
CHAPTER TWELVE

Travis sat at the card table in his bedroom and circled words. Grandpa had banged out the door for his AA meeting at six thirty, so the house was quiet and the TV off. Travis wanted to have the whole first chapter circled by the time he met with McQueen on Wednesday. He worked at it until his eyes blurred and he accidentally circled words he knew.

Finally, he closed the book, flopped on the couch, and clicked the remote. The truck pulled into the drive. Footsteps tromped on the porch, and the front door opened.

"Look what I got," Grandpa said. "It's to celebrate my thirty days."

Travis twisted to see. Grandpa held up a chunk of sheet cake with white frosting and blue writing. Travis turned back to the TV. He was sick of sweets. Grandpa brought day-olds home from the bakery every day. How much of that stuff could a person eat?

"I thought that was last week," he said.

He glanced up and ran into the squinty-eyeball stare.

"What?"

Grandpa set the cake on the coffee table, grabbed the remote, and turned off the TV.

"Hey, I was watching that!"

"Yeah, that Viagra ad is just full of information you need. Listen, boy, I think you need to start talking. In AA they say if you don't talk about what's chewing on you, it'll eat your guts out."

"I'm not in AA."

"Keep this up and you might be. If your dad would've —"

"Would've what?" Travis sat up.

Grandpa stared at the smoke coming off the end of his cigarette.

"Said something. Maybe he'd be here now, and you could hate him instead of me."

"Said something about what?"

"Travis, he was drunk when he drove into that tree."

"Duh." Even a stupid bluefish had that one figured out a long time ago.

"I'm just saying. Maybe if you talked up, you won't have to be like him or me."

"Nobody likes a chatterbox, remember?" Travis fired the words hard.

Grandpa looked down and ran a hand over his mouth. Loose skin sagged around his Adam's apple. When he finally spoke, his voice was low. Not the crusty-cheery "now that I'm sober" voice.

"I said that a time or two, huh?"

"Try a million."

"Okay, so you're right." Grandpa stubbed out his cigarette. "I'm a shitty bad parent. Was then, am now. Does that help?"

He got up slowly, as if it hurt, and took the cake back to the kitchen. He washed the dishes, opened and closed drawers. Every sound scraped on Travis's nerves. He turned the TV back on. *Does that help?* kept circling around his head. No, it didn't help. The only thing that would help was Rosco. He'd put his warm, heavy head on Travis's lap, and slobber on his leg, and Travis could bury his nose in those silky ears.

Grandpa took the trash out and was gone awhile. When he came back, he closed the door gently behind him.

"You know what we could use?" he said. "A bonfire out in the swamp. Remember how we used to do that when you were a little guy?"

"There's no swamp here." Travis meant to spit the words sharp, but his voice shook.

Grandpa came back over and looked behind the recliner. He creaked down onto his hands and knees and peered under the couch. He put his hands on the coffee table and pushed himself back up, falling onto the couch beside Travis.

"Nope, you're right. I've looked everywhere. No swamp. What are we going to do about that?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Travis got up quickly. As he closed his bedroom door behind him, he barely heard Grandpa's voice.

"Me too, buddy boy," he said. "Me too."

The next morning in social studies, Ms. Gordon called on Velveeta first. She taped a big red *P* and a big blue *N* on the board and performed a conversation between the Paleolithic guy and the Neolithic guy, standing first under the *P* and then under the *N*.

She compared and contrasted, she rattled off facts about the people from each period, and she had everyone rolling in the aisles. No possible way Travis could have been part of that. He would have ruined it, even if he could have learned the lines.

Velveeta nodded to a standing ovation. She bowed in every direction and waved the end of her blue-on-light-blue scarf. The rest of the presentations were worse than the ones the day before. Travis would have fallen asleep if Velveeta hadn't kept popping bits of commentary in his ear.

When the bell finally rang, they walked out together.

"See, Travail?" she said. "You could've been part of Team Velveeta and shared the glory. You wouldn't even have had to say anything. I would have made you a sign to hold up. You would've been adorable, especially if you would've costumed up in caveman fur."

Chad Cormick jostled hard on the other side of Travis, knocking his books to the floor.

"So, Roberts, is this why you're not hoopin'? Too busy getting some Velveeta on the side?"

The bump and the words lit Travis up before he could douse the flame. He shoved Cormick hard against the lockers.

"Whoa, whoa, easy," said Chad, holding up both hands. "Sorry, sorry, dude, back down. Just a joke."

Travis dropped his hands and stepped back, breathing hard. Reeling it in, clamping down. Motion in the hallway stopped, and a circle of staring eyes surrounded him. Travis stepped backward, out of the center.

"Joke, man, just a joke." Cormick waved his hand back and forth, erasing the whole thing.

"Sorry," said Travis.

He bent down to pick up the books he'd dropped, eyes locked to the floor. In fourth grade on the bus he'd turned on Clay Rosen like that when Clay fsshed him and put gum in his hair. One minute Travis was sitting there, ignoring it all. The next, Clay was holding his nose and crying while blood puddled on the floor of the bus and a whole ring of kids stared at Travis.

Velveeta's dirty black-and-white checkered sneakers appeared next to his pencil. Travis reached for it and tucked it into the spiral of his notebook. When he finally stood up, everyone but Velveeta was gone.

"That was very Fight Clubby of you," she said. "Beating little Chaddy up right here in the school hallway."

"I didn't beat him up."

"It was so manly, defending my honor and all. If I give you a list, will you beat up everyone on it?"

She grinned, big joke. She didn't know about the puddle of blood, or Joey Nizmanski's concussion, or Grandpa in the gravel.

"No." The bell rang for second period.

"Oooh, late for class. What other excitement can happen today?" Velveeta backed away. "See you at lunch."

Travis walked the empty hall to science, still thinking about that fourth-grade day on the bus. Clay's big brother, Marshall, had grabbed Travis by the collar to pull him off, and Travis tore into Marsh so hard that he let go with a shove. "This kid's gone crazy back here," he'd yelled to the bus driver.

After that day, kids still fssh-hissed at him, but mostly they did it from a distance.

When Travis walked into science, he felt eyes on him as he took his seat on the far side of the classroom. He wished Velveeta's eyes were there. Somehow, she saw him differently from everyone else.

Velveeta on a Stupid TUESDAY

The madre made real food again, and this time the butt showed and brought fancy beer from the brewery and they drank their dinner while I ate mine. All he has to do is show up with a bottle and her whole "I'm going to get my head straight and do things right" is gone out the window again. Ha, ha, have a beer, Velveeta. No, thank you, Mother, but gee, thanks for including me, because I can't wait to grow up and be like my big brother.

I can't understand how Jimmy can be so ugly. He seriously has the ugliest face in the world, and when I look in the mirror and try to see how him and me are related, I can see it just around the edges of my ugliness. Calvin, nobody but you understands exactly how much I hate him to hellfire. I wish he'd explode into ashes and never poke his buttface into my life again.

What if Travis really could beat him up? I can see that fight scene on the big screen. Travis would step out from the alley next to the bar and say, "Hey, aren't you Jimmy the butt?" Then, kablow, kablam, slam in the street. Oh my God, can you just see it? Beautiful.

But that would mean mixing Travis with Trailer World. No. That can never happen. Nevernever. Every time I put on a scarf and walk to the end of Pauly Road, I turn into Velveeta, and she might not be much, but she's better than Vida Wojciehowski. And you know what? You brought this

Velveeta version to life. Without you, I'd have a flask of bourbon in my school locker, and I'd be selling drugs and jacking cars and mugging little old ladies and other things I don't even want to think about.

What would I do if I didn't have this place? Right now, I would be wandering around outside in the dark. Instead, I'm tucked away safe here in your electricity-working trailer with the double-bolted door, wrapped up in scarves and watching *Labyrinth*.

Maybe I can move in here. Do you think the madre would even notice?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Wednesday morning, Travis arrived at McQueen's doorway at 7:45 and sat in the hall outside. He opened the fox book and looked over his hundreds of circled words. Maybe McQueen had no idea how bad it was — maybe he'd thought it would just be ten words a page or so. Anyone could learn that. But this — nobody could learn this many.

"Something wrong, Mr. Roberts?"

McQueen jingled keys out of his pocket and opened the door.

"I circled a lot of words," said Travis.

"Perfect," said McQueen, waving him in. "Let's see what we've got."

"I mean, I didn't know hardly any of those words."

"I know," said McQueen. He held out his hand. "It's a hard book. Let's see."

"Maybe I should have started with an easier book."

"Why?" McQueen flipped through the first few pages. "Are you bored with the story?"

"It's not that. I'm just saying it might be too hard."

"Who's the teacher?"

"You."

"Student?"

"Me."

"You've done excellent work. Top-notch. Now sit back and listen."

McQueen read, his voice like the low hum of a bullfrog on a summer day. The sound and the words eased over Travis, taking him out of the room, out of the walls, into the woods. He closed his eyes and followed the fox through the underbrush until McQueen stopped.

"That's it for today," he said. "But I have a new assignment for you."

He picked up a pen and wrote on a scrap of paper, glancing at the first few pages of *Haunt Fox* as he wrote.

"Look at these words." He handed the paper to Travis. Five words in a list. Travis didn't know any of them.

"*Young*," McQueen pointed at the first one. "Say it."

They went over each word together. *Young, night, summer, hunt, branches.* They did the list forward and then backward, McQueen pointing and Travis repeating until he could do them all without a hitch.

"Nice job," said McQueen.

"But that's not reading. I just memorized them."

"Right. We call that word recognition. Keep them with you all day. Write them on your hand with your finger. Link the look and the sound and the feel together. Make friends with them. Once you absolutely know them for sure, anytime, anywhere, then go through the first chapter and use your eraser to uncircle them."

"But I circled like five hundred words. It'll take me years to learn them five words at a time."

"Teacher?" McQueen raised his eyebrows.

"You."

"Don't forget it. Learn those five, uncircle them, and keep circling into the next chapter. Friday morning, back here. Same time."

The hallway was still mostly empty, and Travis sat on the floor in front of his locker and opened the book. Long lines of words tromped across the pages like columns of ants. McQueen found the swamp in those words, and he took Travis there with him. Not just into the nighttime snowstorm, but into the fox itself, moving through the winter woods and hearing and smelling that mysterious animal world. The lines of ink on the page were a secret

code. For the first time, Travis wanted to crack it. More than anything.

“Travicus! What’ve you got there?”

Travis flipped the book cover-side-down as he scrambled to his feet.

“Why are you here so early?”

“Just had some breakfast,” said Velveeta. “Gotta get my recommended daily amount of vitamins and minerals. But you’re never here early — weird number one. And you’re sitting on the floor, reading — weird number two. It’s Bradley’s influence, isn’t it? He’s been sucking you away from the church of the homeworkless?”

“No.” Travis put the book in his locker. “I just got here early.”

“Because you love school so much, right? Me too. Can’t wait for another day of learning. Let’s go get smart.”

They walked together to Ms. Gordon’s room. Velveeta’s scarf of the day was golden and brown with some dark greens, faded like they were underwater. Every day he looked forward to seeing her scarf. So far she hadn’t repeated one time.

Velveeta was still in McQueen’s office having her individual conference when the lunch bell rang, so Travis got to the table first.

“Hey,” said Bradley, sitting across from him. “Mind if I sit here?”

Travis shrugged and took a bite of pizza.

"So." Bradley ripped the Velcro on his lunch box. "Chad Cormick said Velveeta's your woman. He said you'll beat the crap out of anybody who looks at her."

Travis stared at Bradley. That sounded a lot better than "crazy bluefish," even if it wasn't true.

"So she is, right? Your girlfriend?"

"I told you before. We're just friends."

"Hi, boys." Velveeta's voice popped behind Travis. "Were you talking about me?"

Travis choked on a bite of pizza as Velveeta set her tray down next to his.

Bradley knocked on the table and said in a deep voice, "Hey, open up." Then he answered himself in a nasal voice. "What's the password?"

He switched back to the deep voice—"Password? Oh, man, I forgot"—and continued to rattle lines about a password back and forth in the two voices.

"Bradley!" yelled Velveeta, waving her hands in front of his face. "Are you okay? Are you having a seizure?"

"No," said Bradley in his normal voice. "It's from a game, the old *Halo*. It's funny."

"You're a freak show," said Velveeta. "But entertaining."

"Do you play?" Bradley asked.

"No," said Velveeta. "Is that what you do for fun?"

"I can't right now. I'm cut off."

"Why?"

"Because it drives my dad crazy. He said if I talked

about a game that wasn't football, Monopoly, or charades one more time, he'd yank them all. I forgot, and did, and he did."

"Wow, that must have been very traumatic for you. Why aren't you sitting with your buddies over there? I'm sure they'd be much more sympathetic to your sad story."

Bradley and Velveeta punched words back and forth across the table so fast, they didn't even land. Like a tennis ball that never hit the court.

"Those guys are no fun since I can't play," said Bradley. "I went over to Reed's last night, and he and Jake were all about how they'd pwn me if I was playing, but they're only saying that because I can't."

"Whatever that means," said Velveeta. "If you were at Reed's house, why couldn't you play? Would Reed's parents rat you out?"

"I wouldn't lie to my parents."

"Really? Never? What about you, Travis?" The sound of his name jerked Travis out of the bleachers and into the game. "Do you lie?"

"About what?" he asked.

"Anything," said Velveeta. "Do you lie to your parents?"

"I don't say anything to them."

"Predictable," said Velveeta. "Bradley is Mr. Honesty America. Travis the stealth boy keeps his mouth shut, and Velveeta lies to anyone who will listen. We should start a superhero team."

"Maybe," said Bradley. "But maybe you're lying about lying."

"Maybe I'm not," said Velveeta. "Anyway, you don't have to worry about me and Travis here tempting you with any illegal electronics. We don't even know what you're talking about half the time, right, Travissimo?"

"I don't," said Travis. Even if he wanted those games, he'd never have them, and even if he had them, he'd rather be on Velveeta's team than Bradley's in any game.

"Okay, then tell me what you guys talk about so I can talk about it with my dad and prove I can talk about something besides games, and then he'll let me back online."

"Oh, so that's why you're sitting with the white-trash club?" said Velveeta. "Trying to learn our language so you can normal up to Daddy?"

"No, I —"

"Sorry we couldn't give you more to work with, Bradley. Try us again tomorrow — we'll talk about shoplifting. Your daddy will love that."

She walked away, and Bradley turned to Travis in half a panic.

"I didn't mean it like that," he said. "I like you guys."

"You like Velveeta."

"I do. Can you tell her I didn't mean it like that?"

"Tell her yourself," said Travis.

Velveeta on WEDNESDAY

I went home after working at the library and the madre wanted to play cribbage, but I hate playing with her when she's that drunk. She started in with, "What am I going to do when you leave me?"

The thing is, what IS she going to do when I leave? I mean, I'm leaving someday, right? I don't have to live in this trailer court forever, do I? And what happens when she gets sick—not hung over, but really sick? Buttface Jimmy only comes over when he needs something, not when she needs something.

Then I look at Bradley, with his nice new clothes and shiny white Nikes and green and gold braces on his teeth. He is so well taken care of—who cares if he's the biggest dork in America? I bet his parents already have him enrolled in some fancy college. I bet they check his homework every night. I bet they tuck him into bed. I bet his mommy sings him lullabies.

I've been reading this book of McQueen's. It's about a girl named Liesel whose mother dumped her with strangers. She's super-smart, but she can't read. Not even a little. The way she learns how is by circling words in a book.

I was in the middle of that part today and I looked over at Travis, and he was concentrating like crazy on that book with the fox on the cover. Writing in it with a pencil. He didn't look up one time the whole period.

Plus he was at school early, sitting on the floor with that book and a pencil, and he tried to hide it when I walked up.

Plus he has passed every single time we read in Gordon's class. Every time. I've never heard him read anything.

Plus he was so hostile about doing that social-studies project together, but as soon as that was over, he got normal again.

And biggest plus: that day in front of the library. He asked what it was, even though the sign was right there, and I gave him a "Can't you read?" snotty answer. That's when he acted like I'd thrown a rock at him.

I think Travis is circling words.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Travis kept thinking about what Velveeta said about lying all the time. Did she really lie all the time? If she did, how was he supposed to know what to believe? Maybe he was stupid for believing any of it.

The next day at lunch, she pushed the thick book she'd been reading into the middle of the table. "Do you know what this book is about?" The picture on the cover was a dark curvy line of dominoes, with a finger ready to push the first one over.

"You said it's about death."

"Yeah, but it's about something else, too. There's this girl in it, and she can't read. She's super-smart, but she never learned, and then in the book she learns how."

A hot fire lit up under Travis's face.

"It's so great," said Velveeta, "the way she learns. Not with baby books, but with a book about digging graves."

"You want my cookie?" he asked.

If only Bradley would show up. Where was he, anyway?

"You know that fox book you carry around?" she asked. "Are you circling words in there? I just wondered because the girl in here kind of reminds me of you, and that's what she's doing, so I wondered if that's what you're doing. Besides, McQueen is the one who made me start reading this book."

"He told you." Travis narrowed his eyes at McQueen, over at the teachers' table.

"No!" yelped Velveeta. "He didn't say anything. He's a buttinski, not a blabbermouth. I figured it out myself, and I swear, I won't tell anyone. I think it's super-cool, just like Liesel in the book. And she's got this friend named Rudy, and they steal stuff together. Maybe we can go steal some stuff, too. What do you want to steal?"

Travis was sweating so hard, it ran down his sides. He bit his lip so his teeth wouldn't chatter.

"Travis, really, it's okay," Velveeta said. "If it's none of my business, and if you want me to shut up, just knock on the table three times. If you don't want me to shut up but you still want me to eat your cookie, knock twice. If you

want to give me an extra twenty dollars today if I kiss you in front of everyone, knock once. If you —”

Travis held up his hand.

“That’s not a knock,” said Velveeta.

Travis shook his head.

“I understand the sign language of the Travatoni tribe. I will stop talking.”

“I gotta go.” He picked up his tray.

“The bell didn’t ring yet,” she called after him.

He hid out in the library for the rest of the lunch period, taking deep breaths to keep from freaking out. She knew. There was no way to make her not know, because now she knew. She said she wouldn’t tell anyone, but what if that was a lie?

All afternoon, he kept the fox with him. He circled words into the second chapter and went over his list of five words again and again, writing them on his palm with his finger. Tracing them in deep.

Velveeta came by his locker after school.

“Can I see the book?”

“No,” said Travis.

“Please?”

Travis put the book in his backpack, pulled on his jacket, and slammed his locker.

“Don’t be mad.” Velveeta followed him. “I won’t tell anyone, I swear. And I really do think it’s cool.”

“Yeah, but you lie all the time, remember?”

Velveeta stopped. When Travis got to the door, he

turned and leaned on it as he pushed his way out. She was still standing where he'd left her, in the middle of the hall, kids streaming around her like she was an island.

Their eyes met, and she turned away. Limping, almost.

Travis pushed out the door. The air was dense and sullen, the sky a gray muddle, like Travis's stomach. He'd hurt her. Not a bloody nose or a concussion, but something just as bad.

He turned down the alley and peeked in the park. Nobody there. Travis dropped his backpack and took McQueen's scrap of paper out of his pocket. He leaned against the center pole of the merry-go-round. *Summer, branches, young, night, hunt.* He traced them onto his palm.

"Hey, Travis."

He shoved the paper in his pocket.

"What are you doing?" Bradley tossed down his book bag and sat on the merry-go-round.

"Nothing."

"I want to ask your advice about Velveeta. She got me all wrong at lunch yesterday. How do I tell her that?"

Again, Travis saw Velveeta standing alone in the hall. Even her scarf was drooping.

"I don't know. Just tell her."

"Because the thing is, I do like her. I like her a lot. You know I'm not just sitting by you because my games got yanked, right? Because I'm not. And I don't just like Velveeta. I like you, too. You're cool, but you're not mean."

"I'm not cool," Travis said.

"Yes, you are. Even Chad Cormick thinks you're cool."

"He does?"

"Yup. He said so. He said, 'That Roberts kid is one coolio moolio.' And Reed said maybe you're the Master Chief on a time-regression mission."

"The master who?"

"The Master Chief. He kicked butt way before he got Cortana and MJOLNIR armor. Hey, you know that picnic table by the bridge? Are there some guys there every afternoon?"

"Sometimes," said Travis. "Why?"

"No reason." Bradley kicked the dirt so the merry-go-round started to roll. "So you think I should just tell Velveeta she got it wrong? Or should I not sit by you anymore?"

"I think you should do what you want." Travis grabbed his backpack as he stood. "I gotta go."

"See you tomorrow," said Bradley.

Travis walked slowly through town. So Velveeta got Bradley all wrong. And he got Velveeta wrong. The picnic-table guys hooted and whistled when he walked across the bridge. Travis glanced over at them. Maybe everybody got everybody wrong.

He walked into the house with no Rosco and opened the refrigerator. Sitting on the top shelf, smack in the center, was a twelve-pack of cans, and they weren't Coke.

"Huh." His stomach landed somewhere close to his knees. "So much for that."

He took the fox book out on the back stoop. A moody wind thrashed through the yard. He had just finished erasing the circles around the five words on the first two pages when Grandpa slammed the front door.

"You home?"

"Out here," said Travis.

"How's things?" Grandpa stepped onto the porch. He cracked open a can and tried to light up. The wind blew out the flame, and he had to set the can down and use both hands, making a wind shield. "Learn anything new today?"

"So much for your thirty days, huh?" Travis pointed at the can.

"O'Doul's — nonalcoholic beer," said Grandpa. "See, it says right here."

He put his finger under the tiny-print words.

"Anyway, since when do you care?" He took a deep drag of his cigarette. "It's not easy, you know," he said, the smoke streaming out with his words. "This sobriety thing. I could use a little support."

"What's so hard about it? Just don't drink the stuff."

Grandpa slammed the can on the concrete step, and liquid fizzed up and over. Alcoholic or not, it sure smelled like beer.

"That easy, huh? Is that what you think?"

Grandpa poked him in the shoulder, and Travis moved away. Grandpa reached over and poked again. Like he used to do when Travis was little and didn't want to go to school.

“Don’t you crawl off in a corner and cry!” he used to yell. “If you’re mad, get out here and make some fists.”

And he’d keep poking until Travis slapped his hand away. Then he’d laugh and poke again. The poking went on until Travis made real fists and swung hard. Then Grandpa would put up his palms and get Travis to slug them over and over, hard enough to make solid smacks. After that, he’d sling an arm around Travis’s neck, and the three of them — Travis, Grandpa, and Rosco — would go out to the swamp. That was a long, long time ago.

“You think you got it so bad,” said Grandpa. “Boo-hoo, poor Travis.”

He poked again. Travis clenched his teeth hard. He picked up the book and stepped around Grandpa.

“I’ve got homework.”

He slammed the screen door on his way through, went into his tiny box of a bedroom, and shut the door. He circled words in chapter two until Grandpa went to bed. Then he made himself a piece of cheese toast for dinner.

Velveeta on THURSDAY

I can't believe Travis thought I was lying about thinking it's cool that he's learning to read. I wouldn't lie about something like that. Not ever. So that's his secret, not dying of leukemia. I want us to be friends like Liesel and Rudy in *The Book Thief*, only now I'm not sure if we get to be any kind of friends at all. He didn't want his secret busted. I should have kept my mouth shut. I still can't believe he thought I was lying, though. Ouch.

Later —

The madre came banging on the door while I was writing and just about scared me out of my skin. I didn't let her in, but I went back over to our place with her because she was crying. She said I'd rather spend my time in an empty trailer where an old man died than be with my own flesh and blood, and why am I so mean to her? I hate it when she's like that. It makes me feel so bad. She asked me to stay home from school tomorrow and hang out with her.

How did I ever get to school in the first place? Somebody must have made me go to kindergarten the first time, right? Or did I just wake up one morning and say, "Hey, Ma, I'm five. Guess it's time for me to go to school!"?

I don't remember that.

I remember the first time I came to your trailer, though. You gave me a cookie. How old was I? I think I was in first

grade. I couldn't read yet, because I remember you reading to me.

I also remember when you bought me a toothbrush. And I remember you drilling me on the multiplication tables and spelling words. Good thing you weren't some old perv or something, because it's not like anyone was making sure you weren't. The madre did call you a perv once—I never told you that, but she did. I hit her in the face, and whoa, she yanked my hair and smacked me a good one. Didn't know that, did you?

Calvin. Do you think you could come back and haunt this place, just a little bit? Please?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Friday morning, Travis closed his eyes as McQueen read from the fox book. The story took him away from school, from Grandpa, from Velveeta's hurt eyes, and from the hard work of learning word by word. He didn't believe he would ever be able to read smoothly like that, but he had learned five words. He knew them now, for sure. Five words wasn't a lot, but it was five more than he knew last week.

When McQueen finished reading, he wrote something down.

"What's this word?" He flipped the paper around so Travis could see.

"Night," said Travis immediately. That had been on his list.

"This one?"

T. ight. A smile started somewhere in Travis's gut and spread over his whole body.

"Tight?"

McQueen grinned. "This one?"

"Lll. Light."

Travis whipped through the new list, six words.

"Why isn't *bite* on here?"

"Brilliant question," said McQueen. "It's not here because the English language is filled with sinkholes and blind traps. Stick with these six for the weekend, and we'll tackle *bite* later. I've got something else for you to think about, too."

"What?" Travis took the book back.

"It's time for you to start dealing with your other classes. Ms. Gordon can set you up to use the Kurzweil in the library while everyone else is reading."

"The what?"

"It's assistive technology. Reads the textbook out loud to you and highlights the words so you can follow along. It'll help you with writing, too."

"A special-ed thing," said Travis.

"Yes, and why are you making that face? I don't know if you qualify or not, but you need extra help. All you have to do is ask, and you'll get it."

Travis's third-grade teacher had tried to get him into

special ed. She made Grandpa come to school for a meeting, and he came home mad. He said Travis had better get it together and pay attention. Nobody said anything about special ed after that, but he had to go to lipstick Mrs. Keatley three days a week. Everybody knew what that meant.

Travis wasn't going to ask Ms. Gordon for the Kurtz-thing. He might as well put a bluefish sticker on his head. He got up to leave, but McQueen stopped him on his way out the door.

"Nice job with those words, Mr. Roberts. I'm impressed."

McQueen's words glowed warm around Travis as he headed for his locker. If he worked faster and harder, maybe he could catch up and he wouldn't need any special ed. He just wanted to be regular.

Travis got to first period early and watched the door. Velveeta came in and didn't say anything, just quietly sat behind him.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey."

She took out a pen and drew tiny tornado spirals on the back of her notebook. Maybe he should say he was sorry for saying that she lied. But she was the one who said she lied all the time. How was he supposed to know what to believe?

As soon as he faced front, she tapped her pen on the top of his head.

"Just so you know," she whispered, "I don't lie about everything. I was lying when I said that."

As Travis turned to respond, something landed with a light thud on Velveeta's desk, slid across, and dropped to the floor. Travis picked up a papier-mâché spider leg. He threw it to Megan, who was waving from the other side of the room. Another leg flew to the front corner. Jeremy Matthews was busy in the back, detaching all eight legs from his Paleozoic project and launching them into the air. Another one came to Travis and he caught it and threw it to Chad.

"Are you protecting me from the prehistoric spider legs?" asked Velveeta.

"Kind of." Travis stabbed his arm high to catch the one Chad threw over his head.

"Travis Roberts." Ms. Gordon closed the door as she walked into the room. "Stop."

She held out her hand for the leg, and he gave it to her. The other legs had all disappeared under desks. Ms. Gordon dropped the leg into the garbage can and started talking about the next assignment as though nothing had happened.

Velveeta poked Travis in the neck a few times during class, and every poke was a relief. Maybe she really wouldn't tell anyone about the word circling.

"You know I wasn't lying, right?" she said as soon as the bell rang. "About thinking it's cool what you're doing?"

Travis shrugged.

"Because I wasn't. I wouldn't lie about that, not ever. Sit by me at lunch, right?"

He believed her because of how she'd looked in the hallway the day before. And because he wanted to. He spent the rest of the morning going over his new words and looking forward to lunch.

Bradley came up behind Travis in the lunch line.

"I'm going to do like you said and do what I want. Even if she decimates me. I mean, what can she do? So she makes me feel stupid — so what? Maybe she'll get everyone in the lunchroom to make fun of me. That wouldn't kill me, right?"

Travis picked up his lunch, quesadillas and beans and rice and a snickerdoodle, without answering. Just like Velveeta, Bradley could have a whole conversation all by himself.

When they got to the table, Velveeta said, "So, Bradley's slumming today. Eating the school lunch, even."

"You've got it all wrong about me." Bradley set his tray on the table and stood with his arms crossed.

"Oh, really," said Velveeta. The words sounded like a sword sliding out of its sheath. "Tell me, Bradley, what do I have so very wrong?"

"The whole thing about me slumming. That's mean and plus, not true."

"How do I know that?" asked Velveeta.

"Because I said so and I don't lie."

"Never? Never never, you never lie, not once, not ever?"

"No. Look, you don't like me — that's okay — I'll leave, but I didn't want you thinking something wrong about why I wanted to hang out with you."

He picked up his tray and started to walk away.

"Wait, Bradley," Velveeta said. "I don't not like you that much."

Bradley stopped. Velveeta looked at Travis and nodded, as if he'd said something.

"And actually," she said, "I know you weren't lying, okay? Come on. Sit back down."

"So we're clear, then?" Bradley turned to face her. "I didn't mean anything bad, and you know I don't lie, right?"

"Bradley, we're all very crystal-clear. Aren't you clear, Travis?"

"I'm not in this," said Travis as Bradley sat back down.

"Why are you eating a school lunch?" asked Velveeta, who had already finished off most of hers.

"No good leftovers in the house. Besides, I like quesadillas."

"So if you're not slumming for research, then why are you sitting here? You should be over with Reed and Jake, talking about quadratic equations."

"I like you," said Bradley.

"You are officially out of your mind."

"Why? Travis likes you."

"Travis likes me because he's captured by my feminine wiles. He can't take his eyes off me, can you, Travis? I think we should talk about this every day. Why does everyone like Velveeta? You can make a list of reasons. It'll be a fan club."

"Okay." Bradley got up as the bell rang. "I'll be president. Or no, I'll be secretary. I'll make the list."

Travis followed them out of the lunchroom. Bradley could make his own list, and he should sit somewhere else to do it.

Velveeta came up beside Travis as he stepped out the double doors.

"What are you doing now?"

"Going home."

"Come to the library with me."

"Why?" asked Travis.

"Because it's cold outside and warm in the library. Or are you rushing home to paint words on the wall of your basement?"

"We don't have a basement."

"Well, that's what Liesel does in the book."

"On your left!"

Velveeta leaned into Travis, bumping him off the sidewalk as a couple of skaters rattled by.

"If you come to the library with me, maybe I could help you. Like, go over words and stuff."

Travis shook his head.

"Please?"

"Why would you want to?"

He expected a rapid-fire answer about prostitution or being in love with her or the wrath of Velveeta, but nothing came. When she finally spoke, it was so soft he barely heard.

"Because I want to be part of it." She abruptly turned and walked the other way.

She took big long strides, almost running, her purple-and-blue scarf flowing out behind and catching on the breeze. A few yellow leaves drifted down. He expected her to turn and look at him, but she didn't.

Travis shivered. The breeze had gone cold, and the sky stacked layers of steely gray. He followed Velveeta. She glanced back as she crossed the street, spotted him, and grinned.

"Did you bring the book?" she asked when he caught up.

He nodded and fell into step alongside of her.

As they came up to the library, Travis asked, "How'd you get a job here?"

"It's not an official job. I just put away books and run errands and do what Connie says, and she slips me a cash payment. I think she embezzles it out of the overdue fines. Very stealth and illegal, I'm sure."

"Do you like it?"

"It's better than being punched in the head twelve times."

She held the door open for Travis. The place was crowded and squat, with low ceilings, and slam-crammed full of books, like McQueen's office to the fifteenth power. Velveeta grabbed the shoulder of his sweatshirt and led him zigging around some shorter shelves toward the back corner. He almost tripped over a toddler on the floor.

"Velveeta!" A tiny lady with spiked white hair and an eyebrow ring came out of the back office. "What are you doing here? It's not Saturday. Wait, I bet I know. You want a nice book, don't you? Here, I'll get you one."

Velveeta turned to Travis and said, "She's a book pusher. Cops have busted her twelve times, but she always gets out on a plea."

"Who's this?"

"Connie, this is Travis," said Velveeta. "We're going to study. Can we use the study room, or is somebody in there?"

"All yours," said Connie.

Velveeta dragged Travis into a tiny room and shut the door. He pulled the fox book out of his backpack, realizing suddenly that she would see all those circled words. Baby words. Words everyone knew.

"You know, in *The Book Thief*, Liesel barely even knew the alphabet," said Velveeta. "She had to start from the beginning. But she did it. She worked at it super hard. She's amazing. Come on, let me see the book."

She held her hand out across the table and wiggled her fingers, asking for it. Travis met her eyes. Brown and

quiet, not snicking or rolling, not laughing. She waggled her fingers again, and he handed the book over.

"These are the words you're working on?" She pulled out the scraps of paper he'd stuck in the book.

Travis nodded. She turned the papers so they faced Travis and said, "Let's hear them."

He read both lists and he didn't miss one word. Velveeta swept the papers off the table.

"Okay, you need a real challenge."

She pulled a notebook out of her backpack and started copying words from the fox book.

"Whoa. I can't learn all those."

"Yes, you can. You're on the Velveeta train now, and we're leaving the station. This word is *unwise* — here, say it."

She jabbed her pen point at the first word on the list.

"Unwise." Travis tried to plant it in his head.

Velveeta held up her fist. Travis looked at it, then at her face, then back at her fist.

"Do something to it! Tap it or bang it or do some hand-jive thingy already so we can get back to work."

Travis sledgehammered her fist so hard it dipped to the table and bounced back up.

"Finally, some teamwork here. Now, this long word, here, this says *desperately*, as in, Travis wanted desperately to declare his true love for Velveeta. Say it."

"Desperately," said Travis. "That's an awfully big word."

"Stop whining. You have to learn ten words before you

can leave. Here, this one says *murky*, as in, Ms. Gordon's class is a murky Mesozoic swamp where papier-mâché spiders rule. Say it — *murky*."

"Murky." Travis cracked a smile. "I bet you can't come up with something for every word."

"Oh, yeah? Watch me!"

Velveeta rattled off strings of crazy sentences for every word on the list. By the end, Travis mostly knew them. Velveeta drilled him back through to make sure.

"Isn't this boring for you?" Travis put the book in his backpack, and picked up McQueen's lists from the floor.

"Boring? Are you kidding? This is fun, a-barrel-of-funky-monkeys fun. I'd love to see you wow McQueen on Monday. Can I come and watch?"

"No."

"Okay, fine, I'll just plant a camera and a mic." Velveeta stepped into the main library room. "You make me miss all the good stuff. By Monday, you'll be stealing books."

"Who's stealing my books?" asked Connie, coming up behind them.

"I didn't," said Travis.

"Get a library card, and you won't have to steal," called Connie as they pushed out the door.

Travis kept Velveeta's piece of paper out as he walked home, going over and over the words so he wouldn't forget. All together, that made twenty-one words. All his.

Velveeta on a Fine FRIDAY

It's so amazing and fantabulous. Travis learned all those words today, and I helped him. That made me want to explode and happy-dance with how good it felt, pouring those words into his brain and watching them stick. He's not dumb as a post—he's super-smart. Smarter than Liesel the book thief, maybe. He's going to be whipping through that fox book in no time.

Plus, here's something funny that happened in school. In reading, I was watching Travis working on his book, and then I looked over at McQueen, and he looked back, zippo-zappo, right in the eyeballs, and I looked down at *The Book Thief* on my desk and up at him, and he almost smiled, but not quite. Just enough to let me know that he knew that I knew that he knew that . . . He's smooth, that McQueen.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Travis headed out Saturday around noon. He had *Haunt Fox* in his backpack and baloney in his pocket. Out of the house before Grandpa got home from work.

The day before, walking home on a cloud of word happiness, he'd actually hoped Grandpa would ask if he'd learned anything at school that day. He wanted to say YES and mean it. But Grandpa walked in the door, tossed Travis a doughnut, and spent the evening sucking down O'Doul's and watching TV. Didn't ask anything. He didn't go to his AA meeting. Hadn't gone all week, in fact, or

said one word to Travis since poking him Thursday night. Looked like he was back to not liking chatterboxes.

The day was gray and sullen, the sun hidden. Moisture hung thick on the air, and Travis found it hard to get a full deep breath. When he got close to the dog's house, he high-low whistled. The dog came roaring down the driveway.

"Hang on, hang on." Travis pulled the plastic bag out of his pocket. The dog quit barking as soon as Travis opened the bag. He could smell that baloney and didn't want to scare it away.

Travis tossed him a piece, and he caught it on the float — *chomp sloop* — and it was gone. Travis tossed him the other one. *Slurp*, gone. His long pink tongue swooshed across his teeth, splashing slobber. Travis turned the empty bag inside out and held it at arm's length. The dog dainty-stepped closer and carefully nosed it, licked it, and waved the tip of his tail. He was a nice-looking dog when he wasn't all hair-up lip-snarled. Black with a white chest like a clean shirtfront. Pointed stand-up ears and a sharp nose, and a long narrow tail with a white tip on the end.

"When you're not doing that snarly thing, you look pretty good," said Travis. "But you've still got some drool dripping there."

The dog cocked his head and geared his tail up to a full wag.

"You wouldn't want to go for a walk with me, would you?"

Travis turned to walk away, patting his thigh as he went.

"C'mon, boy. C'mon."

He trotted a little, clapping his hands.

"C'mon."

The dog watched Travis like he was a cartoon on TV. Travis squatted, whistled, and held out his hands.

"Just for a little bit? Just up to the next corner? C'mere, boy."

Travis patted the ground in front of him. The dog looked at the spot with all attention, as if he wanted to understand what the problem was.

"No go, huh? You've got your home and your people — you don't need a walk with me."

A huge rock hulked at the bottom of the driveway, on the other side of the ditch. Taller than Travis, wider than his spread arms.

"What if I just sat there behind your rock for a while and looked over my words? Would you mind?"

The dog stood in place, allowing Travis to approach. He found a flat spot where he could use the rock for a backrest and be completely hidden from the road. The dog didn't growl or bark, but he watched Travis's every move.

"Want to come over here?" asked Travis. "Sit by me? I'll read words to you."

It came out so easy, talking to the dog. Rosco never minded chatterboxing. He'd gaze up at Travis and tick his skinny tail back and forth, waiting for more.

Travis took out his lists and said the words out loud.

He mixed up the order and practiced again. Up and down the lists. The dog edged closer and lay down, nose on his paws, about ten feet away. Listening.

"Not gonna rip my face off if I get one wrong, are you? Oh, wait, you started to wag again — I saw it."

Travis started from the top again. Suddenly, the dog jumped to his feet, ears pricked and tail wagging.

"Larry!" The voice was creaky, like it didn't get used much. "Larry, where are you?"

The dog dashed up the drive. Travis sat perfectly still. If the person came down the drive and looked right, he'd be caught. He was partially hidden by high grass, but not completely. He closed the book and scooted back, trying to ease out of sight, but before he could get all the way around the rock, Larry appeared. Travis froze.

An old woman with a cane walked behind Larry. She moved slowly, her eyes on the ground.

"Where were you?" she asked. "Chasing a squirrel? Barking at the mail?"

She moved beyond Travis's view, on the other side of the rock. The mailbox opened and closed.

"Nothing but bills. Come on, let's get in before it starts raining."

She came back into view and looked up, searching the sky from one horizon to the other. Travis held his breath. She'd see him any minute, and what would he say? "I wanted to sit by your rock"? "I like your dog"?

She pulled herself up the slope on her cane, Larry at

her side. A raindrop fell on Travis's hand, and another on his cheek. A few more spattered on the book. As soon as the woman and Larry were out of sight, he put the book in his backpack and crawled to the other side of the rock. No cars were coming from either direction, so he walked out to the road.

The rain came down in fat, warm drops. He went the long way around into town and stopped at the library, hoping Velveeta might still be there. By the time he got to the door, the rain had turned cold.

"Did you come to get a library card?" Connie asked when he stuck his dripping head in the door.

"No, just looking for Velveeta."

"She left already. Do you want to come in and dry off? Maybe find a nice book or two?"

"No, thanks." He backed out and put his jacket over his backpack so *Haunt Fox* wouldn't get wet.

Cold trickles ran down the back of his neck. As he passed the convenience store, Bradley came out the door carrying a gallon of milk.

"Hey, Travis, why are you walking around in the rain? I got sent out for milk because my parents don't care if I catch pneumonia."

"No reason."

They walked through town together.

"I thought that went pretty well at lunch Friday," said Bradley. "That was funny, the Velveeta Fan Club. You're still not going out with her, right? Still just friends?"

"Why do you care so much?"

"Because I was thinking about asking her to the dance, but I wouldn't if you were going to. I mean, you got there first."

Travis didn't know anything about any dance.

"I've been thinking about it since the posters went up last week and it can't hurt to ask, right? I know she'll say no, but so what? I figure even asking will be interesting, because who knows what she'll say? I'm getting better at sword fighting with her, don't you think?"

They got to Water Street and Bradley stopped.

"So you don't mind, right? If I ask her?"

Travis stood there with his hands jammed in his pockets, shivering. Bradley had on a nice rain jacket with the hood pulled up, and hiking boots. Travis's socks were soggy.

"I didn't think you would, but I just wanted to make sure, because you and I are getting to be friends, too, right?"

Just then, Travis didn't feel very friendly. He wished Bradley would go away and stay there.

"Okay, then, see you later, Trav."

Bradley turned down Water. Travis's feet squished in his shoes as he walked up the hill toward home.

Velveeta on a Soggy, Sucky SUNDAY

Yesterday when I got home from work, the butt's truck was in the drive. I would have gone straight to your trailer, only it was pouring rain and I was soaked all the way to my underwear, and — stupid me — I haven't been keeping clothes at your trailer, but from now on I'm going to, for sure.

So I opened the door and there he was, drunko skunko, sitting on the floor with his head in the lap of the madre, bawling. The madre looked up at me like I was, I don't know, a stranger. Like I was interrupting. Mean-faced, like she hated me.

So, wet or not, I came over here and double-bolted. And stayed here overnight, wrapped up in a towel and a blanket. Nobody even bothered to see if I'm okay. I could have been out in the rain, catching my death of icy-rain cold.

The madre is so many different people. Am I going to get the face-slapping mean madre or the fun card-playing madre or the crying-in-her-beer madre? I never know. Sometimes it makes my head want to spin off. And why doesn't she just kick Jimmy's lazy no-good butt away from here for good?

I wonder what Travis is doing today. I wonder what it's like at his house. I wonder if he learned any new words. Maybe he has really nice parents and I could move in there. They could hide me in the basement and feed me on leftover bread crusts. Only they don't have a basement.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Travis had all twenty-one words ready to rip for McQueen on Monday. He ran through the whole list, and McQueen just about did a dance in his chair.

"You've earned yourself a mid-quarter A in reading," he said. "And wait till you see the new list I've got for you. You're going to love this one!"

It was all trees. Maple, birch, aspen, oak, hemlock, pine.

"Do you know these trees?" asked McQueen. "Can you pick them out in the woods?"

No problem. Travis could close his eyes and picture each one — trunks, leaves, fall colors, spring buds and candles.

“Would you be able to draw any of them?” asked McQueen. “Nothing fancy, just a sketch?”

Travis nodded.

“Great. By Wednesday, draw me a sketch of each one. Put a sign up in front with the name of the tree. All those words are on page one.”

When Travis got to first period, of course Velveeta wanted to see his new list of words. He told her what McQueen wanted.

“And you can do that? You actually know what those trees are?”

“Sure.”

“I knew it all along,” she muttered. “Hiding behind that ‘I can’t read’ business, and there you are with your oversize brain. You’re not an undercover cop — you’re an undercover forest ranger.”

All through first period, she passed him stick drawings with the word printed beneath. A tiger, an octopus, a giraffe, and something he finally figured out was a camel. He kept the scraps in a neat stack and put them in his pocket when the bell rang.

Between classes, Travis stopped and looked at the dance posters. He didn’t want to go to any dance, but maybe Velveeta did. What if he, Travis, was the one who

shouldn't sit with them at lunch? Bradley fired plenty of words at her, more than Travis could come up with in a month.

When he got through the lunch line, he was surprised to see Bradley sitting with Reed and Jake. Velveeta waited for him, with the book from McQueen out on the table.

"I banished Bradley today so we could lunch in peace." She tapped the cover of the book. "The reason this book is called *The Book Thief* is because the girl who can't read keeps stealing books."

"Why?"

"She can't help herself. And then all kinds of things happen to her because of stealing them. And because she can read now."

"Just like that, she can read now?"

"No, not just like that. She had to work at it for a long time."

"Oh."

"But she did, and then she ends up reading out loud to everyone in the bomb shelter. She saves the day by being able to read. I wonder what day you're going to save, Traverelli. Maybe you'll save us from terrorists."

"I doubt it."

"Then maybe you'll give me your Rice Krispies bar and save me from malnutrition."

"Maybe not." He grinned at her.

"I love it when you're mysterious. I guess this time

maybe means *no*, since you're already—oh, it's in the mouth. That's a definite no."

They picked up their trays and headed to the garbage can, Travis still swallowing the last of the Rice Krispies bar. Velveeta's orange-and-yellow scarf splashed color over her shoulder, brightness laid across the smooth dark of her hair. A ray of sun through the window lit her head, so he could see the color of each hair separately—some brown, some dark red. He wanted to touch, to see if her hair would be as silky soft as he imagined.

She turned around and bumped him, almost knocking the tray loose from his hands.

"You're crowding me, Travicus."

He fumbled and dropped his tray as she stepped around him. His plate clattered on the floor, and the fork flew behind the garbage can, and everyone nearby applauded.

"Clumsy much?" Cassidy pushed past him to dump her tray.

Travis's face was so hot, he was glad to have a reason to kneel on the floor. He slowly picked up his plate and silverware. By the time he got everything sorted and thrown away, Velveeta was gone.

He drifted through the afternoon on that splash of color. The way the sun came in at just the angle to catch the red in her hair. Usually things indoors didn't look that good.

He was just opening his locker after the last bell when Velveeta came skidding up.

"Listen to this," she said. "You'll never guess who just asked me out."

Travis's stomach dropped.

"Bradley Whistler." Velveeta nodded. "To the dance. Can you believe that?"

"What'd you say?" asked Travis.

"What should I have said?"

"I don't know. Whatever you want, I guess."

Travis turned back to his locker. He took as much time as he could, straightening his books and pens, and then pulled his hoodie out and put it on. Velveeta stood there with her hands on her hips, watching him. She fired a direct gaze into his eyes, like a super-power telescope. He looked down so she wouldn't see his face getting red.

"I told him I'd think about it," she said. "Are you coming to the library with me?"

"What for?"

"Words! Come on, we'll go over the ones I passed you this morning."

A new wave of September heat radiated up from the sidewalk. Travis didn't really feel like doing words, but he wanted her to make him laugh, and call him Trava-saurus. He wanted her to say she'd never go to a dance with Bradley in a million years. He kicked a rock in front of them, hoping she'd kick it next. She didn't.

Once they got to the library, Velveeta was all business. "Let's see the book."

Travis handed it over.

"Look, the whole first paragraph is uncircled! You're ready to read it."

He shook his head. Going down a list, one word at a time, that was one thing. But to read a sentence out loud, thrashing through wave after wave of those words? He was not ready for that.

"Shut up!" said Velveeta. "You know every word here. Come on, read it!"

Travis shook his head harder.

"Okay, wait. I know. We'll do it a line at a time. I'll read it, then you read it back. You can do that."

The last part sounded like Mrs. Keatley. *Come on, Travis. You can do THAT.*

Velveeta read the first line, bubbling the words out like liquid candy, easy easy. She handed the book to him. He looked at that first line and didn't see any words. Just a stream of black marks. He closed the book.

"Travis, come on. You didn't even try."

Try. That word torched fire-hot. He took the book and shoved it into his backpack.

"I've got to go."

"I can't believe you're not even going to try."

Travis stepped back, away from her, away from the table, away from everything he wanted to hit or throw. He

snatched his backpack and walked out. Her words and the way she said them burned through his chest.

Try. Stupid bluefish, that's all he'd ever be. Thought a few words meant he could read. *TRY, Travis. Can't you at least try?* He never should have told her about the lists of words. It would just give her and Bradley something to laugh about when they went to the dance.

Velveeta on MONDAY

I was mad before we even got to the library because when I told Travis about Bradley asking me to the dance, he acted like he couldn't care less. Not like I thought he'd say, "No, go with me instead," because that would be un-Travis-like. But I did think he'd say something, or at least make a face.

Because of how it was at lunch when I almost smacked him chinside with my tray. I thought he was reaching out to touch my hair. Like in a romantic-movie way. I get it now why people say someone is hot because all of a sudden Travis made me have a fever. Kawoof, furnace on.

Look, bottom line, I gotta get real here. Travis would never like me in a romantic-movie way. Not Vida Wojciehowski, Russet Lowlife Trailer-Trash Loser and half sister of Jimmy the butt. You know what Travis was doing when I thought he was reaching for my hair? He was flicking away a trailer-court cootie.

Still *Velveeta*, on TUESDAY MORNING

Jimmy came over for dinner, so I spent the night here at your place. I hate my life. I especially hate how I feel when Jimmy's around, like the scummiest of scum-sludge bottom-feeder bad.

It stormed all night. I tried to remember what you used to say about how storms are magical and beautiful and awesome. But the thunder growled and barked, and I was all by myself and the electricity went off, so I couldn't watch a movie, and I couldn't find a candle or a flashlight. I started to feel like a bad thing was out there, bamming on the sides of your trailer. Howling at me. Every time I looked at a window, I expected Jack Nicholson's face to show up saying "Heeeeeere's Johnny," and then he'd chase me through mountains of snow with an ax. I shoved some furniture in front of the door in case the double bolt broke.

Now it's light outside, sort of. At least it's not night anymore, but it's still stormy. The lights are back on, but I don't know what time it is. You know what? I'm not leaving here until Jimmy's truck is gone. I think I will have a Velveeta movie day.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Travis let the gray drizzle fall on him. He didn't want to go to school, and he couldn't stay home. Grandpa was still in bed and was probably going to miss work. Good thing Travis hadn't gotten all on board with Grandpa's changes, because everything looked to be going off board pretty fast. Grandpa hadn't made dinner in days, they were running out of groceries, and all the asking about homework had stopped. The whole thing had lasted, what, maybe a month?

Travis shoved himself away from the bridge railing with a sigh. He dragged his feet through town. For a while there,

he'd even thought he could be a new Travis. But really, everything was the same, especially him. Same old bluefish.

He got to school late, after the first bell. On his way to social studies, he ran into McQueen.

"Mr. Roberts, pick your head up there and look around — oh. Something wrong?"

Travis shrugged.

"Problem with the reading?"

McQueen could make mud clump up in Travis's throat like nobody else.

"Come by after fourth period. Bring the book, and we'll see what tripped you up." McQueen nodded, making his eyes big. "Really, we'll fix it."

Travis paused outside Gordon's room. If Velveeta poked him in the neck, he'd just tell her to quit it. She could mind her own business for once. Her seat was empty, though, and relief washed all over him along with a taste of disappointment.

Bradley snagged Travis in the hall between bells.

"Where's Velveeta?" he asked. "Is she sick?"

"I don't know."

At least Bradley didn't know, either.

"I'll sit by you at lunch, okay?"

"Can't, I'm busy," said Travis.

Good thing he had McQueen. Anything was better than listening to Bradley talk about Velveeta. After fourth period, McQueen sat on the desk in front of him, feet on the chair.

"So what's the problem, Mr. Roberts? Something must have happened. Give me a clue. Sounds like?"

"It's not reading," said Travis. "I mean sure, I learned some words. But when I look at the page, they don't look like anything."

"Ah," said McQueen. "You tried to jump ahead."

Wasn't Travis's idea to jump ahead. That was Velveeta's idea.

"Hm. If you insist on jumping, let's make a jump you can do. Because getting discouraged is not on the program. Wait right here."

McQueen came back from his office with a bright-orange-and-green book. He opened it in the middle and pointed at the sentence above the picture.

"Read this."

"The. Bl. Blue. Dog. Is. In." said Travis.

"Good. Now do it again."

McQueen made him do it three times. Then he said, "Read it like you're telling me something I need to know."

"The blue dog is in."

"Read it like your hair's on fire."

"The blue dog is in." Travis said it a bit louder, a bit faster.

McQueen grinned and closed the book. "Okay, that probably *is* how you'd say it if your hair was on fire. Anyway, that's what most kids learn to read on. Took you maybe three minutes."

"But that's a book for little kids."

"Right. Remember when you asked why we're not using an easier book? Because you're not a child, and this is too easy. We're using a book at your level, and it's hard, and you're doing just fine. Now, go get some lunch."

Travis was halfway out the door when McQueen stopped him.

"Mr. Roberts, is there anything else bothering you?"

Travis met McQueen's hypno eyes, and a shiver ran over him. He couldn't answer.

"If there's anything I can do, let me know. Meanwhile, show up tomorrow and we'll tackle more of *Haunt Fox*."

As Travis walked home after school, he remembered asking Grandpa for help with homework, way back before he was officially a bluefish. *You're too little for homework. What's wrong with those teachers? Go out and play.* He never asked if Travis's homework was done, not once. Not until he started his whole "I'm in AA. Let's talk about everything" thing. Which was now over.

The front door was unlocked, and Grandpa was in the recliner, watching TV. Travis went directly to the refrigerator. Nothing in there but O'Doul's and ketchup.

"We're out of groceries," he said.

No answer.

"Even milk."

Thick stale smoke filled the house, and several empties cluttered the coffee table.

"Why aren't you at work?"

“Why aren’t you at work?” Grandpa whined, mocking him. “Is that all you care about, if I’m buying groceries or not? I suppose you expect me to make your dinner. You don’t care if I’m sober. You just care who’s feeding your mug.”

“At least do that,” muttered Travis.

“You got something to say, speak up.”

“Why bother?” Travis raised his voice. “You don’t care.”

“I don’t care?” Grandpa banged down the footrest of the recliner. “I’ve been taking care of your butt with no help for the last ten years, and I don’t care?”

“You only did it because you had to.”

“Oh, yeah? Says who?”

“You. I heard you say it to Dave last summer. You were sitting on the porch. You said you got saddled with me and never had a say in it. It’s not my fault you’re stuck with me.”

“No, but it’s your fault you’re a shit about it.” Grandpa stalked around the counter. “And it’s my fault to think it’d make any difference to you if I quit drinking. Here, you’re a baby? You need somebody to feed you?”

Grandpa yanked open the cupboard, then the fridge. He squeezed a line of ketchup on a cracker and poked it under Travis’s nose.

“There, feed your face on that.”

Travis smacked the cracker backhand, and it flew. Then he swung hard, connecting with Grandpa’s jaw. Grandpa went down like a bag of rocks. Travis turned

away, slapping his hands flat on the counter so they couldn't do anything else.

His face flamed. His breath came ragged and hard. He stared at the faded yellow design beneath his hands.

"Feel any better?" Grandpa's voice came from the floor.

"No." Travis said it to the counter.

The fire juice raged through his body. His knees shook so hard he'd fall if he didn't have the counter to hold. He didn't want to see blood or a bruise or a scared-eyed face. The sludge oozed in, cooling the fire and churning his stomach.

"Me neither." Grandpa got to his feet.

Travis kept his eyes down and his hands flat as the keys jingled and the door slammed. The truck started up, and Travis was alone.

Welveeta Later on TUESDAY in Nightmare Land

I watched *To Kill a Mockingbird* this afternoon. It made me so sad and so lonely because I used to have someone like Atticus and now I don't. I don't have anybody. I fell asleep crying, and somewhere in my sleep, I heard this banging, and I managed to unstick my eyelids, only I thought maybe I was still asleep, because just like in a really bad nightmare, someone was standing in the doorway.

"Who the hell are you, and what are you doing in my father's trailer?"

Sylvia didn't yell it. She said it in this mean, low voice like she was about to slit my throat wide open. She looked even meaner than she did at the funeral. I scrambled up off the couch and tried to make some words, but I couldn't do it.

"How did you get in here?"

Because I'm stupid and I was barely awake, I pointed at the key on the counter. She grabbed the key and pointed at the door with it.

"Get out of here."

So I did.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Travis wrenched his eyelids open. Gray light oozed in through the yellow towel, and a growl of thunder slunk around the house. Storming again. Grandpa hadn't come home, still hadn't been there at midnight when Travis went to bed. He untangled himself from the blankets and listened. No sounds. What if Grandpa's jaw was broken, or he'd gotten drunk and arrested or in a crash? What if he never came back?

Then Travis smelled smoke. He rolled out of bed, pulled on sweats, and opened his door. Grandpa sat at

the kitchen table. No black eye, no broken jaw. Not even a bruise.

"I heard you whimpering in there," he said. "Bad dream?"

Travis turned into the bathroom. He stayed in the shower for a long time. When he opened the door, Grandpa was still sitting there, staring at him.

"Sit down here, boy," he said. "I've got some things to say."

"I have to get ready for school."

"You've got time. Sit down."

Lightning flashed in the morning gray. A wind breezed through the open window, slicing through the clouds of cigarette smoke. Travis sat across from Grandpa in jeans and no shirt, the wet towel still around his neck. Grandpa flicked his lighter off and on. He stubbed out the last of his butt.

"Whoever taught you to fight did a hell of a job," he said, touching his jaw. "Gave me a goose egg." Looking closer, Travis could see the swelling.

"Sorry."

"No, you're not. Listen, we need to get some things straight here."

Grandpa lit up another cigarette. Travis leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. He didn't want to hear it. Not with dried ketchup still stuck on the wall and a storm outside getting ready to pounce. Thunder snarled past the window.

"We had to move. I was three months behind in rent. Your dad's life insurance is almost gone. This house is cheap, I got the job at the bakery, and AA meetings are close. That's where I went last night."

Relief and irritation swirled through Travis, twisted his stomach. Rent, insurance, AA, whatever. Drinking or not drinking. Rosco was gone. He and Grandpa didn't like each other. That's just how it was.

Grandpa shoved his chair back and walked over to stand at the window, staring out and smoking. The morning sky darkened, as if someone had just thrown a blanket over the barely risen sun.

"That's not really what I have to tell you."

He took a deep drag on his cigarette and then crushed the end as he sat back down. He picked up the lighter and flicked. The flame came up, blue on the inside with bright yellow quivering and dancing at the tip. Something sat heavy on the table between them, something bad. The smell of it filled the room, choking Travis, making it hard to breathe.

"Gotta do it," said Grandpa softly. He set the lighter down, put both hands flat on the table, and looked Travis full in the eyes. "Rosco. I killed him."

The words hit Travis like a slap on the face. He sucked his breath in and held it.

"Didn't mean to. I backed out the drive. I thought he'd gone with you to the swamp."

Travis stared, his air slow-leaking out.

"I didn't even look, and you know how Rosco wouldn't move unless you made him."

Travis shook his head no, but he could see Rosco sprawled in that sunny spot on the drive, too lazy to even twitch an ear.

"I rushed to clean everything up before you got home. Put his body in the back of the truck and ran away to hide it."

Rosco's body limp and dead. Tongue hanging out, blood on the gravel.

"Buried him on the back edge of Lenski's cornfield."

Travis stood, knocking his chair over. He turned into his room, shut the door, and slid to the floor, holding his head in his hands.

Rosco. Run over in his own driveway, just because Travis was too selfish to take him to the swamp. Because he wanted to see the foxes. *Stay*, Travis had told him, and Rosco had stayed.

Ba-bam—the bedroom door vibrated, and Travis jumped, his hands flying off his ears.

"Get out here," said Grandpa. "No hiding. We're going to deal with this."

Travis stood up and threw the door open.

"You did it on purpose!" he yelled.

"I didn't!" Grandpa yelled back, his face boiling red. "I loved that old hound before you were even born."

Travis pushed past Grandpa, out to the front porch.

The wind was electric with threat, and lightning flickered. He pressed against the house, arms crossed over his chest, trying to get the pictures out of his head. A jagged bolt lit across the gray western sky, followed by a sharp crack of thunder. Hailstones dropped, popping off the sidewalk. The wind picked up, blowing hail and rain onto the porch. Grandpa opened the door.

"Come in here."

"No."

"You're half-dressed and barefoot."

Travis kept feeling the thump, the gravel, the blood. The mud lump rose in his throat, and he tried to swallow it.

"I'd never hurt Rosco," Grandpa said through the screen. "Rather run over myself."

Why couldn't he stop, just quit talking, stop it? When Travis grabbed the door handle, Grandpa stepped aside and let him pass. He went directly to his room to get a shirt. Grandpa followed, standing in the doorway.

"Stormed like this the night your mama got sick. They left you alone in the house when they went to the hospital. Called me to babysit, said you were sound asleep."

Travis grabbed a pair of socks, sat on the edge of the bed, and pulled them on. He had to get out of there, storm or not.

"You weren't in your bed when I got there. Rosco found you hiding in your mama's closet. You latched right on to him. Squeezed his big long ear, and he didn't yipe

or say a word. From that day on, he was your dog, not mine. You think I'd take that away from you? What kind of sonuvabitch do you think I am?"

Every word felt like a punch to Travis's chest, opening up the places he kept sealed off and secret. He couldn't remember the things Grandpa was saying, but he could feel them. He yanked his shoes on.

"When I hear you whimpering in your sleep, it always reminds me of that night."

Travis grabbed a sweatshirt and slammed through the kitchen and out the front door. The second he got outside, the mud ball in his throat broke loose for the first time in years. The hail had turned to rain, and he walked into it, fast and hard. The water from the sky mixed with the water on his face. The raindrops dove into puddles like bullets.

In that dark closet, reaching out for Rosco, the only thing he had. . . . Only Rosco wasn't there. Travis almost doubled over with the pain of it, sobs jerking him so hard he could barely walk.

He stopped at the bridge and grabbed the railing. His breath shook its way in, raggedy, and came out in sobs. The rain pulled, heavy and cold, on his sweatshirt. A passing car sprayed up water, soaking him from behind. He shivered as the cold crawled under his clothes, under his skin, all the way inside. He gulped in a bite of air, and another, but he couldn't stop the sobbing. He leaned over the water, hair dripping in his face.

Finally his chest stopped heaving. That was almost worse. Hollow and freezing cold. He hurried through town and into the school building, sloshing in his shoes. Down the stairs to the locker room. He landed on a bench and dropped his head into his hands. The tears rolled again, and his whole body shook with each breath. Those long soft ears. They felt like safe. Like not alone. *Th-thud*, blood. Did Grandpa run over his head?

He shivered harder.

"Travis?"

He almost jumped out of his goose-bumped skin.

"Are you okay?"

Bradley sat on a roll of wrestling mats in the corner by the showers. Travis hadn't even looked that way when he'd walked in, never thought anyone would be there so early. He wiped his hand over his face.

"Fine."

He cleared his throat to cover the quaver in his voice and pulled his sweatshirt over his head. It sucked and clung to him, hard to get off. If only he could hide in there forever. He took it into the shower area and wrung it out, his hands still shaking. He dumped the water out of his shoes, took off his socks, and wrung those, too.

"Here." Bradley appeared in the entryway with a towel. "You can use this."

Travis took the towel and rubbed his hair dry, wishing Bradley would go away. When he finally pulled the towel away from his face, Bradley was perched back on

the wrestling mats. Travis took off his clammy T-shirt, full of cold rain and heat from his skin. He scrubbed the towel over his arms and back and chest, trying to rub in some warmth.

He wrung the T-shirt as dry as he could get it, and then pulled it back on. That made him cold all over again. His jeans were still dripping. He pulled on his wet socks and forced his feet into his shoes. He dried his face one more time and came out of the shower, tossing the towel to Bradley.

"You okay?" Bradley asked again.

Bradley had seen him sitting on the bench, must have heard those chokey noises coughing up his throat. Knew he'd been crying. Travis glanced at the clock.

"You look like you swam here," said Bradley.

Travis turned up one corner of his mouth and shrugged, the closest he could get to saying thanks. He left the locker room and ran upstairs to McQueen's office.

"Not an umbrella user, Mr. Roberts?" McQueen said when he showed up in the doorway.

"No, and I forgot to bring the book." Another cold shudder ran through him.

"How far do you live from here?"

"Not far."

"Here—here's a tardy pass." McQueen scribbled on a pad. "Go home and get some dry clothes on. You can't sit in school like that. We'll work on *Haunt Fox* fourth period. You won't miss anything."

Velveeta on WEDNESDAY

It's lunchtime and I'm in the girls' bathroom. Everything sucks so bad. This morning I checked Calvin's doorknob and it's locked and me with no key. My scarves are in there. What if I can't get them back?

I walked to school in the pouring-down rain. First person I saw was Bradley. He held up this little sign in front of his face: SAY YES. At first I couldn't figure out what it meant, but then I remembered about the stupid dance. I will not be saying yes.

Travis was absent. What if he really does have leukemia and now he's dying? What if our fight in the library pushed away his will to live?

Fourth period, I met with McQueen. I asked him how Travis was doing, and he said it was none of my business. Can you believe that? He one-trick-ponied me into helping and then says it's not my business and we're here to talk about me, not Travis, and Travis is turning his life around and what about me? He said, "Word on the street is you're not doing any homework." I told him we don't have streets in Russet. We only have roads. Then his social-worker starey eyes pounded me into a corner, and he said it's time to decide while I still have choices and I lose a choice or two every day I don't do homework.

I told him my only choices are which bar I waitress at.

He asked if I was trying to make that be so.