

CHAPTER 4

Doctors. Where do I start? Doctors *really* don't get me. Mom's a nurse, so I guess she speaks their language, but they sure don't know how to talk to me.

I've seen dozens of doctors in my life, who all try to analyze me and figure me out. None of them can fix me, so I usually ignore them and act like the retarded person they think I am. I paste on a blank look, focus on one wall, and pretend their questions are too hard for me to understand. It's sort of what they expect

anyway.

When I turned five, it was time to think about enrolling me in school. So my mother took me to a doctor whose job it was to figure out how smart I was. She wheeled me in, locked the brake so my wheelchair would not roll, and made sure the lap strap was fastened. When my seat belt comes undone—and it does every once in a while—I slide out of that wheelchair like a piece of wet spaghetti.

The specialist was a very large man. The bottom button of his shirt had come undone, and his stomach poked through above his belt. Gross!

“My name is Dr. Hugely,” he said in a booming voice.

For real. I couldn’t make this stuff up.

“We’re going to play a game today, okay? I’ll ask you some questions, and you get to play with the toys here. Won’t that be fun?”

I knew it would be a long, long hour.

He brought out a stack of well-used, hopefully not lead-tainted, wood blocks, then leaned in so close to

me, I could see the pores in his face. Gross! “Can you stack these in order according to size?” he said loudly and slowly, as if I were hard of hearing and really stupid.

But who was being stupid? Didn’t he know I couldn’t grab the blocks? Of course I knew which block was bigger than the other. But I couldn’t stack them if he paid me money! So I just took my arm and swept them all to the floor. They fell with a wooden clatter. I tried not to laugh as he picked them up. He breathed really hard as he reached for them.

Next, he held up glossy eight-by-ten cards with different colors painted on each one. “Tell me when you see the color blue, Melody,” he said in that voice that told me he thought this was all a waste of time.

When the blue card showed up, I pointed to it and made a noise. “Buh!” I said.

“Marvelous! Tremendous! Stupendous!” he shouted. He praised me like I had just passed the test to get into college. If I could have rolled my eyes, I would have.

Then he showed me green, so I kicked and made a noise, but my mouth can't make the G sound. The doctor looked disappointed.

He scribbled something on his clipboard, pulled out another stack of cards, then said, loudly, "I'm going to ask you some questions now, Melody. These might be hard, but do your best, okay?"

I just looked at him and waited while he placed the first set of cards in front of me.

"Number one. Which one of these is not like the others?"

Did he get this stuff from *Sesame Street*?

He showed me pictures of a tomato, a cherry, a round red balloon, and a banana. I know he was probably looking for the balloon as the answer, but that just seemed too easy. So I pointed to the banana because the first three were round and red, and the banana was not.

Dr. Hugely sighed and scribbled more notes. "Number two," he said. He showed me four more cards. This time there were pictures of a cow, a whale,

a camel, and an elephant. "Which animal gives birth to a calf?"

Now, I watch Animal Planet all the time. I know for a fact that *all* the animals he had pictured there had babies called a "calf." I thought doctors were supposed to be smart. What to do? I hit each picture slowly and carefully, then did it once more just to make sure he understood. I don't think he did.

I heard him mumble "cow" as he wrote more notes. It was clear he was giving up on me.

I noticed a copy of *Goodnight, Moon* on his bookshelf. I think it was written in Spanish. It was called *Buenas Noches, Luna*. That would have been fun to look at, but I had no way of telling him I'd like to see the book.

After watching *Sesame Street* and *Dora the Explorer* a million times, and sitting for hours watching the Spanish channels, I could understand quite a bit of Spanish if it was spoken slowly enough—and at least enough words to read the title of that book. He never thought to ask me about that, of course.

I knew the words and melodies of hundreds of songs—a symphony exploding inside my head with no one to hear it but me. But he never asked me about music.

I knew all the colors and shapes and animals that children my age were supposed to know, plus lots more. In my head I could count to one thousand—forward and backward. I could identify hundreds of words on sight. But all that was stuck inside.

Dr. Hugely, even though he had been to college for like, a million years, would never be smart enough to see inside of me. So I put on my handicapped face and took my mind back to last summer when Mom and I went to the zoo. I really liked the elephants, but talk about stink! Actually, Dr. Hugely sort of reminded me of one of them. My mom and the doctor had no idea why I was smiling as we rolled into the waiting room while he wrote up his evaluation of me. It didn't take long.

I'm always amazed at how adults assume I can't hear. They talk about me as if I'm invisible, figuring

I'm too retarded to understand their conversation. I learn quite a bit this way. But this conversation was really awful. He didn't even try to soften the news for my mom, who, I'm sure, felt like she got hit by a truck.

He began by clearing his throat. "Mrs. Brooks," he then said, "it is my opinion that Melody is severely brain-damaged and profoundly retarded."

Whoa! Even though I was only five, I had watched enough Easter Seals telethons to know this was bad. Really bad. I felt a thud in my gut.

My mom gasped, then said nothing for a full minute. Finally, she took a deep breath and protested quietly, "But I know she's bright. I can see it in her eyes."

"You love her. It's only normal to have wishful thinking," Dr. Hugely told her gently.

"No, she has a spark. More than that—a flame of real intelligence. I just know it," my mother insisted, sounding a little stronger.

"It takes time to accept the limitations of a beloved child. She has cerebral palsy, Mrs. Brooks."

“I know the *name* of her condition, Doctor,” my mother said with ice in her voice. “But a person is so much more than the name of a diagnosis on a chart!”

Good try, Mom, I was thinking. But already her voice was losing its edge, melting into the mushiness of helplessness.

“She laughs at jokes,” my mother told him, the ice in her voice replaced by desperation, “right at the punch line.” Mom’s voice faded. What she was saying sounded ridiculous, even to me, but I could see she just couldn’t find the words to explain her gut feeling that I had some smarts stuck in here.

Dr. Hugely looked from her to me. He shook his head, then said, “You’re lucky she has the ability to smile and laugh. But Melody will never be able to walk on her own or speak a single sentence. She will never be able to feed herself, take care of her own personal needs, or understand anything more than simple instructions. Once you accept that reality, you can deal with the future.” That was just plain mean.

My mom hardly ever cries. But she did that day.

She cried and cried and cried. Dr. Hugely had to give her a whole box of tissues. Both of them ignored me while she sobbed and he tried to find nice words to say to make her feel better. He didn’t do a very good job.

Finally, he gave her options. “You and your husband have several decisions to make,” he told Mom. “You can choose to keep her at home, or you can send her to a special school for the developmentally disabled. There aren’t many choices here locally.”

Where do they get those almost-pleasant-sounding phrases to describe kids like me?

Mom made a sound that could have been the mewling of a kitten. She was losing it.

Dr. Hugely continued. “You can also decide to put Melody in a residential facility where she can be cared for and kept comfortable.”

He pulled out a colorful brochure with a smiling child in a wheelchair on the cover and handed it to Mom. I trembled as she took it.

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“Let’s see,” the doctor said, “Melody is, ah, five now. That’s a perfect age for her to learn to adjust to a new environment. You and your husband can get on with your lives without her as a burden. In time, her memories of you will fade.”

I stared at Mom frantically. I didn’t want to be sent away. Was I a burden? I never thought about it like that. Maybe it *would* be easier for them if I weren’t around. I gulped. My hands got cold.

Mom wasn’t looking at me. She was staring daggers at Dr. Hugely. She crumpled up the tissue she held and stood up. “Let me tell you something, Doctor. There is no way in heaven or hell that we will be sending Melody away to a nursing home!”

I blinked. Was this my mother? I blinked again, and she was still there, right up in Dr. Hugely’s face!

She wasn’t finished. “You know what?” my

mother said as she angrily hurled the brochure into the trash can. “I think you’re cold and insensitive. I hope you never have a child with difficulties—you’d probably put it out with your trash!”

Dr. Hugely looked shocked.

“And what’s more,” she continued, “I think you’re wrong—I know you are! Melody has more brains hidden in her head than you’ll ever have, despite those fancy degrees from fancy schools you’ve got posted all over your walls!”

It was the doctor’s turn to blink.

“You’ve got it easy—you have all your physical functions working properly. You never have to struggle just to be understood. You think you’re smart because you have a medical degree?”

He was wise enough to keep his mouth shut and ashamed enough to lower his head.

Mom was on a roll. “You’re not so intelligent, sir — you’re just lucky! All of us who have all our faculties intact are just plain blessed. Melody is able to figure out things, communicate, and manage in a

world where *nothing* works right for her. She's the one with the true intelligence!"

She marched out of his office then, rolling me swiftly through the thick doors. In the hall we did a quick fist bump—well, the best I could manage. My hands were no longer cold.

"I'm taking you right now and enrolling you at Spaulding Street Elementary School," she announced with determination as we headed back to the car. "Let's get busy!"

CHAPTER 5

I have been at Spaulding Street Elementary School for five years. It's very ordinary—filled with kids, just like the schools I see on television shows.

Kids who chase each other on the playground and run down the hall to get to their desks just before the bell rings.

Kids who slide on icy patches in the winter and stomp in puddles in the spring.

Kids who shout and push.

Kids who sharpen their pencils, go to the board to do math problems, and open their books to read a poem.

Kids who write their answers on notebook paper and stuff their homework into backpacks.

Kids who throw food at each other in the lunchroom while they sip on juice boxes.

Kids who sing in the choir, learn to play the violin, and take gymnastics or ballet or swimming lessons after school.

Kids who shoot baskets in the gym. Their conversation fills the halls as they make plans, make jokes, make friends.

Kids who, for the most part, ignore kids like me.

The “special needs” bus, as they call it, has a cool wheelchair lift built in the door, and it picks me up every morning in front of my house. When we get to school, the drivers take their time and make sure all the belts and buckles are tight before they lower all of us with walkers or wheelchairs or crutches or helmets down on the bus lift, one by one, to the

ground. Then an aide will roll us, or help us walk, over to a waiting area.

When the weather is bright and sunny, we sit outside the school. I like to watch the “regular” kids as they play four-square while they wait for the bell to ring. They look like they’re having so much fun. They ask one another to play, but no one’s ever asked any of us. Not that we could, anyway, but it would be nice if somebody would say “Hi.” I guess the four-square players must think we’re all so backward that we don’t care that we get treated like we’re invisible.

I was so excited when Mom first enrolled me here. I thought I’d learn new things every day, but mostly it was simply something to do that took up time and got me out of the house. In second and third grades I probably learned more from the Sci Fi or Discovery Channels than I ever learned at school. My teachers were nice, most of the time, but they would’ve needed X-ray vision like Superman to see what was in my head.

I am in a special program with other children

with what they call “disabilities.” Our ages range from nine to eleven. Our “learning community”—what a joke— has been together since I started school. We never seem to move up and on like other classes. We just do what we did the year before, but with a new teacher. We don’t even get a new classroom each year.

So the same kids I’m with now were together in second grade with a teacher named Mrs. Tracy. As third graders we suffered through Mrs. Billups, who could have got the award for worst teacher in the world. There are six self-contained learning communities in our wing of the building—children with various conditions, from preschoolers to kids who ought to be in high school by now.

Our classroom, room H-5, might be nice for babies, but give me a break! It’s painted yellow and pink. One wall is covered with a sun with a happy face, a huge rainbow, and dozens of flowers—also with smiley faces. The other wall is painted with happy bunnies, kittens, and puppies. Bluebirds fly all

over a sky with perfect white clouds. Even the birds are smiling. I’m almost eleven years old, and if I have to look at puppies in paradise one more day, I think I’ll puke!

Ashley, the youngest in our group, actually does puke quite a bit. She’s nine, but she could pass for three. She has the smallest wheelchair I’ve ever seen.

She’s our fashion model. She is just plain beautiful — movie-star eyes; long, curly hair; and a tiny pixie nose. She looks like a doll that you see in a box on a shelf, except she’s prettier. Her mother dresses her in a perfectly matching outfit every day. If she has on a pink shirt, she wears pink slacks, pink socks, and two tiny pink bows in her hair. Even her little fingernails have been done to match.

When we do what the teachers and therapists call “group” activities, it’s hard for Ashley to participate. Her body is really stiff, and it’s tough for her to reach or grab or hold anything.

Every Christmas they make the kids in H-5 decorate a stupid six-foot Styrofoam snowman. I

don't know what the children in the regular classrooms get to do, but I know it's close to holiday time when whatever teacher we have that year pulls this thing out of a closet.

Mrs. Hyatt, the kindergarten teacher, loved that messed-up snowman, just three huge balls of yellowing Styrofoam, stuck together with pins and pipes.

"Let's decorate, children!" she said in her squeaky and annoying voice. "We are going to place decorations with Velcro or toothpicks or glue—whatever works—on Sydney, our H-5 holiday snowman!"

I don't know how old the snowman was at that point, but poor Sydney could not stand up straight. It leaned like a drunk who needed the wall to hold it up. Mrs. Hyatt gave us green snowflakes. Green? We were the dumb kids. I guess we weren't supposed to care. Brown garland. Stars in purple and pink.

"Do you like the snowman, Ashley?" Mrs. Hyatt asked her. It's almost impossible for Ashley to

communicate because her body is so tight. Her "talking board" has just two words on it—*yes* and *no*. She turned her head slightly to the left for *no*. I bet she wished she could knock the thing down.

Compared to Ashley, Carl is huge. Even though he's just nine, he's got a special wheelchair that's extra wide, and it takes two aides to lift him in and out of it. But he's good with his hands. He can move his own chair, and he can hold a pencil well enough to write his name. And stab a snowman.

Carl sticks pencils and rulers into the snowman's torso and pens into its head. Mrs. Hyatt used to clap her hands and say in her little squeaky voice, "Good job, Carl! So very creative!"

Carl would just laugh. He can talk, but only in very short sentences that usually have two parts. He has very strong opinions. "Snowman is dumb," he'd yell. "Very, very dumb."

I think he hates the snowman as much as I do. One year he pinned a diaper on the back and another on the front of the bottom third of the

snowman. The teacher let them stay. Carl knows diapers.

When he poops in his pants, which is almost every day, the whole room smells like the monkey house at the zoo. The aides are so patient with him, though. They snap on their rubber gloves, clean him up, change his clothes—he always wears sweats—and sit him back in his chair. Those aides deserve medals. We're not an easy bunch.

Maria, who has Down syndrome, is ten. She *loves* Christmas and Easter and Valentine's Day and Earth Day—it doesn't matter. If it's a holiday, Maria is ready to celebrate. She's wide around the middle, a little like our snowman, but Maria talks all the time. She's fun to be around, even though she insists on calling me "Melly-Belly."

Every year when it's time to bring out the ancient snowman, Maria jumps and cheers with real excitement. I'm pretty sure she's the only kid in our class who truly likes it.

"It's time for Sydney the Snowman!" she gasps.

"Can I put his hat on? Please? Please? Can I give him my red scarf? Sydney will love my red scarf!"

Mrs. Hyatt and every teacher after her always let Maria take charge of the green paper cutout candy canes and the purple-striped stars cut from wrapping paper. Maria kisses each decoration before attaching it with Velcro to the snowman. She hugs Sydney each afternoon before she goes home. And she cries when it's time to put Sydney away each year.

Even though she has trouble figuring out complicated stuff, Maria understands people and how they feel. "Why are you sad today, Melly-Belly?" she asked me one morning a couple of years ago. How could she have known that my goldfish had died the day before? I let her give me a big hug, and I felt better.

If Maria is our hugger, Gloria is our rocker. She rocks for hours in the corner under one of the dumb smiling flowers. The teachers are always trying to coax her out, but she wraps her arms around herself

like she's cold and keeps on rocking. She's autistic, I think. She can walk perfectly well, and she talks when she has something to say. It's always worth listening to.

"Snowman makes me shiver," she blurted out one day when the classroom was surprisingly quiet. Then she curled up in her corner and said nothing else until it was time to go home. She's never added one decoration to our snowman, but she does uncurl and seem to relax when a teacher puts on a CD of holiday music.

Willy Williams—yes, that's his real name—is eleven. I'm not sure what his diagnosis is. He yodels, like one of those Swiss people in a mountain-climbing commercial. He makes other noises, too—whistles and grunts and shrieks. He's never, ever quiet and never completely still. I sometimes wonder if he makes all those noises and movements in his sleep.

When Sydney the Snowman comes out of whatever box they keep him in during most of the

year, the teacher has to keep Willy at a distance because he'll knock the wobbly thing down. Willy's not trying to be mean—it's just that his arms and legs are in constant motion. He can't help it.

Mrs. Hyatt was the first teacher to witness Sydney topple over. "Why don't you add this bright pink bow to our snowman?" she had squeaked to Willy that first year.

All arms and movement, Willy tried, but the stupid pink bow went in one direction and poor Sydney went in the other. Three separate balls rolled across the room. Willy shrieked and whistled. I think I saw him smile as well.

Now, if Mrs. Hyatt had given Willy a baseball to glue to the snowman, it would have been placed more carefully. Willy *loves* baseball.

Our first-grade teacher, Mr. Gross, liked to play guessing games. Willy just burbled if the questions were about butterflies or boats, but watch out if the question was about baseball. He'd screech out the right answer before the yelps and bellows took over.

“Who was the first baseball player to hit sixty home runs in one season?” Mr. Gross asked.

“Babe Ruth!” Then a screech.

“Who broke Babe Ruth’s record of seven hundred fourteen home runs?”

“Hank Aaron!” Whooping noises.

“And who is the all-time hit king?” Mr. Gross seemed to be astonished at Willy’s knowledge.

“Pete Rose! Four-two-five-six. Eeek!”

“And who holds the lifetime touchdown record?”

Silence. Not even a squeak. Willy doesn’t bother with football. Or snowmen.

Sometimes when I look at Willy, though, I get the feeling that he really wishes he could be still and silent. I watch him as he closes his eyes, frowns up his face, and concentrates. For just a few minutes he’s quiet. He takes a deep breath, like a swimmer coming up for air. When he opens his eyes, the noises start all over. And then he always looks sad.

Jill uses a walker because her left foot drags a little as she walks. She’s thin and pale and very quiet.

When Sydney comes out for the season, Jill’s eyes are almost blank. It’s like the light has been clicked off. She cries a lot. Mr. Gross used to put decorations in her hand and try to make it easy for her to join the activity, but it was like helping a store mannequin. I heard an aide say she was in a car accident when she was a baby. I think that’s awful—to start out okay, then lose the ability to do stuff.

Freddy, who’s almost twelve, is the oldest in our group. He uses an electric wheelchair. He loves that thing. He tells me every chance he gets, “Freddy go zoom! Freddy go zoom!” He grins, pretends he’s putting on a helmet, then he pushes the controller to its max position and takes off across the room. Of course, his speed control has two settings—slow and slower. But to Freddy, he’s at the racetrack.

He zooms his electric chair around the raggedy old snowman, tossing Velcroed stars and bells at it, asking, “Snowman go zoom zoom?”

Well, after Willy sent it flying, and Carl tried to stab it with pencils, I guess it was a fair question!

Every year Freddy adds his own touches to the snowman— NASCAR and NASA decals like the ones on his chair. If you ask Freddy what date it is, he can't tell you. But if you want to know who won the Daytona 500, Freddy will know.

And then there's me.

I hate the stupid snowman. But I toss tinsel at it like they ask me to. It's easier than trying to explain.

I have a large Plexiglas tray that fastens to the arms of my chair. It serves as a food tray as well as a communication board. When I was younger, Mom pasted dozens of words on it, but I was still limited to only a handful of common nouns, verbs, and adjectives, some names, and a bunch of smiley faces. There are also a few necessary phrases, like, *I need to go to the bathroom, please* and *I'm hungry*, but most people—even little kids—need to say more than that in a day. Duh!

I've got *please* and *thank you, yes, no, and maybe* close together on the right-hand side. On the left are the names of people in my family, kids in my class,

and teachers. The name "Sydney" is not included.

There's an alphabet strip at the top, so I can spell out words, and a row of numbers under that, so I can count or say how many or talk about time. But for the majority of my life, I've had the communication tools of a little kid on my board. It's no wonder everybody thinks I'm retarded.

I hate that word, by the way. *Retarded*.

I like all the kids in room H-5, and I understand their situations better than anybody, but there's nobody else like *me*. It's like I live in a cage with no door and no key. And I have no way to tell someone how to get me out.

Oh, wait! I forgot about Mrs. V!

CHAPTER 6

Mrs. Violet Valencia lives next door to us. Violets are purple, and Valencia oranges are, well, orange! Purple oranges are just plain unusual, and so is she. She's a big woman—about six feet tall, with the biggest hands I've ever seen. They're huge! I bet she could put a full-size basketball in each of her palms and still have room left over. If Mrs. V is, well, like a tree, then my mom is a twig next to

her.

I was about two years old when I first started hanging out at Mrs. V's house. Mom and Dad hardly left me with anybody at first, but sometimes their work schedules overlapped, and they needed a third person to help out. Mom said Mrs. V was the very first visitor when I first came home from the hospital, the first person to just pick me up like any other baby. A lot of my parents' friends had been scared to even touch me, but not Mrs. V!

Mrs. V wears huge, flowing dresses—must be miles of material in those things—all in crazy color combinations. Bubble-gum pink, with fire-engine red, with peachy sherbet, with bright cinnamon. And all shades of orange and purple, of course. She told me she makes the dresses herself. I guess she'd have to. I have never seen anything like them in any store in the mall. Or in a hospital, either.

Mrs. V and Mom used to work together as nurses at the hospital. Mom told me the children there had been crazy about her. She wore the same bright

outfits in the preemie ward, the kids' cancer ward, the children's burn unit. "Color brings life and hope to these children!" she'd announce boldly, daring anybody to disagree. I guess nobody did.

I remember sitting on Mrs. V's porch that very first time. Mom and Dad looked concerned, but Mrs. V held me tightly and bounced me on her knees. She must have a hidden microphone under those flowing clothes—she has one of those voices that can make anybody shut up, turn, and listen.

"Of course I'll watch Melody," she'd said with certainty.

"Well, Melody is, well, you know, really special," Dad said hesitantly.

"*All* kids are special," Mrs. V had replied with authority. "But this one has hidden superpowers. I'd love to help her find them."

"We can't possibly pay you what this is worth to us," Dad began.

Mrs. V had shrugged and said with a smile, "I'll appreciate whatever you can give me."

My dad looked sheepish. “Well, thanks. And I’ll get that ramp finished this weekend. I just need to make one more trip to the lumberyard.”

“Now, *that* will be a big help,” Mrs. V had said with a nod.

“Melody can be a handful,” Mom had warned.

Mrs. V lifted me into the air. “I’ve got big hands.”

“We want her to reach her highest potential,” Dad added.

“Oh, gag me!” Mrs. V said, startling him. “Don’t get bogged down in all those touchy-feely words and phrases you read in books on disabled kids. Melody is a child who can learn and will learn if she sticks with me!”

Dad looked embarrassed. But then he grinned. “Bring her back in twenty years.”

“You’ll have her back home by suppertime!”

So most workdays I’d end up at Mrs. Valencia’s place for a couple of hours until Mom or Dad could get home. When I got older, I went over to Mrs. V’s every afternoon after school. I don’t know how much

they paid her, but it couldn’t have been enough.

From the very beginning, Mrs. Valencia gave me no sympathy. Instead of sitting me in the special little chair my parents had bought for me, she plopped me on my back in the middle of the floor on a large, soft quilt. The first time she did that, I looked up at her like she was crazy. I cried. I screeched. She ignored me, walked away, and flipped on her CD player. Loud marching band music blared through the room. I liked it.

Then she came back and put my favorite toy—a rubber monkey—a few inches from my head. I wanted that monkey. It squeaked when you touched it. But it may as well have been a million miles away. I was on my back, stuck like a turtle. I screamed louder.

Mrs. V sat down on the quilt. “Turn over, Melody,” she said quietly. Sometimes she can make her voice really soft.

I was so shocked, I stopped yelling. I couldn’t turn over. Didn’t she know that? Was she nuts?

She wiped my nose with a tissue. “You can turn yourself over, Melody. I know you understand every word I say to you, and I know you can do this. Now roll!”

Actually, I’d never bothered to try very hard to roll anywhere. I’d fallen off the sofa a couple of times, and it hurt, so I usually just waited for Mom or Dad to move me to a comfortable position.

“Look at how you’re lying. You’re already on your side—halfway there. Use all that screaming and hollering energy you’ve got to take you to another position. Toss your right arm over and concentrate!”

So I did. I strained. I reached. I tried so hard, I farted! Mrs. V cracked up. But slowly, slowly, I felt my body rolling to the right. And then, unbelievably, *plop!* I was on my stomach. I was so proud of myself, I screeched.

“I told you so,” Mrs. V said, victory in her voice. “Now go get that monkey!”

I knew better than to protest. So I reached for it. The monkey was now only two inches from my

hand. I tried to scoot. My legs kept doing the opposite of what my head wanted them to do. I wiggled. I grabbed a fistful of the quilt and pulled. The monkey got closer!

“You’re a smart little cookie,” Mrs. V told me.

I gave the quilt another tug, and finally, gradually, I had the monkey in my hand. I clutched it, and it squeaked as if it were glad to see me. I grinned and made it squeak again and again.

“After that workout, you must be hungry,” she said. She fed me a vanilla milk shake first, then my vegetables and noodles. Mrs. Valencia *always* serves dessert first. And I always eat all my food—the healthy part, and the yummy part, too. It’s our secret.

Mrs. V is the only person who lets me drink soda. Coke. Sprite. Tahitian Treat. I love the nose-tickling burp. Mom and Dad mostly give me milk and juice. Mello Yello is my favorite. Mrs. V even started calling me that.

At Mrs. V’s house I learned to scoot and then to crawl. I’d never win a baby-crawling contest, but by

the time I was three, I had learned to get across a room. She made me figure out how to flip myself over from front to back and back to front again. She was tough on me. She let me fall out of my wheelchair onto pillows so I could learn how best to catch myself.

“Suppose somebody forgets to fasten that seat belt of yours,” she said in that voice that sounded like she was chewing gravel. “You better know what to do, or you’ll bust your head wide open.”

I didn’t want a busted head, so we practiced. She’d send me back home, tell Mom I had a good dinner and a good poop—I have no idea why parents think that’s so important—then wink at me. I was like her secret mission.

Once I started school, however, I discovered I had a much bigger problem than just falling out of my chair. I needed words. How was I supposed to learn anything if I couldn’t talk? How was I supposed to answer questions? Or ask questions?

I knew a lot of words, but I couldn’t read a book. I

had a million thoughts in my head, but I couldn’t share them with anybody. On top of that, people didn’t really expect the kids in H-5 to learn much anyway. It was driving me crazy!

I couldn’t have been much more than six when Mrs. V figured out what I needed. One afternoon after school, after a snack of ice cream with caramel sauce, she flipped through the cable channels and stopped at a documentary about some guy named Stephen Hawking.

Now I’m interested in almost anything that has a wheelchair in it. Duh! I even like the Jerry Lewis telethon! Turns out Stephen Hawking has something called ALS, and he can’t walk or talk, and he’s probably the smartest man in the world, and *everybody* knows it! That is so cool.

I bet he gets really frustrated sometimes.

After the show went off, I got real quiet.

“He’s like you, sort of, isn’t he?” Mrs. V asked.

I pointed to **yes** on my board, then pointed to **no**.

“I don’t follow you.” She scratched her head.

I pointed to **need** on my board, then to **read**.
Need/read. Need/read.

“I know you can read lots of words, Melody,” Mrs. V said.

I pointed again. **More.** I could feel tears coming.
More. More. More.

“Melody, if you had to choose, which would you rather be able to do—walk or talk?”

Talk. I pointed to my board. I hit the word again and again. **Talk. Talk. Talk.**

I have *so* much to say.

So Mrs. V made it her new mission to give me language. She ripped all the words off my communication board and started from scratch. She made the new words smaller, so more could fit. Every single space on my talking board got filled with names and pictures of people in my life, questions I might need to ask, and a big variety of nouns and verbs and adjectives, so I could actually compose something that looked like a sentence! I could ask, *Where is my book bag?* or say, *Happy*

Birthday, Mom, just by pointing with my thumb.

I have magic thumbs, by the way. They work perfectly. The rest of my body is sort of like a coat with the buttons done up in the wrong holes. But my thumbs came out with no flaws, no glitches. Just my thumbs. Go figure.

Every time Mrs. V would add new words, I learned them quickly, used them in sentences, and was hungry for more. I wanted to READ!

So she made flash cards.

Pink for nouns.

Blue for verbs.

Green for adjectives.

Piles and piles of words I learned to read. Little words, like *fish* and *dish* and *swish*. I like rhyming words—they’re easy to remember. It’s like a “buy one, get the rest free” sale at the mall.

I learned big words, like *caterpillar* and *mosquito*, and words that follow crazy rules, like *knock* and *gnome*. I learned all the days of the week, months of the year, all the planets, oceans, and continents.

Every single day I learned new words. I sucked them in and gobbled them up like they were Mrs. V's cherry cake.

And then she would stretch out the cards on the floor, position me on a big pillow so I could reach them, and I'd push the cards into sentences with my fists. It was like stringing the beads of a necklace together to make something really cool.

I liked to make her laugh, so I'd put the words into wacky order sometimes.

The blue fish will run away. He does not want to be dinner.

She also taught me words for all the music I heard at home. I learned to tell the difference between Beethoven and Bach, between a sonata and a concerto. She'd pick a selection on a CD, then ask me the composer.

Mozart. I'd point to the correct card from the choices she'd set in front of me. Then I'd point to the color blue on my board.

"Huh?" she asked.

When she played a selection from Bach, I'd point to the correct composer, then once again touch the color blue on my board. I also touched purple.

She looked confused. I searched around for the right words to explain what I meant. I wanted her to understand that music was colorful when I heard it. I finally realized that even Mrs. V couldn't figure out everything in my head.

We kept going.

Sometimes she'd play hip-hop music, sometimes oldies. Music, and the colors it produced, flowed around her as easily as her clothing.

Mrs. V took me outside in all kinds of weather. One day she actually let me sit outside in the rain. It was steaming hot, and I was sticky and irritable. It must have been about ninety degrees outside. We were sitting on her porch, watching the storm clouds gather. She told me the names of all the clouds and made up stories about them. I knew that later she'd have the names of every kind of cloud on word cards for me.

“Big old Nimbus up there—he’s black and powerful and can blow all the other clouds out of the sky. He wants to marry Miss Cumulus Cloud, but she’s too soft and pretty to be bothered with such a scary guy. So he gets mad and makes storms,” she told me.

Finally, old Nimbus got his way, and the rain came down around me and Mrs. V. It rained so hard, I couldn’t see past the porch. The wind blew, and the wet coolness of the rain washed over us. It felt so good. A small leak on Mrs. V’s porch let a few drops of rain fall on my head. I laughed out loud.

Mrs. V gave me a funny look, then hopped up. “You want to feel it all?” she asked.

I nodded my head. *Yes, yes, yes.*

She rolled me down the ramp Dad had built, both of us getting wetter every second. She stopped when we got to the grass, and we let the rain drench us. My hair, my clothes, my eyes and arms and hands. Wet. Wet. Wet. It was awesome. The rain was warm, almost like bathwater. I laughed and laughed.

Eventually, Mrs. V rolled me back up the ramp and into the house, where she dried me off, changed my clothes, and gave me a cup of chocolate milk. She dried off my chair, and by the time Dad came to pick me up, the rain had stopped and everything was dry once more.

I dreamed of chocolate clouds all night.

_____ **CH 7** _____

