

Whatever After
SUGAR AND SPICE



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SARAH MLYNOWSKI



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for my nephew and niece,
isaac and sloane mitchell

chapter one



Lamps Can't Duck

●
I'm gonna get you!" Jonah says with a big grin. "I'm gonna get you!"

It's seven o'clock, we just finished dinner, and my little brother is chasing me around the living room with a ball. He's about to throw it at me, but I jump out of the way in the nick of time — ha! Go, me!

I rule at duckball.

SMASH!

I slam my eyes shut and hope for the best.

"Oopsies," Jonah says, his voice quiet.

I reopen my eyes to see that what was formerly our blue-and-white table lamp is now a pile of blue and white pieces on the wood floor.

“Jonah!” I cry. “Look what you did!”

“It wasn’t my fault,” he protests. “It’s too dark in here. I couldn’t see where I was throwing. We should have turned on the light!”

“Well, it’s too late for that now, isn’t it?”

This is bad. Very bad. Jonah and I are definitely not supposed to be playing duckball in the house.

Oh, you’ve never heard of duckball? First, let me assure you that it does not involve actual ducks in any way. It’s called duckball because if you don’t duck in time, you’ll get hit with the ball. It’s sort of like dodgeball. Exactly like dodgeball, actually. But in the story of *Aladdin*, which Jonah and I recently visited, everyone called the game “duckball” so now we do, too.

In addition to duckball, Jonah and I have learned all sorts of new stuff in the last few months. Like how to climb trees. And climb out of wells. And how to fly a magic carpet.

Yup. A magic carpet. It flew through the sky and everything. Another thing we learned in the story of *Aladdin*.

See, my brother and I found a magic mirror in our basement and it takes us into different fairy tales.

Sometimes we bring stuff back from the fairy tales, too. Like clothes. And a puppy. And the golden ball from *The Frog Prince*.

The golden ball that is right now lying next to our parents' broken lamp.

Jonah gulps. "At least the shade didn't break."

I pick up a piece of blue ceramic. "When Mom and Dad see this, they're going to —"

"When Mom and Dad see what?" my mother asks, coming up from the basement with an empty coffee mug.

Crumbs.

Since Jonah is staring at the broken lamp, my mom very quickly sees the problem.

"How many times have I told you two not to play ball in the house?" she asks. "A hundred? A thousand?"

"Probably a million," Jonah says unhelpfully.

Mom shakes her head. "Okay, cleanup time, guys. First pick up the pieces very, *very* carefully and then get the vacuum cleaner."

Uh-oh. My mother is looking at the golden ball. She's picking

up the golden ball. She's examining the golden ball with squinted eyes. "Hey, where did you get this?" she asks us.

I raise my eyebrows at Jonah to remind him not to say anything about *The Frog Prince*. My parents don't know that Jonah and I go into fairy tales. The fairy we met in *Snow White* told us we're not supposed to tell them. And I am very good at following instructions. Most of the time.

"I can't remember," Jonah says, plucking the golden ball out of my mother's hand.

He's probably not even lying. Jonah is only seven. I bet he'd have to think pretty hard to remember which fairy tale we got it from. Especially since we went into *The Frog Prince* two stories ago.

I know it sounds crazy, but we really *do* go into fairy tales. I'm not sure why. All I do know is that it's somehow related to Maryrose, the fairy who seems to have been cursed to live in the magic mirror in our basement. The mirror was already here when we moved into this house in Smithville. I guess Maryrose was already here, too.

How does the magic mirror work? At midnight, if we knock on it three times, it starts to hiss and swirl, and Maryrose takes us

into a story. The only problem is that we don't get to choose the fairy tales. We only discover where we're going once we're there. Surprise! You're in *The Little Mermaid!* I hope you like to swim!

In case you're wondering, I do not like to swim.

"Well," my mom says, snatching the ball back from Jonah's hand, "since you're right that I've told you a million times not to play ball in the house, I'm keeping this for a while."

"But it's my favorite!" Jonah cries.

Jonah does not look happy. I'd better start vacuuming before my mom takes away TV for the rest of the night or something.

"And the two of you," Mom says, "no TV, phones, iPad, or computer for the rest of the night. None. Zippo. That way, the next time you pick up a ball in the house, you'll remember to take it outside."

Noooooo! "Mom —" I'm about to defend myself, but the expression on my mom's face tells me if I say one word, I'll lose screens for two days.

"Aww," Jonah whines.

I grab a garbage bag from under the kitchen sink and then very carefully pick up a jagged piece of broken lamp. It's kind of like the shape of Florida.

“What’s all the commotion in here?” my dad asks as he comes up from the basement. He has a folder in his hands. “I can barely hear myself think.” He looks over at the broken lamp. Then at me. Then at Jonah, standing with his arms crossed over his scrawny chest. He shakes his head. “Seriously?”

“Sorry,” we say simultaneously.

“Come on, guys,” my dad says, using his extra-stern voice. “Clean it up.”

“We are!” I say, using my extra-annoyed voice.

He gives me a look. “Less attitude, Abby.” My dad has been pretty stressed this week. So has my mom.

My parents are both lawyers, and when they’re working on a super-important case, they get cranky. Every little thing Jonah and I do wrong is magnified a hundred and one percent.

Unfortunately, they’ve been on *our* case all day.

It started with the note.

At school, Ms. Masserman snapped at me, “Abby, enough!” when she caught me whispering to my best friend Robin. I had asked to borrow Robin’s eraser since mine was a total nub.

“*You’re* a total nub,” Robin had teased, and I’d started laughing and she started laughing and I started laughing *really* hard and then I got in trouble.

Then Ms. Masserman caught me talking again. But this time it was because Penny, Robin’s other best friend, thought the nub thing was funny, and then she started calling me a nub, which I hated because when she said it, it sounded like an insult and not a joke. So I may have told her to shut it, which Ms. Masserman overheard, and then she gave me a note about “being disrespectful in class” that I had to show to my mom and dad.

My parents were not thrilled. They told me that as punishment, I couldn’t go over to my other best friend Frankie’s house that evening like I’d planned. And Frankie and I were supposed to work together on a school assignment! Okay, and also play Rummy 500, a game we had both just learned and are completely obsessed with.

Then, tonight, at dinner, my parents wouldn’t let me — or Jonah — have dessert until we finished our veggies.

I had to eat an entire stalk of asparagus. Do you know how

gross asparagus is? It tastes like toothpaste. And not the bubble-gum kind — the plain soapy kind. But was the asparagus enough for them? No, it wasn't! They told me I still had to eat all the spinach on my plate. Spinach! Come on. Does anyone actually like spinach? No. No one does. So I refused.

And then they didn't give us any fruitcake.

I know fruitcake isn't the world's best dessert, but it's one step above nothing. And that's what we ended up getting. Nothing.

And now — no screens!

No screens + no Frankie's house + no dessert = worst night ever.

Jonah carefully picks up another shard of lamp and puts it in the garbage bag. Meanwhile, I head to the hall closet to take out the vacuum cleaner. I'm so annoyed at my parents. What am I supposed to do when I'm done? I already finished my homework. I guess I'll just go straight to bed.

Boring.

Our puppy, Prince — yes, the one we brought back from a fairy tale — runs up to me and paws at my leg.

“Hon,” my mom says to my dad. “Let's put Prince downstairs so he doesn't step on any lamp shards.”

My dad opens the basement door. “C’mon, Prince,” he says.

Prince scurries down the steps, behind my father. Our dog has been a pretty good listener lately. Last week, my dad even taught him to fetch the house keys from the kitchen table.

I turn on the vacuum cleaner. It’s actually a good thing Prince is in the basement because the noise of the vacuum freaks him out. I wonder what he’s doing down there.

I bite my lower lip. Hmm. What if he tries to knock on the mirror? What if that makes my dad suspicious?

I so wish my parents’ home office wasn’t down there. It freaks me out. They could discover our secret! Clearly, they should set their desks up in the living room and let us kids have the basement.

Plus, there are no lamps to break in the basement. There’s just an overhead light.

Um, and a magic mirror.

Maybe it’s best we play with the golden ball up here. Definitely don’t want to risk breaking that one.

Although I wish I was in the basement going through the magic mirror right *now*.

Hmm.

I may not be able to play cards with Frankie, watch screens, or have dessert, but I know one fun thing I can do.

My mom didn't say anything about not going into fairy tales. So I wouldn't even be breaking any rules.

Right?

Right.

At 11:45 P.M., my alarm jolts me awake, and I quickly get dressed — long-sleeved T-shirt, jeans, gray-and-white hoodie, and sneakers. Then I look for my watch. I need to wear it because it keeps track of what time it is back home. Fairy tale time almost always runs much slower than Smithville time. Like one day in a fairy tale could be an hour at home.

I spot the watch sitting on top of my jewelry box and grab it. My jewelry box is amazing. It's decorated with images of fairy tale characters — but every time Jonah and I return from a story, the characters on the box change. Like Snow White, who's now wearing my old pajamas.

Unfortunately, they were my favorite pair. But what are you gonna do? You win some, you lose some, right?

I creep into Jonah's room. He leaps out of bed.

"I knew you'd want to go tonight," he says with a laugh. He's already in jeans, a sweatshirt, and his Cubs hat.

Prince, who'd been sleeping at the foot of Jonah's bed, wakes up with a tiny bark and begins wagging his tail.

"Come on, then." My brother and Prince follow me down the stairs. Prince always comes with us. He'd bark like crazy if we left him behind — and wake up our parents. No can do.

We sneak into the basement and face the magic mirror. It's bolted to the far wall. It's twice my size and has a stone frame around it that's decorated with little fairies and wings and wands. It's pretty awesome-looking. I can't believe the people who used to live here left it. Who would leave something this beautiful behind? People who have bad judgment, that's who.

I have excellent judgment. My judgment is so good that when I grow up, I'm going to be a judge. Well, first I'm going to be a lawyer, like my parents, and then I'm going to be a judge because that's the rule. But one day, I'm totally going to rock a judge robe and gavel.

“Let’s do this,” I say to Jonah. “It’s time.”

“Let me,” he says, and knocks once. A hissing sound fills the room.

“Maryrose?” I call out. “It’s Abby and Jonah. Are you there?”

Jonah knocks again, and the glass turns purple. He’s about to knock a third time when he stops with his fist in the air. “Uh, Abby? Maybe we shouldn’t go.”

“Huh? What? Why?”

He twists his lower lip. “We’re kind of in enough trouble. What if we get caught and Mom and Dad take my golden ball away for *a week*?”

“How would we get caught?” I ask. “We’ll make sure to be home by seven in the morning when they wake us up. Or even by six forty-five when their alarm goes off. We always get home in time. Well, usually.”

Jonah scrunches up his face and takes a giant step backward. Prince does, too. “I don’t know,” he says.

“Well, I do. Mom and Dad were mean tonight. No friends. No fun. No fruitcake. And I didn’t even want fruitcake! It’s the worst dessert ever! But they still wouldn’t let us have it. How is that fair? They were in a bad mood and took it out on us!

Come on,” I say. “We’re going.” I reach over and knock on the mirror — knock number three.

The purple swirl in the mirror widens. It feels like a vacuum sucking us in. And I should know. Tonight I am a total vacuum expert, unfortunately.

I jump through.

And something flies into my mouth.

What is that? It tastes disgusting. Bitter. Like spinach?

I spit it out. I’m flat on my belly on the ground. I push up and look around. I’m in some sort of a field that’s surrounded by a blue wooden fence. Beyond the fence are huge trees. A forest. That’s no surprise. We often land in forests. Fairy tales are full of forests. Fairy tales are *obsessed* with forests.

I stand and look up. The sky is pale blue with fluffy clouds, and the sun is out, but it’s already lowered in the sky. I think it’s late afternoon. It’s a little bit chilly. Good thing Jonah and I are wearing hoodies.

And speaking of Jonah . . . um, where is he?

My eyes search the field. Instead of my brother, I see rows and rows of colorful veggies. Spinach! Cabbage! Carrots! My parents would love it here.

But I don't see Jonah. And I don't see Prince. I'm not going to worry though because this has happened before. I'm sure they'll show up any second.

Yup. Any second now.

Three. Two. One.

Okay, I'm starting to worry.

chapter two



Tweet

do not panic. Do not panic, I tell myself.

But did I leave Jonah and Prince behind? I *did* step through the mirror before them.

I spin around and try to figure out what I came out of.

Oh! One of the spinach patches seems to be swirling. Maybe there's still time.

I bend down and scream into the green swirl.

“Jonah! Prince! Where are you guys? Hurry up!”

Nothing happens. The swirling is slowing down. Oh, no. What if they don't come through? Should I jump back into the

swirl? I've never been in a fairy tale by myself. I don't want to be in a fairy tale by myself!

Ahhhh!

I should go back in. No. Yes. No. Yes —

Suddenly, Jonah comes flying out of the patch and lands on his tush on top of a bunch of radishes.

Prince leaps out right after him, paws and legs flailing. He barks once, lands on all fours, and immediately chases after a white butterfly.

YESSSSSSS. They're here! I melt with relief.

Jonah sits up and pulls a leaf of spinach out of his mouth. "Yuck. More spinach? This stuff follows me everywhere!"

"What happened to you?" I yell. "You freaked me out!"

"What happened to *me*? That was your fault! You should have waited for us to stand closer to the mirror for the third knock! That was scary, Abby! You always hold my hand! Why didn't you hold my hand?"

Oops. I guess he's right. I was kind of overeager. "Sorry," I say sheepishly.

"It's okay." He stands and brushes bits of spinach leaves off his jeans. "I'll forgive you this time. Since we made it.

Almost didn't, but we did." He scrunches his nose and looks around. "What fairy tale are we in?" He pulls another leaf out of his hair. "Wait. These are vegetables!" His eyes light up. "Do you know what else is a vegetable? Beans! Does that mean what I hope it means? Could we finally be in *Jack and the Beanstalk*?"

Jonah always thinks we're in *Jack and the Beanstalk*. He's obsessed with *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

"I don't think beans are vegetables," I point out. "I think they're legumes or something. Or maybe fruits?"

"That's ridiculous," Jonah says with a wave of his hand. "Of course they're vegetables. So don't you think it's possible that we're in *Jack and the Beanstalk*?"

"It's possible," I say.

Jonah hops on the toes of his shoes. "It is, right? It is! We're in *Jack and the Beanstalk*! I know we are! We have to be!"

For his sake, that would be nice. I pat him on the head. "Don't get your hopes up. But let's go see."

"We should jump over the fence and look at what's outside of the field," Jonah says. He runs over to the fence and starts shouting. "Jack! Where are you? We're coming!"

I laugh. “Way to not get your hopes up.”

At the fence, I bend down to give them a lift. Prince jumps over it first. Then Jonah, and then me.

“Good work,” I say.

“Oh, wait,” Jonah says. “Where’s my Cubs hat?”

“Um . . .” I look through the fence and see it hanging lopsided over some spinach. “There.”

“Let me just hop back over. Be right back.” Jonah starts to climb the fence when a huge white bird flies out of nowhere and dives down toward my brother.

“Jonah!” I yell.

My brother falls back down to the ground.

The bird tweets at him angrily.

“It doesn’t seem to want you to go back there,” I say.

That’s when I notice a sign above the field’s fence. In all capital letters it says: VEGETOPIA RESIDENTS: KEEP OUT OR ELSE!

“Does that mean I can’t get my Cubs cap back?” Jonah cries. “Who knows when we’ll get back to Chicago? I need my hat!” We grew up near Chicago, but our new house is across the country in Smithville.

“Hmm. Well, technically we’re not Vegetopia residents . . .”

I say.

Tweet! Tweet! Tweeeeeeeet!

The massive bird honks and flaps its wings.

“But good luck explaining that to the scary bird,” I add.

Jonah sighs. “Good-bye, Cubs hat. It was fun.” He makes a sad face, and we turn away from the fence.

To the left of us is a pond. To the right of us is a forest.

“Let’s go the forest way,” I say. “I’m not in the mood to go swimming.”

“You’re never in the mood to go swimming,” Jonah grumbles.

“To the forest!” I declare, and head into the woods. Jonah and Prince follow close behind.

This forest is dense. There are lots and lots of tall trees close together. I can hear the leaves rustling in the gentle wind, but I can’t feel it.

“Let’s walk until we get to something,” I say.

“Like a beanstalk?” Jonah asks.

“Like anything,” I say. “Something that might tell us which fairy tale we’re in.”

As we march through the forest, I notice that the sun is slowly lowering in the sky. It must be late afternoon. That's not good. That's never good. We need daylight. Who wants to be in a forest in the dark? Not me.

Forests have bears. And wolves. And other things that will eat us.

Who knows what could be in here? Fairy tale animals sometimes have magic powers! Really. I've met talking frogs. And talking reindeer. There could be talking lions. Or fire-breathing dragons. Or evil unicorns.

I wouldn't mind seeing a unicorn, actually. But a non-evil one, of course.

How awesome would it be to bring a unicorn back with me to Smithville? I could have a unicorn pet! Maybe it would be pink, with a sparkly horn. It would make all my friends jealous.

Penny doesn't have a pet unicorn, that's for sure.

Although I would never be able to sneak a unicorn past my parents. Especially considering how strict they've been lately.

"Abby," Jonah complains, tugging my arm, "my knee hurts. I skinned it at recess today. How much longer do we have to walk?"

I realize I've been spacing out, my mind on unicorn pets. Prince, my real pet, barks up at me, as if he can tell I've been cheating on him.

"Sorry," I say, snapping to attention. I take in our surroundings. There's just tree trunk after tree trunk. Rocks and dirt crunch beneath our sneakers. Birds twitter in the trees.

I see no unicorns. Or dragons. Or talking lions. Or even bears.

Or any sign of where we might be.

I step onto a huge rock and strain my neck to look around.

"Hey, there's another farm field with a fence around it," I say, pointing. "I think those are red peppers."

Jonah jumps on another rock. "And the sign says 'Property of Me. No Peppers for You.'"

I climb onto his rock and look for myself. The sign really does say that.

"Like I'd want a pepper," Jonah says, shaking his head. "Who steals red peppers? It's not red velvet cake. Or red licorice. Oh! Speaking of which, guess what I have?"

"What?"

He digs into his jeans pocket and pulls out an unwrapped crusty-looking lollipop. “A lollipop!”

“That looks gross, Jonah.”

Prince barks. I hope he won’t try to eat it.

“It’s perfectly fine!” Jonah protests. “I found it in my sock drawer. And since we didn’t have dessert, I thought we might want something sweet.”

“I’ll pass. Thanks.”

“Okay, fancy-pants. Your lollipops always have to have wrappers? Do you also refuse to eat food off the floor?”

“Yes, I do.”

He shrugs. “Your loss.”

“Let’s keep walking,” I say with a sigh. “Maybe we’ll spot a castle.”

“Or a beanstalk.”

“Or a beanstalk,” I say. It’s not looking *totally* unlikely at this point. “I’m sure we’ll find something eventually.”

There have to be houses or a town or people somewhere in Vegetopia. Someone wrote those signs. The peppers don’t know how to use a pen.

We jump off the rock and zigzag around more trees. Prince begins to whine, so Jonah scoops him up.

“Um, Abby?” Jonah says. “What if we never find our way out?”

“It hasn’t been that long,” I say. “We only got here around an hour ago.” I glance at my watch to check. Hmm. It’s 2:00 A.M. back in Smithville. We left at midnight. That means we’ve been gone for two Smithville hours. But time always moves faster in fairy tales than it does back home. Or at least it moves at the same pace. Until now?

“Time might be slower here,” I say, suddenly worried. “We need to figure out why we’re here quickly and then get home.”

“What do you mean, figure out why we’re here?” Jonah asks. “We’re here because you were mad at Mom and Dad and wanted to go through the mirror.”

“Right,” I say. “But why did Maryrose send us to this particular fairy tale?”

“Good question,” Jonah says, pondering.

We always have a lot of questions — and very few answers.

We do know that Maryrose, the fairy in our mirror, is cursed. And we also know that she thinks we're "almost ready" for something. That's what she told us once anyway. But for what?

"We keep messing up the stories, and she keeps sending us back," I explain to Jonah, taking a wriggling Prince from his arms and setting the puppy back down on the ground. "So she must like that we change the stories. Right?"

"Or the opposite," Jonah says, kicking a pebble in front of his shoe. "Maybe she keeps sending us back *because* we keep changing them. Maybe she doesn't want us to change them. Maybe she's waiting for us to learn how to stop messing them up! And that's when she knows we're ready for our mission."

"Oh," I say. "I never thought of it like that."

I push a leafy branch out of the way, and suddenly —
BAM!

Jonah and I bump smack into a girl and a boy.

"Ouch!" I say, rubbing my forehead.

"That hurt!" says the girl, rubbing *her* forehead.

The girl and I stare at each other.

She has wavy brown hair and pale skin and looks a lot like me.

Like identical to me.

The boy has brown hair, pale skin, and looks a lot like Jonah.

Like identical to Jonah.

I love my little brother, but the world does *not* need two of them.

The girl has a totally freaked-out expression on her face. The boy has a this-is-awesome expression on his face.

Jonah has a this-is-awesome expression on his face, too.

I can't see my own expression, but I can pretty much guess it mirrors the girl's.

“What the what?” asks the boy.

Jonah raises a hand slowly.

The boy raises a hand slowly.

I take a step back. So does the girl.

“AHHHH!” all four of us shriek.