

THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR

A Short Story
By
L.K. Campbell

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The House Next Door is a work of fiction.
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It was just my luck to be stuck in a checkout line behind a dozen other people who were buying last minute Halloween treats. Why did I wait until October thirty-first to buy my candy?

I tapped my foot and hummed to myself while the cashier called for a price check on aisle five. I glanced around to see if any other lanes were open and met the gaze of a sexy stranger. Dark brown eyes scanned and scrutinized me as if he knew me. One side of his mouth tilted upward, and he nodded. His leather jacket was open, revealing a tight t-shirt that left little to the imagination. The guy was built. I looked down at my basket to make sure my candy hadn't melted.

"Hey, lady," a voice behind me said. "The line's moving."

I shook my head and looked back toward the other lane, but he was gone. I stood on my tiptoes to see if he'd moved further down to another line, but I couldn't see him. Maybe he was a figment of my imagination. He had to be. I couldn't be fortunate enough to catch the eye of a guy who was drop-dead gorgeous. *Men don't make passes at girls who wear glasses.* That is the old saying, isn't it?

It was twilight when I pulled the car into my driveway. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a flash of light from the house next door. I saw no lights were visible through any of the windows. Maybe it was my new glasses playing tricks on me. I took them off and rubbed the lenses with the tail end of my shirt.

I returned my glasses to their snug perch on the bridge of my nose. It was pitch black darkness over there, except for the street light that cast a pale glow across the front porch. A dark shadow darted across the yard. I shivered and felt adrenalin rush to my chest. I grabbed my grocery bag and dashed to my door. As soon as I was in my warm, cozy house, I reprimanded myself for being frightened.

The house had been vacated soon after Mrs. Murphy found her husband in the garage, slumped over the steering wheel of their car and dead as a doornail. The poor lady lost her mind from grief, and her children moved her to a retirement community. Earlier in the week, I noticed that a local realtor had posted a sign out front. I could never buy a house where someone had died—not that I believe in ghosts, mind you. It would just be too creepy.

"Mr. Murphy is *not* wandering around over there," I said aloud while I went from room to room and turned on every light.

I took a quick shower and pulled on the witch's costume that I'd rented to wear to a party later that night. Not very original, I know, but it was the sexiest costume in the store. I didn't want to show up at singles' party dressed as R2-D2.

"I'm gonna give-a you candy," I sang while I smoothed the tight outfit down over my hips and thighs.

I smeared green paint on one side of my face, but the sharp ding of the doorbell caused me to drop the tin on my cream-colored carpet. "Oh, crap! I'll never get that stain out."

Ding-ding!

"I'm coming!"

I looked through the peephole and saw three little characters from *Pirates of the Caribbean*. "Treat or treat," they said in unison when I opened the door.

One of the little boys looked at my face and snickered.

"I'm a witch with a split personality," I said.

The scowl on this face told me that he didn't get my joke. He shoved his orange

bucket toward me with one hand and made a slashing motion with the plastic hook that was attached to the other.

“Okay, okay. Here’s your candy, you little pirates.”

I backed inside my living room and put my hand on the doorknob, but I stopped cold when an apparition in white seemed to be floating down my driveway. I wasn’t wearing my glasses, so I squinted to get a better look. I might’ve gotten a fright if the wind hadn’t blown up the hem of the ghost costume to reveal jeans and rollerblades. It stopped at the bottom of my porch steps, and I heard a little girl’s voice say, “Trick or treat.”

She held out a paper sack that was already half full.

“My goodness, you kids started early tonight, didn’t you?”

Her arm stretched out in the direction of the Murphy house. “The man over there gave me a lot of candy.”

A cold gust of air blasted my porch, and I trembled. My costume wasn’t made for warmth. “You must be mistaken,” I said. “That house has been empty for months.”

The ghost shook its head. “I knocked on the door, and the man gave me candy.”

I took a few steps toward the end of my porch and looked at the house. There was no vehicle in the driveway, and the windows that faced my house were dark. I turned back to the ghost to question her further, but she’d disappeared. My teeth chattered, and I hurried back into the warmth of my house.

“There *is* no man next door,” I said. “But where did she get the candy? And why am I talking to myself?”

That was when I made up my mind to face my fear head-on. I’d been spooked by that house long enough. I wrapped a shawl around my shoulders and headed back outside. The night was silent except for the shrieks and giggles of the children, who were now out in full force.

Being careful to stay in the shadows, I crept toward the house. When I neared the garage, I saw a glimmer of light peeking out from a crack under the door. I froze in place when I heard a faint tapping that seemed to be coming from that direction. Mr. Murphy used to spend a lot of time in the garage working on that old riding lawn mower with the loud engine that would wake me up at the crack of dawn on Saturday mornings.

Screwing up my courage, I moved forward. The tapping grew louder. If I wasn’t mistaken, there was a window on the other side of the garage. Being careful where I stepped in the darkness of the side yard, I inched my way toward the window. The blinds were drawn, but I could see that the garage was fully lit.

My breath caught when I saw the shadow pass in front of the window. Then, the shadow took on the shape of a man. Before I could stop myself, I screamed aloud. The blinds started to rise, and I took off running. I would’ve made it back to my house if the fishtail hem of my dress hadn’t caught on something that was protruding from the ground. I couldn’t keep my balance in the stiletto heels I was wearing. I teetered around like a drunk person and then fell face first into a pile of leaves.

I heard the garage door open, and a male voice ask, “Aren’t you a little old for trick-or-treat?”

I rolled over and sat up. He was silhouetted against the light of the garage, and I couldn’t make out his features. He was tall and filled out his t-shirt and jeans quite nicely. One thing was certain. He wasn’t Mr. Murphy.

His head cocked to one side, and he said, “Oh, I get it. You’re a witch with a split personality.”

My nerves relaxed. How could I be afraid of a guy who shared my sense of humor? He stretched out his hand and leaned forward to help me up. I couldn’t believe my eyes. It was the hunk from the grocery store.

“Jake McLeod,” he said. “I’m with Pinnacle Real Estate.”

I got to my feet and brushed away the leaves that had stuck to my clothes while I tried to remember my name. "I'm Melissa Avery," I finally said. "I love...I mean...I live next door." My cheeks blazed hot. "A little girl told me that there was a man over here, and I came to investigate."

He grinned, and a twinkle lit up his eyes. "And here I am."

The heat from my flushed cheeks spread to the rest of my body. "Well, I'll leave you to whatever you were doing over here. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"No bother at all. I'm glad I got to meet you, Melissa Avery."

The tone of his voice pricked my already tender nerve endings. I wasn't the kind of girl who could jump in the sack with a man I just met, but Jake could've persuaded me.

"I'd better go. The treat-or-treaters are getting restless," I said. "If you need anything, I'm right next door."

He smiled and winked at me. "I'll remember that."

I was halfway back to my house before I worked up the courage to go back and give him my phone number.

"Jake, I forgot to give you my..."

I stopped and looked around. Where was he? The garage door was closed, but there was no light visible now. I walked around to the side of the house. It was deathly dark and quiet. The beating of my heart increased until I could hear it pounding in my ears. I ran back home and flipped through the pages of my phonebook. There was no listing for Pinnacle Real Estate or Jake McLeod.

I took a flashlight from the drawer of my nightstand and walked to edge of the street. The name on the sign read, "Broadwell Realtors." My chest heaved as I struggled to get my breathing under control. I looked back toward the Murphy house again. A dark shadow rose from the house, crossed the roof and disappeared into the darkness.

THE END