

Chapter One

It never looked much like Christmas in that part of California.

No matter how much they dressed it up in Ribbons or wreaths or lights or tinsel.

The house that Penny lived in was no different.

You Belong in
Cuesta Verde
pop. 24,616 and growing!

PENNY'S
HOUSE

In fact, it was pretty much identical in every way to every other house in *Cuesta Verde*.

The town was what was known as a "planned community," Penny's mom had once explained to her.

Meaning everything had been planned on paper long before anything was built. Every street, every yard and every house, right down to the room.



The only thing that really differed from one driveway to the next was the mailboxes,



And the names that hung on them.

PENNY DORA
JEFFERSON
(AND HER MOM)



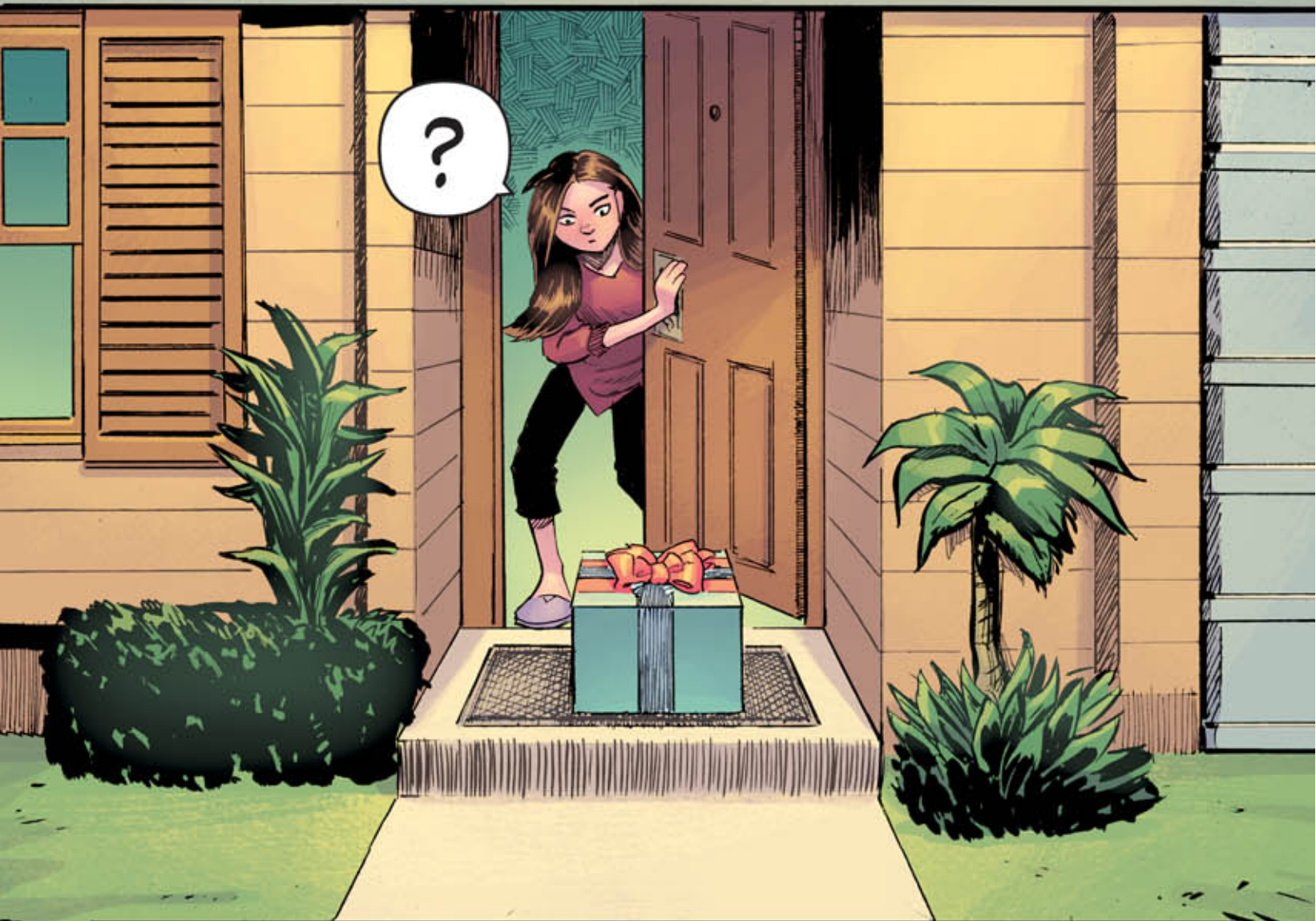
If anyone who lived in Cuesta Verde wished differently, they must have kept it to themselves.

But then, you know what they say . . .



"Be careful what you wish for . . ."



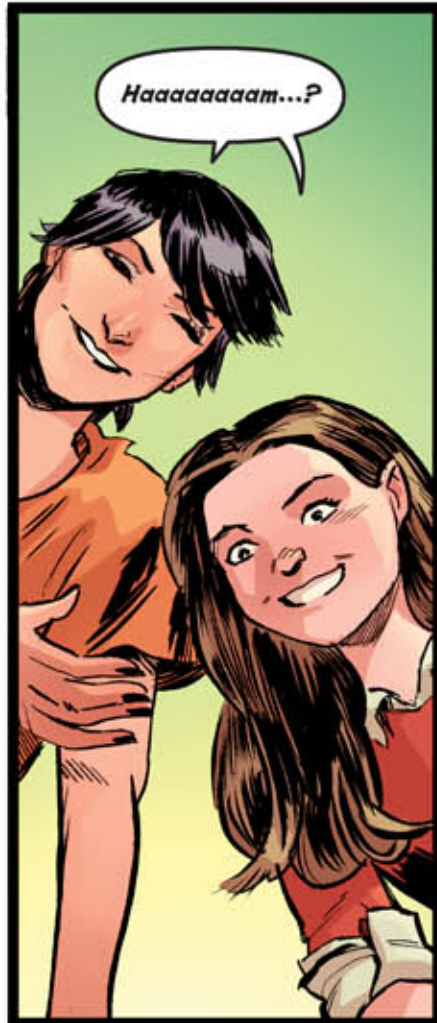


The next day couldn't come soon enough for Penny.



Since July she'd pretty much been convinced maybe Christmas wouldn't come at all this year. No matter how hard she wished.

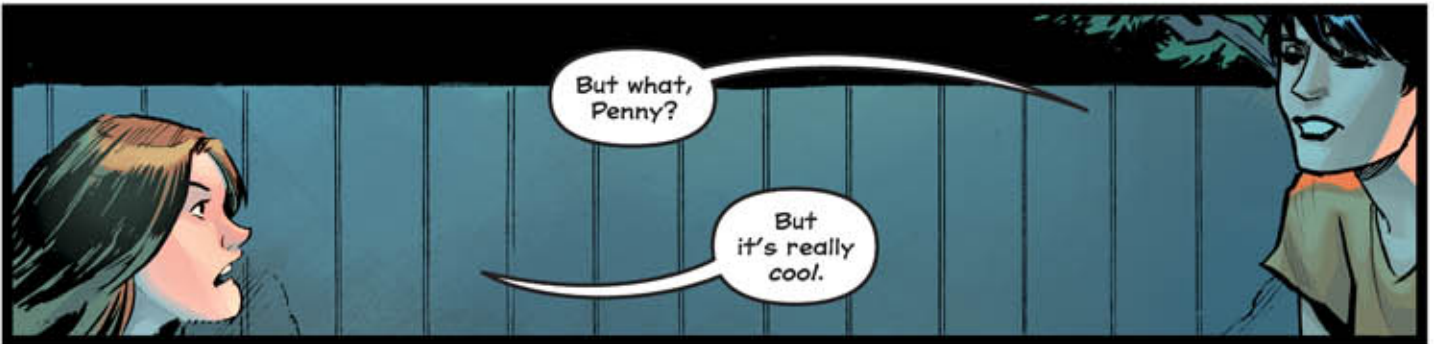




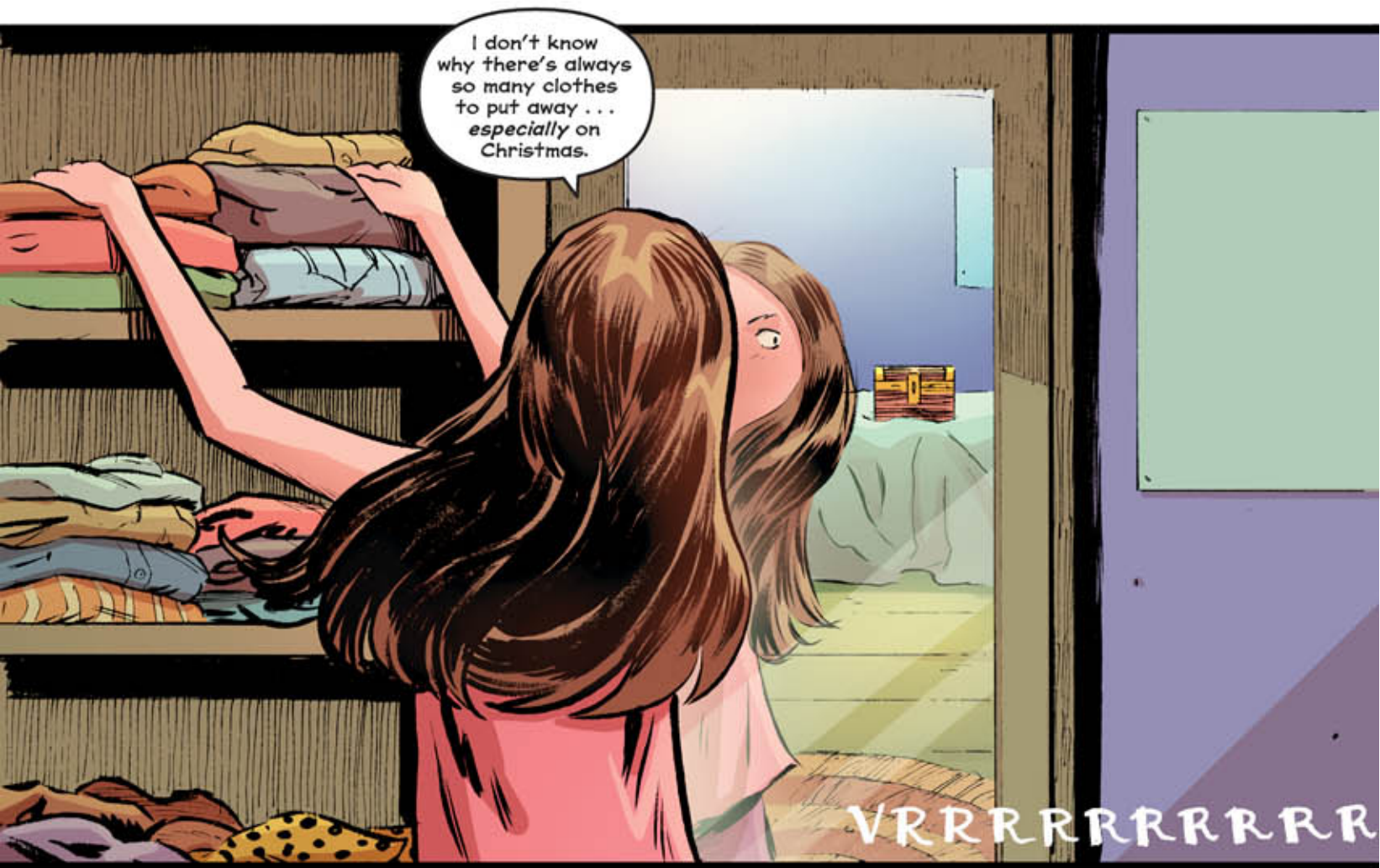


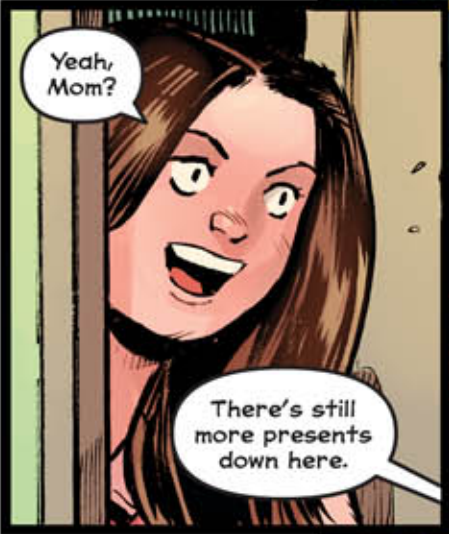




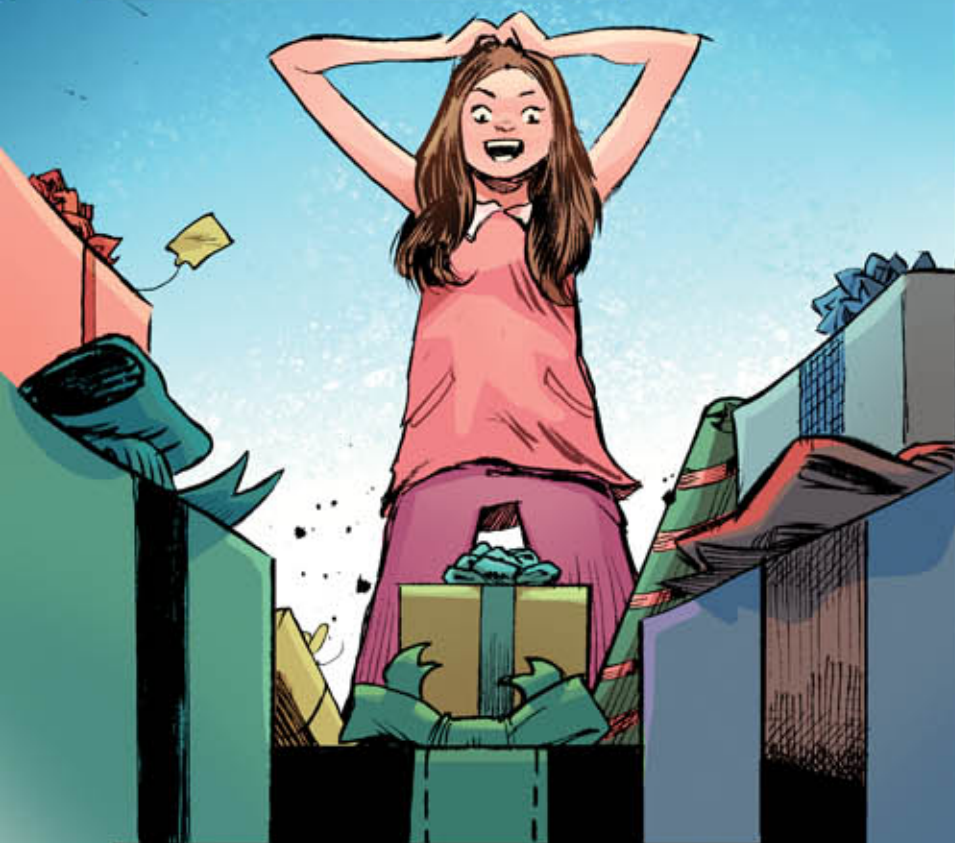








For the next two hours, it was Christmas all over again. Only this time, even bigger and better.



Almost as soon as the last present had been ripped open ...



... again ...

... Penny had fallen fast asleep, surrounded by pretty much everything a ten-year-old little girl could wish for, thanks to two helpings of Christmas in one night.

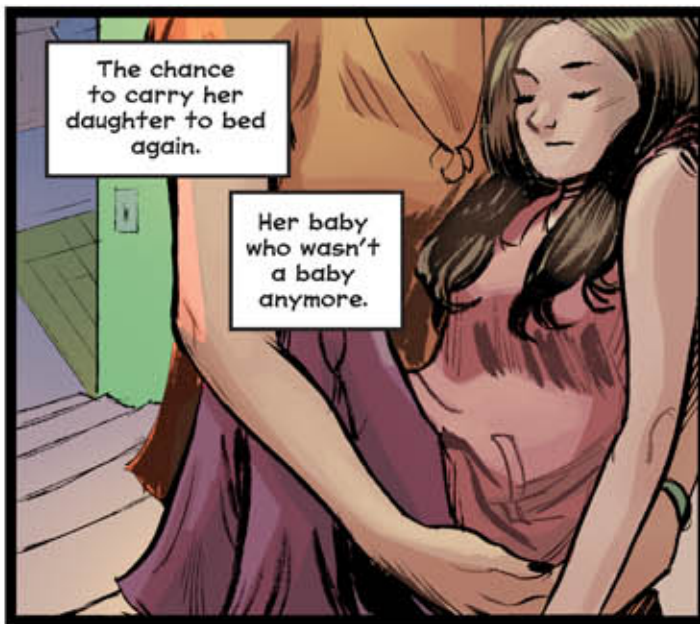


As it turned out, Penny's mom got something she'd been wishing for, for a long time, too ...



The chance to carry her daughter to bed again.

Her baby who wasn't a baby anymore.



It was almost three in the morning when Penny woke up.

That was when the weird whooshing sound began again.

(A sound perhaps she would have heard the first time if not for the racket of her mom's old vacuum.)

At first, she didn't know where the sound was coming from.

WHOOSH
WHOOSH

When she looked under her bed . . .

. . . she could hardly believe her eyes.

WHOOSH WHOOSH

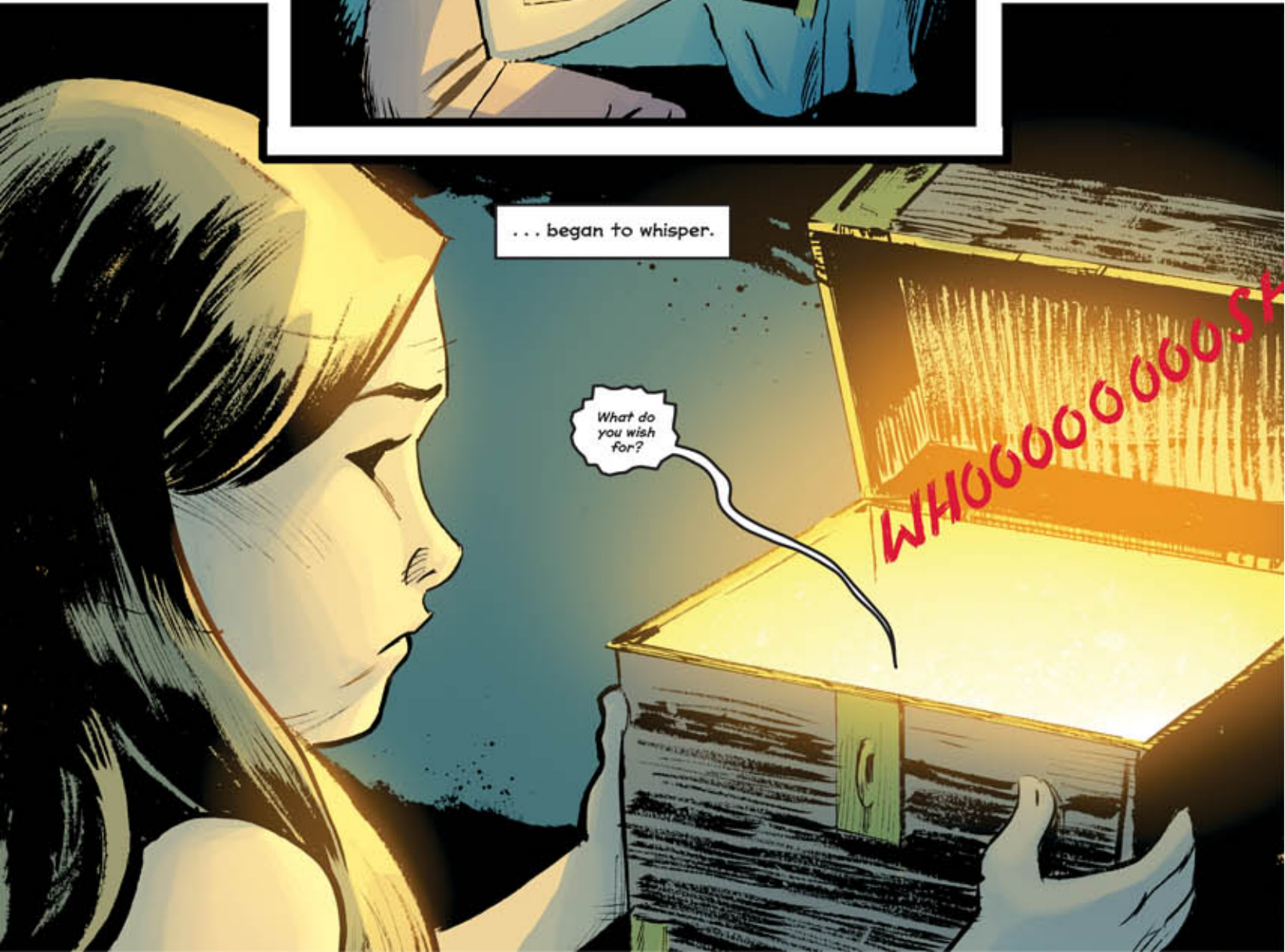
WHOOOOOSH
WHOOOOOSH



The box didn't look so old now. The paint was a bright and lustrous red. The hinges, shining gold.



It wasn't until Penny picked it up that the box ...



... began to whisper.

What do you wish for?





Penny tip-toed across the room and dug around in the back of her closet.



She settled on a weapon.



Then she poked at the box with it -- just once -- and very softly.



When nothing happened ...



... she pushed the box out of the shadows and into the bright patch of moonlight on the floor in front of her window.



Now she could see that the box was once again a very dull red and the paint was back to its normal peeling old self.

Which was almost as terrifying.

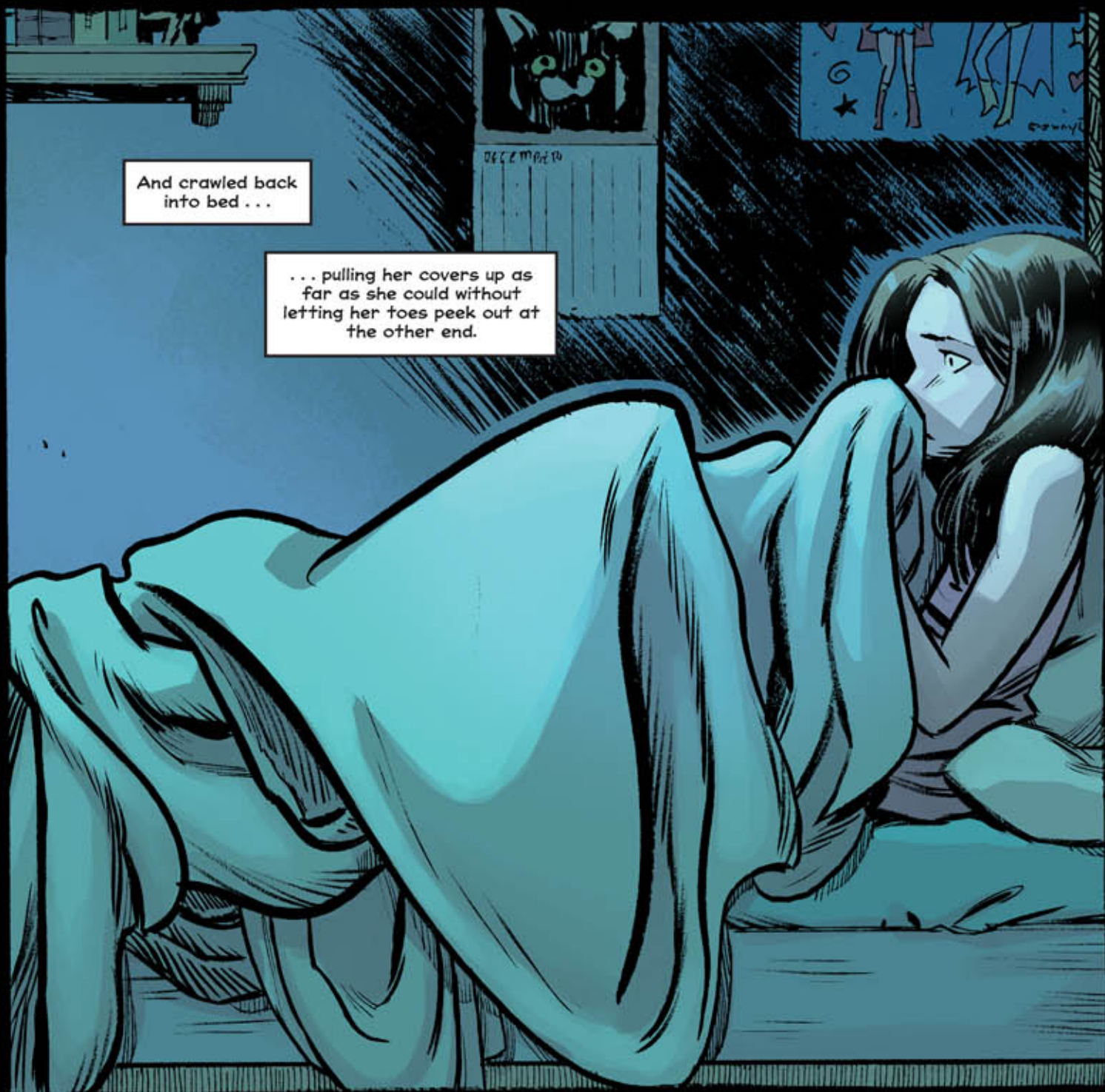




So Penny pushed the box into her closet.



Then pushed her bed in front of her closet -- with no little effort, but with very little noise.



And crawled back into bed . . .

. . . pulling her covers up as far as she could without letting her toes peek out at the other end.



Penny didn't think about the strange box when she woke up the next morning.

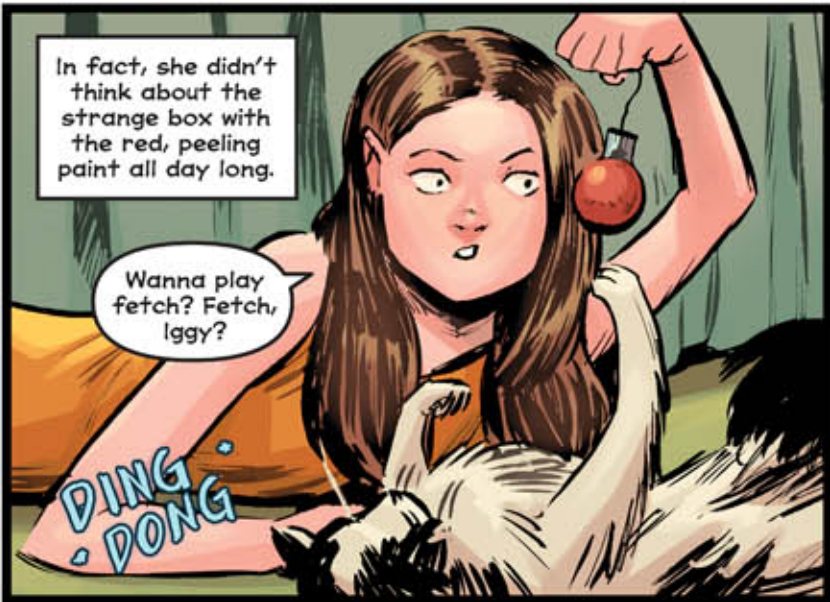
You gonna sleep the whole day away in here?!



She didn't think about it that afternoon.

What do you mean, "nap time"?!?

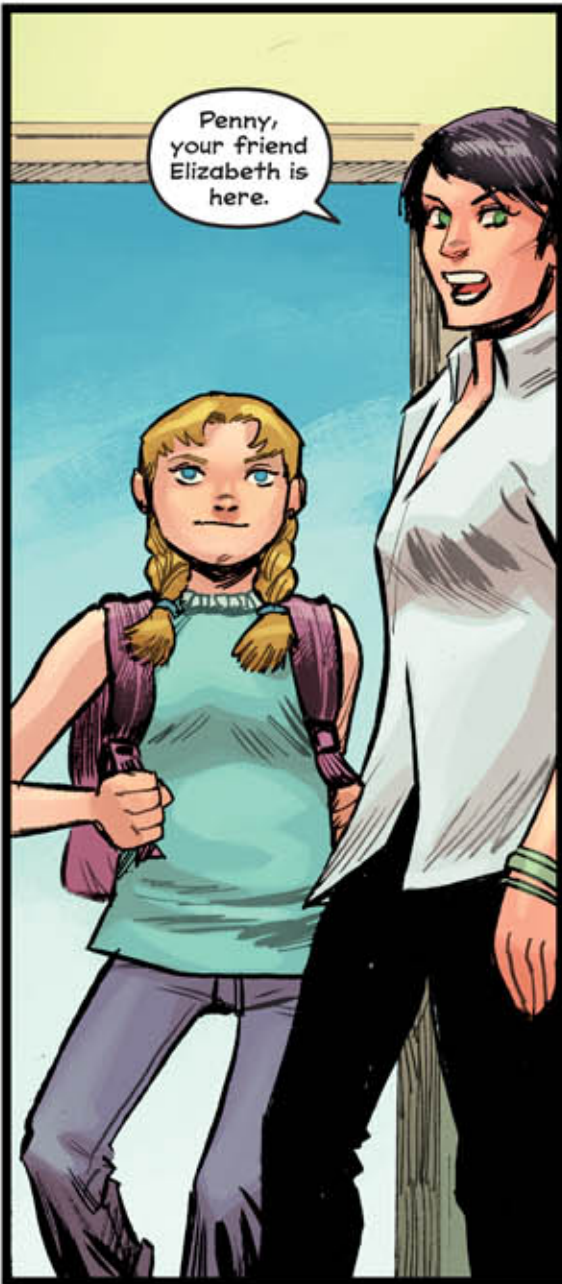
I mean it's time for you to take a nap.



In fact, she didn't think about the strange box with the red, peeling paint all day long.

Wanna play fetch? Fetch, iggy?

DING DONG



Penny, your friend Elizabeth is here.



Well... mostly she didn't.

But she didn't go near her closet, either.

