

# Whatever After

LIAR LIAR

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# chapter one



## Feeling Blue

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I have the *best* weekend plans,” Penny announces on Thursday afternoon. We’re standing outside our school, waiting to be picked up, along with my two best friends, Robin and Frankie.

I try not to roll my eyes. Penny always has the best weekend plans. Penny always has the best everyday plans. Penny is Robin’s *other* best friend.

“My mom and I are having a spa day,” Penny goes on, tossing her blond ponytail. “Manicures and pedicures and dinner at my favorite restaurant.”

I have to admit that sounds fun. Frankie and Robin and I gave each other pedicures at our last sleepover. I wiggle

my toes inside my sneakers. My toenails are still sparkly green.

“What about *your* weekend plans?” Penny asks, looking from Robin to Frankie to me.

“I’m not sure yet,” I say. But I probably won’t be visiting a fairy tale.

Why would anyone visit a fairy tale? Well, I have a magic mirror in my basement. Yes, really! This was how it used to work: At midnight, when my little brother, Jonah, and I knocked on the glass once, the mirror started to hiss. When we knocked twice, it turned purple. Three times, it sucked us inside . . . and took us into a fairy tale. We’ve been to *Cinderella* and *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* and more. We’ve also been inside books, like *Peter Pan*, though the mirror didn’t take us there.

Hardly anyone else knows about the magic mirror, except for Penny. (It’s a long story.)

But then the fairy who was trapped inside our mirror — Maryrose — escaped! And now the magic doesn’t seem to work without her. I tried knocking on the mirror the other night, and nothing happened. I’m glad Maryrose isn’t trapped anymore, but I definitely miss going on adventures.

“What *are* we doing this weekend?” I ask Frankie and Robin, who are both being strangely quiet. The three of us make plans together most weekends. Sometimes with Penny, too, if Robin insists. Plans for sleepovers. Study dates. Cookie decorating. Previously mentioned pedicures.

Tomorrow is Friday, so it would be nice to decide now.

“Well,” Robin says, brushing her curly strawberry-blond hair behind her shoulders. Is it just my imagination or do she and Frankie both look a little nervous? “Frankie and I are doing something kind of cool.”

Wait — they are?

“Ooh, what?” I ask, confused. Why don’t I know about these *kind of cool* plans?

Frankie glances at Robin. She bites her lip. She pushes her red glasses up on her nose.

“Robin and I are going camping with my family,” Frankie finally answers. She looks at me worriedly.

“Camping?” I repeat.

Huh?

“Camping — *blech!*” Penny exclaims. “Raccoons trying to steal your food? Blisters on your feet from hiking? Hard pass.” She points to a pink spot on her arm, frowning. “See

this? It's a mosquito bite! I got it from just sitting in my backyard. Can you imagine how many bites you'll get from camping?"

She's not wrong. I get itchy just thinking about mosquitoes. And I don't love the idea of having to go to the bathroom in the woods. But there are fun parts of camping, too, right? Like sleeping in a tent. Seeing all the stars against the black sky. Telling stories around the campfire. Making s'mores.

Mmm. S'mores. Toasting the marshmallow on the open fire, then squishing it between two crunchy graham crackers with a piece of chocolate that gets all melty. Ah, that first delicious bite . . . And once you have one, you want *some more!* Ha!

Ooh, I'm so excited! Where is my sleeping bag? We're going camping! Do I even have a sleeping bag?

I wait for Frankie and Robin to invite me. Camping, here I come!

I look at Frankie and Robin. Any second now, I'm sure they'll ask me to join them on their camping trip.

Nothing yet.

I wait another few seconds.

But they're not saying *anything*.

“I wish you could come camping with us, Abby,” Robin says at last.

Wait, *what?*

My stomach sinks.

I’m not going?

I *could* go. I *would* go. If anyone asked me. Why is no one asking me?

Frankie’s cheeks are flushed. “It’s just that my parents said I could invite only one friend,” she explains, giving me an apologetic look. “And I didn’t think you liked camping, so . . .”

So she asked Robin.

But . . . but . . .

Okay, maybe camping isn’t my dream activity. But it still would have been nice to be asked!

And I would have said yes. Yes to blisters and bug bites and sleeping outside with raccoons. Because I love spending time with Frankie and having adventures. And I thought I was her number one friend. I know she’s besties with Robin, too, but Robin has Penny. Frankie has me.

But I’m not invited. Because Frankie chose Robin instead of me.

I swallow hard. Being left out is the worst.

“I’m sorry, Abby. Are you upset?” Frankie asks me.

“No, not at all,” I say quickly. Yes, I’m lying, but I don’t want my friends to know how sad I am. I just want to pretend everything is okay instead of having a whole super-awkward talk about it. “I’m totally fine!” I insist.

“You sure?” Robin asks.

“Definitely,” I say, forcing a big smile onto my face. “I need to . . . um . . . clean out my closet this weekend anyway.”

I see my dad’s car pull up in the pickup line right as my brother comes racing out of the school. Perfect — just in time to make a fast getaway.

I wave good-bye to Frankie, Robin, and Penny. Then I hurry into my dad’s car.

At least I know what I’ll be doing this weekend: wishing I was on that camping trip.

I don’t talk to Jonah or my dad in the car, and the minute we get home, I run upstairs. I don’t even rummage in the fridge or pantry for a snack first.

I have zero appetite.



I walk into my room and sigh. Frankie and Robin are probably on video chat right now, discussing s'mores and sleeping bags.

Without me.

I feel so . . . sad.

Excluded.

My eyes get misty, like I might cry.

Maybe I should have told my friends how I really feel. Aren't you supposed to be honest with the people you're close to?

But what would have been the point? It wasn't like they would have changed their plans. And I didn't want to make them feel bad.

Let them think I'm looking forward to cleaning instead.

I glance inside my closet as I pass by. It *is* pretty messy. A bunch of dolls and clothes are piled on the floor. I notice my old Cali Doll in the pile and lean down to pick her up. I give her a hug. It's been a long time since I've played with her. She used to be my favorite.

"You'd invite me camping, right?" I ask her.

She totally would.

If only she were real.

My parents gave me the doll when I started kindergarten, back when we lived in Naperville. She has big brown eyes and her dark hair is in a side ponytail. Her arms and legs and torso are made out of cloth so she's soft and cuddly. She's wearing a T-shirt, jeans, a hoodie, and sneakers. My usual outfit! She also has a little green backpack with her name on it: *Raina*.

The information sheet she came with said that Raina is a student from California. I love that there's a tiny notebook, pencil, textbook, and even a little apple in the backpack.

I put her on my bookshelf and frown.

I know I'm super sad when even my Cali Doll can't cheer me up.

I'm about to fling myself onto my bed when I notice that something is fluttering on top of Raina's head.

Something tiny.

What *is* that?

I step closer. Is it a mosquito?

Are those wings?

A butterfly? No. It has a face, which means . . . it's a fairy.

"Hello?" I say.

You'd think I'd be surprised to see a fairy in my room, but I'm not. This is the third time I've had a fairy in here.

Yup, that's right. My *third* visiting fairy. It's almost like I'm running a fairy hotel.

The first fairy was Maryrose (who used to live in my basement mirror). The second fairy was Tinkerbell (from *Peter Pan*). Maryrose and Tink are actually together right now, traveling the world. At least, I think that's what they're doing. Maryrose said she'd be back, but it's been two weeks since I've seen her.

I don't know who *this* fairy is, though. I'd say she's a little older than my mom, in her late forties. She has long silky blue hair and she's wearing a sparkly silver dress and matching sandals. Her eyes are a glowing turquoise, like the color of the sea, or the hula hoops we have in gym class.

"Hello, Abby!" the fairy says. "I need your help!"

So this fairy knows my name. But how? And why?

"What's your name?" I ask her.

"I'm Celeste," she answers. "Also known as the Blue Fairy." That makes total sense, given her hair and eyes.

"And you need my help?" I ask.

Celeste nods. "I heard that you have a lot of experience helping out in stories. A friend of mine is in trouble. Can I count on you?"

I puff up a little. I love that I have a reputation of being

helpful in stories. “I am pretty good at that,” I respond. “Who did you hear that from?”

“From Maryrose.”

Oh, yay! “You know Maryrose?”

Celeste nods again. “Most of us fairies know each other.”

I have so many questions. Where is Maryrose? Is she with Tink? Are they coming back? Are they okay?

But first — who is Celeste?

I think of all the fairy tales and stories my nana used to read me, but I can’t recall a blue fairy in any of them.

“Which fairy tale are you from?” I ask her.

“I’m from a book,” Celeste answers, her eyes sparkling. “*The Adventures of Pinocchio!*”

“Pinocchio?” I repeat. “You mean the puppet whose nose grows when he tells a lie?” I try to remember that story. I’ve seen some of the movies.

Her face brightens. “Yes! But that’s only a small part of the story. You’ve never read the book?”

“No. I can get it from the school library tomorrow and read it then,” I say.

Celeste sighs and throws up her tiny hands. “There’s no time for that!” Then she swishes her hair back and forth.

A hardcover book suddenly appears in my hand. It's old. Heavy. Gold lettering on the cover spells out *The Adventures of Pinocchio*.

Oh! Fun. Fairy power.

"Thanks," I say, flipping through the book. I definitely won't be able to read it all tonight, but I can start. I put it on my bed.

Then I hear footsteps and someone calling my name. My brother, Jonah, dashes into my room with our super-sweet and adorable dog, Prince, at his heels.

Jonah doesn't notice the fairy. Prince does, and starts barking at Celeste, but Jonah shushes him.

"Abby, I have a very important question," Jonah says.

"I'm kind of busy here," I tell him.

He ignores me. "Do you think dogs like ketchup?" he asks.

I sigh. "I have no idea," I tell him.

"You must be Jonah," Celeste says.

Jonah's eyes widen. He spins around, looking for the source of the voice.

"Um, who said that?" he asks.

"I did!" Celeste responds as she flies in front of him, hovering in the air. "I'm Celeste, the blue fairy from *The Adventures of Pinocchio*!"

Jonah's eyes light up. "Pinocchio? The boy with the nose that grows when he tells a lie?"

"He starts off as a puppet, not a boy. And there's more to the story than his nose," she says, sounding kind of testy. "Anyway, I really need both of you to help me out with Pinocchio. Can you come into the story? Your dog can come, too."

"Yay!" Jonah says, and Prince barks happily.

Hmm. What are we getting ourselves into? "You haven't read the story of Pinocchio, have you?" I ask Jonah, pointing to the book on my bed.

"Nope," he says. "But it sounds fun. Are we going through the mirror?"

Wait wait wait. I cross my arms over my chest and look back at Celeste. "How do we know you're for real? You could be trying to trick or trap us."

This wouldn't be the first time I mistakenly trusted a fairy.

Celeste swishes her blue hair back and forth. A white envelope pops into my hand.

Oh! It's addressed to *Abby and Jonah*.

I open the envelope. A shimmery silver piece of paper is folded inside. I unfold it. It's from Maryrose! It has her signature at the bottom.

*Dear Abby and Jonah,*

*You can trust Celeste. She's a friend. I thought you might be able to help her, if you don't mind!*

*Love,*

*Maryrose*

“Cool!” Jonah exclaims.

It *is* cool, but how can we be sure this letter is really from Maryrose? What if it's a fake?

“What exactly do you need help with?” I ask Celeste.

“Pinocchio doesn't want to go to school,” she explains.

“And it's really important that he go.”

Well, yeah. School *is* important. It's where you learn things that will help you as you grow up. For example, I want to be a judge when I grow up. But to do that you have to go to a lot of school, including something called law school. I know all about it because my parents are lawyers.

“Maryrose said that you and Jonah like school,” Celeste continues. “And that you two would be the perfect people to help.”

I glance at Jonah. We *mostly* like school. Jonah likes recess and lunch. I like learning stuff. And of course I like seeing my friends.

When they're not ditching me to go on a camping trip.

Hmph.

Maybe I need a distraction. Going into a story might be just the thing . . .

It would be more fun than cleaning my closet.

“I need you to convince Pinocchio to go to school,” Celeste tells us. “Then all the pain and suffering of the story won’t happen.”

I swallow. “What pain and suffering?”

“Lots of bad stuff,” Celeste says, looking upset. “People go to prison; people get hurt.”

“Yikes,” I say, exchanging a worried look with Jonah. “But I thought *Pinocchio* had a happy ending?”

Celeste sighs. “The ending of the story is happy but it takes forever to get there. I met up with Maryrose and Tink and told them my predicament. Maryrose suggested that you and Jonah might be able to shorten the story, which would make life a little easier for everyone. Pinocchio, his father — Geppetto — and me. What do you think? Will you help?”

Hmm. Every time I go into a story, there are a lot of obstacles to get through. And sometimes, Jonah and I mess up the story and we have to fix it so it can end happily. But



this would be the first time we'd go into a story when it already ends happily and we just need to *shorten* it.

“Please come,” Celeste adds. “I’ll open the mirror in the basement of your house at midnight. And I hope you’ll both go through it.”

Ohhh, she can do that?

Can all fairies do that? How do I know if she’s good or evil? How long will we have to stay in the story?

But before I can ask another question, Celeste swishes her blue hair back and forth.

And disappears.