

The background is a deep blue night sky filled with numerous small, glowing golden-yellow stars and larger, fainter blue and white stars. A prominent white crescent moon is positioned in the upper right quadrant. A large, ethereal nebula with soft, swirling patterns of light blue and white dust is centered behind the text. Scattered throughout the sky are small, golden, swirling patterns that resemble stylized clouds or magical sparks.

Take a peek inside
the wondrous world of

Nevermoor

Jessica
Townsend



Nevermoor

The Trials of
Morrigan Crow

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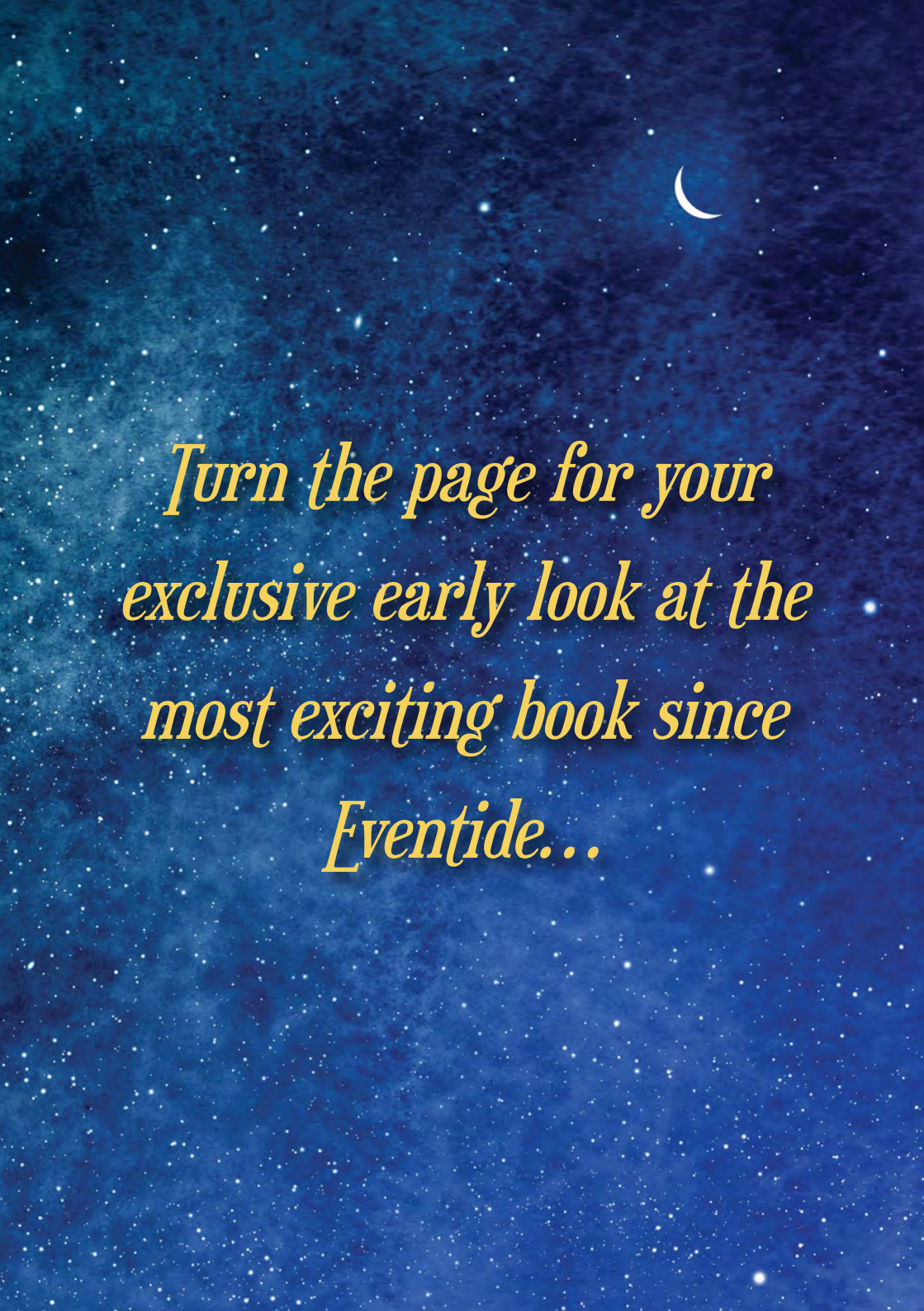
Jessica Townsend

Nevermoor

The Trials of
Morrigan
Crow



'Readers will feel as though Harry Potter
is meeting Alice in Wonderland'
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*Turn the page for your
exclusive early look at the
most exciting book since
Eventide...*

Death Comes to Dinner

On Eventide night, even the streets of dull, conservative Jackalfax came alive.

The cobbled stretch of Empire Road had swelled from a merry hum of good spirits in the morning to raucous, uncontrollable revelry in the final hours before midnight. Street bands played for coins on every corner, competing for the attention of passersby. Coloured lanterns jostled with streamers and strings of tiny lights, and the air smelled of beer, burnt sugar and meat grilling on the spit.

The blackened Skyfaced Clock loomed above the celebrations. At midnight it would fade to the colour of Morningtide – a pale, promising pink – and Spring of One would bring a fresh beginning for everyone. The night was uncommon and crowded with possibility.

For everyone, that is, except Morrigan Crow. Morrigan's night held only one possibility. Like every other child born precisely eleven years ago on the last Eventide, when the clock struck midnight she would die – the eleven short years of her doomed life complete; her curse finally fulfilled.

The Crows were celebrating. Sort of.

It was a sombre affair in the house on the hill. Lights dimmed, curtains drawn. Dinner was Morrigan's favourite – lamb chops, roast parsnips and minted peas. Corvus hated parsnips and would never usually allow them to be served when he was home for dinner, but he kept a grim silence as the maid spooned a huge mountain of them onto his plate. Morrigan felt this spoke volumes about the sensitivity of the occasion.

The room was quiet but for the soft scratching of silverware against china. Morrigan was conscious of every mouthful of food she swallowed, every cool sip of water. She heard each tick of the clock on the wall like a drumbeat in a marching band, marching her ever closer to the moment when she would cease to exist.

She hoped it would be painless. She'd read somewhere that when a cursed child died it was usually quick and peaceful – just like falling asleep. She wondered what would happen afterwards. Would she really go to the Better Place, like Cook had once told her? Was the Divine Thing real,

and would it accept her with open arms, as she'd been promised? Morrigan had to hope so. The alternative simply didn't bear thinking about. After hearing Cook's tales of the Wicked Thing that dwelled in the Worst Place, she'd slept with the light on for a week.

It was a strange thing, she thought, to be celebrating the night of your own death. It didn't feel like a birthday. It didn't feel like a celebration at all. It was more like having your funeral before you die.

Just as she was wondering if anyone would say a few words about her, Corvus cleared his throat. Morrigan, Ivy and Grandmother looked at him, their hands pausing halfway to their mouths with forks full of lamb and peas.

'I, er, just wanted to say,' he began, and then seemed to lose momentum. 'I wanted to say . . .'

Ivy's eyes misted over and she squeezed his hand encouragingly. 'Go on, dear.'

'I just . . .' He tried again and cleared his throat loudly. 'I wanted to say that . . . that the lamb is very good. Cooked to perfection. Nice and pink.'

There were murmurs of agreement around the table, and then a clinking of cutlery as everyone carried on eating. That was probably as good as it was going to get, Morrigan realised. And she couldn't say she disagreed about the lamb.

‘Well, if nobody minds,’ said Ivy, dabbing her mouth prettily with her linen napkin. ‘I’ve not been a member of this family for very long, but I thought it might be appropriate for me to say something tonight.’

Morrigan sat up straight. This should be good. Maybe Ivy was going to apologise for making her wear that frilly, itchy chiffon dress to the wedding. Or maybe she was going to confess that although she’d scarcely spoken a dozen words to Morrigan since moving in, truly she loved her like a daughter, and she only wished they could have more time together, and she would miss Morrigan terribly and would probably cry buckets at the funeral and ruin her makeup, which would streak ugly black rivers all down her pretty face but she wouldn’t even care how ugly she looked because she would just be thinking about lovely, lovely Morrigan. Morrigan arranged her face in an expression of humble serenity.

‘Corvus wasn’t sure if I should say anything, but I know Morrigan won’t mind . . .’

‘Go on,’ Morrigan said. ‘It’s fine. Really, go ahead.’

Ivy beamed at her (for the first time ever) and, emboldened, stood up from her seat. ‘Corvus and I are having a baby.’

The room fell silent; then a great smash came from the doorway as the maid dropped a platter. Corvus tried to smile at his young wife but it came out as a grimace.

‘Well?’ Ivy prompted them. ‘Aren’t you going to congratulate us?’

‘Ivy, dear,’ Grandmother said, smiling icily at her daughter-in-law. ‘Perhaps your announcement might have been better received at a less sensitive time. For instance, the day *after* my only grandchild is due to leave us tragically at the age of eleven.’

Strangely, her words made Morrigan perk up a little. It was perhaps the most sentimental thing she’d ever heard Grandmother say. She felt an unexpected warmth towards the savage old bird of prey.

‘But this is a good thing! Don’t you see?’ Ivy said, looking to Corvus for support. He squeezed the bridge of his nose as if warding off a migraine. ‘It’s like . . . the circle of life. One life may be snuffed out, but another is being brought into the world. Why, it’s practically a miracle!’

Grandmother groaned faintly.

Ivy was relentless. ‘You’ll have a *new* grandchild, Ornella. Corvus will have a new daughter. Or a son! Wouldn’t that be lovely? A little boy, Corvie, you said you’d always wanted a boy. We can dress him in little black suits to match his daddy.’

Morrigan tried not to laugh at the grim expression on her father's face.

'Yes. Delightful,' he said unconvincingly. 'But perhaps we'll celebrate later.'

'But . . . Morrigan doesn't mind. Do you, Morrigan?'

'Mind what?' Morrigan asked. 'That I'm going to be blotted out of existence in a few hours and you're planning a wardrobe for my replacement? Not in the slightest.' She shoved a forkful of parsnip into her mouth.

'Oh, for goodness' sake!' Grandmother hissed, glaring down the table at her son. 'We weren't going to bring up the D-word.'

'It wasn't me,' Corvus protested.

'I didn't say "dead," Grandmother,' said Morrigan. 'I said "blotted out of existence."'

'Well, just stop it. You're giving your father a headache.'

'Ivy said "snuffed." That's much worse.'

'Enough.'

'Doesn't anybody care that I am *with child*?' shouted Ivy, stamping her foot.

'Doesn't anybody care that I'm *about to die*?' Morrigan shouted in return. 'Can we *please* talk about me for a minute?'

'I told you not to say the D-word!' boomed Grandmother.

There were three loud knocks on the front door. Silence fell.

‘Who on earth would visit at a time like this?’ Ivy whispered. ‘Reporters? Already?’ She smoothed down her hair and dress, picking up a spoon to check her reflection.

‘Vultures. Trying to get the scoop, are they?’ said Grandmother. She pointed at the maid. ‘Send them away with your most contemptuous sneer.’

Moments later they heard a brief, murmured conversation from the entrance hall, followed by the fall of heavy boots coming up the hallway, the maid’s timid protests echoing close behind.

Morrigan’s heart pounded with each footstep. *Is this it?* she thought. *Is this Death, come to take me? Does Death wear boots?*

A man appeared in the doorway, silhouetted by light.

He was tall and slender with wide shoulders. His face was half obscured by a thick woollen scarf, and the remaining half was made of freckles, watchful blue eyes and a long, broad nose.

All six-plus feet of him were decked out in a long blue coat over a slim suit with mother-of-pearl buttons – stylish but slightly askew, as if he’d just come from a formal event and was in the process of undressing on his way home. Pinned to the lapel of his coat was a small golden *W*.

He stood with his feet wide apart and hands stuffed into trouser pockets, leaning casually against the doorframe as if

he had spent half his life standing in that spot and couldn't think of a place he felt more at home. As if he himself owned Crow Manor and the Crows were merely his dinner guests.

His eyes locked onto Morrigan's. He grinned. 'Hello, you.'

Morrigan said nothing. There was silence but for the ticking of the clock on the wall.

'Sorry I'm late,' he continued, his voice slightly muffled by the scarf. 'Was at a party on a remote island in Jet-Jax-Jaida. Got chatting to the *dearest* old man, a trapeze swinger – fascinating chap, once swung over an active volcano for charity – and I forgot all about the time difference. Silly old me. Never mind, I'm here now. Got your things ready? I'm parked out the front. Are those parsnips? Lovely.'

Grandmother must have been in shock, for she didn't utter a word as the man snaffled a large piece of roast parsnip straight from the platter and ate it, licking his fingers with relish. In fact, all of the Crows seemed to have lost the capacity for speech, not least of all Morrigan.

Several moments passed as their uninvited guest rocked on his heels and waited, politely expectant, until something occurred to him.

'I'm still wearing my hat, aren't I? Goodness me. How rude.' He arched an eyebrow at his dumbfounded audience. 'Don't be alarmed; I'm ginger.'

Ginger was an understatement, Morrigan thought, trying to hide her astonishment as the hat came off. *Ginger of the Year* or *King Ginger* or *Big Gingery President of the Ginger Foundation for the Incurably Ginger* would have been more accurate. The mane of bright copper waves could probably have won awards. He unravelled the scarf from his head to reveal a beard that was only slightly less shocking in hue.

‘Um,’ Morrigan said, with all the eloquence she could muster. ‘Who are you?’

‘Jupiter.’ He looked around the room for signs of recognition. ‘Jupiter North? Jupiter North of the Wondrous Society? Your patron?’

Her patron. Jupiter North. *Her* patron. Morrigan shook her head in disbelief. Was this another prank?

She’d signed the contract. Of course she’d signed the contract, because it had been wonderful, *glorious* to pretend – just for five minutes – that it was all true. That there was really something called the Wondrous Society, and that they’d invited *her* – Morrigan Crow, of all people! – to join them. That she would live long enough to start the mysterious trials in spring. That some thrilling future waited for her on the other side of Eventide.

Of course she’d signed that blank space at the bottom. She’d even doodled a little black crow next to her name, to cover up a splotch of ink that had dropped from her pen.

Then she'd thrown it on the fire.

She hadn't for a second believed that any of it was real.
Not really. Not deep down.

Corvus at last found his voice. 'Preposterous!'

'Bless you,' said Jupiter as he renewed his attempts to usher Morrigan from the dining room to the hallway. 'I'm afraid we really do have to hurry, Morrigan. How many suitcases do you have?'

'Suitcases?' she echoed, feeling dim-witted and slow.

'Dear me,' he said. 'You *have* packed, haven't you? Never mind, we'll pick you up a toothbrush when we get there. I trust you've already said your goodbyes, but we have time for a quick round of hugs and kisses before setting off.'

Following that extraordinary suggestion (another first for the Crow household), Jupiter rushed around the table, squeezing each of the Crows in turn. Morrigan wasn't sure whether to laugh or run away when he leaned in to plant a loud, wet kiss on her father's horror-struck face.

'That is quite enough!' spluttered Corvus, rising from his chair. It was one thing for a man to arrive unannounced at Crow Manor on Eventide, but quite another to bring the notion of physical affection with him. 'You are nobody's patron. Leave my house immediately, before I call for the town guard.'

Jupiter smiled as if tickled by the threat. ‘I *am* somebody’s patron, Chancellor Crow. I am the patron of this slow-moving but otherwise delightful child. It’s all legal and aboveboard, I can assure you. She signed the contract. I have it right here.’

He whipped out a wrinkled, fold-creased, shabby piece of paper that Morrigan recognised. Jupiter pointed at her signature, complete with the tiny black crow and the accidental ink smudge.

But that was impossible.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Morrigan, shaking her head. ‘I watched it burn to ashes.’

‘Oh, it’s a Wundrous contract.’ He waved it around without care. ‘It creates identical copies of the original as soon as you sign it. That does explain the singed edges, though.’

‘I never signed that,’ said Corvus.

Jupiter shrugged. ‘I never asked you to.’

‘I’m her father! That contract requires my signature.’

‘Actually, it only requires the signature of an adult guardian, and—’

‘Wundrous contracts are illegal,’ said Grandmother, at last finding her voice, ‘under the Misuse of Wunder Act. We ought to have you arrested.’

‘Well, you’d best do it quickly, I’ve only got a few minutes,’ said Jupiter, sounding bored. He checked his watch. ‘Morrigan, we really must go. Time is running out.’

‘I know time is running out,’ said Morrigan. ‘You’ve made a mistake, Mr North. You can’t be my patron. Today’s my birthday.’

‘Of course! Happy birthday.’ He was distracted, moving to the windows to peek through the curtains. ‘Mind if we celebrate later, though? It’s getting quite late and—’

‘No, you don’t understand,’ she interrupted. The words felt heavy and dry in her mouth, but she forced them out. ‘I’m on the Cursed Children’s Register. Tonight is Eventide. I’m going to die at midnight.’

‘My, aren’t you a Negative Nelly.’

‘That’s why I burned the contract. It’s worthless. I’m sorry.’

Jupiter was gazing anxiously out the window now, a frown creasing his forehead. ‘You did actually *sign* the contract before you burnt it, though,’ he said without looking at her. ‘And who says you’re going to die? You don’t have to die if you don’t want to.’

Corvus slammed his fist on the table. ‘This is intolerable! Who do you think you are, waltzing into my home and upsetting my family with this nonsense?’

‘I told you who I am.’ Jupiter spoke patiently, as if to a senseless child. ‘My name is Jupiter North.’

‘And *I* am Corvus Crow, the state chancellor of Great Wolfacre and a ranked member of the Wintersea Party,’ said Corvus, puffing up his chest. He was on a roll now. ‘I demand that you go at once, and allow me to mourn the death of my daughter in peace.’

‘*Mourn the death of your daughter?*’ echoed Jupiter. He took two deliberate steps towards Corvus and paused, his eyes glittering. The hairs on Morrigan’s arms stood up. Jupiter’s voice dropped an entire octave, and he spoke with a cold, quiet anger that was terrible to behold. ‘Can you possibly mean the daughter standing right in front of you? The one who is demonstrably, superbly, *brilliantly* alive?’

Corvus sputtered and pointed to the clock on the wall, his hand shaking with outrage. ‘Well, *give it a few hours!*’

Morrigan felt something squeeze in her chest, and she wasn’t sure why. She’d always known she was going to die on Eventide. Her father and grandmother had never kept it secret. It shouldn’t have been a surprise that Corvus was so resigned to her fate, but Morrigan suddenly realised that to him, she might as well already be dead. Perhaps in his heart, she’d been dead for years.

‘Morrigan,’ said Jupiter, in a voice very different from the one he’d just used on her father. ‘Don’t you want to *live*?’

Morrigan flinched. What sort of a question was that? ‘It doesn’t matter what I want.’

‘It does,’ he insisted. ‘It matters so very, very much. Right now it’s the only thing that matters.’

Her eyes flicked from her father to her grandmother to her stepmother. They all watched her intently, uneasily, as if seeing her properly for the first time.

‘Of course I want to live,’ she said quietly. It was the first time she’d ever spoken the words aloud. The tightness in her chest eased a little.

‘Good choice.’ Jupiter smiled; the cloud disappeared from his face as quickly as it had arrived. He turned back to the window. ‘Death is boring. Life is much more fun. Things happen in life all the time. Unexpected things. Things you couldn’t possibly expect because they’re so very . . . unexpected.’ He stepped backwards, inching away from the window and reaching blindly for Morrigan, fumbling to take her hand. ‘For instance, I bet you didn’t expect your so-called death to arrive three hours early.’

Morrigan felt something powdery land on her face. Wiping it away, she looked up to see the light fixtures shaking and cracks appearing in the plaster. The light bulbs stuttered and buzzed. The windows began to rattle. There was a faint smell of burning.

‘What’s that?’ She squeezed his hand automatically. ‘What’s happening?’

Jupiter leaned down to whisper in her ear. 'Do you trust me?'

She answered without thinking. 'Yes.'

'You sure?'

'Positive.'

'All right.' He looked her in the eye. The floor trembled beneath their feet. 'I'm going to take that curtain down in a moment. But whatever you see out there, you mustn't be afraid. They can tell when you're afraid.'

Morrigan swallowed. 'They?'

'Just follow my lead and you'll be fine. Yes? No fear.'

'No fear,' repeated Morrigan. Meanwhile, fear had set up camp in her stomach and was having a festival. A Ferris wheel of fear spun idly in her abdomen. Dancing circus elephants of fear somersaulted through her intestinal tract.

'What the devil are you talking about over there?' said Grandmother. 'What's he saying to you, Morrigan? I demand to—'

In a rush of sudden movement Jupiter pulled a handful of silver dust from his pocket and blew it towards Corvus, Ivy and Grandmother like a cloudy, starry kiss, then leapt up to the window and ripped down the curtain, dropping it in a crumpled, messy pile in the middle of the floor.

He stood back to gaze at his handiwork and shook his head slowly, mournfully. 'I am *so* sorry. How tragic to have lost her so young.'

Corvus frowned and blinked, looking unsure. His eyes were glassy. 'Tragic?'

'Mmm,' said Jupiter. He threw an arm around Corvus's shoulders and led him closer to the pile of fabric. 'Dear, dear Morrigan. So full of life. So much to share with the world. But taken! Taken too soon.'

'Too soon.' Corvus nodded in shell-shocked agreement. 'Much too soon.'

Jupiter put his other arm around Ivy and drew her into his chest. 'You mustn't blame yourselves. Although you could a bit, if you wanted to.' He winked at Morrigan, who felt a small, hysterical laugh working its way up out of her throat. Did they really believe that curtain was her, lying dead on the floor? She was standing right in front of them!

'She looks so small.' Ivy sniffed and drew her sleeve across her nose. 'So small and thin.'

'Yes,' said Jupiter mournfully. 'Almost as if she were . . . made of fabric.'

Morrigan snorted, but the Crows made no sign that they'd heard her.

'I'll leave you to make the necessary arrangements. You'll need to prepare a statement for the press, Chancellor. But

before I go, may I suggest a closed casket for the funeral? Open caskets are so tacky.'

'Yes,' said Grandmother, gazing down at curtain-Morrigan. 'Indeed. Quite tacky.'

'What did you do?' Morrigan whispered to Jupiter. 'What was that silver stuff?'

'Highly illegal. Pretend you didn't see it.'

The light fixture swung violently, casting shadows across the room. An unmistakable smell of woodsmoke filled the air. The floor began to shake again, and in the distance Morrigan heard something like heavy rain or rolling thunder or – was it – *hoofbeats*?

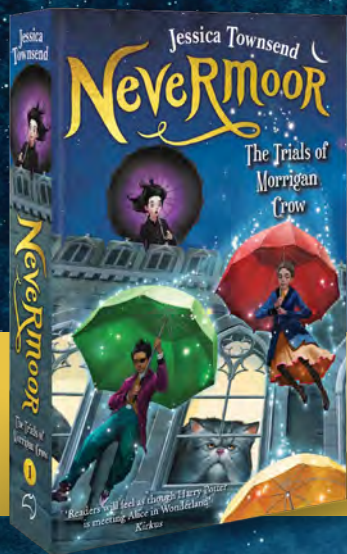
She turned to the window and felt a hot, prickling fear all the way down her spine. Panic rose like bile in her throat.

She could see it. She could see her death coming.

Want to find out what
happens to cursed child
Morrigan Crow?

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on 10 October 2017

Step Boldly



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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. *Nevermoor: The Trials of Morrigan Crow* is her first novel.

With publishing rights sold in 28 territories and film rights pre-empted by 20th Century Fox, *NEVERMOOR* is set to be an international phenomenon and Jessica a Wondrous, worldwide star.

Nevermoor

The Trials of Morrigan Crow

Morrigan Crow is cursed. Born on an unlucky day, she is blamed for all local misfortunes, from hailstorms to heart attacks - and, worst of all, the curse means that Morrigan is doomed to die at midnight on Eventide.

But as Morrigan awaits her fate, a strange and remarkable man named Jupiter North appears. Chased by black-smoke hounds and shadowy hunters on horseback, he whisks her away into the safety of a secret, magical city called Nevermoor.

It's there that Morrigan discovers Jupiter has chosen her to contend for a place in the city's most prestigious organisation: the Wondrous Society. In order to join, she must compete in four difficult and dangerous trials against hundreds of other children, each boasting an extraordinary talent that sets them apart.

Except for Morrigan, who doesn't seem to have any special talent at all.

To stay in the safety of Nevermoor for good, Morrigan will need to find a way to pass the tests or she'll have to leave the city to confront her deadly fate.

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