THE EVIL WIZARD SMALLBONE

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The great white wolf ran through the woods. Snow weighed on his back and shoulders, cold and heavy and wet, but he did not notice. He was on the hunt and he was hungry, though not as hungry as the pack that ran behind him, panting clouds of hot breath into the cold, damp air.

The pack was a coyote pack, and it smelled of rotten meat and motor oil. These are not natural smells for a coyote pack, and a wolf is not a natural leader for coyotes. There was, in fact, very little natural about this pack, except its hunger. It was a hard winter and game of all kinds was scarce.

A sea wind whipped the snow into the white wolf’s eyes and brought a new and curious scent to his
super-sensitive nose. He stopped and sniffed thoughtfully. A boy. Young, human, full of rage and terror, and, yes, raw magic as well. Making for the enemy’s territory. As was he. Curious.

With a furious howl, the wolf wizard Fidelou leaped forward, outpacing even the wind with his long strides. The scent grew stronger—the quarry was near. Ahead lay the Stream that marked the boundary of his enemy’s land, the Stream that no magic could cross. The wolf wizard howled again, with triumph this time. He would give the boy a choice—to join the pack or feed it. He didn’t care which.

But when Fidelou reached the Stream, all he saw was a clumsy trail in the snow leading to the pine tree he had felled last autumn in an attempt to bridge the enchanted water.

The wolf stood on the frozen bank and raised his nose to search the air again. He smelled salt and goats, chickens and cows and sheep and fish. And—wonder of wonders—the boy, moving straight for the enemy’s lair. While his pack muttered and whined around him, Fidelou shook the snow from his shoulders and
thought. If this was so, his enemy’s last defenses must be weakening. Fire and Air had faded long ago, prey to Fidelou’s attacks and their own inherent instability. Water and Earth, however, had stood firm. Until now.

And if they fell, he, Fidelou, would confront his enemy at last, and their battle would be spoken of as long as stories were told.

But first, the boundary must be tested. Fidelou turned away from the Stream, lowered his great head, and bared his long teeth, growling. The pack instantly groveled at his feet, bellies sunk in the clinging snow. Fidelou looked them over. A mangy bunch of curs, each more useless than the last—except perhaps his lieutenant, Hiram, and the she-coyote, Audrey. He would not risk them. That one cowering at the back, though—Doc, the so-called mechanic—was a fumble-fingered fool, unable to repair anything more complicated than a motorized bicycle. He would do.

Fidelou fixed the lean coyote’s amber eyes with his own fiery gaze and growled. Whining pitifully, his head drooping almost to the ground, the unhappy coyote slunk forward and onto the ice. The wolf wizard
watched as he padded cautiously to the middle of the Stream, taking care not to step on any of the rocks breaking the frozen surface. Except for the panting of the coyotes and the occasional eager whine, the woods were still. And then, CRACK! The ice broke open under the coyote’s feet, plunging his hindquarters into the black water beneath.

The pack howled as their packmate scrabbled at the broken ice, searching desperately for something to hold on to. The current pulled him down, and with a final yelp, he disappeared under the ice.

Then the earth trembled beneath the coyotes’ feet, and stones flew from the far side of the stream and rained down on them. Yipping and yammering, the pack turned and fled inland.

But the white wolf remained on the bank, balanced on the heaving earth, the stones bouncing off his thick pelt. He lifted his nose to the invisible moon and howled, a long shivering note of rage and defiance, then turned and followed his pack.
Nick Reynaud didn’t know where he was. He’d left the last town a while back, and now all he knew was that he was somewhere near the coast. No lights or houses or gas stations, only trees, black against the cloudy sky, with the road glimmering faintly between them. Night was falling, along with the temperature. He was cold and hungry, and not far from being scared.

As far as he could tell, it had been two days since he’d stood on the highway with his thumb out, waiting for a truck to pick him up and take him as far away from Beaton, Maine, as the road would go. It had taken a while, and the driver who eventually stopped was pretty suspicious. But it had worked out all right in the end.
Nick smiled. He’d fooled that guy but good. Getting him to believe Nick was going home instead of running away had been easy. Persuading him to drop Nick outside Bath had taken some fast talking, but Nick was good at fast talking. Sometimes he’d even been able to talk Uncle Gabe into beating up on his cousin Jerry instead of him. But not nearly often enough. Which was why Nick was running away. Again.

The first time had been three years ago, right after his mom died. He was only nine at the time, it was winter, and he didn’t have a plan or food or anything, so it was probably just as well that the police had picked him up before he got too far. The second time, he’d been almost eleven and much better prepared. He took off after school with a bag of chips and a hot dog and twenty bucks he’d earned doing odd jobs for Mrs. Perkins next door. When his cousin Jerry caught up with him at the bus station, Nick had been buying a ticket to Bangor. After that, Uncle Gabe made Jerry walk Nick to and from school every day.

Jerry was sixteen, and as far as Nick could tell, his greatest ambition in life was to beat up every man in
Beaton by the time he turned twenty. He liked to practice on Nick.

Nick had put a lot of time and thought into planning his next escape, and he thought he’d done a pretty good job. He’d boosted a map and a flashlight, extra batteries, some trail mix, and a bottle of Coke from a gas station. He’d stuffed his emergency kit and some clean clothes into Jerry’s old backpack and hid it under his bed, ready to grab when he saw a chance to make a clean getaway.

Things hadn’t worked out according to plan.

The week before Christmas, Nick had gotten into another fight at school, and the principal had called Uncle Gabe to come pick him up. After getting yelled at by his boss for leaving work early and lectured by the principal about Nick’s bad attitude, Uncle Gabe was ready for a few beers. When they got home, he gave Nick a couple of licks on account and locked him down cellar, promising him the rest of his larruping later.

Nick decided he wouldn’t be around later.

He crept up the cellar stairs and listened at the door. A deafening hubbub of revving, screeching,

+ 3 +
and crashing told him Uncle Gabe was watching the stock-car races, turned up high. Nick figured he could probably blow the house up right now, and the old so-and-so wouldn’t notice until he was halfway to the moon. With a last wistful thought for the backpack upstairs under his bed, he smashed a crowbar through the nearest window, scrambled out into the scrubby backyard, and made tracks.

As he trudged through the snow, Nick couldn’t help thinking about the flashlight and the trail mix he’d had to leave behind. It could have been worse. He had his jacket and boots, and the suspicious truck driver had stood him a hot dog and a Coke. But his boots were old and his jacket was thin and the hot dog had been a long time ago. He felt like he’d been walking forever. His belly was as empty as a hole in the ground, his feet were like concrete blocks, and he was shivering like a wet dog. He wanted to rest, but everybody knew sitting down in the snow was dangerous, and he hadn’t run away from Uncle Gabe’s belt so he could freeze to death. He put his head down and pressed on.
After a while, he saw a double-wide trailer set up on cinder blocks a little ways back from the road. There was a light shining through the curtains. He was saved.

He banged on the metal door. It opened a crack, releasing a puff of warm, cigarette-scented air.

“Sorry to bother you,” Nick said. “I’m lost. If you’ll give me a hot meal and a warm place to sleep, I’ll do anything you need done. I can fix things . . .”

The door slammed shut.

Nick yelled one of Uncle Gabe’s favorite words and gave the trailer door a farewell kick. His feet were so cold, he couldn’t even feel it.

He hit the road again.

It began to snow. Fat, heavy, wet flakes clung to Nick’s hair, clogged his boots, and slid icy fingers down between his neck and his jacket collar. The wind picked up, needling his already stinging cheeks. He balled his fists in his pockets, bent his head, and forced his legs to keep going.

White swirled around him until he was walking blind, surrounded by snow and cold and the insistent whine of the wind. Time passed, unmeasurable, and
still he walked, his nose dripping and his eyes streaming with frosty tears. He couldn’t feel his fingers or his toes. For a while, he thought he felt a heaving under his feet, as if the ground were bearing him forward on a snowy wave. Must have been his imagination.

Some time later, the snow let up. Behind the clouds, the moon was high. He could just see a snowy road stretched out in front of him, with trees growing thick on each side. He was so tired, he could hardly stagger. There was some reason he shouldn’t stop and rest, but he couldn’t quite remember what it was.

Then the howling started.

It was far off at first, spooky, like the sound track of a horror movie, sliding up the scale and holding, long and hollow, before breaking off and starting again. Nick picked up his pace a little.

A rabbit galloped past him and dove into the underbrush. A deer leaped across the road, wheeled, wide-eyed, and took off in another direction.

The howling sounded again, louder and much closer.

Nick broke into a stumbling run. The road narrowed,
curved, morphed into a path through the woods. The howling was still behind him and the going increasingly rough and clogged with undergrowth. Doggedly, he floundered on.

The path ended at a frozen stream.

It wasn’t a friendly-looking stream. Rocks stuck out of it like gravestones, and the snowy ice between them looked jagged and sharp. He couldn’t cross here. He clambered along the bank until he saw a pine tree lying across the stream. It wasn’t exactly easy to walk on, but he managed it, clinging to the brittle snowy branches with numb hands. At the far end, his foot caught in a tangle of roots and he fell facedown in the snow. He was too tired to move.

But when the howling swelled, closer than ever, Nick was on his feet and running through the woods. It took him a minute to realize that he was running on a path, and another to see that the path was straight and dry and padded with pine needles. There was a light ahead of him, glowing through the branches like a yellow moon. It promised shelter and food and warmth, and Nick followed.

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The path ended. Nick leaned against a pine, panting cloudily and staring across a good-sized clearing at the house the light came from. It was almost too big to be real, with roofs that blocked out half the sky. It had dozens of windows and a forest of chimneys. A deep wraparound porch ended in an octagonal tower with a pointy roof and round windows from which light poured like honey over the mounded snow. He’d never seen anything remotely like it, not even on TV. A house like that could only belong to rich people. And while he didn’t know any rich people personally, they probably would hate some random stray banging on their door even more than the trailer person had. They’d take one look at his uncombed black hair and his broken tooth and his ratacious jacket and call the police, who’d probably send him back to Uncle Gabe, who might not actually kill him but would absolutely make him wish he was dead.

Which was exactly what he would be if he stayed out here in the cold with the wolves.

The howling behind him rose to a furious crescendo, and Nick launched himself into a shambling
run that carried him across the clearing and up onto the front porch. Half sobbing, he pounded on the big oak door. It flew open with a tooth-wrenching shriek of hinges. A narrow beam of yellow light blinded him, and a bony hand grabbed his arm.

“Let go!” Nick gasped.

The light pulled back, and a pair of rimless round glasses floated into view. Nick blinked. A beard like an extra-large dust bunny came into focus under the glasses.

The beard opened. “What do you think you’re doing,” said a gruff, creaky voice, “banging on the door this time of night?”

“I’m lost,” Nick said. “And there are wolves after me!”

“A likely story.” The old man gave Nick a shake. “Can you read?”

“Read? Are you nuts? Why?”

“Answer the question.”

As a general rule, Nick was against answering questions truthfully. In his experience, any truth you gave away was likely to be used against you. “No,” he
said sullenly. “I got a condition or something—the letters don’t make sense. Can I come in before I freeze to death?”

The old man set the light on a nearby surface and rummaged one handed in the pockets of his long coat, muttering “Durn house,” and “Jeezly mess,” and “This better be good.” Finally, he pulled out a small white rectangle and thrust it under Nick’s nose. “What does this say?”

Nick squinted at it. “It’s a white card with black writing.”

The card disappeared. “Can’t be too careful. Don’t need some jeezly boy reading things that don’t concern him.”

As he pulled Nick inside, the door swung shut with a solid *thunk*. Two large black dogs stalked out of the gloom and snuffled busily at Nick’s knees. Nick stiffened. He wasn’t used to dogs.


Nick didn’t believe a word the old man said.
Because Nick could read perfectly well, and this is what he’d read on the card the old man had shown him:

**EVIL WIZARD BOOKS**
ZACHARIAH SMALLBONE, PROP.
Used Books, Maps, Local History, Speculative Fiction, Arcana
Open by Chance and by Appointment,
Fridays–Sundays from May to September

A little while later, Nick was sitting in a kitchen. His feet were in a bowl of warm water, his shoulders were draped in a striped Hudson’s Bay blanket, and his hands were wrapped around a mug of hot milk. The kitchen was tidy and oddly cozy, with red-checked curtains over the windows, an old-fashioned iron stove in one corner, and a stone fireplace with a rocking chair beside it. There was an orange cat in the rocker and a second cat, black, curled up on a braided rug. A picture calendar with the days crossed off in blue pencil hung over the sink.

The old man whose card said he was an evil wizard was hunched over the stove, frying sausages in a
cast-iron pan with his long black coat skirt flapping around his boot tops. He was also wearing a hat like a bashed-in stovepipe. He hadn’t taken either of them off, though the kitchen was perfectly warm.

Nick didn’t believe in wizards, evil or otherwise. Not in the real world, and certainly not in Maine. Even when he was a little kid, Nick had known that fairies and wishes and heroes who overcame dragons and evil wizards were all just make-believe and day-dreaming. However, if there was such a thing as an evil wizard, Nick thought he’d have a coat just like Zachariah Smallbone’s. He might even have two black dogs, although they probably wouldn’t sit with their tongues hanging out, begging for bites of sausage. They probably wouldn’t be called Mutt and Jeff, either.

Nick wasn’t sure about the cats.

Smallbone plunked a plate of sausages and baked beans on the table, and Nick attacked them with the eagerness of a boy who hadn’t seen food for a while. As he scraped up the last bite, the dogs heaved twin sighs of disappointment and curled up on the rug. The black cat leaped onto the rocker, hustled the orange
tiger out of its nest, tucked its paws under its chest, and closed its pale-blue eyes.

Smallbone forked another sausage onto Nick’s plate. “What’s your name, boy?”

Despite the sausages and the cozy kitchen, Nick didn’t even consider telling him the truth. Wizards might be made-up, but evil was real. “Jerry Reynaud.”

Smallbone’s beard bobbed thoughtfully. “Hmph. You don’t look like a Jerry. You don’t feel like a Jerry. You don’t smell like a Jerry or act like a Jerry or sound like a Jerry. I’ll call you Foxkin. Where you from, Foxkin?”

Nick took a deep pull of milk, then launched into the story he’d invented to explain what he was doing wandering through the woods on a snowy evening.

He was proud of that story. It was artistic and, he thought, convincing. It involved a bike and an errand to an imaginary cousin living down the road and the snow and the front wheel frame breaking and Nick’s taking a wrong turn and getting lost. While Nick talked, Smallbone tipped the black cat out of the rocking chair, sat down, and lit a long white pipe.

“Very good,” he said when Nick was done. “Very
good indeed. You’re an inspired liar, Foxkin. You don’t embroider unnecessarily, you give just the right details, and you know when to stop.”

Nick put on his best innocent look. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Fox by name, fox by nature.” Smallbone stared at him through curls of foul-smelling smoke. “You can’t fool me, you know. So you’d better not try. Now,” he went on, “it just so happens that I could use an apprentice. You’re scrawny as a plucked chicken and numb as a haddock, but you’re here, so you’ll have to do. It’ll be the usual arrangement: room and board and whatever I feel like teaching you in return for seeing to the animals, cooking, keeping the place clean, and generally doing as you’re told.”

The sausages and beans curdled in Nick’s stomach. “Apprentice? I don’t want a job. I mean, I’ll work to pay off dinner and all, but I need to go home soon as the snow stops. My uncle—I mean, my father—is—will be worried.”

Smallbone gave a low, dry, evil-sounding chuckle. “You ain’t going nowhere. From the look of you, I
doubt this uncle of yours—I mean father—cares whether you live or die. If he even exists. You’re a waif and a stray, my Foxkin. You knocked on the door and you asked for shelter. Well, you got it. And now Evil Wizard Books has got you.”

He rose to his feet, and the dogs jumped up like they’d been stung and ran into the front room, their tails tucked between their legs. The cats hissed and streaked after them. The old man lifted his arms, and his round glasses shone like silver coins and his white hair and bony fingers crackled with energy.

“I am the Evil Wizard Smallbone.” His voice swelled and clanged like iron bells. “I know spells of binding and release, transformation and stasis, finding and losing. I learned them by experiment and example and luck. But most of all, I learned them from books. And you’ll never learn a single thing I don’t choose to teach you, because you can’t read!”

Nick stared, openmouthed. The evil wizard lowered his arms and straightened his hat. “Well,” he said mildly, “now we’re all clear where we stand, you can take a bath.”

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“What?”
Smallbone’s beard bobbed impatiently. “How old are you, boy?”
Nick was too disoriented to lie. “Twelve.”
“Plenty old enough to know what a bath is. You’re rank, Foxkin. In plain English, you stink. And you look like you been drug through a knothole backwards. Bathroom’s through that door over there. Don’t spare the soap.”
Something was tickling Nick’s nose. He groaned and buried his face in his pillow. He knew he was dreaming because it smelled of lavender instead of motor oil.

The tickling moved to his ear, along with the sound of breathing and something wet and . . .

“Yow!” Nick rolled out of bed with a bone-shaking thump, whacking his elbow so hard he saw stars.

Since his mattress at Uncle Gabe’s was on the floor, he knew he must be somewhere else. Which meant he’d succeeded in running away from Beaton. And now he was—oh, yes—in a big house in the middle of nowhere owned by a crazy old dude who claimed to be an evil wizard.
Nick sat up, rubbing his elbow. The room was just exactly the kind of bedroom his mom would have loved, from its blue-checked curtains to the desk by the window to the painted wooden bed, where a small orange cat was peering at him out of the folds of a bright quilt. It mewed, jumped down, and butted against his leg. Nick scratched its ears and tried to remember what had happened last night.

He remembered taking a bath in a bathtub perched up on lion’s paws, hot enough to soak the last of the cold right out of him. The towels were warm, too, and the long flannel shirt Smallbone gave him to sleep in. Nick thought it looked uncomfortably like a nightgown, but it was either that or the filthy clothes he’d come in. He didn’t like sleeping in his clothes, but sometimes he had to—when the heat was off at Uncle Gabe’s, for instance. Times were tough, Uncle Gabe said. Oil was expensive. And a man couldn’t live without cable and beer.

Did Smallbone have cable? Nick wondered. Did Smallbone even have a TV? It didn’t seem likely.

After the bath, the old man had picked up a lantern

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that smelled strongly of kerosene and seemed to create more shadows than it chased away. He led Nick through the gloomy front room and up a steep stair to an even gloomier hall where rows of brass doorknobs glowed in the flickering light. Smallbone turned one of them and pushed open a door onto absolute blackness.

“Here you are,” he said. “Sweet dreams.” And he’d taken the lantern back downstairs, leaving Nick to find his way to bed in the dark.

Now it was morning, and the room filled with mouthwatering smells of frying bacon and coffee. The orange cat mewed and trotted out the door. Nick’s stomach rumbled hopefully. There was a chair by the bed with a pile of clothes folded across the cane seat. Nick got up and shook out, in turn, a set of embarrassing long underwear with a drop seat, a plaid shirt, a pair of bib overalls, and lumpy knitted socks. A quick, desperate search in a chest of drawers turned up a pair of corduroy knickers, a tiny frilled shirt, two pairs of linen sheets, and another nightshirt. Nick put on the clothes from the chair and went in search of breakfast.
The hall was long and shadowy. When Nick turned toward where he thought the stairs were, he saw a kid glaring at him suspiciously.

Nick scowled and swaggered. The kid did the same.

Oh.

Nick laughed. It was the patched overalls and faded flannel shirt, that’s all, making him look like a hick from Hicksville on the planet Hickooine. Before he left, he’d have to get his own clothes back. He was leaving, no doubt about that. But not until he’d rested a couple of days, found out where the nearest town was, made some plans. It wasn’t like the old man had done anything particularly threatening, after all—just waved his arms around and talked like a nut job. If things got weird, Nick could always run away. He was good at running away.

He clattered down the steps to the front room. He’d been too sleepy to notice much the night before, but now he saw that it was filled with tall, dark shelves stuffed solid with books. It was also dim and chilly and stank of mold. The back of his neck prickled, like somebody was watching him, wary and a little hostile.

+ 20 +
The dogs, maybe. Or the spiders that had spun all those webs. He passed through as quickly as possible, following the smell of bacon.

The kitchen was bright and warm. Smallbone was busy at the stove, his black hat tipped crazily to one side. “Breakfast’s ready,” he said. “Eggs are cooked solid and the bacon’s burnt, but that’s all you deserve, sleeping half the day.”

Nick slid into a chair, and Smallbone slapped a plate of bacon and eggs, sunny side up and perfect, onto the red-checked tablecloth. The black cat jumped up and sniffed delicately at the bacon. Nick flapped his hand at it. “Scat!”

Unfazed, the cat sat down beside the plate, cocked its hind leg, and got down to some serious grooming. Nick gave it a shove. It hissed like a boiling kettle and leaped from the table to a narrow shelf over the stove, where it crouched between a salt box and a pottery jar and glared out resentfully.

“You want to watch out for Hell Cat,” Smallbone remarked. “She bites.”

“So do I,” said Nick, and dug into his eggs. The
dogs from last night stationed themselves on each side of his chair, and the little orange cat jumped into his lap and patted his hand with a soft paw. Nick broke off a bit of bacon.

The old man settled himself in the rocking chair and got out his pipe. “Tom can always tell an easy mark,” he said.

Nick gave Tom the bacon anyway. He crunched it neatly, then jumped down and sauntered off. The dogs yawned and kept on hoping.

Having filled his pipe and lit it, Smallbone fixed Nick with his glittering spectacles. “I suppose you ain’t a farm boy, Foxkin?”

Nick swallowed his egg. “Nope.”

Smallbone said, “It ain’t rocket science. You’ll feed and water the livestock, spread fresh bedding and suchlike. Collect eggs. Milk the goats.”

Nick’s fork paused halfway to his mouth. “Milk the goats?”

“You’ll pick it up.” The old man sounded horribly cheerful. “It’s easy as splitting wood, once you know the trick. You do know how to split wood, don’t you?”

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Nick shook his head. There might not have been much heat in Uncle Gabe’s house, but what there was came from an oil furnace. “If you’re an evil wizard, how come you don’t just do it all by magic?”

Smallbone grinned, displaying a dentist’s nightmare of crooked yellow teeth. “Because that’s what an apprentice is for.”

This conversation was going nowhere good. “I said I’d do one job, to pay you back,” Nick said. “But then I got to move on.”

“One job.” Smallbone’s dark eyes narrowed behind his glasses. “I see. Well, you can clean the shop, then. But wash the dishes first. I hate a dirty kitchen.” He emptied his pipe into the fire, wrapped a muddy-gray scarf around his neck, and went outside.

The shop. That must be the book-filled front room. He remembered the card Smallbone had shown him. Evil Wizard Books, huh? Stink City Books would be a better name. Muttering, Nick left the dishes on the floor for the animals to lick and went to look for a vacuum cleaner. He wasn’t particularly surprised when he didn’t find one. There was, however, an ancient
straw broom and a tin bucket in the mudroom, and a basket of clean rags under the sink. Nick stuffed his pocket with rags, filled the bucket, and carried it and the broom into the shop. He might not be able to keep out of trouble, but he could clean, no problem. His mom had worked for a cleaning company and used to take Nick on jobs when he wasn’t in school. He’d grown up helping her sprinkle water on floors to keep the dust down and polish windows with vinegar and newspaper. He even knew how to wind up cobwebs on a broom handle like dirty cotton candy.

This was a good thing, because Evil Wizard Books was well supplied with cobwebs. They drooped from the corners and hung in heavy swags between the rows of tall bookcases. They veiled the big bay window behind the shop counter like ragged curtains and completely covered a mysterious box-like shape that Nick thought might be an old-fashioned cash register. Besides the cobwebs, there was plenty of grime—on the windows, mostly, but also on the floor, which looked like it hadn’t been swept or scrubbed in maybe a hundred years. Nick saw tracks in the dust where
Smallbone and the dogs had walked to the door and back, and the smears of his own wet boots.

The air smelled sour and musty.

If it hadn’t been for the snow and the wind and the cold and the memory of wolves howling, Nick might have stolen a heavier jacket and some food and taken his chances in the woods. But Smallbone’s sausages had been delicious, also his eggs, and it was nice to feel, if not exactly safe, at least warm. Besides, Nick might be a liar, but his mom had always said it was important to keep promises.

Reversing the broom, he took a swipe at the nearest web. It danced away like a curtain in a light breeze. He swiped at it a couple more times with the same result, almost as though it knew he was trying to get rid of it.

Nick pulled a rag from his pocket, wrung it out in the bucket like his mom used to do, and swiped it over the grimy counter.

The dirt didn’t even smear.

He rubbed harder. Tom jumped up by his elbow, curled himself next to the shrouded cash register, and
watched through slitted eyes. The rag turned black, but the counter stayed as grimy as ever. It felt like trying to blow out one of those trick birthday candles. It wasn’t magic, of course. Magic—except for the card trick, nothing-up-my-sleeve kind—didn’t exist. Nick was very clear on that. Still, there was obviously something going on.

Nick threw the rag on the floor and swore. Tom jumped down off the counter and padded away.

A voice behind him made a *tsk, tsk* noise, and Nick spun around.

Smallbone was standing on the stairs with his coat fluttering like something out of a late-night horror movie. “Best watch your tongue, Foxkin,” he said. “The books in this shop don’t take to bad language.”

Nick swore again, using one of Uncle Gabe’s best swears, then said, “You want this stupid shop cleaned, do it yourself. I’m out of here.”

“You ain’t going nowhere,” said Smallbone.

Nick had heard that before, from Uncle Gabe. “How you going to stop me, old man?”

“I’ll turn you into a spider.”

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Smallbone’s voice was perfectly calm and matter-of-fact. He obviously believed he could turn Nick into a spider, and for a second, looking up into the flat silver of his little round glasses, Nick half believed it, too. Then Smallbone worked his jaw in a munching way, and Nick remembered he was just a crazy old dude who thought he was a wizard.

He laughed.

Smallbone’s beard bunched up threateningly. “You think you’re clever, don’t you, Foxkin, can see right through the old crackpot like he’s a jeezly clean window?”

Nick shrugged. “You said it—I didn’t.”

Smallbone raised his bony fist high. “Just remember, you brought this on yourself.” He began to speak words in no language Nick had ever heard before, his voice clanging and swelling. Nick wanted to run, but he couldn’t move. All he could do was watch Smallbone swelling up and up like a giant balloon as the bookshop faded into a shadowy mist.
Smallbone Cove was one of the prettiest towns on the Maine coast. It was tucked at the end of a deep, rocky inlet with a view down the Reach of little forested islands and distant blue hills. The weather was always practically perfect. In summer, it rained often enough to keep the small farmers happy and no more, and a brisk offshore breeze cleared the fog before anybody was ready to go to the beach. Its shore was free from blackflies, and its woods were free from mosquitoes. The winters were mild (for Maine), with a minimum of nor’easters and a maximum of days above zero. Violets and white trilliums bloomed early in Smallbone Cove, and the bright leaves of fall lingered late.

Whatever the weather was like in the rest of Maine,
in Smallbone Cove, the Fourth of July was always clear and sunny.

In summer, tourists flocked to Smallbone Cove like bears to honey. They loved it because it was quaint and relaxing, a little slice of the good old days, when life was slower and less complicated. Kids jumped rope in the parking lot to rhymes about building walls and blowing winds, and the only snacks available were all homemade.

There were no computers in Smallbone Cove and no electronics. At Smallbone Cove Mercantile, Lily and Zery Smallbone rang up homemade jams and sunscreen on a big brass cash register like the ones in every other shop in town. Telephones had cords and dials and lots of static on the line. There was no Smallbone Cove police force because there was no crime, not even any sketchy-looking characters hanging around at night. Of course, you had to go to Blue Hill if you wanted to eat anything but seafood and veggies. There was no cell-phone reception and forget about wi-fi, but most people thought it was kind of nice to be away from the Internet—for a few days, anyway.

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In winter, when the tourists were gone, the adult Smallbone Covers fished, raised animals, and made things to sell in summer. Their kids went to the smallest school in Maine. It was too small to exist, really—its twenty-five students should have ridden the bus to Blue Hill. But somehow they didn’t—just like the library didn’t have wi-fi like every other library in Maine and the citizens didn’t pay any state or local taxes. It was as if the State of Maine didn’t know that Smallbone Cove existed.

The other thing the Covers didn’t do was leave Smallbone Cove. They didn’t go on vacations; they didn’t go away to college; they didn’t even go shopping in Blue Hill. The adults didn’t seem to mind, and if they did, they didn’t complain. They ordered their souvenir T-shirts and groceries and professional supplies over the phone or even by mail. They understood that staying inside the Town Limits was part of the price they paid for living in a practically perfect place.

The other part was looking after Zachariah Smallbone, the proprietor of Evil Wizard Books.

Nobody talked about him much, but everybody
knew that he was the founder of Smallbone Cove, that he was over three hundred years old, and that he was the reason that Smallbone Cove was the way it was.

When Dinah Smallbone was five, she’d asked her mother if Smallbone was really an evil wizard like in the fairy tales.

Lily had given her one of those looks mothers give kids when they ask an awkward question. Dinah, who was all about asking awkward questions, saw it often.

“I’ve never seen him do magic—not anything I’d call magic, anyway,” Lily said carefully. “And he’s never done anything I’d call evil, unless you count tearing strips off anybody who talks to him when he’s not in the mood for talking. But my grammy used to tell stories that’d curl your hair, about him turning folks into frogs and calling up demons and hurricanes and such.”

Dinah thought about this. “Maybe your grammy was making them up.”

“No,” said her mom, “she couldn’t. Grammy couldn’t make up a story to save her life. If she said Smallbone turned folks into frogs, then that’s what he did.”

* 31 *
“Is that why he doesn’t have to pay for anything, even the special orders?”

“Well, he keeps Smallbone Cove safe, too.” Lily took Dinah’s shoulders and gave them a squeeze. “Listen, honey. You know I told you how people aren’t comfortable talking about certain things? Smallbone’s one of those things. I’m glad we had this talk, but you better not try and have it with anybody else.”

Dinah nodded. She didn’t really understand why certain subjects made adults uncomfortable, but she did understand that nobody would discuss them with her. It was a disappointment that Smallbone fell into that category. She was curious about how anybody could live three hundred years and not just wither up and blow away.

Dinah was curious about many things. When she was six, she’d decided she was going to be a scientist and learn how and why things worked. By seven, she’d discovered that books will tell you things that adults will not, and she started to spend all her spare time in the library. When she was eleven, the Smallbone Cove librarian gave her an after-school job as her assistant.
The librarian’s name was Miss Rachel Smallbone, and in Dinah’s opinion, she was the most interesting person in Smallbone Cove. She wore thick glasses that magnified her eyes into huge pools of darkness. Her lips were thin, her nose small and flat, and she wore her mottled gray-and-white hair tucked into a bun at the nape of her neck. She spent her days by the library’s front window in a wheeled chair with a desk fastened across the arms, writing a book on the history of Smallbone Cove and keeping an eye on things.

As Miss Rachel’s assistant, Dinah helped her go through the Smallbone Cove archives, which consisted of old books and papers that had accumulated over the years. Since she couldn’t help reading what she was sorting and discussing it with Miss Rachel, the job went very slowly. But Miss Rachel didn’t seem to mind and always answered Dinah’s questions, however awkward—including the one about what had happened to her legs.

“Oh, Smallbone did that.”

She sounded so cheerful about it that Dinah was surprised and just a little suspicious. “Mom says she
never heard of him doing anything really evil,” she said.

“That’s because it happened before she was born, dear. And it wasn’t long after that the wolf wizard and his were-coyotes started prowling the Town Limits again, so it didn’t get talked about much.”

Miss Rachel fell silent, but Dinah knew there had to be more to the story than that. “So,” she said carefully, “he just walked into town and blasted you? That’s pretty evil.”

Miss Rachel laughed. She had a deep, hoarse laugh like a bark that only came out when she was really amused. “As if he’d take the trouble! No. It was all because Silas’s grandfather John—he was little Johnny Smallbone then—said I wouldn’t dare steal a pumpkin out of the evil wizard’s pumpkin patch. We were fourteen, you see, and that’s what passes for courting at that age. Anyway, I took the dare and Smallbone caught me. He threatened to turn me into all kinds of horrible things, but in the end, he just withered my legs.” She shook her head. “It was a long way home,
dragging myself and the pumpkin through the woods in the dark, but I made it. Johnny felt terrible.”

“You brought the pumpkin?” Dinah exclaimed.

“Smallbone said he thought I’d earned it.”

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Recently, Smallbone Cove had become a slightly less perfect place to live. All summer, the tourists had complained of being kept awake by mosquitoes and howling coyotes. By Labor Day, they’d all gone home and nobody came back for autumn leaf-peeping. In November, the winter storms had hit heavy and hard, making deliveries difficult. The Christmas food order turned up so late, Lily had begun to worry that it wasn’t going to arrive at all, which would have been fine if it hadn’t included Smallbone’s monthly order of meat. It showed up at last on the morning of Christmas Eve, along with a box of decorations and all the presents the Covers had ordered to give to one another.

After a busy morning unpacking and distributing orders, all that was left to do was put up the decorations. Zery Smallbone helped his wife tack a
bright-red banner with MERRY CHRISTMAS spelled out in gold foil above the counter, climbed off the ladder, and stretched.

“I’m in the mood for a game of checkers,” he said. “Dinah, set up the board.”

Dinah unfolded the checkerboard on top of a pickle barrel, pulled up a couple of stools, and laid out the pieces. Her father sat down and pushed a red checker forward. Dinah expected he’d beat her. He usually did.

The Mercantile was quiet except for the sounds of her mom folding sweaters on the counter and a faint buzzing, like a distant hive of hornets.

Her dad pushed a red checker into the last row. “King me,” he said.

Dinah crowned his checker. The buzzing grew louder.

“Bikers,” her dad remarked. “Funny time of year for them.” He jumped his king across the board, capturing all Dinah’s checkers.

“Aw, Dad!”

The buzzing swelled to a coughing roar, then cut
off. As her father reset the checkers, the Mercantile’s glass door flew open, letting in a blast of frigid air and two men in brown leather jackets.

Dinah shivered, and it wasn’t just the chill. She’d always thought of herself as brave, and she was, about things like skinned knees and worms and climbing trees and swimming out over her head. But there was something about those bikers that made her skin crawl. They were dirty and skinny and they smelled terrible—not just BO terrible, but like they’d been rolling in something old and rotting. It was all she could do not to retch.

“Afternoon,” Lily said in a bright shopkeeper’s voice. “Can I get you folks anything?”

The bigger of the two bikers went up to the counter and leaned on it. There was a picture of a howling coyote on the back of his jacket, under the words HOWLING COYOTES painted in spiky yellow letters, outlined in red. “A pack of smokes and some beef jerky.”

“I’m sorry.” Lily sounded anything but. “We don’t sell cigarettes and we don’t sell meat. You’ll have to go to Blue Hill, I’m afraid.”

* 37 *
The second biker’s eyes narrowed, mean as a junkyard dog’s. “That’s funny. I smell meat.”

“Special order,” Lily said.
He bared his teeth. “Sure it is. For us.”
“Hand it over, honey,” the first biker said, “and nobody’ll get hurt.”

Dinah’s dad jumped to his feet, sending the checkerboard flying and the checkers rolling across the floor. His face was flushed and he was snarling. Dinah had never seen him so mad.

“Back off!” he barked.

The big biker laughed. “Who’s going to make me? Sit down, fatty, or Sid here will take a bite out of you.”

The second biker growled and lunged, teeth bared. Zery Smallbone plopped back into his chair, panting. Dinah released her breath in a frightened little puff.

“Meat’s in the freezer in the storeroom,” said her mom, her voice even colder than the freezer.

The big biker turned to his companion. “You heard the lady.”

Helplessly, Dinah and her parents watched as the
Howling Coyotes took every bit of Smallbone’s special order, threw it all into plastic bags, and screeched away in a cloud of black exhaust, leaving a tense silence behind them.

“Dang it,” Lily said shakily. “That kind of thing isn’t supposed to happen. It’s in the Contract. No mosquitoes, no snakes, no drugs, no shoplifters, no tax collectors, and no scruffy, no-good, vagabond thieves, with or without motorcycles!”

Zery got up and hugged her and Dinah. “There’s something bad wrong.”

“Will Smallbone fix it?” Dinah asked.

“It’s not that simple, honey,” her mom said. “For Smallbone to fix it, somebody has to tell him it’s broken. Which means somebody has to go to Evil Wizard Books and knock on his door and stand in that horrible dark old bookshop with the spiders and the rotting books and tell him something’s gone wrong with his magical Sentries. And that his Christmas ham is gone. If all he does is turn us into frogs, we’ll be getting off easy. No, I think I’d rather deal with the Howling Coyotes.”

* 39 *
Zery said, “You’ll have to tell him sooner or later, when he comes for the meat.”

“Even he’s not going to be running to town in this weather. With any luck, I’ll get it replaced before he shows up. In any case, I’d rather tell him on my turf than his.”

“It’s all his turf,” Zery reminded her.

“I know, but at least this part of it is clean.” Lily sighed. “If those bikers come around again, I’ll reconsider. In the meantime, let’s just call the meat their Christmas present and go down to Eb’s for dinner. I hear he’s making gravlax.”