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#30

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BY JOHNATHAN RAND

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My name is Brooke Whipkey, and I live on Churchside Drive in Gainesville, Virginia, which is a city not far from Washington, D.C. In fact, that's where my mom works. She works at the White House as an assistant for a state senator. She loves her job, but she works late, and she's gone a lot.

My dad is an architect, and he works out of his home office upstairs. He designs homes and buildings, and he's very good at it. He's even won some awards for his designs.

My uncle Chet, who lives only a few miles away, is also very good at what he does: repairing

vacuums. He has a shop in a warehouse not far from where we live. He's a nice guy and one of my favorite relatives, but Dad says he's always been a little nutty, that he's always looking for ways to get rich quick. He has some good ideas, but they just never seem to work for him.

But my Uncle Chet's shop was where my friend, Spider Murphy, and I got into a *lot* of trouble. And by the way, his real name isn't 'Spider,' it's Bartholomew. He's named after his great-grandfather, or something like that. But he doesn't like the name, and he doesn't want to be called 'Bart' for short. So, everyone calls him Spider. He said he's been called that ever since he was four years old. Personally, I don't care what anybody's name is. Spider is cool, and he's been a good friend for a long time. We like a lot of the same things, including one hobby in particular:

Electronics.

Now, that might sound strange to you, but not to me. Sure, some of the kids at school think I'm weird. They think I should be more like them.

They don't think of electronics as a hobby that girls should like, but I do. I've loved electronics ever since I was little, when I accidentally received a kit as a gift from my grandparents.

I say 'accidentally' because that's exactly what it was: an accident. You see, my cousin Matt and I share the very same birthday . . . except he's two years older than me and lives in Gainesville, Florida. Well, on my seventh birthday, my grandparents goofed. They sent Matt's present to me in Gainesville, *Virginia* and my present to him in Gainesville, *Florida*. When I opened the box to find an electronics kit, I was really excited. I'd never seen one before, and I thought it was cool. It was very basic, but there were some neat things to build: a homemade radio and a clock that was powered by an ordinary potato! I had a lot of fun.

But the funny part? My grandparents had bought me a talking doll and accidentally sent it to Matt. He was really confused as to why his grandparents would send him a doll.

When my grandparents found out what

they'd done, they felt terrible. The plan was to swap gifts: I would send the electronics kit to Matt, and he would send the doll to me.

But I said no way. I had already opened the electronics kit, and I was having too much fun with it. I didn't even *want* the doll. In the end, Matt gave the doll to his little sister, and my grandparents sent him what he *really* wanted: a skateboard. Everyone was happy . . . especially Matt's little sister, who got a present even though it wasn't her birthday.

But I think I was happiest of all. I had hours of fun with that kit, learning about electricity and how it worked. My parents bought me another kit, and soon I was making all kinds of experimental electrical things on my own. Most of the things I built were pretty basic, but I sure had a lot of fun. I even won first prize at our school science fair when I was only eight years old! It was just a little homemade light bulb, but it was cool and it really worked.

So you see, I've been fascinated with

electrical things for years. I'm still fascinated, of course, but now I tend to be a lot more careful . . . especially after something horrible happened one awful day in December.



When I got home from school that day in December, I was excited to see a package waiting for me. I'd saved up my money and ordered a burglar alarm kit. It was a pretty simple unit, but I thought it would be fun to build it and hook it up to my bedroom door. That way, my brother Andrew would get the surprise of his life the next time he tried to sneak into my room. Andrew is two years younger than me, and he's nothing but a nosy pest. He is always getting into my room,

going through my stuff, and just being a pain. I hoped my burglar alarm would catch him in the act.

As far as kits go, my burglar alarm was complicated. I'd already built quite a few electrical things—small, simple robots, lights, radios—things like that. The first ones I built were really easy and were made for beginners.

Since then I've built a lot of things, and I've learned a lot about electricity and how it works. Once, I was able to rewire Mom's broken blinker on her car. She was happy because she said that if she had to take it to the repair shop, it would probably have cost her a fortune.

So, I was always looking for more challenging kits and experiments. After a while, the really simple things get boring. I like challenges, and what I really wanted to do was enter a robotics competition. Not only that, I wanted to *win*. Which, of course, meant that I'd really have to know a lot about electronics.

By building my burglar alarm kit, I was sure

I'd learn a lot. It was designed for kids aged fourteen and older, but I was confident that I could build it even though I was only eleven.

"I'm home, Dad!" I called out as I dropped my book bag on the couch.

"Did you find your package, Brooke?" I heard Dad reply from his upstairs office.

"Yeah!" I said.

"Mom called and said she's going to be late," Dad hollered. "That means I'll be making dinner tonight."

Which meant, of course, that he would call to order a pizza and have it delivered. Dad might be good at designing homes and buildings, but he can't cook worth beans.

But that was fine with me. I love pizza, and so does Andrew.

I picked up the package and carried it to my bedroom. Using my fingernail, I sliced through the packaging tape and carefully opened the box. Inside were the contents of the burglar alarm kit and an instruction booklet.

Spreading out everything on my desk, I got to work, mindful that Andrew would be coming home from soccer practice soon. I didn't want him to see what I was working on, because that would ruin the surprise. After all, the whole purpose in having my burglar alarm was to give him the scare of his life when he came into my bedroom uninvited.

I worked at assembling the alarm. By far, it was the most complicated piece of electronics I'd built. But it was fun.

After working for over an hour, I was almost finished building the alarm. As I inserted the battery, I heard the front door slam. Andrew was home.

I got up to close my bedroom door, so he wouldn't come in when the phone rang. I closed my door behind me, walked into the kitchen, and picked up the phone. It was Spider. He had some questions about his math homework. Spider is pretty smart, but sometimes he just doesn't pay attention. I told him that if he actually listened to

our teacher and read his textbooks, he'd be able to figure out the work on his own.

We chatted for a while before I hung up. Andrew had dropped his book bag on the floor and was seated on the couch watching television, and Dad was still upstairs, working. It was four-thirty. In about an hour, he would call down for me to order a large pizza, and Andrew and I would fight over what toppings we wanted.

I walked down the hall and stopped.

Something smelled funny.

I pushed open my bedroom door . . . only to find the entire room filled with smoke!



Panic surged through my entire body. My skin felt hot. My entire room was filled with a cloud of gray smoke.

I quickly saw that the burglar alarm on my desk was the cause. It wasn't on fire, but smoke was rising up, and it looked like it was about to erupt into flames.

Fanning smoke away from my face, I hurried to my desk. Using a screwdriver so I wouldn't burn my fingers, I pried the battery from the unit. I was

sure that I had made a mistake in the wiring, and when I had put the battery in, the unit short-circuited.

But now I had another problem.

The smoke had drifted into the hall and set off the smoke alarm. The high-pitched squeal made me jump, and I raced out of my bedroom.

“False alarm, Dad!” I called out. “No need to come downstairs! I’ll get it!”

I hurried into the kitchen, grabbed a chair from the dining room table, and carried it into the hall. I stood on it, reached up, and removed the battery from the smoke detector. It immediately ceased its loud, shrill beeping.

*I just have to remember to put the battery back in,* I thought. To make sure I would remember, I left the chair in the hall and put the battery on it.

Then, I went into my room, closed the door, and opened the window. Cold, wintry air swept in, chilling my skin and swirling the curtains.

*Maybe I can get all the smoke smell out before*

*Dad or Mom or Andrew finds out*, I thought hopefully. Not that I would get into any trouble, but there wasn't any need for them to know I could have started the house on fire with my miswired burglar alarm.

Which was another problem. My burglar alarm was fried. The wires were blackened, and the unit's casing was charred. I was sure it was ruined.

I was disappointed, but I realized it could have been much worse. If I'd spent another five minutes talking to Spider, the unit might have burst into flames and set my room on fire. That would have been a disaster.

From that day forward, I decided that whenever it came to electricity, I would be extra careful . . . no matter how simple the project seemed. Electricity isn't something to play around with, and it can be extremely dangerous.

But I never knew how dangerous and terrifying it could be until the following summer at my uncle Chet's vacuum cleaner repair shop.



Winter became spring, and spring turned into summer. School let out. I turned twelve on June fifteenth and had a fun birthday party. I got a lot of cool presents, including a super-cool solar powered fan kit.

By then, I'd learned a lot more about robotics and electronics. I went to the hobby store whenever I had the money to buy another kit.

And that became a problem, because kits cost money. Some of them can be really expensive,

too.

So, I started to look for ways to earn money. I had a lemonade stand, but there aren't many people that go by our block, and I didn't earn very much. I tried a dog walking service, but I got only a few customers. Most people who own dogs like to walk with their pets.

I even made flyers and took them around to houses, advertising babysitting services. I posted my flyers on telephone poles and slid them under car windshields. But I didn't get any work, and I think it was because not many people want to hire a twelve-year old babysitter.

One weekend, Spider and I knocked on doors, offering to wash cars. We got a little bit of business, but not much. We washed two cars and made ten dollars.

"Why don't you call my brother?" Dad suggested one day. "He might have something you can do at his shop."

"Uncle Chet?" I asked.

"Sure," Dad said. "He doesn't have any other

employees at his repair shop. Last time I was there, it was a mess. He never cleans or organizes anything. You might be able to do some work for him.”

“That’s a great idea!” I said. “I’ll go ask him right now!”

I raced to the garage and hopped on my bike. Uncle Chet’s shop is about two miles from where we live, so it didn’t take me long to get there. I turned into the parking lot, cruised up to the front of the building and stopped, glancing up at the large sign above a big, plate glass window.

*Gainesville Vacuum Repair*

*No Vacuum Too Small*

*Free Estimates*

The building was an old warehouse made of metal. It originally was white, but time and weather had caused it to become a chalky gray color. It sat empty for years, until Uncle Chet bought it. He had originally started his business in

his garage, but quickly outgrew it and needed a bigger place. The warehouse was huge—much bigger than his garage—but he said that if his business continued to grow, he would need all of the space and maybe more. As it was, the building was as big as our school gymnasium. I couldn't imagine an entire gymnasium filled with old, used vacuums.

But, if I couldn't imagine that, I would never be able to imagine what was waiting for me inside.

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