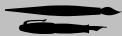


SPECIAL EDITION

Whatever After
ABBY IN WONDERLAND

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chapter one



Just the Four of Us

the good news: There's no school today, even though it's a weekday. YAY! It's one of those "Teacher Days" where all the teachers go in and have boring meetings but we kids get a day off.

The better news: I'm spending the entire day with my best friends, Frankie and Robin.

The terrible news: WHERE we are spending the day. Guess whose house we're going to? No, not Frankie's. Nope, not Robin's, either. And not mine. Give up?

We're going to Penny's house. Yes, Penny. THAT Penny. As in, Robin's other best friend. The one who is always trying to steal Robin away from me.

My parents are driving me to Penny's right now. My mom and dad both have work today — they're lawyers and they need to be in court. Frankie and Robin's parents both work, too. So Penny's mom — who knows my mom from some school committee they're both on — invited Robin, Frankie, and me over to *their* house.

Great.

"We're here," Dad announces as my mom turns our car into Penny's driveway. My stomach flip-flops and I frown.

"Whoa!" my little brother, Jonah, says, glancing out the window of our car. "Penny lives in a *castle*?"

"It's a mansion," I say, staring at the huge stone house and sitting up straighter. It *does* kind of look like a castle. Humph.

I knew that Penny lived in a ginormous house, but I've never seen it before. Penny and I aren't exactly friends.

"Hey," Jonah whispers to me. "Doesn't it look just like the castle from *Aladdin*? Remember, the one that the evil genie tried to steal and —"

I narrow my eyes at my brother and nudge him in the ribs with my elbow. “Shush!” I whisper. “Not in front of Mom and Dad.”

My parents DO NOT know that Jonah and I visit fairy tales. But we really do. Pinky swear.

When we moved into our house in Smithville, Jonah and I found a magic mirror in the basement. The mirror is bolted to the wall, and it has this beautiful carved stone frame that’s decorated with small fairies. Jonah and I discovered that if we knock on the mirror three times at midnight, a nice fairy named Maryrose, who lives in the mirror, will make the glass turn purple and swirl. Then Jonah and I can step through the glass and straight into a fairy tale. We’ve been to a ton of different ones, including *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Hansel and Gretel*, and yep, *Aladdin*. Jonah and I always mess up the stories — sometimes by accident, sometimes on purpose. But it usually works out for the best.

Usually.

I put my hand in my sweatshirt pocket and touch the tiny piece of stone in there. Last night, after dinner, I was down in the basement, playing with our dog, Prince. Jonah and I often take

Prince along into the fairy tales. (We actually *found* him in a fairy tale, but that's a whole other story.) It was only eight P.M., so I knew Maryrose wouldn't let us through the mirror. But dogs can't tell time. Prince kept butting his furry little head against the mirror, probably hoping it would turn purple and start to swirl. The glass didn't swirl, but a *teeny* piece of the stone frame — half a fairy wand — broke off and fell on the floor. I immediately picked it up and hurried upstairs to look for some superglue. But I couldn't find any in my room, and then my parents said it was bedtime. So I've decided to carry the frame piece around with me until I have a chance to fix it. I can't risk the piece — a piece of magic! — getting thrown out by accident. Who knows what problems *that* would cause?

Also, I kind of love walking around with something magical. It's like having a Hershey's Kiss in your pocket, but even better. And less melty.

Although Hershey's Kisses are pretty awesome, too.

"Oops, sorry I said that," Jonah whispers back. He glances toward the front of the car, but luckily, my parents haven't heard anything.

"It's okay," I tell him, ruffling his brown hair.

Jonah is going to spend the day at his friend Isaac's house. Maybe I should ask to go to Isaac's, too. At least then I won't have to deal with Penny.

Nah. Penny plus Robin plus Frankie is still better than two seven-year-old hooligans playing Dinosaur War, which is a game they recently invented.

"Okay, Abby," Mom says as I unbuckle my seat belt, "we'll pick you up at five thirty tonight."

"Thanks," I say. "Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad. Bye, Jonah."

Jonah is so busy playing with the two miniature dinosaurs in his hands that he barely looks up. "See ya! Have fun at the castle! Watch out for the moat!"

"There's no moat, Jonah," I say. And this definitely will NOT be fun.

I get out of the car and walk to the front door, which is shiny black. There's a huge brass knocker with a lion's head on it, but I can't reach it. I ring the doorbell and hear three melodic chimes from inside.

A woman with short dark hair answers the door. She looks too young to be Penny's mom. She gives me a tight smile. "Hello. You must be . . . I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

“Abby,” I say.

“Ah, yes. Abby. You’re the last one. Come on in. I’m Sheila, Penny’s nanny.”

Oh. I didn’t know Penny had a nanny.

“Is Abby *finally* here?” I hear Penny snarl. She’s standing on the other side of the foyer with her hands on her hips.

I’m not *that* late.

“Hi, Abby,” Frankie says softly, looking relieved. She pushes her red-framed eyeglasses up on her nose as she walks toward me.

“Am I that late?” I whisper to her.

“I’ve been here for about half an hour,” she whispers back, biting her thumbnail. “I was the first to arrive. Robin just got here.”

Yikes. Poor Frankie. She’s not exactly friends with Penny, either.

“Isn’t Penny’s house AMAZING?” Robin asks, twirling around.

It is kind of amazing. The floor is marble. There’s a sweeping staircase. And a golden chandelier wider than the four of us combined dangles above my head.

But mostly I'm distracted by Robin and Penny's outfits. They're both wearing jeans and orange long-sleeved shirts. Penny's blond hair is in a super-high ponytail, held in place by a purple elastic. Robin's curly reddish hair is in a super-high ponytail, also held in place by a purple elastic. They are clearly matching on purpose because there's no way that they'd happen to both be wearing that. Penny loves to match with Robin. It's super annoying. Penny also loves to tell Robin — and everyone — what to do. It's *extra* super annoying.

I glance at Frankie, who's wearing a cute red T-shirt with black leggings. Her straight dark hair is loose and falling in front of her face, like she's hiding behind it. Frankie can be a little shy. I'm sure she was not thrilled to be alone with Penny earlier.

My curly brown hair is also loose, and I'm wearing my blue hoodie and jeans. Frankie and I clearly did *not* get the orange-shirt-and-ponytail memo.

But at least Frankie, Robin, and I all have on our FRA necklaces. They're these beaded necklaces with the initials of our first names: Frankie-Robin-Abby. Penny doesn't have one.

"Guess what," I hear Penny saying. "My mom said I could invite a friend to my next horseback riding lesson and Robin is so

excited that she gets to come. She's never been on a horse! Can you believe that?"

"A lot of people haven't been horseback riding," I say, although I have. Only in fairy tales, though, so I can't exactly give that as an example.

"Well, girls," Sheila the nanny says. "I'm going to start cooking. I have a special feast planned for you for lunch. Spaghetti with tomato sauce and garlic bread."

"Yum," Robin and I say at the same time.

Penny frowns and links her arm through Robin's. Penny does not like when Robin and I match.

"Don't get too excited," Penny snaps. "Sheila is not the world's best cook." I look over to see if Sheila heard this, but, thankfully, she's on her way to the kitchen. "My last nanny, Maggie, was a million times better," Penny goes on. "She was the coolest. But my mom caught her trying on her designer dresses, so she got fired."

"Oh, no," Frankie says, her jaw dropping. "Poor Maggie!"

"Poor *my mom*," Penny says. "I wouldn't want someone trying on my clothes. Would you?" She shudders. "Anyway, Sheila isn't that bad. She lets me watch TV until whatever time I want."

“Are your parents here?” I ask. I assumed Penny’s mom would be around, since she set up this play date.

Penny shakes her head. “They’re in London. My dad had a meeting and my mom went along. She loves London. It’s her favorite city. Mine too. Everyone drives on the wrong side of the street there. It’s hilarious. I would have gone with them, but they don’t like me to miss so much school.”

“So your nanny stays overnight?” Frankie asks.

“Obviously,” Penny says. “I bet I could stay by myself, though. I’m really responsible.”

Is she joking? “You can’t stay by yourself,” I scoff. “Ten year olds are not allowed to stay by themselves. It’s against the law.”

“I’m eleven,” Penny says, her eyes narrowing.

“It’s still against the law,” I say. “Trust me. I know this kind of stuff. My parents are lawyers.” I’m going to be a lawyer, too, one day. And then I’m going to be a judge. But first I’m going to be a lawyer because that’s the rule. I love rules. And one of them is definitely that eleven year olds are not allowed to stay alone.

“How old do you have to be to stay alone?” Robin asks.

“Oh. Um. Sixteen, I think.” Or maybe it’s fourteen. I’m not a

hundred percent sure. I'm not going to tell them that, though. I just know it's not *eleven*. Obviously.

"I'm so jealous of you, Penny," Robin says, playing with one of her curls. "You don't have any parents here to get on your case! Or annoying big sisters. You basically have your whole house to yourself. You can do whatever you want. My sister never lets me watch what I want to on TV. And I have to go to sleep by nine. You're so lucky."

"Totally," Penny says, looking at me smugly. Then she claps her hands. "Okay, girls, now that Abby is *finally* here, we're going outside to play crazy eights. Then we'll have lunch. Then I want to show you some of my horseback riding videos. You have to see the time I won first place. And second. And first again. Then I want to show you my portfolio."

I'm exhausted already. "Your what?" I ask.

"Don't you know what a portfolio is?" Penny asks, rolling her eyes.

"No," I admit.

"It's all of my artwork. Well, besides that." She points to a painting of a bowl of strawberries that's sitting on a side table. "I'm going to ask my parents to put that one in a frame."

The painting is good. Really good. The strawberries look almost real. I have to admit that Penny's a talented artist. Not that I'd ever admit that to *Penny*. It would only make her more stuck-up.

"And then we'll have a lip-syncing contest," Penny continues. "I picked out the music ahead of time. Come on. Let's go. We're already behind because of Abby." Penny doesn't wait for us to answer. She just grabs Robin's hand and yanks her toward the back door.

"She is so annoying," I mutter to Frankie. "I don't want to watch her horse videos! Why would I want to watch her horse videos? And she already picked out the music? What if we don't like the music? What if we don't *know* the music? How are we supposed to lip-sync if we don't know the music? I can't fake it!"

"You just say 'watermelon,'" Frankie tells me.

"Huh?" I ask.

"If you don't know the words to a song, just say 'watermelon' again and again," Frankie explains, and pushes up her glasses.

I laugh and link my arm through hers. "Where did you learn that?"

"I read it somewhere."

Frankie reads a lot of books. For our school read-a-thon a few months ago, she read twenty books in one month. She practically reads a book a day.

I read a lot, too, but not *that* much. I have other stuff to do. Like homework and dance class and watching TV and fairy tale hopping.

But I definitely read more than Penny. She only read *one* book for the read-a-thon.

“Hurry up, guys!” Penny yells as she steps onto the patio.
“You’re so slow!”

I grumble something not so nice under my breath.

“What did you say?” Penny asks, glaring at me.

I give her a big, fake smile. “Watermelon,” I tell her.