

CHAPTER 20

I was right about the weather today. I hope the little crocus buds have tiny wool blankets because the temperature dipped back down to the thirties, and our classroom was chilly when we rolled in this morning.

The public-address system blared the usual Monday-morning announcements about bake sales and soccer practice. Most of the time nobody in H-5, not even Mrs. Shannon, pays much attention to

them. The craziness of our morning usually takes over.

Mrs. Shannon had managed to get us a Wii game system—I don't know how. Willy *loves* the baseball program. I have learned to keep out of his way while he pretends to hit the ball as he watches the screen. Sometimes his swings go wide. "A hit!" he'll cry out with triumph, then he'll try to run the bases in the classroom. Even Freddy can't keep up with him.

I usually sit in a corner with my headphones on, trying to tune it all out.

But today I listened carefully to the bulletin. My heartbeat sped up and I jerked my arms with excitement as I heard the principal say, "All students who wish to try out for the Whiz Kids quiz team, please report to Mr. Dimming's room after school."

I stayed nervous all day. I didn't tell Rose what I planned to do. I thought about it, then decided not to. Suppose she said it was a stupid idea? I didn't think I could take that.

Then I spilled tomato soup all over the front of

my blouse at lunchtime. Even though Catherine tried to clean it up, you just can't get red stuff out of a white shirt. I felt like a slob. I wish I had thought of that this morning. I could have *told* Mom to pack a change of clothes for me. It's still hard to remember that I can *say* stuff like that now.

I didn't go out for inclusion classes all day—I wanted to study until the last minute—but as soon as the last bell rings, I grab Catherine's arm. "**Hurry!**" I type. "**To Mr. D's room.**"

Even though I am in the electric chair, we set it to manual so she could push me. I am too nervous to drive.

When we arrive at Mr. Dimming's room, a group of kids from my history class are already there, whispering together and going over note cards. They look up in surprise when Catherine wheels me in.

"Hi, Melody," Rose says. "What are you doing here?" Her voice doesn't sound as friendly as usual.

"**Quiz team,**" I type.

"She can't be on the team," I hear Claire whisper

to Jessica, wrinkling up her nose. “She’s from the retard room!”

Molly thinks that’s really funny. She screeches like a blue jay when she laughs.

I decide to ignore them even though I feel my anger rising. I have to stay focused. Several more students file into the room, from both grades five and six. I don’t know the sixth graders very well—they have different recess times. I wonder if they’re smarter. They’ve had more time to learn stuff.

A few kids point at me and whisper. When Mr. Dimming hurries in carrying a stack of papers sealed in plastic, he scans the room to see who’s here. He frowns slightly when he sees me, but he sets the test papers on his desk and greets us all.

“Welcome,” he says. “I’m so glad that so many of you have chosen to try out for the competition this afternoon. It’s going to be challenging as well as fun. Are there any questions before we get started?”

Connor, of course, raises his hand.

“Yes, Connor,” Mr. Dimming says with a good-

natured sigh.

“Uh, will we get pizza and stuff during practice like last year?”

“Don’t you think you need to make the team first?” his friend Rodney yells out.

“Rodney is right. Let’s do one thing at a time.” Mr. Dimming lifts the stack of test papers from his desk and holds them like a treasure.

“I hold in my hand the official test questions from the national Whiz Kids headquarters in Washington, D.C. I will be reading the questions to you, just as it’s done in real competitions, and then—” He stops and stares.

Everyone looks around to see what has interrupted him. It’s me.

Mr. Dimming taps the stack of papers for a moment, clears his throat, and addresses Catherine. “You know, I don’t think it’s appropriate for Melody to be here. This is not a recreational activity just for fun. The purpose of this meeting is to choose our official team.”

He isn't even speaking to me. He's looking right over my head at Catherine, as if I were invisible. Now I am really mad.

I turn up the volume on my machine—very loud. **"I am here to take the test."**

Mr. Dimming blinks. "Melody, I don't want your feelings to get injured. The test is very hard."

"I am very smart."

"I just don't want you to be hurt, Melody." He sounds sincere. Sort of.

"I'm tough," I type.

"You go, girl!" Rose suddenly says from the front of the room. A few other kids clap their support.

That makes me feel a little better. Just a little.

Catherine speaks up. "By law, she cannot be excluded. You know that, sir."

"Yes, but—"

"Read the questions to the students just as you had planned. They'll write their answers on notebook paper. Melody will record her answers, then print them out for you."

"How do we know you won't be helping her?" Claire asks.

"Because I won't be in the room," Catherine replies. "Too bad, because *you* might need some help!" Catherine grins at her, but Claire just looks away.

I tell Catherine, **"Go now."** I almost push her away. **"Thank you."**

"Your mom is coming to pick you up?"

"Yes."

"Good luck, Melody. You're my champ, no matter what, you got that?"

"Got it!" I wave as she leaves the room.

Mr. Dimming shrugs his shoulders and continues with the directions. "There are one hundred quiz questions. I will read each prompt one time and each answer only once. You will have thirty seconds to record each response. Please write only the capital letter: 'A,' 'B,' 'C,' 'D,' and sometimes 'E.' Are there any questions?"

Claire's hand shoots up.

“Yes?”

“How do we know Melody doesn’t have answers stored in her machine? Us normal people aren’t allowed to use computers.”

“Why are you so worried about Melody?” Rose answers before Mr. D has a chance to. “Are you scared she’ll get a higher score than you?”

“No way!”

“Then be quiet so we can get started.”

Mr. D smiles at Rose. “Students, get out two sheets of paper. One to write on. One to cover your answers. We believe in honesty, but an extra sheet of paper can’t hurt.”

Everyone shuffles to find paper and pens. Then a feeling of quiet expectation falls over the room. Mr. Dimming unseals the official test and opens to the first page.

“Let us begin,” he says, his voice suddenly sounding *very* official. “Number one. The capital of Colombia is:

A. Brussels

B. Santiago

C. Bogotá

D. Jakarta.”

He pauses while everybody scribbles their answers. I punch in the letter C. Good old Mrs. V and her capital quiz cards!

“Number two,” Mr. Dimming continues. “Gerontology is the study of:

A. The elderly

B. Gerunds

C. Germs

D. Rocks and jewels.”

I punched in the letter A. So far, so good.

The test continues for the next thirty minutes or so. He asks questions about atoms and clouds, about fish and mammals, about famous religions and dead presidents. Some of the questions I’m sure of. I guess on a couple. The math questions make me sweat. This is the hardest, most exciting thing I’d ever done.

The very last question is a killer.

“And number one hundred,” Mr. D says, relief in

his voice. “The small intestine of an average adult, if stretched out vertically, would measure about how long?”

- A. Eight to twelve inches
- B. One to two feet
- C. Five to seven feet
- D. Twenty to twenty-three feet.”

I punch in the letter *D*, hoping I’ve guessed right, and breathe a sigh of relief. It was over.

“Pencils down, please,” Mr. Dimming tells us. “Make sure your name is on your paper, then cover it with the cover sheet and pass it up to me.”

As everyone gathers papers and scribbles their names hurriedly, I push the print button on my Medi-Talker. A slim sheet with my answers emerges from the side. Mr. Dimming walks back to where I sit and rips it off. He doesn’t look at me.

“We’re done here,” he tells the class. “Your parents were told what time to pick you up, but if anyone has a problem with a ride, let me know. I won’t leave the building until everyone has safely left school

grounds.”

I am the last one out. I know my mom will probably come in to get me, but I want to leave on my own power. I turn on my chair and wheel around to face the door.

“Melody,” Mr. D calls.

I spin back around.

“I hope you were not discouraged by all this. I was only trying to protect you from being hurt.”

“I’m okay,” I tell him.

“I’ll be announcing the scores and the members of the team tomorrow. I just don’t want you to be disappointed.”

“**I understand.**” Then I ask him, “**Top eight scores get picked?**”

“Yes. Four team members and four alternates.”

I am tired, and I’ve started to drool a little. I’m sure he thinks I’m a dunce—a sloppy one at that. I feel like the red stain on my blouse is screaming.

“**Okay. Good night.**”

“Good night, Melody. See you tomorrow. And,

uh, you might want to wipe your mouth.”

I rub the sleeve of my shirt across my lips. The tomato-stained shirt. I can imagine what he was thinking.

I almost bump into my mom as she hurries in.

“How did you do, sweetie?” she asks breathlessly.

“Okay, I guess.”

To Mr. D, she says, “Thank you for giving her the opportunity to participate.”

“My pleasure, Mrs. Brooks. Melody is a delight, and I’m amazed she’s been able to achieve as well as she has.”

Yeah, right. A delight with drippy lips and a dirty shirt.

“Let’s go, Mom,” I type. I need to go to the bathroom, and I want to go home.

CHAPTER 21

Going to the bathroom at school just plain sucks. I have to be taken out of my chair, lifted onto the toilet, and held there so I don’t fall. Then someone has to wipe me when I’m finished.

It’s not so bad when it’s Mom, but it’s awful when a classroom aide has to do that for me. She is required by law to wear plastic gloves—I guess in case I have some kind of infection or disease. It’s completely embarrassing. I don’t usually have to go

first thing in the morning, but I'm so nervous on Tuesday, I ask to be taken twice.

Then I go to all my inclusion classes. The students who tried out for the quiz team can't stop chatting about the test. I listen to every word.

"I couldn't believe how easy it was," Connor boasts.

"I bet I got a higher score than you did," Claire says, her voice cocky.

"I thought the geography questions were off the map," Rose adds. "I never even heard of some of those countries."

Jessica shakes her head. "The math part wasn't much fun either."

"I can't believe we even *care* about a dumb test for a quiz team," Rodney comments.

"Because the competition is *on television*, man!" Connor replies. "Big-time TV coverage here in town, and if we make the finals, we go to D.C., where it will be televised all over the country. If we win, we get to be on *Good Morning America*. My grandma in Philly

can watch me, and my auntie in Frisco. I'll be famous!"

"What do you mean, *if we win*, Connor?" Claire asks him. "Don't you mean *when* we stomp the competition?"

"Yeah, for sure. I already bought a new suit for when I'm on TV."

Rose rolls her eyes. "I thought this was a team contest, Connor," she reminds him.

"Hey! The team would be nothing without me!" He holds his hand up in the air for high fives.

I listen quietly from the back of the room. When the bell rings to indicate that it's time for Mr. Dimming's class, my palms feel sweaty.

Catherine pushes me into the room and whispers into my ear, "Relax. You rock."

Mr. Dimming gets the class quiet and takes attendance. Why do teachers go so slowly when you want something from them?

Finally, he removes a sheet of paper from his briefcase. "I graded your quiz team tests last night,

and since many of those who tried out for the competition team are in this class, I'm going to share the results with you now. The teachers of the other classes who have students who tried out have been given this same list and are at this moment reading the results to them."

"So read the list!" Connor shouts, getting up from his desk.

"If classroom behavior were a determining factor for making the team, Connor, you might be in trouble," Mr. Dimming says. "Please quiet down for a moment."

That shuts him up, and he sits down heavily.

"First of all, I'm very proud of all of you who took the test. It was quite challenging, and you all did extremely well."

Rose raises her hand.

"Yes, Rose?"

"Can we see the questions and answers later so we know where we messed up?"

"Absolutely. As a matter of fact, we'll use this test

as a learning tool to study for the real competition. But anyone is free to see the test and check their responses."

"*Please* read the names!" Connor says, as politely as I've ever heard him.

Mr. Dimming smiles. "Okay. Will do. I shall read the alternates first. Two fifth graders. Two from sixth grade. Amanda Firestone. Molly North. Elena Rodriguez. Rodney Mosul."

My heart falls to my shoes, which is not quite to the floor, but close. How could I have missed so many questions? Maybe my thumb slipped and I pushed the wrong letters. Catherine squeezes my hand.

Molly and Rodney screech with joy. Amanda and Elena are sixth graders. Connor is noticeably quiet.

"And now," Mr. Dimming continues, "the names of the four students who scored the highest and will represent our school at the local competition downtown. The alternates will accompany them and will be called upon if any of the team members are

unable to participate in any way. Are we ready?"

"Ready," Connor says softly. I notice he has his fingers crossed behind his back.

"I'm proud to report that all four are from our classroom." He pauses. "To know all the finalists are from fifth grade blows me away. Way to go!"

"We torched grade six? Awesome!" Rodney says. "Now read the names before Connor wets his pants!" Connor reaches over and smacks Rodney on the back of his head.

Mr. Dimming takes a deep breath. "The top four scorers and members of our quiz team will be . . . Connor Bates—"

Connor interrupts him with a wild, whooping cheer. Of course.

"And if I may continue," Mr. D says over his glasses, "we also are pleased to welcome Claire Wilson and Rose Spencer."

Claire's smile is smug.

"But that's only three," Connor says, looking around in confusion.

"I can count, Connor," Mr. Dimming replies dryly.

"So who's the last person on the team?" Molly asks.

Earthquake report: TV weather guys feel some strange activity coming from a local school. Could it be a girl's heartbeat—pounding too hard?

Mr. Dimming clears his throat. "I must apologize. I think we have all underestimated a member of our class."

Earthquake report: This is the big one.

He continues. "In my fifteen years of running this competition I have *never* had a student make a perfect score on the practice test. It is designed to be challenging, to weed out the weaker candidates. In a word, it's hard."

"Tell me about it," Connor mumbles.

"When Melody Brooks took that little practice quiz with us last week, I thought it was a lucky accident that she did so well. But yesterday Melody blew us all away. She got every single question right."

He pauses, making sure everyone is taking this in, and then he says, “All of them.”

Earthquake report: Walls are tumbling everywhere!

“So she’s on the team?” Rose asks, disbelief in her voice.

“Yes, she’s on the team.”

“But . . . but . . . we’ll look weird!” Claire counters. “Everybody will stare at us.”

“I’m not going to have any of that kind of talk, do you understand?” Mr. D says sternly. “I’m very proud of Melody. I regret I underestimated her, and I’m glad to have her on our team.”

Earthquake report: Call the paramedics. A girl in fifth grade is about to explode.

Everybody in the class turns to look at me. Catherine gives me a hug, Rose flashes me a smile, and I try not to kick and drip and make my teammates sorry that I’ll be on the team with them.

“Will the Whiz Kids folks be cool with Melody?” Molly asks.

Mr. Dimming looks thoughtful. “I’ll contact the

quiz team officials and let them know about our special circumstances,” he says. “But that’s no concern of yours. Now listen up! Team members will meet every day after school for two hours for the next two weeks—right up until the first competition. Practice sessions are mandatory. Here is paperwork for your parents to read and sign. I need it back tomorrow.”

Earthquake report: Expect big aftershocks—nothing like this has ever been seen before.

The more I think about it, the more excited I get. Television! Pressure! People looking at me! I can feel myself getting tense and tight. My arms and legs start doing the tornado spastic dance. My head jerks. I try not to, but I screech—just a little.

Everybody turns at the sound. I can see Molly and Claire jerking their hands, kicking their legs, and making crazy noises. A few people giggle. Mr. Dimming’s face grows tight.

I aim all my energy at my thumb and point to “Go.”

Catherine gets the message and hurries me out of there.

I want to find a hole and hide in it.

CHAPTER 22

The next two weeks pass in a whirlwind.

In spite of my little display of weirdness that Tuesday in class, I showed up at practice on Wednesday afternoon as if nothing had happened. Maybe nothing had. I was just being me. I'm not sure what the others thought. They said nothing about it.

So, like all the other team members—alternates and regulars alike—I stayed every day after school to practice, from three thirty to almost six o'clock.

I still couldn't get over the fact I was part of the team. Okay. Truth. There was the team, and there was me, and we were in the same room. But we weren't quite a team. They appreciated the fact that I usually got the answers right, but . . .

When Mr. Dimming gave us multiple-choice questions to answer, I had to think for only a moment, then hit the correct letter on my machine. But lots of the preparation involved fast-and-furious, back-and-forth discussions, and I had trouble adding anything to what was being said—most of the time.

"One of the longest one-syllable words in the English language is 'screeched,'" Connor announced one afternoon as he chomped on a raspberry Twizzler.

"That's a good word for Melody," Claire said as she snatched his candy and took a bite.

I couldn't respond, and nobody else bothered to.

"What do you call that dot that goes over the letter 'i'?" Elena asked the group.

I knew the answer, but it took me too long to spell out the word.

"It's called a 'tittle,'" Amanda answered quickly. "Like the brain of a fifth grader!"

"Ooh, snap!" said Rodney.

I had planned to type *snap* when she said that too, but I was too slow. The group had already zoomed on to another question.

Gee, they talk fast.

"Who was the first child born in the American colonies?" Rose asked, reading from a huge stack of three-by-five cards in her hand.

"Virginia Dare," Elena answered. "Okay, my turn." She flipped through her own cards—color-coded. "Who was the first Miss America?"

"That's dumb," Connor said. "They're not gonna ask stupid girl stuff like that."

"You don't know the answer?" Claire asked him.

"Of course I know," Connor replied with a snort. "Margaret Gorman. In 1921. She was sixteen and probably looked better than you!" He and Rodney

were the only ones to laugh.

Rodney jumped in then. “I’ve got a nasty question. What is ‘pediculosis’?”

Without missing a beat, Rose answered, “When you’ve got a scalp full of head lice! Yeeww. Do you know that from personal experience?”

“Of course not. I was just looking for a hard word,” Rodney told her. He and Connor didn’t laugh that time.

“You want a hard word—I’ve got one,” Amanda told the group. “What is ‘hexadactylism’?”

That seemed to stump all of them for a minute, so I had time to tap on the number 6, followed by the word *fingers*, then I pushed play so they could all hear my answer.

“Good job, Melody!” Elena said.

“How does she know all this stuff?” Claire whispered to Rose.

“She’s smart!” Rose said, flipping through more cards.

“But she’ll look odd on TV, don’t you think?”

Claire continued, as if I couldn’t hear her.

I was ready for her. I had typed a couple of things the night before, so all I had to do was push a button. “**TV makes lots of people look funny,**” I had the machine say. “**Maybe even you, Claire.**”

“Ooh, look who’s got snaps now!” Connor hooted. “Good one, Melody!”

If I could have danced, I would have!

But as quickly as that moment happened, it disappeared. The team zipped on at rocket-paced speed, feeding off one another’s knowledge and skill. At the rate they were going, there was no way I could jump in quick enough. I listened, however, and remembered it all.

“What’s the only rock that floats?”

“Pumice.”

“How many chromosomes does a human have?”

“Forty-six.”

“What was the first state to allow women to vote?”

“Wyoming.”

“What’s Mr. Dimming’s first name?”

“Wallace!”

We all cracked up at that.

At the end of every prep session Mr. Dimming gave us another official quiz from national headquarters. Since those always consisted of multiple-choice questions, I always did well, but I wanted to be like the rest of them as we studied.

One Thursday in the middle of a practice session, Rose’s mom ordered pizza for everyone and had it delivered to the school.

“Your mom rocks,” Connor said.

“You’re easy to please, Connor,” Rose replied with a laugh.

Everybody rushed to get the hot, spicy-smelling slices from the box. I was starving like the rest of them, but I just sat there.

“Don’t you want some pizza?” Elena asked me. “I’ll go get a slice for you.” She never said much during the practices, but she took lots of notes and she usually scored pretty high on our practice

quizzes.

“Not hungry.”

How could I explain to her that without Catherine or my mom or Mrs. V, I wasn’t able to eat? I had to be fed like a baby. And I made a mess even then.

When my mom came to pick me up, she asked me if I wanted to stop by Pizza Hut on the way home.

I just shook my head.

CHAPTER 23

The day of the actual competition dawns bright and chilly. I shiver in the early March air as Mrs. V and I wait for my school bus. My jacket feels good. We've decided to use the manual chair today since the electric one, even with the car ramps, is a little too heavy for Mom to handle on her own.

“You ready, Mello Yello?” Mrs. V asks me.

“Oh, yeah!”

“Your head feel like it’s gonna pop with all those facts stuck inside?” she teases.

“Oh, yeah!” I grin at her.

“You’ll do fine. Better than fine. Dynamite. Possibly awesome!” Mrs. V says.

“Oh, yeah!” I push again.

“We’ll all be downtown in the audience cheering you on.”

“And the team?”

“There are others on the team?” she asks, smacking herself on her forehead. “I thought you were a solo act!”

“And teams from other schools?”

“Don’t worry—you’re smarter than all of them put together! So we’ll be cheering the loudest—your mom and dad and me and Penny.”

“Do I look okay?”

Mrs. V looks me up and down. “Like a television star!” she replies. “Your mom tucked an extra blouse in your bag, just in case. Catherine knows what to do.”

I’m glad Catherine will be going with us, and I think Mr. Dimming is glad as well.

“Tell me the plan again.”

“Your mom will pick you up from school, take you to get a bite to eat, and get you to the TV studio about fifteen minutes before the rest of the contestants. Penny and your dad and I will meet you there.”

“TV folks won’t freak out when I show up?”

“They are well prepared for you. Actually, it’s possible a few reporters might be there and want to talk to you.”

“Me? Why?” I can’t imagine why any newsperson would want to talk to somebody who can only talk through a machine. How boring.

“You’re a wonderful human-interest story. Other people might be interested in knowing more about you.”

“They won’t make fun of me?” Just the thought of it makes my palms sweaty.

Mrs. V takes my hand in hers. “Not at all. They’ll

admire you, I'm sure. You are Spaulding Street Elementary School's own personal Stephen Hawking. They're lucky!"

"Hope so."

"Here's your bus. Have a great day, Melody. I'll see you tonight."

I manage to get through the day without spilling anything on my clothes, and I'm relieved to see Mom when the last bell rings at school. After a quick meal of macaroni and applesauce in the car—smart Mom, nothing red—we head downtown.

We find a handicapped parking spot right in front of the studio, and after the usual unloading the chair down the car ramps, seating me and strapping me in, then attaching Elvira, we roll inside. The receptionist, a chunky, pleasant woman with lots of makeup and frizzy hair, directs us to the staging area.

I have to blink a little to figure it all out. Everything you see on TV is fake. I see the place where they film the news. When I watch it on

television at home, it looks like the reporters are sitting in front of a huge window that shows all of downtown. But it's just a painting, and it's pretty small. So is the desk where the reporters sit. It seems so much bigger from home.

I recognize a couple of the reporters who I watch every day. I can't believe how *skinny* the morning lady is. On TV she looks normal-size. I'm going to look like a huge balloon when the cameras show me.

Speaking of cameras, *they* are huge—like giant, black mechanical space beings on wheels. Guys with headphones and women with clipboards run around checking stuff. The back part of the studio is dark, but the place where the contest will take place is lit brightly. I can see where the teams will stand and the big buttons they'll push for the answers.

In another room, behind all the cameras and the action, are the benches where the audience sits. Some people have already started to file in. I can see them through a large glass window.

I jump when Catherine taps me on the shoulder.

“Fascinating, huh?”

“**For real,**” I type.

She and Mom chat a bit before a man wearing jeans and a Cincinnati Bengals sweatshirt approaches us. “Excuse me,” he says to me, “but are you Melody Brooks?”

Surprised, I quickly hit “**Yes.**”

“My name is Paul, and I’m the stage manager.” His huge hand swallows mine as he shakes it. “I’m glad you’re here early. Let’s see if we have you set up correctly. We’re really glad to have you participate.”

He spoke directly to me, not Mom or Catherine! I like him right away.

We roll across the studio, careful to avoid cords and wires, and enter the area where the competition will take place.

“This is where the members of each team will stand,” he explains. “They each have four large buttons to push. Red is for the letter ‘A.’ Blue is for the letter ‘B.’ Yellow is for the letter ‘C.’ And ‘D,’ of course, is green.”

I nod.

“And here, Miss Melody, is where *you* will sit. Right next to your teammates. I have rigged a special answer board for you, so it’s adjusted to the height of your wheelchair.” He looks pretty proud of himself as he shows me the setup.

“**Wow!**” I type. “**This is perfect. How did you know?**”

“My son is in a wheelchair,” he says with a shrug. “I build stuff for Rusty all the time, but there’s no way he could do what you are about to do.” He kneels down so he can look me in the eye. “Knock their socks off, champ! Rusty will be watching.”

“**Okay!**” I type. “**For Rusty.**”

He rolls me behind my answer board and lets me practice with the four color-coded buttons. Because they are so large, hitting the right one is actually easier than using my Medi-Talker. I don’t even have to aim with my thumb—I can use my whole fist.

When I hit the red button, the letter *A* lights up on the screen in front of me to lock in the answer.

“Thanks, Paul,” I type. **“Very, very much.”**

He winks, gives all of the buttons a quick punch to make sure they all light up, then tells me he’ll see me later.

“I can do this,” I tell Mom and Catherine. **“I’m ready.”**

The rest of our team starts to arrive. Connor, dressed in a black suit with a red tie, actually looks good. Rose, blushing and nervous, is wearing pale blue.

“Hi, Melody,” she says. “Are you scared?”

“Nope! Not at all,” I type.

“My mom made me wear this tie,” Connor complains as he rolls his finger inside his shirt collar to loosen it. “I hope I don’t choke on live TV!”

If he does, at least the attention will be on him instead of me. What if I do something stupid or I start to drool and the camera does a close-up?

Amanda, Rodney, Molly, and Elena—the alternates— look a little sad as they wander around the studio. They won’t get a chance to participate

unless something happens to disqualify one of the four of us. I guess that includes Connor fainting or me convulsing.

“Are you okay?” I hear Rose ask Amanda.

“Yeah. But it’s just like I’m all dressed up with nothing to do.”

“I feel you,” Rose says.

“Break a leg,” Amanda tells her.

“Really?” Rose smiles.

“That’s what you’re supposed to say for good luck,” Amanda explains.

“I know. But look at it this way. At the finals in Washington, there are six people on the team. So that opens things up a little.”

“So go out there and win!”

“Will do!”

Claire and Molly make funny faces in front of the cameras, pretending they are on the air. Neither speaks to me.

“Look, Claire!” Molly says, her voice, for once, in awe of something. “You can see your reflection in

that camera over there!”

“Do I look okay?” Claire asks, smoothing her dress.

“You look great,” Molly assures her.

“You know, it really ought to be *you* up there instead of Melody,” Claire says loud enough for me to hear.

“Well, I’m ready if she messes up,” Molly whispers back.

I just shake my head and think, *Delete, delete, delete*. No way am I letting their negativity mess me up. I have enough to worry about.

Mr. Dimming hurries in then, wearing a brand-new navy blue suit, a fresh white shirt, and a red vest and tie. The whole team cheers, and Connor gives him a high five.

He buzzes around for a bit, like a nervous bumblebee. He checks on details, wishes us all good luck, then goes to sit in the observation area. No teachers are allowed near the students during the competition. Catherine is allowed to stand in the

back behind the cameras, just in case I have an emergency.

Other teams start to fill the studio as well. One team, from Green Hills Academy, is all dressed in Kelly green sweaters. Not a bad idea, but the sweaters are ugly.

Another team, from Crown Elementary, is wearing little fake crowns on their heads. That seems to me a little over the top.

Our team hasn’t done anything special. They don’t need to. They have me.

CHAPTER 24

It's time.

“Cameras rolling!” someone calls out. “In five, four, three, two . . .” He points at the man at center stage.

The moderator, a slim guy with hair that looks like it has been glued into place, brushes a speck off his tuxedo, adjusts his red-striped tie, and begins speaking right on cue. “Good evening!” he says with that perfectly modulated voice that announcers seem to be born with. “My name is Charles Kingsley, and

I'd like to welcome you to the Whiz Kids Southwest Ohio Regional Competition!"

Cheers all around.

"In two weeks the winner of this competition will travel to Washington, D.C., to represent our area at the national championships."

More cheers.

"We wish the best of luck to all our young competitors!"

The studio quiets.

"The rules are simple," Mr. Kingsley explains. "Teams will be asked twenty-five questions. Each correct answer from each four-member team is worth one point, so the maximum total team score is one hundred points."

He pauses so the cameras can show the scoreboard.

Then he announces, "The two teams with the *highest* scores from all preliminary rounds will meet for what we call a 'quiz-off,' so point totals are critical. The winner of that final set of quiz questions

will be declared our local elementary-school-level champion and will proceed to the nationals in Washington. The team that emerges as the winner will appear live on national television on *Good Morning America* the next morning!"

Cheers and applause.

"Our first two teams to compete tonight will be Woodland Elementary and Spaulding Street Elementary. Take your places, ladies and gentlemen."

The four contestants from Woodland and the other three members of our team walk to the testing area, waving for the cameras. Catherine rolls me to my position, makes sure I can easily reach the buttons, then she gives me a quick hug and walks away.

"I'd like to take a moment," Mr. Kingsley says, "to introduce a very special participant in our competition tonight. Her name is Melody Brooks."

The cameras all point in my direction. The studio lights are incredibly bright—and hot. I blink rapidly. I feel damp and sweaty.

“Although the other contestants will stand, Melody will be seated as she answers the questions. We’ve made adjustments to our answer board so that she can access the buttons, but nothing else. I hear she’s a fierce competitor.”

I try to wave, but I figure I look goofy and wobbly, so I pull my hand down.

Rose stands next to me, with Connor in the middle and Claire on the far end.

“I feel like I’m gonna throw up,” I hear Claire whisper.

“Don’t you dare!” Connor hisses.

“We’ll start with a practice round, so you can familiarize yourself with our button system. Everyone ready? Which of the following is a mammal?”

- A. Cat
- B. Bird
- C. Turtle
- D. Spider.”

Everybody, including me, pushes A, of course.

The screens in front of us light up with the letter A.

“Don’t you wish all the questions would be that easy?” Mr. Kingsley asks, chuckling.

Yeah, right.

“Remember two things,” he reminds everyone. “First, this is a *team* competition, and second, this is not a test of speed, but of accuracy. Teams get more points if all four contestants come up with the correct answer. And the two teams with the most points meet for the finals. Are we ready?”

“Ready!” the seven contestants on stage answer.

I start to hit the word *ready* on my board, but I decide to concentrate on the contest instead.

“Round one will have twenty-five questions. Let us begin. Number one.”

I tense. *Here we go!*

“The average lifespan of an adult mayfly can range from:

- A. One minute to one hour
- B. Thirty minutes to one day
- C. One day to one week

D. Two weeks to one month.”

Bing! Bing! Bing! Bing! Everyone hits their buttons. Once the answers are locked in, the readouts are displayed. Everyone on our team answered B. One person on the Woodland team answered A.

Mr. Kingsley smiles and says, “Woodland has three points and Spaulding now has four with all correct responses.”

We can do this. I can do this. Bring on the next one!

“Number two,” he intones. “The battles of Lexington and Concord in the American Revolutionary War were fought in what year?”

- A. 1774
- B. 1775
- C. 1776
- D. 1777.”

That one is a little tricky. I press B, however. So does everyone else. The score is now seven to eight.

Mr. Kingsley continues. “In literature the word

‘oxymoron’ means which of the following?

- A. A combination of contradictory words
- B. The outcome of a sequence of events
- C. An implied reference to a literary or historical event
- D. A symbolic story or narrative.”

I am fairly sure the answer is A, but that word could mean “big-headed crippled kid who thinks she can win in a national quiz competition.”

When the answer is shown on the screen, Connor got it wrong, and so did two members of the Woodland team. So the score is now set at Woodland: nine, Spaulding: eleven. We’re still up, but we have twenty-two more questions to go.

“The next question,” Mr. Kingsley says, “deals with math.”

Oh, crap. I’m dead meat.

“There are two thousand three hundred fifty-seven paintings in an art museum. The museum has one hundred twenty-four rooms. Which is the reasonable estimate for the number of paintings in

each room?

- A. 10
- B. 20
- C. 60
- D. 200.”

Yep. Dead, rotten meat. Let’s see—I’ve got to visualize a museum . . . and rooms . . . and lovely paintings. How many in a room? Not sure. Divide what into what? Not sure. I’m going to say sixty.

When the answer flashes as B, I feel like an idiot. But Rose got it wrong too, and so did two kids on the Woodland team. The score stands at thirteen to eleven.

By the time we get to the twenty-fifth question, I’m sweaty and thirsty, but I’m pumped. The lead bounced back and forth between the two teams a couple of times. Sometimes they were in front of us, and sometimes we forged ahead with points. I got most of the language arts answers right, but the math questions stumped me.

Connor can’t spell, so he missed several of those

questions. Rose is weak in history. Claire has trouble with science. The Woodland team was about the same— some kids good in some areas, others good in others.

“We now come to the final question for our first two teams,” Mr. Kingsley announces. He clears his throat and begins: “A weather event that measured 6.5 on the Richter scale would be a/an:

- A. Tornado
- B. Hurricane
- C. Earthquake
- D. Tsunami.”

Bing! Bing! Bing! Bing!

I punch C and relax. I did not have a tornado spaz. Connor, Rose, and Claire all got the final question correct as well. Two people on the Woodland team answered “hurricane” instead. When the results are tallied, our team has a total of eighty-one points. Woodland ends up with seventy-seven.

“Congratulations, Spaulding!” Mr. Kingsley says

with a polished smile. “The two highest-scoring teams will meet for the final round later tonight. Good luck, and we hope we see you again.”

Victory! For round one.

As the show breaks for a commercial, we are all escorted to a special waiting room in the back. The students from Woodland look really disappointed. That’s it for them for the whole competition. All they can do now is watch as the second two teams head to the stage for their session under the lights.

Mom, Dad, Penny, Mrs. V, and Catherine are all waiting for me in the back room, hugging me and kissing me like I’ve won the lottery or something. Catherine does a little happy dance. Dad tells me he filmed the whole thing on his camcorder.

“You rocked, Melody!” Mrs. V shouts.

“I am sooooo proud of you, sweetie!” my mom says.

“**Can I have a Coke?**” I type as quickly as I can. I feel breathless.

Everybody laughs as Catherine rushes to find me

a paper cup for the sodas that are sitting on ice in the waiting room for the contestants.

Mom pours dribbles of the ice-cold Coke into my mouth, one sip at a time, making sure I don’t spill on my shirt. I am *so* thirsty, I don’t even care that people from the other teams are staring at me.

Mr. Dimming, after talking to Rose and Connor and Claire, bounds over to us, beaming. “This is such a thrill, Melody! You were amazing out there! I’m so proud of our team and extremely proud of you.”

“**Thanks,**” I tap. “**What’s next?**”

“We wait for the next teams to compete, then we’ll meet and beat the other high-scoring team and pack our bags for Washington!”

“**Don’t pack yet,**” I type with a grin on my face.

“I’ve been packed for ten years,” he tells me. “I’ve just been waiting for the right team. This is our year. I just know it.”

He wanders off to talk to other parents. I never thought about what teachers dream about. I had no

idea what a big deal this is for him.

Rose comes over and squats down next to Penny. "I like your hat," she tells Penny, who is holding Doodle closely and wearing a blue polka-dotted hat with a red feather.

"Wo-sie!" Penny says gleefully.

"How's my favorite baby girl?" Rose says in her whispery voice.

"Wo-sie!" Penny repeats.

"You did really good, Melody," Rose says to me.

"**You too,**" I type.

"You think we have a chance for the finals?"

"**Yep!**"

"And Washington?"

"**Yep!**"

"And being on *Good Morning America*?"

"**Oh, yeah!**"

Claire stays on the other side of the room with her parents, but Connor ambles over and stands next to Rose.

"You're okay, Melody," he says. "You beat me on a

couple of those!"

"**You rock in math,**" I tell him.

"I know," he replies with a grin, "but I still can't spell! I hope they don't have any spelling questions in the finals."

"I gotta go to the bathroom!" Rose says suddenly. "I am *so* nervous about the finals!" She hurries out. I know what she means. Butterflies. Moths. Giant bumblebees flutter inside me.

When *we* were on camera, it felt like it took a million years to complete our round, but in just a few minutes the second set of contestants come back to the waiting room. The school with the little crowns won round two with seventy-nine points. Then, within another half hour, Edison Elementary clinches the third round with a score of eighty.

Finally, a school called Perry Valley wins the fourth round with eighty-two points, just one point more than us.

"I watched them," Mrs. V tells me when they troop back into the room, excited and victorious.

“They’re really good.”

“**Should we worry?**” I ask.

“Of course not! Our team is the best because they have a secret weapon—you!”

Suddenly, there is a rush of activity in the room as stagehands come in to get us. “Perry Valley and Spaulding Street, we need you back on camera for the finals! You are our two top-scoring schools. Congratulations!”

We hurry back to our places.

The lights seem brighter this time.

Mr. Kingsley returns to his position, gets his microphone adjusted by the stage crew, and shouts, “Welcome back, ladies and gentlemen, to the final round of our regional Whiz Kids competition! The winners of this round will represent us all in Washington, D.C., in just two weeks! All members of the winning team, along with their chaperones, will receive an all-expenses-paid trip to our nation’s capital, three nights in a hotel, and tours of the city.”

“Trophy! Trophy!” someone yells.

“Oh, the famous Whiz Kids Championship award! The winning team in Washington gets to take home that *huge* golden trophy, they receive a guest appearance on *Good Morning America*, and their school will receive a check for two thousand dollars to be used for academic endeavors!”

Lots of whoops at that.

“Let us begin. Teams, are you ready?”

“Ready!” they all reply.

I am ready too.