

Whatever After

SINK or SWIM



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their basement, and this time they find themselves interfering in the Little Mermaid
story-and needing to set things right and make sure everyone has a happy ending.

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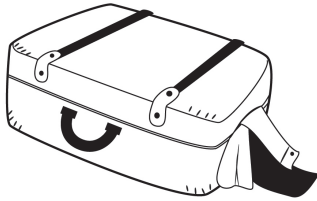
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for anabelle,
my littlest princess

* chapter one *



My Parents Are in the Way

Should I pack a bathing suit?
Yes. I definitely should.

I stuff my bathing suit — it's pale blue with cute white ruffles — into my bright-red suitcase. I'm going to visit my nana in Chicago! I can't wait. My nana is the best. Chicago is the best. And, yeah, I know it's cold to be swimming in Chicago, but my nana lives in an apartment building with an indoor pool and a hot tub.

I'm not really into pools, since I'm not the world's best swimmer.

But hot tubs? I love hot tubs. What's not to love about a big, bubbling bath that melts all your worries away?

Mom and I are flying to Chicago this Friday, only three days from today. It's a long weekend, so I won't miss any school, which is important because I am not a fan of missing school. I am an excellent note-taker and I like hearing everything the teachers say. Also, I don't want to give my new friends the opportunity to forget about me.

So far I have packed:

- the bathing suit
- two bottoms (one pair of jeans, one pair of stretchy black leggings)
- three undies
- three tops (one purple hooded sweatshirt, one white sweater, one light-green shirt with a collar)
- two pairs of pajamas (my orange pair and my navy pair — not my favorites, but they're practically all I have left; I am dangerously low on pajamas.)

The reason I am low on pajamas: When the magic mirror in our basement took my seven-year-old brother, Jonah, and me to

Zamel (where we met Snow White), I accidentally left behind my lime-green pj's. When the magic mirror in our basement then took us to Floom (where we met Cinderella), I accidentally left behind my polka-dot pink-and-purple ones.

Yes, we have a magic mirror in our basement. It came with the house.

I open my jewelry box. My nana bought me a pretty mother-of-pearl necklace for my tenth birthday and I think I should pack it. I don't really understand what the difference between pearl and mother-of-pearl is, to be honest. My nana said mother-of-pearl was more age-appropriate for me. Personally, I think they should call it *kid-of-pearl* if they want it to be more age-appropriate. Anyway, I don't normally wear the necklace to school because I'm afraid it will catch on something and all the mother-of-pearls will go flying across the classroom. But it'll be safe in my suitcase.

My nana bought me my jewelry box, too. The outside features images of all the fairy tale characters. Like Rapunzel with her long hair, the Little Mermaid with her tail, Cinderella in her poofy baker's hat, and Snow White in my lime-green pajamas. Cinderella and Snow White weren't always dressed like that, obviously. Only after Jonah and I changed the endings of their

stories. Which was a total accident. We didn't *mean* to change the fairy tales. But everything ended up okay, so no need to worry.

I gently place the mother-of-pearl necklace on top of my navy pj's. I really need to go shopping. But what am I going to tell my parents about my missing pajamas? Maybe that the dryer ate them? It's not like I can tell them *the truth*; Gabrielle, the fairy who lives inside the magic mirror in Snow White's world, told us not to. Maryrose, the fairy who lives inside *our* mirror, has never said a word to us — so who knows what she thinks.

Last Thursday, Jonah and I woke up just before midnight with the full intention of either talking to Maryrose or getting her to take us to another fairy tale.

We got dressed. We snuck down the stairs. We opened the basement door.

And we saw that the lights were on.

My parents were in the basement.

My parents were not supposed to be in the basement at midnight.

Sure, *technically* the basement is their home office. So of course they are *allowed* to work in it. But how were we supposed to get sucked into the magic mirror when our parents were awake and standing right there? We couldn't. It was a problem.

Why were my parents working at the ridiculous hour of midnight? No, they do not work for a twenty-four-hour call center. They do not work for a bakery, either, and they are not getting up to make the doughnuts. Or brownies. (Or crownies. That's an inside joke between us and Cinderella.)

No, my parents started their own law firm when we moved to Smithville a few months ago. And now they're working like crazy people. Jonah and I haven't been able to get to the mirror all week. My parents had a lot more free time when we lived in Chicago.

Now I sit down at my desk and take out my math textbook and notebook. Time for homework. This desk was with me in my old bedroom back in Chicago, but it looks different — bigger — in my new room. I'm still kind of getting used to my new house. I'm not going to lie — it helps that I have a magic mirror.

It also helps that I've made new friends here: Robin and Frankie. Frankie is a girl, although I know it doesn't sound like it. When I have a little girl, I am not going to name her a boy's name. It's too confusing. On the first day of school, Ms. Hellman, the gym teacher, divided up our class into boys and girls and put Frankie with the boys. Frankie's face turned the color of a tomato.

We laugh about it now, though. The three of us: Frankie, Robin, and me, Abby. We're a trio. The terrific trio. Or maybe the tremendous trio. Or . . . I can't think of another word that means awesome that starts with T. There would be a lot more options if we were four or five. Fantastic four. Fabulous four. Famous four. Fun four. But two new friends are good. Two friends are great.

You get what you get and you don't get upset, right? That's what my mother always says. That and: There's nothing to fear but fear itself. And also: You've made your bed, now you have to sleep in it.

For the record, I make my bed every morning. Unlike my brother.

Anyway, I'm going to use all those expressions when I'm a judge. Oh, yeah, I'm going to be a judge when I grow up. Well, first I'm going to be a lawyer, and then I'm going to be a judge, because that's the rule.

I pretend my pencil is a gavel and bang it against my math textbook. "That's my ruling and it's final!" I say out loud. Not bad.

My door swings open and Jonah barges into my room. "What are you doing?"

“Homework,” I say.

“Then why are you talking to yourself?”

“Because I feel like it,” I snap, embarrassed that he caught me.

He sits on my bed and swings his legs. “Why is your stuff already in your suitcase?”

I turn around to face him. “Why would it not be? Why are you asking me a million questions?”

“I’m bored,” he says. “Want to see if we can rock-climb up the side of the house?”

“No, Jonah, I do not. I have to finish my homework, and then I want to finish packing. I’m leaving in three days, you know.”

My dad’s friend from college and his son are coming to visit this weekend, so my mom and I thought it was the perfect time for some girl bonding. But even if my brother was coming to Chicago, he is the kind of person who would pack the morning of a big trip, not three days before. Actually I take that back. My brother would not pack *at all* because my parents would not trust him to pack. Last time we went away for a weekend, he packed one pair of underwear, two socks, and Kadima paddles. No T-shirts. No jeans. No shoes.

“I don’t think you have to pack,” Jonah says. “I heard Mom telling Dad that she’s exhausted and that her brain is getting

fuzzy and that she should probably postpone the trip to Chicago until after the case.”

I jump out of my chair. “What? Postpone the trip? *Noooo!*”

He shrugs his thin little shoulders. “Sorry, that’s what I heard.”

“Are they in the basement?”

Jonah nods.

I run right out of the room and down the two flights of stairs.

Jonah is on my tail. We reach the basement in approximately two seconds flat.

“Mom!” I shout.

I can’t help but glance at the mirror. It’s still attached to the wall with heavy Frankenstein bolts. Same stone frame engraved with small fairies with wings and wands. Nothing has changed.

Good.

“Yes, honey?” my mom asks, swiveling her chair to face me.

I turn away from the mirror fast before my parents see me staring and realize it’s a magic mirror that slurps us up into fairy tales.

No, they probably wouldn’t guess all that just by seeing me look at it. Especially since they’re so preoccupied with work that they haven’t noticed that I’m short two pairs of pajamas,

or that their law books are gone from the basement bookcases, or that we're missing one swivel chair. Actually, the swivel chair they noticed, but they just assumed they'd left it in Chicago. The truth is all these things got sucked into the mirror when we visited Snow White.

Anyway. "Mom. Please don't tell me we're canceling the trip to Chicago. Please, please, please don't."

"Oh, honey," my mom says, her forehead wrinkling. "I'm sorry. I was going to talk to you about it tonight, but . . ."

"No buts!" I cry. "It's too late to change your mind. Nana is expecting us! We already have plane tickets! And I already packed!" I stomp my foot on the floor for effect. I know it's babyish, but I can't help myself.

"I spoke to Nana this morning — she understands. She said we should come the next long weekend. And I called the airline and we can switch our tickets, too. Maybe then Dad and Jonah can come with us. We'll stay in a hotel and everything!"

Tears fill my eyes. "I don't want to wait until next time! Next time is months away. And I don't want to stay in a hotel. I want to stay with Nana."

She shakes her head. "I'm sorry, honey. But I'm just too busy. Please try to understand."

I don't want to understand. I cross my arms. I pout. I stomp my foot one more time, just because I feel like it.

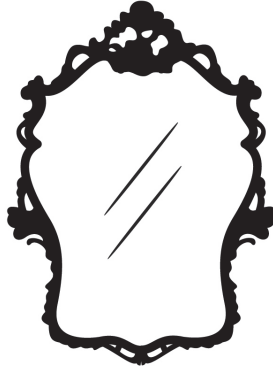
I don't want to act like a baby, but . . . but . . . but . . . *Sigh*. I know my mom is *really* busy. And it's my job as the older sibling to act mature. I am ten, after all.

"I *am* sorry," my mom says. "But you know what they say. You get what you get, and you don't —"

"Get upset," I grumble.

Although right now, it's a saying I wish I could *forget*.

* chapter two *



Grumpy Pants

That night, I toss and turn and turn and toss. I can't sleep. My still-packed suitcase is sitting on my floor. Seeing it there just makes everything worse, but I don't have the heart to unpack it.

It's 11:45 P.M. and my dad and mom are asleep. They turned in about an hour ago.

Hmm.

I feel a tingle in my belly.

I may not be able to visit my nana, but I can definitely visit fairy land.

I sit up and push my covers off. Yes! I'm going to visit fairy

land right now. Why not? I'm wide awake. My parents are not in the basement. Tonight is the night. I know it. I should go!

I look down at the pair of pajamas I'm wearing. Maybe I should change into regular clothes. Although last time, the mirror finally let us in *because* of the pajamas I was wearing. They were the same design as the Floom flag: pink with purple polka dots. But how do I know what clothes will help us get into the mirror if I don't know what story we're going to?

I guess I'll stay in my pajamas. That way if the mirror doesn't let us in, I can at least go straight back to bed.

I spot my open suitcase. Oh! I'll bring my suitcase with me! Why?

1. We are usually in the stories at least a few days. I may as well have a change of clothes with me.
2. It's already packed.
3. Maybe something inside will help us get into the mirror.

So the suitcase is coming, too. I strap on my watch (last time I forgot it and had no idea how much time had passed), then zip my bag and roll it into Jonah's room.

He's fast asleep.

"Hey!" I say, gently shaking him. "Mom and Dad are sleeping. Let's go see the mirror."

He opens his left eye then sits up. "Sure! But why are you bringing your suitcase?"

"To have extra clothes. You can put some of your stuff in it, too."

He climbs out of bed and disappears into his closet. "Like Kadima paddles?" he asks.

My brother is obsessed with playing Kadima. I do not know why. When I'm on the beach, I like to read and relax, not chase a bouncy blue ball with wooden paddles.

"I was thinking more along the lines of clean underwear, jeans, and a T-shirt. You know what, I'll pack for you. You put on your sneakers."

(My sneakers are already on and double-knotted.)

I pack two pairs of his Batman underwear, one pair of jeans, one blue shirt, our toothbrushes, and cinnamon toothpaste. Then I tiptoe down the stairs to the main floor. I lift my suitcase up so that it doesn't bump and wake my parents. It is SO heavy. I motion for Jonah to grab the other end, but he's too focused on his tiptoeing to notice.

I stop at the landing and take a deep breath — there’s no sound from our parents’ bedroom. We’ve come so far — we can’t get caught now. I open the basement door, turn on the lights, and then we creep down the rest of the way.

In front of us is the antique mirror, twice the size of me. The glass is clear and smooth. My brother and I are in the reflection, of course. We’re both wearing pajamas and sneakers. What’s worse — we’re wearing matching black-and-white pajamas. I hadn’t noticed in Jonah’s dark bedroom. We look like twins. Like Oompa Loompas. Like Dr. Seuss’s Thing One and Thing Two.

“We look like zebras!” Jonah says. His short brown hair is a mess. It’s standing up in different directions. I pat down my own curly brown hair. I like to look neat. Also, not identical to Jonah.

I try to look deeper into the mirror to see if I can see Maryrose. She lives inside. At least, we think she lives inside. We don’t really know that much about her. Only that she’s a fairy and that when we knock three times, she takes us inside different fairy tales. Sometimes. I hope we’re wearing — or have with us — the right thing.

“I’ll do the knocking,” Jonah says. “Ready?”

This better work. It will be pretty annoying if I have to drag this suitcase all the way back upstairs tonight.

“One —”

“Wait! Jonah?”

His hand freezes in midair. “Yeah?”

“Let’s try not to mess up the story again, ’kay? We just want to visit and see what’s happening. We don’t want to change anything.”

“Uh-huh,” he says. “One —”

“Don’t ‘uh-huh’ me,” I state. “I do not want you touching ANYTHING or talking to ANYONE. Not without my permission. Got it?”

“Yes, Mom.”

I wag my finger. “No messing the story up. That’s a rule.”

He twists his bottom lip. “What story do you think it’ll be?”

“Hmm. I don’t know.”

“I like *Jack and the Beanstalk*.” His eyes widen. “How cool would it be to meet a giant?”

I nod. As long as he doesn’t step on us.

“Or Aladdin! Then we could fly on a magic carpet.”

Flying on a magic carpet sounds a little scary. What if I fall

off? On the other hand, then I wouldn't need airplanes. "I could take the magic carpet to visit Nana!"

Jonah grunts. "So I can't talk to anyone or touch anything, but you can steal the magic carpet and take it to Chicago?"

"I was kidding," I say. Kind of.

He shifts from foot to foot. "Can we go now?"

"Yes. Just remember: No touching."

"Unless it's stealing a magic carpet."

"Right." Then I shake my head. "No. No touching. No stealing. No anything."

He laughs. "Okay, okay. Can I do my three knocks now?"

"Go."

He does. Almost immediately, there's a hissing sound. The mirror starts swirling and casts a purple light over the room. A second later, it's pulling us toward it like it's a vacuum cleaner.

"It's working!" Jonah exclaims.

"Then let's go!" I grip Jonah's arm with one hand, my suitcase with the other, and step inside.