

THE TEST

a short story by AmandaK

I climbed on the fence and stared at the house. It stood in silence, abandoned and crumbling. Only a few shingles still covered its roof, leaving the rafters exposed to the elements. The front door stood half-open and creaked softly as it moved in a gust of wind. It was a desolate building but somehow it didn't feel empty.

Misgiving chilled my blood. How had I ever let myself be talked into this? My thoughts wandered back to yesterday, after school was out...

"Hey you!" a voice called. I looked around. Did they mean me?

"Yeah, you." A tall, burly kid waved to me. I walked over, a little apprehensive. I was once again the new kid in town --my mom and I moved around a lot since my father disappeared-- and I expected them to try me out soon.

"What's up?" I asked, hoping I appeared nonchalant and self-confident. Inwardly I cringed when out of the corner of my eye I spotted several kids moving forward.

"You're new here, right?" the burly guy asked. His hair was the color of freshly scraped carrots and I noticed the dozens of small freckles covering his nose and cheeks.

"Yeah," I replied.

"If you want to stay here and join us," he motioned to include the others, "you have to take the test." The other kids, forming in a circle around me, nodded. "All the kids in town have to take the test."

"What test?" I wanted to know. I was curious, but also a little uneasy. Usually the biggest bully in town picks a fight with you. If you give as good as you get, everything will be okay. But you can't win the fight, or be a cry-baby about it, not if you want to make friends. This test sounded different though.

"Have you seen the Roberts' house?" they asked me. I stared back at them. I didn't know what they were talking about.

"The abandoned house, outside of town, near the river," they explained. Recognition dawned. They meant the old crumbling house that I saw when we moved into town, my mom and I.

"Yeah," I replied. "I've seen it. It looks like it's ready to fall apart in the next storm."

"Exactly!" they cried. "That's where the test takes place. It's like this."

They stepped closer, lowering their voices to a secretive murmur. "Inside, underneath the stairs, is a peg. It's got a key hanging from it. You have to go in and bring us the key. If you dare to do that, you pass and you can join the Secret Posse."

I looked at them, trying to gauge the hidden meaning in their words. There was something they weren't telling me. It seemed so simple. Walk into an abandoned house, get the key and walk out; that was a test?

"That's it?" I asked.

"That's it," they nodded.

And so now here I was, sitting on the fence. The house shimmered in the afternoon heat. Yet I felt a cold draft even though there was hardly any wind. It seemed as if the cold was coming from the house, exuded in large, lazy waves. I shivered. Still, if I wanted to get accepted here, I had to do what they told me.

I jumped down from the fence and slowly advanced on the building. As I neared the house, it seemed to loom menacingly over me. It was a bright, sunny afternoon, the sky a cloudless blue but as I came closer to the house the sunlight faded to a dull glimmer. My heart thudded in my chest and I swallowed down a lump that stuck in my throat.

I took another step forward and set foot on the lowest of the three steps leading up to the veranda that circled the old building. It groaned beneath my weight. The noise sounded like a soft moan and echoed through the silence that surrounded the house. In the distance I vaguely heard a car backfire as it passed by on the road.

I took another step and tiptoed across the board towards the door. The front door was ajar and I pushed it open cautiously. It squeaked on its hinges and I nearly jumped from the sudden loud noise. Nervously I chuckled to myself. It was only an old house and there was nothing to be afraid of. At least that's what I tried to tell myself.

I walked in. Despite the summer heat it was cool inside, almost cold. In the gloom I saw cobwebs hanging from the ceiling. In the draft created by the opened front door dust bunnies scurried out of the light. I drew a sharp breath. For a moment I could've sworn the dust bunnies had eyes...

I moved towards the stairs. The floorboards protested against my weight and in the shadows I nearly tripped over a loose board that stuck up.

Finally I reached the stairs. Like the boys told me, underneath on the other side, a key hung from a wooden peg. The key appeared made of copper and gleamed in the dim light.

I stretched out my hand and stopped just an inch away from touching it. I hesitated. It felt wrong to take this key. But then I recalled the boys' words. "Everyone in town should take the test."

I grabbed the key off its perch. When my hand closed around it, a howling shriek erupted, apparently from the house. I screamed myself and whirled around to run to the door. Before I could reach it, the door slammed to, shutting off the sunlight that poured in through the opening. I was left in the dark. Frantically I tried to open the door but it wouldn't budge.

Behind me I heard loud cracks and snapping wood. I risked a glance over my shoulder and my mouth fell open. The floorboards were moving, leaving a gaping hole. Where the wooden planks broke, ugly splinters showed, creating the illusion of a mouth with sharp teeth.

I turned back to the door. Fueled by fear I renewed my attempts to open it. Suddenly I noticed the key. It was lying a few feet away where I dropped it in my haste to get outside. I grabbed for it and pushed it into the lock. To my immense relief it turned and I heard the tumblers inside the lock falling away. I pulled open the door and blessed sunlight shone in. I ran from the house like I'd never run before.

And I thought this test would be easy...

Disclaimer: All rights reserved. This is an original work of fiction. It may not be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form or by any means for anything other than personal use without the prior written permission of the author.