

PRAISE FOR
NIC BLAKE AND THE REMARKABLES:
THE MANIFESTOR PROPHECY

“All the brilliance you’d expect from Angie Thomas: a page-turning plot, pitch-perfect characters ... and real stakes that real kids will care about – plus magic!”

Rick Riordan, internationally bestselling author of the Percy Jackson series

“Angie Thomas is such a phenomenal talent, and this truly is fantasy at its very best – a magnificent, exhilarating adventure in a richly imagined world. I loved it!”

Sophie Anderson, bestselling author of *The House with Chicken Legs*

“Packed with humour and bursting with heart and imagination.”

B. B. Alston, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Amari and the Night Brothers*

“A tantalizing first instalment in what is sure to be a blockbuster series.”

Soman Chainani, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The School for Good and Evil* series

“Exploding with heart, humour, and all things Black Girl Magic.”

Dhonielle Clayton, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Marvellers*

ALSO BY
ANGIE THOMAS

For young adult readers

The Hate U Give

On the Come Up

Concrete Rose

*Find Your Voice: A Guided
Journal for Writing Your Truth*

NIC BLAKE AND THE REMARKABLES

THE MANIFESTOR PROPHECY

ANGIE THOMAS



WALKER
BOOKS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated as they may result in injury.

First published 2023 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2023 Angie Thomas
Cover artwork © 2023 Setor Fiadzigbey
Background art © 2023 David SanAngelo

The right of Angie Thomas to be identified as author of
this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book has been typeset in Minion Pro, Latienne URW and Fort Yukon

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Walker Books UK ISBN 978-1-5295-0654-9
Walker Books Australia ISBN 978-1-5295-1632-6

www.walker.co.uk



In honour of Virginia Hamilton
and all of the ancestors who knew we could fly





HELLHOUNDS, HAINTS AND HAPPY BIRTHDAYS

When my best friend JP turned twelve, his parents bought him a phone. It was a super big deal, 'cause one, JP loses everything, and two, his parents think phones are “quick access to the Devil”. (I didn't know the Devil had a phone.)

For her twelfth birthday, Alabama McCain down the street got a sweatshirt once worn by a member of her favourite K-pop group. Weird, but not as weird as being named Alabama even though you're from Mississippi.

Sean Cole got a four-wheeler for his twelfth. Now he likes to ride around the neighbourhood, knocking over rubbish bins. His mom says he's being a boy. I say he's being a butt.

For my twelfth birthday, I've got them all beat. My dad's gonna teach me how to use the Gift so I can finally be a real Manifestor. First I've gotta catch a hellhound.

I tiptoe through the woods so the leaves don't crackle under my feet. In yesterday's lesson, Dad said hellhounds can hear sounds from hundreds of miles away. I think I can smell a hellhound from hundreds of miles away. Wherever this



thing is, it's filling the forest with a strong odour of boiled eggs and Fritos.

"Remember what I told you, Nic Nac," Dad says. His voice is around me, like he's speaking on an intercom. "Look for the signs. Hellhounds always leave a trail."

A trail of what, funk?

I wipe my forehead on my arm. You'd think eight in the morning was too early to sweat, but it's normal for late May in Mississippi. The sun glares through the trees, and the air is thick and sticky; it feels like walking through toffee.

I grip the handle of my net. The mesh is made from Giants' hair, one of the strongest materials on earth. Although I zoned out for most of Dad's hour-long lecture, I do remember that Giants' hair is one of the few things that hellhounds can't chew through. I also remember that hellhounds breathe fire. So I search for signs. Burnt leaves, scorched earth...

Smoke. Up ahead, a pillar rises into the air. Where there's smoke, there's a hellhound.

I tiptoe in that direction, and *bam*, there it is in the clearing – a hellhound with brown fur that stands on end. It has horns, which means *it* is actually a *she*. She's the size of a tiger, and she gnaws on a bone as big as she is. Hey, better that bone than me.

Now to catch this thing. If only I knew how to use the Gift, this would be a breeze. But nooo. "You're too young to learn," Dad said. "It's nothing to play with," he said. "Wait until you're twelve," he said.

"Those rules stink," I said.



Lucky for me, I'm twelve today and that means goodbye rules, but at the moment all I've got is my net. I raise it above my head as I inch closer to the hellhound. Good doggy. Don't worry about this live, three-course meal walking towards—

Aaaand she sees me. I freeze.

"She can smell fear, Nic Nac," Dad says. "Don't be afraid."

Says the guy who isn't three feet from a hellhound.

Nope, I'm not going out like this. One of us is gonna attack first, and it's gonna be me.

I take a step.

She growls and takes one too.

I take another step.

She charges.

I nearly pee my pants.

She tackles me to the ground.

Hundreds of pounds of hellhound pin me down. The stench burns my eyes. I'll never tell Sean he stinks again. If there is an "again". I'm probably seconds from pearly gates and angels.

But suddenly the hellhound shrinks. She smells like cheese – not great but not bad – and instead of biting my head off, she licks my face. The woods dissolve, revealing my garden, and that fire-breathing, gigantic hellhound is a tail-wagging little hellhound pup.

Dad's standing over on the patio, laughing. "Happy birthday, Nic Nac."

He waves his hand, erasing the rest of the illusion he drew, along with the concealment mojo that kept our neighbours from seeing that our garden had become a forest. My dad's

a pretty good Manifestor. He managed to make this furball look ten times her size. In reality she's no bigger than a shoebox.

I wipe her warm slobber from my cheeks. "Is she mine?"

"I'm not saying names, but somebody has been bugging me for a hellhound or a dragon. Since a dragon ain't happening, a hellhound it is."

I grin. "See? I knew you'd get the hang of things."

"You may wanna hold off on that celebration, Nic Nac. Please believe there are rules if you wanna keep this pup."

"Name them."

Dad raises his eyebrows. "Who are you and what have you done with my kid? Because the Nichole Blake I know hates rules."

"Apple." I point at myself. "Tree." I point at him.

He laughs. "Touché, Miss Blake. Tou—"

"What are you guys doing?"

Dad and I jump.

"JP," Dad says with a deep breath. "Good morning to you too."

My best friend peers over the fence that separates our gardens. JP's only the second friend I've ever had in my life. The first was this girl Rebecca who was in my homeschool group in Atlanta. We bonded over Oreos. I thought I'd never have a friend like her again until JP strolled along. When I first met him, he wore a smart shirt and bow tie like he was ready for church on a Sunday instead of fourth grade on a Tuesday. Nobody forced him to dress that way either. JP just likes bow ties. He held his hand out and said, "I'm Joshua Paul Williams. You can call me Joshua Paul."



We call him JP. Sometimes Pastor JP because of the bow ties. Plus, JP's dad is a preacher, and JP has a freckled face, round belly and short brown hair just like him.

JP's the only Black kid on our street besides me, but that's not why we're friends. JP's the one kid who doesn't think I'm the weird homeschooled girl. Also, I'm not one hundred per cent sure JP could survive without me. I'm not saying that because he's an Unremarkable either (aka doesn't have the Gift or any supernatural ability – mostly everyone around here is Unremarkable). I'm saying that because he's a hot mess.

He adjusts the holder straps on his glasses. "Sorry I scared y'all. My momma says I'm sneakier than a snake in slippers."

"Uh, snakes don't have feet," I say.

"Yet I somehow get what she's saying," Dad adds. "How long you been standing there, li'l man?"

JP shrugs. "Not long."

Thing is, the majority of Unremarkables don't know about the Gift or know that Remarkable creatures really exist. On top of that, they can't see that stuff. But illusions are so powerful that they're the one Remarkable thing Unremarkables can see. Luckily the concealment mojo should've kept JP from seeing the illusion Dad drew, and my hellhound puppy should look like a normal puppy to him. But there's a teeny, tiny chance that he saw something. Unremarkables have those moments. They usually explain it away by saying their mind's playing tricks on them.

"Mr Blake, my momma asked if Nic is going with us to the book signing tonight and if I can go to the museum with y'all

tomorrow?” JP says. “She would’ve asked herself, but she gets shy around you ’cause she thinks you’re cute. Don’t tell my daddy I said that.”

Ewwwww! “JP! You don’t say that out loud!”

“It’s the truth!”

Dad shakes his head. We’ve lived in ten neighbourhoods so far – I keep count – and Dad’s had a fan club in every single one. He’s tall and lean with a dimpled smile, dark brown skin, black locs and tattoos covering his arms. Know what it’s like having the cute father in the neighbourhood? Disgusting. I wanna vomit on the regular.

“Nic can still go,” Dad says. “And you can still come with us tomorrow. Tell your momma I said thank you for taking her tonight.”

“Yes, sir. I can’t believe we’re gonna meet TJ Retro.”

“And he’s gonna sign our books,” I add. JP and I are the unofficial-but-should-be-official leaders of the TJ Retro fan club (along with official editors of his unofficial wiki). We’ve read his Stevie James books a hundred times. They’re about this foster kid, Stevie, who finds out he’s a magician and attends a magical prep school with his best friends, Kevin and Chloe. One day he will have to battle the vilest magician in the world, Einan.

The magicians and their magic remind me of Manifestors and the Gift a little bit, but in real life, the Gift is more powerful than magic. You see, the Gift is an innate power that lives in us Manifestors. Magic, on the other hand, is a corrupt form of the Gift. It’s hard to control and super destructive. Also,



magic in real life can only be performed with a wand, and the magic in wands runs out after a while. We Manifestors don't need wands.

So although the Stevie books aren't accurate, they're cool. The third book in the series came out last week, and Mr Retro's making a book-tour stop in Jackson tonight. JP and I have held off on reading the new book, and we're avoiding all spoilers until we get our copies signed. That's discipline right there.

"Good ol' TJ Retro and his inaccurate books," Dad mumbles.

"How could books about magic be accurate, Mr Blake?" JP asks. "Magic isn't real."

"Yeah, Dad, how could they be accurate?" I say.

He side-eyes me, and I grin. Dad hates books about magic. He calls them "fabricated tales written for profit". Technically all fiction books are fabricated tales written for profit, but I let the dude have his moments.

He clears his throat. "They're just not my thing, JP."

"In other words, he's got no taste," I say.

Dad puts me in a light headlock. "What you say?"

"Get off." I shout, and laugh. He plants a big wet kiss on the top of my head.

"I got taste," he says, letting me go. "The best taste. Remember that."

"You wish," I say as my hellhound jumps up my legs. "Check it out, JP. I finally got a dog."

Since JP is an Unremarkable, he can't see the smoke she lets out as she squeaks or the small horns on her head. But JP

barely glances at her. “Uhhh, I better go. Vacation Bible School only waits for Jesus. Happy birthday, Nic!”

He disappears from the fence, and I frown. “What’s that about?”

“With JP, who knows?” Dad says. “C’mon. We gotta get started with your school day.”

The other kids in Jackson got outta school for the summer earlier this week, but Dad homeschools me year-round. Today that’s A-OK by me. It’s Gift lesson time, baby. Time to finally become a real Manifestor.

You see, although we Manifestors are born with the Gift inside us, we still have to learn how to use it, and there are lots of ways to use it too. The easiest is with mojos and jujus, which control the elements. We can do stuff like form fire in our hands or make water shoot from the ground. If we do it with good intentions, it’s a mojo. Bad intentions, it’s a juju. We can also use our minds to summon objects or create illusions and tons of other things. It can take years to learn to master the Gift, plus Manifestors are still discovering new ways to use it. I don’t have to know a ton of stuff, but geez, I’d like to know how to do *something*.

My puppy scuttles behind us into the house. We’ve lived in Jackson for two years now. It was New Orleans before this, Memphis before that, Atlanta, Charleston, DC, New York. Basically, we’ve lived a lot of places. Dad let me choose our new city this time, and I picked Jackson. I can’t explain it, but it felt like the place we needed to be.

I gotta say, I made a good decision. This is one of my



favourite houses so far. It's got an upstairs and a basement, and it's in an artsy neighbourhood called Fondren. Once a month, there's a neighbourhood-wide festival, and on Sundays Dad and I walk to the restaurant a few streets over for milkshakes and cheeseburgers.

It feels like we've found a home here, but any day now Dad could say, "Hey, you up for a change of scenery?" That really means, "Hey, an Unremarkable caught me using the Gift, so let's get out of here." That happens a lot.

In the kitchen, a deep growl rattles the door to the basement. I sit at the counter. "Is that the demon you caught at the governor's mansion?"

Dad waves his hand, and a light glows under the basement door. The demon squeals. "Yep. Second one in two weeks. I swear, demons can't stay away from that place."

Dad's a handyman here in Jackson. Unremarkables don't know that eighty-five per cent of their household problems are the result of haints, demons, ghouls and other Remarkable creatures. Twelve per cent of what's not caused by creatures can easily be fixed with the Gift. The remaining three per cent require a screwdriver and a prayer.

"A'ight, Nic Nac," Dad says. "Quick quiz – when did we Manifestors first receive the Gift?"

Aw, man, here he goes with this. I'm ready for Gift lessons, not a quiz. But I gotta do what I gotta do. "Our ancestors were first blessed with the Gift while they were enslaved," I say. "It was given to them so they could escape to freedom."

"You sure about that?" Dad says.



Oh shoot. The fact that he asked makes me not sure.
“Uhhh ... I think I am?”

“Sorry, baby girl. You got this one wrong today. Remember what I always tell you – nothing about any Black people started with slavery. For us Manifestors, the Gift was first given to our ancestors, the Wallinzi, in Africa. We’re focusing on them for today’s lesson.”

“What? But ... but I thought you were about to teach me how to use the Gift. Today’s the day I’m supposed to learn, remember?”

Dad frowns. “It is?”

“Yes! On my eleventh birthday, you said I could learn when I turned twelve. Before that, you said on my tenth birthday that I could learn when I turned eleven.”

“I don’t remember—”

“Aaaand on my ninth birthday, you said I could learn when I turned ten.”

“That was a while ago. You sure?”

I press my lips together. “Dad, this isn’t fair. You told me you learned to use it when you were ten.”

“I did. I also grew up thinking it was a quick fix for everything, but it’s nothing to—”

“Play with,” I say.

“There can be real—”

“Consequences,” I say.

“You could hurt yourself or—”

“Somebody else,” I finish. I’ve heard this a million times.

“I just wanna know how to use it for simple stuff, like to draw



an illusion to make my room look clean or ways to use it on a gamer troll.”

“Orrrrr you could actually clean your room. Please do. I caught a whiff of some serious funk in there the other day. I’m definitely not teaching you how to use the Gift on a gamer troll. You’d mess around and make some poor kid’s teeth fall out.”

I widen my eyes. “You can do that with the Gift?”

Dad purses his lips. “Like I said, the Gift’s not a quick fix for when you’re in a bind, baby girl. Besides, it ain’t got nothing on this.” He taps the side of my head. “Your brain’s the only gift you need. *You’re* the only gift you need. Everything you need is inside of you.”

“Well, since the Gift is inside me, don’t I need to know how to use it?”

He smirks. “You’re persistent, I’ll give you that. I think we should wait another year, Nic Nac.”

I wanna tell him to give me a chance. That I’d be careful, I promise I would. That I wanna know that I can do it, that I’m a real Manifestor.

But Dad won’t listen. He never does. I sigh. “Yes, sir.”

He kisses my forehead. “Let’s get this Wallinzi lesson out of the way so we can head to Ms Lena’s.”



After about two hours of homeschooling, we hop in Dad’s pickup truck – me, Dad and my hellhound pup. I think I’ll name her Cocoa. She’s the colour of a cup of hot chocolate. The demon Dad caught at the governor’s mansion sleeps in a cage in the bed of the truck, and on the back seat there’s

a crate holding blue-glass bottles with the smoky forms of haints swirling around in them. Dad caught them in various houses this week. When he hits a pothole on our street, the bottles clink against one another.

“You gotta be kidding me,” he says. “Another one?”

Jackson has potholes galore. Sometimes people turn them into pools and flower beds. It’s cool and sad at the same time.

I glance back at the one Dad rode over. “Was that there yesterday?”

“Nah, I don’t think so. Them things pop up real fast, though. Bet it’s got something to do with that volcano under the city.”

Most people don’t know that Jackson is built on top of an inactive volcano that’s only a few thousand feet below the city. The opening is said to be right below the Mississippi Coliseum. I’m just glad it’s inactive. Trust me, I wouldn’t have told Dad we should move here if it was active, although the Jackson culinary specialities of caramel cake and chicken on a stick are worth the risk of volcanic eruption.

We hit potholes the whole way to Farish Street. In one of our history lessons, Dad said that it used to be the spot for Black folks in Mississippi. It was one of the few places where they weren’t discriminated against. I found some old pictures online that showed people crowding the pavement to go into the shops and restaurants.

Today, most of the buildings on Farish Street are abandoned. That’s how Ms Lena’s seems to Unremarkables. They don’t know that the boarded-up door is only an illusion hiding a steel door with ancient markings on it.



Dad holds the cage with the demon in it as he opens the door. The sounds of blues music and chatter drift outside, along with the aroma of fried foods. The place is packed today, but Fridays usually are. That's when Ms Lena serves her famous fried catfish and Cajun fries.

The lights in the juke joint stay dim to keep people from seeing how rundown it is, but the Remarkables light the place up a bit thanks to the Glow: different-coloured auras that tell you the kinda Remarkable they are. Only other Remarkables see it, but Dad says Unremarkables sense it. They usually say that person has "it" or something special about them.

We Manifestors have a golden Glow that's a little brighter than other Remarkables' Glows. It's probably not a coincidence that we're some of the most powerful Remarkables there are. Don't get me wrong, Rougarous, Vampires, Giants, Fairies, Merfolk and other Remarkables are powerful, but they don't have the Gift like us.

A couple of Manifestors at the bar are being served by a small purple-glowing Aziza with brown skin, glittery wings and pointed ears. That's Ms Sadie. Don't call her a Fairy or she'll tell you that Fairies are from Europe and Azizas are of African descent and Azizas are stronger than Fairies. They're able to pick up things a thousand times bigger than them.

A Manifestor at a booth shows a red-glowing Vampire a suitcase with small leather bags in it. The Manifestor is Mrs Barbara, and she's a salesperson for Miss Peachy's Marvellous Mojo and Juju Bags. The slogan shimmers on the suitcase in glittery letters: "If you're wise, you'll open this surprise!"

Remarkables love them, 'cause they're filled with the Gift, but you don't know what a bag can do till you open it up. It could be a mojo bag that rains money and gold, or it could be a juju bag that turns off the gravity in the room or makes it rain actual rain. It's like a Remarkable version of scratch tickets. People will spend all their money trying to find the mojo bags with money or gold in them, and most of those are worth no more than ten dollars. It's rare to find one that's worth millions. Dad says nobody's getting rich but Miss Peachy.

Over at a table, a dark-skinned Rougarou with a grey Glow talks to a Shapeshifter (orange Glow) and a Vampire as he shows them pictures on his phone.

The Rougarou, Mr Zeke, spots us. "Hey, it's the birthday girl!"

I grin as it's echoed around the juke joint. This is a lot different from how it used to be. Before Dad and I moved to Jackson, we didn't hang around other Remarkables much, and if we were around any, Dad told me not to talk to them. He's kinda over the top when it comes to stranger danger. Once we got to Jackson, he met Ms Lena and started coming to the juke joint to sell her the creatures he caught on jobs. He was super hesitant to talk to folks, but over time, the regulars became like our family.

I get swarmed with birthday hugs. Ms Sadie promises me a root beer float with a drizzle of caramel. Mrs Barbara gives me a Miss Peachy's bag and claims she has a good feeling that it may be a gold-raining mojo. I stick it in my pocket. Would be just my luck that it's a juju bag that rains frogs instead.



We go over to Mr Zeke, and he wraps me in his woolly arms. I can only imagine what he looks like during a full moon. “Happy birthday, Nic! How’s twelve treating ya?”

“The same as eleven so far.”

“Wait till you hit the hundreds,” says the Vampire, Mr Earl. “Not a thang feel different. I went a year thinking I was a hundred and ten, and I’m a hundred and eleven.”

“You a hundred fourteen, Earl,” says Mr Zeke.

“Well, dang. See what I mean?”

“I see somebody got a hellhound,” Ms Casey, the Shapeshifter, says with a look at Dad.

I grin. “Yep! He had to cave eventually.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You won’t be grinning when you’re cleaning up all that hellhound poop,” Dad says. “How was the trip, Zeke?”

“Amazing don’t describe it, man. I was showing Earl and Casey the pictures. I got as close as I could.”

Mr Zeke takes a trip every year to a Remarkable city or historic site. This year he went to Africa to see the Garden of Eden. Well, the outside. Nobody can go in. According to Dad, the Wallinzi, the tribe we descend from, live in the city that surrounds the garden. Mr Zeke shows us a picture of himself outside the garden’s gates. The ivory wall is hundreds of feet tall, and two angels in golden armour stand guard.

“How was the city?” Dad asks. “As beautiful as they say it is?”

“More so,” Mr Zeke says. “Those Wallinzi, though ... interesting folks.”



“Funny, I just started giving Nic homeschool lessons on them,” Dad says.

“You oughta teach her that they ain’t real welcoming to outsiders,” Mr Zeke adds. “Especially not to us ‘less gifted’ Remarkables. You know how some of y’all Manifestors are.”

Mr Earl and Ms Casey grunt in agreement. Some Manifestors like to make sure other Remarkables know that we’re the most powerful Remarkables. Dad says it’s silly; that as Black folks we’ve seen people like us get treated as inferior and we shouldn’t do that to others.

“I’m sorry you had to deal with that, man,” he tells Mr Zeke.

“It is what it is, Maxwell. I’ll deal with them over LORE any day.”

There go the grumbles around the juke joint. In Ms Lena’s, you should never mention LORE, the League of Remarkable Efforts, aka the Remarkable government. It’s mostly run by Manifestors, and they monitor Remarkables to make sure we don’t mess with Unremarkables. In any major way, at least. I mean when Mr Earl broke into the Jackson blood bank, he had to deal with the Unremarkable police. But if he were to go on a rampage and bite a bunch of Unremarkables, LORE would step in. LORE also oversees the secret Remarkable cities in North America, including Uhuru, where Dad and I were born.

I haven’t been to any of the Remarkable cities since I was a baby. Dad and I are exiles: Remarkables who don’t live in Remarkable cities. So is everyone in Ms Lena’s. Half of them left LORE cities on their own; some say there are too many



rules to follow in the cities. The other half got kicked outta the cities. Dad says he chose for us to live in the Unremarkable world, but sometimes I wonder if he really had a choice. I mean, with the way we move around so much and how Dad never went around other Remarkables before we came here, it's as if he had something to hide. Then again, I can't imagine he'd do anything to get kicked outta anywhere.

“Speaking of LORE, anything I need to know?” Dad asks.

Mr Zeke glances at me – so quick I almost don't see it – then says, “You know how it is this time of year.”

Uhh, what does that mean?

Dad nods. “Thanks, man.”

Mr Zeke holds his fist out. “Hey, we exiles stick together.”

Dad bumps it. “Always. C'mon, Nic Nac.”

I follow him towards the back. “What happens this time of year?”

“Grown folks' business,” he says. That's also what he calls politics and what happened to Mr Earl after he broke into the Jackson blood bank.

Dad raises his hand to knock on Ms Lena's door, but the door swings open before he can. Shelves cover every wall of the office, holding cages filled with creatures and vials of tonics in every colour. An older Black woman sits at the desk in the centre. Gold rings adorn her fingers, and her skin is bathed in a bronze Glow.

Ms Lena is a Visionary, a person who has visions of the future. That's different from a Prophet. Prophets hear divine messages about certain people's futures, seek them out and

relay the messages. Prophecies aren't super detailed and can get misinterpreted by the recipients. Visionaries see flashes of things that will happen. It's apparently like seeing pieces of a puzzle but not the picture the puzzle creates.

"Ah, my best supplier," Ms Lena says. Her New Orleans accent makes me think of walking around Uptown with Dad. "I see you brought that hellhound back. I told you, ain't no refunds."

I should've known Dad bought Cocoa from Ms Lena. She's the go-to for everything from hellhounds to lightning birds to tonics.

"Oh nah, we're not bringing her back," Dad says. "Just brought her along for the ride."

"Uh-huh. She only breathing smoke? I gave her a tonic to stop that fire mess, but I ain't responsible if she burn your house down."

Um, what?

"Just smoke," Dad says. "No fire."

"Uh-huh," Ms Lena says. I think that's her favourite non-word. "Well, stop wasting my time. Show me whatcha got."

Dad sets the cage on her desk as the demon claws at the metal bars. It's maybe a foot tall and has red bumpy skin and beady green eyes. Ms Lena uncaps a vial and splashes a clear liquid on it. The demon howls as its skin sizzles like water thrown on a hot pan.

"Holy water," Ms Lena says. "He gets too unruly, I'll hit him with some oil."

She pronounces oil like earl. That's how some folks from New Orleans say it. Ms Lena was born and raised down there,



but then this hurricane called Katrina hit. She spent three days on a roof until some Swampfolk – the bayou cousins of Merfolk – rescued her.

“How many haints you got for me, Maxwell?” she asks.

“Ten, including a real angry one from Madison.”

“Oooh, chile! You done made Ms Lena’s day. We ’bout to make some good money!”

“Who buys haints from you anyway?” I ask.

Ms Lena sets her hand on her hip. “Who wants to know?”

“She didn’t mean any harm, Ms Lena,” Dad says.

Ms Lena puts her hand up. “Nothing wrong with a curious child, chile. If you must know, Miss Nosey, there’s some rich Remarkables out here who like to collect haints. Don’t ask me what they do with ’em. It ain’t my business long as they pay up.”

Weird. If I was rich, I’d buy something useful, like a pet dragon trained to attack my enemies. Practical stuff.

“Your daddy said that hellhound’s your birthday gift,” Ms Lena says. “How old are you?”

“Twelve.”

“Ohhh.” She flashes her gold-capped teeth in a smile. “I remember that age real well. You oughta let me try and fetch you a vision. I don’t usually do it for free, but for your birthday I don’t mind.”

“Nah, that’s OK, Ms Lena,” Dad says. “I don’t want you going out your way.”

“Oh hush, Maxwell. It’s not a problem.”

“No, really,” Dad says. “Don’t.”

Ms Lena reaches for my hands. “Why not? It’ll take a min—”
Our fingertips barely touch.

A strong gust of wind whips past me. Dad, Cocoa and Ms Lena disappear, and I’m in a darkened tunnel.

I frantically glance around. “What the—”

Another flash. I’m in a gigantic cave, but everything around me is blurry. There’s something big and dark up ahead; I can’t make out what it is. Then someone shouts, “Nic, run! It’s behind you!”

I’m about to turn around to look, but another gust of wind whooshes past me, and I’m back in Ms Lena’s office.

She lets go of my hands and shouts, “How you do that?”

I hold my throbbing head and blink stars out my eyes. It’s moments before everything comes back into focus, and once it does, I see Ms Lena staring at me, horrified.

I’m just as horrified, looking at her. Her Glow flickers as if someone is flipping a light switch on and off.

“What you do?” she shrieks. “You better tell me, li’l girl!”

Dad doesn’t let me respond. He grabs me and Cocoa and hurries us outta there.



THE ADVENTURES OF TYRAN J. PORTER

Dad speeds home, hitting every pothole. “Tell me exactly what happened, Nichole.”

I start from the beginning. Our fingers touched, there was a gust of wind, then the tunnel, the cave, the voice. “Was that a vision?”

“It sounds like one,” Dad says, and there’s this expression on his face that I’ve only ever seen once or twice. He’s terrified.

Holy moly, he’s terrified. Dad’s not scared of anything, so if he’s terrified, I should be planning my funeral. “What does it mean?”

“Calm down, baby girl.”

“How did I see her vision?”

“I don’t know.”

“What was the vision?”

“I don’t know,” he says.

My chin trembles. “Did I hurt her?”

“Hey, hey. Calm down. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“But her Glow, Dad. It was flickering.”



“I’m sure there’s an explanation,” he says. “As much as we know about the Gift, there’s so much we don’t know, but I promise that you did nothing wrong, you hear me?”

He says that, but his face tells a different story. He hasn’t stopped frowning since we left Ms Lena’s.

There’s something wrong with me ... or worse, I did something really bad.

Dad pulls into our driveway and shuts off his engine. We sit in silence, and he runs his fingers along a tattoo on his forearm. V.XXVII, the Roman numerals for May twenty-seventh, my birthday. It’s technically two tattoos, one on top of the other, so it almost looks like it’s 3D.

“You know,” he says, “I think it’s best if you don’t go to the book signing tonight.”

“But you said I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“You didn’t, but you shouldn’t be around so many Unremarkables.”

My eyes sting. “You think I’m gonna hurt somebody?”

“No!” he says quickly. “No, baby girl.”

“Then why can’t I go? Meeting Mr Retro is one of my birthday gifts!”

“Nichole,” he says, in that tone that warns me to watch my tone. “Look, Mrs Williams and JP can get your books signed for you. We’ll have our own birthday celebration here. I bought cake, and I’ll go pick up a pizza from Sal and Mookie’s. Then we can—”

I jump outta the truck and march into the house, crying my eyes out.





I spend most of my birthday alone in my room with Cocoa.

I overheard Dad call Mrs Williams and tell her I'm not feeling good. He said it was nothing major, but he wants to be sure, so he's keeping me home tonight. It's got me thinking that something really is wrong with me.

My tablet beeps somewhere in my room. Cocoa stops playing with a pair of socks and goes straight to the heap of dirty clothes in the corner. I dig around in the pile for my tablet. I've got three texts from JP.

My mamma told me the news!

Nic, it's TJ Retro!

Illness can wait!

I plop back on my bed. The worst part about being friends with Unremarkables is that you can't be like, "I'm not really sick. I did something to a Visionary today and my dad is more afraid than he wants to let on."

Not happening, so I write: I wish I could go. Can you get my books signed for me?

Of course, JP writes.

I'll get a selfie taken for you.

Technically it's for me since I'll be in it and not you.

But I'll think of you the whole time!

Am I making things worse?

YES, I write and toss my tablet back into the clothes pile.

Cocoa hops on the bed and rests her head on my stomach. She looks up at me with those big red eyes like, "Master, how may I assist?"



I scratch behind her ears. “At least I got you today. Some birthday this is.”

There’s a knock at my door, and Dad peeks around it. “Mind if I come in?”

“It doesn’t matter, you’re gonna come in anyway.”

“True, but I think I got two good reasons.”

I sit up. Dad walks in holding two small birthday cakes covered in thick, tan-coloured frosting. Caramel cake. I’m kinda in love with caramel.

But instead of giving in, I lie back down.

“That didn’t do the trick?” Dad says. “A’ight, bet. How ’bout this?”

He sets the cakes on my nightstand. With a wave of his hand, my ceiling disappears and a night sky takes its place. One by one, Dad draws stars in mid-air. Little twinkling ones, big glowing ones that resemble diamonds. They float up to the ceiling. A couple of them shoot across the room.

Dad grins at me. “I told you that you deserve the stars.”

I fold my arms. “Nice illusion, but no.”

“Aww, c’mon, Nic Nac! You keep pouting, and I’ll burst out singing.”

“I’m not pouting, and you can’t sing.”

“You sure? I’ve got some pipes on me,” he says.

“No.”

“I think I feel a song coming on.”

“Dad, no!”

“*Hap-py birth-day to ya!*” he sings, off-key. He tries to dance, and Cocoa growls at him from the bed.



Before I know it, I'm laughing. "OK, OK! Please stop."

He dances over to me and holds out one of the cakes. "Make a wish, and nah, wishing that I stop singing and dancing don't count."

"I need a prayer for that," I say, and close my eyes. Every year I wish that on my next birthday, it won't just be me and Dad. As much as I love the guy, I wish we had other family too. Then I imagine that I'm surrounded by a mom, grandparents, aunts, uncles, a brother. I've always wanted a brother. I close my eyes tight enough, and I can almost see them. Their faces are blurry, yet they seem real.

I wish for them again and blow out the candles.

Dad looks at the other cake. Every year he gets an extra one to commemorate surviving another year as my father. Rude.

"Happy birthday," he says, sounding a little sad. He blows out the candles.

I lick frosting off a candle. "What's wrong, old man? Upset that I'm growing up?"

"Old man? Can't I have a moment without being judged?"

"Nope!"

"Hater. So, whatcha wish for?"

I never tell him about my family wish. I don't wanna make him think he's not enough. "That we figure out what's wrong with me so I can go to the book signing."

"Oh," Dad says, sounding real guilty. As. He. Should. He brushes my hair. "Whatever happened earlier, we'll figure it out. As far as tonight, it's for the best, baby girl."

"I still don't like it."



Dad has the nerve to smile. “You’re just like your momma.”

There’s an ache deep in my chest. I get one whenever Dad brings her up, as if my heart is missing something. But it doesn’t happen a lot. Dad rarely talks about her.

My mom’s not dead. I think she doesn’t wanna be around for me. Dad says that “sometimes adults make decisions that they think are for the best, but they’re not”. I’m afraid to ask more, because who wants to find out that their mom doesn’t wanna be their mom?

I wish I at least remembered her. Then when I made my birthday wishes, she wouldn’t be so blurry. I think I remember her eyes; I see them in my dreams. They’re big and dark brown like mine, and they gaze down at me as she sings me lullabies.

“Some days, you may not understand the things I do, the things I’ve done,” Dad says, “but protecting you is my priority. A’ight?”

He just had to go there. The caramel cake and silly dance moves were bad enough. Now here he goes with the protection talk. “All right.”

“My girl.” He kisses my forehead and snuggles up against me. “You know, I vividly remember the first time I held you.”

“Daaad,” I groan. “No more mush, please.”

“I think I sat there for hours, staring at you. I wasn’t sure I could be the father you deserved. Still don’t.” He sits here quietly for a moment, then abruptly hops up. “You want pizza for dinner?”

“Pizza’s fine. You OK?”

“Yeah, baby girl, I’m good. How ’bout we go pick one up



from Sal and Mookie's? We can grab some ice cream too, while we're at it."

I almost tell him yeah, but it hits me: it takes about ten minutes to get to Sal and Mookie's, then you gotta wait for the pizza. That would be more than enough time to...

"Can I stay here?" I ask. "I kinda don't wanna be around people."

"Whatever you want, baby girl."

"That should be a daily rule."

"Hah! Not happening," Dad says. He whistles at Cocoa. "C'mon, girl. Let's go get you some food."

She follows him out. Really, I think she's following the cake.

I wait until Dad's footsteps thump against the staircase before I grab my tablet. When I blew out my candles, I made an extra wish: to meet TJ Retro. I don't need a wish when I've got a dad who's leaving, giving me the perfect opportunity to sneak out.

I text JP.

It's a miracle!

I feel better.

Looks like we're both meeting TJ Retro tonight.



Dad leaves minutes before Mrs Williams and JP do. The timing's so perfect that it seems like I was destined to grab my Stevie books, sneak next door and ride to the book signing with them.

I'm pretty sure Dad won't see it that way, but it's a chance I'm willing to take.

The Williamses' minivan has "New Life Christian Church" written on the side, along with the address, service hours and a picture of the first family – Pastor Williams, Mrs Williams, JP and JP's older sister, Leah. I don't know a lot about her. She died before we moved here and JP doesn't talk about her much.

"I'm so glad you're feeling better, Nichole," Mrs Williams says as she drives. She's a short, chubby woman who wears her hair curled. "When your daddy told me you were sick, it broke my heart. Nobody should spend their birthday sick."

"Yes, ma'am. It's a miracle!" I don't know where "lying to a pastor's wife" ranks on bad things, but I bet it's up there.

Mrs Williams throws her hand up. "Hallelujah! You know, Joshua Paul is leaving for the Vacation Bible School camping trip this Sunday after church. You should join them. It'll be two weeks in the wilderness with no phones, no video games, no computers. You'd love it!"

She can't mean me. That sounds like torture.

Lemuria Books is on the second floor of a small shopping centre next to one of Jackson's interstates. Above the entryway of the shop, a statue of hands holds a giant book. The store is cosy inside, thanks to the books in every nook and cranny.

The long queue of TJ Retro fans stretches out of the store and down the staircase. Mr Retro smiles from a poster in the shop's display window. He's a Black man about Dad's age, with twists in his hair. He's holding a copy of his latest book, *Stevie James and the Soul Scythe*, which shows a Black boy on the cover, pointing a wand at a hooded figure. An employee says Mr Retro will be here soon.



“Joshua Paul, why don’t you and Nichole go grab us some goodies from the bakery?” Mrs Williams says, taking our books. “I’ll save your spot. Don’t go too far now.”

“Yes, ma’am,” says JP. He’s real quiet tonight, and trust me, JP and quiet don’t go in the same sentence. He’s been nervously chewing on his lip since I got in his mom’s minivan.

We go downstairs to the bakery, and I nudge his side. “Hey, don’t be scared about meeting Mr Retro. Long as neither of us burps, farts or falls, it’ll be fine.”

“Gee, that’s helpful. But I’m not nervous about meeting him.”

“Then what is it? Another one of your challenge videos didn’t go viral?” JP loves doing those weird online challenges, like recording himself walking up milk crates or eating a piece of spicy candy. The things Unremarkables do for fun.

“My latest challenge video is doing extremely well, thank you,” he says.

“OK. Did you accidentally read a spoiler about *Soul Scythe*? Bruh, it’s fine. One spoiler won’t ruin the whole book.”

“Stevie, Kevin and Chloe take Einan’s soul scythe.”

I gasp. “What? You can’t just tell me that without a warning, dude!”

He folds his arms. “I thought one spoiler doesn’t ruin the book.”

“It ... it doesn’t. I’m just surprised. How do they get it? What do they do with it?”

“I’m not giving you any more spoilers, but that’s not what’s bothering me.”



“What’s up then?”

“I can’t tell you. You’re gonna think I’m weird.”

“I already think that. But,” I quickly add, ‘cause he gasped, “I’m weird too. We go together like peanut butter and crisps.” Aka the best sandwich known to humankind.

“No, I mean you’re gonna think I’m out there. Way, way, way out there. In space, past Pluto, in another galaxy.” He looks down. “I can’t lose anyone else.”

I rub his shoulder. JP may not talk about his sister, but it’s obvious that he misses her big-time. “You won’t lose me,” I say. “Just tell me what’s up.”

“OK. This morning, when you and Mr Blake were in your garden, I saw—” Something behind me grabs his attention, and he gasps. “Nic, look! Look!”

I turn around and follow his pointed finger to the bakery windows. A black SUV just pulled up outside. A Black man in jeans, a T-shirt and trainers climbs out the back.

JP tugs at my shirt. “That’s ... that’s him, Nic. That’s him!”

My mouth falls open, but not because I’m finally staring at *the* TJ Retro. It’s because TJ Retro has a golden Glow.

My favourite author is a Manifestor.



JP grabs my hand and races us back upstairs to join his momma in the signing queue. Moments later, TJ Retro comes up the staircase to a round of applause.

He smiles and waves at everyone. When he sees me, he does a double take. I’m the only other person here with the Glow, the only other Manifestor. This close, there’s no mistaking his.



It bathes his brown skin in a golden light.

He's about to speak, but one of the bookstore employees whisks him away.

"He almost spoke to us!" JP says. "Think he recognized us from online? We do comment and message him a lot."

JP and I aren't obsessed, we're persistent. Difference.

"You know, I can't put my finger on it, but there's something special about that man," Mrs Williams says. "He has 'it', whatever it is."

Typical Unremarkable. Don't know a Remarkable when they're standing two feet away.

Look who's talking. I can't believe I didn't realize that Mr Retro is a Manifestor. Then again, the Glow doesn't show on Unremarkable pictures and videos. I wonder what he's gonna say to me. There's not a lot he can say with so many Unremarkables around, but he could be like, "Let's keep in touch." Then we could text each other, and he'll think I'm so cool that he puts me in his books. Stevie could use another friend.

OK, maybe I'm reaching ... or not. I gotta talk to him.

Of course, now that I'm super excited to meet him, the signing queue moves ridiculously slow. I guess it's for a good reason – Mr Retro takes his time with every kid. Some of them are dressed up as Stevie, Chloe, Kevin, and other characters. A couple have stacks with international editions of the books. Mr Retro signs every single copy.

Eventually, there's eight people between us and the front of the queue. Five. Three. One person separates us from TJ Retro.

I clutch my books to my chest. I'm surprised everyone can't hear my heart pounding. "What do we say to him?"

"Oh no!" JP turns to his mom. "What do we say? I don't remember how to talk!"

Mrs Williams chuckles. "Giving him your names would be a good start."

"What are our names?"

"You're Joshua Paul, and this is—"

"Nichole!"

Oh no.

No, no, no, no, no.

Dad marches into Lemuria, zeroed right in on me. Judging by his glare, I won't leave the house until I'm twenty-five.

"Nichole Blake," he growls. "You've got five seconds to—"

"Calvin?" Mr Retro says.

Dad looks past me. "Ty?"

Calvin? Why would he call my dad that name? And who is Ty?

Mr Retro approaches Dad with careful steps, then hugs Dad tightly. "Dawg! I thought I'd never see you again!" he says.

Dad slowly wraps his arms around him in return. "You're TJ Retro?"

My dad is hugging my favourite author. My dad. Is hugging. My favourite. Author.

Mr Retro pulls back. He's shorter than Dad, so they aren't quite eye to eye. "It's a pen name, long story. Where you been?"

Dad glances around nervously. "This isn't a good place to—"



“Cal, it’s cool,” Mr Retro says. “They’re not here.”

They who? I’m so confused.

“We should go,” Dad says.

“But Nichole hasn’t got her books signed,” Mrs Williams chirps. Beside her, JP stares at Mr Retro, wide-eyed and mouth open. I’m not sure he’s breathing.

Mr Retro notices me. “Oh my God! Is this—”

“Nichole? Yeah,” Dad says.

They share a look, as if there’s a silent conversation between them.

“Wow, Nichole,” Mr Retro says. “I haven’t seen you since you were two! You’re almost as tall as me now, which obviously doesn’t take a lot, but—”

“You know me?” I ask.

“I was there when you were born and helped you take your first steps. Changed a couple of nappies. I’m probably embarrassing you by bringing it up. Point is, I’m your godfather.”

Pause. Rewind. Replay. “You’re my *what?*”

“She’ll have to get her books signed another time,” Dad cuts in. “We have to go.”

“C’mon, Cal. I haven’t seen you in years. You can’t just leave, man.”

JP, who is apparently five minutes behind, goes, “Mr Blake, you know TJ Retro?”

“He was the brother I never had,” Mr Retro says.

Seconds pass. Finally Dad sighs. “You got a pen and paper?”

“Anybody got a piece of paper?” Mr Retro calls out, and

everyone in line seems to rummage through their bags. Mrs Williams digs in her purse and pulls out one of those long receipts that you get at the pharmacy that has more coupons on it than anything.

Mr Retro passes it and his pen to Dad, who quickly scribbles our address on it.

“Come by later,” Dad says. “Make sure you’re alone.”

“Squad promise,” Mr Retro says, with a slight smile. Dad doesn’t return it. Mr Retro clears his throat. “Mind if I sign those for you, Nichole?”

“Sure!” That’s the only word I can manage. Mr Retro takes my books and scribbles in them. He grabs a copy of the new Stevie book and signs it too.

He hands the books to me. “Make sure you read the title pages. Later, Cal.”

“Later,” Dad mumbles. “C’mon, Nichole.”

I follow him and glance back. Mr Retro mouths, “Look at the books.”

I open one. Where it used to say, “The Adventures of Stevie James by TJ Retro,” it now reads, “The Adventures of Tyran J. Porter by Tyran J. Porter.” Below that, he wrote:

And his best friend, Calvin Blake.





THE PEOPLE CAN FLY

“Your name is Calvin, not Maxwell, you’re Stevie James’s best friend, and you didn’t tell me?” I almost shout. Almost. This is my dad, you know?

He whips the truck around a pothole. “Calvin is my first name and Maxwell is my middle name, but to you I’m Dad. And I’m not Stevie James’s best friend, I was *Tyran Porter’s* best friend. Difference.”

“But Tyran Porter is Stevie. He changed the name in my books. He also changed Kevin to Calvin. Aw, man.” I groan as it hits me. “My dad is Stevie’s cowardly best friend!”

Dad does a double take. “Hold up. Coward? That’s how he wrote me?”

“You’re practically afraid of your own shadow.”

Dad hisses a word I can’t repeat. “I wasn’t like that! Half of what Ty went through, he wouldn’t have survived without me! But he couldn’t be bothered to put that in his li’l books?”

“What did you go through?” I ask. “Did you guys really travel into a realm of shadows when you were kids? Did you travel back in time?”

“It’s not as cool as it—”



“Is Einan real? How did you defeat him? You must have done it since an evil Manifestor hasn’t destroyed the world.” I’m talking way too fast, but I can’t get my head around all of this. “Never mind, don’t tell me how it goes. I wanna finish the series first.”

“Nichole. I know this sounds exciting, but some of the stuff we did was dangerous. We nearly died, more than once.”

“Wow. Kevin would totally say that.”

“Hey!” Dad says, all offended. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I point at one of the books. “Cowardly best friend, that’s all I’m saying. Take it how you wanna.”

“TJ Retro,” Dad says mockingly. “What kind of name is that anyway?”

“Looks like he took his real initials and then spelled Porter backwards without the *P*. Genius. I can’t believe you’re friends with him, *and* he’s my godfather, *and* you’re in the books!” I flip to a page. “Who is Zoe?” The truck swerves. “Whoa!”

“Tyran put her name in there?” Dad says.

“Yeah. It used to be Chloe. She’s Stevie’s other best friend. Who is she really?”

He squeezes the steering wheel tight. “A friend.”

“Where is she? Have I met her before?”

“It’s complicated, Nichole.”

“More like incredible. I can’t believe you did something this cool once.”

“Hey! I’m cool!”

“Not with those busted trainers you aren’t. You really wore



your Chucks with the holes in them in public, Dad? Those are supposed to be for gardening, that was the rule.”

Dad’s mouth makes a hard line. “I put on the first shoes I could grab once I realized that my barely twelve-year-old wasn’t home where I had left her.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh. You wanna explain?”

“Umm ... it was my birthday wish?”

“Oh, so you wished to be grounded? Because that’s what you’re getting. When we get home, go straight to bed.”

“But Mr Retro ... Stevie ... Mr Porter...” Geez, these names are hard to keep track of. “He’s coming over.”

“You should’ve thought of that before you snuck out.”

That doesn’t make sense! How was I supposed to know that he’s best friends with my favourite author? In fact, if I hadn’t snuck out, none of this would be happening.

Unbelievable.



When we get home, Dad does the Big Confiscation. My tablet, gone. Laptop, gone. TV and video game privileges, gone. For two weeks, I’m only allowed outside to take Cocoa to handle her business, which basically means I’m only allowed to pick up hellhound poop.

That’s not the worst part. Dad takes my Stevie— *Tyran* books. I thought reading them would get me through my two-week sentence. Plus, Dad being a character in them changes the way I’d read them completely. Not happening.

“But they’re a great way to get to know you better,” I tell

Dad. “Don’t you want your dear daughter to learn more about her wonderful father when you were her age?”

“Good night, Nichole.”

He closes the door in my face.

Great. I’m ending my birthday the same way I miserably spent it – alone in my room. At least before I had Cocoa for company, but she’s asleep on my bed. Sticky caramel frosting coats the hair around her nose, and she licks her lips of the last bits of my birthday cake.

I put on my pyjamas and my satin bonnet and climb in bed with her. Although I’m grounded, sneaking out was worth it. Otherwise, I wouldn’t know that my dad is Stevie James’s best friend.

Man. To be honest, I wasn’t a Kevin fan, no offence to Dad. He’s a whiny li’l brat sometimes. Chloe ... *Zoe* is my favourite. I wonder who she really is.

I don’t know how much time has passed when the doorbell rings.

I crack open my bedroom door. I can’t see anything from up here, but I hear Dad say, “Anybody follow you?”

“Nobody saw me coming. Literally,” says Mr Porter. “I made an invisibility tonic—”

“Wait a second,” Dad says.

My door snaps shut, and there’s a loud pop in my room. It reminds me of getting out of a pool and getting the water out of your ears, except now it’s as if my room is underwater. Everything outside of it is muffled.

Dad soundproofed my room.



“Good night, Nichole,” his voice says all around me.
Having a parent with the Gift is not as great as it should be.



I wake up to Cocoa nipping my ear.

“Noooo, Cocoa,” I grumble, and turn over in my covers.
“A few more minutes.”

She nips with more force.

“Ow!” I grab my ear. Those fangs are no joke.

Cocoa dashes over to my door and runs around in a circle.
Dad did tell me Cocoa was house-trained. He didn’t say she’d bite my ear to get me up in the morning.

I step into my slippers and twist my doorknob; it’s not locked any more. Cocoa bolts out, and I groggily go after her down the hall, down the stairs, to the kitchen, and out the back door.

The sun is barely up. Lights glow in windows around the neighbourhood as people start their day. I wanna go back to bed, but Cocoa takes her sweet time, sniffing out a place to pee.

I stretch and yawn. “It’s all the same, Cocoa. Just go.”

She keeps sniffing. Gospel music blares over at JP’s house. It’s Saturday morning, better known as cleaning day in the Williams household. JP says his momma wakes him at the crack of dawn by turning gospel music on high, and he gets up and starts cleaning. I think Mrs Williams wants to make the whole neighbourhood clean their houses, as loud as she plays that music.

Cocoa freezes mid-step, and her fur stands on end. She starts to bark at a dot in the sky.



It looks like a ... bird? Can't be, that's way too big. It gets bigger as it gets closer, and—

That's a person. A Black man in a T-shirt and jeans. It's Mr Retro.

My mouth falls open. I've seen Manifestors fly before. Dad even flew me around with him when I was younger. But it's not every day that my favourite author flies towards my house.

Mr Retro comes to a soft landing in our garden. "Morning, Nichole! I brought you and Calvin breakfast. I didn't know if y'all were biscuit types or English muffin types, so I got a little bit of everything. You sleep OK?"

Cocoa jumps up his legs to get to the food. I oughta tell him how much I love his books. That Chloe is my favourite character 'cause she's a Black girl like me. Or that his books make me feel better about being different from everyone else.

But what do I say? "I ove your ooks!"

I cover my mouth. Oh no.

He smirks. "You love my books, is that what you were trying to say?"

I nod.

"Thank you. Did you get a chance to look through your copies?"

"Yes, sir. I saw that you changed the names."

"I love that you're polite, but don't do the sir and mister thing. Makes me feel old. Just call me Uncle Ty. Deal?"

Holy moly, I can call him Uncle Ty. "Deal! How long have you known my dad?"



He feeds Cocoa a sausage patty. “Since I was your age. We went to Douglass together.”

“Where?”

“One of the Manifestor academies in Uhuru,” he says. “He hasn’t told you about it?”

“No. Dad doesn’t talk about Uhuru much.”

“I see,” Uncle Ty says. “I’m guessing he didn’t tell you about the stuff we did growing up either?”

“Nope. Is everything in the books true?”

“Somewhat. I had to switch things up a bit or LORE would’ve been on my back.”

“So Einan is real?” I ask, and I instantly feel bad ’cause he goes still for a moment. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. His name is Roho. Well, *was* Roho.”

“You defeated him? That’s so cool.”

“Cool is one way to put it.”

He’s being humble, but forget that. “No, seriously. You should have a statue. Or better yet, a holiday. You’re a real-life superhero.”

“Not sure LORE would agree with you on that one.”

“Are you an exile too?” I ask.

“I guess you could say that. I spent the first ten years of my life in the Unremarkable world, living in foster homes. Didn’t know I was a Manifestor or anything about the Gift. Then one day I was approached by a Prophet. You ever met one?”

I shake my head. I want to, but they’re some of the rarest Remarkables to cross paths with. Most of them live in seclusion

until they seek out the people they receive prophecies about. I would live in seclusion too if people were always begging me to bless them with a prophecy. Plus, not every prophecy is good, and people get mad at the Prophets as if it's their fault. That's gotta be exhausting.

"Receiving my prophecy changed everything for me," Uncle Ty says. "I'll never forget it. 'You are chosen to defeat an evil force that will cause destruction.' Me, a nerdy li'l foster kid. LORE found out about the prophecy and whisked me off to Uhuru to prepare to fulfil it, but..."

He goes quiet.

"But what?" I ask.

"Let's just say that after everything that went down, I decided it was best for me to come back to the Unremarkable world. I haven't been back to Uhuru in years."

"What went down?"

"Enough about me," he says, way too upbeat. "I got you a birthday present." He digs in his pocket and takes out what looks like an ink pen. "It's a G-pen, made with—"

"Giftech," I gasp. Gift-infused technology. You can only buy Giftech in Remarkable cities, and Dad's never taken me to one, so I've never had any Giftech of my own. Dad once told me it's a hundred times more advanced than Unremarkable tech. "What can I do with it?"

"You can write to anyone with it, and they'll see it wherever they are."

"Anyone?"

"Any Remarkable, of course," he says. "You simply think



about the person and write to them in mid-air. Only they'll see the message. Watch this."

He writes in mid-air with the pen. The words "Happy Birthday, Nic" sparkle and float in front of me, then fade away.

"Whoa," I mutter.

Uncle Ty smiles and hands me the pen. "Man, it's hard to believe you're twelve. I still remember the day you were born. Cal passed out. I had to bring him to with an awakening mojo."

"Does this mean that you knew my mom?" I hate that my throat tightens at the mention of her. I shouldn't care about someone who left me.

"I... It's not my place to speak on that, Nichole. I'm sorry."

I swallow away the tightness. "Oh. OK."

Cocoa jumps up his legs for more food. Uncle Ty feeds her another sausage patty. "Good girl," he coos. "I used to want a hellhound. How long have you had her?"

"Since yesterday. She was my birthday gift from Dad. He was gonna teach me how to use the Gift too, but I only got Cocoa."

"You don't know how to use the Gift?"

"Nope. Dad thinks I'm too young to learn. Meanwhile, he learned to fly at my age."

"He actually learned at ten. He used to fly to school - that doesn't help, does it?"

"Nope."

"Sorry. Look, I get it," Uncle Ty says. "When I first got to Uhuru, I was the only kid who didn't know how to use the Gift already. I thought I'd be the worst Manifestor ever."

“You started learning once you got there, didn’t you? Dad says I can’t learn until I’m thirteen. *I’ll* probably be the worst Manifestor ever.”

It’s quiet except for the sound of Cocoa sniffing at the fast-food bags. Uncle Ty stares at me as if I’m the most pitiful thing he’s ever laid eyes on.

He sets the food on the patio table. “You’ve heard the story ‘The People Could Fly’?”

“Yeah. Hundreds of years ago, our ancestors in Africa were kidnapped by slave catchers who used magic to curse them. They forgot the Gift, and they forgot who they were. They were brought to America, and the pain and suffering of slavery made them forget more. Until one day an old man named Toby appeared on a plantation. He wasn’t enslaved, and nobody knew where he came from. Toby saw the ones with the Gift, the Manifestors. He whispered ancient words to them, and they remembered who they were. Then—”

“They flew off like birds to freedom,” Uncle Ty adds. “The beauty of the Gift is that it helps us when we need it. It knew that our ancestors needed to fly, and it helped them do so. Nowadays, it takes a little more effort, but hearing the ancient words helps you do the first step of flying. Levitation.”

“Wait, are you about to—”

Uncle Ty smiles and reaches for my hands. “Kum yali—”

Our hands touch, and everything happens in a flash. Uncle Ty’s Glow goes out like a fire doused with water, and a jolt shoots through my palms, making my own aura glow so bright, it blinds me.



I gasp and let go of him. Uncle Ty's Glow returns to normal as he hits the ground with a thud.

Oh no.

I just killed my favourite author.



Uncle Ty's knocked out cold on our living-room sofa. After he dropped, I yelled for Dad. He used the Gift to pick Uncle Ty off the ground, and Ty's lifeless body floated to the sofa.

I bite my nail and silently pray to God, Jesus, and all the saints for him to wake up. If he's dead, then I'm going to jail, and if I go to jail, my life is over. I'll forever be known as the girl who killed Tyran Porter. "Is he OK, Dad?"

Dad lifts Uncle Ty's eyelids, showing nothing but the whites. "He's breathing, so that's good. It's like he got hit with a knockout juju." Dad looks up at me. "What happened?"

I back up and tuck my hands behind me. "I – I don't know. I didn't mean—"

"Hey, hey," Dad says, moving towards me, but I back up more. I don't wanna hurt him too. "Calm down, baby girl. Tell me what happened."

"He was gonna help me levitate, and he took my hands, and then—" My voice cracks. "His Glow flickered, and he hit the ground. What did I do, Dad?"

He kneels in front of me. "We'll figure this out, OK?"

"What did I do?" I repeat.

He cups my cheek. "I don't know, but I promise it's gonna be OK."



Uncle Ty groans and stirs on the sofa. “Cal?”

He tries to sit up on his own, but Dad catches him and helps him the rest of the way. “Easy, man. How you feeling?”

“Like I got hit by an eighteen-wheeler and my limbs were turned into jelly.”

“You always did have a way with words. What do you remember?”

Please don't remember that I almost killed you. Please, please, please don't.

“I flew over with breakfast,” Uncle Ty says, and my heart sinks. “Nic and I were in the garden, and I was gonna speak the ancient words so she could levitate. I took her hands and then ... it's like a strong static shock hit me. My energy was sapped out of me.”

“I'm sorry,” I blubber. “It was an accident.”

“It's OK. I know you didn't mean it.” He holds his head. “What did you do, though?”

“That's the problem,” says Dad. “We don't know.”

The doorbell rings. Dad lifts a blind at the front window and peeks out. “It's JP.”

He opens the door, and JP strolls in wearing a freshly ironed bow tie and T-shirt with civil rights leaders' names on it. “Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, here we come!” he says.

“Right,” Dad says. “The museum.”

He totally forgot about our homeschool field trip. I gotta admit, I did too.

“Thanks for letting me come, Mr Blake,” JP says. “My daddy's wanted to take me, but the congregation keeps him



busy. You wouldn't believe the stuff people come to him about. There are some real sinners in our..." He notices Uncle Ty. "Church. You're TJ Retro!"

"The name's Tyran. You're JP, right?"

"You remember me from the book signing?" JP asks excitedly.

"Yeah, and from your comments and messages online."

JP turns to me. "See? I told you it worked, Nic!"

I try to smile, but I can't. I stare at my hands.

What's wrong with me?

