

* chapter one *



Today Is Not a Good Day

I slump into a chair at the kitchen table.
“So what’s wrong?” my little brother, Jonah, asks.

It’s five o’clock, and the almost setting sun streams through the windows, making me shield my eyes. “I don’t want to talk about it,” I mutter. When my dad picked us up from school, I told him the same thing. My best friends, Robin and Frankie, have already called twice since I got home to see how I’m feeling, but I don’t want to talk to them about it, either.

Jonah hunts through the cupboard and takes out a bag of chips. “You sure? You look upset.”

I *am* upset. Maybe I DO want to talk about it? I swallow the lump in my throat. “I didn’t win the class spelling bee,” I finally admit.

You might be wondering: Abby, why are you so upset you didn’t win the spelling bee? Did you expect to win the spelling bee?

My answer: Yes! I did expect to win the spelling bee! I ALWAYS win the spelling bee.

Case in point:

In third grade I won the spelling bee.

In fourth grade I won the spelling bee.

But what happened in fifth grade? Did I win the spelling bee?

NO. I did not.

In fifth grade, today, I LOST THE SPELLING BEE.

“Did you come in second?” Jonah asks. He takes a bottle of ketchup out of the fridge, sits down in the seat across from me, and squirts the ketchup directly onto a chip.

“No.”

“Did you come in third?”

“No,” I snap.

He scrunches his eyebrows. “Fourth?”

I bite the inside of my cheek.

“Fifth?”

I explode. “Ninth! Okay? I came in ninth!”

Jonah’s eyes widen. A ketchup-soaked chip falls out of his hand onto the table.

“I know!” I cry. “I’m just as shocked as you are!”

I can’t stop the scene at school from replaying in my head. It was my turn again. I was standing confidently among the remaining eight students at the front of the room. I gave the kids who’d already been eliminated my most compassionate smile. I waited for Ms. Masserman to tell me my word. . . .

“Maybe you’re just not a good speller,” Jonah says, interrupting my playback. He pops another chip into his mouth.

“I am, too, a good speller!” I say, my face flushing.

“Maybe you used to be a good speller compared to the kids in your *old* class,” Jonah explains. “But you’re not a good speller compared to the kids in your new class. Or maybe the words just got harder.”

I nod twice. “They *did* get harder.”

“What word did you mess up?” he asks.

My chest tightens. “*Cinnamon.*”

Suddenly, I’m right back there in the classroom, remembering how it felt to have everyone’s eyes on me.

“C-I-N-A-M-M-I-N,” I’d spelled out with assurance. I waited for my teacher’s smile. Or maybe a thumbs-up. Or perhaps applause?

“I’m sorry, Abby,” Ms. Masserman said, pinching her lips as if she’d just tasted something sour. Like vinegar. Definitely not cinnamon. “That’s incorrect.”

Huh? What?

“The correct spelling for cinnamon is C-I-N-N-A-M-O-N,” she said. “Abby, you’re out. Penny, your turn again.”

My body froze. My neck. My back. My feet. “But . . .” My voice trailed off.

“Yes?” Ms. Masserman asked.

“Can I try again?” I whispered.

“Sorry, Abby. One strike per student.”

My throat closed up. Tears pricked my eyes. I would not cry in school. I WOULD. NOT. CRY. IN. SCHOOL.

I cried in school.

It was horrible.

I asked to go to the restroom as the tears dripped down my cheeks.

“Crybaby,” Penny muttered as I left.

A few of the kids laughed. Not Robin and Frankie, obviously. I heard Robin ask if she could be excused, too, but Ms. Masserman said no.

After ten minutes of sulking in the bathroom, I pulled myself together and returned to class. I avoided all eye contact.

Now, sitting in the kitchen with Jonah, I shudder with embarrassment at the memory.

I put my head on the kitchen table and groan.

“Did everyone get such hard words?” Jonah asks.

“Well, Frankie got “quandary,” which I can totally spell even though it’s hard. I *know* I’m the best speller in the class.”

Jonah rolls his eyes. “Okay, Miss Conceited.”

I cringe. I’ll admit that sounded a little obnoxious. “I guess what I mean is I *thought* I was the best speller in the class. . . .”

I trail off. Am I not as smart as I think I am? Maybe I’m not smart at all. But if I’m not smart . . . what am I?

Ms. Masserman gave me a certificate that says **THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT ABBY PARTICIPATED IN OUR CLASS SPELLING BEE.**

Did she think I would hang that up in my room? When my bulletin board already has two spelling bee certificates that both say **CHAMPION** on them? No way.

I feel the tears behind my eyelids again, and I blink. There. That's better. "I don't want to talk about the stupid spelling bee anymore," I say to Jonah. "Tell me about your day."

My brother grins. "I had a great day."

"Oh yeah? What happened to make it so great?" I snag one of his potato chips and pop it into my mouth.

"Two things. One, I got new cleats."

"Huh?"

"Dad got me new cleats for soccer. They're in the living room. They are really cool."

Hmm. "You get new soccer shoes and I get ninth place in a spelling bee?"

He nods.

"Wanna trade?" I half smile.

He munches another chip. "You don't play soccer. And I don't know how to spell 'cinnamon' or 'quandary,' either. I don't even know what a quandary is. Is it a place to put ducks?"

“It means a sticky situation,” I say. “What’s the second great thing?”

“I learned an awesome new song. Wanna hear?”

“Sure,” I say.

He clears his throat: *“I know a song that gets on everybody’s nerves, everybody’s nerves, everybody’s nerves. I know a song that gets on everybody’s nerves, and this is how it goes: I know a song that gets on everybody’s nerves, everybody’s nerves, everybody’s nerves —”*

“All right, that’s enough,” I say.

“I know a song that gets on everybody’s nerves, everybody’s nerves, everybody’s nerves —”

“I’m going to do my homework,” I say, standing up. “This isn’t helping my mood.” It feels like there’s something pointy pushing down on my chest. Soccer cleats, maybe.

I drag my feet all the way up the stairs to my bedroom. I can hear my dad on the phone down in the basement. My mom is still at her office. They’re both lawyers and they work a lot.

Even when I close my bedroom door, I can still hear Jonah singing.

Our new puppy, Prince, is playing with an old tennis ball on

my carpet. He jumps up when he sees me. He nuzzles his little, dark brown nose against my foot. Then he rubs his light brown cheek against my other foot and looks up at me with his big, chocolate eyes.

“Hi, cutie,” I say, crouching down and scratching behind his floppy ears. “You still love me even though I can’t spell, right?”

Instead of answering, he licks my face. Or maybe that’s his way of answering.

Yup, Prince does still love me. And I love him. He’s sweet and bouncy and very, very smart. Last week I’m pretty sure he folded my sweater and put it away in my drawer.

Okay, that was probably my mom. But still. We’ve only had him a few weeks and he already knows how to “sit,” “stay,” “come here,” and that he should wait until he’s outside to go to the bathroom. I trained him myself. Okay, my mom did that, too, but I definitely helped.

Prince followed us back from the last fairy tale Jonah and I visited. We didn’t mean to take him with us, but now he’s ours. Our parents said we could keep him if his owner didn’t come forward. Of course no owner came forward. His original owner lives in a kingdom on the other side of our magic mirror.

Did I mention that we have a magic mirror in our basement? Well, we do. If we knock on the mirror at midnight, it takes Jonah and me into fairy tales. So far, we've visited Snow White, Cinderella, the Little Mermaid, and Sleeping Beauty. We go through the mirror, we change the stories, and then we come home. Of course, we don't *mean* to change the stories. Well, usually we don't. But they all end up changed.

You probably think I'm making that up. But I'm not. I'm being one hundred percent honest!

I scoot over to the jewelry box my nana got me a few years ago. The box features all the famous fairy tale characters. Most of them used to be in normal, expected poses. You know — the Little Mermaid with her tail. Snow White with her apple. Now all the stories we've been to have new pictures to go with their new endings. Their new *happy* endings.

I plop facedown on my bedspread. At least *they're* happy.

I hear Jonah thump his way up the stairs and into his room. He's *still* singing. “. . . a song that gets on everybody's nerves, everybody's —”

I prop myself up on one elbow. “Jonah!” I shout. “Enough already! You've officially gotten on my nerves! Now get off them!”

Silence. Two seconds later, my door opens.

Prince yips happily.

“Don’t you knock?” I murmur, my face planted in my bed-spread again.

“Okay, grumpy-head, I know just what will cheer you up,” I hear Jonah say.

“Is it you not singing that annoying song?”

“No! We should go through the mirror tonight,” he chirps.

I flip over and stare at my ceiling. “Don’t feel like it,” I grumble.

“That’s exactly why we have to do it. You’re sad. Fairy tale land will make you un-sad. It’s fun.”

“Sometimes it’s fun; sometimes we get into all kinds of trouble,” I argue. “Like almost drowning or being turned into mice. And anyway, I don’t want to have fun. I want to sit in my room and be miserable. I’m not going.”

Jonah plugs his fingers into his ears. “I can’t hear you, I can’t hear you! I’ll come get you at midnight!”

“No, Jonah —” I start, but he’s already backed out of the room.