

## CHAPTER 11

**Fifth grade started a few weeks ago, and a couple of cool things have happened. Well, I didn't get a gadget that makes Garfield-like speech bubbles over my head, but I did get an electric wheelchair, and our school began something called "inclusion classes." I thought that was funny. I've never been included in anything. But these classes are supposed to give kids like me a**

**chance to interact with what everybody else calls the “normal” students. What’s normal? Duh!**

Comparing my new chair to my old one is like comparing a Mercedes to a skateboard. The wheels are almost like car tires, which makes the ride smooth and easy, like riding on pillows. I can’t go very fast, but I can propel myself down the hall with just a little lever on the handrail. Or, if I flip the switch to manual, I can still be pushed if necessary.

When Freddy first saw it, he shouted, “Woo-hoo!” like I’d just won the Indy 500. “Melly go zoom zoom now! Wanna race?” He spun his own chair in excited circles around me.

I’m sure he could beat me, even at the subatomic speeds our chairs are set to.

My electric chair is a lot heavier than my manual chair, and it’s almost impossible for Mom and Dad to lift anywhere. “When you decide to switch to a rocket ship for transportation,” Dad joked at first, rubbing his back, “you’re gonna need to hire

Superman to get it in the car!”

I grinned. But I know he saw the thanks in my eyes.

So he bought a set of portable wheelchair ramps that fold and fit in the back of our SUV. With those, he can roll the new chair into the back of our car and still have back muscles left over.

For me, it’s all about the freedom. Now I don’t have to wait for somebody to move me across the room. I can just go there. Nice. So when they decided to start mainstreaming us into the regular classes, the electric chair was really helpful.

Our fifth-grade teacher in room H-5 reminds me of a television grandmother. Mrs. Shannon is pudgy, wears lavender body lotion every single day, and I think she must be from the South because she talks with a real strong drawl. Somehow it makes everything she says seem more interesting.

She told us on the first day, “I’m gonna bust a gut makin’ sure y’all get all you can out of this school year, you hear? We’re gonna read, and learn, and

grow. I believe every one of y'all got potential all stuffed inside, and together we're gonna try to make some of that stuff shine."

I liked her. She brought in stacks of new books to read to us, as well as games and music and videos. Unlike Mrs. Billups, Mrs. Shannon must have read all our records because she dusted off the headphones and even brought in more books on tape for me.

"Ya'll ready for music class?" she asked us one morning. "Let's get this inclusion stuff goin'!"

I jerked with excitement. As the aides helped us down the hall to the music room, I wondered if I'd get to sit next to a regular kid. What if I did something stupid? What if Willy yodeled, or Carl farted? Maria was likely to blurt out something crazy. Would this be our only chance? What if we messed this up? I could barely contain myself. We were going to be in a *regular* classroom!

The music teacher, Mrs. Lovelace, had been the first to volunteer to open her class to us. The music

room was huge—almost twice as large as our classroom. My hands got sweaty.

The kids in there were mostly fifth graders too. They'd probably be surprised to know that I knew all their names. I've watched them on the playground at lunch and at recess for years. My classmates sit under a tree and catch a breeze while they play kickball or tag, so I know who they are and how they work. I doubted if they knew any of *us* by name, though.

Well, the whole thing was almost a disaster. Willy, probably upset and scared about being in a new room, started yelping at the top of his lungs. Jill began to cry. She held tightly to the hand grips of her walker and refused to move past the doorway. I wanted to disappear.

All of the "normal" children in the music class—I guess about thirty of them—turned to stare. Some of them laughed. Others looked away. But one girl in the back row crossed her arms across her chest and scowled at her classmates who were acting up.

Two girls, Molly and Claire—everyone knew them because they were mean to almost everybody on the playground—mimicked Willy. They made sure they stayed just out of the teacher’s line of sight. But I saw it. So did Willy.

“Hey, Claire!” Molly said, twisting her arms above her head and bending her body so it looked crooked. “Look at me! I’m a retard!” She laughed so hard, she snorted snot.

Claire cracked up as well, then let spit dribble out of her mouth. “Duh buh wuh buh,” she said, crossing her eyes and pretending to slip out of her chair.

Mrs. Lovelace finally noticed them, because she said sternly, “Stand up please, Claire.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Claire replied.

“You stand as well, Molly,” Mrs. Lovelace added.

“We were just laughing,” Molly said defensively. But she stood up next to Claire.

Mrs. Lovelace took both girls’ chairs and slid them over to the wall.

“Why’d you do that?” Claire cried out in protest.

“You have perfectly good bodies and legs that work. Use them,” Mrs. Lovelace instructed.

“You can’t make us stand the whole class!” Claire moaned.

“The board of education requires that I teach you music. There is nothing in the rule book that requires you sit down while I do it. Now stand there and be quiet, or I’ll send you to the office for showing disrespect to our guests.”

They stood. In the middle of the third row of chairs, where everyone else was seated comfortably, they stood.

*This teacher is awesome!*

After that, things went more smoothly. Jill, who had continued to cry, had been taken back to our room by one of the aides. The rest of us sat quietly in the back of the room.

Mrs. Lovelace began class once more. “I think we need a moment to gather ourselves, children.” She sat down at her piano and began to play “Moon River,” and then she switched to the theme song

from one of those new vampire movies. Oh, yeah, she knew what we liked. When I started seeing the colors, I knew she was good. Forest green, lime green, emerald.

I glanced over at Gloria. Instead of sitting all curled up like she usually did, her arms were outstretched like she was trying to catch the music and bring it to her. Her face was almost glowing. She began to sway with the music.

Then Mrs. Lovelace completely changed tempo and played the opening notes to “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.” Willy clapped his hands wildly.

Finally, the teacher started to play “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy.” Dad would have loved it. Kids started to shimmy in their seats. Maria got up and started dancing! She clapped loudly, never quite on the beat, but to a rhythm that was all her own.

Mrs. Lovelace paused at the end of the song. “Music is powerful, my young friends,” she said. “It can connect us to memories. It can influence our mood and our responses to problems we might face.”

She cut her eyes at Claire and Molly, who still stood in the empty places where their chairs had been.

I wanted to tell Mrs. Lovelace I liked music too. I wanted to know if she’d ever heard the song “Elvira” or if she would teach us how to make our own music. I tried to raise my hand, but she didn’t notice me. It must have looked like just another one of those random movements that kids like me seem to make. But I had the feeling that Mrs. Lovelace was someone who’d take the time to figure me out.

The teacher went on. “Before I continue with the lesson, let’s make this a real inclusion experience. Perhaps our friends from room H-5 would like to sit with the rest of us instead of being stuck in the back.”

Freddy heard that and took his chance. He put his chair into gear and zoomed to the front of that big room and shouted, “I am Freddy. I like music. I go fast!”

The class laughed. I can tell the difference between people making fun of us and people being

nice to us. Freddy could too, so he joined in the laughter. Mrs. Lovelace looked momentarily startled, then went over to Freddy, shook his hand, and welcomed him to the class. She sat him right there in front, next to a boy named Rodney. Rodney gave Freddy a high five, and the two of them grinned at each other. Okay, I had to admit it—I was jealous.

Mrs. Lovelace asked an aide to bring Gloria down front close to the piano. A girl named Elizabeth glanced at Gloria nervously, but she didn't move away when Gloria was wheeled next to her.

Elizabeth's best friend is a girl named Jessica. At recess they sit together near the fence and share granola bars. I've always wondered what they whisper about. I also noticed that everything Elizabeth does, Jessica tries to outdo. Like, if Elizabeth beats her running to the fence, Jessica insists they run again so she can win too. Or if Elizabeth gets a new book bag, Jessica will have a new one the next day.

So when Elizabeth started talking to Gloria, who

looked terrified, Jessica raised her hand and asked if one of the H-5 kids could sit next to her.

Maria might have trouble figuring out some stuff, but she's a real friendly person. "I wanna sit by the blue-shirt girl. I wanna sit by the blue-shirt girl," she demanded. She stomped down to Jessica's seat and sat down next to her. Then she jumped back up and gave Jessica a hug, then gave a hug to the kids sitting closest to Jessica. One kid stiffened up when she touched him, but I was surprised that most of them let her hug them. Molly and Claire, since they were standing, had no choice.

"Ooh, yuck!" Claire whispered.

"Cooties!" Molly whispered back.

Mrs. Lovelace raised an eyebrow, then cleared her throat. "It seems you two like to stand. You'll continue to do so the rest of this week."

"Aw, man! This sucks!" I heard Claire say.

Molly had sense enough to say nothing.

Maria didn't notice. She even kissed Claire on the cheek. That was funny.

Willy ended up next to a large, friendly boy named Connor.

Ashley and Carl were absent that day, so that left me sitting in the back of the classroom by myself. The room got real quiet. I suddenly felt cold, like the air-conditioning had been cranked up real high. I got goose bumps.

The teacher looked around the room, expectation on her face, I guess hoping that somebody would volunteer to take me. At that moment I would have given anything to be back in our bluebird room instead of sitting there with thirty kids staring at me.

Finally, a girl got up out of her seat and walked over to my chair. She squatted down and looked me directly in the face. Then she smiled. It was the girl with the long hair who had frowned at her friends for laughing. "I'm Rose," she said, her voice soft.

I smiled back, and I tried really hard not to kick or grunt or make a noise that would scare her away. I held my breath and thought about calm, quiet things, like ocean waves. It worked. I inhaled deeply

and slowly, then pointed on my board to **Thank you**. Rose seemed to understand.

I showed her I could power my own chair, and I rolled to where she'd been sitting. We sat together for the rest of that class. And I didn't do a single embarrassing thing! It ended way too soon.

But ever since, every Wednesday, our little class of outcasts gets to join Mrs. Lovelace's music class. It's awesome!

Jill, Ashley, and Carl eventually became a part of the group. Each one of us has been assigned a "buddy" to sit next to and interact with.

Once they met her, all the girls rushed to be Ashley's buddy. I think it's like playing with a pretty little doll for them, but Ashley seems to like the attention.

Claire and Molly eventually got their chairs returned, but they haven't chosen to be buddies for anybody yet. That's fine with me.

Elizabeth and Jessica have stuck with Gloria and Maria. Jill sits contentedly next to a girl named Aster

Cheng. Rodney actually comes over at recess and talks to Freddy. Sometimes he pushes Freddy really fast in his chair. Freddy loves that.

And I get to sit with Rose every single Wednesday. On Tuesday, I can hardly sleep because I'm so excited. I make my mother pick out my nicest clothes on Wednesday morning—cool outfits like the other kids wear. I screech at her until she gets just the right combination. I make sure she brushes my teeth so my breath won't stink.

I think about Rose all the time. I worry that she will change her mind and not like me. But Rose talks to me like I understand, and she tries to figure out what I'm saying as well. One day I pointed to **new** and **shoes** and **nice** on my communication board, then down to her feet, to let her know that I had noticed she got new sneakers and that I liked them. At first she seemed surprised that I could do this. Especially since it sometimes takes me a long time to make my thoughts make sense using my board. One day I pointed to **music** and **bad** and **stinky**, then I

started laughing. Rose didn't get it at first. So I pointed to the words again, then pointed to Mrs. Lovelace, who was playing some kind of jazz music on the CD player. I'm like Mom—not a big jazz fan; it confuses me because it doesn't have a tune.

Rose finally figured it out and said, "Oh! You don't like jazz? Me neither!" We both laughed so hard, Mrs. Lovelace had to put her finger to her lips to tell us to hush. Never in my life have I had a teacher tell me to be quiet because I was talking to somebody in class! It was the best feeling in the world! I felt like the rest of the kids.

Rose tells me secrets sometimes. I know she bites her fingernails, and she hates milk. She goes to church every Sunday but falls asleep until it's over. Me too. She has a younger sister just like I do. She even likes country music. Sometimes she tells me about trips to the mall with her friends.

It would be so tight to be able to do that.



## CHAPTER 12

**By the end of October the inclusion program has been expanded. Maria and Jill have been added to art and gym classes, and Freddy and Willy go to science. Me— it's the first time I've ever gotten to change classes for different subjects in my life!**

Now when the bell rings, instead of wondering what's happening out there in the halls, I'm out there too. It's awesome. I plow through the crowds in my

electric chair like a power mower in thick grass.

Sometimes kids wave or say, “What’s up?” Every once in a while someone will even walk with me to the next class. Cool.

But “inclusion” doesn’t mean I’m included in *everything*. I usually sit in the back of the room, going crazy because I know answers to things and can’t tell anybody.

“What’s the definition of the word ‘dignity?’” one of my teachers asked a few days ago. Of course I knew, so I raised my hand, but the teacher didn’t notice the small movement I’m able to make. And even if she were to call on me, what then? I can’t very well yell out the answers. It’s really frustrating.

During parent conferences earlier this month, my parents came in to meet Mrs. Shannon and the other teachers. Instead of leaving me on my own in a corner somewhere, Mrs. Shannon pulled me into the circle of teachers who are involved in the inclusion program. She is so great!

She patted the arm of my chair and smiled. “This

child’s got some serious smarts! She’s going to be our star in this program.”

I did my usual screeching and kicking. I think I would have kissed her if I could, but that would have been pretty sloppy, I guess.

“Well, it’s about time somebody recognizes what we’ve always known,” my dad told Mrs. Shannon. “We really appreciate the opportunity to let her show what she can do.”

Mom was especially pleased to find out I’d been assigned a “mobility assistant”—an aide of my own.

“Finally!” Mom said, relief in her voice. “We’ve been asking for this for years.”

“Budget-bustin’ paperwork. A system that runs on grits instead of good sense. I’m so sorry,” Mrs. Shannon replied, shaking her head. “I’m trying to get all the students in H-5 the services they need. But I smacked an aide for Melody way up on top of my list, so we’ll see how it goes. I’m expecting a wonderful school year!”

**So cool**, I tapped on my board.

An aide! Wow. This person's job would be to take me to classes, sit with me, and help me participate. I wondered what she'd look like. Or maybe I'd get a guy. Would he be young and cute, or old and grumpy?

The very next day my new aide was at school before I was, chatting with Mrs. Shannon in room H-5 as we kids were wheeled in. She came right over to me and took my hand. "Hi, Melody. I'm glad to meet you. My name is Catherine. I go to the university, and I'm gonna be your deals and wheels every day."

She talked to me like I was just like any other student, not a kid in a wheelchair. I tried not to kick, but it was hard to hold in my excitement.

"Cute T-shirt," she said as she checked out Tweety Bird on the front of the new lavender top Mom had bought for me.

I pointed to **thanks** on my board.

"What's your favorite color?" she asked then.

I pointed to **purple**, but then quickly slid my

thumb over to **green**. I grinned at her.

"You're quick, Melody. I can see we both like weird colors. We're going to get along just fine." Catherine was dressed in purple tennis shoes, green tights, a purple suede skirt, and the ugliest green sweater I've ever seen.

I wanted to tease her about her outfit, but I didn't want her to think I was mean. After all, I'd just met her. I searched all over my board for a way to jokingly make fun of her clothes, but I couldn't think of a way to do it. So I gave up. It is *so* hard to say stuff.

So now it's Catherine who helps me at lunch so I don't make a mess. And Catherine who reads off the answers I point to on my board. She's added some more words and phrases to it. And she helped Mrs. Shannon order the books I need to read. She even makes sure the headphones don't fall off my ears.

The "regular" fifth-grade language arts teacher, Miss Gordon, is not much older than Catherine. She almost explodes with energy and makes books seem

like live-action plays. She jumps up on the table. Sometimes she sings. She lets the class act out parts of stories, and sometimes she even turns books into games.

“Vocabulary bingo!” Miss Gordon announced one morning. “Doughnuts to the winning team!”

As they played, my classmates broke their necks to get the right definition, screamed out answers, and groaned when they messed up. In just half an hour every student in the room knew all twenty vocabulary words. Miss Gordon gave doughnuts to the losing team, too, but the winners got the ones with the chocolate sprinkles.

I knew all of the definitions, but the other kids moved too fast for me. Chocolate would have made a mess of my clothes anyway.

One unusually warm day this week, Miss Gordon brought in fans and spray bottles of water and let us eat Popsicles in class. Orange ones, of course, in honor of Halloween, while she read poems about pumpkins and ghosts. Catherine held my Popsicle

for me with a paper towel under my chin. We didn’t spill one drop!

Miss Gordon does other cool things too. Like when she decided the class would read the story of Anne Frank, she had kids take turns squeezing into a small space she had built under a table so they could understand how Anne might have felt. I couldn’t do that, but I got the idea.

And she’s assigned other great books this semester. I’m reading —well, listening to—*Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor and *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. And there’s one called *Tuck Everlasting*—the kid never gets to grow up. Staying a child forever is not as cool as folks may think.

Because of Mrs. V, I could actually read the books. But the print is usually very small, and it’s hard for my eyes to stay on the right line. And nobody has figured out the best way for me to hold on to a book without it falling on the floor a million times, so I usually choose the audiobook instead of the written version.

I even take tests now! Catherine reads me the questions, and I point to the answers on the sheets she places on my tray. I pass every single test, and she doesn't help me one single bit. I would probably get 100 percent on each one, but some of the questions require long answers I just can't explain with the words on my board.

One time, in spelling, Miss Gordon read the words aloud, and I pointed to the letters on my board. Catherine wrote down what I pointed to so I could follow along with the test. Claire and Molly, who are always watching me, it feels like, began to complain.

"It's not fair!" Claire cried, waving her hand to get Miss Gordon's attention.

"Catherine cheats for her!" Molly added.

What *is* it with those two? It's like they're jealous of me or something. And that's just plain crazy.

At the same time, I realized that they actually thought I had it easier! That sure was a first.

Last Monday morning Miss Gordon told the

class, "As some of you may know, because I do this every year, our long-range fifth-grade project this year is our biography unit. We will read the biographies of famous people, do a report on a famous person of your choosing, and each of you will also write your own autobiography."

"Well, it's gotta be short. What can you do in eleven years?" Connor, the big kid, shouted out. Everybody laughed.

"In your case, Connor," Miss Gordon replied, "I'm sure you'll think of way too much."

"Can I do my report on the guy who invented hamburgers?" Connor asked to more laughter.

"I doubt if we know who made the first burger, but you *can* do your report on the person who founded McDonald's. He got rich off hamburgers and fries."

"Awesome. My kind of dude," Connor said.

Rose raised her hand. I love the fact that she's in all my inclusion classes. "Miss Gordon, when is all this due?"

Rose is the type of student who takes all kinds of notes in a bright red spiral planner and never misses a homework assignment.

“Relax, Rose. We’ve got until the end of May, and I’ll walk you through each segment, one step at a time. Tomorrow we’ll talk about how to write your memories.”

Rose seemed satisfied, but I noticed she scribbled almost a whole page in her notebook. I’d give anything to do that. But working on stuff the teachers in the regular classes assign is just plain awesome.

History class is even better than language arts class, even though the teacher, a man named Mr. Dimming, has none of Miss Gordon’s spark. Balding and pudgy, he’s been teaching at the school for over twenty years, and kids say he’s never been absent—not even once. Clearly, he loves what he does. His car is always in the parking lot when our bus rolls in and always there when we leave for the day. He dresses like a TV preacher—in three-piece suits with vests

most days. I’ve never seen him without a crisp white shirt and a colorful tie. I wonder if his wife picks them out—some of them are really sharp.

Mr. D loves history. He can quote facts and dates and wars and generals like somebody on a game show. I bet he could win on *Jeopardy*.

The other students don’t seem to like Mr. Dimming much. They call him “Dimwit Dimming” behind his back. I think that’s sorta mean because Mr. D is really smart—smart enough to run the quiz team.

When Mr. Dimming got to American presidents in class, I rocked! He gave the students a list of presidents and all their vice presidents and told us there would be a test in a week. Catherine read the names to me several times.

“I’ve never even heard of some of these men,” she admitted to me as we went over the list the first time. “Hannibal Hamlin was Abraham Lincoln’s first vice president. Who knew?”

I memorized them all.

When Mr. Dimming gave the test, all I had to do was point to the right answers. He checked to make sure that Catherine wasn't helping me. I even finished before some of the others.

While Mr. D was returning the test papers, he gave the class a few minutes of free time to sharpen pencils or stretch or talk. I was surprised to see Rose walking toward my desk.

"How did you do on the test, Melody?" she asked. "I only got a seventy-five." She looked disappointed.

I'd gotten an eighty-five, but I was so excited that she'd come over to me that I got all mixed up. So I pointed to **5** and then **8** on my board.

She touched my arm, her eyes full of sympathy. "Don't worry," she said. "You'll do better next time."

And she did this right in front of Molly and Claire and the rest of the class. There was no way I was going to tell her what I really got on the test.

I tried to think of something to say so she'd stay longer. **Pretty** and **shirt** was all I could come up with using my lame board. I sure could use a word choice

that said *Cool outfit*, but somehow Mrs. V had overlooked that one.

But Rose beamed. "You look nice today too!"

I really didn't. I had on a faded blue sweatshirt and matching sweatpants. Mom hardly got me anything else these days. But I *hate* sweat suits. If I could choose, I'd wear blue jeans with sparkly decals, a blouse with decorated buttons, and a vest!

But I had no way to tell Rose that, so I just pointed to **thank you**. Incredibly, she touched my arm one more time, then she went back to her seat and her friends.

Then the bell rang, class was over, and I had to go back to H-5. No more inclusion, no more Rose. And four more hours of school left. Even Catherine left. She had afternoon classes at the university and hurried to get there on time.

Mrs. Shannon was out sick that day, so I sat quietly with Ashley and Maria and Carl and Willy while we watched *The Lion King*—again. I've seen it a million times—I can quote it. Then the substitute

teacher gave us a math lesson. Addition—again.  
When am I ever gonna get to long division?

I wondered what Rose was doing. It was a very long afternoon.

## CHAPTER 13

### **“Penny! Nooooo!” Mrs. V calls out.**

Dragging Doodle behind her, Penny has scooted out of Mrs. V’s front door and is halfway down the ramp from her porch, shouting, “Bye-bye!” from under her green baseball cap. Butterscotch, at home in our backyard, would be having a doggie fit if she could see Penny trying to bolt.

It’s one of those early November days that an artist would love. Red-bronze leaves. Bright gold sunlight. Leftover summer. I don’t blame Penny for



trying to bolt.

Mrs. V scoops her up and brings her back in the house.

“Goin’ work.” Penny pouts.

“Not today, honey buns,” Mrs. V says firmly as she locks the front door.

Penny loves wearing hats and playing dress-up. Mom rarely buys fancy church-lady hats for herself, but for Penny, she’ll sometimes pick out a crazy-looking straw hat with bows and ribbons and bring it home.

At home Penny spends a crazy amount of time in front of the hall mirror with a couple of Mom’s plastic necklaces hanging down almost to her shoes, a purse on each arm, and a hat tilted sideways on her head. “Gotta go work,” she’ll say, with one hand on her hip.

“Who has she ever seen dressed like that going to work?” Mom asks as we all crack up.

“She’s only two! I’m not going to be able to afford the kid when she’s old enough to go shopping on her

own,” Dad always says. He snaps every cute pose she makes with his cell phone camera.

When Mrs. V sets Penny back down, Penny pokes her lips out, throws Doodle on the floor, and wraps both her arms around her chest. I laugh. I wish I had enough coordination to have “attitude”!

“Here, Penny, why don’t you just sit down and draw me a picture instead,” Mrs. V says, whipping out a box of crayons.

Attitude forgotten, Penny grabs a handful and promptly begins to scribble all over the coloring book, as well as Mrs. V’s table.

I wish I could use crayons. I’d draw a rose, with a velvety red bloom and a green stem and yellow-green leaves coming from it. I can see it so clearly in my mind, but, of course, when I put a pencil or crayon in my stupid-tight little fingers, all I can manage are squiggly lines. Nothing that looks even close to a rose.

I want to draw it for Rose. She has rose designs on her notebooks and book bag. I don’t know where her

trying to bolt.

Mrs. V scoops her up and brings her back in the house.

“Goin’ work.” Penny pouts.

“Not today, honey buns,” Mrs. V says firmly as she locks the front door.

Penny loves wearing hats and playing dress-up. Mom rarely buys fancy church-lady hats for herself, but for Penny, she’ll sometimes pick out a crazy-looking straw hat with bows and ribbons and bring it home.

At home Penny spends a crazy amount of time in front of the hall mirror with a couple of Mom’s plastic necklaces hanging down almost to her shoes, a purse on each arm, and a hat tilted sideways on her head. “Gotta go work,” she’ll say, with one hand on her hip.

“Who has she ever seen dressed like that going to work?” Mom asks as we all crack up.

“She’s only two! I’m not going to be able to afford the kid when she’s old enough to go shopping on her

own,” Dad always says. He snaps every cute pose she makes with his cell phone camera.

When Mrs. V sets Penny back down, Penny pokes her lips out, throws Doodle on the floor, and wraps both her arms around her chest. I laugh. I wish I had enough coordination to have “attitude”!

“Here, Penny, why don’t you just sit down and draw me a picture instead,” Mrs. V says, whipping out a box of crayons.

Attitude forgotten, Penny grabs a handful and promptly begins to scribble all over the coloring book, as well as Mrs. V’s table.

I wish I could use crayons. I’d draw a rose, with a velvety red bloom and a green stem and yellow-green leaves coming from it. I can see it so clearly in my mind, but, of course, when I put a pencil or crayon in my stupid-tight little fingers, all I can manage are squiggly lines. Nothing that looks even close to a rose.

I want to draw it for Rose. She has rose designs on her notebooks and book bag. I don’t know where her

mother finds such cool stuff. Rose's name really fits her—she's pretty and delicate and nice to be around. If she has thorns like real roses do, I've never noticed.

While Penny is busy with her crayons, Mrs. V checks her mail. She opens several envelopes, then gasps with surprise. "Guess what, girls?" she exclaims. "I've won a contest!"

I look at her with interest. Penny continues to scribble, ignoring both of us.

"I entered an essay contest at the bookstore in the mall," she explains to me. "The topic was why fish are important in our world ecology."

I point to **food** on my board and smirk.

"No, silly." She reaches over and tickles me. "I wrote something about oceans and the balance of nature—I don't honestly remember what I said—but I won first prize: a trip for six to the new downtown aquarium. All expenses paid. Stupendous!"

I've seen the commercials on television for the aquarium—it's supposed to have sharks and turtles

and penguins and a million other sea animals. **Go?** I ask by pointing on my board.

"Well, besides me, I don't know who else to take," she says, scratching her head and grinning.

I kick my foot straps loose. *Me! Me!* I want to scream. Instead, I point to myself.

"Hmmm. Who could I take?" Mrs. V teases, looking around the kitchen. I can tell she's trying hard not to laugh.

*Me! Me!* I jab.

"Well, of course I'll take you, Mello Yello," Mrs. V says, smiling. "Just think of all the new words we'll gather. I'm going to write down the names of every single fish for you to learn!"

I slap my head, pretending to be upset.

"So, if I take you and Penny, your mom and dad, and me, that's five. I wonder who else we could take?" She scrunches up her face, thinking.

I know immediately. Rose could go with us! I spell out her name. **R-O-S-E**. And again. **R-O-S-E**. Then I hit **Please**.

“Hmmm. Your friend Rose from school?” I buck and kick with excitement. “I think that’s a great idea, Melody. I’ll ask your parents and her parents, and if she’s willing, we’ll have a wonderful day.”

I can’t stop kicking my feet!

It takes several weeks before both Mom and Dad are off work on a Saturday, but Thanksgiving weekend ends up working out for everybody. I have trouble sleeping the night before. Rose’s parents seem really nice from what I could tell from listening to Mom’s end of the conversation. I couldn’t believe Rose wanted to come! She wanted to come with me, the kid in the chair!

At school Rose whispered with me about the trip, just like I’d seen other kids do when they have secrets. I felt like a real girl.

Now that the Saturday is finally here, we all pile into our SUV early in the morning. Even though the weather has turned pretty chilly, I made sure Mom put a really nice outfit on me—cute jeans and no sweats. Rose hasn’t said anything about what I’m

wearing, but she keeps cooing over Penny.

“Your sister is adorable, Melody!” Rose says. I smile and nod.

Penny reaches out her chubby little hands and claps. “Wo-sie,” she says.

“I think she said my name!” Rose exclaims. “Your sister is not only cute, she’s a genius!”

As we drive, Rose chatters with my parents and Mrs. V like she’s known them all her life. I watch it all silently, thinking this has to be the best day of my life.

When we get to the aquarium, Dad unloads my chair and eases me into it while Mom gets Penny’s stroller out and straps her in. Rose pushes Penny as Mom pushes me, so we can be side by side.

The place is crowded—I guess because it’s a holiday weekend. Nobody pays any attention to me, which is perfect. I can almost forget who I am.

Inside, fish tanks go from floor to ceiling. I think of Ollie. He might have been happy here. In one tank sharks swim overhead, just like we’re actually

looking up from the ocean floor. Okay, so Ollie might not have been so happy in *that* tank.

I've never seen so many fish—from all over the world, it seems. Fish with spikes and spots. Fish with markings so beautiful, they look painted.

Penny slaps at the glass whenever a fish comes close. "Fishies! More fishies!" Mrs. V, as promised, writes down names of species and takes pictures so I can remember when we get back home. Mom and Dad whisper together like teenagers. I've never seen them so relaxed.

We stop in front of every tank. I love the jellyfish, which remind me of streams of shiny cloth, and the lion-fish, which really do look a little like swimming lions. At the sea horse tank Rose observes that their heads point backward! She seems to be having a great time.

Then, from around the corner, come the two people I'd least want to run into: Molly and Claire. They are with a Girl Scout troop. They're fake bumping into each other, not paying much attention

to their group leader, who is telling them about the percentage of salt found in ocean water.

Molly and Claire, dressed exactly alike in jeans, long-sleeved T-shirts, and Scout vests, look at Rose with surprise.

"Hey, Rose! You here with your mom?" Claire asks.

"Uh, no," Rose says evasively, walking away from us and toward them.

"Your dad?" Molly says, looking at me like I smell bad. And she's acting like my parents are invisible.

"I'm here with Melody and her family," Rose mumbles.

"On purpose?" Claire shrieks. Both she and Molly start laughing loudly.

"It's not so bad," Rose says quietly. But I heard her.

Mom starts to say something to the girls, but Dad takes her arm. "They're children," he tells her. "Let them work it out themselves."

Mom has those daggers in her eyes—the sharp points she shoots at people who say dumb things

about me—but she stays quiet. Her fists are balled.

Mrs. V, however, isn't going to let anybody stop her. From her almost-six-foot height, she towers over Molly and Claire. "You! Girl with braces on her teeth!" Claire looks up at her, stunned.

"Yes, ma'am?" Claire has sense enough to say.

"Why do you think your parents spent good money getting you braces?"

"Huh?" Claire looks confused. Molly has quietly disappeared into her Scout troop.

"Your teeth were imperfect, so your parents got you braces. One day you'll thank them when you get a date for the prom," Mrs. V roars. The whole Scout troop, plus a few other visitors to the aquarium, stop to listen to her.

"What do my teeth have to do with anything?" Claire asks, looking around nervously.

"Some people get braces on their teeth. Some get braces on their legs. For others, braces won't work, so they need wheelchairs and walkers and such. You're a lucky girl that you only had messed-up

teeth. Remember that."

"Yes, ma'am," Claire says again. Then she scurries off to join her friends.

Rose walks back to us then, a little embarrassed, I think. "Claire can be clueless," she whispers to me.

*You think?*

After a few more tanks Penny gets tired and starts to whine, so we leave the aquarium before we even get to see the penguins. We take Rose home and she thanks us properly and says she had a real good time.

But did she?

## CHAPTER 14

**The Monday following Thanksgiving break, Catherine and I roll into Miss Gordon's language arts class a few minutes before the bell. It doesn't look like I'll ever find out what Rose really thought about the trip to the aquarium because she clearly has more exciting things on her mind.**

Everyone is huddled around her desk.

"Awesome!"

“I love the color—I didn’t know they come in lime green!”

“Oh, man, that’s what’s up!”

“How many songs have you downloaded so far?”

“What’s your new e-mail address?”

“You got IM?”

“Videos! That’s so tight!”

“I wish my mom would get me a laptop like that.”

I roll closer. Rose is showing off a brand-new laptop computer.

“I can get on the Internet and find stuff for school and type up all my homework,” she’s telling the group around her. “I’ve already uploaded pictures of my dog, and I’ve got my own MySpace page!”

I just shake my head as Catherine takes me back to my usual place in the back of the room. A laptop. I’m still pointing to words and phrases that Mrs. V and my mother have taped to a board that’s strapped to my wheelchair, and Rose has the Internet—I guess that means the whole universe—at her fingertips.

I close my eyes, trying not to cry, dreaming of the

perfect Melody-made computer. First of all, it would talk! Oh, yes. People would have to tell me to shut up! And it would have room to store *all* my words, not just the most common ones that have gotten pasted on my dumb plastic board.

It would have big keys, so my thumbs could push the right buttons, and it would connect to my wheelchair. It would not have to be lime green.

I open my eyes with a start. Such a thing *has* to exist, right? Or something like it? Maybe?

I grab Catherine’s arm and point to Rose’s computer. **Me too**, I punch on my board. I do it several times.

“You want a computer like Rose’s?” Catherine glances over at Rose’s laptop. “It really is nice. Even I don’t have one as cool as hers.”

**No**, I point.

“Wait, you don’t want a computer?” Catherine sounds confused.

I have learned to be patient with people. Once again I point to Rose’s computer and then to the



words **me too**. I search all over my communication board, and the words *better*, *nicer*, and *cooler* just aren't there. So I point to **good**, then go to the alphabet strip and then jab at the letters E and R. **Good-er**. I sound like a doofus.

"Oh!" Catherine says finally. "You want a better computer than Rose's?"

**Yes!** I pound on the board. Then I point to **for** and **me**.

"I get it!" Catherine cried. "You want something specially designed for you! That's just plain brilliant, Melody!"

I spell out **D-U-H**, and we laugh.

Miss Gordon starts class then, reminding everyone about due dates for the biography project.

"Tomorrow," she announces, "class will meet in the media center so that you can make final choices about the person you will write about. And next week we will begin making outlines of your life stories. Any questions?"

Connor, always the class clown, raises his hand. "I

found out the guy who invented the flush toilet was named Thomas Crapper. Can I do my report on him?"

Kids crack up. Rodney laughs so hard, his whole face turned red.

Miss Gordon shushes Rodney and the others. "Sorry, Connor. I get this request every year. The flush toilet was invented in 1596 by John Harrington. No funny name. Do you still want to research him?"

Connor looks deflated. "Nah, I guess I'll stay with the folks who started McDonald's. If I've got to spend a lot of time looking up stuff, burgers are better than toilets."

Rodney tries to bust out laughing again, but Miss Gordon silences him with a look.

"Who will you choose to write about?" Catherine asks me as Miss Gordon walks around the class talking to students about their projects.

I think for only a minute. **S-T-E-P-H-E-N H-A-W-K-I-N-G**, I spell out.

I want to know how he does ordinary stuff, like

eating and drinking. After all, he's a grown man. Does his wife put him on the toilet? He has kids. How does he manage to be a dad?

And I want to know about his talking devices, the supercool computers that help him talk and do really hard math problems, like finding black holes in space.

I tap out the question for Catherine: **Computer for me?**

"I have no idea!" she replies. "Let's check it out."

## CHAPTER 15

**The next morning we get the first snowfall of the season. Big, fat flakes fall outside the windows of room H-5.**

Freddy zooms over and touches the window. "Nice," he says.

Mrs. Shannon rolls all of us closer so we can watch the snow accumulate on the grass and trees. It's really pretty. Even Jill seems to relax.

"We gonna play in the snow?" asks Maria.

"No, Maria. It's too cold to play outside, but guess

what? It's gettin' close to Christmas!"

Maria cheers.

"I've heard it's some sort of a tradition round here to decorate this old Styrofoam snowman," Mrs. Shannon continues. She makes a face as she pulls Sydney's head out of his box.

Maria starts to hug it, but Mrs. Shannon stops her and says, "I believe in the smell of fresh pine trees at holiday time, and real candy canes, and popcorn garland. Tomorrow I'm bringing in a real tree and we're going to make it beautiful!"

Freddy and Carl slap palms. Maria looks disappointed for a moment, but she seems to forget about the snowman as Mrs. Shannon gives everyone a soft piece of chocolate candy. She wisely stuffs Sydney back into his box.

While Mrs. Shannon shows the rest of the class how to make paper snowflakes, Catherine and I sit together in front of the one clunky classroom computer and do Web searches on communication devices. It's soooo slow. Sometimes it gets jammed

up and stalls, and we have to reboot it and start all over. Room H-5 always gets the big old leftover computers that the other classrooms no longer want.

Catherine and I research all kinds of electronic talking and communication devices that have been designed for people like me. Lots of them seem as clunky and awkward as our room computer. Some look really complicated. All of them are expensive. Crazy expensive. Some of the websites don't even list the prices—like they're afraid to specify how much the things cost.

The devices that use standard computer keyboards wouldn't work. I'd have no way to hit the individual keys. I need something that would work with just my thumbs.

We find adapted computers, talking boards that speak the words, push-button systems, and even devices that work with blinks or head nods. Finally, we find something called a Medi-Talker that looks like a possibility. It has spaces big enough for my thumbs to get into and millions of words and

phrases built into it!

I watch an online video of a boy about my age using one, and even though he clearly has no voice of his own, this little box lets him tell all the details of his recent birthday party! I get so excited that my legs start kicking and my arms start flailing and I look like some kind of crazy human helicopter.

Catherine prints out the information and tucks it into the book bag that is attached to the back of my chair. “Good luck, Melody!” she whispers as she leaves for the day.

When I get off the bus after school, Mrs. V is waiting for me as usual. I almost twist out of my seat trying to point to my bag to let her know I have something important in it.

“Hold your horses!” Mrs. V says. “Since when are you excited to do homework? What’s got you all in a tizzy today?”

I just grin and kick. After my snack of caramel candy (first) and tuna melt (last), and after Penny, who has just gotten up from her nap, eats her

applesauce, Mrs. V *finally* pulls the papers out of my bag.

“Well, this is *exactly* what you need,” Mrs. V says, slapping the printouts onto the table after reading them. “No wonder you’re all fired up.”

**Yes! Yes! Yes!** I point. Then I point to the individual words: **Talk. To. Mom. And. Dad. Talk. Talk. Talk.**

“I’ll do just that, just as soon as they get home from work, Melody,” Mrs. V promises.

I can hardly wait. While Penny watches Cookie Monster gobble carrots instead of cookies on *Sesame Street*, I dream of talking, talking, talking.

When Mom picks us up, Mrs. V, true to her word, not only shows Mom the printouts, but even has her computer already set to the Web page where the Medi-Talker is advertised and sold. Penny sits on Mom’s lap and keeps pushing computer keys, messing up the display, which is getting on my nerves. But Mom watches the video that shows people actually talking and cracking jokes and even

going to college by using that machine.

Mrs. V explains to Mom how this is exactly right for me, and Mom, instead of being practical and sensible and thrifty like she usually is, seems to agree.

“Looks like insurance will cover about half the cost,” she muses as she navigates the website. “Let me talk to Chuck. This is long overdue.”

**Tonight?** I ask from my board.

“Yep! Tonight!” Mom says, giving me a squeeze.

But nothing happens right away in my world. Mom fills out the online application for the machine the next day and sends it in. I wait.

Then we have to ask my doctor to fax in a prescription. I’ve heard of prescriptions for antibiotics, but for machines? That seems crazy. Who’d ever want this machine unless they needed it? I wait.

Next, we have to get approval from our insurance company. More paperwork and phone calls, more questions and answers. I wait.

A parental financial statement has to be turned in. You gotta be kidding! Why do they make it so complicated? I wait.

The medical form was missing one signature and has to be resubmitted. I wait.

One last approval form from a school official has to be turned in. I wait.

I realize I’ve been waiting for this thing all my life.

Finally, finally, finally, on the Wednesday before Christmas, the Medi-Talker arrives. I need no other gift.

When I get home from school, Mrs. V tells me that she hurried to my house when she saw the UPS truck pulling up in our driveway. She signed for the package and brought it to her house for safekeeping. The huge brown box sits there taped and secure. And it is addressed to *me!*

I wiggle and squeal and insist we open it right away. I can feel one of my tornadoes coming on. *Spastic City, here I come!*

“Calm down, Mello Yello,” Mrs. V says, placing a

hand on my shoulder, but I can't relax.

**Open! Open! Open!** I tap.

"Well, your mom knew you'd be impatient," Mrs. V says, "so when I called her to say it arrived, she told me it was okay for us to open it."

I feel like I'm going to have a heart attack watching Mrs. V carefully open the edges of the box. She lets me pull at the brown paper inside. Then, under about a mile of bubble wrap, there it is. The Medi-Talker. Smaller than I expected, it's only the size of my wheelchair tray, but it's sleek and shiny and cool to the touch. It is like a butterfly ready to unfold its wings.

Boy, oh, boy. I can't wait to try it.

Mrs. V plugs it into a wall outlet to charge the battery, then pulls out the *huge* booklet of directions. "Whew!" she says. "This will take a year to read and understand." She flops down in a soft easy chair with Penny on her lap and begins to read.

And I begin to wait. And wait. And wait. Finally, when I just know I'm going to explode, I wheel over

to the table where the Medi-Talker sits.

I've seen the kids at school play video games they've never seen before, and I've seen them program their phones and computers without touching a book of instructions. So I take my right thumb and push the on button. The board whirs and glows, and then a welcome message appears on the screen.

I push another button, and a voice that sounds like an Englishman with a really bad head cold blurts out, "**Welcome to Medi-Talker!**"

Mrs. V jumps up from the couch. I shriek with joy. "It looks like you're way ahead of me, Melody. Not that I'm surprised." She sets Penny down. "Now let's see what this machine can do!"

I feel like Christopher Columbus bumping into America. It had been there all the time, but he was the first one from his world to find it. I wonder if his heart had beat as fast as mine is.

We quickly discover that the Medi-Talker has more than a dozen levels, all easily reached with just

one button. So on level one we program in the names of everyone I know—my name, all the members of my family, kids and teachers at school, my doctors, the neighbors, my parents' friends, and, of course, Mrs. V. On the second level she insists we add all the vocabulary words we've been collecting on our multicolored three-by-five-inch flash cards.

Type, save. Type, save. Mrs. V's fingers fly as she keeps adding words for me. Lots of our vocabulary words are already in the machine's memory, but she gives me more. More. More.

Nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives—thousands of them—as well as a cool sentence-maker that is located on another level. We can prepare hundreds of phrases and sentences and get to them with just a touch.

*Have you heard their latest song?*

*That's what's up!*

*How did you do on the spelling test?*

Ordinary words. Normal conversation. I've never had that. Awesome.

Another level is for numbers and even computation—I'll be able to do math now. Maybe I won't tell the teachers about that one.

And there's a level full of corny jokes and silly sayings, with room left for us to add more. Another level plays music! I can connect the device to a computer and download any song I want. I can't wait to search iTunes. Maybe I can ask Rose which songs are hot.

Rose! I can actually talk to Rose now!

We stop programming after a while. Penny needs to be changed and kept occupied. But I'm much too excited to rest.

So after Mrs. V gets Penny set up with her dollhouse at the foot of the couch, we add even more words and phrases. Finally, she stops typing and says, "Would you like to try it out?"

The room is absolutely quiet. I stroke the edge of the machine softly, then push two buttons.

**"Thanks, Mrs. V,"** the computer's voice says.

She blinks real fast. I do too. She reaches for a

tissue. We both need it.

Mrs. V tucks the tissue into her pocket, then begins reading again from the instruction manual. “Hey, listen to this!” she says. “With that connector cord, you can also save longer things you want to write—like stories or poems—on the computer!”

“**Wow,**” the machine says.

Mrs. V nods in agreement. “This is going to be fun. But you’re gonna need lots of practice to make it say what you want, kid.”

She’s right.

Many levels have been left blank for users to input their own information—words, sentences, phone numbers, even pictures. Information can be typed directly into the machine, or it can be downloaded from a computer. It’s a little overwhelming.

“We can design this to fit *you*, Melody,” Mrs. V tells me. “This will be *your* world, so let’s take our time and make it exactly what you need.”

I am so happy—I almost feel like hugging the machine, but that would look silly. Instead, I name it.

That’s probably pretty dumb, but sometimes it’s good to have something that nobody else knows but you. I’m not going to type the name into the machine, because it’s personal, but in my mind I’m going to call the Medi-Talker “Elvira,” after that song I like. Yep, my heart’s on fire for Elvira!

While Mrs. V plays with Penny for a while, I continue to explore what Elvira can do. One of the first changes I want to make is the hello message and the voice that speaks it. The computer-produced greeting sounds really fake. But the machine offers several female voices to choose from, as well as a bunch of different languages.

I pick the voice called “Trish.” She actually sounds like a girl, not a grown-up. I wouldn’t mind sounding like her if I could talk.

“**Bienvenue,**” Trish says in French. I know that means “welcome.” I push the button for German and she says, “**Willkommen.**” I even find something that sounds like “**Foon ying**” when I touch the button for Chinese.



I stop for a minute and stare at the board. It has never occurred to me that there are kids like me in Germany and China and France who need a machine to help them talk.

Mrs. V returns to me and helps me change the original welcome message from the very mechanical-sounding “Welcome to Medi-Talker” to Trish’s voice saying, “Hi! I’m Melody. Talk to me!” I can’t wait to take it to school and introduce *my* new computer to everybody there. I wonder what Rose will say.

By now both Mom and Dad have called to check on how we’re doing, how much progress we’ve made. They’re both anxious to get here and see the device for themselves, so while we wait, Mrs. V suggests that we just keep programming it, adding more and more. She thinks I should practice using it for a couple of weeks before taking it to school. I don’t really want to wait, but I have to agree with her that this is going to take some time. I want to be able to use the system to talk like ordinary kids. Sort of.

So we return to words—I want to input thousands of them: *Notebook. Marker. Homework. Assignment. Test. Positive. Negative. Fingernail. Nail polish. Outfit. Backpack. Purse. Scared. Excited. Purple.*

Then we type in more phrases—hundreds of them: *to the mall, from a distance, in the middle of, as a result, the reason why.*

Lastly, we get to some sentences—dozens of them: *What time is it? What’s up with that? You crack me up. I’m so excited.*—before the doorbell rings.

When Dad and Mom come in to pick us up, Dad is ready with his camcorder. His hands are shaking a little. “Show us how it works, honey,” he says.

I can’t believe Dad is making a video of me saying my first words. It’s almost like when he filmed Penny’s first words—well, not really.

I type very carefully and push the button to make the machine speak.

**“Hi, Dad. Hi, Mom. I am so happy.”**

Mom gets all teary-eyed, and her nose gets red.

She is looking at me all soft and gooey.

When I think about it, I realize I have never, ever said any words directly to my parents. So I push a couple of buttons, and the machine speaks the words I've never been able to say.

**“I love you.”**

Mom completely loses it. She bubbles up with tears and grabs Dad. I think he might be sniffing back a couple of tears himself.

But he has recorded it all.