

## Full House Fan Fiction

### My New Friend

By: Doug Fowler

#### CHAPTER ONE

Ten-year-old Michelle Tanner waved her red and orange pom poms. "Yay, go Lee," she screamed cheerfully. She grinned happily. Her fifth grade friend and classmate, Lee Wagner, was running into the end zone. Nobody was near him. "Touchdown!" Lee flipped the ball to the referee. He jogged over to the sidelines. Michelle and her two best friends jumped and chanted. "Go, Comets, go. Go, Comets, go." Michelle, Cassie Wilkins, and Mandy Metz made swishing noises, as if they were comets. Lee's cousin Suzie Johnson, five, eyed Michelle closely, trying to copy her. Michelle brushed away some of her strawberry blonde bangs after jumping. Lee walked by to get a drink of water. He got his cup and turned to Michelle. "Thanks for being my cheering section, guys." "It's our pleasure," Michelle said. "We're having fun. Your cousins remind me so much of my cousins, Nicky and Alex. I bet Derek's a good player." Derek, eight, was playing catch with several larger boys. Three-year-old Mark was over by the swings with his mom. Their dad, Joe, was recording the game. "These outfits are cool, huh, guys?" The best friends wore matching white blouses and red skirts. "Your dad found some great bargains, Michelle," Cassie complimented her. "My mom would be really proud. She loves to find things on sale." Michelle got a sip of water, too. "He insisted we go shopping right away." Mandy nodded. "Mr. Tanner said we should go all out. And I'm glad we did." Her dark curls flopped as she jumped. "Yeah, cheerleading is fun," Suzie exclaimed. "Look what I did to my hair." The girls turned to her and laughed. She'd used her scrunchies to attach pom poms to her head. Instead of two black ponytails, she appeared to have two larger ones - one orange and one red.. "They're just like your cousins, Michelle," Cassie agreed. "Always doing something funny." "Look this way, pumpkin," her father, Danny Tanner, shouted. He was pointing a video camera at her. Michelle turned, smiled, and waved a pom-pom. "Dad loves to make a big deal out of everything we do. With our large family, there must be a dozen cabinets full of tapes." Lee ran back onto the field. He put on a black helmet with an orange comet, outlined in red, on the side. "Those red uniforms are cool, too," Cassie said. "I'd rather have blue, that's my favorite color." Mandy hesitated. "Well, favorite football color. I love pink, too. But, what football team would wear pink?"

"Not one I'd want to be on," Derek admitted behind them.  
Another of Michelle's classmates, Jamal Anderson, knocked the ball loose. Lee fell on it.  
"R-O-W-D-I-E," the girls shouted as they jumped and waved their pom-poms.  
"That's the way we spell rowdy, rowdy. Let's get rowdy. Wooooo!"  
"All right," the Comets' gray-haired coach hollered. "That's the way to grab that ball!" Michelle thought he looked a little short of breath. "That ices it, guys! We're going to the finals!"  
"Are you all right, Sir," Michelle wanted to know.  
"I'm fine," the coach said defensively. "I just get so excited over these games."  
Danny noticed the same thing Michelle did. "Maybe you'd better sit down and relax," he said from the sidelines.  
"If I have chest pains, I'll sit down!" The coach went back to screaming instructions.  
The game ended a couple minutes later. After the teams shook hands, Michelle listened to Lee's coach. "You boys did a great job. We're going to the finals now. You can hold your heads up high and say that after next Saturday, you'll be number one! Keep thinking about that. Comets are number one! And have that attitude when you come here to practice on Monday! Just one more week of hard work, and the trophy will be yours!"  
Lee ran up to Michelle on the playground Monday morning. "Hey, Michelle. Thanks again for coming Saturday."  
"You're welcome. I love helping my friends. Your coach sure likes to yell," she said. She didn't want to call him mean without knowing more about him. But, she thought he'd sounded kind of mean.  
Lee seemed to struggle a little. "Well, he's just being a football coach. I mean, he loves to cheer, and he's always encouraging us. He inspires us to do our best. Even when we don't feel like it. That's just the way football is."  
"I guess as long as he doesn't scream right at you," Mandy remarked as she walked up behind Michelle. "And he realizes you're there to have fun."  
"Yeah, he does. Anyway, what you said about doing anything?"  
Michelle looked at him curiously. "What is it??"  
"Well..." He hesitated. "My parents should both be able to make it to this game. Uncle Joe and Aunt Mary are gonna be here all week, too. Uncle Joe's work sent him here. So, they're making a vacation out of it. But, Dad's going to be working, Uncle Joe's at a conference, and Aunt Mary will be with my cousins all week."  
"So, what's the problem," Cassie wondered.  
"Well..." He seemed unsure of how to word it. So, he simply blurted out the words. "We could use a coach."

"A...coach," Michelle said after a moment of silence.

"Coach Harris was short of breath at the game." Lee said it got worse later.

"His son convinced him to go to the hospital. It turned out Coach had a small heart attack."

"Oh no" and "is he all right" flew from several lips at the same time.

"He'll be okay. But they have to keep him there a few days. And, he won't be able to coach us in the title game." Lee breathed deeply. "My family will be busy. But, you've got a big family. I'm sure your dad would be good. He was a sportscaster, right?"

Michelle nodded. "Yeah. Unfortunately, he and my Aunt Becky will be busy. They're producing a special series of programs for the station."

Lee understood. Danny and Becky hosted a local talk show called "Wake Up, San Francisco."

They sometimes helped to produce other shows for the station, too. "What about your Uncle Jesse? Or Joey?"

Jesse was Jesse Katsopolis, her dad's brother-in-law. Jesse moved in to help raise Michelle and her sisters after Michelle's mother died in a car accident. Her dad's best friend from college, Joey Gladstone, also moved in then. Jesse later met and married Becky.

"One thing's for sure. I don't think Michelle's sisters could do it." Cassie laughed. "It's one thing to put together a class party. It's another thing to coach a football team."

Michelle agreed. "I can hear Stephanie now. I'll coach the team if there's a cute ninth grade boy at quarterback. And, if I get to sit next to him." Michelle's sister Stephanie, was 14, and crazy about boys. Her other sister, D.J., was 19 and in college.

"Just watch. Nicky and Alex will wind up coaching," Mandy teased. Nicky and Alex were Jesse and Becky's identical five-year-old twins. All nine members of Michelle's family lived in her full house.

Michelle spoke solemnly. "I can ask. But, Uncle Jesse and Joey have their radio show. And, one of them might have to take off to watch Nicky and Alex a couple days. I was going over to Cassie's after school today as it was. Nicky and Alex might be over with me," she told Cassie.

"Unless someone in their playgroup volunteers to take them."

Cassie pointed to Lee. "Maybe his Aunt Mary could watch Nicky and Alex."

Lee agreed. "I'll have to ask. Sounds like everyone but you will be busy."

Michelle could tell something was on his mind. She didn't know if she dared to guess. "Wait, Lee.

You mean...you want me..."

"Michelle, coaching is easy. Just draw up some plays, teach us, and tell us to have fun." He stared at her a second. "You...do know how to make up plays, don't you?"

"I'm afraid not. We've played soccer. Stephanie was great at baseball. I've played it, too. Joey's played hockey. But, football? In the final's? I don't know about this," she finished, sounding quite uneasy.

Snobby Rachel Tilly walked up to Michelle and her friends. Rachel hadn't been very nice when she and her family moved there the previous year. Rachel and Michelle had started to become friends

in the last days of fourth grade. But, Rachel had been away all summer, so that seed hadn't had much time to bear fruit. Plus, while Rachel was nicer now, she still sounded a little arrogant at times. She boasted about herself and said the wrong things sometimes. "What are you trying to do now? It can't be Class President, Victor's doing that this year," Rachel said.

Cassie turned to her. "Rachel - can you coach Lee's football team this week?" Michelle was thankful that her friend had put Rachel on the spot. Rachel shook her head. "Don't be ridiculous, Cassie." She brushed back her incredibly long hair. "I'm a star. Not the coach of a bunch of guys running around bumping into each other. Now, ballet, I could coach. I was in dance school all summer in New York," she reminded her friends.

Mandy held out a hand. "See, Michelle. You have to. Rachel won't even try to get the Comets the league title."

Michelle noticed Rachel mulling it over. Rachel loved publicity. Was this a way she could gain it? She wasn't sure. But, she knew Rachel might take the offer just for that. So, Michelle jumped at the opportunity. "Okay, Lee. If I can't find anyone else, I'll coach your team." "Thanks. Could you be at our practice at four?" Michelle shrugged. "I'll see what I can do."

### CHAPTER THREE

After the boys' doctor appointments, Jesse dropped Nicky and Alex off at the Wagners. The Johnson children, Derek, Suzie, and Mark, were all playing in the back yard. Cassie's mom had dropped Michelle and Cassie off there, too. The girls were swinging on the swings.

Suzie was changing a doll's diaper when Nicky walked up to her. "Hi," he said sweetly. "Can I help with that?"

"Why would you play with dolls?" Derek complained.

Michelle was going to speak up for Nicky. He didn't mind playing with dolls, since he'd grown up with Michelle and her sisters. However, Suzie gave Derek a look. Michelle could tell Suzie had things under control.

"I think it's very nice if a boy wants to play with me," Suzie said. She turned back to Nicky.

"Here, give her her bottle?" Nicky took the doll in his arms. "Keep her head propped up, she's very tiny. Here, you better sit while you feed her."

Nicky sat feeding the doll her bottle while Suzie picked dandelions. He looked at Derek and Mark. "You must be her brothers," he said.

"Yeah. Are you Michelle's brother?" Mark wanted to know.

"No. I'm her cousin. How come you don't live with your cousin?" Nicky asked. Derek laughed. "Lee's fun. But he lives half-way across the country from us. We're from Texas."

Nicky gave a nod of understanding. "You must hafta cross the street to get there."

"Texas is a long way away." Mark thought for a moment. "It's...five or six blocks."

Michelle turned to Cassie as they went inside to put on their uniforms. "Isn't that cute how little kids think?" Michele asked. Cassie nodded.

Suzie took the baby from Nicky and walked away, burping it. Nicky went inside to use the bathroom. A second later Alex returned from doing the same. Since they had on matching red shirts with blue jeans, the Johnson children thought it was the same boy. Suzie sat her baby in a stroller. She pranced over to Alex, carrying her dandelions. "These would make a pretty bouquet, wouldn't they?" Suzie asked him.

Alex turned on the charm, just like he'd seen his dad do with his mom. "Yeah. You dance real nice." Suzie thanked him. "Do you go to school?" Alex asked.

"Derek and I are home-schooled. Do your parents live with Michelle's Mommy and Daddy?"

"With Michelle's Daddy. Michelle's Mommy's in Heaven," Alex reported. He didn't sound sad like an adult might. To him, it was just a fact of life. Suzie, however, felt really bad for Michelle.

"That's where our Grandma went," Mark reported.

Alex grinned. "Do they know each other?"

Derek nodded. "Yeah, I bet they're best friends."

"I'll go ask your Mommy." Alex raced inside. A few seconds later, Nicky came outside with Michelle.

"What's wrong?" Michelle asked Suzie.

Nicky's face quickly brightened. "I know what Daddy says makes girls happy. " Nicky went over to the Wagners' garden and plucked a daisy.

Michelle stifled a giggle.

Nicky walked over to Suzie and spoke sweetly. "I hope you feel better."

Suzie smiled warmly as she took the flower. "Why, thank you. You're so nice."

Wrs. Wagner called out to them. "Anyone coming to watch Lee better come on."

Michelle, Suzie and Derek ran into the house, while the twins remained behind with Mark.

Suzie held the daisy as they got into the minivan. Once they buckled up, she plucked the petals.

"He loves me, he loves me not...." Once she pulled the last one off and said "he loves me," she sighed contentedly.

Suzie couldn't wait to tell her new friend the news. "Guess what," she proclaimed merrily to Michell, clasping her hands together. "This is the best vacation of my life."

Michelle smiled as she turned from the window. "I'm glad you're having a good time. What's your favorite part?"

"That cousin of yours. I'm gonna marry him someday," she declared.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

Michelle grinned broadly. "That's so cute," she said to herself. "Does he know it yet?"

"He will. He liked my dancing. And, he gave me a flower," Suzie answered.

Michelle figured Nicky had complimented Suzie's dancing when Michelle wasn't paying attention. She didn't have much time to think about that, though. Rachel walked up to her almost as soon as she started the practice. "I figured you could use another cheerleader," Rachel said. Then, she looked at Suzie. "Don't tell me you're going to try cheerleading. You're just a little kid." "Oh, yeah? Watch this." Suzie jumped and yelled "hooray." She tried to turn a cartwheel before falling over halfway through. She got up and hollered, "Yay, team!" Rachel waved her off. "That's a piece of cake. Watch this." Rachel did several acrobatic spins. She then did two somersaults, jumped up, and hollered, "Comets!" Michelle whistled. "Wow, Rachel, you are good." Suddenly, Michelle had an idea. Rachel was starting to be friendly, but she'd never learned to be nice. Maybe teaching someone would help her learn. "Can I see you for a second?" Rachel and Michelle met behind the water cooler. "What is it?" "Look, Suzie was going to cheer with Cassie and Mandy. But, you might be able to teach her yourself." Rachel beamed. "Now, she's almost six years younger than you." "Well, duh," Rachel commented. "Rachel, listen. That means she needs lots of encouragement. No nasty talk. If you have to correct her, be nice about it. Compliment the things she does right. If you can be really nice, she'll look up to you. And, you'll have made a great friend." She smiled warmly at Rachel. "Haven't I always said I love doing nice things?" Rachel thought for a moment, then sighed. She remembered how Michelle had been nice to her last spring, even when she wasn't nice back. She could tell Michelle had enjoyed helping her a lot, even when Rachel hadn't wanted her help. Rachel imagined that she could get the same kind of feeling. "You're right, Michelle. You have tried. I still remember that penguin job you gave me in the ice show. I didn't think I'd like it, but I was the star." Rachel purposely avoided mentioning the more recent episode. Having someone follow in her footsteps seemed to be intriguing Rachel. "You'll really let me show her I'm the best?" "I'll let you show her how to be like the best," Michelle corrected her. "Cool. What do I do now?" "Show her a few simple cheers. Cassie and Mandy will help you," Michelle said. Michelle and Rachel walked over to the other three girls. They were doing jumping jacks. "Guys, take five. Rachel's going to coach Suzie in cheerleading." She read incredible shock on her friends' faces. "Look, it'll be okay. I told her just what I expect." D.J. walked over with her boyfriend, Steve. They and several parents would be supervising the practice. "Are you sure that's a good idea, Michelle," D.J. wanted to know. Michelle nodded. "Remember what you always said about your best friend Kimmy?" "Kimmy's quite a character. But, she was always a lot friendlier than Rachel," D.J. said out of the corner of her mouth.

"But, you kept showing her how to be good. Just like I try to show Rachel how to be nice,"

Michelle whispered.

D.J. grinned. "Okay. But, you might have to help her. And you're already coaching."

"That's what Cassie and Mandy are here for," Michelle said.

"Okay, good luck." D.J. and Steve walked back to their seats.

Michelle checked over the roster, then scanned the children in front of her.

"Hey, we're missing some boys."

"A couple kids came down with chicken pox. And, Roy broke his arm," Jamar explained.

Michelle rolled her eyes. Roy was one of their starting receivers. Another of the missing kids also caught balls.

The league's rules said no player could be above a certain weight. But, they didn't say anything

about a minimum weight. "Derek, do you think you could play?"

Derek leaped up quickly. "Sure. I played in a mitey-mite league back home."

"What about me," Suzie said.

Derek chuckled, shaking his head. "I don't think a girl can play football."

Rachel said she could help. "I could be a receiver. In fact, I'd like to play Saturday. But, Michelle

told me to teach Suzie. Suzie and I will practice catching the ball, as well as cheerleading."

Michelle laughed. It wasn't likely that either Rachel or Suzie would play. So, she agreed. "Okay,

Rachel. That's fair. Derek, get in..."

Mrs. Anderson, the team mother, walked up to Michelle. "We'll need Mrs. Johnson to sign a permission form. I have one in my car. Practice with the others while I take it to her."

Michelle grinned. Some of her problems were solved. By the time Mrs. Anderson returned,

Michelle had had the team practicing many running plays. Mrs. Anderson showed up with Mrs.

Johnson and Mark. Becky had picked up the twins right before Mrs. Anderson got there.

Mark walked up to Michelle as she wrote on her clipboard. "Our Grandma knows your Mommy."

Michelle bit her lip. She felt and looked uneasy. How would she explain that her mother was

dead? She wasn't on the earth for their grandma to know. Michelle had never known her herself.

It would be such a shock to him.

Thankfully, Cassie was nearby. "Is your Grandma in Heaven?" came the guess. When Mark said

"yes," Michelle passed Cassie a look of immense relief.

Mark had noticed Michelle's face. Not sure what it meant, he guessed. "Are you sad cause you

don't have a Mommy?"

Not sure of what to do, Michelle simply nodded slowly. "She died when I was a baby."

Mark instantly hugged Michelle. The warmth of the impromptu show of love meant a lot to

Michelle. She had a wonderful family. There was always lots of warmth and love shown in her

home. And, at times like this, a big hug was very helpful.

Something else would have warmed her heart even more, had she noticed. Rachel and Suzie had

observed the entire scene.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Suzie turned to face Rachel. She noticed her cheerleading coach was gazing intently.

"Michelle's nice, isn't she, Rachel?"

"Yeah," Rachel mumbled. "Come on, let's try another of those."

"Okay. I like doing ferris wheels."

Rachel bit her tongue. "It's carthweels," she muttered under her breath.

"Whatever. Hold my legs up, that's my problem." Rachel helped Suzie turn cartwheels while they spoke. "When did you first meet Michelle?"

Michelle glanced over and smiled. She was excited to see Rachel trying to be patient.

"Last year." Rachel tried to let go, but Suzie's left foot nearly hit her in the nose. "Watch where those feet are flying!" she complained.

"Sorry. I'll bet you were sad when you heard she didn't have a Mommy." Suzie nearly made it three-quarters of the way before falling when Rachel let go.

Rachel formed a half-grin. "Not bad for a beginner. Try to shift your body a little." Rachel did one of her own to demonstrate.

"Okay. I'll try that. So, were you sad?"

Rachel could tell Suzie wouldn't budge until she answered. She said half-heartedly "I didn't really think about it."

Michelle sighed. At least Rachel wasn't claiming she was better because she had a mom.

"It's scary, huh?" Suzie said sadly. She couldn't stand to think about not having a mother. "I felt really bad for Michelle. I went in and gave my mommy a really big hug. Did you do that?"

"Look, can we stop talking about this?" Rachel stormed.

"Why?"

Rachel rolled her eyes. She was trying very hard to be nice, like Michelle said. Plus, she wanted this girl to think of her as a great coach. "I just don't want to think about it," she said with a growl in her voice.

"It's okay to be scared," Suzie assured her.

Rachel fumed, clenching her fists and walking away. Michelle wasn't sure what to say, but she walked toward Rachel, anyway.

Mary sat by Rachel on the bench. "Hey, you're doing a good job teaching Suzie." She paused a moment. "You know, this is the first time my children have ever considered that Mommies can die young. I bet you never thought about that before you met Michelle, either."

Rachel shook her head.

"But you know what I told them? There would always be someone around to love them. Someone to hug them and tuck them in and tell them stories and all that. I told them if something happens, their Daddy and I have everything planned. Just like Michelle's did. So, they'll always be in a home with lots of love," Mrs. Johnson said.

Rachel forced a grin. "I'm sure it'll never happen. But..." She breathed heavily. "I guess it is scary." She gave a look of shock. "Don't you dare tell anyone I said that, Michelle. I can't

believe I admitted that."

Michelle nodded and walked away slowly. She wished she could think of something to say. She'd never thought of how Rachel might have felt about learning Michelle didn't have a mom. Of course, being scared didn't give Rachel the right to be mean. But, maybe Michelle could help her, somehow.

She would do that later, though. Right now, she had a football team to coach.

Suzie, meanwhile, was discussing her "true love" with Cassie. She turned quickly to Rachel.

"Do you think Michelle's cousins are cute, Rachel?"

Rachel decided to have some fun. "I never thought much about them. But, you see that quarterback?" She pointed toward a tall fifth grader with wavy black hair. "That's Simon Granger. Michelle thinks he's hot."

Cassie shot Rachel a look as Suzie turned a cartwheel. "Rachel, Michelle says he's cute. But I have never heard her say he's hot."

"Come on, Cassie. I just want to have a little fun. Hey, you did it," Rachel said with shock.

Suzie had turned her first cartwheel on her own! The other girls cheered.

"Yep. So, should I tell Michelle's cousin I like him?" Suzie asked.

Rachel smirked. She teased, "Sure. If you play your cards right, you could be married to him by the end of the week."

"Oh, boy. Thanks, Rachel," Suzie shouted. Cassie and Mandy both stared hard at Rachel.

## CHAPTER SIX

After practice, Michelle and her friends ate some pizzas that someone ordered. They sat at a picnic table with Suzie and her mom.

"Will those boys be coming over here tomorrow," Suzie asked as she bit into a piece of pizza.

Michelle smiled. "She must really like one of them." "Uncle Jesse's taking tomorrow off. He'll be home for them."

Mary nodded. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, we won't have to babysit them. But, they seem like a very nice family. You can go over there when they're not in school," Mary remarked.

"Good." Suzie took a sip of soda. "Can I get married when I'm five?"

Milk came out Michelle's nose because she laughed while drinking it.

"Suzie, D.J.'s not even married yet."

"I'm sure she's talking about a play wedding," Mrs. Johnson said.

"Michelle's friend said I could. And she wouldn't lie," Suzie said.

Michelle decided to let it go. She determined that Suzie had to know they were playing, if one of her friends told her that.

The next day, the Johnsons went sightseeing. They stopped by the Tanners after school.

Michelle was doing her homework before going to Lee's practice. Jesse was upstairs. Stephanie and her friends were watching the twins in the back yard while they studied.

The Johnson children quickly went upstairs to the attic. "Wow. This is like another home!" Suzie said.

Jesse came out of the boys' room. "Hey, nifty apartment, huh? Careful, don't touch all that," he said. He pointed at a large collection of Elvis Presley items.

Derek said, "It looks just like our attic. They've got junk, too."

Jesse rolled his eyes. He explained patiently. "Look, this isn't junk. It's Elvis Presley memorabilia. This is the king of rock and roll here."

"Where's his crown," Mark asked.

"Look, it's obvious you don't appreciate all this. That's fine. But it's to look at, then. Not to touch. Why don't you go play outside? I've got a little work to do while my boys are occupied."

Alex came upstairs at that moment. "I came to get my jacket. Hi, Suzie," he said with a smile.

"Hi. Your daddy loves Elvis," Suzie said.

"Yeah." He put his jacket on, then pulled a cookie out of the pocket..

"Here, this is from school yesterday. Do you want it?"

Suzie took the cookie. "Thank you. These are my favorite kind."

"Hey, when do we get some," Derek complained.

"I'll show you the cookie jar." Alex led them downstairs. They failed to hear Jesse telling Alex to only give each person one cookie.

Alex ran outside ahead of the others after each got a cookie. He ran around to the front while Mary said "what do we say?"

"Thank you," the children cried as Nicky rode his tricycle into the back yard.

"You're welcome," Nicky said. He turned to Mrs. Johnson. "What did I do?"

"What, you don't remember," Derek asked. Nicky had on the same style jacket as Alex, and the same blue jumpsuit.

"He's just being nice," Suzie shot back at Derek. She took Nicky's hands. "You're a very nice host. First you give me a flower, now this." Suzie sighed. "Rachel's right," she said to herself.

Suzie went inside. Suzie found Michelle doing homework in her bedroom. "Michelle," she said, "your cousin just gave me a cookie. It was my favorite kind."

Michelle looked up from her paper. "Yeah, they're really nice, huh?" She glanced at her watch. "Well, I've only got a couple more math problems. I'll do them when we get back."

"Michelle, were you ever in love?"

Michelle chuckled, and turned all her attention to the girl who seemed to be her "little sib" then. "I thought I was when I was a little older than you. Steve gave me a valentine candy. I thought that meant he wanted to marry me. We had a play wedding, but I was hoping it was real." She scratched her head. "Why?"

"I think your cousin likes me," Suzie explained.

"Well, you better ask him first," Michelle remarked. As they prepared to leave for practice, Michelle wished she had a little sister like Suzie. She was helping just like Stephanie and D.J. had helped her for so many years.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Michelle was explaining a new pass play she'd invented. She wanted her team to have fun.

But, she decided to be creative, too.

Mark walked up behind Simon. He put an ice cube down his back as Simon listened.

"Hey, what was that for," Simon shrieked.

"Suzie says Michelle said you were hot," Mark explained.

Michelle's face turned several shades of red. She spoke to Cassie out of the corner of her mouth. "Remind me to apologize to Stephanie for the last five years of teasing her around boys."

Her friend nodded.

Derek waved Mark and Suzie away with his hand. "Go on, you two. Go play by the swings.

I don't want you to get run over. Lee really eats up the yards when he runs."

Suzie's eyes grew wide. "Wow, he must be hungry."

Mark agreed as they walked to the swings. "That's nothing. That man on TV Sunday, he said

some team was eating up a clock."

"There you are," Rachel said from out of the blue. "Come on, Suzie. Today we're going to try some leaps. Let me see your best ballet moves."

Suzie spun while kicking her leg. She danced quite gracefully.

However, Rachel was not easily impressed. "Hmmm, not bad for your age. Of course, I was a lot better."

"You were? Are you a real ballerina?" Suzie asked.

"Of course. Watch this. It's from The Nutcracker.'" She danced for a couple minutes.

Suzie and several others watched. "Lee's older sister and I get to be sugar plum fairies."

Suzie smiled. Rachel liked to talk about herself. But, she seemed pretty nice. And, she had good advice. Suzie wanted to be like her.

As Suzie practiced some moves, she thought about Michelle's cousins. "How do I find out if a boy likes me?"

"When I start to really like boys, I'm asking them out. I'm not waiting," Rachel said. "Okay,

good jumps. Now call for a letter and spin at each jump."

Suzie jumped and twirled while shouting "Gimme an A!"

Rachel glared. "I mean a letter in Comets! It starts with C."

"Oh. Gimme a C," Suzie shouted as she leaped.

"C," Rachel shouted. They repeated this until she'd done every letter.

"You're actually getting pretty good," Rachel said. For the first time, there was a hint of approval in her voice.

She enjoyed teaching Suzie.

"Thanks. So, I should ask Michelle's cousin if he likes me?"

"Why stop there? If you really like him, you oughta ask him to marry you," Rachel told her.

"I'll ask him tomorrow. We can have the wedding before the game," Suzie said.

Michelle walked over to the dancing duo several minutes later. She held her hands in the form

of a "T." "Wait a minute. This is cheerleading practice, not ballet."

Mandy walked up to her. "Rachel was having so much fun, we couldn't stand to stop her."

"Yeah. Rachel's teaching me everything she knows. She's so cool," Suzie said excitedly.

Michelle smiled at Suzie. She tried hard to hide her shock. She'd been hoping it would happen. But, sometimes it seemed like Rachel would never become friendly. She was sometimes even mean to the one classmate with whom she was friends. "So, she's being really nice to you?"

"Why wouldn't I," Rachel declared, putting her hands on her hips. "She can tell I'm the best. And you said if I was nice, that would happen."

"Well, yeah." Michelle froze for a second. She still didn't like Rachel's boasting. And, she didn't want Suzie to become like her.

Still, she could talk to Suzie about that later. Right now, the important thing was, Rachel was being nice. Maybe not overly friendly. But, this was a start. "It's fun being nice, isn't it?"

Rachel had to think. Finally, she nodded slowly. "Yeah, yeah it is," she said with a sudden look of recognition. She grinned. "It feels kinda neat." Rachel walked away, not wanting to discuss it any more.

Once out of Rachel's hearing, Michelle pumped her fist and whispered "yesss!"

The next day, Suzie decided to try what Rachel had told her. She and Derek ran in the Tanners' front door. Derek quickly sat down with Joey to play video games. Joey was home watching Nicky and Alex while Jesse did their radio show. Suzie ran upstairs, where Nicky was looking under Michelle's bed for a stuffed animal. "Can I help," Suzie asked.

"Wait...here it is." He pulled out a brown dog.

Suzie wasn't quite sure how to do what Rachel said. So, she blurted out, "Do you like me?"

"Yeah. Come on." Nicky led her up to his room. "My brother's getting the other stuff."

She noticed a large collection of dogs, bears, horses, and other stuffed animals. "Oh, are you going to put on a play with stuffed animals? I love doing that."

"Yeah. Michelle still likes this sometimes. She does the horsies. Do you want to do them?" Nicky asked her.

"I'd love to." She picked up a dapple gray horse and made it gallop along Nicky's bed. "So, would you want to get married?"

"Now?" He was stunned.

"No, we can play this now. How about Saturday," Suzie asked.

Nicky shrugged. "Okay. Wait a minute. I forgot something in Joey's room."

Suzie played with the stuffed animals for a minute. As she did so, she dreamed about getting married and playing with stuffed animals all her life. Of course, at her age, she didn't comprehend what all went into having a boyfriend, let alone getting married. But, Rachel seemed to know.

Then, Alex came upstairs. "I'll wear this Saturday."

Suzie gave a look of shock. She held her hands to her face. Alex was dressed as a mascot.

He was wearing a golden retriever's head. He also wore Joey's oversized, fuzzy bunny slippers.

"You can't wear that at our wedding," Suzie cried.

"We're getting married," Alex asked, greatly astonished.

"That's what you're supposed to do at a wedding," Suzie said, with a hint of Rachel's sarcasm.

Alex scratched his head. "You mean you and me?"

"Of course. You want to, don't you?"

Alex hummed. He didn't know it could happen this early. He was very attached to Nicky - he didn't want to be without him. "Can my brother still live with us?"

Suzie didn't know. But, the Tanners had a large family. So, they could, too. "Sure."

"Okay."

"Good. Now, go take off that silly costume."

Derek ran up to the third floor. "It's time to go."

"Okay." Suzie walked downstairs with Derek. When they got to the second floor, they saw Nicky walking with a stuffed lion. "See you later. And remember, wear a normal suit for our wedding. Not a Halloween mask."

"Okay." Nicky looked confused, then shrugged and went up to his room. Alex joined him

after a moment. "Did you find a mascot mask for Saturday?"

Alex nodded. "Yeah, it looks just like Comet."

"Guess what. I'm getting married Saturday."

"Good, me too." Alex smiled as he picked up a teddy bear. "I like it when we do things together."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Suzie was really excited Saturday morning. Lee's sister had been on a sleepover elsewhere.

So, Michelle spent the night with Suzie.

"Oh, that's so pretty," Suzie said when they got back to Michelle's house. She was in the crawlspace above the attic apartment with Mark, Stephanie, and Michelle. She held up a white dress. "You wore this, Stephanie?"

"Yep. In fact, I had a little play wedding in it myself," Stephanie remarked.

Suzie dug around in the box of clothes. "Where's the train?"

"Over here." Mark held up an old toy train that Nicky and Alex used to enjoy.

"Not that kind," Suzie snapped.

Stephanie noticed Suzie's attitude. "Has she been like this," she whispered to Michelle.

Michelle hummed. "Now that you mention it, she sounds more... unpleasant." She turned to

Suzie. She'd thought it was her imagination on the sleepover. But, Rachel might be rubbing off too much on Suzie. "Suzie, let's talk in our room for a minute," Michelle said. She led the others to the second floor. Mark went down to the living room with his parents.

Stephanie sat Suzie between her and Michelle on her bed. "Suzie, Rachel's not the kind of person you should be like."

"Duh, she's the best," Suzie explained. "And, she knows so much."

Michelle sighed. She repeated something Stephanie and D.J. had done many times. Michelle had picked up words like "duh" from hanging around her Uncle Jesse's band when she was little.

And, Stephanie and D.J. would always stop everything and make Michelle speak politely before continuing, even if it took quite a while. Thanks to their persistent efforts and modelling of good behavior, Michelle couldn't recall saying such things as "duh" or "you got it, Dude" beyond age five. Michelle prided herself in being very polite now.

"Suzie, before we go any further, you are going to say that without the duh' - you know better than that."

Suzie caught the look. Michelle was glad they wouldn't have to delay the play wedding to make Suzie talk nicely. "Okay. I'm sorry. But, she is the best," Suzie said meekly.

"Suzie, Rachel's getting better. But, she still isn't as friendly as she should be," Michelle said.

"How can you say that? She's your friend," Suzie protested.

"I can see why you thought that." Michelle put her arm around Suzie. "The truth is, I wanted her to teach you so she would see how fun it is to be nice. Because, she often isn't very nice."

"Rachel would tease Michelle soemtimes because she has a mom and Michelle doesn't," Stephanie added as an example.

Suzie's mouth flew open. "Rachel wouldn't do that. That's mean!" she said with a scowl.

"But she did." Michelle looked down. She wished she didn't have to disillusion Suzie like this. But, she had to be told.

"You're starting to sound like Rachel," Stephanie informed her.

Michelle said, "Maybe not so much your parents notice yet. But, you were a little nicer when you first came. Like when Mark held that toy train up," Michelle said. "That was funny. And yet you acted rude. You know better, don't you?"

Suzie rested her head in her hands. "Yeah, I guess," she muttered.

Michelle could tell Suzie felt bad. "It's okay. We still like you. We just want you to be good to others, and not rude like Rachel. You should look up to someone like us. Because we're nicer than Rachel would be, aren't we."

Suzie sat up quickly. "Yeah. But, that doesn't mean Rachel would be mean about you not

having a Mommy. Rachel says she can't even think about that. It's too scary for her."

Michelle closed her eyes. There it was again. Why did Rachel have to be so mean? Probably because nobody ever taught her to be nice in such a situation. How could Michelle teach her?

Michelle grinned as she considered a solution. "Tell you what. I'll talk to Rachel, and help her not to be so scared. But, if I do that, you have to promise me you'll be nice. And not sound rude just because Rachel does."

"Okay." Suzie jumped off the bed, grinning proudly. "You know what? I'm gonna go ask Mommy if I can have a sister. I want an older sister just like you." She ran downstairs.

Michelle began to unpack her overnight bag. "She's so cute. It would be great to have a sister like that to help." Once Michelle finished, she said, "I'll have Rachel to help, though, I guess. She is getting better, though," Michelle emphasized. "She's coming over this morning because Suzie invited her to this wedding."

"She must be getting better. I can remember when Rachel wouldn't think of stooping to come over here. She thought she was too good, with her dad being so rich with his national bakery."

Stephanie pulled out a camera. "I think you made the right choice, pairing her with Suzie."

"Thanks." Michelle left their room and walked downstairs. Rachel and Suzie were at the bottom of the steps. "Rachel, it's great to see you. We're glad you could come."

Rachel put an arm around Suzie. "Yep. I'm here to see this beautiful bride on the most important day of her life. Where we do the most fun thing of all."

"Eat cake," Mark spouted.

Suzie noticed Rachel glowering. She cut Rachel off before she could say anything. "Come

on, Rachel, that was funny. Although I'd rather have ice cream."

Rachel bit her tongue. She was still going to try to be nice. Why not? Michelle was right. It had been fun. Her old habits died hard, though. "Okay, besides that. Now, does your dress have a train? If not, go get a linen tablecloth."

"I'll find one. The boys are so excited to play wedding," Becky said. She went upstairs to their apartment.

"Yeah. Let's just hope Suzie can spell Katsopolis," Rachel said sarcastically.

Suddenly, the thought registered with Michelle. Rachel was setting up this whole thing. The way she talked, and the way Suzie had talked last night, Michelle wondered: Did Suzie understand she wasn't really getting married? And, did her cousin? In fact, which cousin was it?

Suddenly, her mind was flooded with questions. So many, she almost forgot she was supposed to coach a football team in a few hours.

## CHAPTER NINE

Joey, Derek, Nicky, and Alex were downstairs in Joey's basement apartment. "We almost

forgot something - a bachelor party," Joey said as Michelle walked downstairs.

"Joey, can I talk to Nicky and Alex," Michelle asked. The twins looked so cute in their matching gray suits.

Joey held up a finger. "In a minute. Now, boys, before you get married, you need to do something crazy."

"I know." Nicky began making gross noises with his armpits. Soon, Alex, Derek, and Joey were copying him.

"Cool," Alex shouted as they tooted. "This is a fun bachelor party."

"Now I know what I'll do at mine," Derek declared.

Michelle laughed. Joey loved acting like a kid. That was what made him a great comedian. He would know the wedding was pretend. But, would Nicky and Alex?

"Boys, listen. I just wanted to make sure you understood..." Michelle paused. "You see, whichever of you is marrying Suzie..."

"I am," Nicky said.

Alex turned to his brother, smiling. "Hey, my wife's gonna be Suzie, too!"

Michelle's mouth hung open. What was happening? "Wait a minute..." Oh, no! As if things couldn't get worse. "Guys, there's only one Suzie."

"You mean we're marrying the same girl?" Nicky asked.

"Can we do that," Alex asked Joey.

Joey was at a loss for words. He held up a finger. "No. You see...how should I put this?"

"I know how we'll decide. Let's flip for it." Nicky did a somersault.

Alex pulled a nickel out of his pocket. "I've got a nickel."

Michelle was shocked. She held out his hands. "You can't decide who you're going to marry by flipping a coin."

Joey nodded. "She's right. It's best if you do rock, paper, scissors."

The twins shook their hands and opened them. Nicky held his fingers like scissors, Alex held his hand down. "Scissors cut paper," Nicky said.

Alex shook his head. "Nuh-uh, Uncle Joey says paper covers scissors and rock." The twins called Joey Uncle Joey.

Jesse walked down to the basement. "Have mercy, you guys look incredible." He snapped a picture.

"Daddy, Alex said paper covered scissors," Nicky complained.

Jesse looked puzzled for a second. "Well, yeah, paper covers walls if it's big enough," Jesse said. Michelle stood back and enjoyed the silliness.

"But paper's supposed to cover rock," Nicky said.

Joey loved cartoons. He referred to one of his favorites. "Did the Flintstones have any wallpaper in their cave? No."

Jesse understood what his boys meant now. He glared at Joey. They made a great comedy team. They loved to tease each other. But they knew it was all in fun. "Well, think, Joey. That's because it all got cut by the scissors." Michelle laughed.

"No," Joey said decisively, "because if the Flintstones had wallpapered their cave, the wallpaper could easily cover the scissors until the Flintstones were done papering." He held a finger to his chin. "Unless a rock got thrown through the paper."

"Come on, Joey, kids on every playground in America know..." He rolled his eyes. "Listen to this, I'm arguing with a grown man over rock, paper, scissors."

"Yeah, but you guys have fun with it," Michelle said. "I hope Rachel and I are like that someday. I love joking around if it's not mean."

Jesse motioned his boys upstairs. "Come on, let's go. You guys can have your play wedding and then decide who really got married."

Michelle followed everyone else upstairs. Turning aside to Derek, she said "I'm glad we're just playing football to have fun. Because the way things are going, we might not even get to the field till right before game time."

## CHAPTER TEN

Michelle dashed up to her room to see Rachel sliding a linen tablecloth into the neck of Suzie's dress. Mark was helping. "Doesn't she look gorgeous, Michelle?"

"Yeah, Rachel. Suzie, listen...about your groom..."

Nicky and Alex ran upstairs, too. "Come on, Suzie," Nicky shouted.

Suzie was shocked. "What? There's two of you? I didn't know you were twins."

"That's what I wanted to tell you." Michelle paused. "Well, one of the things, actually."

"Let's go," Alex said. He and Nicky each grabbed one of Suzie's arms, and walked downstairs with her.

"But wait...I thought there was just one of you plus a younger brother. I don't want to marry both of you." She looked at both as she got to the foot of the stairs. The rest of the Tanner household and the Johnsons were watching. "How will I decide who's gonna pay the bills and

call me 'honey' and kiss me when he leaves for work?"

Mary walked over to Suzie. "Honey...you know this is pretend, don't you?"

"But, Rachel said it was real."

Michelle could tell Suzie looked sad. She walked over, and put an arm around her. "Suzie,

Rachel probably said some things to make you think it was real. Didn't she?" She glared at Rachel.

"Only a little," Rachel said. "Come on, I was just having fun."

Michelle smiled. "Remember that time I told you about with Steve?" Suzie nodded. Michelle snickered as she said, "D.J. was doing the exact same thing. Just having fun, because she thought it would be cute. That's part of the fun of having a big sister."

"Didn't that make you mad when you got teased," Suzie asked simply.

"It's pretty funny now. But D.J. could tell right away I felt bad. And she apologized. Just like Rachel's going to do. Right, Rachel?"

Rachel hesitated for a moment, then finally muttered a tiny "I'm sorry."

"You've got lots of years to decide. And when it happens," Mary said, "it'll be so wonderful, you won't be able to believe it."

Nicky turned to Alex. "I guess we're not getting married."

Alex nodded. "When we get older, let's marry twins."

"That will solve the problem," Nicky agreed.

Michelle grinned as she thought of something else to hearten Suzie. "You still get to eat cake. My dad baked a big one last night."

"Oh, boy," Suzie shouted. She and her brothers were off like a shot toward the kitchen.

"And then, we all need to get changed fast," Michelle remarked. "So we can get to that football game."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The temperature was quite warm for that time of year. Both teams had large supplies of water and other cold drinks on hand. Michelle made lots of substitutions, to give the players plenty of rest.

Suddenly, Jeff Farrington tripped over an opponent. "I'm okay," Jeff said as he limped over to the sidelines. "I just have to rest this for a minute."

Michelle looked warily at him. "I don't think so. Their coach just took a guy out for the rest of the game because he felt light-headed. We'd better play it safe."

"But, you need me, don't you? We won't have enough receivers if I go out," Jeff said.

"Don't worry. I wouldn't let the team down. I talked to their coach about letting non-roster players play. We've both had lots of injuries, so we agreed it would be fair." Michelle smiled.

"We are here to have fun, after all."

Michelle walked past the cheerleaders. Rachel was leading Cassie, Mandy, and Suzie in cheers - and doing a very good job. Michelle grabbed a spare helmet, put it on, and fastened the chin strap. "Does someone want to help me get these pads on?" she called to her friends.

Before Cassie and Mandy could start, Michelle heard her dad's voice.

"Michelle, come here a

minute," he instructed her urgently.

What could he have to say that's so important, she wondered as she walked up to him. "What is it, Dad," she wondered.

"Hnoey, I'm sorry," he said, putting both hands on her shoulders. "But I can't let you play."

"But Dad, we're out of receivers. They need me," Michelle explained.

Danny glared intently. He must really mean business, she told herself.

"Listen. You had a very serious concussion when you fell from your horse. Luckily, there was no damage. But, football isn't like other sports I let you play," he added. "Baseball, soccer, and horseback riding don't involve the physical contact this does."

Michelle remembered a pro quarterback with San Francisco's team. "But, Dad, Steve Young played after a whole bunch of concussions."

"And if I'd been his dad, I wouldn't have let him play after the first, either. The threat of serious damage is much greater if you get a second concussion," he finished.

Michelle sighed. She really wanted to play. Her team was down ten and looked desperate.

But, she knew she had to listen. She didn't want to risk permanent damage. Besides, if she

insisted on playing, she might end up sitting in the stands next to her dad for the rest of the game.

"Okay, Dad."

Michelle took off her helmet as she walked back to the sidelines. "Dad won't let me play because of my concussion."

"We understand," Cassie said.

"That was a year and a half ago. Still, I can see his point," Mandy said.

"I can, too. But, now who do we..." Michelle glanced over at Rachel. She wasn't on the official roster. But, perhaps she could play, anyway.

She walked over to the other sideline. "Excuse me, Sir," Michelle said. "We're running out of

players with this heat, and then the other injuries. I'd like to be able to add Rachel Tilly, that cheerleader in the long brown hair."

The coach smiled. "Okay, thanks. That's fair, as long as she's under the age and weight limit.

Hard to believe a girl like you could run a football team. But, you're doing a good job."

"Thanks." Michelle jogged back to her sidelines. "Rachel, how about putting on some pads."

She thought for a second. "Oh, wait. We'd better weigh you first," she kidded her.

They found a scale in the locker room. "Good thing they have weight limits. Otherwise, you'd have put a horse into the game," Rachel teased back.

"Or our dog, Comet. He's good at catching treats in his mouth," Michelle said as they met with the other coach to weigh Rachel.

Mark overheard the name. "Michelle, you named your football team after a dog?" The others - including Rachel - laughed.

Once the other coach affirmed that Rachel could play, she put on her pads. "Don't worry,

Michelle. I won't let you down," she pledged. "With me in there, this game's as good as won."

Michelle rolled her eyes and turned to her friends. "She may be getting friendlier, but she's as boastful as ever."

The Comets were down by three at midfield near the end of the game. With time running out, Michelle decided to see what Rachel could do. She was one of their tallest players.

"Guys, come here a second," she said during a timeout. Once the team was huddled around her, she drew with a stick. "Okay, it's fourth and ten. This could be our last chance. Here's what we'll do. Rachel, you've caught two balls, but you are still a girl. So, they won't be looking for you."

"Are you kidding. One of those was for a touchdown," Rachel said.

"Just listen." She diagrammed her idea in the dirt. "Now, look. You run straight up this way, while we send the other three receivers out on the right. You three will go like this. Lee will block after looking he'll run. Derek will run over the middle. We'll throw to you along the sidelines, Rachel. Derek, make sure you're far enough for the first down."

"Oh, perfect. I can outjump anyone," Rachel shouted. "Just watch me score," Rachel said as she left the huddle. Michelle cheered loudly as the team lined up, and the quarterback snapped the ball.

Simon dropped back to throw. With Rachel running, he threw the ball toward her. She leaped in the air, but the defender jumped just as high.

Michelle gasped in horror. The two players had tipped the ball. They fell, and the ball was dropping toward the ground.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Out of nowhere, Derek raced up to the ball. He'd streaked toward the pass as soon as it was thrown. He scooped it up just before it hit the ground. The startled teams watched as he dashed the remainder of the way. "Touchdown," Michelle and her friends screamed.

The final seconds ticked off the clock. The Comets had won the league title! Michelle's team mobbed her on the sidelines.

"Michelle, look out," Mandy cried. Michelle looked behind her and gasped. Rachel and Lee poured a huge bucket of Gatorade on her.

"Cool, do that to me," Derek said as the teams went onto the field to shake hands. "Maybe then I won't have to take a bath tonight."

"Are you kidding," Rachel said as she laughed. "That stuff's so sticky, Michelle's going to need a shower just to get it out."

"More like two or three," Michelle joked back. Once back on the sidelines, she took a cup and poured some water on Rachel. Pretty soon, the whole team was splashing each other with the last of their water.

After a moment, Michelle turned to Rachel. "Hey, look at us. We're laughing together and having fun."

"Hey, yeah." Rachel smiled. "You know, I could get used to this."

Danny walked over to them. "Great job, everyone. Michelle, would Cassie and Mandy like to come with us. We're going with the Johnsons to celebrate before they leave."

"Sure." Michelle looked at Rachel. Did she dare to try it? Sure, why not. Rachel was getting a lot better. "Care to come along, Rachel?"

Rachel grinned. "Sure. But, why don't you all come to my dad's place? Tilly Pastries just opened a sit-down shop. I'm sure there's enough room."

Suzie's eyes grew wide. "Your dad runs a pastry shop? You are so lucky!"

"I'm even luckier than that. This being friendly stuff is getting to be fun," Rachel said.

The families were seated at five four-person booths in Tilly Pastries. Michelle was in awe of the situation. She was seated with her two best friends. And, Rachel sat beside her! Rachel was becoming fun to be around. She never would have believed it was possible just a week ago.

Cassie was finishing a funny story. "...Meanwhile, I'm thinking it's Mandy's grandma who's hurt, and not Michelle. So I say Your grandmother is eight years old." She made her eyes bulge with shock as she said that.

Rachel laughed. "That's a real winner, Cassie. I still remember when my brother broke his arm at school. I was about four, and I said in this meek voice You mean he broke it off?"

Michelle giggled. "This is great, isn't it, Rachel?"

"Yeah. I really need to be nicer to Sidney, too. I just never learned how." She glared at Michelle, but joked playfully. "You sure have been great at pushing me to be, though."

"Yeah. We promised at camp this summer to pray for you every night. And, we have," Mandy said.

"You...you did that for me?" Rachel was very stunned. "I've never had anyone do that."

Michelle looked down, remembering what Suzie had said. "Rachel, at first, after you were so nasty, I didn't want to be friendly to you. But, I realized you can't learn to be nice unless someone's nice to you. And..."

A lump formed in Michelle's throat. It wasn't a pleasant subject. But, if she'd made this offer in the beginning, things might have been easier. "I know you think it'll never happen. I know it's scary for you. But, I meant what I said last spring. If anything were to happen to your parents, I'll be there for you. And you can talk, or cry, or whatever you have to do. I'll understand."

Rachel nodded slowly. "Thanks, Michelle," she mumbled. She was very pensive as they ate their pie and ice cream. Suddenly, she looked into the kitchen, and rose from the table. "Oh, there's my mom. I'll be right back."

Suzie noticed Michelle grinning broadly as she walked over to their table a moment later.

"Where's Rachel?" Suzie asked.

"Being thankful." Suzie looked strangely at her. "She's giving her mom a long overdue hug," Michelle explained.

"I just wanted to give her this ballerina. I colored it myself." Suzie showed Michelle a picture. It looked like almost like a star with hands and a face. It looked like something Nicky or Alex would draw. Michelle hoped Rachel would appreciate it. She still wasn't sure how far this new Rachel would go in being nice.

Rachel jogged back to the table and sat. "Hey, Suzie. What's that?"

"I drew it for you. You can have it."

Rachel stifled giggles. "I guess I'm supposed to accept this, huh?" she muttered toward Michelle

Michelle nodded slightly. "It's a ballerina," she whispered back.

"What a lovely ballerina. Thanks." Rachel put it in her tiny purse. "I'm glad you came.

You've been a real help to us." She put her hand on Michelle's shoulder.

"I thought Michelle said you weren't very good friends."

"We are now, thanks to you," Michelle told her.

Suzie looked puzzled. "Mommy, how did I make them become friends? I wasn't even trying."

Mary smiled. "Just by being there, honey."

"It's one of those things we won't understand till we get to Heaven," Joe said. "But, the things we say can really build people up, or help them understand each other."

"Yeah, speaking of Heaven..." Rachel grinned at Suzie. "I finally gave my mom that big hug you said you had to give yours. Can you believe this, Michelle?" She turned back to face her classmate. "This is the first time I've really thought about thankfulness. And, it's a pretty good feeling, too."

Michelle realized a lot of things about being nice were new to Rachel. But, she didn't say that.

Instead, she smiled at Rachel and the Johnsons. "I've made lots of new friends this week. It's been so much fun. And, the best part, Rachel, is that you can keep growing nicer."

"And, I bet you can show me how, huh," Rachel said. It had none of the sarcasm it would have had earlier. She sounded genuinely interested.

Michelle nodded. "You bet. Because, in this world, nothing beats having friends."