

\* prologue \*



This Is Not a Joke

Once upon a time my life was normal.  
Then the mirror in our basement ate us.

Do you think I'm joking? Do you think I'm making this up?  
You do, don't you?

You're thinking, Um, Abby, mirrors don't usually go ahead and slurp people up. Mirrors just hang on the wall and reflect stuff.

Well, you're wrong. So very WRONG.

Everything I'm going to tell you is the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I'm not making anything up. And I'm not a liar,

or a crazy person who thinks she's telling the truth but secretly isn't. I am, in fact, a very logical person. Fair, too. I have to be, since I'm going to be a judge when I grow up. Well, first I'm going to be a lawyer, and then I'm going to be a judge, because you have to be a lawyer first. That's the rule.

But yeah. I am an extremely logical, extremely practical, and extremely *un-crazy* ten-year-old girl whose life went completely berserk after her parents forced her to move to Smithville.

Still don't believe me? You will when you hear all the facts. You will when you hear the whole story.

Let me start at the beginning.

## \* chapter one \*



### The Beginning

**t**he moment the recess bell rings, the kids in my new fifth-grade class decide they want to play tag. We *eenie meenie miney*, and somehow I'm it. Me, the new kid. Great.

Not.

I cover my eyes to give the other kids a ten-second head start (okay, five), then run toward the fence. Straightaway, I spot Penny, who is very tall. Well, taller than me. Although most people are taller than me. She's also wearing a bright orange sweatshirt that's hard to miss. I don't know all the kids' names, but Penny's is easy to remember because she always wears

super-high ponytails and I just think, Penny's pony, Penny's pony, Penny's pony.

I dash over and tap her on the elbow. "You're it, Penny's pony! I mean, Penny."

She looks at me strangely. "Um, no. I'm frozen."

Huh? It's not that cold. Plus, her orange sweater looks really warm.

"What?" I ask.

Penny wrinkles her forehead. "You tagged me. I'm frozen."

"Noooooo," I say slowly. "I was it. I tagged *you*, so now *you're* it. Now you have to tag someone else to make them be it. That's why the game is called it." I blink. "I mean, tag."

"The it person has to tag *everyone*," Penny says. Her tone suggests she knows way more about tag than I do, and my cheeks heat up. Because she doesn't. "When you're tagged, you freeze, and the very last person tagged is the next it. It's called *freeze tag*. Got it?"

The LAST person to get tagged gets to be it? If you're the last person tagged, that means you're the best player. If you're the best player, you should get to do a happy dance while everyone

throws confetti on you. You should not have to be the new it, because being it is not a reward.

My heart sinks. If I have to be it until every last fifth grader is tagged or frozen, this is going to be a very, very, VERY long game.

Here's the thing. I am trying to have a fresh start and be flexible about my new school. But how can I when the people here do EVERYTHING wrong?

Please allow me to present my case.

1. Everyone in Smithville calls Coke, Pepsi, and Orange Crush *soda*. Ridiculous, right? *Pop* is a much better name. *Pop! Pop! Pop!* Coke *pops* on your tongue. It doesn't *soda* on your tongue.
2. The people here do not know how to make a peanut butter and banana sandwich. The right way is to slice the banana up and then press the slices one by one into the peanut butter, preferably in neat and orderly rows. But the kids in my new school mash the bananas, mix a spoonful of peanut butter into the mashed

bananas, and then spread the whole gloppy mess on their bread. Why oh why would they do that?

3. And now, instead of tag, they want to play “Ooo, Let’s All Be Frozen Statues While Abby Runs Around and Around and Around.”

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury:

I do not want to call pop *soda*.

I do not want to eat gloppy banana mush.

I do not want to be it.

“I’m pretty sure the way I play is the right way,” I say, my throat tightening. I’m right. I am.

“No,” she states. “I’m frozen. And you’d better get going, or it’ll just get harder.”

Tears burn the backs of my eyes. I don’t want things to get harder. I want things to be the way they used to be. Normal!

“No thanks,” I say in a careful voice that’s meant not to let my tears out but might sound a little squished. Or prissy. Or spoiled-brat-y, possibly.

“You’re quitting?” Penny asks. Her eyebrows fly up. “Just because you didn’t get your way?”

“No! I’m just . . . tired.” I’m not even lying. I *am* tired. I’m tired of everything being different. Why can’t things be like they used to be?

I go to Mrs. Goldman, the teacher on playground duty. I ask her if I can go to the library.

“You mean the media room, hon?” she asks.

I shrink even smaller. They don’t even call a library a library here?

But the second I step into the *media room*, the world gets a little better. I take a deep breath. *Ahhhh*.

Maybe in Smithville a room filled with books is called a media room, but it smells just like the library in my old, normal school. Musty. Dusty. Papery.

The books on the shelves of the school library — media room, *argh* — are books I recognize. They’re books I’ve gobbled up many times before. Many, *many* times before.

My shoulders sag with relief, because guess what? No matter how many times you read them, stories always stay the same.

I get my love of books from my nana. She used to read to me all the time. She’s a literature professor at a university in Chicago, the normal place where we used to live.

I feel a pain in my gut when I think about my old house. My faraway friends. My nana. Peanut butter and banana sandwiches made the *right* way.

And then I shake off those heavy feelings and run my finger along the row of books. My finger stops. It rests on a collection called *Fairy Tales*, where good is good, and bad is bad, and logical, practical fifth-grade girls never get stuck being it forever.

My chest loosens. Perfect.