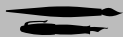


Whatever After
FAIREST of ALL

SARAH MLYNOWSKI



Scholastic Press/New York

for jessica braun,
p.s. read (forever!)

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Jonah discover an antique mirror that transports them into the Snow White fairy tale.

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* 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

the 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.

* chapter two *



My Annoying Wake-up

That night I'm dreaming about my old friends. We're playing tag the *right* way when someone calls my name.

"Abby! Abby! Abby!"

I half open one eye. It's Jonah, my seven-year-old brother, so I pull my bedspread over my head. Sure, I love the kid, but I'm a growing girl. I need my sleep.

Jonah yanks down the covers, presses his mouth to my ear, and says, "Abby, Abby, Abby, Abby, Abby, ABBY!"

I groan. "Jonah! I'm asleep!"

"Wake up, wake up, wake up!"

Does he have to repeat everything a million times? There's a fine line between being persistent and being annoying.

"Go back to bed," I order. I have been told that I can be bossy, but come on. It's the middle of the night. Plus, it's my job as an older sister to boss Jonah around. I'm only performing my sisterly duty.

It's also my job to make sure he eats his vegetables.

At dinner, I caught him hiding his broccoli in his sock. So I told on him. Then I felt guilty and gave him half my chocolate cookie.

"But the mirror is hissing," he says now.

I squint at him. *What?* I don't even know what to do with that sentence. "Jonah, mirrors don't hiss. They don't make any sounds at all. Unless you break them." Uh-oh. I sit up like a jack-in-the-box. "Did you break a mirror? That's bad luck!"

"I don't think so." He does this weird twisty thing he sometimes does with his lips. "Well, maybe."

"Jonah! Which mirror?" I swing my legs over the side of my bed. It better not be my pink hand mirror, the one I once caught him using to examine his toes.

"The big one downstairs."

"Are you kidding me? The creepy one in the basement?"

I realize I'm shrieking, and I lower my voice so I won't wake my parents. "Why were you in the basement so late at night?" There's something odd about the mirror in our basement. It seems like it's watching me wherever I go. Like the eyes in that painting the *Mona Lisa*. But of course that makes no sense. Mirrors can't watch you. They're not alive.

He shrugs. "I was exploring."

I glance at my alarm clock. "It's eleven fifty-two!" My wrist feels heavy and I realize I forgot to take my watch off before I went to sleep. I press the light. It says 11:52, too.

Jonah shrugs again.

Jonah is always exploring. It's amazing we're even related, really; we're so different. I like reading. He likes adventures. I like cuddling in my bed with a book. He'd rather be rock climbing. Seriously. Mom takes him to rock-climbing classes at the Y on Sundays.

Patiently, I take a breath. I ask, "Did you see green?" because when Jonah was three, Dad got him a clock that changes colors. All night it stays red, and then at seven A.M. it turns green. Jonah is supposed to stay in bed until the clock turns green.

But Jonah isn't great at following instructions. Or colors.

“I know how to tell the time,” Jonah says, all huffy.

“Then why did you wake me up?”

“Because I saw purple, too, and I wanted to show you,” he says, then waves at me to follow him. “Come on, come on!”

Huh? He saw purple?

I sigh. Crumbs. I get out of bed, step into my striped slippers, and follow him.

“Wait!” I say, spotting his bare feet. I steer him to his room, which is next to mine. “You need shoes, mister. I don’t want you cutting your foot on a piece of broken mirror glass.”

“But there’s no glass.”

He broke a mirror and there’s no glass? I point to his closet. “Shoes!” It’s my job to protect all of him, even his smelly feet.

Jonah’s room is bright, because of the glow-in-the-dark stars stuck to his ceiling and his *red* clock. Not purple. Red. Jonah grabs his sneakers from the floor of his closet and shoves them on. “Are you happy now? Let’s go, let’s go!”

“Shush!” I order. Mom and Dad’s door is closed, but their room is just down the hall. Mom will not be happy if we wake her up. (She already got annoyed at me once today when I told her she was six minutes and forty-five seconds late picking me up

at school. I didn't mean to make her feel bad. But I have a super-cool timer on my watch, and if I'm not going to use it to tell her how late she is, then what am I going to use it for?)

We slink down the first flight of stairs. They creak. A lot. Finally, I reach to open the door to the basement.

I freeze. I freeze as if, well, I've been tagged. Because the truth is I am possibly not the bravest girl in the world. And it's late. And we're going to the basement.

I prefer reading about adventures, not having them.

"What's wrong?" Jonah asks, sliding in front of me and down the stairs. "Come on, come on, come on!"

I take a big, deep breath, turn on the basement light, and close the door behind me.

* chapter three *



Mirror, Mirror, Bolted to the Wall

One step. *Creak.*
Two steps. *Creak!*
Three. *Creeeeeak!*

I stop on the very bottom stair and look across the basement at the huge and creepy mirror. It's still huge and creepy, but other than that, it looks perfectly fine. "There is not a single crack in the mirror," I say. "We're going back to bed. Now."

"I never said it was *cracked*," Jonah says. "I said it was hissing." He approaches the mirror, getting so close his breath turns the glass foggy. "It must have stopped when I left."

I stay where I am, taking in every last detail of the antique mirror the previous owners left behind. It's twice the size of me. The glass part is clear and smooth. The frame is made of stone and decorated with carvings of small fairies with wings and wands. I don't know why the old owners didn't take it with them, except . . . well, it's creepy. And attached to the wall. With big, heavy Frankenstein bolts.

In the reflection I see my shoulder-length curly brown hair. My lime-green pajamas. My striped slippers. Only, there's something off about my reflection, so I turn away. I don't know *what* exactly, but it's weird.

"It's not hissing," I say, checking out the rest of the basement. Black leather couch. Desk. Swivel chair. Lots and lots of bookshelves, all filled with my parents' old law books, which they never look at but don't want to throw away. Mom and Dad are both lawyers. Unlike me, neither of them wants to be a judge.

For the record: I'm going to be a really great judge because I'm all about peace and order. I'll make sure justice is always served, because it's not fair when bad people don't get in trouble, or when bad things happen to good people.

Like my parents making me move to Smithville.

“You have to knock,” Jonah says.

His words pull me back. “What’s that?”

“On the mirror,” he says, his eyebrows scrunching together.

“You have to knock.”

I laugh. “I’m not knocking on the mirror! Why would anyone knock on a mirror?”

“They would if it was an accident! See, I was playing flying crocodile when —”

“What’s flying crocodile?” I ask.

“An awesome new game I invented. I’m a pirate and I’m being chased by crocodiles, except my crocodiles can fly and —”

“Never mind,” I say, regretting I asked. “How did this lead you to the mirror?”

“Well, when I was being chased by one of the flying crocodiles —”

“One of the *imaginary* flying crocodiles.”

“— when I was being chased by one of the *imaginary* flying crocodiles, I tripped and smacked into the not-imaginary mirror. It sounded like a knock. I’ll do it again. Ready?”

Ready for what? I'm ready to get back into my toasty bed.
But to him I say, "Go ahead."

He lifts his fist and knocks.

We wait. Nothing happens.

"Nothing's happening," I tell him.

But then I hear a low hissing sound.

Sssssssssssssssssssss.

My whole body tenses. I do *not* like hissing. Especially hissing mirrors. "Um, Jonah?"

"See? Now check this out. Look what happens when I knock twice!"

He knocks again, and a warm light radiates from the mirror, too. A warm *purple* light.

"See?" Jonah says. "Purple! Told you!"

My mouth goes dry. What is going on? Why is the mirror in our basement turning colors? Mirrors should not change colors. I do not like mirrors that change colors!

"This is when I went to get you. But I want to see what happens if I knock again. Three's a charm, right?"

"Jonah, no!"

Too late. He's already knocking.

Our reflection in the mirror starts to shake.

I don't like shaking mirrors any more than I like purple hissing mirrors.

"What's it doing?" I whisper. My image is rippling like the surface of a lake. My insides are rippling, too. Have I mentioned that I want to be a judge because I like peace? And order? And not rippling, hissing, purple-turning mirrors?!

"It's alive!" Jonah squeals.

The ripples in the mirror spin in a circle, like a whirlpool.

"We should go," I say as tingles creep down my spine. "Like, *now*." I try to pull Jonah away, but I can't. Our images are churning around and around and around in the mirror like clothes in the dryer, and we're being dragged toward the mirror. Jonah's right foot slides forward. His sneaker squeaks against the concrete floor.

"It wants my foot," Jonah cries.

"Well, it can't have it!" I grab him tight. "You can't have it, you . . . you mirror-thing!" I crane my neck toward the basement stairs. "Mom! Dad!" I yell. But they are two floors up and I closed the basement door. Why did I close the basement door?

I snuck into a basement in the middle of the night and closed the door? What is wrong with me? I need backup! “Help!”

With my free hand I reach out and grasp the leg of the desk. My fingers burn, but I will absolutely not let go of my brother *or* the desk leg.

Whoosh! Suddenly, the whole world turns sideways. Jonah and I are horizontal. We wave in the air like human flags, which makes no sense. I don't *like* things that make no sense.

“Cool!” Jonah hollers. Is he smiling? He is! He's smiling. How could he be having fun at a time like this?

My brother's shoe disappears. Disappears right off his foot and goes into the mirror.

No! Impossible!

There's a really loud buzzing, and my brother's other shoe gets swallowed by the mirror, too.

Slurp.

My heart is racing, and I'm hot and cold at the same time, because that could not have just happened. None of this can be happening. And why weren't Jonah's shoes tied? Do I have to do everything myself?

My slippers are suddenly sucked off my feet.

So not my fault. You can't tie slippers.

A book flies off the bookshelf and into the mirror. And another. All my parents' law books go — *swoop* — right off the bookshelf and into the mirror, their pages flapping like the wings of overexcited birds.

The swivel chair scoots across the floor. *Slurp!*

My brother's hands are slipping. "Abby?" he says, and for the first time tonight, my brother — who isn't afraid of anything — sounds scared.

"Hold on!" I try to tighten my grip on his hand, but our palms are clammy. Pain shoots right from my fingers to my shoulders. I ignore it. I need to hold on. I *have* to hold on.

"Abby!"

"No!" I say, holding on even tighter. He flutters in the air. His eyes are wide and glowing purple.

"Jonah!" I scream. NO, NO, NO. I will NOT let the crazy mirror slurp up my brother. I'm in charge here! I will keep my brother safe!

I let go of the leg of the desk and grab him with both hands. With a satisfied grumble, the mirror sucks us both inside.