Children of the Quiet Night

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Introduction

This is a story about what grows in the dark when the lights go out. In the wake of sirens that faded and promises that didn’t hold, the halls of a suburban campus became more than a place of lockers and bells; they became a shelter, a frontier, a laboratory for the youngest among us to figure out how to live together. The adults were gone. In their absence, the leftover rooms and basements, the boiler tunnels and storage vaults, offered both refuge and challenge. Out of that tight-stitched darkness came new words, new rites, and a society that learned to count time by footsteps, battery bars, and the steady breath of those sleeping nearby.

Children of the Quiet Night follows two siblings as they descend—literally and figuratively—into this underground world. They are not the first to make rules here, and they will not be the last to break them. Around them are the infected roamers above, the thrum of danger that keeps hands steady and voices low. But the story is not only about threat; it is also about tenderness—the way a jacket draped over another’s shoulders can be an oath, the way a lantern shared can be leadership, the way myths protect hope when facts are scarce. In the hush between alarms, a community sketches the outline of itself: who speaks in Councils, who runs the scavenger stairs, who watches the vents, who writes the stories on the back of detention slips.

This book is, at its heart, a coming-of-age tale. Adolescence has always been an improvisation: of identity, of loyalty, of what is owed and what is possible. Here, that improvisation is sharpened by scarcity and fear. Leadership is not a title but a daily practice—measured in carried water, in the courage to question, in the humility to be questioned. Some characters will be sure about everything until they aren’t. Others will doubt until the moment they must act. Together they will learn that governance is less about speeches and more about who refills the first-aid tin without being asked.

You will see how rules are born: out of a single bad night, out of a rumor that felt true enough to obey, out of a wish to keep one another from the worst. You will watch myths take shape—stories told to scare, to soothe, to explain why we must tap twice on the doorframe or never say certain names near the vents. And yes, you will witness rituals designed to ward off the roamers above and the rivalries below: chalk marks on thresholds, shared songs at watch change, the lanterns dimmed in precise counts. Some of these practices work because they’re smart. Some work because everyone believes they do. That difference matters, and it doesn’t.

The siblings at the center of this book are not heroes in the caped sense. They make mistakes that cost. They tell half-truths to protect and to control. They love too hard

and trust too fast, then learn to love slower and trust better. Their bond will guide them into alliances and out of comforts, and the choices they make will ripple through a community that is, at any moment, one argument away from splintering. Through them, you will meet the mapmakers and the runners, the rule-keepers and rule-benders, the healers and the fighters, all of whom are building a living answer to a simple question: What do we owe each other when no one is coming?

Though this is fiction, it doubles as a primer on youth-led survival and governance, not because it offers a perfect model but because it insists on showing the seams. You'll find structures that resemble councils, tribunals, and watches; you'll see how consensus falters and why a clear chain of response can save lives; you'll spot the quiet work that sustains everything—inventorying batteries, tracking water, noticing who hasn't eaten. You will also see how power accumulates, how charisma can dazzle, and how myths can be wielded kindly or cruelly. If you are reading for lessons, read for the small ones: the checklists taped under a desk, the buddy system invented on the fly, the rule that changes the day after it fails.

This is not a world without beauty. The underground hums with hand-drawn constellations on cinderblock walls, with laughter that arrives like a flare and just as quickly disappears, with the strange grace of a hundred shoes left neatly by a door because someone decided neatness meant survival. There is grief here, too, and it is not tidy. Names are carried in pockets, in laces, in the soft leather of a scavenged planner. The infected roamers above remind everyone that the night is still out there, hungry and indifferent. Yet the "quiet" in Quiet Night is not only fear. It is also listening—an invitation to hear one another, to make space for the living among all the things that might end them.

If you are new to stories like this, take a breath before you enter. The dark can be frightening, but it is also a place where sight adjusts, where small lights matter. If you are familiar, look again at the instruments these kids make for themselves: the codes, the curfews, the ceremonies. Notice when those instruments protect and when they cut. Keep your eye on the siblings, yes, but also on the ones at the edges of scenes—the watcher on the stairs, the one who always holds the door, the one who is quiet until the question finally reaches them.

When you turn the page, the campus doors will close behind you. You will feel the temperature change, the hush of layered concrete, the living fabric of a community stitched from courage, compromise, and the stubborn hope of young people who refuse to be left with nothing but fear. The Quiet Night is waiting. Walk softly. Listen for the lanterns. And when the rules don't fit, pay attention to what the children do next. That is where the world begins again.

CHAPTER ONE: Day Zero

The last normal morning started with a carton of orange juice that wouldn't pour clean. Mateo tilted the container at an angle that should have worked—gravity being one of the few reliable forces left in his life—but the juice came out in a sad, intermittent dribble that hit the rim of his glass and slid down the side in a sticky trail. He stared at it. He could have just put the thing down and tried the other carton, but he didn't. He held it there, watching the juice crawl down the glass like something with a destination.

"You're giving the juice a hard time," Luz said from the kitchen table, not looking up from her history textbook. She had the kind of focus that could lock onto a page while a helicopter crashed through the roof, and today the kitchen was quiet enough that nothing was going to pull her away.

"It's just slow," Mateo said. He was sixteen and believed, with the full conviction of someone who had not yet been truly inconvenienced, that most problems could be solved by tilting the container at a slightly different angle. "It's like it's resisting."

"It's expired." Luz tapped her pen against the page. "Mom bought it Thursday. That was four days ago. We told her not to buy the big one."

"Mom buys what she buys."

"Mom buys what she buys and then we all suffer the consequences." Luz finally looked up. She had their mother's sharp eyes and their father's habit of sounding like she was delivering a verdict from the bench. She pushed her dark hair behind one ear. "There's cereal if you want."

Cereal was a negotiation in their house. Not a dramatic one—not anymore—but it required arithmetic. How many bowls left in the box? Would milk cover them, or would you get to the flakes and hit dust, that awful scraping sound at the bottom? Mateo had once finished an entire half-empty box rather than suffer that sound in the early morning, and Luz had brought it up at three separate family dinners since then. He thought she'd never stop.

He poured what he could into the glass—the juice loosened eventually, as if it had just needed someone to be patient—and carried it to the table. The kitchen smelled like toast that their mother must have started before leaving. He could see the plate she'd used, a single perfect line of bread along the rim, and the butter dish with the lid off, a faint crescent of butter still clinging to the inside. She'd left early. She always left early

on Tuesdays.

"She said she'd be back by six," Luz said, though she hadn't looked up. She said it the way she said most things: like a fact she'd already verified.

"Yeah." Mateo sat down and took a sip. The juice was still wrong—slightly sour, the kind of sour that wasn't quite spoilage but wasn't quite right either. He made a face. "I think it's actually bad this time."

"There you go." Luz turned a page. "The expiration date is a suggestion, but it's a suggestion with data behind it."

Their mother, Dr. Elena Navarro, worked at the county hospital. Twelve-hour shifts that sometimes bled into twenty-four when someone was short-staffed or when a new protocol rolled down from administration and she had to train people on it. She had left the house that morning in her scrubs with her badge on and a granola bar unwrapped in her hand, and she had said the same thing she always said: *I might be late. Text me if you need me. Don't be strangers.* She kissed the tops of both their heads without stopping, and the front door clicked shut behind her, and the day moved on.

Their father was a quieter absence. He'd left two years ago—not dramatically, not with slammed doors or a suitcase thrown into the trunk of a car, but slowly, like a tide pulling back. One morning he was there, and the next he was sending texts on Sundays and missing Thanksgiving because of a conference in Denver and then missing Thanksgiving again because of a project deadline and then Luz stopped counting. He sent money. He called on birthdays, sometimes. Mateo had gotten used to it in the way that only a teenager can: completely and with the full force of pretending it didn't matter.

"Did you finish the chem worksheet?" Luz asked.

"No."

"It's due Wednesday."

"I know what day it is." Mateo drank more juice. The sourness was settling in his stomach. "I'll do it Monday night."

"You always say Monday night."

"It's a system."

"It's a system that produces zero completed assignments."

He was about to respond—something deflecting and light, the kind of thing that had worked since they were twelve and Luz had first decided that managing him was her responsibility—when the lights flickered.

It was subtle. Not a full blackout, just a dimming, like someone had lowered the sun by a notch. The kitchen hummed for a second with a different frequency, the refrigerator's motor adjusting, and then everything settled. The fluorescent bulb above the table buzzed once, twice, and then held steady.

"You feel that?" Mateo asked.

"I felt it." Luz's pen had stopped moving. She was looking at the window now, not at him.

Outside, the suburban morning was doing what suburban mornings do. A neighbor's sprinkler was throwing water in lazy arcs across a lawn that hadn't been mowed in nine days. A delivery truck was parked at the curb two houses down, and someone was already pulling a package off the porch. A kid on a bike was riding along the sidewalk with one hand on the handlebars and the other holding a phone to his ear, riding the line between cool and dangerous that only a thirteen-year-old can truly ride.

Then the sky changed.

Mateo would have said it was the color, but it wasn't exactly that. It was more like the air itself had thickened, like someone had put a filter over the world that turned everything slightly amber. The sun was still there—it was morning, after all, late October with the light coming in low and golden—but the gold was wrong. It was too dense. Too deliberate. It looked like the sky had been lit from behind by a fire that was very far away and very large.

Luz stood up. Her textbook slid off the table and hit the floor with a sound that seemed, in the sudden quiet, enormous.

"Mateo."

She said his name the way she said it when she was scared—not loudly, not in a way that asked for help, but low and steady, like she was warning him about a car coming around a blind corner. He had heard her use that voice exactly twice before: once during a thunderstorm when they were nine and seven and the power had gone out for three hours, and once when a dog had come running at them on the trail behind their house, teeth visible, leash trailing.

"That's weird," he said. He said it because saying *I'm scared* was a language he had

not yet learned to speak, and because his brain was doing what his brain always did under pressure: cataloguing irrelevant details. The juice glass. The cereal box. The lightbulb still buzzing faintly.

The buzz stopped. Every sound in the neighborhood stopped with it—no sprinklers, no bikes, no delivery truck reversing—and in that silence Mateo heard something he had only ever heard on the internet, in shaky phone videos that people watched with morbid fascination and then went back to their lives: a siren. Not one siren. Many. Rising from different points across the town, a chorus of warning that climbed in pitch and overlapped until it became a single sustained note of something between a wail and a scream.

"Oh God," Luz whispered.

Their mother had talked about this. Not often, and not in any way that suggested she thought it would actually happen. She worked in hospital administration; she dealt in contingency plans, in protocols that existed in binders on shelves and were updated quarterly and were, everyone agreed, unlikely to ever be needed. But she had talked about them at dinner once, when Mateo was fourteen and had asked why the hospital had a basement that went deeper than the parking garage. She had looked at Luz across the table and said, "There are procedures for things we hope never happen."

"I need to call her," Luz said.

She was already moving, phone in hand, thumb on the contact. Mateo watched her dial. The phone rang once, twice, three times. A voice he didn't recognize picked up and spoke in a language that was not English, not Spanish, not anything he could place—a rapid, clipped series of syllables that sounded mechanical, like a recording. Luz repeated herself. The voice repeated back. She tried again. The line went dead.

"The circuits are overloaded," she said, and her voice was the same low, steady tone but without the fear behind it this time. It was clinical. Mateo hated it. He loved it. She switched to their mother's cell. Same voice. Same dead end.

Outside, a dog started barking. Then another. Then all of them, a chain reaction that rippled through the neighborhood west to east, each house adding its voice to a growing wall of sound. The kid on the bike had stopped. He was standing on the sidewalk now, looking up, phone still at his ear. The delivery truck was moving again, but wrong—going the wrong direction down the street, fast, the driver's face pale through the windshield.

And then the second thing happened.

A woman ran out of the Sanchez house across the street. The Sanchezes were a

normal suburban family—two cars in the driveway, a trampoline in the backyard, a political sign that changed with the seasons. The woman was Mrs. Sanchez, who Mateo had seen once at a school fundraiser wearing a lanyard and name tag and making small talk by the coffee table. She was running across her lawn in bare feet, and she was not running from anything Mateo could see. She was running toward the street, waving her arms, screaming a name that he couldn't make out. Then she stopped. She stopped in the middle of the road and stood there, perfectly still, and her mouth kept moving but no sound came out, and then she folded—just collapsed, like someone had cut the strings on a puppet.

Two people from the next house went to her. They helped her up. They were talking to her, and she seemed fine, and they were walking her back toward the porch, and Mateo almost relaxed, almost let his shoulders drop, but then a man on the other side of the street—older, maybe seventy, wearing a bathrobe—stopped walking his dog. He stood on his driveway and stared at the sky. His mouth opened. A sound came out of him that Mateo had never heard a person make in real life: a low, guttural moan that was not pain and was not fear but was something adjacent to both, something that sounded like a person being taken apart from the inside. He dropped the leash. The dog sat and watched him. The man took a step forward. Then another. He walked into the street with the slow, unsteady gait of someone who had forgotten how to walk and was re-learning from scratch, each movement a fresh puzzle.

"Luz," Mateo said, and his voice cracked on her name.

She was already at the window. She saw what he saw. She went very, very still.

The neighbor from four houses down—a man Mateo knew only as Mr. Kowalski because that was what was on the mailbox and he had once spent forty-five minutes explaining the migratory patterns of woodpeckers on a Saturday morning—exited his house through the garage. He was carrying a baseball bat. He walked to the center of the street with the same slow determination as the man in the bathrobe, and he stood there, and he waited. When the woman in the road made a sound—a soft, confused sound, like a person waking from a deep sleep—he swung the bat.

Mateo pulled Luz away from the window.

"Mateo." Her voice was hard now. Not scared. Something past scared. Something that had crossed a line and come out the other side into a place that was cold and clear. "How long does Mom keep granola bars in the hall closet?"

"I don't know."

"Where does she keep the spare batteries?"

"Her purse?"

"How many granola bars?"

"I don't—I don't know, Luz."

"Okay." She was already moving again, and he realized that he needed to follow her or lose her, because Luz was a person who did things and he was, at this moment, a person who sat, and the difference between those two positions had just become the entire world. "I remember she showed me once. When I was fourteen. She said, 'If anything ever happens, this is where the food is.' It's in the utility closet. Third shelf. Behind the old towels."

Mateo stood. His legs felt wrong—too loose, like they belonged to someone taller. He followed Luz down the hall.

The utility closet was exactly the kind of thing that adults create and children ignore: a narrow space between the kitchen and the garage, stacked with cleaning supplies, holiday decorations, and seasonal gear that accumulated year after year. Luz moved things aside with a speed and precision that surprised him. The old towels came off. Below them, packed in a bin that their mother had labeled EMERGENCY in block letters with a Sharpie, were granola bars—six boxes of them, protein bars, dried fruit, a water purification kit, a first-aid kit with actual gauze and not just band-aids, three flashlights with batteries still in them, and a laminated card with instructions printed in their mother's careful handwriting.

Luz picked up the card. She read it silently, her lips moving, and then she read it again.

"Basement," Mateo said. "Behind the furnace. There's a door. Where does it go?"

"I don't know. It's a storage room, I think."

"It's not just a storage room." Mateo set down the granola bars he'd grabbed and pulled his phone out. The screen was cracked—two weeks ago, a drop onto the tile floor of the school cafeteria—and it loaded to the home screen and then showed a single white bar of signal and a message: NO SERVICE. He turned it over and over in his hand, as if the problem might be on the phone's end, something fixable, a restart away from solvable. "I'm trying to think."

"Think faster." Luz was at the basement door now. She opened it. The smell came up—damp concrete, old wood, the mineral tang of the earth itself—and then the stairs, narrow and steep, descending into a darkness that was not quite total because their

mother had, at some point, installed a single motion-sensor bulb near the bottom that glowed faintly like a gargoyle's eye.

Mateo followed her down.

The basement of their house was the kind of place that exists in every suburban home but is rarely visited: a space that had been finished with optimism and abandoned gradually, panel by panel, as the family's needs contracted to the main floor. There was a washer and dryer against one wall. Shelves of things that had been important once—vacuum cleaner boxes, old luggage, a treadmill with a broken belt. Against the back wall, partially hidden by a hanging sheet that their mother had used as a dust cover, was a door. Not an exterior door. Not a door to the outside. A door built into the foundation itself, heavy and metal, with a handle that looked like it belonged on a ship's bulkhead.

"I never went through it," Luz said. She put her hand on the handle. It was cold. "I didn't think it was real."

Mateo remembered being ten and asking about it. Their mother had said it was a remnant from when the house was built—some kind of access point for the foundation, something that was supposed to connect to a crawl space but had been sealed off. "Don't bother with it," she'd said. "It leads nowhere."

Luz pulled.

The door moved. It was heavy—it took both her hands and her full weight, and she grunted with the effort, and Mateo grabbed the edge to help. It swung inward on hinges that had been oiled recently, more recently than anything else in the basement, and a breath of air came up from below that was cooler than the house, cooler than the morning, cooler than anything that should have been coming from under a suburban home in October.

Below the door was a set of stairs. Concrete, like the basement itself, but narrower and rougher, as if they'd been poured quickly or by hand. They descended into a space that was too far down for the motion-sensor bulb to reach, and the darkness there was complete—thick, substantial, the kind of dark that feels like a substance when you look into it.

Mateo heard a sound from below. He stopped. He listened. The sound was faint and rhythmic—not mechanical, not animal, more like breathing. Like the house itself was alive down there, exhaling slowly through the cracks in the foundation.

"Lu—"

He stopped. Because Luz was looking at him, and in the dim light from behind he could see her face, and she was doing something he had never seen her do. She was afraid. Not the sharp, quick fear of a test you haven't studied for or a car that runs a red light. A deep, structural fear—the kind that rearranges the furniture inside you, that makes you understand, for the first time, that the world is larger than you thought and more dangerous and that the rules you've been living by are not rules at all, just habits, just convenience, just luck.

She was afraid and she was still moving forward.

Mateo thought about the woman in the road. The man in the bathrobe. The siren that was still going, somewhere, rising and falling like a tide. He thought about his mother, six miles away in a hospital that might be full of people who were doing whatever the thing was that the man in the bathrobe had done. He thought about the granola bars, the flashlights, the laminated card.

He grabbed a flashlight from the bin. Clicked it on. The beam was strong and pale and cut into the dark below like a knife into warm butter.

"Okay," he said, and his voice sounded strange to him—a stranger's voice, younger than he thought it should be. "Okay."

They went down together. The stairs were steep enough that they had to go one at a time, Luz first because she was braver or because she was stubborn, Mateo behind her because someone had to be ready to catch her if the whole thing was a mistake. The concrete was rough under his palms, and the air grew colder with each step, and the breathing sound grew louder until he realized it was not breathing at all but the echo of his own footsteps bouncing off walls he couldn't see yet.

At the bottom, there was a passage.

It was wider than he expected—wide enough for two people to walk side by side, though the ceiling was low enough that Luz, who was two inches taller than him and not shy about mentioning it, had to duck. The walls were unpoured concrete in some places and cinder block in others, which told him nothing he could translate into understanding. The floor was bare earth packed hard, and the air smelled like clay and something metallic that he couldn't name.

The passage ran straight for about twenty feet, then turned a corner into darkness that even the flashlight couldn't fully defeat. The beam caught the edges of things—pipes along the ceiling, rusted but still intact; electrical conduit running in parallel lines, some of it live, he could feel the hum of it in his teeth; and at the corner, a hand-painted sign on a piece of plywood, the letters done in blue spray paint:

CAMPUS SHELTER — LEVEL B2

Below the words, someone had taped a printed sheet of paper. It was old—the tape had yellowed, and the edges were curling. But the writing was still legible, and Mateo read it aloud without thinking, his voice bouncing off the concrete walls:

"Occupancy maximum: forty. Water available at south junction. Do not open exterior doors after dark. Do not use open flame near ventilation shafts. Report all injuries to the designated First Keeper. Welcome. You are safe here."

Luz was looking at the passage beyond the sign, where the corridor continued and, judging by the faint echo of their footsteps, opened into a larger space—a room, maybe. A big one.

"Someone planned this," she said.

"Yeah."

"Someone planned this before today."

"Yeah."

Mateo looked back up the stairs. From this distance, the top was just a rectangle of gray light, a postage stamp of the world they'd left behind. The siren was still going, but fainter now, swallowed by distance and stone. He looked forward, into the corridor, into the dark that was not friendly and was not safe but was, for the moment, solid and real and beneath them.

"We should go back up," he said. "We should get Mom. We should go to the hospital."

Luz shook her head once. "We can't call her. We can't reach anyone. The whole neighborhood is—" She gestured upward, vaguely, in a way that encompassed Mrs. Sanchez and the man in the bathrobe and every strange, wrong thing that had happened in the last twelve minutes. "And if we go outside, we're part of that."

She picked a direction. It was the only one available.

They walked. Behind them, the stairs led up to a house where the toast was still in the toaster and the orange juice was still dripping off the rim of a glass and the morning was still, in some theoretical dimension, normal. Ahead of them, the corridor stretched forward into the hum and the dark and the deep foundation of a campus neither of them had ever thought to explore, toward a room that was waiting with concrete walls and a low ceiling and the faint, unmistakable smell of other people—people who had

come here before them, who had left signs and food and the hand-painted promise that they were welcome, who had gone back up at some point and not come down again.

Mateo clicked the flashlight off to save the battery. In the dark, Luz's hand found his, and they stood together in the silence of a place that had been built to outlast the world above and was, it seemed, about to get the chance.

The quiet night had begun.

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