

From his place atop the donation cart, Little Book sat up with a start. Hardly a moment had passed since the bookstore had closed, but already he was missing his author. Her absence did not go unnoticed, for he stood up on his sneakered feet and glanced around warily. “Mom?” he said aloud.

To the human eye, Books’ll Thrill Ya bookstore was a book lover’s haven, a place of quiet intellect and musings; but for the pint-sized Little Book, it was enormous, a place where he could get lost. Perhaps, that’s what had happened, he thought. Paige had gotten lost.

Worried for his safety and hers, he scampered down from the donation cart, hurried across the room to the foyer, and gazed out the front glass door. He tried to recall the last words Paige had muttered before placing him on the cart, but memory failed him. As the deafening silence of the room engulfed him, he started to feel as though something terrible had happened. His author, it seemed, had abandoned him.

And then he heard the familiar sound of Paige’s VW Beetle as it roared to life.

“Oh, no!” he muttered desperately.

Little Book tipped on his sneakered feet when he saw the VW Beetle reverse from the parking space, pull forward, then slowly drive out the lot. Afraid that he would get left behind, he banged on the glass with his white-gloved fists. “Mom, wait!” he cried out in desperation.

“Come back! You forgot me! Come back!”

To Little Book’s dismay, Paige didn’t look back, nor did her VW Beetle slow down. Instead, it exited the parking lot, followed closely by Mrs. Cash’s sporty, red Toyota Camry.

“No, Mom.” Little Book groaned as he sank to his knobby knees. Grief-stricken, he covered his face with his white-gloved hands and cried a puddle of black ink. “How could she leave me behind?” he whined. “How could she forget me?”

A moment later, sudden movement in the display window caught his attention. He turned towards what he thought was the source of the noise, but there was nothing to suggest he'd heard anything. Wiping his teary eyes, he stood up and muttered timidly, "Hello?"

At once, a thick book tumbled out of the display window and sprang open on the carpet in front of him. Two characters, Cletus and Clyde, twin pranksters who shared the same spine, sprung out from the pages, wearing powder-blue leisure suits and matching platform heels.

"Is she gone yet?" the twin pranksters asked as they dawdled past Little Book on their way to the glass door.

Realizing the conjoined twins were talking about Paige, Little Book turned and stood alongside them with a forlorn look in his eye.

"She's gone all right," he mumbled lowly, "and I don't think she's ever coming back."

"Oh, she'll be back all right," said Clyde, his voice full of confidence, "bright and early tomorrow at nine."

Puzzled, Little Book blurted out, "Tomorrow?"

"That's right," said Cletus, grinning broadly. "But now—it's party time!"

Both twin pranksters whirled around and bellowed into the darkness simultaneously, "What time is it?!"

All at once, the overhead lights bumped on, and upbeat pop music blared through the bookstore's speaker system. Cletus and Clyde wasted no time getting lost in the crowd, leaving Little Book to fend for himself as books from almost every genre in the bookstore flew off the shelves and landed on the carpeted floor below. All of their covers sprang open and out rushed throngs of fairytale and storybook characters, numbering well into the thousands, partying like there was no tomorrow.

Not to be outdone by their literary peers, greeting cards in the gondola racks by the door climbed out of their confines as well and began serenading Little Book, singing lyrics to an upbeat pop tune they all seemed to know.

*Banging on the front glass door,  
too small to be seen,  
your cover shows you're really young,  
one we call a 'tween.  
Intuition tells us  
that you being here's not planned.  
Before you get your hopes up,  
one thing understand:  
Bound but loose, that's how you've got to be,  
'cause that's the only kind of book that our readers read.  
Bound but loose, only life we know,  
just living one big party when the doors close.*

Suddenly, a pasty-faced older gentleman, sporting a black tuxedo and black satin cloak that hung loosely about his slumped shoulders, appeared out of thin air and yelled at the pack of greeting cards. "Leave him alone!"

The greeting cards took one look at the pasty-faced stranger and ran off, leaving Little Book alone with him.

"Count Boris von Bookulah, at your service," the pasty-faced stranger announced, his diction a vibrant blend of Romanian and Transylvanian undertones. He straightened as much as his crooked spine would allow, then added, "To my friends, I am simply 'The Count.' He gave Little Book a discerning once-over, then tilted his chin as if to present the image of European royalty. "Who, pray tell, are you?" he asked.

Eager to make new friends, Little Book beamed back at him. "My name's Little Book, I'm

a good book.”

The Count’s brow shot up, and his yellow eyes glittered fiendishly. “A good book,” he repeated breathlessly. “Do you know how long I’ve hungered for a good book, something I can really sink my teeth into?”

The Count’s razor-thin mouth opened slowly to reveal jagged-edged teeth that pushed through graying gums. His crooked spine aligned perfectly with a whip-snapping sound as he loomed over Little Book in a threatening manner. He was just about to take a bite out of the pint-sized tyke when a gravelly male voice called out to him from behind. “Yo, Count! Not about to make a happy meal out of one’ah our children’s books, are you?”

The Count froze. What little color he had in hollow cheeks drained from his face as he turned around and found himself face to face underworld mobsters, Booksey Malone and Mickey Black Eyes.

Wearing their trademark pinstriped zoot suits and fedoras, the two mobsters glared at The Count with looks of disgust in both of their eyes.

The Count wavered, but only for a moment. “Why, if it isn’t my two favorite mobsters, Booksey Malone and Mickey Black Eyes.” He stuck his hand out, but rather than shake his hand, Mickey grabbed him roughly by the collar and lifted him off of his feet until he tipped on his toes.

“That’s Mr. Booksey and Mr. Mickey to you,” the henchman growled in a rogue New Yorker’s voice. “And how many times we gotta tell ya, we ain’t mobsters no more. We’s bid’ness men of the utmost impotence.”

Booksey slapped his forehead dramatically. “The word’s ‘im-por-tance,’” he responded, sounding out each syllable. “We’s bid’ness men of the utmost importance!”

“Duh, okay, boss,” Mickey grumbled. “Whatever you say.”

“Why, of course!” The Count said, nodding eagerly. “What was I thinking? I mean, look at you—” He broke off, stammering and muttering as he tried to find words. “—you’re both such fine, upstanding—”

“Shad up!” Booksey shouted, cutting him off. “We saw the way you was eyeballin’ the kid over there, and I gotta tell ya, I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all!”

The Count swallowed the lump in his throat. Real fear showed on his face. Not liking where the conversation was headed, he glanced Mickey and changed tack.

“Pleeeeeease, Mr. Booksey,” The Count pleaded. “I wasn’t going to hurt him. Honest! I’d never hurt a kid. You have to believe me. I was tryin’ to help him. I-I think he’s lost!”

“Lost, huh?” Booksey side-glanced Little Book. “Yo, kid, are you lost?”

Little Book shook his head. “No, sir. I’m left behind.”

Booksey glowered at The Count. “See? The kid ain’t lost, he’s left behind.”

The Count didn’t argue, but his bottom lip quivered, and his yellow eyes welled as if he wanted to cry.

Believing he and Mickey had spooked The Count enough, Booksey made a downward motion with his hand. Mickey discerned the gesture and lowered The Count until they stood eye to eye. Then, Booksey leaned in and spoke in low voice so that only The Count could hear.

“If I catch you with one’ah your grubby claws on one’ah our children’s books again—” Booksey side-glanced Mickey. “Show ‘em what’ll happen, Mick.”

Mickey punched the bookcase standing next to him. It splintered with a loud *crack!*

The Count flinched in fear, and his lips tightened into a razor-thin line.

Neither Booksey nor Mickey said another word; they didn’t have to—the splintered

bookcase spoke volumes.

The Count smoothed the lapels of his tuxedo and cleared his throat rather noisily. “Well, gentlemen, I think I’ll just be on my way.” He turned and nodded politely at Little Book. “Sorry about the misunderstanding, kid.” And then he walked off, muttering to himself about children’s books and the need to have them under constant supervision.

When The Count was finally out of earshot, Booksey turned his attention solely on Little Book. “You be careful playin’ ‘round these parts,” he told the kid firmly. “Otherwise, a bookie monster might get ya. Now beat it. Get back to the shelf space where you belong.”

Booksey and Mickey walked off laughing, but the mob bosses’ stern warning never left Little Book. The idea that he had almost fallen prey to a bookie monster left him white-faced with terror, even though his dignity and limbs were still intact. But for how long?

With a sigh of exasperation, Little Book wound a path through a never ending stream of literary inhabitants and storybook characters, who seemed totally at ease mixing and mingling under the bright lights of the first floor. Although he hated to admit it, the place looked quite homey, with rows upon rows and aisles upon aisles of bookcases; more bookcases than he had ever seen. The bookshelves had genre markers that he never knew existed: Romance, Mystery, Sci-fi, History, Religious, Self Help, The Middle Ages, Medical, Cooking, and Psychology, to name a few.

After a few minutes or so of wandering in circles, he stopped and sighed. Thus far, his journey through the bookstore had been anything but fun. The mobsters had made him so afraid that he’d encounter another bookie monster that he was reluctant to ask anyone anything, much less ask for directions. Now, he was lost.

With no one else to turn to, he decided to press onward until he saw Cletus and Clyde at

work in the plaza area, sectioning off chairs in the audience with gold stanchions and a red, velvet rope.

“Excuse me,” Little Book said, tapping Cletus on the shoulder.

Both pranksters turned and fixed Little Book with a curious stare.

“Could you please help me?” Little Book asked. “I’m trying to find my way out.”

“Out?” Clyde gaped at Little Book as if this was the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard. “Whadaya mean you’re tryin’ to find a way out?” he asked the kid.

“Well, the front door’s locked,” Little Book informed them, “and I gotta get home. It’s getting late.”

“Home?” Cletus repeated the word in an amused voice. “This is home. The only way out is for someone to buy you out.”

“Unless you consider being fed to the Lyons as a way out,” said Clyde, interjecting.

Little Book’s jaw dropped. His eyes went round as saucers as he visualized himself on the run from a pack of hungry lions, chomping at his backside. Horror-struck, he turned and raced through the crowd and ran back into the foyer and pounded the glass with his white-gloved fists. “Heeeeelp!” he yelled, expelling all the air he had in his lungs. “Let me outta here! I wanna go home. Heeeeelp!”

Little Book was so determined to get out of the bookstore that he seemed oblivious to the fact that his repeated hand strikes had triggered the security system and set off the alarm.

A moment later, Cletus and Clyde charged into the foyer, stopping only when they were standing behind Little Book.

“Yo, kid, stop that!” seethed Clyde, grabbing hold of Little Book’s white-gloved fist. “Are you trying to get killed?”

Little Book spun around and gaped at the pranksters like he was a cornered animal. “I wanna go home,” he sniffled, trying to catch his breath. “I wanna go back to my author, Paige Turner.”

Suddenly, a military Jeep containing four uniformed Space Arrangers sped around the corner on two wheels and skidded to a halt in the foyer. Space Arranger Johnny Depth, head space keeper of the bookstore, leaped out from the driver’s seat wearing spit-shined boots and black battle fatigues. He drew the water gun affixed to his hip holster and aimed it at Little Book.

“Step away from the exit!” Ranger Depth commanded. “You’re too close to the monitor!”

Cletus and Clyde threw their hands up in the air. Panicked, Little Book copied their movement.

A split second later, Ranger Depth’s eyes narrowed on the twin pranksters with a flash of recognition. After a moment of contemplating the duo, he relaxed his posture and holstered his water gun.

“You two, again,” he spat contemptuously. “How many times have I told you guys? Stay away from the security monitor!”

“My apologies, sir,” said Cletus. “I’m sorry for the mishap, but we were just showing our little buddy here the new state-of-the-art security system.”

Ranger Depth turned his steely-eyed focus on Little Book. It had been a long time since he’d super-soaked an inhabitant for trying to escape, and he certainly didn’t want to do it to a kid.

“In that case—” Ranger Depth angled his wrist-way communicator (a device much like an iWatch) at the keypad on the wall and tapped a series of numbers into the device. The red, blinking light on the monitor steadied, and the alarm reset with a soft *bleep*.

Ranger Depth regarded the twin pranksters, but his eyes were on Little Book. “Make sure he knows absolutely no one comes in or goes out of that door unless I know about it. Kapeesh?”

Both pranksters nodded their understanding. “Sir, yes, sir.”

Ranger Depth retraced his steps to the Jeep and climbed inside. Before he could settle comfortably in the driver’s seat, a garbled, disembodied voice came through the radio console as a harried cry for help.

“This is unit two-one-eight,” the disembodied voice shouted, “I’ve got subjects on the run in aisle four-zero-three of the Sci-fi section. Repeat. Four-zero-three! Send backup now!”

Ranger Depth fastened his seatbelt. He threw the gear shift in reverse and tossed a hard look at Little Book. “Don’t let these two misfits get you into any trouble,” he told the little tyke. “And remember, no in and out privileges for anyone, for any reason.”