



ADVANCE
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SALE

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WIZARD for Hire

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF LEVEN THUMPS

OBERT SKYE

WHAT IF there was a wizard in your hometown who offered his services to anyone in need? WHAT IF you were scared because your scientist parents had been kidnapped and you couldn't tell the police?

WHAT IF you stumbled across a classified ad in your local newspaper that read, "Wizard for Hire. Call 555-SPEL"? WOULD YOU call?



Fourteen-year-old Ozzy is desperate to find his parents, but he's not so sure about that ad. . . . He's read about wizards in books like Harry Potter, but they couldn't actually exist in the world today, could they?

Enter Labyrinth, aka "Rin," who dresses the part. Sort of. His bathrobe and high-top tennis shoes seem unorthodox. At least Rin acts like a wizard, but Ozzy has his doubts. Do real wizards write notes on their shoes and eat breakfast for every meal? Most of all, Ozzy just wants to know if Rin can cast any magic spells.

With the help of a robotic-talking raven invented by Ozzy's father, a kind and curious girl at school who decides to help Ozzy, and, of course, a self-proclaimed wizard who may or may not have a magical wand, Ozzy begins an unforgettable quest that will lead him closer to the answers he seeks about his missing parents.

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Sales inquiries and reviewers contact:

Ilise Levine • ilevine@shadowmountain.com

For media inquiries, contact: Jill Schaugaard • jschaugaard@shadowmountain.com

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WIZARD for Hire

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WIZARD for Hire

OBERT SKYE



SHADOW
MOUNTAIN

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IT IS A FACT THAT ALL WHO HAVE LIVED HAVE LIVED THROUGH SOME LOSS AND HEARTACHE. YES, THERE IS HAPPINESS, BUT EVERYONE ALIVE EXPERIENCES SADNESS AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER. IF YOU ACHE YOU ARE NOT UNUSUAL—FRIENDS DISAPPOINT, BETRAYAL IS REAL, AND THERE IS ALWAYS THE POSSIBILITY OF LOSING SOMEONE DEAR. IT IS WORRISOME TO BEGIN A STORY BENEATH SHADES OF SHADOW AND GLOOM BUT IT IS WISE TO REMEMBER THAT DESPITE ALL THE WORRY THERE IS MAGIC AFOOT.





CHAPTER ONE

SUCH A SHAME TO RUIN THIS
BRIGHT, LAZY SUNNY DAY

In the dense Oregon woods, there is a small cabin, a little wooden home with a crooked green roof and round windows. The cabin is surrounded by aspens and oaks and topped off with clouds that love to huddle above. Behind the home is a thin stream that runs parallel to a tall wall of black mossy stone.

As the noon hour arrived, a small hole opened in the clouds, allowing a loose rope of sunlight to drop down. The light coiled up into a mound of warmth, flopping against the ground and lighting up the front steps of the cabin. A man with a dark mustache and thick brown hair sat on the steps. He lifted his right hand above his eyes to look up at the light. Next to the man was a woman with glowing skin and hair the color of milk chocolate. The man is Dr. Emmitt Toffy—the woman, his wife, is also a doctor, but her name is Mia.

Two charming people sitting in front of an interesting

cabin in the middle of a lush forest. Next to Mia was Ozzy, their seven-year-old boy with wide, grey eyes. His complexion was dark and his hair was thick and black, like a night with no stars. At seven he was already tall for his age, but thin. He had a deep purple birthmark that covered the pointer finger on his left hand like a single-finger sheath.

Despite the dark complexion, hair, and finger, Ozzy's face was giving the sunlight some competition.

The boy smiled at his parents as he played with a plastic dragon on the steps near his mother.

"I never get tired of this sunshine," Ozzy's father said, still looking up. "I have an affection for light."

"It *is* wonderful," his mother observed. "The forest is perfect, Emmitt. I'm afraid I don't miss the east at all."

Two months before, they had moved with Ozzy into the isolated Oregon forest. Emmitt was a doctor in the field of neuroscience. He was also an inventor. Mia was a brilliant theoretical psychologist, studying how people thought and acted and dreamed. They had lived successfully back east for many years, but they had sold everything and, under the cloak of darkness, taken Ozzy across the country to Oregon.

The cabin they had purchased was hidden from the world. There were no roads leading up to it or even dedicated paths. They received no mail, had no visitors, and since they had arrived, Ozzy had seen no one other than his parents. The inside of their wooden home was filled from floor to ceiling with boxes that had yet to be opened

or organized. The only place that had any semblance of composure was Ozzy's space. His room was in the attic, which was accessible by climbing twenty thin wooden stairs. Engraved on the front of each stair were dozens of small black stars that made it look like Ozzy was traveling the cosmos to reach his room. Other than that, the inside of the house looked like a convention of cardboard and chaos and it didn't seem as if the doctors were in any hurry to remedy that. They had unpacked only the essentials for the moment.

"The boxes can wait," Dr. Emmitt always said. "Today is about what's already unpacked."

The family had spent their first few weeks walking through the trees and planting a garden back by the stream. Ozzy's parents taught him how to do things for himself and let the boy read to them to improve his mind. At night he would be tucked into his small attic room, where a single round window let in moonbeams and lit the space in a magical light. While Ozzy slept, his father would work in the basement and his mother would put pen to paper in the office on the ground floor, both parents laboring over things that Ozzy knew nothing about. But today there was no laboring, just some sunshine and a bit of resting on the steps after a small hike.

The image was idyllic—a mother and father with their small child on the porch steps of a quaint mountain cabin. There were city families that would have paid good money to have their pictures taken in such a scene—a family

portrait they could show to their friends as proof of how close they were to nature and each other. For the Toffys, however, it wasn't an act—it was their life. They were safe and hidden away from something of which Ozzy was completely unaware.

The grey-eyed child moved his plastic dragon into the soil of a potted flower on the porch. He pillaged the bright azaleas.

“Ozzy,” his mother said with a warm smile, “your dragon might enjoy running through the stream more than dirtying its talons here in the soil. And you're old enough to play behind the house by yourself.”

“Just don't go beyond the sight of the cabin,” his father said.

Ozzy grinned. He collected his dragon from the dirt. And like a small, independent adult he walked around the house and behind the cabin.

The stream wasn't more than a couple of feet wide and a few inches deep, but it ran all year and filled the air with the constant burble of tumbling water. It originated from a spring near a dark stone wall and weaved through the nearby trees and down away from the cabin. The dark wall was covered in moss and the stain of a million years of wet skies. Animals of all kinds often gathered near the water to drink. A skinny brown fox who had been doing just that saw the boy and darted off.

Ozzy knelt and set his dragon in the water.

A cold trickle of liquid washed around his small fingers

and he shivered. The toy stomped through the water and over the slick rocks.

Ozzy missed his home in New York, but memories of it were already beginning to fade—the few friends he'd had, the store on the corner that sold cheese and bread, Jonathan the doorman who always gave him sweets.

The dragon splashed through the water as Ozzy created new and mossier memories.

“Attack, ambush . . .”

Ozzy heard his mother scream from the front of the cabin.

The young boy dropped his toy and kneeled tall.

His mother screamed again.

He could hear his father shouting and unknown voices shouting back.

Ozzy stood up and ran. His steps were uneven as he bolted forward in what looked like a prolonged stumble. He reached the front of the house and saw several men in green clothing. Some of the men were in the cabin. Two of them were pulling his parents into the trees and away from the scene.

“Mom!” Ozzy screamed.

“Ozzy!” she yelled.

Ozzy froze, fear making it impossible for him to move. He was too scared to help his parents, yet there was no way he could turn and run away. His feet felt like old roots planted deep in the ground and hardened from age.

“Ozzy!” his dad screamed. “Ozzy . . .”

One of the men put a rag over Emmitt's mouth. Another did the same to Mia. Ozzy's parents thrashed and kicked, but their mouths were covered and they were no match for the hulking men who had them bound. Ozzy's father was struck behind the head and collapsed. Mia witnessed the strike and lost consciousness from the horror of it all.

The two Toffys were picked up and thrown over the shoulders of the men like rolled-up rugs. Then, as if they were subtle brushstrokes on the edge of a painted forest, they faded into the trees and were no longer defined or discernable.

Two of the green men stepped out onto the porch and spotted Ozzy.

"Hey!" one of them yelled to the boy. "Stay right there!"

The man yelling was thin, with a black beard and a hooked nose. Ozzy stared as the man slowly began to move closer. The look on Blackbeard Hooknose's face was sinister. The other man was short, with red hair and an uneasy look.

"We're not going to hurt you," he said calmly. "Don't move."

Ozzy shivered violently and his feet broke free from the soil. The two men lunged forward and Ozzy spun around and took off running. He ran back behind the cabin, across the stream, and scurried up over the black wall. Once

there, Ozzy jumped down under a fallen tree and hid himself beneath the branches of a feathery bush.

He could hear Hooknose stomping around nearby.

“Come out, boy! We won’t hurt you.”

Ozzy stayed perfectly still.

The red-haired man moved closer.

Through one of the cracks in the bush Ozzy saw the assailant. He closed his eyes and clamped his teeth, wishing to disappear and reappear someplace safe.

He opened his eyes to discover that his wish hadn’t come true.

The men yelled for Ozzy a few more times before Blackbeard hollered out, “Forget it, Eric. Let’s search the home.”

“What about the kid?” the short man asked.

The hole in the clouds above cinched up and took every bit of sunlight and warmth with it.

“Leave him. We’ve got the doctors.”

Ozzy didn’t dare even quiver.

Tears dropped from his eyes like wet coins. They plunked softly into the pool of water collecting in the dirt around him creating a hopeless wishing well.

The men climbed down the stone wall and returned to the cabin to do some pillaging of their own. Ozzy stayed where he was, too frightened to move. Eventually the sun went down and all sounds of anyone in or around the cabin ceased.

The world was silent.

The boy worked his way out of his hiding place and, with slow movements and great caution, he snuck back to the front of the cabin.

What he found was sickening. There were boxes and papers tossed all over the front porch. The door was open and he could see that inside the home had been ransacked as well. His parents were nowhere to be seen.

Ozzy stood like a small broken tree. He hung his head and cried.

If anyone had been there to witness the scene, their hearts would have broken for him. But no one was there. In fact, Ozzy was very much alone, and he would remain that way for quite some time.

It's terrible to be lonely.

It's even worse to be lonely, seven, and on your own.