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Opening extract from

Vivian Versus the Apocalypse

Written by

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Chapter One

Just before midnight that night, I stand barefoot in the grass in a borrowed dress, drinking champagne out of a plastic cup and looking at the stars. There's a party going on in the abandoned mansion behind me, organized by my best friend, the indefatigable Harp, the one who loaned me the dress and secured the champagne. It's late March, and a little chilly. I can hear Harp shouting over the music inside, trying to get everybody to count down, like tomorrow is just the start of a new year. *Ten nine eight*. I know I should be celebrating, too, but I don't like the countdown. *Seven six five*. I think of my parents. I wonder if they're counting down, too. I picture them, hand-in-hand in the middle of our street, waiting. *Four three two*. In this moment, the one they believe will be their last earthly moment, are they thinking at all of me?

One.

Inside, there's a whoop, then laughter. "Where's Viv?" I hear Harp shout. I half-turn to go in, to drink and dance with my best friend, both of us vindicated, still alive. But then something black flashes against the moon. It looks enough like a human body that I freeze. I think, *This is it*. In the three years since Pastor Beaton Frick first predicted

that the Rapture was approaching, I've never once thought he was right. But in this moment, my eyes wide open, my body taut with worry, I know I'm doing what I thought I never would. I'm believing.

Then I see the thing again, and recognize it to be a bat, darting and swooping in and out of my line of sight. And suddenly Harp's at the front door, saying, "Vivian Apple, what the hell? Are you trying to ascend? In the middle of my party?" And I'm rushing towards her, my cup of champagne sloshing onto my legs, laughing harder than Harp's quip warrants, because I'm trying not to feel the belief still shivering in my bones, like a new, unshakeable part of me.

I've lived next door to Harp all my life, but she'd always seemed a little wild—this was the girl who at twelve pulled out a pack of cigarettes at the bus stop and hacked her way through four of them for no apparent reason while the rest of us looked on in awe. And anyway, I already had friends, good girls like me. But when high school started, nationwide Rapture Watch began to hit its stride. Pastor Frick had already made the prediction—that in three years, the most devout Church of America congregants would be plucked into heaven, and following that would be six months of hell on Earth for all that remained, ending in absolute obliteration. It wasn't until a series of catastrophic events in the weeks immediately preceding my freshman year—an earthquake in Chicago that killed hundreds, a massive bomb detonated at a Yankees game, the sudden and unnerving death of the entire American bee population—that people became convinced. My old friends turned

Believer; they retreated to hidden bunkers with their families. While I made SAT flashcards and waited for the weirdness to blow over, my old friends were getting married and having babies, populating the Earth with more soldiers for Christ's Army. So by last year, Harp's wildness suddenly resembled sanity more than anything else, and we became an inseparable team, a fiercely Non-Believing unit of two. Three months ago, when her parents finally converted, Harp packed a bag and walked the two miles to her brother Raj's apartment in Lawrenceville, where he lives with his boyfriend, Dylan. She's made no secret about wanting me to move in. It'll be like a slumber party, Harp's always saying, one where we have to pool our earnings from our minimum-wage jobs to pay the rent that seems to increase each month at the landlord's whim.

At Harp's apartment our main source of entertainment is reading out loud articles from the insipid Church of America magazines for girls sold now at every drugstore ("*SPRING into the eternal kingdom in this sweet pale gold romper! Only $145 on the Church of America website!*"). This is what we were doing two weeks ago when Harp had her idea.

"We should have a party on Rapture's Eve," she said.

"You think?" I said sarcastically. I'd seen this coming for weeks. In a lot of ways I'm still getting to know Harp—our friendship is less than a year old—but if I understand only one thing about her, it's that this girl loves a party.

"Something classy," Harp continued. "Wine. Music. I'm talking a Bacchanalian orgy."

I laughed. "Well, that does sound classy."

Harp grabbed a notepad from the table beside her bed, and started jotting down ideas. "We'll get Raj to buy the beer, and then, and then! We'll break into one of those abandoned mansions on Fifth Avenue, in Shadyside. You'll have to scope them out for a few days, to see which ones look dead."

"Just in case you're not keeping track, your plan already involves the breaking of at least three laws," I said. "And anyway, why Shadyside? Why not have it here?"

"It would be easier for you," Harp shrugged. "You could walk there from your house."

"If my parents let me go."

"Vivian." Harp frowned at me. "You know, and I know, that the world isn't ending in six months. But let's pretend, for the sake of argument, that it is. And then let's let that hypothetical guide our answer to the question, 'Will we be asking our fundie parents' permission to attend an alcohol-fueled gathering of heathens?"

"You know I don't like lying to them," I said. "I don't like sneaking out. I just want it to be two weeks from now. I want everything to go back to normal."

"There's no normal anymore," said Harp. "There's never going to be a normal again. So now's probably as good a time as any to start acting like you're the hero of your own story."

"Yeah, yeah," I sighed. Harp's always singing this song. When we first started hanging out last year, she said she'd only deign to be my friend if I quit being the obedient prude she'd spied from her bedroom window—the girl who worked hard for straight As, flossed daily, set the

dining-room table. What Harp doesn't understand is that I *like* my parents—current hiccups in sanity notwithstanding. I like knowing that they like me. That's why I've always been a child they could be proud of. It's why I can't, even now, bring myself to leave their house. Because I don't want to make them unhappy. Because I know if I leave, I'll miss them.

"They're pod people," Harp said, like she was really sorry about the news she was imparting. "There's nothing you can do for them now."

"They're my *parents*," I said, like the word was some kind of talisman.

Now, in the doorway of the mansion, my best friend pulls me close. She is a full head shorter than me, with that messy-sexy hair I've tried and failed to emulate on my own head. Sometimes I feel too big around her, not quite human. But Harp's not quite human herself—she's a tiny, foul-mouthed, mischief-making elf.

"Viv, old bean," she says, "I'd say this hop of mine is turning into a corker!"

"Ritzy as hell, you old so-and-so," I say. "Bee's knees. And how!"

"Okay, let's not push it," says Harp. "There's only one problem, as far as I can see, and it's a dire one."

"What?" I gaze around the living room. This afternoon, Harp and I hung winking white Christmas lights along the ceiling, and everyone—friends and strangers alike—looks soft and happy in their glow.

"It's my friend Vivian," she says, her expression grave.

"She's avoiding a good time like it's a new strand of bird flu. Even though she looks straight-up banging this evening, she's standing out in the yard when there are perfectly cute boys she could be in here talking to."

"I'm not going to risk getting Magdalened, thank you," I tell her. While I recognize a few of our Non-Believer classmates milling around, there are plenty of people I don't know, and Harp knows as well as I do you should never talk to boys you don't know. It's rumored that the Church of America regularly sends out its best-looking adolescent males to tempt girls into Falling, confront them into weepy contrition, and then bring them in for full-on conversion.

But Harp won't accept this excuse. "Remember that game we played a couple weeks ago? Let's pretend it's the last normal night of the rest of the world. The four horsemen are en route. Isn't there even one dude in this room you'd want to bone before the locusts start falling?"

To humor her, I look around, bypassing the guys I know to be partnered or jerks or gay. But then the crowd parts, and I see him. He's on the steps in the foyer. I don't know him, but I'm sure he's not a spy. He's around our age—good-looking, but not in the way those Church boys always are, golden-haired and square-jawed. This boy has long fingers and soft, messy brown hair. He wears black-framed glasses and uses the same tricks I do for blending into a crowd—he keeps his red plastic cup close to his mouth, so he can drink from it to keep from talking, and he's found something in this abandoned house to read.

"Who's that?" I ask.

I'm not sure Harp has even registered who I'm talking

about before she takes me by the elbow and steers me into the foyer. We stand in front of him until he looks up, and when he does, I feel a flare of something like excitement, or fear. I might just be a little drunk. But this boy's eyes are the bluest things I have ever seen.

"I'm Harp," my best friend says, business-like. "This is Viv. Personally I think you guys would make really cute babies together."

She's gone before I can groan. The boy looks a little stunned, but he shifts on the step to make room for me. "I'm Peter," he says as I sit.

For a while we gaze in different directions. Peter seems to be watching the dancers, and I'm trying to think of something to say. Something that reveals my charm and my wit, the multitudes I contain. But I've got nothing. Over a minute has passed before I manage to ask, "Do you live in Pittsburgh?"

"I don't," he says.

He doesn't say where he lives. He doesn't say anything. In the Church magazines, they're always trying to convince you that boys who don't talk to you are just shy. That the shyness of boys is a virtue. "*Signs That He Is THE ONE: 1. He doesn't text you back. A boy who doesn't text you is a boy actively trying to resist temptation! A boy destined for paradise! Bind yourself to him in holy matrimony!*"

"So you're dead," I say.

"What?" Peter turns to me—his expression wary, like he's just realized I'm crazy. His eyes are so blue. I worry if I drink too much champagne, I'll start expounding to him on the subject of his eyes and their blueness.

"You said you don't live in Pittsburgh, and yet here you are. The logical conclusion is that you're a ghost. Or!" Peter starts to smile as I continue. "Or, you're a reanimated corpse. That's part of the prophecy of the Rapture, right? The dead will rise and crash our parties?"

He laughs. "Do you really think that's a priority, for the reanimated corpses?"

"Absolutely," I say. "No French onion dip in purgatory."

There's this particular way he laughs, a happy surprise in his features, like it's the last thing he expected to be doing. It feels like an accomplishment, to have made him laugh. I duck my head and see what he's been reading—a page of a newspaper, yellowed at the edges. In the center is the face of Pastor Beaton Frick. The picture's in black and white, so you can't see the twinkling green of his eyes, or how tan his skin is from years of Florida living. But you can see the distinguished gray flecks at his temples, the movie star cleft in his chin, the thick white line of his smile. Sometimes I wonder if the Church would have taken off as quickly as it did if Frick had been some crotchety-looking old guy, with hair coming out of his ears.

"Why do you have that?" I ask.

Peter hands the paper to me. The paper's dated three-and-a-half years ago, and under the picture of Frick is a jokey headline (*"Uh-Oh: The Rapture's A Go!"*), the kind that everyone used at first, before the Church got powerful and its congregants began boycotting the "lamestream" media, claiming religious persecution.

"It was upstairs in one of the bedrooms, framed," Peter

says. “I don’t know what that says about the people who used to live here.”

I skim the article. It has the usual descriptions of Frick’s strong handshake, his toothy grin, the vertical line that forms in his brow whenever he expresses a conviction. I see all the words Frick uses when he’s explaining exactly who the unsaved are and how they’ve incurred Christ’s wrath (“gay,” “secular,” “feminism”). Usually I look at Frick and see a crazy man. But tonight, through the haze of champagne, I see a man who wants to take my parents away.

“I can’t wait for this all to blow over,” I say.

After a moment, Peter asks, “What do you mean?”

“You know,” I shrug. “After nothing happens. After everyone snaps out of it.”

“That’s kind of . . .” Peter speaks carefully, like he wants to be sure he’s saying it right. “I mean, these people really believe what they believe.”

“But what they believe is so absurd,” I laugh. I wait for Peter to laugh, too, but he doesn’t. He’s frowning at me.

“What do you believe in?” he asks.

I open my mouth, close it again. I’ve got no ready-made answer to this question. I have a feeling it would take me time, a long time, to articulate whatever it is I would come up with.

Peter seems to sense my confusion. “Or, okay, let me put it this way—in three years, you’ve never once considered it possible that the world as we know it is about to end?”

I want to tell him that I have—that not a half an hour ago, for a fraction of a second, I believed. I want to entrust

him with this secret. I want to tell him how there was a kind of relief in it, a close and secret sense of safety, like I was falling, yes, but into some kind of a net. But will that sound stupid? Won't these contradictions make me seem blurrier, less defined? I worry that if he can't see me clearly, he'll forget me easily. And, anyway, admitting it feels like tempting fate, like breaking a mirror on purpose.

"No," I say.

"Why not?"

Because. Because if my parents are right, the world will end before I've done anything worth doing. Before I've become a person worth knowing. If the world ends, then I end. And I feel like I've barely started. Is this pathetic? Peter looks at me with a flicker of something unidentifiable behind his eyes. He's invested in this conversation in a way I don't totally understand. I want to trust him, to tell him what I really feel, but all of the sudden I get that magazine voice in my head again. It's saying, "*Your BF has ENOUGH worries without yours to bring him down! A godly woman smiles with the force of a thousand heavenly suns! Brighten your guy's day in this sweet lemonade frock!*" So I muster a dazzling, careless grin, like I'm about to tell him another joke—a really, really good one.

"Because it's a downer," I say.

After a moment, Peter laughs. But it's not the same laugh from before. This one's polite and quick. When it's over, he stands.

"I'm going to get something to drink. The kitchen's that way, right?"

I nod. I think for a second he might ask me what I want,

or suggest that I come with him, but he just says, "Nice talking with you."

It's not the first or worst of the many uncomfortable interactions I've had with the opposite sex, but I have a feeling I won't be able to shake it off quickly. I stand on the step and search for Harp's dark-brown head in the crowd—she is, as ever, at the center of it. I move in her direction, trying to still the sick flutter in my chest. I know I can do better than this. I know I can be more and better of a person. Since today is not, in fact, the start of the end of the world, I might as well treat it like the start of something good. Like it's a new year, after all, a time for making resolutions. As I cross the party, hoping to soak up some of Harp's boundless energy, her endless boldness, I say to myself *Dear God*, and then I scratch that, for obvious reasons. *Dear Universe*, I say. *Make me less meek, make me less afraid. Dear Universe, make me the hero of my own story.*

The next morning, I shake Harp awake before I leave, to see if she wants to come home with me, but she just pulls a pillow over her head, mumbles goodbye. I walk the two blocks alone. No cars pass, nobody walks their dogs or waters their gardens. The street my parents and I live on is peaceful in the late morning sun. At my house, the newspaper's wrapped in blue plastic on the front lawn. I pick it up and slip inside.

I'd expected them to be waiting, to give me a sermon on the sin in which I've no doubt been reveling. But they're not in the living room, the dining room, the kitchen. I sigh in relief. Maybe they never noticed I was gone. I sit on the

couch and open the paper, expecting Rapture headlines, but there's no mention on the first page, just stories about all the usual disasters—tsunamis and tornadoes, terrorist attacks, fast-spreading viruses. I can't make myself focus on the words. All I can think about is how empty the house seems. I feel a little nauseous about it.

I stand. "Mom?" I call out. "Dad?"

No answer.

They're out for a walk. They're out to breakfast. It hasn't happened yet, so they're outside somewhere, waiting for it to happen.

I sit on the floor. I lie down. I'm light-headed. I drank too much last night. I should go up to my room, where I can sleep it off. I'll wake in the early evening to find my parents peering down at me in the dark. The cold faith in their eyes will have already started to melt away. They will be looking at me with love.

"Mom?" I say to the ceiling. "Dad?"

The silence is like a weight pressing down on me. If I could just get up and go upstairs.

I should call them. They don't always keep their phones on—their looming salvation has made them weirdly absent-minded—but at the very least, I can leave an ordinary message. "Hi Mom," I say out loud, to practice. "Just seeing what you and Dad are up to today. You guys up for pizza tonight?" I go quiet, like I'm waiting for her response, but all I can hear is the house.

I fish my phone from my pocket and dial my mom's number. I bring the phone to my ear. After a moment, I hear a ring, and then, too soon, another. One is in my right

ear, coming through the phone, and the other is somewhere in the house, above me. My parents' bedroom. It's the most obvious place for them to be, and yet I hadn't thought to look there. I walked into the house and thought I could feel its emptiness. But isn't it possible that they're still in bed, the way they are some weekend mornings, poring over their twin Books of Frick, or deep in one of their endless spirals of conversation, their two voices bouncing off each other and conjoining and bouncing again?

I pull myself to my feet and walk up the stairs, the dual rings echoing in my ears. I walk down the hall to their closed bedroom door, not worrying, yet, about the fact that no one is picking up. I am thinking of Harp, asleep on the floor of a mansion—I wish she were here with me. Harp will laugh when I call her tonight, when I tell her what I thought at first, when the house seemed so big and blank. Harp will be hysterical. I am thinking of Harp laughing, so I don't wonder when no voice answers my knock on my parents' door, and I'm not jolted, upon opening it, by the sight of their bed, empty and made. I swear I feel nothing at all, until I happen to glance up at the slanted ceiling above and see the twin holes, rough at the edges but wide enough to fit their slim bodies, opening like perfect portals into the vast cloudless sky. I see the sun streaming down like spotlights beside their bed, illuminating two cylindrical showers of golden dust, and that's when I feel something tear in me, something important.