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WunderSmith

The Calling of Morrigan Crow



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sneak peek of NEVERMOOR book two:

WunderSmith

THE CALLING OF MORRIGAN CROW



## CHAPTER ONE

# *The Angel Israfel*

Morrigan Crow leapt from the Brolly Rail, teeth chattering, hands frozen around the end of her black oilskin umbrella. The wind had whipped her hair into a state of extreme disarray. She tried her best to smooth it down while hurrying to catch up with her patron, who was already yards ahead, pelting along the noisy, swarming high street of the Bohemian district.

“Wait!” she called out to him, pushing her way through a knot of women wearing satin gowns and lush velvet cloaks. “Jupiter, slow down.”

Jupiter North turned back, but didn’t stop moving. “Can’t slow down, Mog. Running late. Catch up.”

And he was gone again, running headlong through the mess of pedestrians and rickshaws and horse-drawn carriages and motorised coaches.

Morrigan coughed as she walked into a sweet-smelling cloud of sapphire blue smoke, puffed right into her face by a woman

who held a thin, gold cigarillo in her blue-stained fingertips. For a moment, Morrigan lost sight of Jupiter through the haze, but then she spotted the top of his bright copper head, bobbing up and down in the crowd, and sprinted to catch up with him.

“A child!” she heard the blue-fingered woman exclaim in her wake. “Darling, look – a child, here in Bohemia. How frightful!”

“It’s a performance piece, darling.”

“Oh, indeed. How novel!”

Morrigan wished she could take a moment to stop and look around. She’d never seen this part of Nevermoor before. If she wasn’t so worried about losing Jupiter in the crowd, she’d have been excited to see the broad streets lined with theatres and playhouses and music halls, the colourful jumble of bright lights and neon signs. People, dressed in their finest, piled out of carriages on every corner and were ushered inside grand theatre doors. Street hawkers shouted and sang, beckoning customers into rowdy pubs. There were restaurants so overflowing with diners that their tables spilled out on to the pavements, every seat occupied, even on this frosty Spring’s Eve, the last day of winter.

When Morrigan at last caught up with Jupiter, he was waiting for her outside the most crowded – and most beautiful – building on the street. A shimmering establishment of white marble and gold, Morrigan thought it looked a bit like a cathedral and a bit like a wedding cake. A brightly lit sign across the top read:

NEW DELPHIAN MUSIC HALL PRESENTS

GIGI GRAND

and the

GUTTERBORN FIVE

“Are we . . . going in?” Morrigan puffed. A stitch bloomed painfully in her ribs.

“What, this place?” Jupiter cast a scornful look up at the New Delphian. “Heavens, no. Wouldn’t be caught dead.”

With a furtive glance over his shoulder, he ushered her down an alleyway behind the New Delphian, leaving the crowd behind. It was so narrow they had to walk in single file, stepping over piles of unidentifiable rubbish and bricks that had crumbled loose from the walls. There were no lights down here. It had a strong smell of something dreadful that got stronger the farther down they went. Like bad eggs or dead animals, or maybe both.

Morrigan covered her mouth and nose. The smell was so noxious she had to fight the urge to vomit. She wanted more than anything to turn round and go back, but Jupiter kept marching behind her, blocking the way.

“Stop,” he said, when they were near the end of the alley. “Is this . . .? No. Wait, is it . . .?”

She turned to see him inspecting a section of the wall that looked exactly like every other section. He gently pressed the grouting between the bricks with his fingertips, leaned in to sniff it, and then gave the wall a tentative lick.

Morrigan gave him a look of horror. “Ugh, *stop that*. What are you *doing*?”

Jupiter said nothing at first. He stared at the wall for a moment, frowned, and then looked up at the narrow patch of starry sky between the buildings. “Hmm. Thought so. Can you feel that?”

“Feel what?”

He took her hand and pressed it to the wall. “Close your eyes.”

Morrigan did so, feeling ridiculous. Sometimes it was hard to tell when Jupiter was being silly or serious and she suspected,

on this occasion, he was playing some stupid joke on her. It was her birthday, after all, and although he'd promised her no surprises, it would be just like him to pull an elaborate, embarrassing stunt that ended in a room full of people singing *Happy Birthday*. She was about to voice her suspicions, when—

“Oh!” There was a very subtle, fuzzy tingle in her fingertips. A faint humming in her ears. “*Oh*.”

Jupiter took hold of her wrist and pulled it back, ever-so-slightly, from the wall. Morrigan felt resistance, as if the bricks were magnetised and didn't want to let her go.

“What is that?” she asked.

“A little bit tricky,” Jupiter murmured. “Follow me.” Leaning back, he placed one foot on the brickwork and then the other and, casually defying the law of gravity, proceeded to walk skywards up the wall, hunched over to avoid hitting his head on the other side of the alley.

Morrigan stared at him in silence for a moment, and then gave herself a little shake. She was a Nevermoorian now, after all. A permanent resident of the Hotel Deucalion and a Wondrous Society member to boot. She *really* ought to stop being so surprised whenever things took a slightly odd turn.

She took a deep breath (nearly retching again at the horrible smell) and copied Jupiter's actions exactly. Once both her feet were planted on the wall, the world pitched out of kilter and then righted itself again, so that she felt perfectly at ease. The dreadful smell instantly disappeared and was replaced with fresh, crisp night air. Suddenly, walking up an alley wall with the starry sky stretching out in front of her seemed the most natural thing in the world. Morrigan laughed.

When they emerged from the vertical alley, the world lurched right-side-up once again.

They were not – as Morrigan had expected – on a rooftop, but in yet another alleyway. This one was noisy and bustling, and bathed in sickly green light. She and Jupiter joined the end of a long queue of excited people, held back by a velvet rope. The mood was contagious; Morrigan felt a little thrill of anticipation and she stood on tiptoe to see what they were queuing for. At the front, plastered to a worn pale blue door, was a messily handwritten sign:

OLD DELPHIAN MUSIC HALL

STAGE DOOR

TONIGHT: The Angel Israfel

“Who’s the Angel Israfel?” Morrigan asked.

Jupiter didn’t answer. He twitched his head for Morrigan to follow him, then sauntered right up to the head of the queue, where a bored-looking woman was checking names off a list. She was dressed all in black, from her heavy boots to the pair of woolly earmuffs hanging around her neck. (Morrigan approved.)

“Queue’s back there,” she said, without looking up. “No photos. And he won’t be signing nuffink ’til the show’s over.”

“I’m afraid I can’t wait that long,” said Jupiter. “Mind if I sneak in now?”

The woman sighed and gave him a blank, perfunctory glance, chewing a wad of gum with her mouth half open. “Name?”

“Jupiter North.”

“You ain’t on the list.”

“No. I mean, yes. I know. I was hoping you might remedy that for me,” he said, smiling through his tangle of ginger beard. He gave the little golden W pin on his lapel a subtle tap.

Morrigan cringed. She knew that members of the elite Wondrous Society were admired in Nevermoor, and often



received special treatment that ordinary citizens could only dream of, but she'd never seen Jupiter try to use his 'pin privilege' in such a blatant fashion before. Did he do it very often, she wondered? It seemed so . . . uncouth.

The woman was – understandably, Morrigan thought – unimpressed. She scowled at the little golden W, before flicking her thickly glitter-lined eyes up to Jupiter's hopeful face. "You ain't on the list, though."

"He'll want to see me," said Jupiter.

Her top lip curled, revealing a mouth full of diamond-encrusted teeth. "Prove it."

Jupiter tilted his head to the side and raised one eyebrow, and the woman mirrored his expression impatiently. Finally, with a sigh, Jupiter reached inside his overcoat and pulled out a single black feather, shot through with flecks of gold, and twirled it – once, twice – between his fingers.

The woman paused in her chewing. Her eyes widened slightly. Her mouth fell open, and Morrigan could see the wad of bright blue bubble-gum wedged between her teeth. With an apprehensive glance at the queue growing behind Jupiter, the woman pushed open the faded blue door and jerked her head, motioning the two of them inside. "Urry up, then. Five minutes to curtain."

It was dark backstage at the Old Delphian. There was a hushed, expectant air as black-clothed stage hands moved about quietly and efficiently.

"How'd you do that?" Morrigan asked in a whisper. "What was that feather?"

"More persuasive than a pin, apparently," murmured Jupiter, sounding a bit put out. He handed Morrigan one of two

pairs of earmuffs he'd pilfered from a box marked 'CREW'.  
"Here, put these on."

"What for?"

He ran a hand through his copper hair, which Morrigan recognised as a sign that he was nervous. "He's about to sing."

"Who, you mean the Angel Is— er, thingy?" she asked.

"Israfel, yes."

"But I want to hear it."

"Oh no, you don't. Trust me." From where they stood, Jupiter looked through the curtain out into the audience beyond, and Morrigan took a quick peek, too. "You never want to hear one of his kind sing, Mog."

"Why not?"

"Because it will be the sweetest sound you'll ever hear," he said. "It will trigger something in your brain that will bring you a perfect and unbroken peace, the best you could ever hope to feel. It will remind you that you are an entirely whole human being, flawless and complete, and that you already have all you will ever want or need. Loneliness and sadness will be a distant memory. Your heart will fill up, and you'll feel the world could never disappoint you again."

"Sounds dreadful," Morrigan said in a flat voice.

"It *is* dreadful," Jupiter insisted, his face sombre, "because it's transient. Because Israfel can't keep singing for ever. And when he stops, eventually that feeling of perfect happiness will fade away. And you'll be left here in the real world, with all its hardness and imperfection and muck. It will be so unbearable, and you will be left so empty, it'll feel as if your life has stopped. As if you are trapped in a bubble, while the rest of the world

carries on living imperfectly around you. You see those people out there?” He drew the curtain back very slightly, and they looked again into the audience.

The sea of faces, lit by the glow of the empty orchestra pit, all shared the same expression – eager but somehow vacant. Wanting. *Wanting*. “They’re not patrons of the fine arts,” Jupiter continued. “They’re not here because they appreciate a masterful performance.” He looked down at Morrigan and whispered, “Junkies, Mog. Every last one of them. Here for their next hit.”

Morrigan peered out at those hungry faces and she felt a coldness creep upon her.

A woman’s voice pierced the atmosphere. The audience was silenced.

“Ladies and gentlemen! I present to you, on the evening of his one hundredth triumphant, transcendent performance here at the Old Delph . . . the one and only, the celestial, the *divine* . . .” The amplified voice dropped to a dramatic whisper. “Please show some love for the Angel Israfel.”

The hush instantly splintered, the music hall erupting into joyful noise as people applauded, whooped and whistled. Jupiter elbowed Morrigan hard in the side and she snapped her earmuffs tightly into place. They blocked out every scrap of noise, so all she could hear was the blood rushing in her ears. Morrigan knew they weren’t here to see a show. They had a much more important job to do, but even so . . . it was a bit annoying, really.

The darkness of the hall was replaced with a pure golden glow. She blinked into the glare. Above the crowd, high up towards the ceiling, in the centre of the opulent space, a spotlight illuminated a man of such strange, otherworldly beauty that Morrigan actually gasped.

The Angel Israfel floated in midair, held aloft by a pair of powerful, sinewy wings – feathers black as night, veined with iridescent, glittering gold. They protruded from between his shoulder blades, beating slowly and rhythmically. He must have had a wingspan of at least three metres. His body, too, was strong and muscular, but lithe, and his cool black skin was veined in tiny rivers of gold as if he had been broken apart like a vase and repaired with precious metals.

He looked down at the audience and his gaze was at once benevolent and coolly curious. All around, people stared up at Israfel, weeping and shaking, clutching themselves tight for comfort. Several audience members had fainted right there on the floor of the music hall and nobody was helping them. Morrigan couldn't help but think this was all a bit much. He hadn't even opened his mouth to sing yet.

Then he did.

And the audience stopped moving.

And they looked as if they might never start back up again.

A still, abiding peace descended like snow.

Morrigan could have stayed there, huddled at the side of the stage, watching this strange, silent spectacle all night . . . but Jupiter got bored after a few minutes. (*Typical*, Morrigan thought.)

In the dim and smoky backstage depths, Jupiter found Israfel's dressing room and he and Morrigan let themselves in to wait for him. Only when the heavy steel door was fully closed did Jupiter indicate it was safe to remove their earmuffs.

Morrigan gazed around the dressing room, wrinkling her nose. It was overflowing with detritus and there was a musty smell of unwashed fabric. Empty cans and bottles littered every

surface, along with half-eaten boxes of chocolates and dozens of vases filled with flowers in various stages of death. Clothes were piled up on the floor, the sofa, the dressing table, the chair . . . everywhere. The Angel Israfel was a slob.

Morrigan gave a snort of puzzled laughter. “You sure this is the right room?”

“Mmm. Unfortunately.”

Jupiter made a space on the sofa for Morrigan to sit, delicately removing items of rubbish and placing them in the bin . . . then he got carried away and spent the next forty minutes tidying, wiping down the makeup-smudged mirror and making the room as habitable as he possibly could. He didn’t ask Morrigan to help, and Morrigan didn’t offer. She wasn’t touching this health-and-safety hazard with a ten-foot pole.

“Listen, Mog,” he said as he worked. “How are you? You okay? Feeling happy? Feeling . . . calm?”

Morrigan frowned. She’d felt perfectly calm until he’d asked her whether she was feeling calm. Nobody ever asked anybody if they were feeling calm, unless they thought the person had a reason *not* to feel calm. “Why?” She narrowed her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong!” he replied, but his voice had gone a bit squeaky and defensive. “Nothing at all. It’s just . . . when you meet someone like Israfel, it’s important to be in a good mood.”

“Why?”

“Because people like Israfel—”

“Angels, you mean?”

Jupiter winced. “Um. Sure, let’s call them that for now. Angels . . . absorb other people’s emotions. It’s, uh, it’s very bad manners to visit one if you’re feeling particularly sad or angry, because you’re bound to put them in a dreadful mood and ruin

their day. And, frankly, we can't afford for Israfel to be in a mood. This is too important. So, er . . . how are you?"

Morrigan plastered a very large smile on her face and gave him two thumbs up.

"Right," he said slowly, looking a little disconcerted. "Okay. Better than nothing."

A voice, sounding over the backstage PA system, announced there would be an intermission of twenty minutes, and moments later the dressing-room door was flung open.

In strode the star of the show, shirtless and sweat-soaked, wings tucked behind his back. He made a beeline for a tea trolley filled with rattling glass bottles of spirits in varying shades of brown (but no tea, Morrigan noted with interest) and poured himself a small drink of something amber-coloured. Then another. He was halfway through the second when he finally seemed to clock there'd been a change to his surroundings . . . and that he had company.

He stared at Jupiter and downed the last of his drink.

"Picked up a stray, have we, dear?" he finally asked, inclining his head towards Morrigan. Even his speaking voice was deep and melodic. Hearing it made Morrigan feel a strange little twinge of something, like nostalgia or homesickness or longing, right at the back of her throat. She swallowed thickly.

Jupiter smirked. "Morrigan Crow, meet the Angel Israfel. None sing so wildly well."

"Pleased to—" began Morrigan.

"Pleasure's mine," Israfel cut across her and waved vaguely around his dressing room. "I wasn't expecting guests this evening. I've not got much in, I'm afraid, but . . ." He indicated the not-tea trolley. "Help yourselves."

“We haven’t come to be fed and watered, old friend,” said Jupiter. “I have a favour to ask. It’s rather urgent.”

Israfel flopped on to an armchair, swung his legs over the side and stared sulkily at the drink in his hands. His wings twitched and rearranged themselves, draped over the back of the chair like a voluminous feathery cape. They were sleek and smooth, with soft downy bits underneath. Morrigan only just managed to stop herself reaching out and stroking them. *Might be weird*, she thought.

“I should have known this wasn’t a social call,” said Israfel. “It’s not as if you ever visit any more, *old friend*. You haven’t been round since Summer of Eleven. You do realise you missed my triumphant opening night?”

“I’m sorry about that. Did you get the flowers I sent?”

“No. I don’t know. Probably.” He took a sip from his glass and shrugged petulantly. “I get a lot of flowers.”

Morrigan felt sure that Israfel was trying to make Jupiter feel bad, but she couldn’t help feeling bad herself. She’d never met Israfel in her life and yet she couldn’t bear the thought that he was unhappy. She felt a strange urge to give him a biscuit. Or a puppy. Something.

Jupiter pulled a tattered scroll of paper and a pen from his coat pocket and silently held it out to his friend. Israfel ignored it. “I know you got my letter,” said Jupiter.

Israfel swirled the glass in his hands and said nothing.

“Will you do it?” Jupiter asked simply, his hand still outstretched. “Please?”

Israfel shrugged. “Why should I?”

“I can’t think of a decent reason. But I hope you’ll do it anyway.”

The angel was watching Morrigan now, his face closed and wary. “Only one thing I can think of that might draw the great

Jupiter North into patronage.” He took a sip of whisky and shifted his gaze back to Jupiter. “Please feel free to tell me I’m wrong.”

Morrigan looked to her patron as well. The three of them sat in a still, uncomfortable silence that Israfil seemed to take as some sort of confirmation.

“*Wundersmith*,” he hissed under his breath, as if it was a bad word. He sighed deeply, ran a hand over his face wearily and snatched the scroll from Jupiter’s hand, ignoring the pen. “You are my dearest friend and the biggest fool I’ve ever known. So yes, of course I’ll sign your stupid safeguard pact. Pointless though it is. A *Wundersmith*, honestly. How ridiculous.”

Morrigan shifted in her seat, feeling awkward and a bit resentful. It was galling to be called *ridiculous* by someone whose dressing room was this much of a cesspit. She sniffed, trying to look haughty and unbothered.

Jupiter frowned. “Izzy. You can’t know how grateful I am. But this is highly confidential, you realise. It stays between—”

“I know how to keep a secret,” Israfil snapped, reaching back and, with a wince, plucking a single black feather from his wings. He dipped it into a pot of ink on the dressing table and scrawled a messy signature at the bottom of the page, handing the pact back to Jupiter with a dark look and tossing the feather aside. It fluttered prettily to the floor, its golden flecks catching the light. Morrigan picked it up. “I really thought you might have come sooner than this, you know. I suppose you’ve heard about Cassiel?”

Jupiter was blowing on the ink, trying to dry it quickly, and didn’t look up. “What about him?”

“He’s gone.”

He stopped blowing. His eyes met Israfil’s. “Gone?” he echoed. “Disappeared.”



Jupiter shook his head. "Impossible."

"That's what I said. And yet."

"But he's . . ." began Jupiter. "He can't just . . ."

Israfel's face was sombre. Morrigan thought he looked a bit afraid. "And yet," he said again.

After a silent moment, Jupiter stood and grabbed his coat, motioning for Morrigan to do the same. "I'll look into it."

"Will you?" Israfel looked sceptical.

"I promise."

Down the alley wall they went, out into the garish Bohemian high street lit up as bright as day, and through the crowd towards the Brolly Rail platform – but at a much more civilised pace than before. Jupiter held a hand firmly on Morrigan's shoulder, as if he'd just now remembered they were in a strange and swarming part of town and he really ought to keep her close.

"Who's Cassiel?" asked Morrigan. She realised she was still holding the feather she'd picked up in Israfel's dressing room. She ran her fingers along its soft edges, wondering briefly if it was bad form to steal a feather from an angel, if that was a bit like stealing his clothes. But it didn't matter; she could hardly go back now. She tucked it into an inner pocket of her coat.

"One of Israfel's lot."

"He's an angel, too?"

Once again, the word made Jupiter wince. "They're not exactly . . . I mean, 'angel' is a bit of a . . . it's more complicated than that."

"Cook used to tell stories about angels," said Morrigan. "Back at Crow Manor. The Angel of Death, the Angel of Mercy, the Angel of Ruined Dinners . . ."

“Mmm, yes. I know all about her stories,” said Jupiter. His voice was carefully restrained, but he had a look of deepest disapproval. “This isn’t the same thing.”

Morrigan was confused. “They’re not really angelkind?”

“I think that’s probably stretching the imagination a bit, but they are celestial beings, of a sort.”

“Celestial beings . . . what does that mean?”

“Oh, you know. Sky-dwellers. Fancy flying types. Them wot have wings and use ’em. Heads up!” Jupiter grabbed Morrigan and swung her away from the road just in time to save her from being clipped by a speeding motorcar. He shook his fist and shouted something quite rude at the driver, then carried on as if they’d never been interrupted, guiding Morrigan across the street to the nearest Brolly Rail platform. “Cassiel is an important figure in celestial circles. If he’s really missing . . . well, I suspect Israfel is mistaken, anyway. Or exaggerating – he likes a bit of drama, old Izzy. Here it comes. Ready to jump?”

At the exact right moment, Morrigan and Jupiter hooked their umbrellas on to the steel loops of the passing Brolly Rail frame, and held on for dear life as they sped through the maze of Nevermoor boroughs. Brolly Rail cables ran all over the city in unfathomable patterns, criss-crossing low through high streets and back alleys, then soaring above roofs and treetops. It seemed stupidly dangerous to Morrigan, whizzing all over the place with nothing but your own grip on your umbrella to stop you from falling and splattering all over the ground, or breaking every bone in your body. But as terrifying as it was, it was also exhilarating, seeing all those people and buildings fly past as the wind whipped at your face. It was one of her very favourite things about living in Nevermoor.

“Listen, I have to tell you something,” said Jupiter, when they’d finally pulled the levers to release their umbrellas and leapt from the speeding Brolly Rail, landing in their own neighbourhood. Jupiter held out an arm to stop her. “I haven’t been totally honest with you. About . . . about your birthday.”

Morrigan’s face dropped. “Oh?” she said coolly.

“Don’t be cross.” He chewed on the side of his mouth, looking guilty. “It’s just that . . . well, Frank got wind that it was today and . . . you know what he’s like. Any excuse for a party.”

“Jupiter . . .”

“And – and everyone at the Deucalion loves you!” His voice pitched several notes higher than normal in unprecedented levels of wheedling. “I can’t deprive them of a reason to celebrate the birth of their very *favourite* Morrigan Crow, can I?”

“*Jupiter!*”

“I know, I know,” he said, holding his hands up in surrender. “You said you didn’t want a fuss. Don’t worry, all right? Frank promised to keep it low-key. Just the staff, you, me and Jack. You’ll blow out some candles, they’ll sing *Happy Birthday* –” (Morrigan groaned; just the thought of it sent a pink-hot flush of embarrassment creeping up her neck and all the way to the tips of her ears) “– we’ll eat some cake, job done. It’ll all be over for another year.”

Morrigan glared at him. “Low-key? You promise?”

“I swear to you.” Jupiter held a hand over his heart, solemnly. “I told Frank to rein himself in, then rein himself in some more, and keep reining it in until he got to what he thought was woefully understated, and then rein it in about ten times more than that.”

“Yeah, but did he listen?”

Her patron scoffed, looking highly offended. “Listen, I know I’m Mr Cool-Guy Laidback Relaxington and all that –”

(Morrigan raised a politely incredulous eyebrow.) “– but I think you’ll find my employees *do* respect me. Frank knows who the boss is, Mog. He knows who signs his pay cheque. Trust me. If I tell him to go low-key, he’s going to go—”

Jupiter cut off, his mouth open, as they turned the corner on to Humdinger Avenue, a street dominated by the huge, glamorous façade of the Hotel Deucalion, where Morrigan lived with her patron . . . and which Frank had evidently dressed for the occasion.

The Deucalion was draped with millions of flamingo-pink fairy lights that lit up the whole night and could probably, Morrigan thought, be seen from outer space.

“Completely over the top?” she finished for Jupiter, who had been rendered speechless.

Gathered on the Deucalion’s front steps were not just the staff, but what seemed like every guest currently staying at the Deucalion and a few ring-ins besides. Their faces shone with excitement and they surrounded a lavish nine-tiered, pink-iced cake that Morrigan thought looked more appropriate for a royal wedding than a twelfth birthday. A brass band was positioned by the fountain and on Frank’s signal they launched into a rousing celebratory march, just as Morrigan and Jupiter arrived. Topping the scene off was a huge sign running the entire length of the rooftop. Its enormous flashing letters read:

MORRIGAN IS TWELVE

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY!” shouted the mob of staff and guests.

Frank pointed to Jupiter’s teenage nephew, Jack, who lit a cluster of fireworks that went whizzing and whistling into the air, showering the scene with trails of stardust.

Dame Chanda Kali, the famous soprano and Dame Commander of the Order of Woodland Whisperers, launched into a very theatrical version of the birthday song (which immediately attracted three robins, a badger and a family of squirrels to worship adoringly at her feet).

Charlie, the Deucalion's fleet manager, had groomed and bridled one of his ponies, ready to carry the birthday girl inside.

Kedgeree the concierge and Martha the maid held armfuls of presents, beaming brightly.

And Fenestra, the giant Magnificat and head of housekeeping, used the commotion as a cover to discreetly swipe a huge paw full of pink icing.

Jupiter shot Morrigan an anxious sideways glance. "Shall I, er . . . shall I have a quiet word to our Roof-Raiser-in-Chief?"

Morrigan shook her head, trying – and failing – to control a smile that was twitching at the corners of her mouth. Despite her earlier misgivings, she felt a warm, sunshiny glow right in the centre of her chest, as if a cat had curled up there and was purring contentedly. She'd never had a birthday party before.

Frank was all right, really.

Later that night, deliriously sugared up on birthday cake and exhausted by the never-ending well-wishes of a hundred party guests, Morrigan crawled into the cocoon-like nest of fleecy blankets her bed had turned into that night (it obviously knew what an awfully long day she'd had). She fell asleep almost the moment her head touched the pillow.

Then, what felt like half a second later, she was awake.

She was awake, and not in her bed.

She was awake, and not in her bed, and not alone.



**JESSICA TOWNSEND** lives on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. She was a copywriter for eight years, and was once the editor of a children's wildlife magazine for Steve Irwin's Australia Zoo.





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