



# JAX FREEMAN

AND THE  
PHANTOM SHRIEK

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

**KWAME MBALIA**

**JAX FREEMAN**  
*AND THE*  
**PHANTOM SHRIEK**  
BOOK 1

by **KWAME MBALIA**

**FREEDOM FIRE**

**Disney • HYPERION**

Los Angeles New York

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# PROLOGUE

**MOSES WAS CRYING BEHIND HIS FAMILY'S GENERAL** store when two things happened.

A door opened where no door had been before.

A boot stepped out into the night.

In between those actions, his world changed.

The wind picked up. Slowly at first, in gentle swirls that brushed the weed clumps peeking through the asphalt, and then faster and faster still. The trees surrounding the store leaned and the windows rattled. Some dented metal trash cans thumped against one another, and the lone streetlight protecting that stretch of road from the dark flickered once. Twice. The third time, it turned off completely for a few seconds.

When the light returned, the boy clamped his hands over his mouth and choked down a sob.

Bricks were marching along the sidewalk.

They began to stack themselves in piles, clinging to each other tighter than any mortar could cement them together. Wooden planks peeled off the sagging fence surrounding the garden where Moses's mother grew her cucumbers and melons. The boards inched along the pavement like worms after a storm, crawling toward the middle of the field behind the store, on the other side of the old railroad tracks. Once there, the planks straightened again, nails driving them together as the bricks formed columns and buttresses, arches and pillars. Glass shards from old Coca-Cola bottles assembled themselves into glittering rectangles and joined the magical maelstrom on the fringes of the neighborhood. Dust clouds leaped toward the sky, forming one brief, furious funnel cloud that momentarily blocked Moses's view of the activity. Then it spun away, and everything fell still.

A train station now loomed next to the tracks, complete with a new elevated platform and an overhang supported by pillars. Long and with thin towers at either end, the structure reminded Moses of a castle he'd seen in a book once. Stained-glass windows lined the front of the building—six on either side of a tall red door with a polished brass doorknob.

The red door opened, and out stepped the boot. The boot became a leg, the leg became a person, and a Black face peeked out. A giant young man limped onto the platform. He wore a long navy blue peacoat that he clutched shut with one hand while the other grasped a pillar for support. His charcoal-gray slacks and polished black leather boots made him almost indistinguishable from the night, and the flat navy cap with black

brim pulled low on his head hid his face. He paused to lean against the pillar and reached into an inner coat pocket, rummaging around.

“All wrong,” he muttered. “All wrong. Not enough time to reverse it—need to delay. Got to delay.”

Moses slid quietly off the overturned barrel he’d been sitting on and began to inch his way to the back door of the general store. He’d seen enough to know that a strange man appearing out of nowhere in the middle of the night in Wilmington, North Carolina, wasn’t something you wanted to stick around for. He was almost to the door when he heard something he hadn’t heard in all his thirteen years.

A train whistle.

The man on the platform heard it, too, and he whirled around. “No!” he whispered loudly. “Not yet! Not yet! She’ll be here.”

The train whistled again. Moses stood still, forgetting for a moment that he was supposed to be minding his own beeswax. There hadn’t been a train on the old tracks behind the store for years! His daddy always complained about it. Said when the railroad discontinued the line all his customers went away. If the trains were coming back, that was a good thing, right? His parents wouldn’t have to sell the store, and Moses wouldn’t have to leave to go live in Chicago with an aunt and uncle he’d never met. Trains meant business, and business meant money.

He almost jumped for joy as the train’s whistle sounded again. . . . Except this time, it seemed a little different. Not like a whistle at all, but more like . . .

“Boy!”

Moses flinched. He'd been spotted! The man on the platform was glaring in his direction. The boy let out a whimper and recoiled, but the man didn't notice. He threw something, and Moses caught it out of reflex. It was a metal pin with a train car in the middle. BROTHERHOOD OF SLEEPING CAR PORTERS, it read, and it seemed to glow in his hand.

“Run!” the man said, just as the train whistled again, and it sounded like . . . screaming? Like a hundred voices tied together with wires and nails! Like something horrific! “Take this and tell them I'm sorry. I tried to stop her, tried to stop the spell, but . . . I'm sorry.”

The horrible shrieking came closer, and the platform began to shake and rattle. And the man, instead of running away like Moses planned to do, he limped down onto the tracks, turning *toward* the thundercloud of horror that raced at him as it screeched and screeched and screeched. Shadows boiled, and the night splintered into a hundred different pieces.

The thing rumbling down the tracks wasn't a train at all. It was a kaleidoscope of terror, and Moses began to scream, too, his cries merging with the oncoming scourge. For a few seconds longer the man stood tall against its approach—thirty feet away, twenty feet, ten—and then he was gone.

They found Moses the next morning in a ditch beside the tracks, his eyes red and his voice raw, still screaming and clutching the metal pin.

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CHICAGO DEFENDER, VOLUME XV, ISSUE 02, SEPTEMBER 1920

## One Year Later: The Riots of 1919

The esteemed reporter Thomas Williamson spoke with several city officials as well as transplants from Southern states in an attempt to garner more info.

### FAMILIES WITH SOUTHERN CONNECTION AT CENTER OF THRIVING CHICAGO COMMUNITY

Hiram Davis was once a tobacco farmer, but now he and his family, along with other transplants, find themselves serving as community leaders in Tenement Building E on the South Side of

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## JOY AND CELEBRATION AS FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN UNION ESTABLISHED

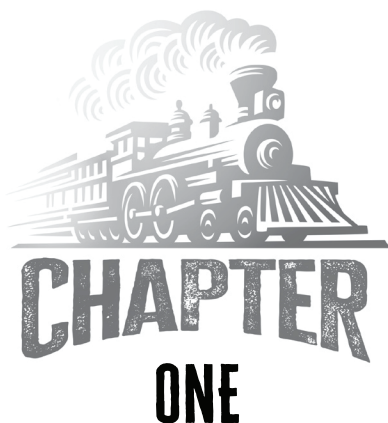
Philip Randolph called the day a "historic and a crowning achievement" as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a union serving the porters employed by Pullman Railroad, was born. A crowd of hundreds cheered

**NEW DISPATCH RECEIVED . . . IF YOU ARE SEEING THIS, A NEW DISPATCH FROM THE SPIRIT REALM IS BEING HELD IN YOUR NAME AT YOUR NEAREST ALTAR . . . PLEASE ACKNOWLEDGE RECEIPT AT YOUR EARLIEST CONVENIENCE . . . YOUR ANCESTORS THANK YOU.** as history was made.

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**PART  
ONE**



# CHAPTER ONE

**IT'S BEEN SEVEN HOURS AND NINETEEN MINUTES** since I, Jackson Freeman, turned twelve, moved across the country into a house of doom, and abandoned everything I ever knew and loved, only to be accused of tomfoolery. Me! Tomfoolery! I've never been more offended in my life. But I'll let you be the judge. While everyone is discussing my "actions," let me tell you what really went down.

And before I start, no, I'm not being dramatic. I'm a theater kid, feel me? Or I used to be. Tried it for two weeks right after everything happened. But still, it counts, and as such, we *emphasize!* There's a difference between emphasizing and being dramatic.

Oh, I know, I know. What, you may ask, is a nearly six-foot, two-hundred-pound Black kid from the South doing in

the theater and not playing football? Well, Sergeant Stereotype, for one, I'm good at it. Turns out acting comes naturally to me. Suck it, broad generalizations.

And two . . . well, I got kicked off my football team after . . . everything went down. Injustice, right?

Anyway, all that pales in pasty comparison to what actually happened when I turned twelve. Now listen, I'm going to try and keep it tame, but it was pretty gruesome. I'm talking *gas station toilet after burrito-bowl Tuesday* gruesome. I'm talking *pimple-popping a tree zit* gruesome. (DO NOT GOOGLE TREE ZITS IF YOU EVER WANT TO EAT AGAIN.) Still interested? Cool. Allow me to get you caught up real quick.

JANUARY 2. UNION STATION. DOWNTOWN CHICAGO.

It was the day before my birthday. Minutes before my birthday, actually. I was at the front of the line to the passenger-assistance window. Everyone, including me, was tired and cranky after our forty-hour train ride had been even longer because of delays.

"Name?" asked the agent.

I leaned closer to the mic on the window. "Jackson."

"First name?"

"That *is* my first name."

The agent—an old lady with warm brown skin, a faint island accent, and two pairs of glasses on her head—sighed. I shrugged. If she didn't comment on me having two last names, I wouldn't say anything about her two pairs of glasses. Plus, it's rude to comment on another person's appearance, feel me?

“Last name, then.”

“Freeman. Jax Freeman.”

A bell chimed in the distance, and across the room, a man in a conductor’s uniform glanced over. I couldn’t tell exactly, but it looked like he was frowning.

*Join the party, I thought. This is the worst week of my life.*

“Okay, Mr. Jackson ‘Jax’ Freeman, what are you running from?”

“I’m . . . sorry, what? I’m not running.”

The agent didn’t look up. “It’s eleven p.m. Everybody here is running from something. What’s your problem?”

I blew out a frustrated puff of air. Fine. Where to begin? With the fact that I’d been forced to uproot myself from my home in Raleigh, North Carolina, and move here? To live with a bunch of relatives I hadn’t seen in years? All because of something that wasn’t my fault?

Maybe it was because Mom and Dad hadn’t known ahead of time that kids under thirteen couldn’t travel on the train without an adult. When we found that out at the Amtrak station in Raleigh, the two of them exchanged a look—*the* Look that they always give each other when they’re about to ask me to lie about my age. Most parents say their kids are younger to get discounts and stuff like that. Mine? They tell me to say I’m older, on account of my size.

There, I said it. I’m big. Nothing wrong with that; it is what it is. Sometimes people think I’m my dad (handy during parent/teacher conferences) or that I’m trying to scam Happy Meals (really?), but most times they leave me alone.

Until they find out I'm just a kid. Whatever. At least I'd made it to Chicago without getting in trouble.

Yet.

But you know what? Maybe my problem was the fact that I'd gone to passenger assistance to try to locate my two oversized, heavily taped-up camouflage-print duffels. Hand-me-down bags from Dad, who'd helped load them onto the train before he waved me off. I didn't know how I was supposed to lug both of them to meet my favorite uncle (technically my only uncle, but who's counting?), Uncle Moe. I hadn't seen him in a few years, not since the last family reunion, when he bought me a wizard's cape and a wand that shot out glitter. Mom had complained, but Uncle Moe had said *Black boys can be magical, too* with a weird look on his face. Anyway, he was supposed to pick me up here and drive me to my new house in Chicago. Or old house, depending on how you looked at it. Me? I tried not to look at all. Things were so bad I shouldn't have had to face them head-on. *Wriggle past your problems*, that's what I always say.

The point is, I figured I'd get a baggage cart when I got off the train. Except . . . my duffels didn't get off with me.

"Yeah, my bags went missing," I said to the agent. "Five feet long, camo print, really beat-up? Look like somebody packed their whole life in them?"

She stared at me. "Mm-kay, sweetie, just a sec." She perched one pair of glasses on the bridge of her nose while she consulted her computer.

I stood in front of the passenger-assistance window and tugged on my too-small shirt again, trying to loosen it a little.

Then I rubbed my arms. It was freezing here. Winter in Chicago was apparently in full force, and snow flurries drifted in from the train tunnels as I blew into my cupped hands. I'd packed my coat in one of the duffels, since it had been a balmy seventy-two degrees when I left Raleigh, and the wind now knifing through my chest was a cruel reminder of how silly an idea that had been.

Everything I needed was in my bags. The three brand-new school outfits I'd begged Mom to get me for my first week. My good phone charger. My lucky cleats, even though the new school didn't have a football team. Those cleats went with me everywhere. Well, except for today. The only things I had on me were a crumpled ten-dollar bill, a cheap cell phone with a nearly drained battery, a wonky old phone charger (I keep it as a backup coiled up in my pocket, but when I use it, I have to hold it at a certain angle and it smells like burned waffles), and a handwritten note I double-checked every few minutes.

Oh, and a full bladder. Just an hour left in the eleventh chapter of my existence, and I couldn't wait to release the horrible vibes of the last year along with the Dr Pepper I had drunk two hours before. New year, new me, and all that, right? Hopefully year number twelve would be better.

"Hmm." The passenger-assistance lady adjusted her glasses, then pulled them off and rubbed her temples. "Hmph."

Or maybe year number twelve would be more of the same.

She sighed. "Sweetie, it looks like there was a problem back in Carolina. Your bags didn't make the transfer."

"The transfer?"

“Mm-hmm. You needed to take them with you when you changed trains.”

I groaned. All my stuff! I didn’t want to mention that I’d thought train stations had baggage handlers, like at the airport. “Can someone send them here?”

“Wellll . . . let’s see if I can track them down through Lost and Found. . . I believe that train went to Atlanta. . . Hmm. No, wait.” She paused. “Let me see, that can’t be right.”

Pay attention now. This is when things got weird.

The clock in the corner hit midnight, a bell rang in the distance, and all of a sudden, I was twelve years old. Glorious. Cause for celebration, right? Wrong. WRONG. It was at this point that things really went south. I’m not talking Interstate 85 to Atlanta like my duffel bags—I’m saying things went downhill with no brakes. They took a turn for the worse without putting their blinkers on. I’m saying it was bad, feel me?

*“You shouldn’t have come.”*

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

The agent looked up. “Yes?”

“Did you . . .” I began, then cleared my throat. “Did you say I shouldn’t—”

“Just give me one more second, young man,” she said, putting her glasses back on and turning to her computer monitor. I stared at her, befuddled. I was going to chalk it up to being sleepy and nearly frozen when the voice came again. This time I saw the speaker, and I wish I hadn’t.

The pair of glasses still on top of the lady’s head—the bright blue ones on a silver chain, those glasses, a totally normal thing

that exists—blinked. And *spoke*. I swear, even though I didn't know where their mouth was.

*"You don't belong here,"* the glasses said. *"It's too soon. No training, no heirloom, no chance, no way."*

"Um..."

The agent looked up, which took the judgmental (unfairly, in my opinion) glasses out of my view. But before she could comment, another employee—an old man with graying hair and half of his uniform shirt untucked—limped over. It would've been reassuring to have someone else see what I was seeing, to confirm that my brain hadn't froze along with my fingers and toes, except...

"Everythang all right?" he asked.

*"OOOHHH, THIS IS GONNA BE A BAD ONE, Y'ALL!"* his belt buckle said. *"GRAB THE AIR FRESHENER AND PLUNGERS—WE MIGHT BE HERE AWHILE!"*

That's right. The man was wearing two belts, and on one of them, the silver buckle resembled the face of an old man. It was grimacing in pain, twisting into knots as if it weren't made of metal, and talking. Let me repeat that: HIS BELT WAS TALKING!

"What... is happening right now?" I mumbled.

The shimmering blue glasses twisted on top of the passenger-assistance agent's head. *"Wallace, don't nobody want to hear about your toilet troubles—you're dead! Save it for your spirit spades game later."*

*"Wilma, I can't,"* the belt buckle said. *"I swear, this is gonna be the death of me and the generations that come after. It's*



*genetic. A lavatory lineage. A bloodline of bowels. It's something I ate, and now my whole family's gonna pay. Oooh, call the fire department—it's getting smoky in here!"*

"*You haven't eaten in sixty years, you hunk of junk,*" said the glasses. "*You're dead!*"

"*I am haunted by the toilet-clogging troubles of my past!*" The scowling belt buckle twisted toward me. "*Young man, I'm gonna hire you. Find my next of kin. Warn them! Warn them of the colon crises they'll face if they don't change their diets. Please!*"

"*Hush,*" the glasses—Wilma, I guess?—said. "*You can't hire him—he's not a summoner. Now go about your business before you attract too much attention. Gonna get this boy in trouble.*"

I rubbed my eyes furiously, trying to scrub away the weirdness unfolding in front of me. Clearly, I was overtired. Imagining things. What I needed to do was to get my bags back, then go find a warm place with an outlet where I could charge my cell phone and call my mom to tell her I made it. Find my bags, then call Mom. Find my bags, then . . .

"Oh, my goodness!" The agent sat up straighter as she read something on her monitor.

Her coworker peered over her shoulder, then whistled. "Well, I'll be," he said.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, the talking accessories forgotten.

The woman jerked backward in her seat as if something had thumped her in her chest. She inhaled sharply, and her face twisted in horror as she reread whatever information had

popped up on her computer. “Lord almighty, are you serious? That can’t be. That . . . Oh my word.”

“What?”

She didn’t answer, just tapped on the keyboard and mumbled prayers as she squinted at the screen. Finally, after an anxious minute, she sighed again and shook her head. “I’m sorry, sweetie, but it looks like your bags ain’t coming this way at all.”

“Why not?”

She hesitated, glancing at her colleague as if deciding whether she should tell me, then sighed. “Because, apparently, they were pulled off at . . . Greensboro? Yep, Greensboro. Says here they were considered a . . . ‘possible threat.’”

The man turned toward me. “You, a threat? How old are you? Nineteen? Eighteen?”

“I . . . I’m—” I stammered out, backing away from the window before cutting myself off. If they found out I was twelve, I’d get in trouble. The other people in line stared at me suspiciously, and I swallowed my comment. “Okay, thank you! I’ll be fine,” I blurted out, then turned and walked away.

As I left, I heard Wilma—the pair of blue glasses still perched on the agent’s head—call after me. “*Like I said, you shouldn’t have come.*”

I was losing it. Hallucinating. That was it. I had to be hallucinating. Was that a side effect of hypothermia? Of starvation? I hadn’t eaten solid food since breakfast, when I’d snarfed all my snacks because I was nervous.

I needed to get out of there.

*How old are you?*

That question followed me wherever I went. I guess when you're bigger than people expect, they think you're grown, that you're out of place, or—even worse—threatening. It happens, feel me? You get used to it.

Sort of.

I went up to the street level. The digital clock in the middle of the waiting area ticked over to 12:10 a.m. I pulled the note out of my pocket and, for the hundredth time, read the instructions I had jotted down.

*Great Hall, marble staircase to Canal St. city buses*

Simple enough, right? No way I could miss that. I walked over to the stairs where Uncle Moe was supposed to meet me. Mom had insisted on having at least one person from the family be with me on my birthday. You know, since my parents couldn't. They were still back in North Carolina because Dad had injured his back planting begonias. (More like *back-gone-ias*, amirite? Right? It's fine; I'll wait here while you figure it out.) I could've been there, too, in the middle of the Carolina Panthers' winter football academy for top prospects. I'd saved up my allowance and birthday money and begged and borrowed to pay for my spot. I'd just finished my first semester at Ligon Middle School with a bunch of friends I'd grown up with, and in December I showed out at the offensive-lineman camp. It had been the best four months of my life.

Followed by the worst week of my life.

"*Attention!*" came an automated message over the station's

public address system. *“Union Station will be closing at one a.m. Please exit the building. Attention...”*

Closing? What?! What was I supposed to do now? Where was my uncle? Had he gone back home because my train was so late? I needed to call him before I got kicked to the cold, cruel curb.

I scanned the walls for an outlet where I could charge my phone for a few minutes. But the only thing I saw was a display on the other side of the floor. It was a replica of the inside of a train sleeping car, and two smiling Black people in uniform, a man and a woman, stood and waved in a digital projection in front of it. A glass case to the side held various memorabilia, including a hat, a folded coat, a metal pin, and even some old-fashioned train tickets. Two boys my age were checking it out. Thinking one of them might have a phone I could borrow, I drifted over.

*“The Pullman sleeping car porter,”* a voice narrated from a speaker mounted on the train replica. *“The lifeblood of the rails. For decades, African Americans helped usher in the luxury and efficiency of train travel across America as porters, touching the lives of many. Also...”*

The narration continued, but the display flickered as a bright orange light flared nearby. For a second I thought I saw a large silhouette of a hand fall across the train replica before I had to squint and turn away from the strobing effect. When I turned back, both the light and the shadow were gone.

The two kids walked away with their hands in their pockets. “Hey, wait,” I called to them. “Did y’all see that?”

They turned, and the nearest to me frowned in confusion. “See what?” he asked.

“That weird shadow hand?”

“You saw the—?” the second kid started to say before the first one elbowed him.

“Nah, you’re tripping,” the first one said and pulled his friend away. They exited so fast I didn’t have a chance to ask them about borrowing a phone.

I turned back to the display. It was no longer flickering, and the voice continued to narrate, but there was something different about the setup now. It took me a minute to realize that one of the items in the memorabilia case was missing—the pin. I looked at the empty space, then shrugged. Had one of the boys taken it?

If so, that wasn’t right. But it also wasn’t my problem. I had too many of my own already.

I made my way to the Canal Street door, hoping Uncle Moe was waiting outside. That was it—he was out there in his car, and because it was my birthday, we’d stop on the way home for midnight cocoa, just like my parents and I did on special occasions. Like when Mom became a principal. Or when Dad’s begonias successfully bloomed before Mr. Barnes’s did across the street. (Don’t ask—it’s like a whole grown-up competition with unwritten rules and lots of sulking.) I loved those outings because it was like we were between yesterday and tomorrow, and nothing existed except for us three. The Freemans. That’s all I wanted for my birthday—for things to be like they used to be. All of us. Together. Home.

But if wishes were fishes, no one would go hungry, so instead, I was all alone.

Do you like that saying? I've got a million of them.

As I'm sure you've guessed, nobody was waiting on Canal Street. Apparently, Uncle Moe had given up on me. No bags, no family, no ride. The only car was a police cruiser parked at the curb.

I turned and stared around the Great Hall, consulted the note again, and checked the exit sign to make sure I was in the right place. But no one was there to greet me. No one to shower me with kisses, wrinkle their nose at my outfit, or even ruffle my hair, all of which I hated, but, you know, at least they proved I existed.

I sighed.

Maybe Uncle Moe would come first thing in the morning, after my mom called looking for me.

*"You there. Hey! You know we're closing, right?"*

I looked around, confused. All the passengers and employees had left the station, so where was . . .

*"Up here!"*

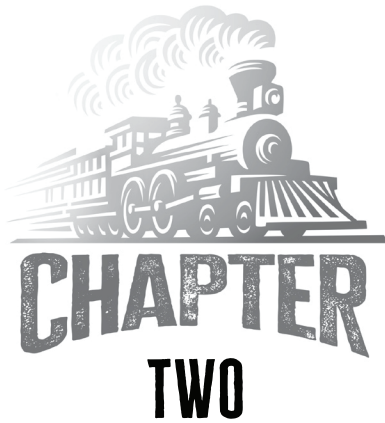
A face appeared on the digital clock, the colon between the hour and minutes wrinkling like a nose. *"We closed now, you hear? You one of those summoners, ain't you? Or close enough. Look here, I gotta job for you, and ain't no time like the present. Get it? Time? Present? Hoo-boy, Imma mess."*

"No thanks," I said, dazed and exhausted. "I'm . . . going to go now."

*"But that's the wrong way!"*

Since it was too cold to wait outside without a coat, and I didn't want to get snagged by a cop, I hightailed it up the stairs to find a place to hang out until Uncle Moe finally figured out I needed him. I'd thought I left all of my troubles back in North Carolina, but I was wrong.

New year. New me. New problems.



## CHAPTER TWO

*“A STRING OF BURGLARIES ACROSS SOUTH CHICAGO and into Naperville has left authorities puzzled. Victims report that the stolen items are worth very little money but have personal significance. Also, the search for a missing couple on Chicago’s West Side has been called off, as it has been unsuccessful after several days. And now, the weather. Severe blizzards...”*

The news echoed from video monitors spaced across the mezzanine level of Union Station. I guessed they were always on, even when the place was closed. Maybe the custodians had to come and turn them off?

*Maybe the weird inanimate talking objects needed something to watch, I thought. Did the candelabra from Beauty and the Beast watch television?*

I passed a giant mural showing workers in overalls lifting hammers above a shiny set of railroad tracks. “The Gandy



Dancers,” I read aloud. The faces of men and women in all shades of color beamed with pride. ““The workers who connected America.”” At that moment my stomach grumbled, and I turned away from the image to deal with more pressing concerns.

I stared longingly at the sandwich stalls and snack shops—all now closed—lining the hallway on either side of me. There were spots selling pretzels, ready-made turkey subs, even a burrito joint. I was scanning the price lists—grimaced at one, made a strangled sound in my throat at another—and tightening my belt (Not literally; I wasn’t wearing a belt. More like, pulled the drawstrings on my shorts even tighter, right? You get the point) when I remembered that it didn’t matter anyway. Everything was closed.

I left and was just about to make do with my last stick of gum and some mint-scented pocket lint when I saw a tiny shop tucked between a utility room and an out-of-order restroom. (Seriously . . . the world needs to have a conversation about the lack of working bathrooms. If my mother had been there, she’d have had the whole administrative staff of Union Station sitting on the floor around her while she yelled at them about accessibility. My mother can be scary when someone isn’t fairly treated.) I nearly walked past the shop, except I smelled something so familiar, so delicious, that it stopped me in my tracks. Why was someone still cooking when everything was closed? Then my feet decided to head toward it on their own.

“Miss Ella’s Pecans ’n Spreads,” I read off the handmade sign. The shop was barely the size of a closet. A glass display

with a heat lamp warmed caramelized pecans, cinnamon-dusted almonds, boiled peanuts, and—for some weird reason—empty glass bottles lined up in neat rows. Next to the case was a raggedy piece of cardboard with a crude picture of what I thought was a dusty ice cream cone at first, until I realized it was a mound of pecans rolled up in paper. “‘Two dollars or best offer.’ Best offer? What does that mean?”

I didn’t realize I’d spoken out loud until a tiny old Black woman popped up from behind the display. “Simple,” she said.

“AAAAAH!” I shouted, nearly jumping out of my shoes. Where had she come from?

“Quiet, boy, you gonna wake the neighborhood!” she snapped in a country drawl.

“aaaaaaaah!” I shouted in lowercase.

“Better.” She nodded. “Now, the sign means that for two dollars you can get some of the best pecans on this side of the river, plus a one-card spread to reveal your fortune for today. Unless you got somethin’ better to offer.”

The woman had on her Sunday-best wig, tucked beneath a hairnet and pinned in place. She wore an apron that was nearly larger than her body and carried a wooden pole that towered over her head. The top of the pole was carved with faces wearing various expressions—scowling, smiling, crying, and shouting.

“Well?” the lady asked, her dozens of bracelets rattling as she folded her arms across her chest. “Get a good look?”

I flushed, because I’d definitely been staring. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, be better.”

She sounded just like my grandmother. “Yes, ma’am,” I said.

Miss Ella (I assumed) studied me for a few extra seconds, then tapped the counter with her pole. With a muttered grunt, she lifted it, and I realized it wasn’t a pole—it was the largest wooden spoon I’d ever seen. It had to be almost as tall as me! The old woman began to stir a giant pot next to her. I inhaled another whiff of vanilla and cinnamon and clove and other spices, and I swear my stomach threatened me, that’s how loud it grumbled.

“Sounds like you gotta belly full of thunder over there,” Miss Ella said with a short laugh. “You gonna get you somethin’?”

“I guess so,” I said reluctantly, gripping my ten dollars. It was supposed to be for emergencies. Did being hungry count as an emergency?

“You guess? You don’t want my pecans?” She put both hands on her hips, and I swear the spoon kept stirring.

“Um . . .” I said, squinting at the spoon. “No. I mean, yes, I do.”

“No, yes . . . Make up your mind, child, before you get dizzy. Is your money a little tight?”

I opened my mouth to protest, then closed it. She hadn’t said it with any judgment or anything, like other people would. Like my friend Mikey back in Raleigh, who’d joke about how I should only look for WIC snacks when we hit up the stores on the weekend. Or the afterschool-care lady in fourth grade, who would always leave reminder-to-pay notes in my backpack even though Mama always paid on time.

“You ain’t got a better offer?”

I looked up. Miss Ella was tapping the sign with the handle of her giant spoon. “Two dollars for the pecans, or a better offer. Now, I’m an old lady, and working this here spoon gets mighty tiring. So I’ll cut you a deal. While I stir this next batch, you can tell me a story ’bout yourself, and we can have us an arrangement. How’s that sound?”

“It sounds like charity,” I said.

Miss Ella sucked her teeth. “Child, charity ain’t nothing but another word for help. Look, closed mouths don’t get fed, so if you wanna eat, I suggest you get to talking. Shop’s closing soon.”

I wanted to say no and walk away, because I wasn’t gonna be a burden on nobody. In fact, I’d made up my mind to go drool next to a vending machine when Miss Ella flicked a pecan at me. I caught it out of reflex. It was still warm and smelled incredible. My hand popped it in my mouth before my brain could come up with an excuse to hand it back.

*Oh.*

*My.*

*God.*

The taste of sugar and spices exploded on my tongue like sweet fireworks. Crusty and chewy and with a hint of salt—these were better than the ones they sold back at the Carolina State Fair, and we used to stand in line for over an hour to get those.

“Now then,” Miss Ella said, “we got ourselves a deal?”

Finally, after several seconds, I nodded.

She clapped once. “Well, don’t just stand there like a frog on a log in a bog, gimme some tales, child! And none of them new-fangled whiz-pop adventures you kids like these days. I want a good story. Something about you. Gimme that Earl Grey.”

I stared at her. “You mean . . . you want some tea?”

“Don’t correct your elders, young man.”

“But . . .” I said, “what if I don’t really know any good stories? Not about me.”

“Everybody has a story. A memory, a dream, a vision—”

I looked up. “Visions? Like, seeing stuff that isn’t there?” Maybe she’d seen strange things, too, and heard them. Could it be something in Union Station making me see stuff? A gas leak? At this point I’d take reassurance from anyone, including a random tiny old woman.

“Ooh, child, dreams and visions are the best stories. They’re the ones our subconscious is trying to tell us. A direct line to the spirits. You just gotta answer the collect call and open yourself up to what they’re saying.”

Hope flickered inside me. “And you can understand them?”

“Child, you’re in luck, because deciphering visions is my specialty. Speak.” She slid a paper cone of pecans across the counter and watched me closely as I picked it up.

I took a deep breath. Despite the strangeness of it all, I really *did* want to tell someone about what I’d seen, just to make sure I wasn’t losing my mind. Okay, I could do this. “So . . . I’ve been seeing things here in the station ever since I arrived. I thought I was sleepy, but maybe . . . I don’t know, they felt real.”

The spoon stirred faster. “Hmm. Could be powerful

messages,” said Miss Ella. “Or could be you need glasses. Hard to say. Keep going.”

“Well, actually, earlier I thought I saw . . .” My voice trailed off because it seemed too silly to say out loud. “I thought a pair of glasses talked to me.”

The spoon paused. “A pair of glasses?” Miss Ella frowned. “And a belt. A gassy belt.”

She raised one gray eyebrow. “A belt . . . with gas.”

“Well, more the belt *buckle*, but still, that’s wild, right?” I spoke in a hurry and through a mouthful of pecans. It was like the snack had removed the mental dam blocking my words. “Probably stress or something like that, right? That’s what I figured. Moving cities, changing schools, no football, no friends—”

“These glasses,” she interrupted, “and the belt buckle. You heard them talking?”

I nodded. “I know it sounds ridiculous. I thought so, too. But I was just, I don’t know, stressing about my bags, and now no one’s here to pick me up. This has been the worst birthday ever.”

“A birthday!” Miss Ella scooped up another newspaper cone of nuts and handed it to me. “Then you *must* accept this on top of your other new gift. I insist.”

I took it, juggling it with the first cone, a little dazed from the sudden change in conversation. What did she mean by my “other new gift”? But I wasn’t about to refuse free food. “These things are really delicious. Did you put something addictive in them?” I asked as a joke.

She sniffed. “Ain’t nothing in my pecans except for brown sugar and a little luck powder.”

“Luck powder?”

“Or maybe that was my laxative . . .” she said, pausing her stirring and examining the pot critically.

I stopped chewing. “Laxative?” I squeaked.

She shrugged. “We’ll know sooner or later. Best not to stray too far from a toilet. Now then, these visions . . .”

“They’re nothing, right?” I rubbed my stomach. I wasn’t sure whether she was kidding about the powder or not. Was that an extra-tingly rumble I felt?

“Nonsense,” Miss Ella said, resuming her stirring but now keeping one eye on me.

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Nonsense. Great. So I was just imagining things. I guess that makes me feel bet—”

“No, your vision is fine.”

“It is?”

“Yep.” She checked the consistency of the next batch, then turned her full gaze on me. “You can see spirits, including the ancestors of some folk, I reckon. A powerful gift, that is. This reading just got a lot more interesting.”

Words wouldn’t form in my brain. Me, able to see spirits? That was the most ridiculous thing I’d ever heard!

She pulled an old deck of cards from her apron’s front pocket. Not like the cards Dad used to play spades. These were larger and thicker. And . . . older. “Take one card but lay it flat on the case. Miss Ella will connect it to your story after you finish. Well, go on now, don’t keep an old woman waiting.”

She stirred the giant pot with increased energy while she peered at me expectantly. The wind howled outside as I hesitated. Then I reached over the case, plucked a card from the deck, and set it in front of me. Slowly, carefully, Miss Ella extended her right hand and placed a single wrinkled brown finger on the card. The wind quieted. Miss Ella set her spoon in the pot, then flipped over the card and held it up. It had a drawing of a man in a long coat striding out of a tomb in a graveyard. His face was blank, and yet it drew me in. But when I looked up to meet Miss Ella's eyes, she was wearing a horrified expression, as if she'd just realized something important.

"You have a mission," Miss Ella whispered. "You are on a path that forks. One direction will lead you to safety, alone, but others will suffer. The other path leads to others' safety, and the righting of a wrong, but *you* will suffer. Who do you want to suffer, boy?"

Her voice deepened.

The noise around us faded.

Her eyes bored into mine.

"You have a responsibility. A legacy to fulfill. Can you do this, child? Are your shoulders wide enough to carry generations of expectations? Of hopes? Of dreams? Souls of all ages fled here from deep in the swamps to the forests of steel and concrete, and they hide here still."

"Um..." I whispered, taking a step back. "Miss Ella?"

"This is your destiny!" she hissed. "Will you accept it? It comes soon. Sooner than you expect, sooner than you hope, sooner than you fear. A mission. A decision. Stay here when



the call comes, and I can help you. Teach you, prepare you. You cannot go it alone, and I fear—”

“*JAX FREEMAN TO THE INFORMATION DESK,*” the public address system blared from the speakers in the ceiling. “*JAX FREEMAN TO THE INFORMATION DESK. YOUR PARTY IS WAITING.*”

The announcement jolted me out of a daze. A half-empty cone of pecans rested in my right hand as I stared at the speaker. I thought the station was closed. How did they know I was still here?

Then I put all that aside. My “party” had to be Uncle Moe. He’d finally arrived!

When I glanced back at Miss Ella, she shrank back. “Freeman?” she whispered. “You’re a Freeman? Then it’s time.”

“Um, I have to go now—”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Okay . . . right.” I started backing up. This was too much. It was definitely time to scoot. “Sooo . . . thank you for the pecans?”

Miss Ella scooped another cone of nuts and shuffled around the counter to get closer. Her eyes were wild, almost desperate, as she pulled a packet from her apron pocket and poured powder into the palm of her hand. Not a laxative, I hoped!

“Listen to me, child,” she said. “Your ancestors have a job for you—today! You can see spirits, and your ancestors need your help! Even if you’re not a summoner yet, you can do this.”

Now I was all the way creeped out. This was the third time tonight someone—or something—had talked about hiring me

or sending me on a mission. “No, thank you, I don’t need any more lax—I mean, pecans. In fact, here’s the rest of the other cone. I’m sorry I ate them— AAAH!”

I ducked as she hurled the dust in her palm at me. It missed and fell on the floor. That was it. I was gone. Skedad-dling. Scramming. Outta there. For the second time that night, in what was quickly becoming the story of my life, I turned and ran.



# CHAPTER THREE

**I TOOK THE STAIRS DOWN TWO AT A TIME, ALMOST** at a dead sprint. Half the lights were still on, but the rest had been turned off as the employees began to leave. The station was practically empty, and I thought I was too late. I put on a burst of speed and was relieved when I rounded a corner and saw the information desk come into view. But I didn't see Uncle Moe. Instead, a tall, skinny man in a conductor's uniform and hat stood waiting for me. His face was pale, almost gray, and his mouth—when he smiled at me—was missing several teeth. A silver name tag was pinned to his breast pocket. BUCK was all it said.

“Ahh, young Freeman?”

“Yes,” I said suspiciously.

“Perfect, perfect. They're ready for you.”

“Who's *they*?”

“Your bags, of course! There was a mix-up. We found them. Got them at the platform downstairs if you can identify them.”

A huge weight was being lifted off my shoulders. My bags! They hadn’t been lost forever! I could get my good charger, plug in my phone, and call my parents. “Really? Thanks! Sure, I can identify them.”

“This way, then.”

I followed him to a service elevator, grateful that he was still working after hours, and we descended to the arrivals platform below. He pressed a button and beamed down at me, and I flinched. His eyes were red, and his fingernails were long and curled, ending in . . . well, in points. Plus, in the cramped space, he smelled like . . . I can’t even describe it really. Something old. Not like old people, but like something that’s been sitting in an attic too long. Mildewy. Rotten. And then, to make it worse, he’d tried to cover it up with body spray, but the smell still lingered. When the doors opened, I almost sprinted out, so happy to breathe fresh air again.

It took me several seconds to realize Conductor Buck had stopped walking.

“Where are the bags? I’m so glad you found them,” I said, eager to get to them and grab a hoodie. Or two. It was bitterly cold down on the platforms. Chicago was not playing—any colder and someone was gonna have to warn Jack Frost that it was on sight.

I was breathing into my cupped palms, trying to get some warmth into them, when a chill colder than the night air ran down my spine.

“Hmm, yes, we’re glad, too,” the conductor said from behind me. “Glad to be living again.”

I turned to see Conductor Buck pulling a piece of string out of his chest pocket. No. Out of his . . . *chest*? I must’ve been seeing things, because I could’ve sworn he was pulling out stitches. He sprinkled the string with a pinch of dust (Come on now, what was with all the dust around here? What if I had allergies?), and it began to glow.

Seriously.

It began to *glow*. And grow. It stretched, shining like a coil of LED lights, and curled up at his feet.

“Come here, little birdie,” he sang, leering at me as he lifted the string with one hand and coiled it like a lasso. With the other hand, he pulled a needle out of his pocket. Long, pointed, wickedly sharp. “Come, I’m gonna stitch us back together. It won’t hurt none at all. Well, not me, at least.” He giggled.

As he stepped closer, the clothes on him began to fall apart, as if the string he’d pulled was the only thing keeping them intact. First went his hat, then his coat. Underneath he was practically skin and bones, thin and drawn and flapping, and very, very terrifying.

I backed up, searching for an exit but finding only train tracks on either side of me. The elevator closed, and Conductor Buck now stood in front of the stairs. He flung out the string and it raced toward me like a python, slithering on the floor and leaving a trail of silver dust in its wake.

“Hey!” I shouted, jumping aside. The sound of rattling

breath was the only warning I got before Conductor Buck shoulder-charged me, sending me reeling backward.

“Rotten child!” he snapped. I guess he didn’t realize I was actually bigger than him. The impact had forced him back several paces as well. “Give me your skin!”

“What?! No! What sort of weirdo man are you?!”

“Weirdo? Man? None of the above, none of the above. Not yet. But this skin is fading. Been a wraith too long. Just you wait, though. My time is coming, right after I peel you like a nasty fruit.” He giggled again and lunged at me, and only me tripping over my own feet saved me.

*Wraith?* This night was surreal. I was in a fever dream. That had to be it. At any second, I’d wake up and still be on the train, and my uncle would be waiting for me at the station. All I had to do was wake up. I had to wake up. I had to . . .

“Get over here!”

I blinked and ducked as the string whistled over my head, missing me by mere inches. The tail end of it stabbed my cheek, and I felt a sharp pain, like a hook had embedded itself in my face. I grabbed the string with both hands and yanked it out, yelping as the pain burst across my jaw. The same pain stung my palms as I tried to shake the string loose.

But I couldn’t.

“Gotcha now, boy,” Conductor Buck crowed in triumph. He stalked toward me, the skin around his mouth starting to fall away in flakes. Soon I could see bone, and even his eyes were gone. Only hollow sockets filled with unfathomable darkness

remained. “Ooh, I can’t wait till your skin is mine. You know how long it’s been since I felt the wind? Touched grass?”

“Forever,” I muttered. I couldn’t help it.

“Close enough!” he snapped. “But that changes tonight. When I put on your skin and string your bones around my neck, I’ll be back, and better than ever. The power of a summoner is a mighty thing, and I want it now, no matter what she says.”

“She?” I said, scooting backward, trying to buy some time. “I don’t know who you’re talking about! You got the wrong guy, I swear. I don’t even know what a summoner is.”

Conductor Buck laughed even as more skin peeled away, revealing his few yellow teeth. “You can’t hide it, boy. I saw you talking to the spirits earlier. The ancestors don’t speak to just anyone. Gotta be powerful to hear, but to talk to them? Don’t play sly with me, Freeman. Yesss, a Freeman summoner, too! Oooh, she’s been looking for you. But if I get you first, we’ll see who gives the orders. We’ll see! I’ve been cooped up in this station for decades, but soon, ooh baby, soon! Now come **HERE!**”

The last word came out in a roar as he pulled himself forward on the string still stuck to my palms. Without thinking, I kicked out in a panic, trying to keep the wraith away from me. My right foot connected with his left shin. *WHAM!*

He shrieked in pain as some of his bones clattered to the train-platform floor. He hopped on one leg, trying to remain upright as he glared at me. “Repel powder!” he shouted. “That’s a dirty trick. Dirty! You been talking to that witch!”

A rumble sounded, and my eyes flicked to the clock on the far wall. I knew, as sure as my name was Jax and water was wet, that a train was going to come through in one minute. Express. From Gary, Indiana. How I knew this I don't know, but now wasn't the time to question it, nor was it the first question I'd ask if given the opportunity. Plenty of weirder things to investigate. What I did know was I had to move.

"GIVE ME YOUR SKIN!" Conductor Buck shrieked, hopping toward me.

I took off my right shoe and flipped it over to see glittering black grains embedded in the sole—the same powder Miss Ella had thrown at me and I'd apparently stepped in. Whatever that powder was, laxative or not, it was protecting me.

As much as I hated to sacrifice a low-top Chuck Taylor special edition, I launched my shoe like a missile and watched it land square in the emaciated chest of the shrieking skeleton man.

*WHAP!*

Conductor Buck was blown backward off the platform in a tangle of bones and shredded uniform bits, clattering in a scattered heap on the tracks below. I ran, one foot bare, toward the elevator as he shouted threats.

"That's a dirty trick, Freeman! When I pull myself together, Imma find you and wear you like an evening coat. I been stuck here eighty-nine years, boy—you ain't getting away. I'm not foolin' with you! You are mine! Get back here! You hear me?"

The elevator dinged, and I leaped inside. I punched the



button for the ground floor over and over, willing it to close. *Eighty-nine years? This isn't happening! It can't be happening!* When I looked up, Conductor Buck had shoved his left arm into his right leg socket and was crawling along the tracks like a misshapen crab, or a twisted, nightmarish spider from a horror movie. He dragged himself closer, howling in rage.

“Gonna wear you like a dinner jacket, boy, you hear me?”

“Come on come on come on, close!” I shouted at the elevator doors. Why were they so slow? Was this it? The end? In a new city with no friends and one shoe?

“Don't you dare run, boy!” Conductor Buck shouted. “I'm gonna—”

*Here it comes*, I thought.

*SPLAT!*

A train rolled into the station, bashing the wraith to pieces. Trash, dust, and bits of an angry ghost rippled outward, and too late I realized it was all heading toward me. The shock wave slammed me against the back of the elevator, and as I slid down, my head hit the handrail. Stars exploded in my eyes, and then everything went dim. Faintly, I could hear one final howl being carried by the wind.

The elevator doors closed. My brain was spinning as my chest heaved from all the running. Wraith. Summoner. Spirits? Someone was playing a huge joke on me. *Welcome to Chicago, Jax. Here's your free hallucination with a concussion on top.* So far, being twelve sucked. At least things couldn't possibly get any worse.

The elevator doors slid open as I struggled to my feet, just in time to see a sour-faced Uncle Moe, an Amtrak security officer, and a tall, severe-looking Black woman marching toward me.

Gran.

“JACKSON JOSIAH FREEMAN, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?!”