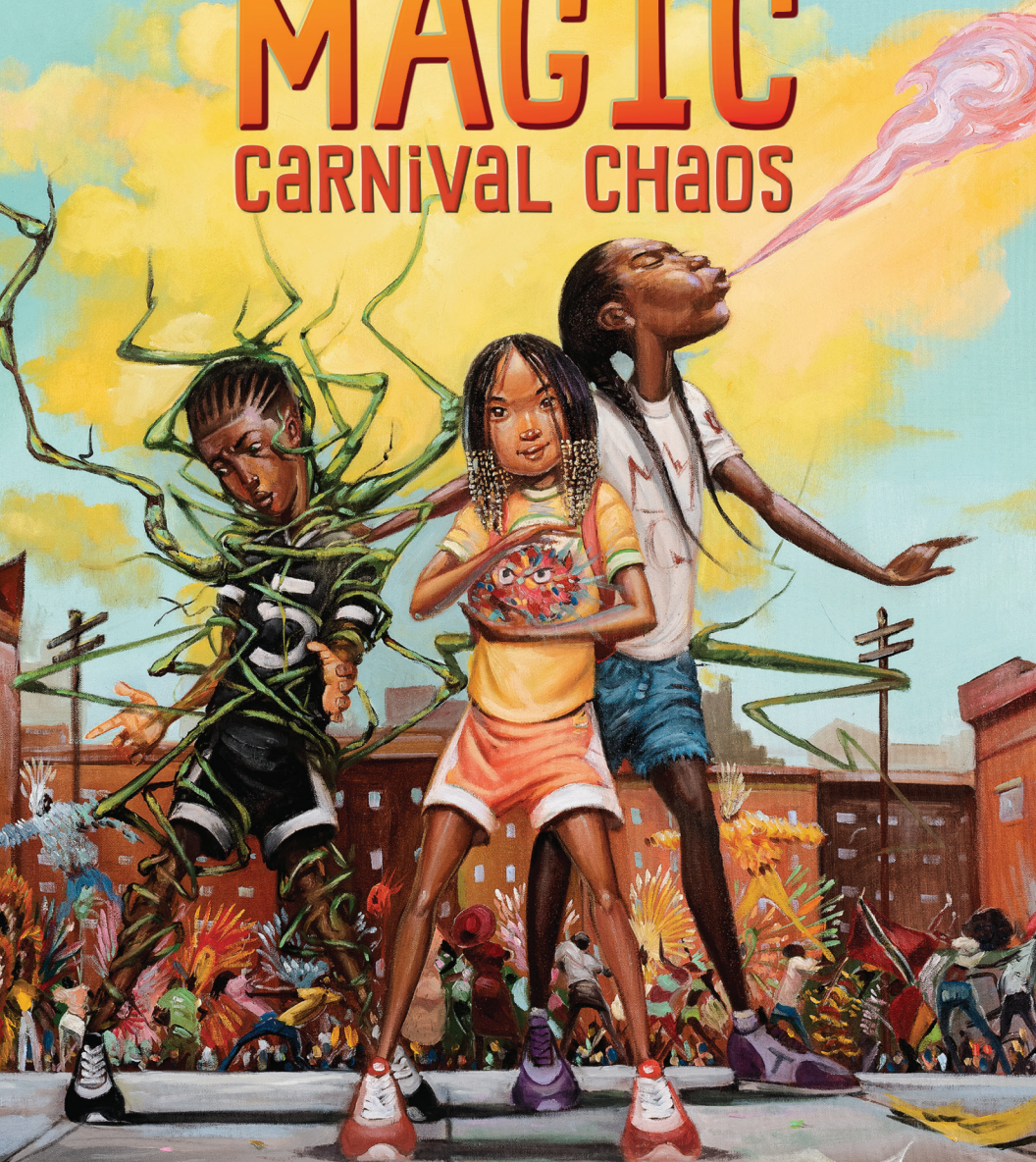


MOKO MAGIC CARNIVAL CHAOS



NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

Tracey Baptiste

MOKO
MAGIC
CARNIVAL CHAOS

TRACEY BAPTISTE

FREEDOM FIRE

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For my brother, Roland

Introduction

Listen. Can you hear it? Can you feel it? It's building. A buzz, a thrill, the feeling of excitement that looms right around the corner. The breathless pause inserted just before the crescendo. Do you know what that is? Someone's starting a story, and if you're quick enough, you can catch the opening lines. Then hold on tight, because you're going to be transported to a world of thrills and amazement.

I know, because that's the same feeling that washed over me when I cracked open *Moko Magic: Carnival Chaos* and met a trio of cousins guiding us on an adventure. Misty, Aidan, and Brooke are not only family, but also the characters at the start of a journey we all can join. The strongest relationships are often forged—not without their hiccups, of course—in the heart of such an adventure, whether it's while walking in a haunted forest or winding through the aisles of a corner bodega. When they come together, your new favorite cousins connect the United

States, the Caribbean, and Africa through old traditions and new legacies that make up one uninterrupted story—history. And that’s why *Moko Magic: Carnival Chaos* is the perfect book to launch the Freedom Fire imprint.

Come on, it’s starting! See? The music, the dancing, the costumes, the joy! It’s everywhere—and it’s spreading. Hurry! We can talk while we catch up.

Freedom Fire books, at their heart, are about the joy we create when we come together. Whether on the front stoop with your cousins, in the classroom with your friends, or during a days-long festival filled with magic and mystery, you’ll find joy at the core of those experiences. What story better represents the accumulation of those feelings than *Moko Magic: Carnival Chaos*? This book truly celebrates celebration and shows how a community can build *and* heal itself when it comes together. What book could carry the mission of Freedom Fire on its spine better than what Tracey has written for us to enjoy? What—

Whoops, there go the floats, which means the musicians are right behind them. We have to pick up the pace. Where was I? Oh, right: joy. You know where I find joy? In shenanigans. Maybe a little tomfoolery, and—dare I say—hijinks. Something Misty knows a lot about, and Brooke, too. Aidan . . . well, he’ll learn. And so will you, if you keep up with them in their pursuit of magic. I promise, dear reader, sharing in their carnival adventures will fill you with an electric kind of wonder, like it did me.

What is carnival, you ask? Really? Well, we have a couple

seconds. Just don't slow down—I smell something cooking that will set your soul afloat. Or maybe it'll give a float a soul. I'm not sure, but I'm ready to find out.

Carnival is a festive season celebrated at different times around the world, united by dance, music, and the joy of community. Like Canboulay in Trinidad and Tobago, where calypso music was born. And Crop Over in Barbados, where calypso traveled and became so beloved that a king of calypso is crowned every year. Thousands of miles away in Toronto, Canada, Caribana is one of the largest North American street festivals. All these events, even though they are separated by oceans and continents, salute and recognize the Caribbean diaspora. No wonder Carnival makes a great backdrop for *Moko Magic*. But don't let me lecture you—take the plunge into the book and learn for yourself! I'll be waiting to hear from you all about the fun and danger.

Speaking of danger, be careful! There are pools and pockets of magic everywhere, and if we're going to hear this story, we have to watch where our feet lead us. It's easy to get lost in the rhythm, understand? There's power in celebration, especially when we do it together, but we can't let it get out of control. You know what could happen.

Wait . . . you don't?

Well, I guess this is perfect timing. Because listen: Just up around that corner, they're starting. Let Brooke explain what happened. Or maybe Misty would be a better choice. Still, Aidan did have that whole . . . incident.

Actually, why don't we have each one narrate their tale? Yes, that should work. Quickly, now. Can you see the magic building? The story begins soon, so follow me, and whatever you do, don't touch anything that shimmers, and I promise you'll be fine.

Hmm, there was something else I was supposed to tell you. . . .

Oh, that's right! Wait! Watch out for the—

Oh well. . . Maybe it's better you find out for yourself. See you on the other side!

-Kwame



One

The Thing with Feathers

Misty

The first problem was that the ice cream was melting faster than Misty could bike back to the house. Every time she brought her hand up for a lick, there was some new pothole, bump, sidewalk crack, or passerby she needed to swerve around. The uneven cycle of lick, swerve, bump, drip, lick, drip, bump, swerve was getting infuriating. By the time she swooped around the corner from Eastern Parkway onto New York Avenue, the ice cream was half gone. Not all of it down her throat, as she would have liked. Her hand and face were a sticky combination of sweat and icy treat. She went up the sidewalk through the traffic of walkers hurrying somewhere on their lunch hour, then made a skidding turn around a dad with a stroller and a left onto John Street. She lifted off the seat of the bike and pumped her legs. Nearly there. She didn't dare look at her watch. Because she

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already knew the second problem: She had been gone too long. Her absence would not have gone unnoticed.

In the middle of the block, she shifted her body and curved neatly toward a tall gateway painted a bright red. It was solid wood with wrought iron scrollwork in black that curved, twisted, and twined across each side. Misty screeched to a stop, kicking up concrete dust that hovered in the hot Brooklyn air. Music was blaring behind the gate, which meant that Uncle Andrew was at work. He never worked without calypso playing. Especially during carnival season, or anytime close to the Caribbean Day Parade on Eastern Parkway during Labor Day.

Misty took large, careful bites so she wouldn't get brain freeze, licked the remaining soursop ice cream from her hand and wrist, then unlatched the gate.

The moment she opened the gate and walked her bike into the yard, she was met with a burst of color. If color made sound, this would be a riot. A jumble of every imaginable hue covered costumes ranging from small swimsuit-size outfits embellished with beads and feathers to huge mechanical constructions that stretched to the second-floor windows. This year, her uncle's masquerade group, aka band, had chosen the theme Feathers & Hope. So wings of every kind, in various stages of production, lay on rows of tables beneath a white canvas canopy or hung from the perimeter fence. Wire skeletons waited to be covered in fabric. Lengths of cloth twisted in what little breeze came into the yard. Fuzzy bits of feather drifted in the moist air. Each half-formed wing flapped lazily like a bodyless creature. In the

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middle of it all was Uncle Andrew. His dark body was bent over a ferocious shade of pink as his quick fingers sewed on bright green sequins and his feet tapped to the music coming out of his portable speaker. With only six days to go before Labor Day on Eastern Parkway, her uncle was busy.

Misty grinned. Carnival had always been her favorite season, and this year, because she'd celebrated in Trinidad and then moved to Brooklyn in August, she'd get to celebrate it twice!

"Darlin'-ay-oh!" Uncle Andrew sang. "Doh do that thing to me! Baby!"

"Uncle!" Misty called.

Andrew briefly looked up from his work. Without missing a beat, he switched up the lyrics. "Misty-ay-oh! Yuh mama looking for you! Honey!"

Misty's throat constricted, but she nodded. Whatever minuscule hope she'd harbored now vanished. The family hadn't been too busy to notice that she'd snuck out. Her uncle returned to his work, sinking and pulling the needle and thread in time to the calypso beat.

Misty went to an outside pipe—it was called a *faucet* here, she mentally corrected herself—near the back door and rinsed off her hands. Then she washed her face and neck of the drips of ice cream mixed with sweat and grime. She shook her hands dry, sprinkling water droplets on a couple of nearby costumes. Oops! She took a furtive glance back to see if her uncle had noticed, but he was still embroiled in his sewing and swaying. She went inside.

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A welcome blast of cool air hit her body. When the door closed behind her, Misty was plunged into the darkness of the basement laundry room. The music from outside was dulled to just the persistent boom of the bass and the tinkly sounds of the bottle and spoon. As her eyes and ears adjusted to the dimmer, quieter environment, Misty thought she saw something move at the other end of the room.

“Hello?” she said.

There was a light scratching sound followed by a low *thunk*, and then a rattle that grew steadily louder and louder. Misty squinted and moved forward carefully. Another *thunk*. And then a *whirr*. As she got close, a light blinked on, and all the sounds stopped. It was only the washing machine.

Misty took a deep breath, then bounded up the stairs and into the kitchen. Auntie Trish was standing at a huge steaming pot on the stove, stirring it slowly with a wooden spoon.

“Afternoon, Auntie,” Misty said.

Her aunt lifted the hem of her T-shirt to wipe the steam from her glasses. “Misty? Where have you been?”

“Just to get ice cream.”

“Without telling anybody?” Her aunt didn’t wait for a response. “Girl, you haven’t even lived in this country for a month, an’ you telling me you going off on your own? In these streets? Girl.” Her aunt had one hand on her hip and the opposite eyebrow cocked.

“I’ve been there with Brooke and Aidan a hundred times,” Misty said. “It’s not even that far. I know exactly where to go

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and how to get back. I've got the whole area down in my head like a map. It's easy, easy."

"You really have a story for everything, yes, Misty?" her aunt said. "First of all, you don't go nowhere without telling somebody. Second, you will need to go with them a hundred more times before you go off on your own again, you hear me?"

"Yes, Aunty."

"That is, *if* your mother don't cut the legs off your body this morning." She pursed her lips and shook her head. "Well, what you still doing here chatting? Your mother is waiting." She lifted her chin toward the second floor.

"Yes, Aunty."

Aunty Trish bowed her head over the pot and stirred. As Misty walked by, she stood on her tiptoes to peek inside. A toxic-looking green liquid bubbled in the pot. Fortunately, it wasn't food. At least, not this time. Her aunt was dyeing cloth for one of the costumes. Everything that happened in their family had to do with carnival. Even the cooking. But most of that was done by Uncle Stanley, Aunty Trish's husband, at the restaurant. This was a good thing, because if anyone ate Aunty Trish's cooking, they might die from food poisoning.

"What you think?" Aunty Trish asked. "Is it bright enough?" She used the wooden spoon to lift up a bit of the cloth. It shone a nearly neon green.

"Plenty bright," Misty said.

"Riiight," Aunty Trish said. She turned off the fire and

started swinging her hips and shaking her shoulders in time with the music her brother was playing outside.

Misty danced her way down the hallway and up the next flight of stairs to the bedroom she was sharing with her mother. They were staying with Aunty Trish and Uncle Stanley until they found their own place. Uncle Andrew and his son, Aidan, lived in the garden apartment. Misty had learned that this was just a fancy way of saying they lived in the basement, which opened to the backyard.

Her cousin Aidan was sitting on the floor and looking through a box while her mum dug around in the closet. He was two months older than Misty, a fact he enjoyed repeating as much as she enjoyed flaunting the fact that she was two and three-quarter inches taller.

“Hi, Mom! Hey, A!” Misty was going for American casual. Instead, her voice sounded just-off-the-boat terrified.

Aidan’s head whipped around, making his short cornrows swing around his ears. He gave Misty the wide-eyed, puckered-mouth look of *girl, you in for a world of hurt*. Her mother’s glare came much more slowly.

“Exactly why you think you can leave this house without permission?” her mum asked.

“Aidan and Broo—”

Her mother wagged her finger, and Misty broke off. “Mm-mm,” she said. “No.” She took a deep breath. “So where it is you went?”

“To get ice cream,” she said.

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“All that way? By yourself?” She sucked her teeth. “You really think you’re grown.”

Misty looked at Aidan, who promptly ducked his head. Clearly, no help would be coming from him.

“Misty, Brooklyn is not Trinidad,” her mum said. “This ‘little miss independent’ thing you have going on doesn’t work here. You can’t go gallivanting in the streets. You don’t know your way around yet. Don’t go off on your own like that ever again. Please.”

Misty knew better than to talk back, but she glanced at Aidan again.

“Don’t look at him,” her mother said. “He’s lived here his whole life.” She continued riffling through the closet, muttering under her breath. Then she clapped once. “Right. So, we are looking for that jar of beads I brought with us,” she said. “Do you know where I packed it?”

Misty caught Aidan’s expression. His jaw had dropped open like he couldn’t believe she wasn’t in for some kind of punishment. Misty gave him just the slightest of shrugs.

“Um, no, Mummy,” she said. “I don’t remember.”

“Well, it have to be somewhere, ent?”

“We took some stuff down to the laundry room,” Misty said. “Remember?”

“That’s right. Go and look for me, please.” Her mother shut the closet door. “And when you find it, take it out to your uncle.”

“If I’d known it was for Uncle Andrew,” Misty said, “I wouldn’t have put it so far out of reach.”

“Misty.”

“Yes, Mummy?”

“Hurry up.”

“Yes, Mummy.”

“I’ll help her, Aunty Leslie,” Aidan said.

The two of them ran barefoot to the end of the hallway and raced down the stairs. When they got to the kitchen, they slowed to walk carefully across the tile. Aunty Trish squinted at them from behind her glasses as she wrung out the green fabric in the kitchen sink. Then, at the top of the stairs, the race was on again, into the part of the basement adjacent to Aidan and Uncle Andrew’s apartment.

Aidan moved to the middle of the room and swiped at the air a couple times until he found the pull string for the light. A bare bulb clicked on, throwing soft yellow light around the space and deepening the shadows behind each appliance and box. The shadows grew and shrank as the light swung, making the boxes, old toys, and even the bare concrete posts loom, shrink, and loom again, as if they were breathing.

“How exactly did you get away with that?” Aidan asked.

Misty wasn’t sure herself. At the very least, she’d thought there’d be yelling. “Dunno. Mummy’s been distracted, I think.”

“Lucky,” Aidan said.

But Misty didn’t feel lucky. The move to Brooklyn hadn’t been as exciting as she’d hoped. She had expected adventure, like an explorer discovering a brand-new place and uncovering its secrets. She’d thought she would learn to conquer the subway,

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the snaking cars revealing hidden bits of the city underground. She'd wanted to ride up and down elevators in buildings so tall she would get dizzy when she looked out the windows. But with her mother looking for work and everyone else busy preparing for the Labor Day parade, she'd barely left the house. She also missed Trinidad more than she thought she would. Of course, she missed her dad most, especially his quick laugh and big hugs. But she also missed the warm breezes blowing off the Caribbean Sea, the familiar hills, and the way the island often smelled like fresh rain and ripe fruit.

"So where's this jar?" Aidan asked, returning Misty to the task at hand.

"We put the suitcase over there." She pointed toward a pile of boxes. Next to it, with the sticky JFK airport tag still on the handle, was a brown plaid suitcase, one of several beat-up, mismatched bags that she and her mother had brought to America.

"Geez, this is hideous," Aidan said.

Misty felt a pang of embarrassment. Over the last few weeks, everything Misty and her mother owned or said or did had come under scrutiny. The kind that felt like ridicule. The kind that suggested island things weren't as good as American things. It made Misty feel small. "Who cares what it looks like?" she snapped. "It works, doesn't it?"

Aidan gestured to the small rectangular window that opened to the backyard costume factory where his dad was hard at work. "Clearly, people do care what things look like."

"Well, we're not entering the suitcase into any competition,

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so I think we're fine." Misty purposefully reached over Aidan's head to pull down the suitcase. "I'll get it, since you can't reach." She yanked, but it was stuck. She'd really packed it in tight. She put her entire weight into getting it out, but it wasn't budging. Aidan grabbed the body of the suitcase from below to help. Still nothing. "On three," Misty said. "One, two, three!" They strained until the suitcase came free, but a couple of boxes were knocked loose along with it.

Misty went down on her butt. Aidan was on his hands and knees. One box had opened, spilling lengths of wire, and another teetered precariously at the top of the pile.

Aidan said, "That's going to fall."

"What's in it?" Misty asked.

"No idea. But just in case . . ."

They both got to their feet quickly and tried to grab the box, but the effort tipped it farther off its axis and it came crashing down. There was the unmistakable sound of things breaking. Lots of things. Expensive-sounding things.

"What was that?" Auntie Trish called from the top of the stairs.

"Nothing!" Misty and Aidan shouted at the same time.

"Didn't sound like nothing to me!"

"It's okay, Auntie!" Misty said. "We're just getting the beads my mother wanted!"

Aidan toed the second box. One of the flaps tilted back, revealing a stack of broken dishes. "We're dead."

Once again, Misty thought she saw something move near

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the wall. She bent down and peered into the shadows. “I think there’s some kind of animal back there.”

Aidan backed up. “Like a rat?”

“I don’t know,” Misty said. She got to her knees and crawled after it. The bare basement bulb swayed just enough that she caught a glimpse of the thing in the corner. Misty laughed. “It’s a feather!” she said. “Probably from one of your dad’s costumes.”

Aidan sighed with relief.

Misty put her hand into the shadows and pulled the thing out. It wasn’t one feather—it was several. Small plumes of pink, gold, blue, and green shivered in her hand. The bundle felt incredibly soft and warm. She held it out for Aidan to see, but it fell from her hand. Only it didn’t fall, exactly. It seemed to have taken a flying jump. . . . Misty was just about to scoop it back up when it went scurrying across the floor.

Aidan screeched. “What was that?”

“I don’t know!”

Misty dashed after the bright little quivering thing. She cornered it near the breaker box. Her heart was beating so hard, she could hear it pounding in her ears.

“Don’t touch it!” Aidan yelled. “A rat probably got into the glue and feathers! It might have rabies.”

But Misty wasn’t so sure this was a rat. For one thing, she hadn’t seen anything like a rat body. No snout, no little round ears, no claws, and no long tail. Regardless, if it had gotten into the glue, it needed help. She picked up the feathered thing, turning it in her palm. The creature trembled, and then it unfurled

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its feathers, revealing a pair of large sparkling purple eyes in the middle of its balled-up body. Like rhinestones come to life. The whatever-it-was looked up at her and blinked.

Misty screamed.

Aidan screamed.

The thing let out a squeak from a tiny mouth filled with little glittering teeth.

“What is going on?” their aunt called from the top of the stairs. She came stomping down and walked straight over to Misty and Aidan.

Misty held out the thing to her aunt. She waited for her aunt to scream. And waited. And waited another moment.

Her aunt sighed. “It’s you who cause this whole mess?”

Misty was just about to protest that she and Aidan were only trying to get into the suitcase, but her aunt wasn’t looking at her or the broken dishes. She was looking at the creature.

“Allyuh nothing but trouble,” her aunt said. “All right. Everybody upstairs. We’ll clean this up later.”

The pair of slack-jawed cousins looked at each other, then at their aunt, and at each other again.

What kind of craziness was this?



Two Fluffrat

Misty

Misty tried to wrap her mind around exactly what she was seeing. Aunty Trish was holding the fluffy little thing, which was now purring in the palm of her hand but every now and then giving Misty and Aidan some sparkly purple side-eye.

What was it? Definitely not a rat that had gotten caught in the glue and feathers. This thing was entirely glue and feathers and beads and glitter and some sharp sparkly bits that looked enough like claws to keep Misty at a distance.

The kitchen was crowded but quiet. Misty's mum, Leslie, had walked in a few minutes ago, spotted the feathered thing in Aunty Trish's cupped hand, and sighed. Uncle Andrew had been summoned from outside and now sat at the table.

"Well?" Misty demanded of the three adults. "What exactly is that thing? Where did it come from? Why are you all so calm about it?"

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“Why is nobody trying to kill it?” Aidan added.

At this, the little creature gasped as if it understood and shrank back in Auntie Trish’s palm.

“Nobody is killing anything,” Auntie Trish said. “These don’t last very long anyhow.”

There was another sound from the creature that Misty interpreted as indignance.

“What is it, though?” Misty asked again. “Maybe explain that.”

“Watch that sass, miss,” her mother said.

“She’s right,” Aidan said. “You all obviously know what it is, but we don’t.”

Uncle Andrew scooped the little feathered thing from his sister. “It’s just a little bit of extra mas,” he said. “This is what happens when carnival magic gets a little out of hand.”

“Carnival magic?” Misty asked.

“Mas?” Aidan asked. “Does it bite?”

“What is carnival magic?” Misty asked.

“No, it doesn’t bite,” Uncle Andrew said. “Here, come and hold it.” He held it out to Aidan.

“Would someone tell me what carnival magic is, please?” Misty said.

“Shh!” her mum said.

Aidan froze, suddenly aware that everyone was staring at him.

“Come on, son,” Uncle Andrew coaxed. “I promise nothing bad will happen.”

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Aidan shrank back a little, but then stuck out his hand, reaching a single finger toward the creature. Uncle Andrew leaned forward, and Aidan just brushed the creature's fluttery edges. Aidan shivered and pulled away.

"See?" Uncle Andrew said.

"I don't get it," Misty said. "This feathered fluffrat is carnival magic?"

"A little bit of it, yes," Uncle Andrew said.

"It's the result of magic floating around in the air," Auntie Trish explained. "In this case, Uncle Andrew's magic." She paused as both Misty's mum and Uncle Andrew looked at her. "Well, we think it's his magic, anyway."

Misty and Aidan turned their entire bodies to look at Uncle Andrew.

"What does she mean, your magic?" Aidan asked his dad. "You don't have any magic."

Uncle Andrew gave his son a little grin. "What you think going on out there? You can't say that is not magic."

"Dad, that is not *magic* magic," Aidan said. "That's sewing. This thing is . . . it's alive!"

"Everything is a little bit magic," his father said. "But yes, this little fella is something else again. But I promise, it's nothing spectacular."

"Not spectacular?" Misty asked. "You made a whole being!"

"True, but like your aunt said, the mas don't last very long," Uncle Andrew explained.

"How come I've never seen this before?" Aidan asked. "If

you're all so calm about it, shouldn't I have seen bits of costumes coming to life before now?"

"It's been a while since we had one of these show up," Uncle Andrew said. He stroked the creature, and it fluffed out more, as if it enjoyed his gentle attention.

"That's actually what we need to talk to you kids about," Aunty Trish said. She smiled in that way Misty's parents did when they were about to tell her about some kind of medicine she was going to have to take, or that she was headed to the dentist, or that it was time for the annual bush bath.

"Which means we should wait for Brooke to get back," Misty's mum said.

"Wait?" Misty asked. "You told us that Uncle Andrew is magic, and we're supposed to just sit around the kitchen with a bit of living magical carnival rat running around until Brooke comes home? Why can't you tell us what's going on now? Brooke can get caught up when she gets here!"

"Relax, Misty, relax," her mum said.

"Uncle Andrew made a carnival feather rat!"

"It is not a carnival feather rat," Uncle Andrew said.

"It does look like a carnival feather rat," Aidan said.

Uncle Andrew sighed.

"We could go ahead and start . . ." Aunty Trish said. "Brooke already knows a little about this."

Misty's mum frowned at her sister. "What do you mean, she knows a little?"

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“We agreed not to tell them anything until we knew for sure,” Uncle Andrew said.

“How long has she known about this?” Misty’s mum asked.

“I can’t believe you, Trish.” Uncle Andrew shook his head.

“Relax, allyuh,” Auntie Trish said. “It’s not like I told her everything about everything. It’s just every now and then, I let her in on a few things. She is older than these two.”

“How long, Trish?” Misty’s mum demanded.

Aidan reached toward the feathered creature again. “It looks a little scared.”

“Wouldn’t you be?” Misty asked. “Everyone’s yelling.”

Aidan stroked the creature. It ruffled its feathers in response and grew bigger and bigger, as if it were trying to bury Aidan’s hand inside its fluff. Then, in a puff of air, the feathers disassembled and drifted to the floor as beads and rhinestones clattered on the tile. The creature was gone.

“I killed it!” Aidan shouted.

“No, son. No,” Uncle Andrew said.

Aidan tried to scoop up the feathers, beads, glitter, and rhinestones. They dribbled between his fingers.

“Aw! I was just starting to think it was cute,” Misty said.

Aidan looked at her, horrified.

“I wasn’t the one who killed it,” she said.

“He did not kill it,” Uncle Andrew said as he swept feathers and beads into one hand with the other and put it in a pile on the counter.

“Oh loss, now Aidan’s traumatized,” Aunty Trish said. “Poor soul.”

“Okay,” Misty said. “If it’s not dead, then what happened to it?”

Aidan’s usually deep brown skin had taken on severe undertones of green. “Can you put it back together, Dad?” He tried to pile the fluffrat ingredients into some semblance of a ball.

“That’s not how it works,” Misty’s mum said gently. “Your father can’t reassemble it just so. Magic has a way of acting of its own accord. Forcing it never works.” She looked at her siblings. “We’ve learned that the hard way, so let us save you some trouble.”

The basement door slammed, and Brooke came running up the stairs into the kitchen. She stopped short near the counter, and several feathers blew up toward the kitchen light with her arrival. Aidan grabbed at them.

“What’s the big emergency?” Brooke asked.

“Uncle Andrew made a magic fluffrat,” Misty said.

“And I killed it,” Aidan added.

“What?” Brooke asked.

“It wasn’t a rat, Misty!” Uncle Andrew said.

“That thing?” Brooke asked. She looked at Aidan trying to keep the bits of feather and beads together. “What is it?”

“That was a bit of mas,” Aunty Trish said. “They know.”

Brooke breathed out hard. “Oh,” she said. “Finally!”

“You knew about the magical carnival bits?” Misty asked.

“I haven’t seen one, but yeah,” Brooke said. “So I missed it?”

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Aidan nodded.

“Ugh! Can somebody make it again so I can see?” Brooke asked.

“That’s the whole thing, eh?” Uncle Andrew said. “We’re not exactly sure who made it.”

“What do you mean?” Brooke asked.

“Well . . .” Uncle Andrew said. All three adults looked at Misty, Aidan, and Brooke.

“You mean *us*?” Misty asked. “You think we did this?”

“Uh-uh. That’s not possible,” Aidan said. “We found it in the basement. It was already there when we went downstairs. We did not make it.”

“How?” Brooke asked, excited.

“Well, there’s only one way to find out for sure,” Uncle Andrew said. “You’re just going to have to do it again.”

“Do what?” Misty asked.

Uncle Andrew looked at them with a mischievous grin. “What else? Make magic.”



Three

Moko Number One

Aidan

Aidan stood between Brooke and Misty, staring at the pile of what used to be a living creature on the kitchen table. There was something about Misty calling it a fluffrat that made Aidan extra uneasy. He didn't like rats. Or bugs. Or snakes. Or anything that might come out at him suddenly. That included the little fluffrat, even if it was kinda cute.

"It's nothing to be 'fraid of, son." His dad put his hands on Aidan's shoulders, and Aidan leaned into him a little.

It wasn't that Aidan was afraid, exactly. It was that he wasn't sure what exactly he was supposed to be doing, and his father and the aunts were looking at them as if they were expecting something . . . amazing. Brooke seemed skeptical that he or Misty could do anything remotely like magic. Misty looked excited, like she'd adopt a whole crew of fluffrats to keep in her pockets.

He'd never thought of himself as magic. Ever. Not even when

he was little. Definitely not the way other kids did when they pretended to have superpowers or imagined themselves in fantastic places. He'd always been much more comfortable in reality. His idea of magic was reading a book that transported him through history.

"What are we supposed to be doing?" Misty asked. "Because we're just staring, and, um, I don't think that's working."

"Hush, nah," Aunty Leslie said. "We trying to see something?"

"What?" Misty asked. "Maybe if we knew what it was you were trying to see—"

"Misty!" Aunty Leslie snapped.

"All right, Mummy," Misty said.

Brooke stuck her hands out toward the pile.

"Did it move?" Aunty Trish asked. "Did you see that?"

"I think that was a breeze from the window," Aunty Leslie said.

"The window is closed, Leslie," Aunty Trish said. "And we're all sweating in the no breeze in this kitchen."

"Must've been a draft or something," Aidan's dad said.

"Her hand stirred the air when she moved," Aidan said. "That was physics, not magic."

"It might have been magic," Brooke said.

"Okay, let's check. Do it again," Misty challenged.

Brooke moved her hand a second time, and a couple of the feathers shivered.

"Watch," Misty said. She did the same thing with her hand,

and once again, the feathers moved. “See? Aidan was right. Physics.”

Aunty Trish sighed. “Okay, that’s enough for the time being.”

Everyone relaxed and turned away from the table. Aidan was glad they’d stopped trying. The whole thing was stressing him out.

“Can somebody explain this now?” he asked.

Aunty Trish took a deep breath. “Our family belongs to a long line of healers called mokos.”

“You mean like moko jumbies?” Misty asked. “The people who dance around on stilts during carnival?”

“That’s what people know them as now,” Aunty Trish said. “But they didn’t start out so. In West Africa, among certain peoples, mokos were healers, with knowledge they passed down through the generations.”

“That’s just medical school,” Aidan said.

“And what does any of that have to do with magic?” Misty asked.

“Would you two please let Mom finish?” Brooke said.

“Why do you think you’re the boss of everyone just because you’re the oldest?” Misty asked.

Brooke rolled her eyes. “I’m just saying, if you wait a couple of seconds, you’ll hear everything you want to know. That’s all.”

“Why don’t we start with the story of the first moko,” Aidan’s dad suggested.

“That’s just a legend,” Aidan said.

“Sometimes a legend is history that wasn’t written down,”

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said Aidan's dad. "Being an oral historian was also a role that was passed down through family tradition."

"The jeli and the griots," Aidan said.

"The what and the who?" Misty asked.

"That's what oral historians in West African societies were called," Aidan explained.

"Go ahead," Aidan's dad prompted. "You know the story of the first moko jumbie. Tell them."

"Well, there are a few different versions," Aidan began, "but all of them have basically the same main points. There was a healer—a moko—in a village who saw colonists capture some of his family. To save them, he followed the colonists all the way to the coast and watched as they put his sister on one of the slave ships. He snuck behind them all the way into the water, and as the water got deeper and deeper, his legs got longer and longer so he could keep his head above the waves. When the ship set sail, he trailed it all the way to the Caribbean. He was never able to save his sister, but he became the first moko jumbie. That's how the tradition of stilt walkers at carnival started. To recreate what the first moko jumbie had done."

His dad tousled Aidan's head, making his carefully cornrowed braids flop around.

"What does that have to do with magic?" Misty asked.

"Did you miss the part where his legs stretched under him so he could walk across the whole Atlantic?" Brooke asked.

"That's not the same as making a fluffy, sequin-covered, live rat out of craft supplies," Misty said.

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“No,” Aunty Trish said. “But it does show that the first moko who came to the Caribbean had magic in addition to his healing powers. Maybe his powers grew beyond healing because what he saw was so, so awful. Then his magic was passed down to the next generation and the next.”

“Until it came to us,” Brooke said. “That’s so cool, right?”

Misty stuck her legs straight out from the seat of her chair and stretched her toes. “And we can do what he did?”

Aunty Leslie waggled her head. “Sort of. Over the years, the first moko’s magic became diluted as it spread to several people in one family. Now, when the magic passes to the next generation, it splits between three people.”

Aidan looked at his cousins. “The three of us!”

“Exactly,” Aunty Leslie said. “Each of you will get a part of the moko’s magic: the power to heal, to protect, and to see things that others don’t.”

Aidan, Brooke, and Misty smiled at each other. Aidan studied his hands, flipping them over and back again as if he would detect something in his skin that he hadn’t noticed in the whole eleven years he’d been alive. His cousins appeared the same as they always had. Well, he didn’t know Misty as well as Brooke since she’d only just moved to Brooklyn. But he’d spent a lot of time with Brooke over the last year after he and his dad moved into the downstairs apartment. And she didn’t look any different today than she had on any of the other three hundred and sixty-five plus. He wondered what exactly about them was magic.

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“Wait a minute,” Misty said. “Wait, wait, wait. You said that this moves from one generation to the next, right?”

“Yes,” Aunty Trish said.

“And it always divides into three,” Misty added.

Aunty Leslie took a deep breath, like she knew what was coming.

“Which means that the three of *you* had to have these powers before they came to us,” Misty said. She considered her mother with one eyebrow cocked like the top of a question mark.

“Yes,” Aunty Leslie said. “We had this ability, too.”

“Had?” Misty asked.

Aunty Trish sat next to Aunty Leslie. “This magic shows up at about the same time to those affected, and when it leaves, that happens at the same time, too.”

“Leaves,” Misty said.

“It comes when it’s needed,” Aunty Leslie said.

“And only as much as is needed,” Aunty Trish said.

“Okay,” Brooke said. “So why do we need it now?”

The adults suddenly looked uneasy. Whatever the answer was, it was bad. Aidan didn’t want to ask how bad. He didn’t want to know. Not yet. But of course, his cousins probably didn’t feel the same way.

“Mummy?” Misty asked.

Aunty Leslie shrugged a little and shook her head. “We don’t know why it’s happening now. But we do know one thing. Whatever the trouble is that needs this magic, we’re going to find out very soon.”