



“Did you find something?” Max asked his mother for the fifth time in as many minutes.

For the fifth time she answered, “Not yet, sweetie.”

They had been inside the Gingerbread House for what felt like hours. Max’s mother was looking for a gift for his aunt Maxine’s birthday. They were having a party for her at their house that night, and they’d already been

to the grocery store for food, the florist for flowers, the party store for balloons, and the bakery for a cake. The present was the last thing on the list.

“How about this?” Max asked, picking something at random from a shelf and holding it up.

His mother looked at it. “I don’t think Aunt Maxine would like a ceramic clown.”

Max groaned and put the clown back.

“Why don’t you go look around?” his mother suggested. “I won’t be much longer.”

“There’s nothing interesting to look at,” Max complained, indicating the shelves filled with candles, teacups, and bubble bath. Nothing a ten-year-old boy would want.

“Why don’t you go to that new store that opened next door, then?” his mother said.

“There might be something fun there. I’ll be done here in a few minutes and will come meet you, okay?”

“Okay,” Max said unenthusiastically. *It will probably be more boring old-lady stuff*, he thought as he walked out of the Gingerbread House.

He peered into the window of the shop next door. The name was painted in red-and-black letters across the glass: FRIGHTVILLE. *Looks like a lot of old junk*, Max thought as he pushed the door open and went inside.

He was wrong. Frightville wasn’t filled with junk. Max stood just inside the doorway, marveling at a room overflowing with stuff that most definitely wasn’t for old ladies. At least not old ladies like his aunt Maxine.

“You look like a young man who enjoys interesting things,” said a voice.

Behind the counter of the shop, a man was standing and regarding Max with an appraising air. Tall and thin, he was wearing a black suit that looked like it was probably a hundred years old. The man himself also looked like he might be a hundred years old, with pale skin and silver hair.

“This is a lot better than teacups,” Max remarked.

“Oh, I have some extremely fascinating teacups,” the man said, coming out from behind the counter. “They tell your fortune. But I have a feeling you’re looking for something *really* special.”

Max grinned. “What have you got?” he asked.

The man waved his hands around. “See for yourself,” he said. “Adventure waits around

every corner.” He paused, raising one eyebrow. “For those who aren’t afraid to look for it,” he concluded.

Max wandered around the store—checking out everything. The man was right—there *were* teacups. But there were so many other things. There was a doll that was sewn out of scraps of different-patterned fabrics, a jar filled with antique keys that looked like they might unlock treasure chests, and lots of boxes with peculiar symbols on their sides that made Max wonder what might be inside them. But then he saw something *really* weird. Tucked into the dusty corner of a cupboard was a set of teeth. Max tapped his fingernail against them. He’d thought they might be wood or plastic, but they actually felt like real teeth. Or maybe they were ivory or bone. Whatever they were made of, they were

old and stained, and there was a small metal key sticking out of one side. Max picked the teeth up and discovered that there was a paper tag tied to the key. Written on the tag was a short poem:

The Wish Eater

Make a wish and write it down
Place it in the Eater's mouth
Go away, come back and check
If it's gone, the answer's YES

Max turned the key that was attached to the teeth. The mouth swung open and a red wooden tongue emerged. He peered inside. How could a toy eat a piece of paper? It was a silly idea. But the Wish Eater *was* really cool. He'd never seen anything like it.