



# Whatever After

GENIE IN A BOTTLE

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for maddie and molly wolf  
cousins and sweeties



# chapter one



## Penny's Pennies

**Y**ou've already read twenty books?" I ask. "That's amazing."

"Thanks, Abby," says my best friend Frankie. We're sitting at a crowded table in the cafeteria, eating lunch. "How many have you read?"

"Only nine," I say, and take a bite of my cheese sandwich.

"That's still great." Frankie nods and adjusts her cute red-framed glasses. Her twenty-first book is on the table, next to her blueberry yogurt.

This month, the fifth grade is doing a read-a-thon. That means that we have to get our parents to pledge a certain amount

of money for every book we read, and all the money we raise goes to help our school library. My parents and Frankie's parents both pledged two dollars a book, which means that I've made eighteen dollars so far. Frankie has raised forty! The person who raises the most money gets to help the librarian pick the books that the library should order. Tomorrow is our deadline.

If I win — and, um, it's not looking promising — I know exactly which books I'm going to ask for: more books about fairy tales. The library has three fairy tale books now, but last week when I went to find one, all of them were checked out. I think the third grade is doing a unit on fairy tales. Great for them, but does that help me? Not at all.

Why am I obsessed with fairy tales? Because I go INTO them. I do! Pinkie swear. So far, I've visited *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Rapunzel*, *The Snow Queen*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Frog Prince*. I never get to choose the story. I don't even know the fairy tale I'm going to end up in until I'm in it. Which is why I need more fairy tale books to be available in the library.

It's very, very helpful when I've read the tales and know what's going to happen next.

Yeah, I can ask my parents to buy me more books about fairy tales, but they don't know about the magic mirror and I don't want them to get suspicious. They've already almost caught me and my little brother, Jonah, coming back from some fairy tales. They're lawyers, and pretty smart.

HOW do my brother and I go into fairy tales? Well, we have a magic mirror in our basement. If we knock on the mirror three times at midnight, *poof* — we step right inside a story.

Really.

See, there's a fairy named Maryrose who is trapped in our mirror and she's the one who takes me and Jonah inside. We're not sure why she's trapped, but we do know she was cursed. We're also not sure why she sends us into the stories she does. All we know is that she has some sort of mission for us. I kinda think our mission is to help uncurse her, but I don't know for sure.

“Are you going to read any more books by tomorrow?” Frankie asks me, and I snap back to the present.

“I'm hoping to finish the one I'm reading,” I say. “Then I'll be at ten.” I've been reading everywhere. At home. At recess. In the car on the way to and from school. I even read twenty-two

pages in the bathtub last night, which may not have been the best idea since I sort of dropped the book in the tub. Anyway. It's still readable. Damp, but readable.

I turn to Robin, my other best friend. "What about you?"

"I've read five," she says, glancing up from her book and her turkey sandwich. Her strawberry-blond hair is pulled back in a high ponytail. "But my parents pledged three dollars a book, so I've already raised fifteen dollars. Woot!"

Robin is super smart at science but not the fastest at reading and writing, so I'm glad her parents are giving her an extra reward.

"I didn't mean to interrupt your reading," I say with a wave of my hand. "Go, go, go!"

"I've only read one book," offers Penny from across the table. She makes a face. "I hate reading."

"Well, I guess you won't get to be the one to pick out the books," I say. Okay, that was a bit mean. But Penny isn't exactly my favorite person. Robin, Frankie, and I are a set. We're all three best friends. But Penny is Robin's *other* best friend, which is why she's sitting with us. Penny has her hair in a high ponytail, just like Robin's. They like to be twinsies. It's annoying.



Penny pops a grape in her mouth. “Actually, I probably will. My parents pledged a hundred bucks.”

*What?* “A hundred bucks?” I repeat. “How many books do you have to read for that?”

“One,” Penny says, twirling her pony. “They’re going to donate a hundred bucks no matter what. And I’ve already read one. So I get a hundred.”

My jaw drops. Her parents are giving her a hundred dollars? For reading one book? That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.

I wonder if I can get my parents to do the same thing.

She laughs. “Maybe I could bring in a hundred dollars in pennies. Penny’s pennies. How hysterical would that be?”

Ten thousand pennies would be heavy, not hysterical. And super annoying.

“I hope I can pick out fashion magazines instead of books,” Penny goes on. “Or maybe I’ll get lots of books about horses.”

Penny loves horses. Her cubby is covered with pictures of Thoroughbreds.

I cannot let that happen. I cannot let all the new stuff be

fashion magazines or books about horses. I will not be able to free Maryrose while galloping into fairy tales and looking stylish.

Here's the thing: If I win the read-a-thon, I'm not *only* asking the librarian to order more fairy tale books. I'm also asking her to order a book on spells and curses. And with a book on spells and curses — and how to reverse them — I can help free Maryrose from our mirror. So I *have* to win.

“Mom? Dad?” I say at dinner. “Would you guys give me more money for my read-a-thon?”

“How much more?” my mom asks, passing me the bowl of mashed potatoes.

I do the calculations in my head. I'm almost up to ten books, so . . . “What if you give me ten dollars a book?” I suggest. That would get me to one hundred! No. Wait. Then Penny and I would be tied. “Ten dollars and one cent per book?” That would get me to one hundred and ten cents. I'd win!

“Honey, that's a lot of money,” my mom says. “I think two dollars a book is a good motivator to keep you reading.”

I've lost my appetite. “But it's not enough! I'm going to lose.”

“I think you’re forgetting the point of this read-a-thon, Abby. It’s not to win. It’s to help the library,” my dad says, taking a bite of his roast beef.

I sink into my chair. I know they have a point. But they don’t get it.

Jonah is making wells in his mashed potatoes instead of coming to my defense. Hello? Doesn’t he know how important this is?

Except he doesn’t. I haven’t told him about my plan to order a book on spells. But I can’t say anything now, in front of our parents.

A glob of mashed potatoes falls off my brother’s fork and lands on his place mat.

Our dog, Prince, jumps up out of nowhere and licks it off.

“No, Prince, get down!” Jonah says sternly. Prince has been acting up lately. A lot. Last week he chewed up my mother’s new sneakers. He also jumped on my desk chair and used his snout to knock the read-a-thon books off my desk. Over the weekend, he stole my dad’s meatball sandwich. Yesterday he ate Jonah’s math assignment.

Okay, it’s possible my brother made that last one up. He probably just didn’t do his homework.

But anyway, my parents put my brother in charge of training Prince in manners. So far, Prince's grade is an F.

"If you don't stop," Jonah tells him, "I'm putting you in the other room."

Prince hangs his head. But I think he's just pretending, because he's happily licking the potatoes off his doggy lips at the same time.

Jonah is doing about as well with his dog training as I am with my read-a-thon.

That night I stay up late reading my tenth book, *Wishing Day*. But I'm distracted. Despite it being a great book, I've been reading the same page for the past fifteen minutes. I yawn. Should I push myself and try to finish it tonight?

What's the point?

I'm still going to lose. I will not make more money than Penny. I will not win the read-a-thon. I will not convince the librarian to order a book on spells and curses.

I look at the clock. It's 11:40 P.M.

Maryrose lets us through the mirror only at midnight. That's twenty minutes away.

Since I'm not going to be able to help her here, I might as well see if there's any way to uncurse her by going through the mirror. At least there's magic in the fairy tales, unlike here in Smithville.

I slam my book shut and sit up.

I know what I have to do.