

DAKOTA'S DARING ADVENTURES

The Witch



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Hi. MY NAME'S Dakota and I'm seven years old. Just like most boys my age, I have a best friend. His name is Jacob. We do lots of cool things together, though we don't always make the best choices. But I've learned that even if I don't make the right choices all the time, if I try hard enough, there can always be a happy ending. Just like the time Jacob and I decided to check out a spooky old house down the block. Jacob was sure a witch lived there, but I didn't think so.

The autumn breeze whispered gently outside my bedroom window one cool fall afternoon. Halloween was only two weeks away and I couldn't wait for it to get here. I also couldn't wait for all of the candy I knew I would get trick-or-treating. I had a brand-new costume for Halloween this year. I was going to be 'The Boomerang Kid'. He's a superhero that throws his boomerang and captures the bad guys.

I had nothing in particular to do that afternoon so I was kind of bored. I was tired of playing in my room, so I went downstairs and outside onto the front porch. I sat down on the top step and looked up and down the street at all of the houses I would be trick-or-treating at on Halloween night. I wondered what kind of candy they would give me. In case I didn't mention it, chocolate is my favorite.

As I sat on the step, I looked at a house down the street near the end of the block. This house looked different from all the other houses on

our street. The grass had grown very tall in the front yard. The front steps looked as if they were falling apart, and the paint was peeling off of the house in many places. A shutter had fallen off one of the windows and was lying in pieces on the floor of the front porch.

As I was looking at the house, I heard a voice calling to me from the sidewalk.

"My dad says we can't trick-or-treat at that house." It was Jacob, my best friend from next door. He was going to be 'The Masked Cowpoke' for Halloween.

"Why can't we trick-or-treat at that house?" I asked.

"I don't know," Jacob answered in a whisper as he walked up to the steps, "but I heard some kids at school say that the lady who lives in that house is a witch."

"A witch!" I shouted. "In our neighborhood?"

"Not so loud," Jacob warned. "She might hear you."

I put my hands over my mouth. Then I thought about it. I looked at Jacob and asked, "How can she hear me when her house is all the way down at the end of the block?"

"She's a witch, so she knows magic. And if she knows magic, she can do anything," Jacob answered.

"But we really don't know if she is a witch," I shrugged.

Jacob smiled a mischievous smile and said, "Maybe we should find out. Get your flashlight from your room and let's go."

After a short walk down the street, we realized that the house looked even spookier when we were standing right in front of it.

"Are you sure somebody lives here?" I asked, looking curiously at the grass and weeds that had grown over the walkway leading to the front steps.

"Sure, I'm sure," Jacob answered. "Some kids were talking about her at school. They said a fourth-grader peeked in one of her windows and saw her casting a spell on a cat. Then she cast a spell on the

pumpkins she has growing in her back yard. Now they're alive! Only a witch could do that."

All at once we heard a door slam. We both dove behind the large tree by the street in front of her house. When we peeked out from behind it, we saw a woman wearing a black shawl slowly making her way towards the garage behind the house. In her left hand was a crooked black cane that looked kind of like a piece of a tree branch.

We huddled behind the tree, watching to see what she was going to do. The old woman walked slowly into the garage and disappeared into the darkness. Moments later, her old, noisy car began to back out. It was the oldest car I had ever seen.

"Wow, look at that antique car," I whispered to Jacob as the car backed past the tree we were hiding behind.

"Yeah," Jacob laughed, "it must be a hundred years old."

We watched as the old car drove slowly down the street, leaving a trail of smoke behind it.

"What should we do now?" I wondered as I turned and began to walk back home.

"Where are you going?" Jacob asked. "She's gone. Let's go peek in her windows and see what's in there. We might see another cat that she put under her spell." Jacob started walking down the driveway toward the back of the house.

"But it's not our house," I told Jacob as I walked a few steps behind him. "We could get into trouble."

"There's no one home," Jacob laughed. "How can we get in trouble if there's no one home? Besides, who's going to see us back there?"

He turned to me and smiled, and before I knew it, Jacob had talked me into doing something I knew I shouldn't do. I didn't realize it at the time, but I had just made a very bad decision.

I followed Jacob all the way down the driveway to the back of the house. It was just as scary looking back here as it was in the front of the

house. The grass and weeds in the back yard had grown tall and needed to be mowed. Some pieces of wood had fallen off the house and were lying on the ground. They were almost covered up by the grass and the weeds.

There was a small set of steps leading up to a narrow porch that ran along the back of the house. There was a cat on each side of the steps. They looked as if they were under some kind of spell because they just sat there not moving a muscle. Their eyes seemed to watch us as we tiptoed up the steps. The old boards creaked and crackled under our feet as we walked across them.

When we reached the top of the steps, Jacob looked out at the back yard. "Look at that," he said, pointing at the tall grass. There, partially hidden by the weeds, was a small pumpkin patch. But these weren't ordinary pumpkins. Each of them had an evil smile and a pair of angry eyes that seemed to be looking right at us.

"I'm not going out there," I said as I turned back toward the house.

"Me neither," Jacob quickly agreed.

We walked over to a window next to the back door and tried to look through it. The glass was kind of dirty. That made it hard to see through. Jacob cupped his hands around his eyes and squinted as he tried to see inside the house.

"What do you see?" I asked eagerly.

"Not much," Jacob moaned. "This looks like the kitchen."

As Jacob peeked through the window, he noticed a large pot simmering on the stove. A trickle of steam drifted into the air above it. Next to the stove was a row of bottles, each one a different size and shape. Each of them were filled with brightly colored powders.

"Look at that," Jacob said, pointing at the bottles. "I bet that's what she uses to mix her magic potions."

I looked through the window at the bottles while Jacob walked over to another window. "Wow," he whispered excitedly, "Dakota, you've got to see this."

"See what?" I asked.

Jacob was backing away from the window with a strange look on his face as I walked over to him. I looked at him for a moment, then turned and looked through the dirty glass. It took me a few seconds to realize what I was looking at.

"Are those animals?" I asked, not really believing my eyes.

"They *were* animals," Jacob nervously answered.

I looked over at him, then back through the window. Inside the house I saw a cat, a bird, and a lizard. None of them were moving. They were just standing there. Their eyes were wide open and shining in the sun that beamed through the window.

"Are you sure they're real?" I asked.

"Look at them," Jacob said. "Don't they look real to you?"

I looked at them again. They really did look real, especially their eyes. It seemed as if they were all looking right at us just like the pumpkins were, and those cats on the porch steps.

I stepped back from the window without taking my eyes off the frozen animals. Then I turned to Jacob and said, "Wait a minute. What did you mean when you said they *were* animals?"

"They were animals until she cast a spell on them," Jacob said. "Now they're frozen under her spell until she needs them again."

"Needs them for what?" I asked. Jacob was beginning to creep me out.

"Who knows?" he shrugged. "Maybe they guard her house while she's gone. Maybe she's going to use them to take over the world. I don't know."

As Jacob spoke, we heard the sound of her noisy car turning into the driveway. Jacob and I looked at each other.

"She's back!" we both shouted.

"Quick, let's get out of here," Jacob said.

Jacob and I ran across the back porch toward the steps, but before we reached them, a board cracked loudly under Jacob's feet. Jacob tried to stop himself, but it was no use. The board snapped, and he fell through the porch floor onto the hard, crusty ground below. I grabbed for him but I was too late. Jacob had fallen under the porch and was trapped there.

"Dakota, get me out of here!" he screamed.

I got down on my stomach and reached down into the hole in the floor. The sound of the old car grew louder as it slowly coasted down the driveway toward the garage.

"Grab my hands!" I yelled.

Jacob reached up and took hold of my hands, but Jacob was a year older, and heavier than me. He tried to pull himself up and I tried to keep him in my grip, but Jacob was just too heavy. I could feel myself slipping. I kicked my feet and struggled as best I could, but it was no use. Before I knew it, Jacob had pulled me through the hole. Now both of us were trapped under the porch.

"What are we going to do?" I whispered to Jacob in a panicked voice.

Before Jacob could answer, the old car drove past the back porch and into the garage. The engine was turned off and the car door squeaked open. We moved away from the hole and over to some old boards that closed in the underside of the porch.

Through a crack, we watched as the old woman slowly made her way from the garage to the porch steps. She was carrying a box. The boards creaked as she slowly climbed the steps and walked across the porch to the back door. She stopped at the door and slipped her key in the lock. I could hear her keys jingle as she unlocked the door and went inside. She closed the door loudly behind her.

Jacob and I were both relieved that the woman didn't see us, or the hole we made in her porch floor, but we didn't know how we were going to get out from under her porch.

We looked around for something to stand on so we could reach the hole and climb out, but there was nothing under the porch except some old bottles, a few pieces of broken wood, and the two of us.

"We've got to find a way out of here," Jacob whispered as we stood looking through the boards at the garage.

"How are we supposed to do that?" I asked. "We can't reach the hole."

Jacob didn't answer. Something had caught his eye. He walked over to some boards that were nailed onto the wall of the house. Jacob studied the boards for a moment, then looked over at me. "Dakota, come over here and help me."

I walked across the dry, bumpy dirt to where Jacob was standing. "Help you do what?" I asked.

"Help me get these boards off."

I looked at him curiously. "Why?" I asked.

"There might be a door or a window or something behind them that we could crawl through," Jacob explained.

"But that's the basement," I said. "If we crawl through there, we'll be in the house. I don't want to be inside a witch's house. Do you?"

"Do you want to stay under this porch for the rest of your life?" Jacob asked.

"No," I admitted.

"Then help me get these boards off," Jacob said as he grabbed the end of one of the boards.

The two of us took hold of the board and began pulling on it. The wood was old and the nails were rusty, so the board was easy to pull off. It wasn't long before all of the boards were lying in a pile on the ground.

We quickly discovered that the boards were covering an old window with no glass in it. Jacob said it would be easy for us to crawl through.

I looked timidly at the window and the dark room beyond it. "You go first," I told Jacob. Then I gave him a little push. Well, maybe it was a big push.

"Hey," Jacob said, not really wanting to go first. But it was his idea so he took a deep breath and crawled through the window and into the house. I climbed through right behind him.

The room was very dark. The only light came from the window we had just crawled through.

"Take your flashlight out of your pocket and turn it on," Jacob said as he reached into his pocket for his. We both turned our flashlights on and began shining them around the room. There was a string hanging from a light on the ceiling. Jacob jumped up and grabbed it. The light came on. It wasn't a very bright light, but along with our flashlights, there was enough light to see.

We both drew in a deep, quick breath when we saw what was in the room with us. The room was filled with animals. They all had spells cast over them like the ones we'd seen through the kitchen window. They looked as if they were all just waiting to be brought back to life. There was a huge alligator, several strange-looking birds, a cat, and a big snake. They were all just standing there, waiting to be brought back to life, and they were all looking right at us.

"Look at them all," I whispered.

Jacob couldn't take his eyes off them. "I hope they don't come back to life while we're in here," he said.

"Then let's get out of here," I said as I walked towards a door on the other side of the room.

The door led to a dark hallway.

"We have to find a way out of this old house before the witch catches us," Jacob said nervously.

So, as quietly and carefully as we could manage, Jacob and I walked out of the room and down a dark, narrow hallway.

At the end of the hallway there was a steep staircase, and at the top, there was a door. The door was closed. We both stood trembling near the bottom step.

Jacob looked at me. "We have to go up, Dakota. It's the only way out of here."

"But what if she sees us?" I asked. "What if we get caught? What if she casts a spell on *us*?" I was sorry that I had listened to Jacob. If I had said *no* when Jacob asked me to come with him to the old house, we wouldn't be trapped in this creepy old basement right now.

"Come on," Jacob said as he climbed the first step, "and be quiet or she'll hear us."

We tiptoed up the steps, one at a time, until we reached the top. The door was right there in front of us. Jacob reached for the knob. He slowly wrapped his fingers around it and began to turn, but the knob was stiff and wouldn't move. Jacob tried again, but the knob just wouldn't turn, and the door wouldn't open.

Finally, Jacob got impatient and twisted the knob sharply with both hands. The knob clicked loudly and the door flew open, spilling us both out onto the floor on the other side. With wide eyes, we looked around. We knew instantly where we were. We were in the kitchen. And standing there over us was the old woman — the witch.

Her eyes looked furious. Her wrinkled face scowled at us as we lay helpless on her kitchen floor.

"What are you boys doing in my house?" she shrieked.

We were so scared we couldn't speak. I just knew the witch was going to cast a spell over us and put us in that room with the other animals.

"Well?" she said, taking a step towards us. "What do you have to say for yourselves?"

I knew Jacob wasn't going to answer her so I spoke up. "We were on your back porch and one of the boards broke. We fell under the porch and we couldn't get out. We weren't going to rob you or anything, honest."

The old woman looked over her shoulder through the window at the porch. She saw the hole that we had fallen through. Then she looked back at us. We both cowered as she took another step closer.

"Are you boys all right?" she asked in a gentler voice.

"Yes," I answered as I stood up.

"You didn't get hurt falling through that hole, did you?"

"No," Jacob replied, still lying on the floor.

"Well, why don't you both get yourselves up so I can take a look at you?"

Here it comes, I thought to myself. *Here comes the spell*. We began to tremble again. The old woman could tell we were afraid.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Are you afraid of something?"

We both nodded our heads.

"What are you afraid of?"

"We're afraid that you might cast a spell on us like you did to those animals," Jacob said, pointing to a bird sitting motionless on the counter.

The old woman looked over at the bird, then back at us.

"A spell," she laughed. "How would I cast a spell on you? I made that bird and all the other animals out of clay. That's how I make my living since my husband died." The old woman lowered her eyes slightly as she spoke.

Jacob stood up. "You had a husband?" he asked.

"Yes, many years ago, but he's gone now, and I have to do whatever I can to earn money. Making these clay statues is all I really know how to do."

The old woman walked over to the counter and picked up the statue of the bird. "Do you like it?" she asked.

"It's beautiful," I exclaimed. "It looks so real, especially the eyes."

"That's because they're made of glass," the old woman said. "Would you like to have it?"

"For real?" I asked.

The woman smiled and said, "Yes, for real."

She gently placed the bird in my hands.

"It's heavy," I said as I held it. I felt bad for thinking this woman was a witch. She was just a poor, lonely woman with no one to help her. As I watched, she reached up on top of the refrigerator and took down a statue of a cat.

"Here," she said as she handed it to Jacob, "this one's for you."

Jacob thanked her as he held the cat proudly in his hands.

The old woman walked to the back door and opened it.

"Maybe you boys would like to come back one day and help me fix the hole in my back porch." She held the door open for us as we walked out.

I stopped and thought for a moment. "I have a much better idea than that," I said.

"Well, come back sometime and see me," the old woman told us. We told her goodbye as we walked out the door and down the steps.

Later that afternoon, I waited patiently for my dad to get home from work. As his car turned into the driveway, I ran alongside it waving my arms to get his attention.

The car stopped and my dad got out. I explained to him that there was a woman living just down the street that needed someone to help her fix some things around her house. My dad looked down the street at the old house then smiled at me and said, "Why don't you and I walk down there and see what we can do to help her?"

My dad and I headed down the block to the old woman's house. We crossed the street and made our way down the driveway to the back porch. As we climbed the steps, my dad saw the hole in the porch floor. He knocked on the door.

The old woman saw us and opened it. She smiled when she saw me.

"Hi, I'm Dakota's dad," he said as he shook her hand.

"It's very nice to meet you," she replied. "I'm Mrs. Miller."

"It's very nice to meet you, Mrs. Miller. Dakota told me that you could use some help around your house. I can see there are some things that need to be fixed."

"Well, Dakota is a very nice boy to be so concerned about me, and you are very nice to offer to help."

For the next two weeks, me and my dad, and Jacob and his dad made many trips to the old house. So did some of the other kids in our neighborhood and their dads. We fixed lots of things like the shutter that had fallen off and the hole that we had made in the porch floor. My dad even mowed the grass. By the time we finished, her house looked just like all the other houses on our street. It felt good to be able to help Mrs. Miller, even if we had to fall through her porch floor to do it.

When Halloween finally came, Jacob and I went trick-or-treating together like we always do. As we made our way past Mrs. Miller's house, I looked over at Jacob and said, "I knew that woman could never be a witch."

"How did you know that?" Jacob asked.

"Because there's no such thing as witches."

"I guess you're right," Jacob agreed as we walked down the street and around the corner. Jacob suddenly stopped and stood very still.

"If there's no such thing as witches," he said nervously, "then who do you suppose lives there?" Jacob pointed to a house at the very end of the block that looked even spookier than Mrs. Miller's house used to.

"Mrs. Miller's house is not the witch's house," Jacob said, pointing down the street, "that's the witch's house."

We both stared at the house for a few moments. Could there really be a witch living here, we wondered, or could it be just another poor, old woman that needs help taking care of her house? We decided not to do what we had done before. We had learned that things are not always the way they seem.

We continued trick-or-treating until we came to the old, spooky-looking house. None of the lights were on in the house. It looked like no one was home. Maybe nobody even lived here. A heavy iron gate leading into the front yard stood open, as if it were waiting for us to walk through. We both stared nervously at it.

"Want to go knock on the door?" Jacob asked.

"No, let's skip this house," I quickly answered.

"Good idea," Jacob said as we headed down the sidewalk past the house. All of a sudden, we heard a loud squeaking noise behind us. We stopped and turned to see what it was. As we watched, the old, rusted iron gate began to close, all by itself. It latched with a loud crash, just as a gust of wind sent a pile of dead leaves spiraling up into the air around us. Jacob and I looked at each other and began to run back up the sidewalk.

"I've trick-or-treated enough tonight," I yelled as I ran.

"Me too," Jacob agreed. "Let's go home."

We both ran home as fast as our feet would take us. Soon we were safe in our own houses with our bags full of candy. We were glad to be away from whatever it was that might be in the old, spooky-looking house behind the rusted iron gate. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that one day my curiosity would take me through that iron gate and up to that spooky-looking house, but only if Jacob would come too.