

CHAPTER 25

OMG! What a night! I still can't believe how everything turned out once the championship round began. That's when Mr. Kingsley explained, "The questions this time will be a bit more difficult. Scoring, however, will be the same. The team with the best score out of one hundred possible points will be our champion."

He picked up the cards that contained the quiz

hooks me up. Then she places the morning paper on top of it.

There I sat plastered on the front page of the newspaper. In color.

“Wow!” I type.

“The article is all about the team winning the competition, but yours is the only picture they used. Interesting.”

“Why me?”

Mom smiles quickly. “Because you are unique and wonderful and lots more interesting than ordinary fifth graders, I guess,” she says. “The whole article seems to be focused on you.”

“Team kids won’t like that,” I type.

“I’m sure they’ll be happy for you, sweetheart.”

“No, they won’t.”

“Here, listen to this.”

She reads me the article: “Spaulding Street Elementary’s talented academic team of fifth and sixth graders won the local Whiz Kids quiz competition last night by a score of eighty-six to

eighty-five. With stunning skill and knowledge, they answered questions far above their grade level to defeat seven other teams.”

“Makes us sound smart,” I tap.

“And so you are,” Mom replies.

“Math questions made me sweat.” I get clammy under the arms just thinking about them.

Mom continues. “Ooh, here’s the part about you. Listen to this! ‘One outstanding member of the Spaulding team is Melody Brooks, an eleven-year-old who has been diagnosed with cerebral palsy. In spite of her physical challenges, Melody’s quick and capable mental abilities were able to shine as she led her team to victory.’”

“They will hate me,” I type glumly. Butterscotch, who still sleeps in my room, nuzzles my hand. She always seems to know how I feel, but it doesn’t help this time.

“Oh, don’t exaggerate. I think it’s a lovely article, and your friends should be proud.”

“You don’t get it.”

questions and smiled. “Here is question number one. What is ‘diplopia’?

- A. Double vision
- B. Left-handedness
- C. A disease of the gums
- D. A form of cancer.”

Oh, boy! He wasn’t kidding! This was going to be a killer round. I was sure the answer was A, though. Kind of.

When the answer was revealed, “double vision” was correct.

Whew!

Rose, Connor, and I got it right. Claire missed it. Everyone on the Perry Valley team answered it correctly. The score was three to four.

“Number two,” Mr. Kingsley said. “Who is the composer of *Rhapsody in Blue*?

- A. Mozart
- B. Gershwin
- C. Copeland
- D. Beethoven.”

Bing! Bing! Bing! Bing!

Thanks to my parents and Mrs. V, that was a little easier. I pushed the button for B. One person on the Perry Valley team got it wrong, and Claire messed up as well. That made the score six to seven, with Perry Valley ahead. Everybody could feel the tension.

The next twenty questions covered things like lions in the jungle, gravity in space, authors of famous books, and math. Some of those I even got right.

Bing! Bing! Bing! Bing!

Even though Connor aced a hard spelling problem and Claire came through on a difficult history question, Perry Valley kept staying one or two points ahead of us.

It was getting near the end of the round. Perry Valley had surged ahead on a math question and was up by three points. It looked pretty grim for us, with a score of seventy-eight to eighty-one. I glanced at Connor. Sweat dripped from his nose.

Then Mr. Kingsley asked, “The condition in which a person may be able to hear colors or visualize flavors when music is played is called:

- A. Synthesis
- B. Symbiosis
- C. Synesthesia
- D. Symbolism.”

I grinned and punched in C. Not only was it one of Mrs. V’s vocabulary words, it was me!

I breathed a sigh of relief when I realized that Connor and Claire and Rose had also chosen the right answer. When the results were tallied, only one of the Perry Valley kids had gotten it right.

The score stood at eighty-two to eighty-two. It was time for the very last question. This one would determine the group that would go to Washington. I glanced at Rose and the others. I think we all gulped at the same time.

“Our last question of the evening,” Mr. Kingsley began, “is a mathematics problem.”

I groaned inside. *There goes our trip to*

Washington! I may as well go back to room H-5 and hide there for the next thousand years.

“Number twenty-five,” Mr. Kingsley said slowly. “Lisa gets up every morning and gets ready for school. She takes twenty-two minutes to get dressed, eighteen minutes to eat breakfast, and ten minutes to walk to school. What time should Lisa get up so she can arrive at school at 7:25 a.m.?”

- A. 6:15 a.m.
- B. 6:20 a.m.
- C. 6:25 a.m.
- D. 6:35 a.m.”

I need to add, then subtract. How do I subtract time? I need to see a clock! I’m getting all mixed up! Time is running out! I can’t mess up now!

It could have been C, but it might have been D. I thought a moment more, then I pushed D, feeling like I was going to throw up. The answers lit up on the screen. Everybody on our team had answered D. Either we were all correct or all really terrible at figuring out time problems. Three students on the

Perry Valley team had answered *D*. One of them had answered *C*.

“Well, it looks like we have a winner, ladies and gentlemen! I’m extremely pleased to announce that the team that will represent us in Washington, D.C., this year, the team we hope to see on *Good Morning America*, with a score of eighty-six to eighty-five, is . . .” He paused for effect. “Spaulding Street Elementary School!”

I couldn’t help it. I squealed. I kicked. My arms jerked crazily. I tried *really* hard to control it, but I just couldn’t help it. My body went a little wacko on me.

“Shut her up!” I heard Claire hiss.

“Shhh,” Rose whispered through clenched teeth.

“Thank you for watching our telecast,” Mr. Kingsley said, throwing a quick glance at me. “Please join us in two weeks when we televise the finals from Washington. This is Charles Kingsley, good night.”

He signaled that he was finished, the cameras blinked to dark, and the lights, blessedly, clicked off.

I couldn’t stop kicking. My arms acted like windup toys gone bananas. I screamed with joy. At least nobody noticed this time, because hoots and hollers abounded as dozens of people stormed the stage.

Dad balanced Penny in one arm and the camcorder in another. Mom, Catherine, and Mrs. V rushed over to me and almost smothered me with hugs. Mrs. V tried to look as if she weren’t surprised, but her grin seemed to be permanently attached.

Mr. Dimming, the alternates, and all the parents of the rest of the kids on the team cheered and jumped and patted one another on the back. One of the parents streamed confetti over us. Balloons appeared from nowhere. Somebody in the studio turned the speakers up loud and played the song “Celebration.” People started to dance.

It seemed as if a million pictures were taken. Amazingly, lots were being taken of me. I did my best to calm down and relax.

“Smile, Melody!” called a guy with a baseball cap.

Click! Flash!

“Can somebody sit her up a little straighter in her chair?”

Click! Flash!

“Get a picture of the kid in the wheelchair!” I think that guy was a reporter.

Click! Flash!

“Where’s the winning team?” another reporter asked loudly. “We want a team picture for the newspaper! Why don’t you kids stand around Melody? Okay now, smile!”

Click! Flash!

I could barely see. Blue dots danced in front of my eyes.

“We want the winning team for a TV interview!” someone else called out. “Can we have them over here?”

People were shuffled around, and a stagehand helped set us up. Connor, Rose, and Claire sat in chairs next to me. Amanda, Molly, Elena, and Rodney stood behind us. Mr. Dimming stood next

to Rodney.

I hoped that my hair looked okay and that I wouldn’t look too goofy.

The reporter silenced the crowd as the cameraman lined up and got into position.

“Good evening. This is Elizabeth Ochoa of Channel Six News. I’m here in our studio as we speak to students from Spaulding Street Elementary School, victorious members of the winning team of the Whiz Kids competition held here tonight. These are eight of the brightest young people in our community, who buzzed their way to victory tonight. Let’s meet them. We’ll start with the alternates in the back row, the youngsters who will fill in should one of the team members not be able to participate. Please tell me your names and ages,” she asked as she put the microphone in front of each student.

“Amanda Firestone, age twelve.”

“Molly North, age eleven.”

“Elena Rodriguez, age twelve.”

“Rodney Mosul, age eleven and a half”

That got a laugh.

Ms. Ochoa continued. “And seated in front of me is the championship team! Please tell me your names as well.”

“My name is Claire Wilson, and I’m eleven, and I got more right than anyone else on my team.”

“Good for you!” Ms. Ochoa said. “I know you studied hard for this.” The reporter moved quickly to Rose. “And you are . . . ?”

“Rose Spencer, age eleven,” Rose said, sounding shy.

“What stands out for you this evening?” the reporter asked as the camera moved in closer.

“I was on last year’s team, and we lost by only a few points, so it’s real exciting to win this time. I’m very proud of our team.” Rose was beaming.

“Great answer! And we’re proud of you as well,” Ms. Ochoa said. “And now to this tall young man. Your name, sir?” she asked Connor.

“Connor Bates. Hi, Mom!” Connor spoke loudly

into the mike.

“Do you remember the hardest question you were given tonight?” the reporter asked him.

“I thought all the questions were super easy,” Connor said with a grin. “I missed a few on purpose so the other contestants wouldn’t feel bad!”

Ms. Ochoa burst into a tinkly laugh. “How does it feel to be on a team with your very special team member?” she asked.

“Hey. Melody is okay. She’s really smart. Let me introduce you to—”

But I wasn’t about to let him steal my thunder. **“My name is Melody Brooks, and I’m eleven years old,”** my machine said loudly and clearly.

The reporter looked amazed. “Well, this is astounding! How does it feel to be part of the winning team, Melody?”

I pressed my key for **“Super.”**

She laughed. “Was it difficult to study and prepare for the competition?” Ms. Ochoa asked.

“No. Lots of people helped me.”

“What was the hardest part about participating tonight?”

“Hoping I wouldn’t mess up!”

She smiled. “We all feel like that sometimes. Are you excited about traveling to Washington, D.C.?”

“Oh, yes!”

“Have you ever been there before?”

“No.”

“How will being on the winning team change your life at school?”

I thought that was a good question.

“Not much,” I admitted. Then the reporter waited patiently while I took the time to tap the right words.

“Maybe kids will talk to me more.”

“I talk to her all the time,” Claire interjected.

Both Rose and Connor looked at her with frowns.

“Huh?” Rose said.

Ms. Ochoa moved away from me and over to Claire. “So, you consider yourself to be Melody’s friend?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Claire said with a bounce of her

cinnamon-colored curls. “She and I eat lunch together every day and test each other on questions for the quiz team. Melody is a lot smarter than she looks.”

Rose raised her hand to speak, but the reporter shook her head. “I’m so sorry, but we’re out of time,” she told Rose. To the camera, she said, “In addition to a great group of kids, we’ve just met two remarkable young women—best friends in spite of their differences and members of the winning, Washington-bound Whiz Kids quiz team. Congratulations to you all!”

I was stunned. Claire?

CHAPTER 26

In the midst of all the commotion Mr. Dimming seemed to get an inspiration. "Let's go out to dinner to celebrate!" he announced as the last of the studio lights were turned off.

"Great idea!" Connor said immediately.

"I'm starving!" said Amanda. "Even though I wasn't on camera, I've been too nervous to eat all day."

"Me too!" Elena added.

“How about Linguini’s?” Connor suggested. “They’ve got all-you-can-eat spaghetti.” Leave it to Connor to know all the best places to eat.

“They might go out of business after you show up, Connor,” Mr. Dimming said with a laugh. “Don’t go embarrassing me, now.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. D. My max is about twelve bowls of spaghetti.”

“Linguini’s is perfect,” Rose’s dad said. “It’s walking distance—just around the corner from the studio. These kids deserve a special night out!”

I looked at Mom, not sure if this was a good idea.

Then Elena walked over to me and said, “You’ll come too, won’t you, Melody?”

“Yeah, Melody,” Rose added, “come with us. You did really great tonight.”

“We couldn’t have won without you,” Connor said as he buttoned up his coat.

Their words made me feel like one of the helium balloons that some families had brought.

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” Molly said, glancing

at Claire.

Balloons do pop.

“You weren’t up there,” Connor reminded Molly.

“So, you comin’ or not?” Rose asked.

“Sure,” I tapped. “**It will be fun.**” I glanced at Mom again, who nodded. Dad took Penny home, and Mrs. V gave me a hug and promised she’d see me in the morning.

The air was brisk and the conversation silly as we headed for the restaurant.

“How many windows do you think are in that office building?” Connor shouted, pointing to the tallest one we could see.

“Five thousand two hundred and seventy-four,” Rose answered.

“Man, you’re good!” Rodney said. “How did you know that?”

“How do you think I got on the quiz team?” Rose told him. “I’ve got smarts!”

“She’s just guessing,” Molly told Rodney. “You believe anything.”

The restaurant had been in that location for years. The outside entrance was designed to look like a bistro from a small Italian village. Painted grape leaves and tiny white lights decorated the bricks around the door.

The door.

When Connor's dad opened it for everyone to enter, Connor and Rodney bounded up the steps.

The steps.

Five stone steps led upstairs to the dining area. Everyone, including Mr. Dimming, rushed past me and Mom. Finally, Connor's dad, the last to go up, looked at me, looked at the stairs, and the lightbulb came on.

"Uh, do you need some help?" he asked. He was large, like his son. I bet he could swallow a few bowls of pasta as well.

Mom replied, "Would you be so kind as to ask an employee where their wheelchair ramp is located?"

As if glad to have something to do, Mr. Bates dashed up the steps. Mom and I sat there in the cold.

Alone.

A waiter dressed in black rushed down moments later. "I'm so sorry. We have an elevator in the back, but it went on the fritz this afternoon. The technician is coming to fix it first thing in the morning."

"That's not going to help us tonight, is it?" Mom told him. Her voice was tight but not angry.

"I'd be glad to help you carry her up the steps," he offered.

"No," I tapped. My eyes begged Mom.

Mom told him, "Just hold the door for us, young man. We'll be fine."

He did just that. Mom turned her back to the stairs, got a good grip on my chair, tilted it back slightly, and took a deep breath. I was so glad we had decided on the manual chair this morning.

Mom gently rolled the back wheels up the edge of the first stone step.

Pull. Roll up. Bump. First step.

Pull. Roll up. Bump. Second step.

Pull. Roll up. Bump. Third step.

She paused and took another breath. We'd done this before. Many times.

Pull. Roll up. Bump. Fourth step.

Pull. Roll up. Bump. Fifth step.

Then we finally rolled into the dining room, which was crowded with noisy, laughing customers.

"Over here, Melody!" Mr. Dimming called as he saw us.

Mom led me over to our very large table, and I was relieved to see that the group had left a spot for me. With all the kids on the team plus their parents, we took up a big chunk of the table space in the place.

In some restaurants the tables are too low for my chair, but this time I was able to slide perfectly into place. Mom helped me take off my coat, then sat in the seat next to me. She gulped the water from her glass and asked for a refill.

The waitress began to take orders.

Rodney and his parents ordered a large mushroom and onion pizza. "We're vegetarians,"

Rodney explained. I had no idea.

"Can I get a steak, Dad?" Connor asked.

His dad clapped him on the back. "Sure, I think I'll have one myself. For this one night, you get anything you want!"

Connor's eyes got large. "A whole chocolate cake?"

"You'll barf, boy," his dad replied.

"I want the pasta delight," Rose told the waitress. "With extra cheese."

"Me too!" said Amanda.

"May I have the spaghetti and meatballs, please?" Elena asked.

Claire and Molly both ordered lasagna.

When the waitress got to me and Mom, I was ready.

"I'll have mac and cheese, please," I made Elvira say.

The waitress looked a little surprised, since most of the machine was tucked under the table, but she was cool and acted as if she got orders from Medi-

Talkers every day. “Sure, hon. Comin’ right up. You want some salad with that?”

“No, thanks.”

She gave me a real big smile, then took Mom’s order. Only my mom would order baked fish at an Italian restaurant!

As we waited for our food, the cheerful mood continued. Our tables were covered with white paper instead of tablecloths, so everybody, including the adults, had been given crayons and markers.

“Look at this—I drew a giant monster rabbit!” Connor said. He glanced at Rose’s drawing, then added large green teeth to his own. “And it’s gonna eat that wimpy bug you just drew,” he told her.

Rose laughed. “Well, this is a poisonous spider, and it’s gonna bite your silly old rabbit!”

Rodney and Connor then lined up all the salt and pepper shakers and started tossing sugar packets over the barricade with forks and spoons as catapults.

But I noticed that Claire, who was sitting next to

Rodney, was strangely quiet and didn’t even pick up a crayon.

“Engage the enemy!” Connor cried. “Score!”

“You weren’t even in my territory, man! Besides, you tossed the pink fake sugar stuff. You only get half a point for that stuff!”

I sat and watched my teammates do such ordinary things. Drawing. Laughing. Teasing. Joking. I really tried hard to look like I was having fun too, but all I wanted to do was go home.

When the waitress finally brought the food, forks became important for eating and the war ended suddenly. Conversation slowed down as everybody dug into their meals. Connor took a huge bite of his steak.

“Mmm, this is the bomb,” he said with his mouth full.

Mom’s fish looked a little, well, fishy, as she picked at it with her fork. She and I were thinking the same thing, I knew.

My food sat untouched in front of me.

Our family goes out to restaurants every once in a while. Actually, Penny is more of a problem in a restaurant than I am because she's wiggly and excitable and she's likely to throw her peas on the floor.

Usually, eating out doesn't bother me. Mom and Dad take turns spooning food into my mouth, and I ignore anyone who is rude enough to stare.

But this was different. At school I eat in a special area of the cafeteria with the other disabled kids. The aides put bibs on us, feed us, and wipe our mouths when we're done. With the exception of that sip of Coke at the competition, nobody on the team had ever really seen me eat. Rather, be fed.

I didn't know what to do. My food sat there getting cold. I looked at Mom. She looked at me. She picked up the spoon and looked at me with the question on her face.

I nodded. Very carefully, she placed a spoonful of pasta in my mouth. I swallowed. I did not spill.

I saw Molly poke Claire, and they exchanged

looks.

Mom spooned one more portion into my mouth. I swallowed. I did not spill. We continued, one spoonful at a time.

I was so hungry.

Nobody said anything, but I saw them look down at their plates with way too much attention. It got quiet. Even Connor stopped talking.

Finally, even though my plate was still full, I pushed it away.

"Would you like to take this home, Melody?" Mom whispered.

I nodded yes, hugely relieved, and she signaled for the waitress, who also brought dessert menus.

Being reminded of cake and ice cream cheered up Connor, who did not order a whole chocolate cake, but did order two slices. Rodney ordered apple pie, while Rose asked for pudding.

Claire ended up taking her food home in a box as well. She had eaten almost nothing and barely said two words all evening.

“So, what did you think about that final question? That was *too* hard!” Rodney said.

“Piece of cake!” Connor replied, laughing at his own joke. He smeared whipped cream over his second piece of cake.

“Did you see the *hair* on that announcer?” Amanda teased. “It never moved!”

“Must have been made of plastic,” Rose said, laughing.

“What are you wearing to the D.C. competition?” Rose asked Claire.

Claire just shrugged.

“I wonder if we’ll get to visit the White House while we’re there,” Amanda mused. “That would be awesome.”

“I believe it’s on our agenda for Saturday,” Mr. Dimming replied enthusiastically. “I’m excited about that as well!”

“So, what’s with you and Melody being best friends, Claire?” Elena asked.

Claire didn’t answer, but she rubbed her hand

over her forehead. “I don’t feel so good,” she said weakly. “Is it hot in here?” No one had time to answer, for at that moment Claire stood up suddenly, clamped her hand over her mouth, and stumbled from her seat.

“Are you okay?” Mr. Dimming asked.

Before he could finish the question, Claire threw up all over his new shoes.

“Ooh, gross!” Connor said, obviously trying not to laugh.

“Poor thing,” Rose said.

“Whoa, what a stink, man!” Rodney covered his nose.

Claire’s mom rushed her to the bathroom.

Mr. Dimming rushed out as well, I guess to clean off his shoes.

I wondered if Claire felt as embarrassed as I had while Mom was feeding me.

Our little victory celebration was clearly over. Parents gathered coats and checks and paid their tabs. Claire returned from the restroom looking

pale. No one mentioned the incident. We all headed for the steps.

Hmmm, I thought. Claire gets sick in the middle of a crowded restaurant, yet I'm the one everybody looks at sideways.

They all had to wait for me and Mom. We took our time.

Push gently. Roll down. Bump. Top step.

Push gently. Roll down. Bump. Next step.

Push gently. Roll down. Bump. Third step.

Five bumps down to the bottom of the steps.

And I was still *so* hungry.

CHAPTER 27

The next morning Mom bounds into my room holding a newspaper. "Good morning, my rock star," she greets me. "Guess what?"

Rock star? She's tripping. I turn to look at her. My face says, *What?*

"You're famous!"

Huh?

She gets me out of bed, straps me into my chair, unplugs the Medi-Talker from the charger, and

hooks me up. Then she places the morning paper on top of it.

There I sat plastered on the front page of the newspaper. In color.

“Wow!” I type.

“The article is all about the team winning the competition, but yours is the only picture they used. Interesting.”

“Why me?”

Mom smiles quickly. “Because you are unique and wonderful and lots more interesting than ordinary fifth graders, I guess,” she says. “The whole article seems to be focused on you.”

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“No, they won’t.”

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eighty-five. With stunning skill and knowledge, they answered questions far above their grade level to defeat seven other teams.”

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“They will hate me,” I type glumly. Butterscotch, who still sleeps in my room, nuzzles my hand. She always seems to know how I feel, but it doesn’t help this time.

“Oh, don’t exaggerate. I think it’s a lovely article, and your friends should be proud.”

“You don’t get it.”

Mom ignores me and proceeds to get me ready for school. Two blue T-shirts—one to wear and one to pack, just in case. Two pairs of pants. She never picks out jeans. I decide not to argue. I have a feeling it is not going to be a good day.

“What a great photo of you! I’m going to make sure I get extra copies of the paper,” she chatters cheerfully as she tugs on my socks before putting on my sneakers. “I’ve got to make sure everybody at work sees this.”

Dad has finished dressing Penny, so he brings her into my room. When Penny notices my picture in the paper, she drops Doodle and shouts, “Dee-Dee!” She picks up the paper and kisses it.

I bet I won’t get many reactions like that at school today.

Dad leans over and gives me a kiss on the cheek. “I’m so proud, I could pop,” he says softly. “I love you, Melody.”

That makes me get all teary. Just once I wish I could hug my little sister or tell my dad I love him

too. In real words, not through a machine.

The reaction at school today is just what I expected. Words float out of lips that say nice things to me, but eyes tell the truth. The eyes are cold, as if I had beat the reporter over the head and forced her to print that picture of me.

Even Rose acts distant. “Nice picture of you in the paper, Melody,” she says.

“Thanks. Should have been all of us.”

“I think so too,” Rose replies.

I just sigh. *I can’t do anything right. I don’t want to be all that—I just want to be like everybody else.*

When we get to Mr. Dimming’s class, he strides in wearing *another* brand-new suit—there must have been a two-for-one sale—and a brand-new smile. He looks like he might explode with happiness. He carries a stack of the morning newspaper with him.

“I didn’t sleep at all last night,” he admits to us. “I am just so *very* proud of our team and our school!”

He pauses while the class cheers for the quiz team. Rose, Molly, and Claire smile happily. Connor

and Rodney take bows. A few kids even turn around and look at me with a smile.

“Do we get free pizza or something?” Connor blurts out.

“Absolutely!” Mr. Dimming replies. “The principal has declared that next Friday is Quiz Team Day, and the entire school is being treated to free pizzas and sodas!”

More cheers from the class. Connor looks really pleased.

Mr. Dimming continues. “And I want to give a special shout-out to Melody, who really helped us secure our victory! Let’s give her a special round of applause!”

He begins the clapping and the class joins in, but it seems more polite than sincere. I guess I’m not as cool as free pizza.

“Who saw the eleven o’clock news last night?” Mr. D asks, still beaming.

About half the kids raise their hands. I had missed it—I had fallen asleep exhausted after we got

home.

“I taped it and TiVoed it and put it up on MySpace!” he tells us excitedly. “But now we must get back to regular class activities.” He sounds disappointed.

“But how do we get ready for Washington?” Rose asks, obviously not ready to let him do that.

Teachers are *so* easily distracted! I knew he’d bite on that one.

Mr. Dimming smiles again and takes a deep breath. “We have only two weeks to get ready, Rose. I’ve prepared a packet for each of my team champs,” he says as he passes out the paperwork. “Take this home and bring it back tomorrow without fail. In it I’ve included information about how to redeem the free plane tickets and info about our hotel and schedule for the days we are in D.C. It also gives details about our practice schedule, which begins today. We will meet every day after school and half a day on Saturday.”

“Saturday?” Connor asks, disbelief in his voice.

I'm worried about that too. A whole half day? If Catherine can't come, how will I get to the bathroom or eat?

"I'll bring bagels for breakfast, fruit for snacks, and we'll order in burgers for lunch," Mr. Dimming tells him.

"Sounds sorta healthy," Connor responds with a grin. "But I'll be there."

"You skip a practice and you get bounced to the alternates, Connor. I'm in this to win."

"Why don't you take a couple of days off, my man?" Rodney says to Connor. "I'd be glad to take your place. Slide you right out in a blink." He sounds serious.

"No way, man. I'll show," Connor says hurriedly.

Molly raises her hand. "Mr. Dimming, do the alternates go to Washington also?"

"Absolutely!"

"So, should I buy a new dress just in case I get to be on the team?"

"That's up to you, Molly," the teacher replies.

Claire raises her hand then. "Mr. D, I think I know what Molly's getting at. Since there are six people on the D.C. team instead of four, which of the alternates will you choose?"

"We will use a point system," he replies. "The students with the six highest scores from all our preliminary rounds will make the final TV team. Sound fair?"

Claire looks satisfied at that, and she and Molly high-five each other.

Mr. Dimming finally gets back to regular class work—the study of Spain and Portugal—and I do my best to do nothing to call attention to myself. No weird noises or kicks or grunts for the rest of the class, no answers to questions I know. I just sit in the back of the room with Catherine and hope the morning will pass quickly.

I spend the afternoon in room H-5, where we watch Tom and Jerry cartoons for three hours. Can you *believe* it?

After school Catherine feeds me a pudding cup

and some juice just before it's time to go to Mr. Dimming's room for our first practice. She frowns as I finish my last sip of juice.

"What's bugging you, Melody?" she asks. "You should be on top of the world, but you're acting like somebody just popped you in the nose."

"**They don't want me on the team,**" I type.

"That's ridiculous. You were the star last night."

"**That's the problem.**"

"Without you, they would not have won!"

"**They're scared of me.**" I try to explain. "**They think I look funny.**"

"You never let that bother you before," she counters.

It's hard to put my feelings into words that will come out right on my talker. I know the other kids are uncomfortable with me on the team. There's no other way to put it. My presence was cute at first, maybe okay for a local competition, but for the big game—on national television—that's different. I'll make them stand out, and not in a good way.

I start typing again. "**I make them look . . .**" I hesitate, then type in, "**weird.**"

"You're the smartest person on the team!" Catherine exclaims.

"**I drool.**"

"So pack a box of tissues!"

"**I make funny noises.**"

"And Connor farts sometimes!"

I have to smile at that.

"No more of this feeling sorry for yourself, young lady! Let's get down to Mr. D's room and kick some butt!"

"**Okay, let's go,**" I type.

We roll down to the room, and I hold my head high. Well, at least as high as I can when it isn't wobbling around. Nobody says anything more about the newspaper article, and practice goes on as usual. I answer most of the questions correctly, and by the time Mom picks me up, I feel a little better.

But I do notice Rose and Claire and Molly whispering together as I leave. It could be about a

new music video or a shopping trip to the mall . . . or it could be about me.

CHAPTER 28

How can they expect us to get ready in such a short time? Crazy! Plane tickets and permission slips. Paperwork and practice.

Practice every day for close to two weeks. Study every evening with Mrs. V. Words. Cities. States. Countries. Capitals. Oceans. Rivers. Colors. Diseases. Weather. Numbers. Dates. Animals. Kings. Queens. Birds. Insects. Wars. Presidents. Planets. Authors. Generals. Laws. Quotations.

Measurements. Equations. Definitions. My head has been spinning nonstop with facts and figures. But I'm ready now. Our team is ready.

Mr. D kept his promise. The six highest scorers from all our practice rounds were announced at the last practice session a few days ago. Of course, just like the other kids, I had been keeping a mental tally of everybody's points, so I was pretty sure I'd be one of the on-air contestants, not an alternate.

Mr. Dimming almost *glowed* with anticipation as he made the announcement. He paced nervously. A little more and the man would be dancing!

"Here we go," he said. "I feel like I need a drumroll or something!"

"Read the list—please!" Connor shouted impatiently.

Mr. Dimming said slowly, "The six members of the championship Spaulding Street Elementary School quiz team are . . ." He paused. I thought Connor was going to throw something at him. "Rose, Connor, Melody, Elena, Rodney, and Molly.

Claire and Amanda will be our alternates."

"I'm an alternate?" Claire gasped.

"Molly beat you by two points, Claire," Mr. D explained. "But you still get to come with us and cheer us on and tour the city."

"But it was *me* who helped her study!" Claire said, outrage in her voice. "That is so *not* fair!"

I just shook my head and smiled a little. There is *so* much Claire doesn't know about stuff not being fair.

Molly looked smug and not at all sorry. Her mother came to pick her up, and the practice was over.

The competition is tomorrow—Thursday evening. Assuming we win, we'll have the *Good Morning America* appearance on Friday, followed by a trip to the White House. More sightseeing in D.C. is planned for Saturday, then we come home on Sunday. On Monday, hopefully, we'll return to school as national champions. With that trophy.

So tonight we pack. I've never been on a trip away

from home before, so we have some serious planning to do. I feel crazy excited, crazy nervous. Dad bought me a bright red suitcase with wheels. It smells like the inside of a new car. Touching it makes me smile.

Mom and I went shopping yesterday—something we don't get to do much anymore. She let me choose a couple of new outfits—with *jeans*—none of those practical, baggy sweat suits for this trip!

As we rolled down the mall, we passed a card shop. I had a brainstorm and tapped out on my board, **“Go in. Get card, please.”**

“For whom?” Mom asked as we wheeled in there.

“Catherine,” I typed. **“To thank her. For helping me get ready.”**

“How very grown up of you!” Mom said, clearly pleased.

“One for Mrs. V, too?” I tapped out.

“Absolutely!”

The card we found for Mrs. V could not have been more perfect. The front was completely covered

with hundreds of oranges, except for one blue one in the middle. Inside, it said: *You're one in a million. Thanks.*

“She'll love it,” Mom said.

For Catherine, I picked out a card that showed a desk full of computers and MP3 players and video games, and a young woman connected to all of them with earphones. It read: *Glad you're always there to plug in to me. Thanks for all you do.*

“You couldn't have designed those better yourself,” Mom said as she paid for the cards. Yep, pretty perfect.

Around seven o'clock the doorbell rings. It's Mrs. V, coming over to help with the final packing preparations. She and Mom make a great team.

“I've made a checklist according to Mr. Dimming's suggestions,” Mom says. “Black skirt and white blouse for the competition.”

“Check,” Mrs. V says as she neatly folds those two pieces into my suitcase.

“Sheck!” Penny mimics.

“Extra white blouse, just in case,” Mom says.

“Great idea,” Mrs. V replies, nodding.

Mom carefully folds in two more shirts and my favorite pair of jeans. “Comfortable outfits for sightseeing in Washington. Spending money for souvenirs. Sunglasses. Camera.”

“Check, check, check,” Mrs. V repeats.

“Pajamas, toothbrush, deodorant, hair clips.”

“All there.”

“A warm jacket—no telling what this March weather will do.”

“Sheck!” Penny cries.

“Power pack for Medi-Talker, extra batteries, tissues, and wipes.”

“Got it!”

“Umbrella?”

“For you or for Melody?” Mrs. V asks with a laugh. “Do you have *your* bag packed?”

“Yeah, I’m just about ready. I’m nervous too.” Mom pauses. “You’re the best, Violet. I know Penny will be safe with you while we’re gone—”

“**And Butterscotch,**” I interrupt.

They both laugh. Mom continues, “Frankly, without you, there is no way that Melody would be packing for this trip.”

“**Get card, Mom,**” I type. I reach my hand to the side, but I can barely touch the edge of my book bag hanging on my chair.

Mom reaches into the bag, pulls out the envelope, and sets it on my tray. I push it toward Mrs. V.

She opens it, reads it, then squeezes me so hard, I can hardly catch my breath. “This one goes on my refrigerator door!” she says quietly. “I want to look at it every single day.” She busies herself then with dusting off a pair of my shoes that have never taken a step.

“**I’m a little scared,**” I admit.

“Nonsense, Mello Yello,” Mrs. V tells me. “I fully expect to see you on *Good Morning America* with that ten-foot-high trophy!”

“**That would be awesome,**” I type.

“Now tell me once more,” Mrs. V says to Mom.

“What time does the plane leave tomorrow? Penny, take Melody’s underwear off your head, you silly girl!”

Mom checks her papers. “Plane leaves at noon. That means we should leave here no later than nine, get to the airport by ten, get all checked in, make sure her wheelchair is properly taken care of and such, then we can relax until it’s time to board the plane.”

Mrs. V scratches her head. “I wonder why they chose the noon flight. That will get you into Washington around two. The competition starts at seven. That’s cutting it a little close.”

“Mr. Dimming told us the hotel has a late check-in policy. The TV studio is just across the street from the hotel, so we’ll be fine.”

As Mom closes and zips my suitcase, I feel tears come into my eyes. I can’t believe this is happening. In just one day I will be in Washington, D.C., on national television. I pray I won’t screw up.

I want to call Rose and see if she’s nervous too. I

want to ask her what she’ll wear to the White House. Suppose we get to meet the First Lady—now, that would be the bomb! I want to know if we’ll be sitting near each other on the plane. I want to be like all the other girls.

I don’t sleep well that night. In the morning Mom gets me bathed and dressed and fed in record time while Dad gets Penny ready.

“Go see plane?” she asks repeatedly.

“Fly! Whee!” Dad says as he flies her around the room in his arms. She loves it.

We head outside, and Mrs. V hurries over, camera in hand. She snaps pictures of me getting strapped in, my suitcase being loaded, and my brave and hopeful victory smile. Then she does it all over again with Dad’s camcorder. Now, we’ll never be able to forget this morning.

Penny darts about, chasing Butterscotch, running in circles around the car, which has been washed and shined. Mom, dressed in a cool denim suit and, surprisingly, a pair of late-style Nikes, loads our bags

in the car, and we're totally ready to go by eight forty-five.

Dad takes Butterscotch back into the house, then locks the front door on his way out. "All set?" he asks.

"Let's do it!" Mom yells. Even Penny can feel the excitement. She claps her hands. I can't stop grinning.

Even though I know we have plenty of time, I keep wanting Dad to drive faster. I'm so afraid that we'll miss the plane or that we forgot my ticket or that I'll throw up and we'll have to go back home.

At the airport garage we have no trouble finding a row of empty handicapped parking spaces. We unload me, my chair, our bags, and Penny and Doodle. Mrs. V snaps more photos.

It seems like hours, but in minutes we're at the check-in gate.

Mrs. V pushes me. Mom carries Penny. Dad pulls a cart loaded with the luggage and Doodle. It's ten o'clock on the dot.

"Hi!" Mom says cheerfully to the uniformed lady at the desk. "We're here to check in for the noon flight to Washington, D.C." She hands the lady our tickets.

"The noon flight?" the woman replies with a frown. She types and clicks, purses her lips, then types some more. Finally, she looks up. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but that flight has been cancelled. We've had loads of cancellations today—a late-winter snowstorm in the Northeast has caused backups all over."

Cancelled? My stomach starts to gurgle.

"Snow?" Mom's voice sounds thick. "But the weather here is sunny and clear."

"They've got five inches on the ground in Boston already, and more is predicted for this afternoon farther south. The FAA won't let planes take off in weather like that, so our whole system gets gummed up. Planes due to arrive here and then return eastward get cancelled, meaning our afternoon flights can't depart. It's complicated. Sorry."

The desk agent continues to type rapidly. She tells Mom, “I can get you and your daughter on the next direct flight out, however. It leaves here at 7:23 p.m. and will get you into Washington at 9:07. The weather service has predicted that the storm system will have fizzled by then, so we can start getting folks where they need to be. Actually, tomorrow it will all be rain.”

My heart is thudding now.

“Would you like me to rebook you now?” She smiles cheerfully. She doesn’t get it.

“But the competition *starts* at seven,” Mom mumbles weakly.

“Excuse me? I didn’t hear you,” the desk agent says.

I can’t breathe.

Mom speaks a little louder. “What about the rest of our group? We’re traveling together—a group of schoolchildren—a quiz team, actually. They were also booked on this flight. We’ve got a competition this evening.”

“Oh, I remember those kids. They were here early this morning. Great group. So polite and well mannered. They told me all about the competition and the huge trophy they might be bringing home.”

“They came *early*?” Mom croaks.

“It seems they all went to breakfast together, then came straight here. It’s a good thing they did too, or they wouldn’t have gotten out.”

“Where are they?” Mom asks.

“Oh, they got switched to the nine o’clock flight—the last eastbound plane to get out before flights started getting cancelled. They had to run down to the gate, but they made it just in time. I made sure of it.” She looks down at her computer. “Yes, that flight left about an hour ago.”

“They’re gone?” Mom whispers.

I feel like I’m going to choke.

“Are you and your family going to D.C. to cheer them on?” the woman asks. She still doesn’t get it.

“No, my daughter is on the team,” Mom explains. “We *must* get to Washington. Isn’t there another

flight— perhaps on another airline?”

The woman looks at me and blinks. “She’s on the . . . ?” she starts to ask, but then she catches herself, returns her gaze to her monitor, and begins typing furiously once more. I can hear her fingernails as they click on the keys.

Dad places both hands on the ticket counter and leans in toward the agent. I’ve never seen him so angry. “How could this happen? Shouldn’t we have been notified that the flight was cancelled?”

“We try, sir, but it’s not always possible,” the lady replies, sounding truly sorry. “We do always advise passengers to call ahead and check their flight status.”

“But this was the trip of a lifetime! You can’t possibly understand how important this is to my daughter!”

I squeeze my eyes shut. Stupid elevator music floats from the tinny airport speakers. I hear no beautiful colors. I smell no lovely aromas. All I can see is the darkness behind my eyeballs.

“I’m really, really sorry, sir,” the lady says.

“What about a connecting flight? We *must* get her to Washington this afternoon!”

The woman types and clicks for what seems like hours. Finally, she looks up. “There are no other flights to D.C. on any other carrier, sir, nonstop or otherwise. That weather system has grounded everything. There will be nothing until later this evening. I’m so sorry,” she whispers.

I open my eyes because they are filling with tears.

Dad walks away from the ticket counter, his face scrunched into tight wrinkles, then, without warning, he smashes his fist into the wall right next to where I’m sitting.

I jerk my head up. I know that had to hurt.

“Ahhh! I shouldn’t have done that!” he admits, holding one fist in the other.

But if I could have smashed my fist against a wall, I would have as well.

Mrs. V looks from Dad to me. “I don’t understand how this could have happened either,”

she says to Mom. “Shouldn’t someone from the quiz team have called you?” Her voice could crush bricks. “The teacher, perhaps?”

“Maybe there wasn’t time,” Mom says helplessly. “At least that’s what I hope. Surely they . . . surely they wouldn’t have left her behind on purpose.”

I still have not taken one deep breath.

“I really do apologize, ma’am,” the gate agent finally says. “I’ve even checked airports in nearby cities. There are no flights out of the area until this evening. I have plenty of seats on our seven o’clock flight if you’d like me to book you.”

“No, thank you,” Mom says quietly. “It’s too late.”

The entire airport feels like a vacuum to me. No sound. No voices. No air.

Mom walks slowly toward me.

I sit there in my new blue and white outfit with new matching tennis shoes, next to my new shiny red suitcase, feeling very, very stupid.

And angry. How could they *do* this to me?

And helpless. I *hate* feeling like this—like when I

was little and got stuck on my back like a stupid turtle. There was nothing I could do. Nothing.

“How long does it take to drive to D.C.?” Mrs. V asks. I don’t even look up. I know the answer.

“Ten hours at the very least,” Dad replies, his voice soft.

“Go fly airplane?” Penny asks.

“No fly today,” Dad says, touching her gently on her head with his good hand.

Mom rolls me over to a bench on the other side of the check-in area. She kneels down in front of me. She’s crying.

I don’t think I’ll ever breathe again.

Mom hugs me. “It’s gonna be okay, sweetie. You’re still the best, the smartest, the most wonderful girl in the world. Somehow we’re going to get over this.”

No. I won’t.

Mrs. V wipes her eyes as well. She sits on the bench and takes both my hands in hers. “Oh, baby girl, I know this is hard. But there is just no way to get you to Washington.”

I just sit there. The morning started out like crystal, but the day has turned to broken glass.

CHAPTER 29

When we get home, I ask my mother to put me in bed. I refuse to eat lunch. I try to sleep, but quiz questions and why questions keep flying into my head.

Why didn't they call me?

Why didn't they tell me about breakfast?

Why can't I be like everybody else?

I finally cry into my pillow. Butterscotch nudges me with her nose, but I ignore her.

They left me on purpose! How could they do that?

They left me on purpose!

I feel like stomping on something. Stomping and stomping and *stomping!* That makes me even crazier because I can't even do that! I can't even get *mad* like a normal kid.

Penny peeks into my room, then, when she sees I'm awake, she climbs up on my bed and snuggles close to me. She smells like watermelon bubble bath. She tries to count my fingers, then tries to count her own, but all she knows is one, two, three, five, so she says that over and over. Then she tries to teach Doodle to count. "Two, Doodle! Two!" I feel myself relaxing a tiny bit.

"Oh, here you are, Penny!" Dad says from my doorway. "Are you making Dee-Dee happy?"

"Dee-Dee good girl," she tells Dad.

"Yes, she is that. The very best," Dad agrees. "You okay, Melody?" he asks as he comes over to stroke my hair.

I nod. I point to Dad's left wrist, which is wrapped in an Ace bandage.

"Yeah, it hurts," he says. "That was a dumb thing to do, but I guess it made me feel better."

I nod again.

He lifts Penny from my bed with his right arm. "Ready for a snack, Miss Penny?" he asks her.

"Hot dogs!" she demands.

"Do you want me to fix you something, Melody?" he asks me.

I'm not hungry. I shake my head, then point to the clock.

"Maybe later?" Dad says.

I smile at him, and he quietly leaves the room with my sister.

The phone rings.

I hear Mom say, "Oh, hello, Mr. Dimming." She walks quickly into my room, portable phone to her ear, her palm so tight around the receiver, I can see the veins on the top of her hand.

"No, I *don't* understand," Mom says curtly. "Why weren't we called?" She listens to him for a minute, then bursts out angrily, "We could have easily been

at the airport an hour earlier. We could have been there at dawn!" She's almost shouting. "Do you know how much this has devastated my daughter?"

A pause.

"Yes, I'm aware she's probably the brightest person on the team. Was. The word is WAS. There is no IS." Mom pauses to listen again. "*You'll make it up to her?* You've got to be kidding!"

Mom hangs up on him and flings the phone into a corner. She wipes her eyes, pulls a tissue from a box on my desk, and sits down heavily on the chair next to my bed. I listen to her blow her nose, then I turn over.

"Oh, Melody, if only I could make your hurt go away," she says plaintively.

I blink at my own tears.

She pulls me up onto her lap. It isn't the snuggly fit it used to be, but it feels good. She rocks me, humming softly. I finally fall asleep listening to the rhythm of her heartbeat.