

SAME



BUT



DIFFERENT

TEEN LIFE ON THE AUTISM EXPRESS

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SCHOLASTIC INC.

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# CALLIE

**I'M STARTING TENTH GRADE TODAY.** The first day of school usually makes me feel excited, but this time around, things feel a little different. Simply because, well, things *are* different. My twin brother, Charlie, is starting ninth grade (again). Charlie's repeating a grade is a big deal. But it's much more than that. Charlie has autism. We've been together forever, and our tight bond is slowly loosening up. Charlie and I used to be inseparable. I knew he was different, but my younger brothers, Cole and Chris, and I have never

treated him that way. He's always been one of us, a member of the Garrison family. Nothing to it.

But then, I kept getting good grades, made lots of friends, joined the track team. Charlie didn't do any of those things. He had trouble finishing his homework, passing his classes, and answering questions in class. He wasn't the best at making friends, and let me tell you, my brother couldn't care less about playing on a sports team.

Charlie's repeating ninth grade. At the same time, he's watching me move ahead while he stays back. And okay, I admit it. I'm a little more than excited and relieved about not being in the same grade as Charlie. No more cringing when my "has-trouble-talking" brother is forced to speak out loud in class. No more volunteering to be his partner for class projects because no one else wants to. No more being known as "Charlie's sister." I can finally be me.

The thing is, though, Charlie and I are still in the same school building, so I can still see the stuff my brother goes through. Last year, I had a front-row seat to the action. Now I will witness it all from a distance. I can't help but wonder: Is it better to be up close, or to watch Charlie from farther back?



# CHARLIE

**OKAY.** Here we go. First day is always the worst. New people. New routine. But this year, things suck even more. New people. Same place. Same grade, all over again. No Callie.

I'm cool with the no Callie part. That girl is always trying to jump into my business. Always telling me that she's my eyes and ears for when I need help "figuring it out." Well, guess what. I can "figure it out" without *her*.

Getting held back is even worse when you're made

to stay in special ed. Why do they call it special, anyway? There's nothing *special* about being in a place people say is "the loser room."

I'm sick of being *special*. I don't want to be *special* anymore.

I want to be in the main room in school. I mean, all I ever hear my parents talking about is getting me into the "mainstream." Well, there's nothing "main" about having kids look at you like you just farted. Is that why I'm special?

The good news is that I have Ms. Jackson this year for homeroom. The bad news is that Ms. Jackson was Callie's homeroom teacher last year. Turns out, Ms. Jackson also teaches special ed. That's good news, too. But as soon as I get into class, I hear people comparing me to the "normal twin." That's bad news. Callie's nowhere around? She's someplace in this big crowded school. She's off swimming in a mainstream. She's off being normal. Good for her. Miss Figure-It-Out is *figuring out* her own self, while I'm stuck here. Being special.

When the bell rings (that LOUD bell kills my

head), it's time to move to the next class. I somehow have to get to math. I hate changing rooms. I call it the torture race:

*Go to my locker.*

*Struggle with the code.*

*Put back one set of books. Pull out another.*

*Kids all talking LOUDLY.*

*Strong smells.*

*Bad smells.*

*Bright lights that slice at me.*

*Colors that punch me in the eyes.*

I wish I could wear my headphones at school, but it's against the rules. I'm a sweaty mess by the time I switch rooms. I didn't make it to the bathroom in between classes. So when I get to my next class, I need to pee. Badly.

But okay, things are back to being better when Justin and Steve sit by me. Callie had warned me that it might be hard to make friends this year, but I'm already doing it. With Steve and Justin. Right here. On each side. They're passing notes about the best-looking girls in our grade. And they're asking me to

help move the notes around. And before I know it, I'm getting in trouble and being asked to sit up by the teacher. Justin and Steve don't admit to anything, but I don't care. I'm not sure how they didn't get caught. I guess I have to work on not being so loud when I fold paper. But who cares about that? I'm in with Steve and Justin. At least I have two friends. On the first day. What class was this again? Oh yeah, math.

Steve and Justin find me again during lunch and ask if I want to have pizza with them this Friday in the cafeteria, when there's going to be a back-to-school pizza menu. They ask if I have any money I can give them now to hold on to for Friday's pizza. I don't have any cash to give them today for the pizza, but they say I can bring it on Friday. Yes! Wait till I tell all of this to Callie.

The lunch bell rings, and we three walk to our next classes together. It's going to be a great year.