

## CHAPTER 30

**What happened today was all my fault. I should have listened. We should have all stayed home and spent the day together. But we didn't. Because of me.**

When I awoke this morning, it was raining. Thunder. Lightning. Wind. A constant, soaking downpour that laughed at umbrellas and raincoats. The air itself was gray and heavy, thick with too much moisture. I could hear it pounding on my window.

Dad came into my room and sat down in our old reading chair. He held his wrist carefully. Mom had put his arm in a sling. “Messy day out there,” he said.

I nodded.

“Your team got beat in one of the late rounds in D.C. last night,” he told me. “They got ninth place—a little bitty trophy.”

But they weren’t *my* team anymore. I tried to pretend like I didn’t care. I blinked real hard and faced the wall.

“I wish I could fix this for you, Melody,” Dad said quietly as he headed out of my room.

That made the tears fall for real.

At first I didn’t want to go to school. I’d been excused because I was supposed to be in Washington, and if I went in, I’d have to sit all day in room H-5 with Willy and Maria and Freddy. It seemed pointless.

But as I thought about it, I changed my mind. I felt the sorry for myself shift to mad again. And the mad me decided that I was *not* going to sit at home

like a kicked-around puppy. I was gonna show up and let everybody know they didn’t beat me.

Mom leaned on my door just then and said, “You want to stay home today? No one will blame you.”

I shook my head forcefully. *No! No! No!* I kicked the covers off my feet.

She sighed. “Okay, okay. But the weather is ugly, and I woke up with a migraine. Plus, Penny is sick, and Butterscotch threw up on the carpet. I had to put her in the basement.”

She got me bathed and dressed and took me downstairs. Usually, Dad carries me up and down the steps, but with his arm out of commission, Mom just grunted, lifted me, and did it herself. She eased me into my manual chair (my electric chair and lightning storms don’t mix well), hooked up my old Plexiglas talking board (ditto for Elvira), then sat down to catch her breath.

“It looks like we’re going to have one stormy day, honey,” she said as she glanced at the wet mess outside the window. As she ran a brush through my

hair, she whispered, "I'm so sorry, my Melody, so, so sorry about everything."

I reached up and touched her hand.

The rain continued to fall.

She fixed me breakfast—scrambled eggs and Cream of Wheat—and fed me, one spoonful at a time. She kept placing her palm against her forehead. She was unusually quiet. I wondered if she was thinking about how many times she had fed me, how many more times she'd have to do it.

Wearing a floppy yellow hat and yellow duck-footed sleepers, Penny wandered into the kitchen, coughing and sneezing.

Mom stopped feeding me, found a Kleenex, and wiped Penny's nose. She hated that, of course, so she screamed like she was being tortured by enemy spies. Normally, Mom makes a game of it and wipes Doodle's nose as well to make Penny tolerate it better, but I guess she didn't feel up to it this time.

Then the phone rang. Mom answered, a spoon in one hand, the dirty Kleenex in the other.

"Hello. You what? You need me to come in? But I'm off today. I'm supposed to be in Washington." She paused. "Long story."

I cringed. Penny continued to howl.

*She ought to put Penny in the basement with the dog!* I thought, frowning.

Butterscotch scratched furiously at the basement door.

"Penny, please!" Mom cried out, cupping her hand over the phone. "I can't hear!"

Penny quieted a little, but only because she had squatted down on the floor and put both hands in Butterscotch's water bowl—sloshing water all over the floor.

Mom listened for a minute, then said into the phone, "How bad is the accident? Lots of injuries? Okay, I understand. I'll be there, but I have to wait until I get my daughter on the school bus."

She hung up the phone and sighed, squeezing the tissue into her fist.

"I've got to go in to the hospital, Chuck," she

called out to Dad. “Big pileup on the freeway. Are you dressed and ready?”

Dad came downstairs, still in his pajamas. “I’m not going in today,” he announced.

“You almost never take a day off,” Mom said, a surprised frown on her face.

“My wrist is aching, the weather is awful, and Penny has a cold,” he explained. “Why don’t you just stay home with me today?” he said to me.

But no, I kicked and shrieked and insisted on going to school. **Can’t miss today!** I pointed. **Must go! Must go!**

Mom just put her head in her hands once more. “Get Penny out of the dog’s dish” was all she finally said.

Dad ripped a bunch of paper towels from the roll, cleaned up Penny’s mess, and wiped her nose with a wet paper towel. That started her screaming again. Her screech became a shriek.

That’s when she reached up and knocked over the cup of orange juice on my tray. My clean blouse was

a sappy mess. *She did that on purpose!* I thought angrily.

Mom simply shrugged her shoulders and yanked off my shirt in one swift motion. She told Dad, “Melody is determined to show up at school—why, I do not know— but she may as well go.”

I couldn’t explain to them that I wanted to see Catherine. Somehow I felt like she’d talk to me and make me feel better. She’s a college kid—she would know what to say. Besides, I had to give her that card. Today.

It took Mom several minutes to find a new shirt for me until she remembered all the clean clothes in my suitcase. When she rolled that red suitcase into the kitchen, I looked at her, then looked away. I refused to cry any more.

For some reason, the bus came early that morning. I’d just gotten my clean shirt on, my book bag still needed to be packed with my lunch and Catherine’s card, and I had to go to the bathroom. Even over the noise of all the rain and thunder, the

honk of the bus horn blared clearly. It always sounds like a goose in pain.

I heard Dad open the front door to wave the driver on. He yelled, "Don't wait, Gus! She's not ready!" The driver—a sandy-haired guy who's been on this route for a couple of years—beeped once more, then rumbled on. Gus is really cool and often waits a few minutes as parents hustle to get their children out of their houses. It just takes us longer sometimes to get it together in the morning.

"Melody, baby, why don't you just stay home with Dad and Penny today? Please?" Mom asked as she lifted me off the toilet. "It's such an icky day."

I kicked and cried out again, shaking my head. *No, no, no!* I didn't know why it was so important, but I knew I had to show up. Maybe I wanted to let everybody know what the team had done to me—I wasn't really sure. I only knew I had to go to school.

Mom sighed and pulled up my jeans. When I got back in my chair, I pointed to **Thanks** and **Mom**. She just shook her head and stuffed my lunch into my

book bag.

The rain didn't seem to be letting up, so Mom took a deep breath and started the process of loading me into the car. When I ride the bus, I simply roll down our ramp, down the driveway, onto the bus lift, and into a specially designed area of the bus that straps my chair into place.

But when I ride in the car, it involves a whole process of taking apart and putting together me, my chair, and my stuff. Even with my manual chair, it's a pain.

And Dad was no help. With his arm in a sling, he shrugged and tried to look like he was sorry he couldn't come out and lend Mom a hand. I think he was enjoying it a little, and that made Mom even more upset.

The rain and wind, if anything, had gotten worse. Mom had draped a huge plastic raincoat over me and my chair, and another one over herself, but in seconds the hoods had blown off and our heads were soaked. We headed slowly down the wheelchair

ramp, the wind whipping at us and the rain attacking from all sides.

I thought it was exciting. I'd never seen the sky so dark at eight in the morning. The thunder and wind made it feel like a scene out of a really good movie. My hair is short and curly, and I think it looks sorta cute when it's wet. Good thing. Mom hates it when her hair gets wet—it gets stringy and limp. I gotta admit: Mom with wet hair should hide in a closet.

She opened the car door on the passenger side, and the wind blew it shut. She did it again, this time using me and my chair as a doorstop. The front seat of the car, of course, was getting soaked. She lifted me into the seat, strapped me in, and began the process of collapsing my chair. Fortunately, most of it is plastic and leather and metal, but I knew it would stay damp all day, even if somebody wiped it off real good when I got to school.

Mom placed my chair, along with my old communication board, into the back of the SUV. When she shut the trunk, she slammed it hard. The

rain continued to fall. By the time she scooted into the driver's seat, she was a dripping mess and in a terrible mood.

"I wish I could go back to bed," she said grumpily as she put the key into the ignition. "My head is killing me—why did I agree to go to work? I'm supposed to be off today, with you in Washington." She sighed heavily.

I kicked my legs in response, but only a little. I didn't want to upset her even more. That's when I glanced down and noticed she'd forgotten my book bag. *Catherine's card!* I reached over, grabbed Mom's arm, and pointed to my feet.

"What?" she said, irritation in her voice.

I kicked, I pointed, I grunted. Then I pointed to the house. Dad, who had changed into thick gray sweats, was standing there at the front door, grinning, my denim book bag in his right hand. I could see Penny, still in her little yellow duck pajamas and now a yellow rain hat, standing behind him. She had Doodle and Mom's red umbrella in her

hands. Lightning crackled. Thunder followed. The rain poured. I watched Mom's hands tighten on the steering wheel.

She made a noise that sounded like something I would say, almost a growl. "Arrrrh!" She flung open the car door, stomped back out into the storm, up the ramp, and then she snatched the book bag from Dad. She was sopping by the time she got back in the car. Dad waved his bandaged arm from the porch one last time, then turned and went back into the dryness of the house. I watched as the front door *almost* closed.

That's when I saw a small bundle of yellow, dragging a red umbrella, dart out of the house. I saw her for only a second. But I saw.

I screamed! I kicked! I flailed my arms!

The windows were almost completely fogged up, and they got even worse as I continued to act like I'd been possessed by demons. Mom looked at me as if I had lost my mind. She screamed at me, "Stop it! Are you crazy?"

But I wouldn't stop. I couldn't. I banged on the car window, pulled Mom's shirt, hit her head. I pinched her, or at least tried to.

"I can't take any more, Melody!" Mom screamed over the thunder. "I *hate* it when you get like this. You've got to learn to control yourself! Now QUIT!" She put her hand on the keys to start the car.

I screamed, reached over, and tried to pull the keys from her. I scratched the back of Mom's hand.

She smacked me on the leg. She'd never raised a hand to me before. Never. I still didn't stop screaming and kicking and jerking. I had to tell her. *I had to tell her that Penny was out there!* Never had I wanted words more.

I was going out of my mind.

"I'm taking you to school, and I hope they keep you!" Mom mumbled under her breath. Angrily, she turned on the car. A rush of air started to clear the windows. The windshield wipers rocked at their fastest speed.

I cried. Huge, sobbing tears. I grabbed at Mom's

arms once more, but all she did was shake my arm away. I could tell she felt like hitting me again, but she didn't. Her lips were tight. She looked out the rearview mirror. She put the car into reverse.

I shrieked, I screeched, I yelled. The rain poured. The thunder roared.

Slowly, the big car rolled backward. I felt the soft thud. I became deadly silent.

Mom stopped, turning her head slowly to the left. Then she turned slowly to the right, almost as if in slow motion, as she saw Dad come running out of the house, a look of stark alarm on his face. "Penny!" I heard him yell. "Where's Penny?"

Mom rolled the window down on my side. Rain poured in onto me, but I didn't care. "What do you mean? She's with you!" Mom's voice was low, but sounded frantic and very, very scared.

She got out of the car. She looked down. She screamed for a long, long time.

Her screams were louder than the police sirens that eventually came shrieking around our corner,

louder than the fire truck and ambulance sirens that followed them, louder than my silent cries.

I sat there for what seemed like hours, basically forgotten, strapped in the front seat of the car as the rain poured in my open window.

I ached with fear.



## CHAPTER 31

**The air felt thick and damp, like the silence that followed the screaming and crying and sirens. The rain had slowed to a drizzle.**

After Mom and Dad left with the ambulance, Mrs. V took me out of the car and sat me in my chair. She placed the soggy, filthy Doodle on my tray.

“I found this under the car,” she said, her voice shaky.

I touched it and burst into tears.

As she rolled me to her house, she said, “We’re gonna clean Doodle up and have him waiting for Penny when she comes home. You hear?” I couldn’t tell if she was trying to convince me or herself.

I felt dizzy and nauseous. I could not stop shaking.

After changing my clothes into warm, dry sweats, she switched the radio to an easy-listening station and turned the volume down low. The only color I heard was gray.

Mrs. V stood behind me, gently rubbing my shoulders.

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

I shook my head no.

She continued to massage my back and shoulders until we both could feel the tension slipping away.

“I’m going next door to get your Medi-Talker and the dog,” she said. “You want anything else?”

I shook my head and continued to listen to the tones of smoky gray.

When she got back, Butterscotch seemed

nervous. She kept pacing and sniffing, as if she was looking for something.

“I think she’s looking for Penny,” Mrs. V said. “Dogs know.”

She hooked up Elvira to my chair and switched it on, but there was nothing either of us could say.

“It’s not your fault, you know,” she said finally.

I shook my head forcefully. Mrs. V should know better than to say stuff just to make me feel better.

“I mean it, Melody. It is *not* your fault!”

“**Yes, it is!**” I replied on my talker. I turned the volume up loud.

Mrs. V walked around to where I could see her, leaned down until her face was just inches from my own. “You did your best to warn your mother. You should be proud of yourself.”

“**Not proud. Not enough,**” I typed.

“Sometimes things happen that are beyond our control, Melody. You did everything right.”

The guilt bubbled up then.

“**I was mad at Penny,**” I typed, slower than usual.

“Penny knows you love her,” she said.

Tears slid down my cheeks.

**“Made Mom take me to school.”**

“So what? The fact that you insisted on going to school, even after what happened to you yesterday, shows you are a strong person, a better person than anyone else there. I’m proud of you for that.”

**“Don’t be.”**

“I’m sure Penny will be just fine,” Mrs. V said then, but her voice said otherwise. For the first time I could remember, Mrs. V sounded unsure.

**“Will she die?”** I had to know.

“She was alive and breathing when the ambulance took her, so I’m going to believe that’s still the case. Toddlers are very resilient, you know.”

I had to know something else. **“Her brain? Messed up?”** I asked. I had seen enough television shows on brain trauma to know it was possible. My classmate Jill had been in a car accident. I couldn’t bear to see Penny like that.

Mrs. V answered thoughtfully and honestly. “I

suppose it’s possible, but I pray that’s not the case.”

**“Two broken kids,”** I typed. Just the idea almost made me gag.

“That’s not gonna happen, Melody.” But Mrs. V’s voice wavered—I heard it.

I was still for a moment, then I typed, **“It should have been me.”**

“Huh? What do you mean?”

**“Nobody would miss me.”**

“Now, you just stop stupid talk like that! My whole world would fall apart if something happened to you. Your parents’ as well.”

I’m not sure I believed her. I tilted my head. **“Really?”** I typed.

“I plan to wear purple to your college graduation!”

**“Far away and very hard.”**

“Like making the quiz team?”

**“They left me.”**

“And they lost!”

I glanced out of her large picture window and

watched the wet branches sway. How could I say it? I looked back at my talker and typed very slowly, **“I want to be like other kids.”**

“So you want to be mean and fake and thoughtless?”

I looked up at her angry face, then looked away. **“No. Normal.”**

“Normal sucks!” she roared. “People love you because you’re Melody, not because of what you can or cannot do. Give us a little credit.”

**“I want it to be yesterday,”** I typed.

“Yesterday your heart was broken because they left you behind, remember?”

**“Rather have that than this.”**

“I know. Oh, Melody, I know.”

**“I’m scared.”**

“Me too.”

The silent room echoed our thoughts.

**“I had a goldfish. He jumped out of his bowl,”** I typed then.

“I remember your mom telling me about that.”

**“Tried to save him. Couldn’t.”**

The phone rang then, startling both of us. I jerked in my chair. Mrs. V picked it up.

“Yes,” she said.

I strained to listen.

“Oh, no!” she said.

My heart dropped beneath my chair. She listened for a long time.

“Oh, yes!” she said finally. Then she burst into tears and hung up.

**“Is Penny dead?”** I typed. The world was spinning.

Mrs. V wiped her eyes, looked at me, and took a deep breath. “She has some internal injuries, a badly broken leg, but she survived the surgery! She’s gonna live!” Then she cried once more.

Normal doesn’t suck at all.

## CHAPTER 32

**It's Monday, so I have to return to school today. The temperature has dropped and the sun is glowing like some kind of frosted golden jewel. Yet everything feels different and not quite right.**

Mom spent the weekend at the hospital with Penny, sleeping on a cot in her room. I have not seen her since, well, since everything changed. I wonder if Mom is mad at me.

Mrs. V comes over and helps me get dressed and

fed. Even Butterscotch seems to miss Penny. She puts her head in my lap and looks at me with lonely eyes. I can't help her.

Dad is a mess. He keeps dropping things like forks and keys. He starts to talk, then forgets what he was going to say. He hasn't shaved.

"Go and get yourself together, Chuck," Mrs. V finally tells him. "A hot shower and cold glass of orange juice will do you wonders. When you go see Penny this morning, you don't want to scare the child, do you?"

"Uh, you're right," Dad replies. "You've got Melody covered?"

"I'll see she gets on the bus. Now scoot!"

He bounds up the stairs to the bathroom.

"**Penny better?**" I tap on my board.

"Yes, oh, yes! When I spoke to your mom this morning, she told me that they have taken her off the IV already. Penny was eating applesauce, complaining about her cast, and asking for Doodle, which I've got cleaned up and ready for her. Penny is

going to be fine, Melody. Just fine."

I inhale deeply. Mrs. V spoons eggs into my mouth, but my stomach roils with worry.

"**Her leg?**" I ask.

"Her leg is in a cast. It's big and clunky and will annoy the heck out of her, but the doctors have said that when she gets stronger, she'll even be able to walk with it."

I'm glad Mrs. V is always straight up with me.

"**Wheelchair?**" I can't think of anything worse than a teeny baby wheelchair.

"No. They want her to move around as much as possible."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "**Her head?**" I ask.

Mrs. V understands. "No brain damage, Melody. None."

I exhale slowly. "**You sure?**" I spell out.

"Absolutely. I saw her myself last night. She bumped her head when she fell, but the car hit her leg. It didn't touch her head at all."

The school bus honks then, so Mrs. V wheels me

down the drive to meet it.

She checks my backpack, adjusts my foot straps, and gives me a big hug.

“You ready, Melody? Ready to face the quiz team?”

I nod. After what had almost happened, facing a bunch of snotty fifth graders will be easy.

Gus looks at me with concern as he lowers the bus lift.

“How’s your little sister?” he asks me. “That is so scary!”

“**Gonna be okay,**” I type. “**Thanks.**”

I realize right then that news like that travels fast. Everybody at school will probably know as well.

Gus wheels me onto the lift and pushes the button to raise it as I wave good-bye to Mrs. V. The ride to school is strangely quiet—none of the usual squeaks and grunts from the students who ride the special bus.

When we get to school, the air is chilly, so the aides take us directly to room H-5. As we get settled,

I look at my friends there through different eyes.

Freddy, who wants to zoom to the moon.

Ashley, our fashion model.

Willy, the baseball expert.

Maria, who has no enemies.

Gloria, the music lover.

Carl, our resident gourmet.

Jill, who might have once been like Penny.

Not one of them even knows how to be mean.

And me, the dreamer who tries to escape room H-5, a kid with a computer named Elvira. I don’t even know where I belong anymore.

Catherine comes in then, wearing a new outfit that is actually cute and stylish. Tan slacks, black sweater, and a vest.

“**Nice outfit,**” I tell her.

“Thanks! And I did it all by myself.”

“**I have something for you.**” I point to my book bag.

She reaches into my bag, digs around, and finds the card that almost led to tragedy. After she reads it,

she blinks back tears.

“No, Melody, thank *you!*” She leans over and hugs me. Then she looks serious and says, “Mrs. Valencia called and told me all about what happened with your little sister. How’s she doing?”

“**Better,**” I type.

“You know, you probably saved her life,” Catherine tells me.

“**What?**”

“Seriously. Your screaming and yelling slowed your mother down. Gave her time to figure out why you were acting like you had hot potatoes in your pants.”

“**Could not stop Mom,**” I stab out on my machine.

“You did exactly the right thing. I’m so proud of you.”

“**Really?**”

“Really. Especially after all you had been through at the airport. You want to talk about it?”

“**No,**” I type, and look away.

Maria comes over to my chair and gives me a big hug. “You did good, Melly-Belly,” she says. “Real good.”

I’m not sure if she is talking about the quiz team or something else, but my eyes get all drippy and my nose starts to run.

I wish I could give her a big squeeze back to let her know how good she has made me feel. But I just tap, “**Thanks.**”

I’m never sure how much Freddy is aware of what’s going on in the world around him, so he surprises me when he zips over to me and asks, “Melly go zoom in plane?” He looks excited, maybe even envious.

“**No, Freddy,**” I type. “**No plane. No zoom.**”

His face scrunches up into sadness, then he drives away.

Mrs. Shannon comes over next and squats beside me. “Your head must be near ’bout ready to explode from all that’s happened in the past few days.”

“**Boom,**” I type. But I don’t feel like smiling.



“Let’s talk at lunch. Okay, Melody?”

“Okay.”

“Are you going to your inclusion classes?” she asks.

“Yes,” I tap. I’d thought about this all weekend—when I wasn’t thinking about Penny. I’d decided I wasn’t going to hide.

“I want you to know I’m very proud of you.” She gives me a big thumbs-up and then gets our morning routine going.

As it turns out, Miss Gordon is absent today, so the first inclusion class I’m set to attend is Mr. Dimming’s.

“Are you sure you want to go?” Catherine asks me. Instead of answering, I power my chair toward Mr. D’s door. Catherine rests a hand on my shoulder as I whirl in.

A small brass-colored trophy sits on Mr. D’s desk. The room is quieter than normal.

Mr. Dimming clears his throat. He shifts from one foot to the other. He runs his finger around the

collar of his dim white shirt—he’s back to his old, well-worn brown suit. His old shoes as well.

Finally, he says, “Hello, Melody!” His voice sounds fake cheerful.

I do not reply.

He wiggles so much, he looks like he has to go to the bathroom. I just watch him. No kicks from me. No weird sounds. I am amazingly calm.

I glance over at Rose, but she is looking in the other direction. No one seems to know what to say.

At last I break the silence. I turn the volume up loud on my machine, then type out, “**Why did you leave me?**”

Somebody should have been there with a video camera proving that, yes, a fifth-grade classroom can be absolutely, totally quiet.

Faces search other faces, each one willing another to speak.

Eventually, Rose stands up. She looks directly at me and says, “We didn’t plan to leave you, Melody. Honest.”

I look her dead in the eye and wait.

I don't react at all. I just wait.

She continues. "We all went out to breakfast early that morning—"

I interrupt. "**Nobody told me about that. How come?**"

None of them answer. Their silence says what their words cannot—it's better without me.

I blink real fast.

Claire finally stammers, "We figured you'd slow us down because you have to be fed and stuff."

It's so quiet, I swear I can hear my own heartbeat.

**"You threw up. Nobody left you."**

"Ooh, snap!" I hear Rodney whisper.

Claire stares down at her desk.

**"Who took my place?"**

Claire lifts her hand slightly, but she won't look at me.

Rose scrapes at a spot on her history book. "We finished breakfast really fast because we were all excited, so we got to the airport extra early."

Connor stands up then. He looks uncomfortable. "So when we got to the airport, they told us that the noon flight had just been cancelled but that we could make the early flight if we hurried."

Molly speaks next. "So we checked our stuff real fast, then rushed—I mean, ran like track stars, even Mr. Dimming—down to the gate to get that early flight."

**"Nobody thought about me?"** I ask.

Silence again.

Finally, Elena says, "I did. I was the first one to board the plane. Just as I gave my boarding pass to the agent, I reminded Mr. Dimming that you were missing."

Mr. Dimming again twists from one foot to the other. "I was so busy—trying to count heads and check seat assignments and deal with everybody's carry-on bags— so I asked the kids to call you at home. I knew Rose, at least, had your number in her cell phone."

All eyes shift to Rose. She looks at the floor, then

slowly, she looks at me. A tear runs down her cheek. “You couldn’t have made it there in time anyway. I . . . I picked up my phone to call you. I flipped it open, then I looked at the rest of the kids on the team.” She pauses.

I could imagine them standing there, thinking about the chance to be on *Good Morning America*, with that huge trophy . . . and me.

Rose continues in a whisper. “We looked at each other. Everyone made just a tiny head shake—no.”

*All of them?* I shiver.

Rose snuffles and whispers finally, “So I closed the phone and we got on the plane. I . . . I never made the call.”

How can silence be so loud?

Mr. Dimming finally says quietly, “I’m so very sorry, Melody. So sorry.”

Rose bursts into tears then and puts her head down on her desk.

“Just before the competition,” Molly explains, “a reporter from the *Washington Post* came to interview

the team. But he left when he found out you weren’t there.”

Connor walks up to the front of the room then, picks up the ninth-place trophy, and brings it to me. He stammers and licks his lips. “Uh, the team kinda wants you to have this, Melody. Sorta to make up.” He places it on my tray.

The thing is small, made of cheap plastic that has been painted to look like metal. The name of the school is even spelled wrong on the faceplate.

I look at the ugly little statue, and I start to giggle. Then I crack up. Finally, I roll with laughter. My hand jerks out and hits the trophy—I’m not sure if it was an accident or not—and it falls to the floor, breaking into several pieces.

The class stares at me in surprise. When they see that I’m not going to go ballistic on them, they finally start to laugh as well—a little. Even Rose sniffs and smiles.

“**I don’t want it!**” I finally type. Then, turning the volume as loud as it will go, I add, “**You deserve it!**”

Still laughing, I click on the power to my chair, do a smooth turn, and roll myself out of the classroom.

## CHAPTER 33

**Fifth grade is probably pretty rocky for lots of kids. Homework. Never being quite sure if you're cool enough. Clothes. Parents. Wanting to play with toys and wanting to be grown up all at the same time. Underarm odor.**

I guess I have all that, plus about a million different layers of other stuff to deal with. Making people understand what I want. Worrying about what I look like. Fitting in. Will a boy ever like me?

Maybe I'm not so different from everyone else after all.

It's like somebody gave me a puzzle, but I don't have the box with the picture on it. So I don't know what the final thing is supposed to look like. I'm not even sure if I have all the pieces. That's probably not a good comparison, since I couldn't put a puzzle together if I wanted to. Even though I usually know the answers to most of the questions at school, lots of stuff still puzzles me.

Penny came home from the hospital with bumps and bruises, a cast, and a new red hat. Doodle is back in her arms. They're spoiling her rotten. That's okay with me. Even Butterscotch is treating Penny like she's an injured puppy. The dog has brought all her favorite stuffed toys into Penny's room, like gifts.

Today I'm working on Miss Gordon's autobiography project. Mrs. V has Elvira plugged into the computer. Classical music is softly seeping from her new iPod. I hear soft purple.

This is going to take a while. So much is stuffed

inside my mind. I have lots to say and just one thumb to say it with.

I guess I'll start at the very beginning. . . .

*Words.*

*I'm surrounded by thousands of words. Maybe millions.*

Cathedral. Mayonnaise. Pomegranate.

Mississippi. Neapolitan. Hippopotamus.

Silky. Terrifying. Iridescent.

Tickle. Sneeze. Wish. Worry.

*Words have always swirled around me like snowflakes— each one delicate and different, each one melting untouched in my hands.*

*Deep within me, words pile up in huge drifts. Mountains of phrases and sentences and connected ideas. Clever expressions. Jokes. Love songs.*

*From the time I was really little—maybe just a few months old—words were like sweet, liquid gifts, and I drank them like lemonade. I could almost taste them.*

*They made my jumbled thoughts and feelings have substance. My parents have always blanketed me with conversation. They chattered and babbled. They verbalized and vocalized. My father sang to me. My mother whispered her strength into my ear.*

*Every word my parents spoke to me or about me I absorbed and kept and remembered. All of them.*

*I have no idea how I untangled the complicated process of words and thought, but it happened quickly and naturally. By the time I was two, all my memories had words, and all my words had meanings.*

*But only in my head.*

*I have never spoken one single word. I am almost eleven years old. . . .*