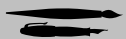




Whatever After

SUGAR AND SPICE

SARAH MLYNOWSKI



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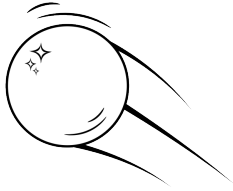
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for my nephew and niece,
isaac and sloane mitchell

chapter one



Lamps Can't Duck

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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.