

Witch Hollow

by Mary Kay Morel

TWO MONTHS AGO, my best friend, Ethan Bamwell, and I started sixth grade at Meadow Valley Middle School. That means we're big kids now. But one snowy Saturday, right before Halloween, we trudge over to our old elementary school to play on the swings again. They look pretty forlorn.

"Maybe this isn't a good idea," I say, dusting the wet snow from the cupped seats.

"Well, we could build a snowman instead," Ethan offers, pointing to all the white stuff piled on the ground. "Or," he pauses dramatically, "we could visit Witch Hollow."

"Are you crazy?" I stare at him like he's lost his mind.

Witch Hollow lies nestled beyond the school's soccer field. The hollow is mostly wooded brush and towering trees, surrounding a thumbprint of a pond. Back when we were little, everyone (well, mostly big kids) told us the place was haunted by a witch. If you disturbed her woods, she'd come to your house in the middle of the night and scare you senseless. As a result, we were too frightened to go near Witch Hollow.

Now that we're bigger, we know better. Witch Hollow is actually haunted by high-school students—the kind my grandma calls "degenerates." They go there to drink beer and have loud parties. The last thing they want is an audience of pesky little people, so they made up the witch stories to scare younger kids away.

"What about the degenerates?" I ask uneasily.

DO YOU BELIEVE
IN WITCHES?



I TRY
NOTTO...

Illustrated by Loek Koopmans

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“Don’t worry, Alyssia,” Ethan says, catching giant snowflakes in his hand. “No one’s going to be there in this weather.”

I nod and hope he’s right. The truth is, I’ve always wanted to explore Witch Hollow. I secretly long to walk through those twilight woods. And even though I’m a big kid now, I still half wonder if there really is a witch. So I follow Ethan across the soccer field. We slip through the hole in the back fence—the one that the teachers have never found. Then we step into those woods.

I feel the magic instantly.

I feel the magic instantly. It’s the kind witches and wizards once had—magic that comes from trees and earth and sky. We move deeper into the shadowy darkness. Creeping along, we wiggle our way through the thickets and slip between pines

that are as tall as King Arthur’s castle. The woods around us grow dark as a dungeon. Perfect home for a witch, I think.

Then the trees give way to a small pond that shimmers like a gray mirror. I catch my breath at the sight. “It’s just—perfect,” I whisper.

“We come in peace, Witch,” Ethan yells, raising his palms upward. “We mean you no harm.” Then he turns to me. “Let’s make something.”

“A snowman?” I suggest.

He shakes his head. “No. Let’s make the witch of Witch Hollow!”

He starts moving rocks. I join him, shaping pond mud into thick balls like bread dough. Next thing I know, we’re packing the mud and rocks into the fork of a great willow tree standing near the water. The mixture grows to the size of a beehive. Then bigger. Just as it reaches the height of a bushel basket, we hear a car’s engine.

My heart sinks to my feet. The degenerates!

We run to an opening in the trees. Through the branches, we look out on the road that snakes into the backside of Witch Hollow. A tiny red car is lurching valiantly across its snowy surface, heading straight toward us.

“The enemy!” Ethan says in a whispery hiss.

I nod. “We have to do something!” I say. “We’ve got to stop them!”

Just as I speak those words, the car skids off the road and plunges into a snow-filled ditch. A boy in a ski jacket climbs out of the driver’s seat. He kicks the tires unhappily. Then he stands, staring at the car. I almost expect him to scratch his head. Immediately, he does just that.

THEY’RE
MAKING A
PRETEND
WITCH...
RIGHT?



I THINK SO.
STILL! SEEMS A
LITTLE RISKY.

I wait for the passenger door to open. It does. A girl crawls out and stands next to the boy, making lots of gestures.

“Leave,” I command them.

The girl climbs into the driver’s seat as the boy positions himself behind the back bumper. Then he starts to push. The tires spin; the engine whines. Gradually the vehicle slithers back onto the road. Only now it’s facing the direction it came from. The boy hops into the passenger seat, and the girl drives away, traveling much more slowly than before.

“They tried to take our kingdom,” Ethan says. “But you scared them off with your amazing psychic powers.”

“Really?” Suddenly I remember wishing that I could stop that car—just before it careened off the road. I remember picturing the boy scratching his head—and he did. I remember waiting for the passenger door to open—and it did. Then I told them to leave—and now they’re gone! Did I do all that? Did I make those things happen? I’m not sure.

We return to our mud hive and spend the rest of the afternoon creating the witch. We sculpt the mud and rocks the same way we learned to shape clay in art class. Our mittens grow wet; our fingers go numb. I hum while I work, and Ethan occasionally bursts out singing, “Row, row, row your boat . . .”

We end up with a head and torso, our creature emerging from the branches, looking like she’s actually part of the tree. When we’ve finished shaping her features, we use sticks to draw the details, making fine lines in her neck and face. We add curly dried leaves and fragments of bramble, wreathing her head with a mop of wild hair. Then Ethan places a tree branch of a broom in her hands. Finally, we step back and study our masterpiece.

“Wow!” I whisper. “I wish our art teacher could see what we’ve done.” Witch is gorgeous in an ugly, scary way. Definitely worth an A⁺.

“We’ve made her real,” Ethan says. “Now she can walk these woods again.” Then he pulls two buttons from the sweater underneath his coat and puts on the finishing touch. Eyes. They give Witch a complete face. She’s whole now. We stare at her, and she stares back.

Finally, I look away, feeling a little creeped out. “We should go home,” I say softly, brushing mud and snow from my clothes.

“It’ll be dark soon,” Ethan agrees. He looks away from Witch, too.



Just as we're about to leave, he stops and turns. "Bye, Witch." He bows low to her. "Take good care of this kingdom and keep out the hooligans. We'll return soon."

I glance toward Witch one last time. For a glimmer of an instant, I swear she blinks her eyes. I blink back and decide that I've lost my mind. "Let's go," I mumble.

We plow through the trees and back across the soccer field. More than once questions bubble to the top of my brain. Did I really make that car go off the road? Do I actually have those kinds of powers? And did Ethan and I bring the witch of Witch Hollow to life? I want to ask my best friend about these things, but he seems tired and isn't talking now. Then I spot my front porch and forget all about the witch. Instead, I tell Ethan good-bye and head for home, wondering what Mom will have for dinner.


Afterwards, because it's Saturday night, I'm allowed to stay up and read as late as I want. I start a book called *Night of the Werewolf*, but it gets too scary and I grow too sleepy. After three chapters, I turn out the lights.

The book, though, must have spooked me because I jump straight up when the dog next-door starts howling around midnight. Wide awake, I creep to my window, scared of what I'll see but determined not to miss anything.

Outside, the snow has stopped. A full moon hangs white as a bone and cold as steel. The dog wails again, his voice naked and lonely. Then the corner of my eye catches movement in the black web of backyard trees. Something flickers in the branches and slowly stirs out of that stillness. I watch the movement become a shadow. Then the shadow reconfigures itself in full form.

It takes me a good seven seconds to realize what I'm seeing: a shape, almost human, emerging from the black, riding slowly forward, leafy hair trailing her tree branch of a broom as she swishes toward my house.

It's . . . Witch. Our witch. Only she's no longer some mud-and-rock figure pinned to a tree. Instead, she's real enough to ride the midnight skies and cruise this neighborhood. I don't know whether to wave or run back to bed and hide under the covers. Then, just as she's halfway past my window, she turns and winks one button eye. In spite of my surprise, I wink back and wave my hand. And she's gone. Just like that.

I return to bed, wondering if this is the witch of Witch Hollow. Or have we created another one, more real and true than the first? I just don't know. I'll ask Ethan what he thinks when I see him tomorrow. 

YOW. THIS IS
GETTINGSUPER
CREEPY.



FOR REAL!