



# Whatever After

COLD AS ICE

SARAH MLYNOWSKI



Scholastic Press/New York

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557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mlynowski, Sarah, author.

Cold as ice / Sarah Mlynowski. — First edition.

pages cm. — (Whatever after ; 6)

Summary: On their sixth trip through the magic mirror, Abby and Jonah find  
themselves in the story of the Snow Queen, a troubled character who chose power  
over family and friendship, and Abby has to free the children the Queen has under  
her spell — with the help of her new friend, a talking reindeer called Ralph, and a  
strange girl named Sharon.

ISBN 978-0-545-62734-4 (jacketed hardcover) 1. Snow Queen (Fictitious  
character) — Juvenile fiction. 2. Fairy tales — Adaptations — Juvenile fiction.  
3. Magic mirrors—Juvenile fiction. 4. Reindeer—Juvenile fiction. 5. Brothers and  
sisters — Juvenile fiction. 6. Friendship — Juvenile fiction. [1. Characters in  
literature — Fiction. 2. Fairy tales — Fiction. 3. Magic — Fiction 4. Reindeer —  
Fiction. 5. Brothers and sisters — Fiction. 6. Friendship — Fiction.] I. Title.

II. Series: Mlynowski, Sarah. Whatever after ; 6.

PZ7.M7135Co 2015

813.6 — dc23

2014031601

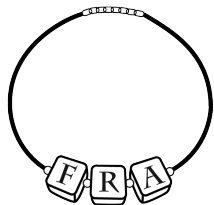
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 14 15 16 17 18

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, December 2014

for stella green  
princess of locust valley

## \* chapter one \*



### The Friendship Necklace

It's recess and I'm hanging upside down from the monkey bars. I should be concentrating on not falling. But instead I'm thinking about what I'm going to do with Robin and Frankie, my two best friends, when they come over after school. My plan is to make up dance routines and cook English muffin pineapple pizzas. But wouldn't it be so much more fun if I could take them through my magic mirror?

Yes! It would!

Don't get me wrong. Making up dance routines is a blast. And my English muffin pineapple pizzas are amazing. But as

an after-school activity, you can't beat going through a magic mirror, can you?

No! You can't!

And yes. I have a magic mirror in my basement.

You don't believe me? It's the truth. The whole truth, and nothing but the truth. When my little brother, Jonah, and I moved from Naperville to Smithville, we discovered that when we knock on our basement mirror three times, it takes us into a fairy tale. Well, first the mirror starts to hiss, then it casts a purple light over the room, then it starts to swirl, and *then* it sucks us into a fairy tale.

So far, we've been to the stories of *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Rapunzel*. Robin even came with us once. But it doesn't count because she doesn't remember any of it. She was under a sleeping spell.

"Abby?" Frankie says, startling me out of my thoughts. "Abby, are you okay? You've been hanging there for a while. Your brain hasn't frozen, has it? It's so cold out!"

I laugh and grab the bars with both hands. "This isn't cold! It's forty-five degrees out. You don't even need gloves to do monkey bars in this town."

Smithville has the mildest winter ever. It doesn't even snow here. Not like it did in Naperville.

I don't miss the cold, but do I miss the snow.

"Well, my glasses are freezing onto my face," Frankie says.

Frankie's glasses' frames are bright red. I helped her pick them out. They look great against her straight dark hair and dark olive skin.

"We're going to stay inside at your house today, right?" she asks me, leaning against the bars. "No playing in the backyard?"

I jump down. "Indoors only," I tell her, smoothing back my own wavy brown hair. I feel a pang of excitement. I love when I get to host my best friends at my house, although the three of us can have fun anywhere.

Some people say bad things happen in threes, but I say *great* things happen in threes. Like best friends. FRA. That's what we call ourselves, FRA. It stands for Frankie, Robin, and me — Abby. We debated calling ourselves FAR or RAF, or even ARF, but I thought ARF sounded too much like a dog's bark. We decided FRA sounds like *friendship*. FRA forever!

A few Wednesdays ago, we even made beaded friendship necklaces that spell out FRA.

We always get together on Wednesdays, because it's the only day none of us have after-school activities.

I glance across the school yard to see what Robin is doing. She's playing four square with Penny.

My stomach twists.

Robin's been spending a lot of time with Penny lately. Four square at recess. Sitting next to each other at lunch. Whispering to each other during class.

And Penny's not always so nice. I've seen her roll her eyes at me a few times. Twice she's called me bossy. Can you believe it? Bossy? Me?

Okay, fine, I can be a little bit bossy (especially with Jonah), but only because I have really good ideas. Like red glasses and making English muffin pineapple pizzas. Even Robin loves the pizzas. Last time we made them, she used the pineapple chunks to make eyes, a nose, and a mouth. It was adorable.

Here's the thing: I don't really like Penny. And Penny doesn't really like me. And I don't think Robin should spend any time with her at all.

I take a deep breath, trying to stay positive. I turn to face Frankie, who is now swinging on the monkey bars. This afternoon, FRA will have the best time ever.

Even though things feel a little funny between us and Robin.

Even though I can't take Frankie and Robin through the magic mirror.

There are a bunch of reasons why I can't take them. But the most important one is that I'm not supposed to tell anyone that the mirror exists. A fairy Jonah and I met in the story of *Snow White* warned us not to.

The recess bell rings, and Frankie and I hurry to line up.

Five hours left until FRA time. I can't wait.

At the end of the day, while Frankie is using the bathroom, I'm searching the hallway for Robin. I spot her at the water fountain.

"Ready for English muffin pineapple pizzas?" I ask her, shouldering my backpack.

Robin stands up and swallows hard. "Oh. Hey, Abby. Actually. I can't come over today. I have other plans."

“What plans?” I ask, my voice tight. “Do you have a doctor’s appointment?”

“No,” she says, fiddling with her beaded necklace. “I’m going to Penny’s.”

My stomach sinks to the bottom of my shoes. Penny? She’s ditching us to spend more time with Penny?

“No. No, no, no.”

“Excuse me?” Robin asks.

“No!” I say. “You can’t ditch us to hang out with Penny! It’s FRA day! Last week we went to your house, the week before we went to Frankie’s, and today you’re supposed to come to mine. That’s the way we do it. For months. We have an order. A routine.”

Robin looks down at her glittery sneakers. “Penny invited me to come over after school, and I want to go.”

“Can’t you go another day?” I ask, exasperated.

“No,” she says. “I can’t. Penny is busy on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The only day we both have free is Wednesdays.”

“But the only day *we* have free is Wednesdays!” I shout. Then I try to catch my breath. Hmm. I don’t really want Penny coming over, but I’d rather invite her along than lose Robin. “I guess

Penny can come to my house, too,” I say. “It’s fine. I probably have extra English muffins.”

“That’s okay,” Robin says. “Maybe another time.”

My eyes prick with tears. What is going on here? “Are you mad at us or something?”

“No,” Robin answers, and our eyes lock. “I’m allowed to have other plans, aren’t I? I can’t just spend all my time with two people!”

“Why not?” I demand. “We’re your best friends! You’re supposed to spend all your time with your best friends!”

Robin tugs on one of her strawberry-blond curls and is quiet for a moment. “Penny is my best friend, too,” she says.

*What?*

“No — no, she isn’t,” I stammer in shock. “Since when?”

“Since now,” Robin says.

“*We’re* your best friends. Me and Frankie. Not Penny. Penny isn’t nice.”

“I think she’s fun,” Robin says.

“Fun isn’t the same as nice,” I say. I cross my arms. “You can’t be Penny’s best friend and our best friend, too.”

Robin pales. “Why not?”

“Because I said so,” I respond, letting my voice rise. “You have to choose. It’s either Penny. Or us.”

Robin’s eyes narrow. “If you’re making me choose, then I choose Penny.”

I gasp. I feel sad, but also really, really mad. My eyes narrow, too. “Then take off your necklace.”

Robin’s jaw drops. “My FRA necklace?”

“Yes!” I say, my voice cracking. “You’re not our best friend anymore. You can’t wear it. Go make necklaces with your new best friend, Penny. You can make Robin and Penny necklaces. *RP!*” I make the RP sound really loud, so it sounds extra ridiculous. Even more ridiculous than ARF did.

“You want me to take it off right now?” Robin asks quietly.

I nod. I’m afraid I’ll start crying if I open my mouth.

“Fine.” She pulls the leather strand over her head and throws it at me. “You keep it.”

I stuff it in my backpack and run off to find Frankie.

My heart aches. FRA is over. From now on, it’s just FA.

\* \* \*

At my house, I instruct Frankie to remove the R bead from *her* necklace.

“Do we really have to do that?” she asks, stretching out on my bedroom carpet.

“Yes,” I say.

Her forehead wrinkles. “But why can’t Robin have another best friend?”

“Because Penny is mean,” I explain.

“But why does that matter to us? We don’t have to be Penny’s best friends, too.”

“Frankie,” I say patiently. “The whole point of having a best friend is that you choose that friend over everyone else. Robin chose Penny over us. She took off her necklace. Why should we have her initial on our necklaces? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I guess so,” Frankie says sadly.

I feel sad, too, but I don’t want to give in to it. I pull my necklace off, untie it, and remove the R bead. Frankie does the same and I pick up the R bead from her hand.

“I won’t throw them out,” I say. “In case Robin comes to her

senses. I'm not a monster. If she apologizes, she can be back in our group."

Apologizes and promises to never talk to Penny again, that is.

I slip the beads and the necklace into my jewelry box and firmly shut the lid.

"I love your jewelry box," Frankie says, glancing over.

"Thanks," I say, biting my lip. I'm always a little nervous when my friends notice my jewelry box. My nana gave it to me. There are drawings of fairy tale characters on the box. But every time Jonah and I accidentally change the ending of a fairy tale, the drawing of the characters changes, too. I'm worried Frankie might notice that Sleeping Beauty is riding a bicycle, for instance, and I obviously can't explain why that's the case.

"Let's go make the pizzas!" I say, to get us out of my room.

We head down to the kitchen. I try very hard not to think about Robin as I slice open the English muffins, spoon out the tomato sauce, and sprinkle on the cheese.

"Now for the pineapple," I say. I carefully stand on a chair and open the cabinet door.

Peas. Corn. Peanut butter. No pineapple.

“How am I supposed to make English muffin pineapple pizzas without pineapple? Huh? Huh? It’s impossible!” Tears prick the back of my eyes. I know I’m not really upset about the pineapple. The pineapple is not the real missing ingredient. The real missing ingredient is Robin.

She was our best friend. And even if she doesn’t remember, she did go through the mirror with me once. We had a special bond.

Maybe I should tell Frankie about the magic mirror after all. Yes! I should. Then *we’ll* have that special bond. We won’t need Robin. We’ll have each other.

“Frankie —” I start.

“Abby!” Jonah yells, rushing into the kitchen. “Look what I have!”

“What?” I ask, suddenly grateful that he interrupted me. What was I thinking? I’m not supposed to tell *anyone* about the mirror. The fairy from *Snow White* said it would be dangerous if I did.

“A Spider-Man watch!” Jonah cries. He juts out his small, seven-year-old arm. “Isaac got two for his birthday, and they didn’t have the receipts to return them, so his parents said he could give one to me. Isn’t it the best?”

“Yes, Jonah,” I say. “The best.” Sometimes I want to ruffle his brown hair, but I don’t because I know that will embarrass him.

“I am going to wear it all the time,” he says, admiring his wrist. “I’m never going to take it off.”

“You’ll probably want to take it off in the shower,” Frankie says. “I once wore my watch in the shower, and it stopped working.”

“Good point,” Jonah says solemnly. “I will take it off to shower, but that’s it.”

I used to have a watch, too. But on our last trip through the mirror, I had to trade it for cab fare.

Now I have no watch.

No pineapple.

And no Robin.

I guess bad things do come in threes.