

Whatever After

SEEING RED

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chapter one



Nana's Here!

Yes! It's Friday at three P.M.

I know exactly what you're thinking. That I'm happy because it's the weekend. No school for two days. No quizzes. No cold cafeteria chicken nuggets. No waiting for the swing hogs to give me and my friends our turn at recess.

And that's all true. But the *real* reason I'm so excited right now?

Guess who's waiting outside to pick up me and my brother from school?

NANA!

Yep. Nana!

My grandmother is amazing. She's nice and fun and so smart. She's a professor at a college in Chicago. That's where I *used* to live, before my family moved here, to Smithville. So we don't get to see Nana too often. In fact, we haven't seen her since we moved.

"There she is!" I exclaim, pointing at Nana's yellow Jeep, parked in front of our school. Nana gets out of her incredibly cool rental car with a huge grin on her face. She's short, with curly gray hair that comes to her chin, and bright hazel eyes.

"Nana!" Jonah shouts with glee, and goes rushing over.

"There's my big boy!" Nana says, picking him up and swinging him around.

Jonah's only seven, and hasn't reached the age where he'd get embarrassed by that kind of thing.

"And my Abby!" Nana exclaims, grabbing me in a bear hug.

I might be ten, but hey, Nana gives the best hugs.

"I'm so happy you're here," I tell her.

Nana's staying with us this whole weekend while my parents are away at a work conference.

“Are you all set to go home?” Nana asks, opening the back door of the Jeep.

I nod happily. I already said good-bye to my two best friends, Frankie and Robin, before dashing outside the school.

“I bet we’re having breakfast for dinner, right?” Jonah says excitedly as he hops into the car.

Nana laughs. “Of course we are. French toast with butter and maple syrup, and fresh-picked strawberries from my garden that I brought all the way from Chicago.”

“I love breakfast for dinner,” I say. This is already the best day ever.

As I get in next to Jonah, I glance at Nana’s tote bag on the front seat. Sticking halfway out of the bag is a thick hardcover book with a dark blue cover and gold trim. Ooh! I’d know that book anywhere. It’s *The Big Book of Fairy Tales*. The book must have a hundred stories in it. Nana has been reading fairy tales to me and Jonah since we were toddlers. Maybe even babies.

“I see you brought our favorite book,” I say as I buckle in.

“Sure did,” Nana says, getting into the driver’s seat. “I’ll read you guys a story or two before bed. If you’re still interested in fairy tales, that is.”

“Of course we’re still interested!” Jonah says, raising his eyebrows at me. “VERY interested. Right, Abby?”

I put my finger to my lips. “Shhh!” I whisper.

Nana glances at us in the rearview mirror, looking a little confused.

Okay, yes. Jonah and I are both acting a little weird.

Why? Because we actually go INTO fairy tales.

More like FALL into them.

Seriously.

Cinderella. Snow White. Aladdin. The Princess and the Pea.

Those are just a few of the fairy tales we’ve visited.

See, we have a magic mirror in our basement. When we knock on it three times at midnight, it pulls us inside and whisks us into a fairy tale.

Usually. The mirror doesn’t always let us in.

But if it starts to hiss, and then turns purple and swirls, off to fairy tale land we go. Me and Jonah and our cute little brown-and-white dog, Prince.

Nana has no idea. No grown-ups know about the magic

mirror. But it's thanks to Nana that I'm so familiar with the fairy tales we end up in. And knowing all the fairy tales can really come in handy, especially when Jonah and I are trying to figure out what's supposed to happen next in a story.

"So tell me *everything* about your lives in Smithville," Nana says to me and Jonah as she drives us home.

And we do. We tell her about our school and our friends and Prince. But of course, we don't mention the magic mirror in our basement. (Or the fact that we got Prince from a fairy tale.)

At home, Nana, Jonah, and I play two rounds of badminton in the backyard, and I'm having so much fun that I don't even mind that Jonah beats me. Twice. (Okay, maybe I mind a little, but I don't want to be a sore loser in front of Nana.) Then we take Prince on a walk. Nana and Prince obviously love each other. Nana keeps rubbing his furry, floppy ears, and Prince wags his tail every time.

When we get back to our house, the phone is ringing in the kitchen. I run to answer it while Jonah settles Prince on his dog bed in the corner of the kitchen. Meanwhile, Nana is taking out the eggs and bread to make her amazing French toast.

I grab the phone. "Hello?"

“Abby? It’s Penny.”

That’s a surprise. Penny is friends with *my* best friend Robin. But Penny and I aren’t exactly close friends ourselves. Even if she did go into a story with me once.

“Hi, Penny,” I say uncertainly. “What’s up?”

“Sooo,” Penny says, and I can picture her sitting in her huge bedroom, playing with her blond ponytail. “Since I got an eighty-nine — which is almost an A — on the vocabulary quiz, I’m allowed to have three friends over for a sleepover tonight. I already invited Robin, of course — she IS my best friend — and she said you’re good at making s’mores, so you can come, too, if you want. Oh, and I’m inviting Frankie since she tells good ghost stories.”

I roll my eyes at only being invited for my s’mores skills. But YAY! A sleepover! S’mores and ghost stories and my two best friends. How fun is that going to be?

“That sounds great,” I say. “I just need to check with my nana. She’s watching me and Jonah this weekend. But I’m sure she’ll say yes.”

“Call me back as soon as you can,” Penny says impatiently. “We’ll be making gourmet pizzas and sundaes. Oh,

and ice cream crepes for breakfast. Pickup is at noon tomorrow. Bye!” *Click.*

I rush over to Nana with the phone still in my hand and tell her all about Penny’s invitation.

“Doesn’t that sound awesome?” I ask Nana.

“It does sound nice,” Nana agrees, taking out the whisk and beating the eggs in a silver mixing bowl. “Your friend will be disappointed to hear you can’t attend.”

Wait. WHAT?

I tilt my head. “What do you mean? Why can’t I go?”

“Family time!” Nana says brightly. “You, me, and Jonah.”

A bark comes from the direction of Prince’s dog bed.

“And Prince,” Jonah adds.

“Of course, Prince!” Nana says with a smile.

My cheeks heat up. I do want to spend time with my nana. But she is here until Sunday night. And we’ve already spent some quality time together! We played two rounds of badminton!

“Nana, I really want to go,” I say. “There will be pizzas and sundaes. Plus s’mores and ghost stories. And ice cream crepes in the morning.”

“That reminds me,” Nana says. “I stopped at Bagel Heaven before I picked you guys up from school.” She points to the brown bag on the counter. “We’re having bagels tomorrow morning! Poppy seed for you, sesame for Jonah, and an everything bagel for me. Plus a plain one for Prince.”

Why is Nana talking about bagels at a moment like this? This is a crisis!

“Nana, please tell me I can go to Penny’s?” I beg.

Please say yes. Pleeceeeeeeeze!

“I’m sorry, Abby, but no,” Nana tells me, dipping a slice of bread into the egg mixture she’s whipped up.

“You don’t even like Penny,” Jonah reminds me.

I frown at Jonah. “I like her sometimes!” I say to him. Then I look back at my nana. Maybe I can talk her into it. I just have to lay out the facts. My parents are lawyers, and that’s how they win their trials. By pleading their cases. When I grow up, I want to be a lawyer, too — well, I want to be a judge, but you have to be a lawyer first — so this will be good practice.

“It’s a sleepover,” I explain to Nana, “and my two best friends will be there. I don’t want to be left out.”

Nana shakes her head. “I came to spend time with you, Abby. So the answer is no. Maybe you can sleep over next weekend.”

Penny isn’t having a sleepover NEXT weekend. She’s having a sleepover THIS weekend. She’s having a sleepover TONIGHT.

“But I’m going to miss all the stuff,” I say. “They’re going to stay up late telling secrets and I won’t know anything!”

“We can stay up late telling secrets,” Nana says.

Nanas are for hugs and bedtime stories. Not for secrets.

“I’ll get out the strawberries,” Jonah offers.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Nana says to him.

“So I really can’t go?” I ask Nana with my best puppy-dog eyes. That means they get very round and wide and match the hopeful smile on my face.

“No,” she says. There’s a slight DO NOT ASK ME AGAIN edge to her tone.

Crumbs.

I call Penny. The numbers take forever to press. I sigh three times. When Penny answers, I explain I can’t go.

“Oh, you poor thing,” Penny says. “Missing all the fun. We’re going to have a disco party at midnight! And we’ll be making friendship anklets with these amazing beads my dad picked up in France. You’ll be the only one without one. Oh, well. Bye!” *Click.*

Arrrrgh! Boo! Hissss!

She’s the worst.

I want to make an anklet, and I want s’mores and ghost stories. I want to hang out with Frankie and Robin at a sleepover — even if Penny has to be there, too.

“Abby, be a sweetie and get out the orange juice, will you?” Nana asks.

I grumble to myself as I head to the refrigerator. I am not feeling very sweet. I am actually feeling extremely bitter.

So maybe Nana’s French toast was ooey-goey delicious. But I’m still really, *really* mad about missing the sleepover.

There is no way I can handle Robin and Frankie having matching friendship anklets with Penny and not me. No. Way.

After we eat popcorn and watch the latest Wonder Woman movie, Nana clicks off the TV. “Wow, how did it get to be so late?” Nana exclaims. “It’s definitely past Jonah’s bedtime, and it’s almost Abby’s.”

“I love getting to stay up late when you babysit,” Jonah says, holding up his hand for a high five.

Nana slaps him five. “That’s what nanas are for. A little rule-breaking is always in order.”

“If rule-breaking is in order, maybe I can go to the sleepover after all?” I suggest, holding my breath.

“Abby,” Nana says, giving me a bit of a frown. “The answer is no, and that’s final. No more asking. It’s late, anyway. The girls are probably asleep.”

They are definitely not asleep.

“Come on, guys,” Nana says. “Let’s head upstairs. I’ll read you both a fairy tale.”

Even though I love fairy tales, right now I don’t feel like hearing one. That’s how I know I’m really upset.

While Nana gets *The Big Book of Fairy Tales*, Jonah and I go into our rooms to change into pj’s, and then we meet in Jonah’s room. Nana reads us a story I’ve never heard, about

a princess who doesn't have any friends. Probably because she was never allowed to go to sleepovers.

Finally, it's lights-out. Nana tucks in Jonah, kisses him on the forehead, and then comes into my room to tuck me in.

"You do understand, right, Abby?" Nana says, sitting on the edge of my bed. "Family time is important. There will be lots of sleepovers, but we don't get to see each other very often."

"I know," I say, my throat tightening. "I just . . . even if I went to the sleepover, we would have all day tomorrow and Sunday together. That's way more than enough family time."

Nana lifts her chin. "Well," she says in an *I'm very disappointed in you* voice, "it's not enough *for me*. I haven't seen you in months, and I want to spend time with you. You're my favorite granddaughter. My only granddaughter." She leans over to kiss me on the forehead, then stands up. "Okay? Good night, Abby."

"I wish Mom and Dad were here," I say, tears burning the backs of my eyelids. "They would have let me go."

I turn over onto my stomach and bury my face in my pillow so I don't cry.

“You’re being rude right now, Abby,” Nana says in a quiet voice. “That’s not the Abby I know. I hope you’ll apologize in the morning.”

She walks out of the room, leaving the door slightly ajar.

I’m suffocating myself in the pillow, so I throw it on the floor and flip over onto my back. I sigh and stare up at the ceiling. I’ll never fall asleep. I’ll be too busy thinking about the midnight disco party and the fancy French anklets.

If only I could sneak over to Penny’s house without Nana even knowing.

I sit upright.

Wait a minute.

Would the magic mirror take me? If I asked Maryrose really nicely? Like really, really nicely?

Maryrose is the fairy who’s trapped inside our mirror. She’s the one who takes me and Jonah into different fairy tales.

How awesome would it be if Maryrose sent me to Penny’s? I could just pop right into the middle of their disco party!

I'd be like, *Hey, guys! I've been here the whole time!*

And then I could sneak back to my house in the morning.

I look at my clock. In two hours, it will be midnight.

Magic mirror, here I come.