

## CHAPTER 16

**I wait until after the holiday break to take the machine into school. I have practiced with Mrs. V every single day of Christmas vacation. Learning how to push the right buttons, how to switch smoothly from one level to another, how to make contractions. I had to figure out how to say *isn't* instead of *is not*, or *there's* instead of *there is*. It was hard. I kept messing up, but Mrs. V wouldn't let**

**me quit. I didn't want to.**

So on that first Monday back, Elvira is the star of the day, making me the center of attention. And not because of something embarrassing I did, like throwing up or spilling my food, but for something really cool instead. Unbelievable!

Even the teachers seem impressed. "Watch out, world!" Mrs. Shannon announces when she sees me in the hallway. "Melody is ready to rock, y'all!"

I grin, push a button, and a song from the latest teen musical begins to play.

"Girl, you really got it goin' on! Music and everything!" Mrs. Shannon starts sashaying down the hall in rhythm to my music. I crack up.

In room H-5, Maria is glued to me all morning. "Cool beans, Melly-Belly," she keeps repeating. "Cool beans. Can I play?" She wants to touch the glowing lights and shiny buttons, but Mrs. Shannon steps in and distracts her with a new computer game she's loaded on the classroom machine.

When Catherine comes in, just before the bell for

language arts class, I'm ready for her. She's wearing a green plaid shirt, a blue skirt, and orange knee socks. I planned the first thing I wanted to say to her, so Mrs. V and I had programmed it in ahead of time. I push a button and smile. "**Let's go shopping.**"

Catherine gasps, then laughs so hard, she almost can't catch her breath. Then she runs over to me and hugs me. "I'm so happy for you, Melody! You really needed this! And, yes, we're gonna have to find a day so you can teach me some fashion sense!"

"**We need hurry,**" I type in. I am in a great mood.

"You're a coldhearted woman!" Catherine declares, still laughing. "But for now, let's get you to your inclusion classes and show off this cool new machine!"

I shiver with excitement. When I roll into Miss Gordon's room, as usual, nobody looks up, except for Rose, who flashes me a smile.

But then I turn the volume up real loud and I push a button: "**Hi, everybody. I have a new computer.**"

Heads turn and voices whisper.

“They make computers for the special eddies?”

“It talks? Mine doesn’t do that.”

“You don’t *need* yours to talk!”

“It sounds weird.”

“So do you.”

“What could she possibly have to say, anyway?”

But Connor jumps up, his shaggy blond hair flopping into his eyes, and says loudly, “That’s awesome, Melody!”

And because he’s one of the popular kids, and probably the biggest and tallest kid in the fifth grade, I think because he gives his okay, the rest of the students decide to leave it alone.

Well, most of them. Claire, who was the first in the class to get her own laptop and who makes sure everybody knows it when she gets a new iPhone or a Wii game, sniffs and says, “That sure is a funny-looking computer! But I guess it’s perfect for a kid like you.” She and Molly exchange looks. I swear they think I am blind.

Miss Gordon, who looks like she wants to squeeze Claire like an empty toothpaste tube, tells her, “Claire, I don’t allow rudeness in my classroom. Now sit down and hush!”

But even Claire can’t dim my good mood. I push another button for a sentence Mrs. V and I prepared ahead of time. Somehow I knew I would need it! The machine says, “**I talk to everybody now—Claire, too!**”

I see her scowl, but everyone else laughs. They all want to touch the machine or push a button or try to operate it, but Catherine keeps them away and lets me do all the demonstrating.

I go to the green level—the jokes. “**Knock, knock!**”

“Who’s there?” several people reply together.

“**Isabel,**” the Medi-Talker says.

“Isabel who?” the kids surrounding me reply.

“**Isabel out of order? I had to knock!**”

Everybody laughs at the silly joke with me. Even though my arms and legs flail out and I drool a little

as I laugh, it is the first time in my entire life that I feel like I'm part of the group.

I wish I could click a save button so I could play this moment over and over and over again.

I type in, "**Today is Monday. It is cold,**" then push a blue button on the machine. It whirs a little, then, like a tongue sticking out, a thin sheet of paper erupts from the side of it. Printed on it are the words I just typed.

"Whoa!" says Rodney, the champion video game player in the class. "It's got a printer! That's too slick!"

Miss Gordon nods with encouragement as Catherine passes the printout around so everyone can read my words. Then Catherine tells the class, "Melody's Medi-Talker is a combination computer, music player, and speech device. It's got HD, high-tech guts, and it's designed to rock her world and connect you to it. Take the time to listen to what she has to say."

Claire raises her hand.

"Yes, Claire," Miss Gordon says, a look of warning in her eyes.

"I'm not trying to be mean—honest—but it just never occurred to me that Melody had thoughts in her head."

A couple of other kids nod slightly.

Miss Gordon doesn't raise her voice. Instead, she responds thoughtfully: "You've always been able to say whatever came to your mind, Claire. All of you. But Melody has been forced to be silent. She probably has mountains of stuff to say."

"**Yes. Yes. Yes,**" I make the machine say.

I give Miss Gordon a smile of thanks, then I show Rodney and Connor a video game that came with my Medi-Talker. I doubt if I'll ever be fast enough to play Space Soldiers, but it's nice to know it's there. Rodney could probably master it in a hot minute.

Miss Gordon checks out the various levels and looks impressed. "What a huge vocabulary you have now, Melody!" she says to me. "I know you feel like a ton of bricks have been lifted from you."

## CHAPTER 17

I nod. **“Way cold,”** the machine says loudly. Oops! I meant to say *Way cool*. I feel my face getting warm as I hear Claire and Molly snicker.

But Rose pulls her desk close to my chair. “This is so awesome, Melody,” she says softly, and I let her touch the shimmery keys.

**“Oh, yes,”** I reply. Then I look at her. **“Friends?”** I type.

“Friends!” she answers without hesitation.

**“Happy,”** I type, then I tense. I hope I won’t do anything stupid like knock something over with excitement.

Rose is looking intently at me. “I can’t imagine what it must be like to have all my words stuck inside,” she finally says.

**“It sucks!”** I type in.

Rose chuckles. “I feel you!”

**As I’ve been getting used to using Elvira over the last month, life at school has been almost pleasant. Almost. I can ask Connor about a TV show that came on the night before or tell Jessica that I like her new shoes.**

It’s been snowing—just flurries—almost every day. Late one January afternoon I typed, **“I hope we have a snow day—no school.”** Everybody agreed. For once, I got to speak for the class.

I can answer questions in class lots better with Elvira to help me. For the first time, instead of “pretend” grades that teachers would give me because they weren’t quite sure if I knew the answer or not, I get real grades recorded in the teachers’ grade books that are based on actual answers I’ve given. Printed out and everything!

But at recess I still sit alone. It’s been too cold to go outside, so we sit in the far corner of the overheated cafeteria until it’s time to go back to class. None of the girls gossip with me about some silly thing a boy has said. Nobody promises to call me after school. Nobody asks me to come to a birthday party or a sleepover. Not even Rose.

Sure, she’ll stop and chat for a minute or two, but as soon as Janice or Paula calls her to come and look at a picture on a cell phone, Rose will say, “I’ll be right back!” then skip away as if she’s glad she has a reason to cut out on me.

I just smile, hope I wasn’t drooling, and pretend I didn’t notice. After a few minutes of faking it, I push

the button for the sentence “**Go back to H-5,**” and Catherine and I roll back down the hall.

One afternoon near the end of January, Mr. Dimming announced, in a voice that sounded like he’d been chewing on dry toast, “Instead of regular class today, I think we’ll have a practice round for the Whiz Kids quiz team.”

Everybody cheered because, otherwise, we would have had a lesson on the Sahara Desert. Talk about toasty and dry!

Every year our school sends a team to the Whiz Kids competition. The local rounds, with teams from elementary schools all around the city and county, are held downtown at a hotel. Last year our school got to second place in the whole district. The principal was so proud, she bought pizza for the entire school, even though the team was only for grades four, and five and six.

The first-place teams from across the state go to Washington, D.C., for the nationals. It’s televised and is a really big deal.

Rose scooted her desk closer to mine. “I was on the Whiz Kids team last year,” she told me.

**“I know,”** I typed. **“You’re smart.”**

She beamed, then leaned closer. “Connor will probably get picked again too. He’s a little hard to handle, but he’s great with trivia.”

I glanced over—Connor was boasting to his friends about last year’s competition. “You ought to see the room in the hotel where they hold the contest. Gold chandeliers! Rich-looking stuff everywhere! And kids from all over looking smart. But we smoked them all!”

“All but one team, dude,” Rodney shouted out good-naturedly. “They tore you up!” The class hooted.

“Yeah, but this year we’re gonna win! Right, Mr. D?”

“We’re certainly going to try, Connor,” Mr. Dimming replied. “The rules have changed slightly, so our team this year will be made up of just grades five and six. That gives us strength because some of

you competed last year. Now let’s just see how good we are. Let’s do a set of sample questions just for fun, shall we?”

“You got prizes?” Rodney asked.

“Not every competition results in a prize, Rodney,” Mr. D replied.

“Yeah, but it’s more fun with good stuff at the end,” Connor added. “Please?”

“Okay, okay! One slightly squished Butterfinger candy bar from my lunch bag,” the teacher said, holding it up. Everyone laughed once more.

“Chocolate gives you zits,” Rose teased Connor. “I don’t want candy—I want to win!” She moved her desk back to her own row.

Catherine sat on the other side of me. “Do you want to play the practice round with them?” she asked.

**“Yes! Yes! Yes!”** I typed. **“Answers—A, B, C, D. Easy.”**

She grinned. “Okay, easy! Let’s see what happens!” Mr. Dimming cleared his throat and smiled.

“Whiz Kids time is my favorite event of the year,” he admitted. “Let’s see if we can go all the way this year!”

The class cheered.

“I will read the questions first, then the choices for the answers. You will write down the correct letter. Does everyone understand?”

Connor raised his hand, then called out even before Mr. Dimming noticed him. “Don’t give us easy ones, Mr. D. I’ve got brains of steel!”

“And a mouth to match,” I heard Rose whisper.

“Number one,” the teacher began. “Which planet is closest to the sun?”

- A. Venus
- B. Earth
- C. Mercury
- D. Mars
- E. Jupiter.”

“Baby questions!” Connor protested.

“Please, Connor. Silence,” Mr. D said sternly. Connor finally shut up.

I pushed the letter C on my machine and waited for the next question.

“Number two,” Mr. Dimming continued. “How many sides are on a heptagon?”

- A. Four
- B. Six
- C. Seven
- D. Eight
- E. Nine.”

I typed in the letter C again. Would the same letter come up twice in a row? Why not? I knew I was right.

“Question number three,” Mr. D. said. “How long is one regular term for a U.S. representative?”

- A. One year
- B. Two years
- C. Three years
- D. Four years
- E. Six years.”

Hmmm. That one could be tricky. It seems like the same politicians are on the news all the time. But



I typed in *B* as my answer.

Mr. D gave us fifty questions in all. Several were math problems. Others had to do with science and grammar. The last question was about geography.

“In what state would you find the Grand Canyon?” he asked.

- A. California
- B. Arizona
- C. South Dakota
- D. New Mexico
- E. Utah.”

I’ve never been there, but I’ve seen specials on the Travel Channel, and I’m almost positive it’s in Arizona. I typed in the letter *B*, pushed the print button, and Catherine took my paper to the teacher’s desk.

“Melody participated?” Mr. Dimming asked as he took the printout. He glanced from me to the paper in his hand. “How nice.”

I didn’t like the sound of his voice.

He scored the papers while we watched a movie

about the pyramids in Egypt. I couldn’t help stealing glances at him.

Finally, Mr. Dimming looked over his wire-rimmed glasses. “I’ve tallied the results. These are not official tryouts, but the students with very high scores today are Paula, Claire, Rose, and Connor.”

Connor jumped from his desk and cheered. “I knew it! I’m the man! I’m hot! Lemme hold that piece of candy!” He started up the aisle toward the desk where the Butterfinger lay.

“Sit down, Connor!” the teacher said with exasperation. “You did well, but you don’t get the candy.”

“Who beat me?” Connor seemed amazed. “Rose? That’s okay. I’ll triumph in the real tryouts.”

I looked over at Rose. She smiled at me—a look of anticipation on her face.

Mr. Dimming was silent for a moment. He scratched his head. Finally, he cleared his throat and said, “The winner of today’s competition, and the winner of the Butterfinger candy bar, with a *perfect*

score, is . . .” He paused again, gave his head a shake, and started again. “The only person in the class who got every single question correct is . . . Melody Brooks.”

Dead silence. No cheers. Just looks of disbelief.

“No fair!” Molly blurted out angrily. “Melody’s got a helper who whispers the answers to her!”

“She musta cheated!” Claire added loudly.

Catherine jumped out of her chair and stormed over to where Claire and Molly were sitting, her new black leather boots clicking sharply on the tiled classroom floor. “I did *not* help her! Did it ever occur to you that she might have some smarts of her own?”

“She can’t even sit up by herself!” Claire replied, her voice petulant.

“What your body looks like has nothing to do with how well your brain works! You ought to know that by looking in the mirror!”

“Ooh! She got you!” Connor said. That got a couple of laughs. But most of the kids were looking around uneasily. No one looked at me.

Claire said nothing in reply, and I guess Molly decided to shut up as well.

Catherine returned to where I sat, but the whole thing made me want to crawl under a table and disappear.

Mr. Dimming raised his hand for the class to be silent. “Melody, please come up and get your candy bar,” he said. “I am very proud of you and your efforts today. And your classmates are as well. Let’s all give Melody a round of applause!”

Everybody, except maybe Molly and Claire, clapped as I rolled slowly to the front of the room. The sound of my chair’s motor whirred softly. They couldn’t hear the sound of my thumping heart.

I figured the teacher offered me the candy to shut up Claire and Molly and to make me feel good that I accidentally got all the questions right. But it was no accident. I knew them all. Every single one.

Mr. Dimming placed the candy bar on my tray. Good. At least I wouldn’t have to worry about dropping it in front of everybody. I rolled back to my

place with my head down.

"I'm so proud of you! And you should be too!" Catherine whispered, holding her hand up for me to slap. But I didn't move.

"**Not,**" I typed.

"Why not? You beat them all."

It took me a very long time, but I typed, "**They think my brain is messed up like the rest of me.**" I felt like crying.

"Then we'll just have to study and show them they're wrong!" Catherine said, a hint of defiance edging her voice.

"**Why?**" I asked.

"So you can be on the quiz team," she told me.

"**Never happen,**" I tapped.

Just as Catherine was about to reply, Mr. Dimming announced that the official tryouts for the quiz team would be held in one week. "Many of you scored quite well on this practice round," he said, "but remember you will have to compete against the sixth-grade students as well for the real competition.

Go home and study. Only the best will be chosen."

"Like me?" Connor yelled.

"If you qualify," Mr. Dimming told him. "I'm taking a winning team to Washington, D.C., this year, class. Are you with me?"

"Yeah!" they all yelled.

I was amazed they'd get excited about studying for anything. But he rallied them like a football coach.

"Are you willing to study so we can be on television?"

"Oh, yeah!"

"You gonna buy a new suit if we win?" Connor blurted out.

Mr. Dimming actually laughed. "That's a promise. A new suit—maybe blue—with a red satin vest."

The whole class broke out in laughter and applause.

"Then, let's do our very best," Mr. D said. "I'm going to create extra-challenging questions so that we will be stupendously prepared this year."

“Well, he’s already starting with the big vocabulary words,” I heard Molly whisper to Claire.

“Hard questions?” Connor whined.

“Look at it this way,” Mr. Dimming told Connor. “If Melody Brooks can win the first round, then my questions must not be difficult enough! We’re all going to rally to win the competition!”

Everybody cheered.

Except me.

## CHAPTER 18

**After school that day I was grumpy and mean. Mrs. V had prepared a new stack of word cards for me. Penny was wearing one of Mrs. V’s turbans, and she looked ridiculous. Plus, she kept singing some stupid baby song at the top of her lungs. I took my arm and swept the whole pile of cards to the floor.**

“Who put salt in your Kool-Aid, Miss Thing?” Mrs. V asked. She did not pick up the cards.

Penny stopped singing and stood there blinking at me.

I switched the Medi-Talker to off and looked away.

“Fine. Be like that. But you’re going to pick up every single one of those cards!”

I stuck out my lip and stared at the wall.

Penny reached out and shook my arm. I tugged it loose. She didn’t seem to care and started singing again:

“Happy, happy, happy, clap your feet,  
Happy, sappy, pappy, blow your nose,  
Biddy-boddy-bowdee, jump and jump.”

She jumped. She stomped her feet. Then she sang the song again. And again.

She was really getting on my nerves. I wished she would just shut up! Talking all the time. Walking all the time. Jumping and bouncing and singing. *Just quit it! For just one moment, please STOP!*

But she wouldn’t. “Hi, Dee-Dee,” she said. She put Doodle on my tray.

I pushed the toy to the floor.

“Doodle, Dee-Dee.” She picked up the stupid raggedy thing and placed it on my tray once more.

I knocked it off again. *Leave me alone!* I wanted to scream.

Penny was used to things falling off my chair, so she couldn’t know I was being just plain horrible. The third time she put Doodle on my tray, I swept it off with such force that my arm brushed Penny’s head. She toppled over and fell to the floor.

She looked at me, surprise on her face, grabbed Doodle, and ran to Mrs. V in tears.

“What’s gotten into you, Melody?” Mrs. V asked as she rocked Penny on her lap.

How could I explain?

I didn’t want to cry, but I did. I turned my wheelchair so it faced the wall just as the phone rang. Mrs. V looked from me to the phone, sighed, and got up to answer it.

“Oh, hello, Catherine.”

*Catherine?* I turned my chair slightly to listen

better.

“Out of sorts?” Mrs. V asked. “Well, as a matter of fact, she does seem a little mopey this afternoon. No, I take that back. She’s downright monstrous.” Mrs. V caught my eye and made a funny face at me.

I just glared at her.

“I’m not surprised she got all the questions right — the child is brilliant!”

*Lotta good it does me.*

“The teacher said *what?*”

Great, now *everybody* would know. Just thinking about it made me feel like pond scum again.

“In front of her classmates? What kind of professional is he supposed to be?” Mrs. V looked furious.

“How did she react? Never mind. I already know. She’s sitting here looking like one of those blowfish we saw at the aquarium—all puffed up and spiny.”

That’s actually kinda close to how I felt.

“Thanks so much for calling, Catherine,” Mrs. V said. “Yes, please call her parents this evening, and

I’ll be sure to talk to them as well. I am going to work on this problem right now.”

With that, she hung up the phone, set Penny down on the floor, put her hands on her hips, and turned to look at me.

I figured here’s where she hugs me and makes me feel better.

“So, you aced the quiz and then bombed the follow-up?” she said to me, indignation decorating her words. She flipped my talker back on.

Why did she sound mad at *me*? I looked up in surprise.

“**He hurt my feelings,**” I answered.

“So what?” Mrs. V spat back.

“**Kids laughed. Even Rose.**” It was true, though I could hardly admit it. Even Rose had covered her mouth to stifle a laugh.

“Did you get the highest score in the class?” Mrs. V asked, completely ignoring my attempt to make her feel sorry for me. I should have known better.

“**Yes.**”

“Did Catherine help you in any way—even a little bit?”

“No.”

“Then let’s get started.”

I looked at her, a little confused. “**Started on what?**” I asked.

“On your study plan. You and I are going to practice, prepare, and push. I am going to quiz you, and you are going to answer. We’re going to learn geography, science, math—thousands of glorious tidbits of information!”

She sounded excited.

“**Why?**” I asked carefully.

“You know how athletes get ready for the Olympics? They swim early in the morning and late at night. They run around the track for hours and hours without a crowd to cheer them on.”

“**I can’t run very fast,**” I typed, then I grinned at her.

“Maybe not, but you’ve got the fastest, strongest brain in that school, and you are going to try out for

the quiz team next week.”

“**They won’t let me be on the team,**” I typed slowly.

“Oh, yes they will! They’ll want you, all right. They’ll *need* you, Melody. You are going to be their secret weapon.”

“**You think?**”

“I know. Now let’s cut out all this fake feeling sorry for yourself and get started on studying. We have one week. I’m the coach, and you’re my athlete. Get ready to sweat!”

“**Sweat stinks!**” I told her with a laugh.

“So let’s get stinky! But first you are going to pick up every single one of those cards.”

I knew not to argue. She took me out of my chair, set me on the floor, and left the room while I pulled the cards that I’d knocked down into a messy pile on the floor. Penny helped.

Then Mrs. V put me back in my chair, and we got to work. She was gonna be a tough coach. “How is the test set up?” she asked me.

“A, B, C, D,” I tapped.

“Multiple choice! Wonderful! Piece of cake for you.”

I wasn’t sure about that, but I didn’t disagree with her.

She went to her computer and found a Web page that listed every U.S. state and capital.

“**Did those in school,**” I told her.

“Great! So we’ll do them again!”

I fake groaned.

Mrs. V then looked up the capitals of all the major countries in the world. Gee, there sure are a *lot* of countries! But once she read them out loud to me, I had the info stuck in my head.

“What’s the capital of Hungary?” she demanded.

I knew the answer was Budapest before she even gave me the four choices.

A. Accra

B. Berlin

C. New Delhi

D. Budapest.”

I pushed *D*, of course. Mrs. V didn’t stop to cheer. She kept going.

I correctly answered that Tokyo was the capital of Japan, Addis Ababa the capital of Ethiopia, Ottawa the capital of Canada, and Bogotá the capital of Colombia. She quizzed me until Dad came to pick us up.

As Mrs. V stuffed Doodle and some unused diapers back into Penny’s bag, she explained briefly what had happened at school and what she planned to do about it, what we were already doing.

“Are you sure?” Dad asked, glancing at me. “Maybe we’re setting her up for failure, and she’ll be hurt even worse.”

“I am absolutely positive!” Mrs. V insisted. “Can Melody stay a little longer to study? I’ll give her dinner and bring her home in a couple of hours. That will give you some one-on-one time with Penny.”

“You cool with that?” Dad asked me.

“**Yes! Yes! Yes!**” I typed. “**I want to do this.**”



“Go for it, my Melody,” Dad said. He gave Mrs. V a thumbs-up sign and left with Penny.

After dinner we moved on to science. I learned that the bones in the leg are the femur, the tibia, the patella, and the fibula. Why can’t they just call them something easy, like “knee bone” and “skinny leg bone”? But I memorized them.

I learned that insects are arthropods and that they have tibias too!

“The study of insects is called ‘entomology,’” Mrs. V said. “That gives me an idea—let’s learn all the words that end in ‘ology!’”

I put my hand over my head and pretended to groan, but deep inside I was really jazzed.

“Which word means the study of words and their meanings?” she asked me after we had reviewed a very long list of “ology” words.

- A. Bibliography
- B. Archeology
- C. Histology
- D. Lexicology.

I thought for a minute. I knew she was trying to trick me. *Histology* sounds like *history*, but for some reason, I think it has to do with skin. And *bibliography* has to do with books, not words. I typed in the letter *D*.

This time she did cheer. “Let me get you home, Melody. Top athletes need their sleep. We’ll do some more tomorrow.”

I grinned at her, tired and energized at the same time.

Mrs. V had called Catherine and explained the situation, told her to stuff information into my head along with the macaroni at lunch. So the next morning Catherine, of course, jumped right in.

While we were in room H-5, Catherine hooked me up on the earphones. I listened to an old audio cassette on volcanoes. It was scratchy and skipped a little, but it gave me information. Volcanoes were named for the Roman god Vulcan. I could’ve figured that one out myself. I found out about lava and ash. I learned about how the whole city of Pompeii got

covered up when Vesuvius erupted. Surprisingly interesting stuff.

I listened to tapes on Australia and Russia, on constellations and on the planets.

“You learning anything from these oldies but goodies?” Catherine asked as she slipped in another tape for me. It was on diseases.

**“Info always good,”** I typed.

“I feel you,” she replied. “Are you still upset about what happened in Mr. Dimming’s class?”

**“Deleted the memory—need room for facts,”** I took the time to type.

She gave me a thumbs-up.

**“I’m a little scared,”** I admitted. **“Suppose I mess up?”**

“You can do this, Melody,” she said sternly as she adjusted the earphones. “You certainly have enough smarts to be on the team.”

**“Go away while I take the test,”** I typed. **“Keeps Claire quiet.”**

“Gotcha!” Catherine said. She held her hand up to

slap my palm. It wasn’t much of a slap—more like a mushy grab—but we were on the same page.

Except for lunch and recess, I listened to tapes and worked with Catherine the rest of the day. She quizzed me on facts and dates and kings. And math. That might be hard for me. Words float easily into my head. But numbers seem to sink to the bottom like rocks. I don’t know why.

“Let’s do it again,” Catherine said gently as I got mixed up on a math problem about trains and their speed.

Nobody rides trains anymore! Who cares?

But she kept at it until it made sense to me. I discovered that if I make numbers into a picture story in my mind, the answers come easier. I changed the figures to words. Magic!

Instead of going out for inclusion classes, I shook my head and told Catherine I didn’t want to go. I wanted to stay and study instead.

Evidently, I wasn’t missed. Nobody sent a frantic message to room H-5, wondering why Melody

wasn't in class today. Nobody peeked their head in the door to see if I was absent or sick or maybe having a convulsion in the middle of the floor.

Nobody seemed to notice at all.

## CHAPTER 19

**The week zipped by. I studied at school every day with Catherine, after school every day with Mrs. V, and every evening at home as well. I reviewed words from all the levels of my board. I practiced spelling long words and matching facts and dates. I made up my own games. Mom quizzed me about flowers and medical terms. Dad asked me questions about economics and retail**

**management and sports. I swallowed it all.**

Sometimes I sit in my room and just type in new sentences for Elvira to say. One letter at a time. It takes hours. But once an entry is in, all I have to do is push one button and the whole sentence will be spoken for me.

I guess the question I get asked the most, in a lot of strange variations, is: “What’s wrong with you?” People often want to know if I’m sick or if I’m in pain or if my condition can be fixed. So I prepared two answers— one that is polite but kind of wordy, and one that is a little smart-mouthed. To those who are genuinely concerned, I push a button to say, “**I have spastic bilateral quadriplegia, also known as cerebral palsy. It limits my body, but not my mind.**” I think that last part is pretty cool.

To people like Claire and Molly, I say, “**We all have disabilities. What’s yours?**” I couldn’t wait to use that one. When I showed Mrs. V, she laughed so hard, she snorted.

Now it’s the Saturday before the tryouts, and Mrs. V and I are sitting outside on her front porch. I’m wearing a light jacket, but it’s one of those rare warm February days that fools the hyacinths into thinking spring is here. I want to warn the little buds and say, *Wait! It’s gonna snow next week. Stay put for another month!* But every year the early spring flowers shiver in the last snow of the season.

We watch wisps of clouds hover over us. A canary-colored goldfinch is perched on the railing, looking at the empty bird feeder dangling above it. If he could talk, I bet he’d ask for thistle—and more warm days like this.

“What would you do if you could fly?” Mrs. V asks as she glances from the bird to me.

“**Is that on the quiz?**” I ask, grinning as I type.

“I think we’ve studied just about everything else.” Mrs. V chuckles.

“**I’d be scared to let go,**” I type.

“Afraid you’d fall?” she asks.

“**No. Afraid it would feel so good, I’d just fly**

**away.**” It took me a long time to type that.

She is quiet for a very long time. Finally, she says, “You *are* a bird, Melody. And you *will* fly on Monday when you take the test.”

I hear our front door slam shut next door, and I wave to Mom and Penny as they wander over to the porch. Butterscotch, clearly happy to be unleashed, bounds next to them, sniffing the base of every tree.

Penny walks with such determination, her face alternating between frowns and smiles as she concentrates on marching down the path between our two houses, then climbing the front steps with both hands and both feet. She’s wearing her puffy winter jacket and the hat of the day—a blue straw thing that is scrunched and crooked from her sitting on it so many times. Poor Doodle, of course, drags behind her.

“Dee-Dee!” she cries as she finally gets to the top step. I’m still boggled by how easily she does stuff.

I touch the sleeve of Mrs. V’s dress as I think about what she asked me. “**Freedom,**” I type,

pointing at Penny. “**Freedom.**”

Mrs. Valencia nods. She understands.

“What a glorious day!” Mom says, breathing deeply. “You think we’re done with winter?”

“**More cold coming,**” I type.

“You’re right, but it sure is a nice preview,” Mom says as she unzips Penny’s jacket. “How’s the study team progressing?”

Butterscotch rests at the bottom of the steps. I swear the dog looks like she’s smiling.

“**Good,**” I say through my Medi-Talker.

“Violet, you’re amazing,” Mom says. “The time and effort you’ve put into teaching her and getting her ready for this test, and . . .” She breaks off, blinking hard. “You must have taught her *thousands* of words.”

“Nobody seems to be amazed that Penny is soaking up and learning thousands of words,” Mrs. V replies with a shrug. “Melody is no different.”

Mom nods in agreement. “I know you’re right, but— but . . . it’s just so much *harder* for Melody.”

“No, it’s harder for *us*. We have to figure out what’s in her head.”

I’m getting tired of them talking about me like I’m in another room. I turn the volume on my machine up loud. “**Let’s have cookies.**”

“Cookies!” Penny repeats.

Mrs. V stands up. “I hear you, Penny babe. Let me find us some sweets!” As she heads into the house, she turns to Mom and says softly, “Miz Melody here has always had a special place in my heart.”

“**Heartburn!**” I type.

That gets them both laughing.

Mrs. V returns a few minutes later with a plate of hot chocolate chip cookies and two servings of milk in red sippy cups decorated with Disney princesses. I hate to admit it, but a sippy cup makes it easier for me to drink.

“Cookies!” Penny screams. She reaches for the plate, but Mom pulls her arm back.

Mrs. V gives Mom two cookies on a paper towel. Mom blows on one, then gives it to Penny, who

proceeds to stuff the whole thing in her mouth.

“Look at my little Penny pig,” Mom says, laughing.

Mrs. V breaks my cookie into segments, then places a piece in my mouth. Although I’m a caramel lover, these cookies must have been made in chocolate heaven. I swallow while Mrs. V gives me sips of cool milk. Cookies smooch down so great with milk—I don’t even have to try to chew. I’d love to have enough control to feed myself, but that’s on my list of things I’d wish for— along with walking, and taking myself to the bathroom, and—oh, yeah— flying.

Interrupting my thoughts, Mrs. V asks, “What continent produces the largest crop of cacao beans, which give us this chocolate?”

“**Africa!**” I type.

She nods and gives me another sip of milk. “And which state produces the most milk?”

“**California,**” I reply.

“I think you’re ready, Melody!” Mrs. V

announces.

Mom reaches over and strokes my cheek. “You’re going to rock on Monday!”

“**Then what?**” I type.

“Then you run for president!” Mrs. V interjects.

“**Yeah, right,**” I tap out.

Just then Dad pulls into our driveway. Boy, does our big old car need a trip to the car wash!

“I guess Chuck got off early today,” Mom says, looking pleased. “Maybe we can get an early dinner.”

Dad gets out of the car, stretches, and waves at us.

Penny’s face lights up. “Daddy!” she calls out. Standing up, she looks at us with a devilish grin.

“Don’t you dare!” Mrs. V warns, in her “I mean it” voice.

Penny ignores her. “Go bye-bye in car!”

She *loves* to ride in the car. It doesn’t matter where — the store, the post office—as long as she gets to ride in her little car seat in the back. Doesn’t make much sense to me—she falls asleep as soon as we turn the first corner.

She hurriedly bumps down a couple of the porch steps, then two more, waiting for a reaction from Mom.

“Penny Marie Brooks, you bring your little buns right back up here!” my mother cries out. When Mom uses all three names, it’s serious.

Penny reaches the bottom of the steps, looks back at us, smirks, and says, “See Daddy! Gotta go to work!” Then, as fast as her short little legs will carry her, she bolts for Dad.

Mom, of course, has other ideas. So does Butterscotch, who jumps up, gives three short barks—almost like Mom using three names—and calmly walks in front of Penny to block her path.

“Good dog,” Mom says. “Come back here, little cookie face!” By this time she has hurried down the porch steps and retrieved my sister. “This child,” she says to my dad, who is ambling over to us, “is an escape artist! I need four sets of eyes with her!” She wipes the chocolate off Penny’s face and nuzzles her.

“Good thing you’ve got Butterscotch,” Dad says as

he brushes the top of the dog's head. "How's my shiny copper Penny today?" Dad kisses Mom on the cheek and takes Penny from her. Penny manages to rub the rest of the chocolate from her hands onto the front of Dad's shirt.

"Just what I always wanted," Dad says as he glances down. "Chocolate-covered clothes!" The napkin Mrs. V passes him only smears it more. Dad just laughs.

"Go work, Daddy?"

"Daddy just got home. Give me a break, kiddo." He hands Penny gently to Mrs. V, then sits with Mom on the porch swing. "And how's my favorite Melody?" he asks me.

"**Super,**" I type on my machine.

"Ready for your competition?"

"**Yep!**" I tap.

Dad gets up and squats in front of me. "You're going to ace that test and make that quiz team!" I can tell he means it.

I believe in me. And my family does. And Mrs. V.

It's the rest of the world I'm not so sure of.