detail when we review the histories is always spot-on. Your worksheets are always complete and correct. You could put all those skills to use and become a great Vanquisher."

Something about that doesn't sit right with me. I stare down at the floor.

"And of course that means you'll have to put a stake in Aaron's cold, dead heart." He shrugs like he's not talking about one of my best friends, like he's not talking about Miss Kim's only son. "It will be for the best," he continues. "Trust me."

"I won't ever do that," I say. "Not ever. You can't make me. Aaron isn't a monster. He's my friend."

"You have no idea what he will be capable of," Mr. Rupert says quietly. He has a faraway look in his eyes, like he's thinking about something that bothers him. He shakes his head. "I don't have to force you to end him, Miss Wilson. There will come a time where he will leave you no other choice."

"You're wrong," I say defiantly. "You don't know everything. Just because you're always mad doesn't mean I have to be."

The corner of Mr. Rupert's mouth pulls up. "We shall see, Miss Wilson. We shall see."

I crumple up my graded paper, throw it on the ground, and turn to leave. "I wish sunlight would burn your ashy behind to the ground," I mumble under my breath.

"What's that, Miss Wilson?" Mr. Rupert asks.

"Nothing," I say quickly. I rush upstairs thinking about how if sunlight really could do to Mr. Rupert what it does to vampires, his dusty butt would go up in flames.

I join Cedrick and Jules in the front yard where my dad is putting the finishing touches on our new gate—it's made of

painted silver and closes our driveway off right near the street. It reminds me of the big gate that closes in the *Addams Family* house. Ours isn't sentient as far as I know. It doesn't move on its own or boot out unwanted guests if it feels like it but it's almost like that, in a way. No vamps are getting past that except Aaron and even for him, it's dangerous.

"Looks good!" my dad says as he steps back and admires the glinting flourishes, the swirls of silver painted charcoal black. "It's perfect."

Cedrick gazes in the direction of his house. His dads put up a new gate, too. Solid silver. More modern looking, though, with its straight up-and-down pickets and level crossbeams. Jules's mom, Miss Celia, opted out of putting up a gate but had a thick band of silver run directly underneath the driveway in a shallow trench. It's covered by dirt and cement, and a vamp wouldn't stand a chance walking over it—or at least that's what our parents have been telling us.

Since our confrontation with the vampires that had come after they attacked me and Aaron and his mom, Miss Kim, things have been quiet—too quiet. Our parents, who are all that are left of the fabled band of masked vampire slayers called Vanquishers, have fortified our houses, our yards, our lives, in anticipation of another attack from this newly formed hive of the undead but so far, it's been crickets. My mom says she's been feeling like she felt when she was still vanquishing, like the silence from the hive is building up to something awful. For

me, that awful thing had already happened—my friend Aaron was bitten by a vamp the night of our school fundraiser at the Royal Roller Rink and nothing had been the same since. Finding out my parents and the family members of my closest friends were the legendary Vanquishers was a shock. Almost as shocking as watching Aaron complete his transformation into a creature we are supposed to fear above all else.

Cedrick nudges me with his shoulder. "What did old man Rupert want?"

I sigh and shrug. "Who knows? He's always just running his mouth about nothing. He told me that if I want to be a Vanquisher one day, I'll have to stake Aaron."

Jules rears back like they're absolutely disgusted. "He really said that? What is his problem anyway?"

"I think it has something to do with the vamps," I say.

"I mean, yeah," Cedrick says, shrugging. "He hates them."

"Exactly," I say. "It's not just that he's scared or wants to keep us safe or whatever. He *hates* vampires. Like, it's personal."

"Maybe a vamp scared him when he was little," Jules suggests, pushing their long braid behind their shoulder. "It's gotta be something like that, right?"

"It's gotta be," I say.

"He's a school counselor," Cedrick says. "Can he, like, counsel himself or something?"

I take my phone out and check the FangTime app I'd installed. The name is corny as heck but it tells me the exact

moment the sun will set, which tonight is 8:11 p.m. "I don't care about him right now. I just wanna see Aaron."

"Me too," says Cedrick. "We need to watch *Black Panther*."

"Again?" Jules asks.

Cedrick's brows push together. "Yes. Again."

High above us, storm clouds gather and blot out the already fading daylight. A chill runs through me. I glance at the time—it's seven.

"Everybody inside," my dad says, his tone serious.

I march up the front steps and Jules and Ced follow me inside. We sit side by side on the couch, watching the minutes tick by. I snap a pic of Cedrick through a filter that makes him look like he's got on winged eyeliner and red lipstick. I turn it around and show it to him.

"Not even gonna lie," he says. "It's a good look on me. Send it to me?"

I send it to him in a text and save a copy so I can add it to my latest photo album. It's only about halfway full right now, mostly pics of me and Jules and Ced just acting up, being ridiculous. I have some good shots of my mom and dad, and even a few of Aaron before he, well, before he turned into a vampire. I'm suddenly a little sad.

"What's wrong?" Jules asks, scooting in close to me. "You look upset."

My mom eyes me carefully as I confide in Jules.

"I was just thinking about my photo albums. I have a bunch

of pics of us from before, you know? I want Aaron to be in the new ones I take but he won't show up in them."

"I already got that covered," Cedrick says.

"What?" I ask. "How?"

Cedrick clicks around on his phone and then turns the screen toward me and Jules.

Jules tilts their head. "Is that, like, one of those inkblot tests? Where everybody sees something different? I see a cat with a human face."

I squint hard at the photo and realize it's a drawing Cedrick has taken a picture of. I let my gaze wander up to Cedrick's face to find him grinning, waiting for me to say something.

"Ced," I begin carefully. "Did you—is this—is this a self-portrait?"

"What?" Cedrick asks, confused. "'Course not."

A rush of relief washes over me.

"It's my dad," he says, beaming.

Jules stands straight up and walks away. I try not to look at the portrait because I'm afraid I'm gonna laugh and I don't want to hurt Ced's feelings.

"Why did you draw this?" I ask, trying not to sound like he committed some kind of unforgivable crime.

"Aaron can't show up in pictures," he says. "I know you like to take pictures of all of us so I thought, 'Hey, just do like they did in olden times. Paint a portrait!' " He grins even wider. "It needs some work, but I'm getting better. I'm gonna be painting like Leonardo DiCaprio in no time."

Jules makes a noise like they're choking to death and I glance over to see them and my mom leaning on each other, their backs to us, bodies heaving with silent laughter.

"I think you mean Leonardo da Vinci," my dad says as he saunters over. "Don't let these haters get to you, Ced. I'm sure you—" He catches sight of the drawing still lit up on Cedrick's phone and stops midsentence. "You just keep working on it, Ced. Just keep working."

The doorbell rings and Ced slides his phone into his pocket. My mom lets Miss Celia and 'Lita in. 'Lita kisses me on the top of my head before settling into my dad's recliner. She grips the handle of her retractable silver sword. The blade isn't deployed . . . yet.

Mr. Ethan and Mr. Alex show up next and even though he's annoying, Mr. Rupert also shuffles in looking like he hates the world and everyone in it. When we're all inside, my mom and dad move through their nightly lockup routine, which now includes turning on specialized UV lights in the backyard. They cast a hazy purple glow over almost every square inch of the space and it streams through the kitchen window. The smell of fresh garlic and wet metal permeates the air. Applying vampire repellant to all the windowsills is an everyday task now, even if it leaves the place smelling a little too much like musty armpits.

My dad slides a double deadbolt into place at the front door and posts up by the fireplace near the hidden compartment that holds his silver stakes. Mr. Ethan's index finger is hooked

through his belt loop. As he shifts from one foot to the other, his shirt comes up a little and I spy a silver-infused rope hanging around his waist. My mom is much less subtle. She's not pretending she isn't Carmilla anymore, the right hand of the Mask of Red Death. She holds her crossbow close to her chest, her fingers ready to let loose a silver-dust-filled stake at any moment.

We all huddle together in the living room as the alarm on my phone goes off, alerting me that it's time for Aaron to get up. It's a recording I found on YouTube of some man chanting, "I vont to suck your blood!" over and over again. Mr. Rupert replaces his angry face with an even angrier face as I struggle to silence the alarm.

Jules presses their shoulder against mine but we don't make eye contact. If we do, I'll bust out laughing and Mr. Rupert might lose it completely. As we settle into an awkward silence, my mom slowly raises her crossbow and aims it at the front door, finger hovering over the trigger.

My phone buzzes. It's Aaron.

AARON: Hey Boog.

ME: I can't wait to see you! Come over. We're all waiting.

AARON: Already here.

There's a gentle rustling at the front door. My dad's body tenses as he palms a silver stake. Mr. Ethan lets his silver-infused rope unfurl and he crouches low to the floor. 'Lita just holds her little silver stick, letting her thumb rest against the button

that will eject the blade of her sword from its hiding place. Miss Celia moves behind the couch and puts her hand on Jules's shoulder. The adults move like a team, and they are. They've fallen right back into a familiar pattern. The Vanquishers are at the ready.

There's a knock at the door.

"It's us," a voice calls. "Kim and Aaron."

My dad goes to the peephole and peers out. He glances back at my mom and she gives a quick nod. He unlocks the door and pulls it open.

Outside the sky is dark, the cicadas are screaming, and my friend Aaron is standing next to his mom on my front porch.

"You can come in," I say.

"You've already invited him in once," my mom says gently. "You don't have to do it every time."

"The invitation stands until you revoke it," Mr. Ethan says. "Only the person who gave the invitation can rescind it, though. Remember that."

I nod. "I didn't even know you could take back the invitation," I said. There's so much more to all of this than I'd realized. All the little details, the ins and outs of vampire lore, it's a lot to think about and a single mess-up could put us all in danger. I wonder if this is how my parents had been living all these years, just trying their best not to make a mistake. In the back of my mind, I know it's the reason my parents are making me attend Mr. Rupert's little classes. I know the information is

important. I just wish the person delivering it wasn't such a weirdo.

Aaron steps inside, keeping his eyes low, his head down. He brushes past my dad with a little nod and I bum-rush him. I wrap my arms around Aaron's lanky frame. Chilly air clings to him, like's he's just come in from the cold and not an eighty-five-degree almost-summer evening. He hugs me back and that's where the warmth is. He's still my friend and I don't care what Mr. Rupert says. I'll never do anything to hurt him. Jules and Ced come up and hug him, too.

"How did you . . . sleep?" I ask.

Aaron grins. "Like the dead."

We all bust out laughing and the weird feeling in the room eases up a little. I move around and give Miss Kim a big hug. She pushes my braids behind my shoulder and smiles at me.

"Glad you're here, baby," she says. She squeezes Jules's shoulder. "All of you. It's so good to see—" She stops midsentence as Mr. Rupert clears his throat for no reason.

"Are you sick?" Cedrick asks, knowing that's not the case at all. "Maybe you should wear a mask."

Mr. Rupert's face is stuck in a permanent scowl. His gaze moves to Aaron and then to me. When he looks at Miss Kim, his eyes widen and he takes a half step back. Miss Kim is mean mugging him something fierce. A part of me hopes Mr. Rupert will test her because I'd like to see Miss Kim fold him up one good time. I bet she could do it, too.

"Mr. Rupert is on his way out," I say to Miss Kim.

"I think I'll stay if that's all right with you, Samantha," Mr. Rupert says, glancing at my mom.

My mom shrugs. "Sure. As long as you're on your best behavior, Daniel. Do not start no mess in my house. I'll put you out myself."

I grab Jules's arm and squeeze it. I thought Miss Kim folding him up would be great but if my mom does it, that would be even better. Mr. Rupert sits on a stool by the kitchen and says nothing.

I pull Aaron over to the couch and we sit down together. Cedrick squeezes in and takes out his phone. Him and Aaron gush over leaked set photos from some new superhero movie and they start trading theories and ideas about what the next *Black Panther* movie is gonna be about. Me and Jules exchange glances. We both know we have to let them have their little fanboy moment before we can move on to anything else. Cedrick tries to slide past the drawing that's supposed to be his dad but Jules won't allow it. They reach over and swipe back to the drawing.

"Cedrick is gonna do a painting of you," Jules says. "He's been practicing."

Aaron's lips scrunch up under his nose and his eyebrows push up. "Uh. What's this a drawing of? Is it a werewolf?"

"It's my dad," Cedrick says, swiping the picture off his screen.

"No it's not," Mr. Alex says. "Must be Ethan 'cause ain't no way—"

Mr. Ethan nudges Mr. Alex in the ribs. "It's a masterpiece, Ceddy," Mr. Ethan says. "I love it and I believe in you."

Cedrick beams.

"Just one big happy family," Mr. Rupert grumbles.

'Lita angles her head from her perch on my dad's recliner and glares at Mr. Rupert through her long eyelashes. "Sam has warned you, Daniel. She was much more gracious than I will be if you continue."

Mr. Rupert stands up and clutches his hands together in front of him. "I just—I'm having a very hard time here." His mouth is drawn tight, his eyes narrow. "You all have spent your lives vanquishing for the greater good, fighting the undead at great peril to yourselves and your family, your community. And now, *now*, everyone is suddenly fine with inviting a vampire into your homes? Into your lives? I cannot fathom it."

"He might be a vampire but he's our friend," Jules says. "We keep saying that to you and you don't seem to get it. Is that because *you* don't have any friends, Mr. Rupert?" Jules doesn't say it like they're trying to dig at him. They're genuinely asking and it's something I haven't thought about at all. I wonder if Mr. Rupert has anyone the way I have Ced and Jules and Aaron.

"I understand perfectly," Mr. Rupert says with a quiet anger. "What I understand is that everyone here is willing to throw

away generations of tradition for what? For the sake of some ridiculous middle school friendship?"

Mr. Ethan stands up from the dining room table but Mr. Alex pulls him back to sitting. My dad approaches Mr. Rupert.

"Daniel, we know this is hard for you—with everything you've been through—"

"Don't," Mr. Rupert says as tears stand in his eyes. "Don't do that. This isn't the time or place."

I stare into his face and I see something there that's not just pure old-man rage. It almost looks like sadness, like somebody hurt his feelings—bad. My mom slowly approaches him now.

"Daniel, I need you to listen to me. If you can't get on board, you'll have to go." Her tone is gentle but there is no mistaking that she's dead serious. "I can't blame you if you want to take that as an out. I will not hold that against you because I love you like a brother."

Me, Ced, Jules, and Aaron exchange glances.

My mom smiles warmly at me. "A stubborn, hardheaded, obnoxious older brother." She turns her full attention back to Mr. Rupert. "But our goal from here on out is to help Aaron because he is a child and you of all people should understand how precious his life, despite this change in him, is."

"There is no way those two vamps we killed are the only ones out there," my dad chimes in. "Someone made them and I know your commitment to the people of San Antonio is as

strong as your commitment to us. We need to find out who bit Aaron and more importantly we need to find out why."

Mr. Rupert's shoulders roll forward and he nods. I don't know if that means he's on board but for now, my mom touches his shoulder and he retakes his seat in silence.

"Are you coming back to school?" I ask Aaron. "You probably can't, huh?"

"There's no way that can happen, Boog," Miss Kim says. "He can't be up in the daylight and even if he could"—she gives Aaron a tight smile—"we just can't risk it. He'll be doing online school for now."

Jules stifles a giggle. "Imagine you're a vampire and you still gotta go to school and do homework." They pat Aaron on the back. "That sucks. I really wish you could be there with us. Only thing getting me through algebra is knowing y'all are gonna be there after class."

Aaron sighs. "I miss that but I can't even keep my eyes open in the daytime so it probably wouldn't work anyway."

"And what do we tell everybody else?" I ask, looking to my mom and dad. "I mean, people know Aaron's been found safe. The rumor is he ran away and then got scared and came back."

Miss Kim bristles. "I hate that that's what people are saying but it's as good a cover story as any. I don't mind letting people believe it."

My mom gives her a quick hug. "I think the general public have accepted that story but the general public isn't exactly who I'm worried about."

I turn to my mom and she's got her lips pressed together, her brow furrowed. Something's up. I'm about to ask her what it is when 'Lita chimes in.

"There are more of the undead out there," she says. "We have to find out what they want, what their goal is. And we must protect Aaron, at all costs." Her steely gaze flits to me and I see nothing but the 'Lita we all know and love—our resident grandma who would do anything to keep us safe. Now Aaron is under her protection, too, and that makes me feel a little better about everything. "We'll keep up the cover story for Aaron," she continues. "But I am wary of warning the public that a hive is now active in San Antonio."

"It's been so long," says Mr. Ethan. "I don't even know how people would react."

Miss Celia shakes her head. "People will do what they always do when they're afraid or when they don't understand something. They'll panic."

"But we can't just leave people unaware of what's happening," Mr. Alex says. "It's already dangerous."

"Rumors are spreading," Mr. Ethan says as he gently puts his hand on Mr. Alex's shoulder. "And not like before when it was some nameless, faceless person in some Podunk town supposedly getting bit. People are wondering what's happening right here in San Antonio. Vampire-proofing supplies were wiped out at H-E-B a few days ago."

"Maybe the rumors are enough to raise people's guards for right now," says 'Lita. "But no formal announcement or anything

like that for the time being." Everyone nods in agreement. 'Lita sighs and looks down into her lap. "I wish Dayside was still with us. She always had a way with the toughest situations."

I look to my mom and watch as her expression changes from concern to sadness. "She really did," my mom says. "Nat, too. She would have a plan for this. She was always thinking ahead."

"It would do us all good to remember why they're not here anymore," says Mr. Rupert. "We deal in monsters." He looks Aaron dead in the eye. "There is no planning for anything other than the inevitable."

"Which is what?" I ask. I can't stop myself.

Mr. Rupert folds his hands in his lap. "Monsters will act monstrous. That is a proven fact."

I wish inviting mortals into your house had the same rules as vampires. I'd take back the invitation for Mr. Rupert so fast.

Jules leans in close to me. "I hate the way he's always singling Aaron out," they whisper. "I know he's a vamp but geez. He was our friend first."

I nod and step between Aaron and Mr. Rupert. My mom watches my every move but allows me to say what I need to say.

"Dayside and Nightside aren't here because a vampire killed them. I know that's really hard for you. Y'all were really close." I stare Mr. Rupert right in the face. "But the vampire that did that isn't this vampire." I gesture to Aaron. "Maybe it would do *you* some good to remember that, too, Mr. Rupert." I parrot

back Mr. Rupert's own words and I know it's borderline disrespectful but it's too late now.

My dad makes a sound and when I turn to look at him, he's beaming. He walks over and puts his hand on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze. "Boog said it perfectly. Let's not forget where we came from. We owe that to Dayside and Nightside. But let's also try to remember where we're going and how we plan to get there."

"I think we could all use some rest," my mom says. She glances at Aaron. "Even you, baby. How are you feeling, all things considered?"

Aaron shrugs. "Not too bad. Look at this." He raises his arm, and in the low light of the living room lamp, it turns to wispy ribbons of black mist. It stretches toward me and encircles my wrist. Mr. Rupert tenses up, like he might leap from his seat at any moment. I ignore him and the smoke interlaces its tendrils with my fingers.

"It's cold," I say. "Like ice."

"Well, I mean technically I'm dead," says Aaron. "It makes sense that I'd be ice cold."

Miss Kim's mouth turns down and she hugs herself around the waist. Aaron notices and we both move toward her at the same time, wrapping her up.

"Sorry, Mom," Aaron says. "I was tryna make a joke but it's not funny."

Miss Kim waves us off, batting at her eyes. "No, it's okay.

I want you to joke. The fact that you can find anything funny right now is a little bit of a bright spot, right? After all you've been through?"

Aaron nods and his mom squeezes him tight. A knot crawls up my throat. When Aaron was missing, when we thought the worst had happened, it was like a weight was pressing down on all of us. Now he's back and we're all grateful, but he *is* changed. He's a vampire now and a group of people whose only goal was slaying the undead is trying to find a new way of doing things that includes keeping him safe.

When Aaron and his mom leave, they're accompanied by Mr. Ethan and Miss Celia. They're going to do our new and improved lockup routine over at Aaron's while my mom and dad repeat the process at our house. I thought the lockup routine we had before was annoying, but it has nothing on the way we do things now. There are UV lights in every corner of our yard and hanging from every corner of the house, and they can be switched on or off whenever we want. Aside from the new and improved silver gate at the end of our driveway, all our house's exterior doors are either set inside silver doorframes or contain silver in the core of the door itself. The front yard and backyard are now covered with dirt from VDS, the company that supplied graveyard dirt to homes and businesses back in the day. My mom had more holly trees planted and my dad installed thermal cameras. Vamps can't be seen by regular cameras but their cold, dead signatures show up on the thermal cameras,

which detect abnormally hot or cold spots. All of this is to keep us safe but there is a part of me that wonders how long it can last. I watched my parents vanquish the vamps that had come after me and Aaron and Miss Kim but there are more. There have to be. And that is the scariest part of all. That a new group of the undead are out there, right now, and they have me and all the people I care about most in their sights.