

SARAH AND THE HOUSE OF MYSTERIES

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ONE

This was the moment that changed my life forever.

The night was just beginning, and I was about to enter the most dilapidated house in the neighborhood. Which, by the way, just happens to be across my house.

Everybody knows this house is haunted, and that's precisely why I'm here in the first place. A few days ago, I accepted a dare from Margaret, the most popular girl in my school. Ever since she came at the start of the year, with her princess-like figure and wickedly mellow manners, everybody wanted to be her, or be around her.

It's awfully unfair how some people seem to have this magnetic aura about them, and end up having tons of idiotic servants doing even the most outrageous things just because she asked them to.

Like myself.

I wanted so bad to please Margaret and be in her group, that I accepted her dare to spend a whole night in this house. At the time it didn't seem like such a crazy idea, but now I'm having doubts about my smarts. And I'm not stupid. In fact, I'm one of the smartest girls in my class. But that doesn't help my cool quotient. Quite the contrary! Smart is so not cool! Maybe that's why I accepted this dare.

Nearly all the houses in our neighborhood are new, except for this one. In fact, it's been uninhabited for so long that part of the roof collapsed, and its garden is nothing but a bunch of overgrown dry grass. People say that a killer witch lived here, and that now the spirits of her victims come out at night.

All I know for sure is that sometimes, when I'm already in bed, I've heard strange noises coming from this house. But that's precisely the type of thing I didn't want to think about as I stood by the entrance, still unready to bite the bullet.

"Well?" Margaret demanded, while her entourage nailed at me with suspicion. "Are you going in or what?"

"She's getting the willies," taunted Lilian, her best friend and closest minion.

"I am not!" I protested angrily, pretending a courage I didn't feel. "I'm just waiting to see if there's anyone in. I don't want to break in."

Of course, they laughed at my retort.

"No one's in!"

"What a chicken!"

"Stop your dillydally and get in once and for all!" Margaret prodded me.

I tried to take a step forward, but my feet refused to move.

"Well," Margaret smirked, taunting me in a gooey tone, "seems we'll just have to tell everyone that you're a coward..."

"A gutless coward!" seconded Lilian.

"No Wait!"

I dashed up to the porch and turned round at them, my heart throbbing wildly in my throat.

"See? I'm in. I did it! I'm not scared." *Yeah right.*

"But you have to spend all night in, remember?" Lilian snapped. How to forget!

"Let's go," Margaret commanded, starting to move away with the group. "We'll come back tomorrow, and if you're not in there when we come in, we'll tell everyone you're a coward!"

I don't know what's worse: spending the night in the haunted house on my own, or having the entire school mock me and bully me for years to come.

So I stayed put.

I saw them leave in a cloud of jeering laughter and nasty looks at me, And I stayed there, awash in biting cold and an even colder silence. It was so cold that I could almost hear the air freezing in my ears. The streets were eerily empty and soundless, as if the entire city had suddenly frozen. The lights from inside the surrounding houses seemed so inviting and yet so far... A shiver crossed me at the prospect that awaited me.

Come, it can't be that bad, I tried to reassure myself. *It's just an empty old house!*

But suddenly I remember telling Mum that I would spend the night at Janice's, my best friend since first grade, and a ferocious guilt punched my gut. I've heard that old houses sometimes are occupied by squatters and really nasty people. Suddenly, I began to feel panicky about this. What if something bad happened to me in the house? Maybe I shouldn't have lied...

A chilly breeze began to blow, so I decided to enter the house for shelter, at least until Margaret and the girls were out of sight. I knew they'd be too lazy to hang around for long, especially in this cold, so it shouldn't be long.

I thought I'd have to wrench the door knob, but to my surprise it opened quite easily.

Curious. Gingerly, I took a first step in, and walked into what would be the adventure of a lifetime.

The door creaked painfully as I pushed it, as if it hadn't opened for centuries, and the weak floor below my feet protested loudly under my weight. I stood there petrified, unable to go on. But then, the door slammed shut and darkness engulfed me. A scream left me, but I stayed put, with all my senses in high alert for anything lurking in the shadows.

After a while, my eyes adjusted to the dimness and I began to distinguish a few things around me. Like the overgrown weeds and plants adhered to the walls slowly eating up the place, and huge cobwebs hanging from the planked windows. Suddenly, I heard chirps and squeaks. Bats? Mice? I didn't want to know!

I really wanted to leave, but I was afraid Margaret would return. *Maybe if I walk around a little I'll feel less anxious*, I thought.

But, after a moment of just moving around in circles, I began to feel less afraid. No idea why. I turned on the lamp of my phone, but the light scared off a bevy of doves perched on the beams of the exposed roof. They scared the bejesus out of me, but at least they were not bats. Bats really give me the creeps.

Everything was dark and dusty, but less derelict than I had thought. In fact, it was pretty clean for a house that hasn't been inhabited for ages. I even noticed that there was a broken mirror and some portraits hanging on the walls. Still, it was not the kind of place where I'd stay the night.

Suddenly, I realized that if I didn't keep a register of being there, I couldn't prove to Margaret and the girls that I succeeded in the dare. So I turned off the phone lamp and began to record a video.

"This is Sarah..." I begin, as if I were a journalist, "and I'm here inside Maple Street thirteen... on September 15th at around..." I checked my wristwatch, "...9 pm..."

My eyes wandered, and suddenly I noticed a dark stain on the floor. *Blood!* I took a wary step back, telling myself I'm being stupid. But the more I try to convince myself, the more I'm certain I am that it's the blood of one of the witch's victims.

Suddenly I hear a loud crack. My nerves spiked. What was that? A rat? I didn't even care to check. I stopped recording and raced towards the door, but now the doorknob was jammed! What the heck?! Let me out!

I was still wrenching it furiously, when a female voice from inside the house reached my ears.

"Who's there?"

I froze. My eyes opened like saucers. My legs turned to jell-o. My heart was about to burst. There was someone living here! Cornered like a mouse, I froze, expecting the worst.

I saw a figure emerge from the shadows, but it was so dim that I had to squint my eyes to see better. It was not a squatter, and it was not armed, so that was a relief.

But then I noticed something weird about it. The figure seemed substantial, but just enough for me to see it.

It was a ghost, of course. I knew I should be frightened. But instead, I felt just curious.

After a moment of disconcert, I noticed it was a girl, about my age, but dressed in something like an old-fashioned sleeping gown.

"Who are you?"

We both asked at unison, but her grayish countenance bore much more command than mine, and so I'm the first to reply.

"I'm sorry. I...I didn't mean to intrude," I said in a trembling voice. "I thought the house was deserted. I'm... a neighbor."

"What's your name?"

"Sarah," I replied in a whisper. Something in her eyes changed at the name, and her manner softened, approaching me in a floating movement.

"Why are you here, Sarah?"

"...I..." I couldn't possibly tell her the real stupid reason why I was there, so I quickly made up a story. "I just wanted to have a look inside, you know. I love old houses and I've seen this one so many times before...I live just across the street, you see. I always wondered how it looked inside..."

"Enter an abandoned house? Alone? At night?"

It was obvious that she wasn't buying any of it. This ghost girl was smarter than I thought.

"I heard your friends," she said then, uncovering my lie. "They dared you to spend the night here to prove you're brave, didn't they?"

I nodded, feeling every bit as daft as I must have seemed.

"Why do you want to be with them? They don't seem nice at all."

"Well, they're popular."

"Oh, I see..." she said, as if she knew all about it, moving around in ethereal manner. "That means you're not," she blurted, making me almost angry. "But you want to be."

I only stared at her, half angry, half stunned. Can ghosts see right through people as we do through them?

"You know what's truly cool?" she asked. Lots of answers came to my mind, but I figured she was meaning something else, so I wagged my head, waiting for her reply. "Magic!"

The word came out of her in an eerie whisper, sending chills through my skin.

"The power to do things that no one can, to create things that aren't there, to make the impossible happen...!" Suddenly, I noticed my heart was racing.

"Do you want to be able to do magic, Sarah?"

Her question rang with an impossibly seductive invitation. And before I could stop myself, I nodded my head and whispered a 'yes'.

She smiled with satisfaction and floated back a few steps. Then, she blew on a candle holder on the wall, and lit up all its dead tapers. I stared, dumbfounded. How had she done that? She just smiled at me, teasing me to approach and do the same. But I was so flabbergasted that I feigned utmost dumbness.

"Give it a try," she insisted, a wee more forcefully. I felt like an idiot advancing towards the dusty candelabra on the opposite wall and blowing at its candles. Obviously, nothing

happened. But she continued staring at me, so I kept on blowing, ever more intently. And then - a spark! And just a second later - a flame! I stared at it agog and breathless. Had I really done just that?!

"Well done!" she cheered, almost congratulating herself. I tried it once more, just to prove myself that the first time hadn't been an illusion, and this time the candles lit up even faster. I broke into an incredulous laugh, feeling a burst of absolute exhilaration. I had done magic!

"Not bad," the ghost girl approved, with a challenging glint in her eyes. "Now, try this."

She clapped her hands loudly and a bright flame burst right in the middle of her palms. I stared, staggered. Try that? Not in a million years! That was not just totally impossible, but also dangerous. But in the end, I caved to the pressure of her challenging stare.

I clapped my hands just to please her, and nothing happened. I was both relieved and disappointed, but the ghost girl would not give up.

"You're clapping like you don't care," she chided me. "Clap harder! Like you mean it! You ought to want it to happen!"

I clapped as if I was following a song, but nothing happened. Then, as if I were trying to catch a fly, but the ghost girl still wasn't pleased. Then, annoyed by her nagging insistence, I clapped like when I want to startle my cat, and at once a bright flame appeared inside the cup of my hands. I was so shocked that I began a skippy dance, shaking my hands to put off the flames.

I expected the ghost girl to be pleased with my performance, but instead she gave me a quizzical look, followed by a dark stare.

"Try this..."

Out of nowhere, an apple appeared on her open hand. I gasped and stared agog. No way! I could never do that! I wagged my head nervously.

"Do try," she goaded.

"I can't!"

"Sure you can! Just concentrate on what you want. Concentrate hard, from your guts."

She was so vehement that I couldn't oppose resistance. I shut my eyes, even if that wasn't part of her instructions, just to concentrate harder. I thought of an apple, just like hers, only redder, plumper. I put all my energy on it, but as much as I concentrated, the thing never materialized.

"I can't," I gasped weakly after a moment, feeling exhausted. "I told you."

"What are you trying to produce?"

"An apple."

"Is that what you really want? An apple?"

I wagged my head, suddenly understanding what she meant. And then set to try again.

This time it felt completely different, like a surge of warm energy coming right from my guts. What I really, really, REALLY wanted was a silver bracelet with rhinestones, just like the one Margaret and the other girls wore as a symbol of their school royalty status. I wanted it so bad that I could see myself wearing it. I could almost feel it at my fingertips. Until, suddenly, I could really feel it at my fingertips!

I opened my eyes and gazed in total disbelief at the incredible apparition. I inspected it all over, speechless and agog. It was real! Solid and perfectly real! And it looked fantastic on me!

"Awesome!" I laughed victoriously. The ghost girl watched me as if she'd witnessed more amazing things hundreds of times before. "Wait until I tell Margaret and the girls I can really do magic!"

"Why would you want to tell them?" she frowned. "They're not your friends."

"But they will be once they know about this!" I say joyfully. "Thanks for showing me all this...er..." Suddenly I realized I didn't know her name. "What's your name?"

"Dorothy"

"Thanks, Dorothy. Now I ought to get home. It's getting really cold and I'm starving!"

"But, won't you stay the night? What about your friends, your dare?"

"Oh, they won't be coming, rest assured, and I got everything I need to convince them I was here," I said, pointing at my phone.

"Oh, all right."

She looked so disappointed, that I felt I could not leave without giving her at least a glimmer of hope. After all, it must have been ages since she had last received visitors.

"I'll come back tomorrow, I promise."

"You will?"

"After school. Then you can teach me some more magic tricks."

She seemed to consider it for a second, and then tilted her head.

"All right," she smiled faintly, almost as if she didn't believe me. "I'll be waiting for you."

I gave her a quick goodbye and raced out of the house without a second thought.

I was so euphoric that I forgot all about my initial scare or the oddity of talking to a ghost. I had succeeded in the dare! I had done magic! I had a bracelet like Margaret's! And the best was that I had proof of it all!

The night suddenly seemed brighter, and I skipped my short way back home. But I had just crossed the garden fence, when I noticed that my wristwatch was missing.

Oh, well, I thought, too happy to care, it must have fallen somewhere.