

How It Begins

If the whole thing really had been a TV show, like everyone kept pretending it was, there are a million places the first episode could have started.

Like, maybe a good place to start would have been back in June, when I came home toward the end of sixth grade, and Mom greeted me with three fateful words: *Caitlyn, we're moving*. Not *Would you like to...?* Or *What would you think if...?* Or *Would you ever consider...?* Not a question at all. By the time she brought the subject up, she'd already accepted her new job as director of the Mitchell Urgent Care Center, given notice at the hospital where she'd worked as a nurse practitioner since forever, and taken out a lease on a tiny house in Mitchell, Vermont.

Which is to say, the middle of absolutely nowhere.

But that's just one place where the show could start. There are other options. Like, on the drive here, when we passed the big green sign: WELCOME TO THE GREEN MOUNTAIN STATE. I saw nothing but trees and fields in all directions, and suddenly it hit me: *This is really happening*. I had to pretend to sleep, just so I could press my face into a rumpled old sweatshirt against the window and cry without Mom noticing. By the time I opened my eyes again, we were passing an abandoned factory, the words OXTHORPE TEXTILES, MITCHELL, VERMONT still faintly visible on the bricks.

Or maybe the show would begin the first time I pulled up in front of my new school. The sign said it was a school, anyway—THE MITCHELL SCHOOL,

K-7—but it sure didn't look like any school I'd ever seen. This place was more like a haunted mansion: a huge wooden house with broken shutters, peeling paint, and a tangle of weedy vines snaking up the exterior. Near the front door, there was a bell, like a miniature version of the Liberty Bell, with a sign that read, **THE GOOD DAY BELL: RING IF YOU HAD A GOOD DAY.**

I remember thinking, *The Good Day Bell. Stupidest thing I've ever seen in my life.*

It's strange how hard it is to choose just one beginning for this show. There are so many different ways to tell a single story. But I guess if I had to pick, I'd start the show a few minutes after I first saw that dumb Good Day Bell. I'd begin in a classroom that doesn't look like a classroom, inside a school that doesn't look like a school, in a town where I never expected to be living.

Let's pause in that classroom to look around. Chances are, it's not like any you've ever seen. There's an enormous marble fireplace and a gold-framed portrait of some old man. A cracked stained-glass window featuring a bunch of half-naked flying babies. An enormous chandelier dangling from a cracked ceiling above a heavy wooden table. And around that table: ten seventh graders, all frozen in place.

They're staring, those kids, their twenty eyes fixed on something in the doorway. Whatever it is they see there, they don't like it. Not one bit. Sorry, though. This show doesn't begin with cheers. This particular show begins only after the door opens all the way. That's when the room goes instantly, eerily silent.

Hi. I'm Caitlyn. I'm the New Kid here at Mitchell. And this, right here, is probably the most horrifying moment of my life.