

out of my dreams

# ALSO BY SHARON M. DRAPER

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SHARON M. DRAPER



A Caitlyn Dlouhy Book

ATHENEUM BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi



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This book is for  
Damon Draper and David Brantley Jr.,  
whose chances to dream  
and fly were cut short.



out of my dreams





# CHAPTER 1

**I walked to the podium, tall and confident. I wore a dusky-red velvet dress that swirled lightly with each step I took. A black silk sash and satiny-smooth shoes completed the look.**

I turned to the crowd and waved. I could hear cheers, yes, cheers, for me, Melody Brooks!

“We love ya, Melody!”

“You’re the best, Melody!”

“We are so proud of you, Melody!”

“Can’t wait to hear from you!”

I smiled brightly, acknowledging each person as I

passed them. Mom and Dad and Penny were in the front row, and near them I spotted our neighbors Mrs. V and Miss Gertie, and a girl I didn't recognize. And ooh, was that Noah from camp? OMG! My heart skipped a beat. I couldn't believe he showed up!

Reaching the podium, I grabbed both sides, lifted my chin, and took a deep breath. I spoke loudly and clearly, my voice echoing from the microphone.

"To all my friends and relatives who have gathered here today, I am so very thankful. And to all of you who don't know the full story of how a surprise trip changed my life and opened new doors for me, here we go!"

More applause. Was that music playing in the background? I felt like dancing. My feet wiggled in my shoes, and suddenly I was tipping, tapping, twirling across the stage to the beautiful strains of a soft Strauss waltz. So I danced. Yes, I danced. Right there onstage in front of hundreds of people. The notes and the melody did their own dance in my heart, just like my name. I glided across the stage as lightly as the golden air around me. Music raised me up as I reached for the sky. I stretched, farther, farther, and then . . .

I opened my eyes, as the dream began to crumble into the reality of morning, I realized I could not speak; there was no music, not even any random birds squawking outside.

I was in my bed, waiting for my mom to get me up,  
place me in my wheelchair, and get me ready for the day,  
which would not, for sure, include dancing!

But what a strange dream. . . .

## CHAPTER 2

Fully awake now, I gazed out my bedroom window—I'd fallen asleep propped up on my pillows, so at least I could see outside—but my view was gray, gray, and more gray. Not one peek of blue sky among the, yep, thick gray clouds. It had been raining all night, so brown puddles muddied our lawn. Even the leaves hung listlessly, heavy with water droplets.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Thunder used to spook me, but now it reminded me of being at camp earlier this summer, where during art class, I learned how to use the thick, gloppy paint to express my feelings, especially the harder ones like when I was confused

or hurt. If I were painting now, my page would be filled with browns and grays and dirty blues. I shivered and looked around for a sweatshirt—there was a dark orange one at the foot of my bed, but I couldn't put it on by myself, or get out of my pj's. Ugh.

I was stuck looking out the window till Mom showed up.

Each raindrop became a tiny explosion against the ground. I doubt if anyone can hear just one raindrop, but hundreds of them make their own kind of music. It's rhythmic, yet gray. I can usually sense a color in just about everything. For example, the rustling of leaves sounds like green, and the wind in my hair feels like blue, and my favorite cookies taste like gold. But I didn't sense colors in today's rain.

And I still didn't hear one single bird chirping. Did birds run for cover in a storm? It must be hard, with only leaves or skinny branches to stay dry under. But maybe they liked rainy days—free showers!

And the wind—wow. It was seriously spooky outside. And there were certainly no crowds in an audience waiting to hear me give a speech!

Maybe it was the world's way of crying with me and every other kid—summer vacation was nearly over. As if in answer, lightning sparked across the sky.

At least I was safe and warm inside. The storm could do the painting in gray droplets. Soaked, saturated,

sodden, full of spurts and splashes. Ha! All the words that just slid out of my mind began with the letter *S*. I have this unspoken love affair with words, maybe because I can't actually speak them. My words are like bubbles from under the sea, floating around me, floating within me, silent, screaming to be heard. At the same time, words make me whole. Which is ironic because, hello, I can't talk.

But that doesn't shut me up. So don't be feeling sorry for me. Because I have a lot to say.

## CHAPTER 3

**Here's the thing. Lots of people talk who have nothing to say. But for me, words are my superpower—I use them to fly me to galaxies of understanding, to joke around with friends at a picnic table, or to tell my little sister, Penny, to open the back door so that our dog, Butterscotch, can go out and pee.**

Lucky for me, I've got a device that helps me get the words out, a computerlike machine called a Medi-Talker. Just by touching a few squares with my right thumb (it behaves best!), it talks for me—and full sentences emerge. I named it Elvira—the device, not my thumb—ha-ha. Why? “’Cause I can,” Penny would sass.

Actually, it's from an old song Dad always plays in the car.

Before Elvira, which sits on a specially made shelf on the side of my bed at night, I had a zillion thoughts stuck in my head with no way to get them out. But now I can have ordinary conversations with my family and the new friends I made at camp. I just wish the voice installed in it didn't sound like a kid with a really bad cold. In my head, I'm thinking I should sound like Beyoncé.

Maybe they'll fix it one day. Maybe I will!

A few weeks ago at Camp Green Glades, I also got to do other kinds of things I had never even dreamed of. Gee, I loved that camp! Truth? I didn't think I would when I first got there. I was scared, away from home for the first time ever, and way out of my comfort zone. Like, duh—I can't walk or talk and you want me to go to camp and hike through the woods? But it ended up being the best thing ever, even when we ran into a skunk! I'm usually transported by a wheelchair, but at camp I rode a horse—in a thunderstorm—by myself!! Well, it wasn't exactly supposed to happen like that, but even though I ended up soaking wet and totally terrified, I had a blast. Plus, I went zip-lining—yep, me—hung out under the stars around a blazing campfire, and even learned to swim. It was the most fun I'd had in my entire life.

Even better? For the first time, I made friends. I glanced down at my skinny wrist and gently touched



the frayed, multicolored friendship bracelet that my friends and I wore at camp. It was really the first time in my life that I'd ever had anyone my age to giggle and whisper with. Ever.

The four of us have sent a few texts to each other since then, but nothing is as awesome as singing songs by a blazing campfire.

That might sound like no big deal, but, for real? Before I went to camp, I never had one single person who I could call a real friend. Yeah, I knew kids at school, but no one actually wanted to hang around with me, not even for a minute. A lot of them, well, didn't even seem to see me. They'd walk around me. Or pretend I was invisible. Guess what that made me feel like? Yeah, invisible.

But at camp—all the kids had some sort of challenge, which is how I guess the rest of the world sees us. There were kids who had spina bifida, and Down syndrome, and some conditions I'd never heard of. We all needed help, just in different ways. And because we *all* got help, it all started to feel . . . normal. Weird, huh? For one magical week, we felt ordinary. We slept in cabins, ate our meals together, went to our first dance together, and almost got sprayed by a skunk together—actually, a few kids did get sprayed! Yeah, friendship. I could hardly wait until next summer.

Until then, I was back to pre-camp normal, which

was not very normal at all. The condition that I've been labeled with is called cerebral palsy. Isn't that an awful-sounding name? Maybe I should start a campaign to name it something more interesting or funny, like spaghetti legs or noodle toes. For now, it is what it is, but it's not who I AM.

But what it meant was, in a few weeks, I would have to return to a school where the kids who are used to me will ignore me, and the new kids are gonna stare for sure at the seventh-grade girl who rolls down the halls in a motorized wheelchair. (I'd give anything to make it go faster!) I'm the only kid who had to be fed (yep, it's embarrassing) and who needed help to go to the bathroom. Double embarrassing!

I'm the kid whose mouth hangs open sometimes—and the drool is its own situation! Oof. I'm the one whose arms fling out unexpectedly, whose legs are toothpick-skinny in slightly cute stretch pants, whose shoes are always scuff-free on the bottom.

That's what they see. They don't see *me*. Melody Brooks. I can do eleventh-grade algebra problems in my head. Crossword puzzles too! I used to be in the special needs class because of my various "issues," but the school finally realized I'm supersmart, so they bounce me around, never quite sure where I belong. My math classes are all advanced level, which I ace, but I already

know that my “hands-on” science course this year is going to be a challenge—probably more for the teacher than for me. One of the experiments will be slicing open a tomato to see what’s inside, which is easy enough for kids who can hold a knife in one hand and the tomato in the other. For me, well . . . I feel sorry for the tomato!

I love golden retrievers and snowflakes. I like to visit the lions and tigers at the zoo. They’re strong and powerful, yet somehow sad because they’re limited by fences and cages. I totally get it.

I’m scared of bears—not sure why, because I never met one! And I don’t like skunks—it’s not their fault, but their smell is unforgettably, horribly funky. Let’s just say I now know from experience!

I love bubbles. Yep, the thin, iridescent orbs that my little sister loves to chase. Bubbles are weightless and free—like dreams. What must that be like? Not tied down to the earth by gravity, or by disability?

I don’t like chocolate, and that might be rarer than cerebral palsy! But I love words, even though I’ve never said a coherent one in my life. Like I said, I’m so lucky to have Elvira.

As I waited for my mom, and for the storm to pass, I noticed a flash of royal blue landing on my windowsill. It was one of Mrs. V’s blue jays. Well, they’re not *her* birds,

of course, but she looks out for them, leaving them seeds and suet and nesting materials. When I asked her why, she simply replied, “Their blue makes me happy! Besides, they’re scrappy and tough like you, Melody.”

*Now* I get the happy part—a jay had never landed on my windowsill before, and it made me instantly excited, like a slice of blue sky had broken through all that gray after all! Watching the blue jay reminds me of the nature series Dad likes to binge-watch. Blue jays are feisty and bossy and squawk-yell at each other. They steal twigs from each other’s nests and gobble whatever food shows up each morning.

But hello—they eat ants! Even at my hungriest, I don’t think I could handle an ant sandwich. The blue jay must have sensed my thoughts, because it flittered off, probably pecking at the suet from the feeder that Mrs. V had hung up in her backyard. It was kinda like a jaybird fast-food restaurant. I guess they’ll eat ants for dessert. Then, after totally pigging out, they simply lift their wings and soar into the sky. Lucky blue jays!

Blue’s my favorite color, by the way. It makes me feel calm and peaceful; it’s the color I see when I close my eyes at night. But blue also burns brightly in the center of a flame!

Of course, just as I was thinking about peaceful blue and flying, the bird flittered back over toward me with a

squawk, and . . . dropped a splat of poop on my window! And then I was cracking up. I'd have to tell Mrs. V about that one!

Mrs. V, whose full name is Violet Valencia, lives next door. She's practically like family. She helps my parents with me and Penny. She traveled around the world when she was younger, can speak three languages, has read hundreds of books, and does a full yoga workout every morning. She hasn't missed a day in five years, she told me.

And Mrs. V was the one who first opened my life to speech and actual conversation. She was the one who pushed me to stretch, to defy boundaries, and to succeed when I had no idea I could do any of it. She was even the one who found Elvira for me! Mrs. V never sees anything impossible in my life—only possibilities.

I already knew what she'd say if I asked her about blue jays: "Let's look this up. Let's do some research. Let's find some photos."

By "let's," she means me. So that was what I did. Elvira is also a fully functional supercomputer, so I thought I might as well start researching blue jays while I was waiting for Mom. Hmm—blue jays eat all kinds of insects, and eggs robbed from other nests. They're pretty bird pirates!

And now I know why they strut about on Mrs. V's

lawn instead of hopping. They've got heavier legs and feet than most birds.

I was admiring close-ups of those cool crests on their heads—like they're all flying around with crowns on—when, at last, I heard Mom walking down the hall. Penny must have woken her up; she was chattering away about her latest passion—fingernail polish. She had bottles of the stuff all around the house—every color imaginable, and some I'm sure somebody just made up. So Mom got her a shiny red Caboodle to contain the mess—one of those plastic bins with a handle and little squares inside—and now Penny carries that thing everywhere. It's filled with pink frosted lip gloss, hair clips, kid cologne, and even body glitter. And yes, eight zillion bottles of nail polish! The part that's impressive is that she's not even five, but she knows exactly how to apply the polish—she never spills a drop. Her hands never shake or wobble as she paints her left hand with the right, and her right hand with her left. Her dexterity amazes me, and, facts, maybe makes me a *little* envious. I couldn't even hold a spoon long enough to feed myself without spilling. I glanced at the bird poop on my window—couldn't wipe that up either!

## CHAPTER 4

Past my window, I saw—no one. The folks who live on our street are pretty predictable, and apparently avoid the rain, ha. Mr. and Mrs. Casselberry live in the big yellow house to the left of us. They wave sometimes as they walk their dogs—three miniature poodles. Butterscotch probably laughs as those little bitty dogs march down the street in matching outfits. Seriously, the last time it rained, they all wore cute tiny yellow doggie raincoats.

Across the street lives Miss Gertie. She's old. I mean old-old. I'm not being impolite—she just is! Her hair is silver, wrapped up in a bun . . . and she walks pretty slowly to her mailbox, then back, every day.

She's gotta be lonely, I figured, because I've hardly ever seen anyone visit her. Once in a while she sees me sitting in the window and gives a wave. In return, I flap my arms as hard as I can to wave back.

*No wave today*, I was thinking as Penny exploded into my room. My sister doesn't walk, she bursts, and her constant chatter sizzles with energy.

"Hey, Dee-Dee," she blurted out, thrusting a hand in front of me. "Which do you like better: the lavender and pink champagne polish?" Then she thrusts the other hand out. "Or this: the tangerine and buttercup yellow?" Then she began blowing on each finger.

Just so I didn't swing my arm out and accidentally smear her polish, I quickly typed, "**Buttercup!**"

Penny did a little happy dance, then darted out of the room—probably to watch her favorite show, *Yabba Dabba Duckie*, her mind and body racing to another adventure.

As I watched her run off, I felt so glad that she doesn't have to face the world from a wheelchair, that she can say whatever silliness pops into her mind, that she can paint her fingernails ten different colors if she wants to.

Mom peeked into my room. "Ready to get up, sleepy-head?"

Sleepyhead? Excuse me . . . I've been up with the birds! But I tapped "**Yes**" on my board and gave her a big smile, 'cause I try not to stress her. She's a nurse at



the local hospital, and with her job plus seeing to all my needs, she doesn't get much rest. So I do my best to make things as easy as possible on my end.

Once we finished my morning bathroom business and getting dressed, she started breakfast. "You want your nails done too?" she asked.

I shook my head no vigorously; I wanted my camp polish to last as long as possible. It came with really good memories—the camp dance. And . . . Noah.

"Gotcha," she said with a smirk.

I tapped out the words, **"Penny is a whirlwind this morning. She's like a bubble dancing in the air."**

Mom raised an eyebrow knowingly. "You got that right!"

**"Laughter like diamonds and sparkles of joy,"** I tapped next.

Mom ran her hand over my hair. "You have such a gift with words," she said. "You should write a book, maybe poetry."

I smiled. **"Maybe,"** I tapped. **"In my free time."**

We both laughed. She fed me one of my favorite breakfast meals—scrambled eggs drizzled with maple syrup. Hey, don't judge me! It's yummy!

"I'm gonna toss a load into the washer," she said, wheeling me back into my room and handing me my Dad-made custom TV channel changer. The buttons

were as big as quarters; I could push them with my thumb so I didn't have to bother anybody when I needed to switch the station.

"Netflix?" Mom asked.

I shook my head. I'd seen just about every movie they had to offer. I could probably write a film script. Mom fiddled with the remote, then switched to the Disney Channel.

"What language?" she asked. She knew me so well.

"**German,**" I tapped. She nodded, clicked it on the language setting, then handed me the remote.

I've started teaching myself other languages in addition to French, which I already knew: Spanish, Chinese, German, and Arabic. So I love watching shows in those languages whenever I can.

I settled into a movie about mountain climbers in the Himalayas. I might accomplish amazing things in my life, but inching up a mountain with just my fingertips and toes—nah, not gonna happen.

During a commerical I glanced out the window. Hey, the rain stopped. And there was Miss Gertie, dressed in a pale purple bathrobe, hands empty, walking away from her mailbox. When she reached the freshly blooming Tropicana roses lining her walkway, she paused, sniffed one.

Tropicanas (of course I'd researched them—lol!) are

usually a bright coral-orange color, but Miss Gertie must be some kind of rose whisperer—hers were pale pink, and orange sherbet. But her favorite was clearly a bush called the Peace rose. Its blooms were huge, golden, and edged in salmon. Miss Gertie watered that bush right down by the roots, sprinkled around little granules that I bet were fertilizer—and I know for sure she talked to it. I could see her whispering now as she pinched a random brown leaf from one of its stems.

As she straightened up and stretched her back, she saw me at the window. She waved and then pointed with pride at her blooms.

I flop-hand waved back.

She continued up the walkway. Suddenly, she seemed to stumble on something on the path. She pitched forward, swinging out her arms to steady herself. Maybe the walkway was slick because of the rain, or maybe she just couldn't catch her balance, but—oh no! She fell to the ground! I waited, heart thumping, for her to stir, to get back up, but she didn't seem to be moving.

I screeched for Mom, but she was in the basement doing laundry. I screeched for Penny. I screeched out to the empty air and closed windows of the neighborhood. Not one single car passed by. Not even a random blue jay. And Miss Gertie was lying motionless in her yard.

## CHAPTER 5

**I continued to holler for Mom, for Dad, for anybody!**

Miss Gertie had not moved.

I could hear Mom singing as the washing machine chugged and sloshed. I could hear the beating of the water as Dad took his shower. Penny, deep into the latest episode of *Yabba Dabba Duckie*, had the sound up on full blast. No one could hear me.

Still, I hollered and hollered. Still not one car drove by. Not one neighbor jogged up the sidewalk. Where were the dog walkers? It was like a horrible movie scene, except this was real.

“Yabba Bo-dabba Duckieeeee!” came from the next room.

*Chug-slosh, chug-slosh* came from the laundry room.

I squealed and yelped and kicked. My legs do that, not that it helped.

Then it dawned on me—Elvira!

My heart began to flutter. I steadied my breathing, and, for the very first time ever, I tapped the 911-EMERGENCY square on the bottom left edge of my board.

A pleasant female voice picked up almost immediately. “911. What is your emergency?” I bet she had said that a thousand times.

My heart thumped. How could I possibly do this?

I took a deep breath, and hollered as loudly as I could, “Uhhhhh!”

The woman on the other end sighed loudly and repeated, “911. What is your emergency?”

I shrieked. When I get excited, my body control disappears, and my wobbly-bobbly moves go into overdrive.

“It is a crime to interfere with the work of the police and fire departments!” she almost barked at me. Then she hung up.

I was stunned. At the same time I couldn’t blame her. I probably sounded like somebody who ought to be ignored. They probably get lots of prank calls at that job.

I hit the red button for the second time in my life. The same operator picked up. I let out another shriek.

“I will report you to my supervisors if you do this again!” She hung up again.

I redialed once more.

A male operator picked up this time. “911. What is your emergency?”

I tried again, this time grunting. “Uhhhhh!”

“This is an emergency line. Are you in an emergency situation?” The voice sounded annoyed.

Gahh! I probably sounded like a crazy person. Still, I screeched once more.

“Uhhhhh!” I was starting to panic. I couldn’t think clearly.

“It is illegal to use this line to play games. Do you have an emergency?”

“Buhhhhh! Buhhhhh!”

The music of the duckie show blared in the background. Totally flustered, I glanced out the window. Miss Gertie hadn’t moved an inch. And that’s when I remembered the HELP tab on my talking board. Duh! How could I forget that? So I hit HELP on my board. Again and again.

**“HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP!”**

The operator kinda changed his tone then. “Can you speak?” he asked carefully.

I hit **“NO.”** But I know that made no sense to him.

I tapped **“HELP”** once, twice more. I paused, took a breath, then took the time to tap out the words **“My name is Melody. Send help quick!”**

“Okay, Melody. Your voice doesn’t sound normal. Can you tell me why?”

I had no time for explanations about my birth, my life, and all my issues. I tapped, **“HELP”** once more.

“Are you in trouble?” the operator asked at last.

Finally, I seemed to be getting through.

**“Yes. Yes. Yes.”**

Now his voice shifted to all business. “Okay. My name is Jeffrey, and I’m going to try to help you.”

At last! Took him long enough.

Jeffrey continued, now all in. “Your address has appeared on my screen. Are you in danger?”

How should I answer him? It wasn’t me who was in danger. But I typed **“YES.”**

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

**“No. Friend.”**

“So your friend is in trouble?”

**“YES!”**

“Okay, I get it. I’ve just dispatched someone to your address. Let me ask you this, Melody: Are you using an assistive device?”

He got it! Thank God! Thank God! Thank God!

I tapped back quickly. **“YES! YES!”** I wondered how he knew, but I didn’t want to take time to ask.

“Okay, I’m confirming that help is on the way!”

I felt a little like I was on one of those emergency rescue shows that Dad likes to watch. But this was real.

**“Hurry!”** I typed. **“My friend is hurt.”**

“Is your friend with you?”

**“No. Across the street.”**

“Are you safe?” he asked.

**“Yes. I’m fine.”**

“Good. Tell me about your friend.”

**“She’s reallllly old.”**

“Can you tell if she’s breathing?”

**“Can’t tell.”** Then I tapped out, **“She fell. Hit her head. And she’s still on the ground!”** Then I added, **“Her name is Miss Gertie.”** It seemed to take forever to tap that out and hit send.

“This is terrific information,” Jeffrey assured me. “I’ve passed it along to the crew.”

I looked out the window once more, but still no one was in sight. I was thinking, *This Jeffrey guy sure is taking his sweet time to get this going!* To Miss Gertie, it must seem like a million years. Which is, if she was even conscious enough to be aware of how long she’d been on the ground. Which got me to worrying even more. What if she was unconscious? What if she was lying there and didn’t even know it?