

Whatever After

JUST DANCE

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chapter one



The Fairy at Home

I can't wait for tomorrow," my best friend Frankie says.

It's Friday, and the school dismissal bell just rang. Frankie and I are heading down the hall with our other best friend, Robin.

Robin's other best friend, Penny (who is my *sometimes* friend), is walking with us, too.

"The school dance is going to be amazing," Frankie adds.

Robin nods, her strawberry-blond waves bouncing. "It really is."

Is it? I wonder.

Everyone around us in the hallway is talking about the dance, too. I get it. Our school dance sounds fun. Why?

1. It's only for fifth graders — that means us.
2. We can request our favorite songs from the DJ.
3. The gym will be decorated with streamers and balloons. Plus, there will be a refreshments table with punch and all kinds of cookies.

But here's why *I'm* not so excited about the dance:

1. I'm a terrible dancer.
2. I'm a terrible dancer.
3. Did I mention I'm a terrible dancer?

"I'm going to wear my gold dress," Penny announces, her eyes glittering. "And my new shoes."

Of course she got new shoes for the occasion.

"I'm going to wear my favorite off-the-shoulder sweater and leggings," Robin chimes in as we weave around a crowd of kids.

"I think I'll wear my jeans with the checkered pockets," Frankie says, pushing her red glasses up on her nose. "What about you, Abby?" she asks me.

"Oh, um . . ." I haven't thought about what to *wear*. I'm trying to get out of *going*.

Every time I think about the school dance, I think about THE INCIDENT.

It happened last month at my cousin Harry's bar mitzvah.

A bar mitzvah is a celebration for when a Jewish boy turns thirteen. It's super fun. There's a religious ceremony first, and then a party. With lots of dancing.

At the party, I ran onto the dance floor with all the other kids, including my little brother, Jonah. I didn't think twice about it. I could dance. Of course I could! I've taken dance classes. I've even made up dances with my friends. Dancing was easy, right?

Wrong.

I was moving to the music when I happened to turn my head, and I saw an older girl laughing behind me.

I moved my hand up, she moved her hand up. I moved my hand down, she moved her hand down.

Was she mimicking me?

Oh, wow. She was! And she was mocking me! Was I a bad dancer?

I took a step back, trying to get off the dance floor.

All of a sudden, I bumped hard into a different girl, who bumped into a boy, and we all fell like human dominoes.

The last boy fell into the refreshments table and toppled the cake, which was in the shape of an Oscar trophy because the theme of the bar mitzvah was the Academy Awards.

Yup. It was bad. Really bad.

The girl who had been mocking me was laughing so hard she was almost crying.

I was mortified. Everyone had seen what had happened. My parents and Jonah tried to make me feel better, but the damage was done.

Ever since THE INCIDENT, I decided that I'd *never ever* dance in public, or even private, again.

I definitely can't risk dancing at school in front of all my classmates.

No way.

"Abby?" Frankie asks me now as we head outside. "You didn't say what you're gonna wear. Are you okay?" Frankie is very thoughtful.

"Maybe she has nothing good to wear to the dance," Penny says, eyeing my orange T-shirt.

Penny is *not* very thoughtful.

"Of course she does," Robin says, sticking up for me. Robin is also very loyal. "And who cares what she wears? It's the dancing that's the important part!"

Exactly. “The thing is, I’m not sure if I can go to the dance at all,” I say in a rush.

Robin’s face falls. “Why not? We all have to go together!”

Frankie’s face falls, too, and even Penny looks disappointed.

“There’s stuff going on at home,” I say. Which *is* actually true.

“Is everyone all right?” Frankie asks worriedly.

“Yeah,” I say quickly. “Everyone is fine. We just have . . . a guest.”

Which is also technically true.

“Who?” Robin asks, exchanging a confused look with Frankie. I usually tell the two of them everything, and I haven’t mentioned any guests.

“Yeah, who?” Penny demands.

“Um, a friend of the family,” I say. Which is not really true.

So what is the truth?

Well, I currently have a fairy living at my house.

Yes.

A fairy.

Her name is Maryrose, and she usually lives in the magic mirror in my basement.

Yup. I also have a magic mirror in my basement.

If I knock three times on the mirror at midnight, the glass starts hissing and then turns purple, and my brother and I can jump through the mirror, right into a fairy tale. We've been to fourteen different fairy tales, everything from *Cinderella* to *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Maryrose is the one who sends us into the fairy tales. She'd been trapped inside the mirror for a long time (cursed by an evil fairy!), but when Jonah recently cracked the mirror by accident, she got free and is now hiding out in my bedroom.

Ever since Maryrose escaped the mirror, she's been *very* weak. She's trying to figure out how to get back her full fairy powers. And I want to help.

"Well, I hope your parents let you come to the dance anyway," Robin says.

"Same," Frankie says.

Penny raises her eyebrows at me. I wonder if she suspects something. Penny, Robin, and Frankie have all gone into stories with me. But Robin and Frankie don't remember anything about what happened. Only Penny does. So I asked her to keep the whole thing a secret.

But I'm not going to tell Penny about Maryrose being in my house. Knowing Penny, she would want to come over

and meet Maryrose, and I can't deal with that on top of everything else right now.

As soon as I get home from school, I rush upstairs to my room and close the door behind me.

“Maryrose?” I call out softly.

I'm still getting used to Maryrose being my roommate. I have SO many questions for her. Where is her home? Do fairies have friends? Is she going to send me and Jonah to more fairy tales? Or are we done now that she's been freed from the mirror? Do fairies like to dance? (Are they good at it?)

Because Maryrose is so weak, she isn't able to talk very much. Which is why I have all these questions and no answers. She spends most of her time napping inside my jewelry box. She can shrink down to a tiny size so she fits inside easily. It's very cool.

I'm happy to see that Maryrose is now sitting on my bed, and she's her usual size — a little taller than me. My adorable dog, Prince, is curled up beside her, his brown-and-white furry head on her knee. Aww. Prince loves Maryrose! He usually sleeps in Jonah's room, but ever since Maryrose arrived, Prince has been staying close to her.

“Hi, Abby,” Maryrose says, her voice faint. “Thank you for the peanut butter and banana sandwich you left me for lunch. It was delicious.”

“Of course,” I say. I’ve been sneaking Maryrose extra food when I can. I’m hoping my parents won’t notice anything is missing. Her favorite food by far has been peanut butter. She’s already finished two jars of it. Yesterday, she ate it straight from the jar with a spoon.

At least I don’t have to worry about my parents discovering a fairy in my room. Maryrose is able to sense who’s coming. If my mom or dad is about to walk in my room, she shrinks and hides in my jewelry box.

I sit in a chair across from Maryrose, studying her. She has long wavy brown hair, pale skin, and violet eyes. And she looks . . . watery. Almost like she’s melting. She sometimes flickers in and out of focus, depending on how tired she gets. I’m not sure how old she is — a hundred years old? Five hundred? A thousand? — but she looks a little younger than my mom. Thirtyish.

She’s wearing a gauzy silver dress and silver leggings and silver pointy shoes. She doesn’t have fairy wings. I’m not sure if she’s supposed to or not.

Maryrose has a book on her lap. It's gold and very thick.

"What's that?" I ask.

"My fairy book," she responds. "It's five thousand pages long."

That's a lot of pages. I love to read, but there are limits.

"I've been reading it to find out how to strengthen my powers. So far, no luck." Maryrose sighs.

Prince lets out a doggie sigh. Maryrose smiles and reaches out to pet him, but her hand fades in and out. Prince is less freaked out by her wateriness than most dogs would be, I think. We got him from a fairy tale originally, so that's probably why. He comes with us into all the fairy tales now.

"I'm not sure why being on this side of the mirror has made me so weak," Maryrose says. "Otherwise, it feels good to be out. I was getting a bit of a neck cramp."

"How long were you in there?" I ask eagerly.

"Hard to say. At least a few hundred years. I . . ." Her mouth gets watery, which I know means she's too weak to talk more.

Knock-knock. Knock-knock. Knock-knock-knock.

That's Jonah's secret knock for when he wants me to know it's him.

“Come in!” I call.

Jonah rushes in and shuts the door. He sees Maryrose on my bed, and his face lights up.

“Hi, Maryrose!” he says.

She manages a little wave.

Jonah hurries over to Prince and scratches behind his ears. “Hey, Prince. You used to come running to me when I got home from school. What happened?”

“He’s been hanging out with Maryrose,” I say. “She might be his new favorite person!”

Jonah’s smile wavers. “Oh. Well. I’m glad he likes her.”

“I need to rest,” Maryrose says through a yawn. “Going to sleep . . . in . . . box.” She turns all watery, then shrinks down to the size of my pinkie and floats over to the jewelry box.

Prince lets out a bark, looking sad.

“She’ll be back,” I reassure my dog. “She’s just napping.”

Maryrose sleeps while I do my homework, and keeps sleeping all through dinnertime. We have spaghetti and meatballs, and I sneak some food into my napkin when no one is looking. After dinner, I go upstairs and leave the meal for Maryrose on my desk. I check to make sure she’s still sleeping in the jewelry box and am glad to see she is. She looks almost pretend in there, like a magic plastic toy.

I say good night to my parents and Jonah, brush my teeth, and climb into bed. Prince curls up at the foot of my bed.

“Good night, Maryrose,” I call to my jewelry box.

I hear the faintest snore, and I smile, falling asleep.

The next thing I know, someone is shaking my shoulder. I open my eyes. It’s dark in my room. I glance at my alarm clock. It’s 11:55 P.M.

Maryrose is standing beside my bed.

“Abby,” Maryrose says. “I’m sorry to wake you up. But . . .”

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

“I need you to go into a fairy tale,” she says. “Right now!”