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## CHAPTER TWENTY

By the time Travis passed the farm where Grandpa had stopped him on the first day of school, the sun peeked between the layers of gray, and a cool breeze had come up. His hair was almost dry, but his feet were still soggy. McQueen's tardy pass was soaked in the pocket of his wet jeans.

Lenski's cornfield. He should be able to get there before nightfall. It'd be easier if he had some water. Or money, so he could buy something when he passed through Salisbury. His stomach was hollow, and his mouth dry.

The sun climbed the layers of clouds, and big holes of blue opened in the sky. Travis peeled off his damp sweatshirt and tied it around his waist. A couple of potato trucks passed, loaded to the top. He'd just crossed the county line when the pickup pulled over on the opposite shoulder.

"Get in," Grandpa called out the window.

Travis kept walking.

"You've got maybe fourteen miles to go. Give or take. And you'll never find it if I don't show you. Get in."

Grandpa pattered along in the gravel, matching his speed.

"God, you're a stubborn shit."

He stopped, got out, slammed the truck door, and crossed the road. He didn't light up. He just walked alongside, keeping pace, even though Travis was going at a good clip.

"Look, I know I knocked you off your pins this morning. I'm sorry."

Travis had never heard those words out of Grandpa's mouth.

"Get in the truck and I'll take you there, right now."

Travis's feet hurt, especially his right heel. He felt like the skin might rot off if he didn't get it dry.

"Please? Get in the truck? I brought a sandwich along in case I found you."

Please? He'd never heard that word before, either. Travis made a sharp right, cutting Grandpa off. He crossed

the road and walked back toward the truck. The lighter flicked behind him as Grandpa lit up. Travis got in the truck, took off his shoes, and peeled off his wet socks. The muscles in his legs twitched and quivered.

Grandpa came along, walking slowly now, dragging on his cigarette. Finally he got in and started the engine without a word. Travis grabbed the peanut-butter sandwich. Rammed it down and wished for some water, but not enough to say anything out loud. No sound in the truck but the tires on the road and sometimes the blinker.

Everything sparkled from the rain. That storm had washed out the last of summer, and now it was really fall. The leaves showed patches and runs of color. Sharp reds and bright yellows, breathing through the green.

The roads started to turn familiar, the ones Travis had ridden on the school bus for eight years. A couple of miles from the old place, Grandpa turned onto a dirt two-track with a line of trees on one side and a cornfield on the other. The corn had been cut, and the chopped-off stalks poked up out of the dirt, stretching in a wide pattern of yellow and brown. All dead. Grandpa stopped the truck.

"Look," he said. "You know I loved that hound, right? You don't really think I did that on purpose."

One time when Travis got up in the night, Grandpa had been sitting on the floor with his arms around Rosco, saying how much he loved him. He was sloppy drunk, but still. He never said that to Travis, drunk or sober. And

as much as Rosco had loved Travis, it was Grandpa he obeyed.

Travis put his shoes back on with no socks, pulled on his sweatshirt, and got out of the truck. The birch and aspen alongside the field were on their way to yellow, and the patch of sumac had gone completely red. The leaves rustled and rattled in the wind.

"There's the spot." Grandpa pointed.

The dirt was still in clods, not settled. No grass growing. A big rock sat in the middle of the fresh dirt. Big enough that Travis wasn't sure he could lift it. Must have been hard for Grandpa to move.

Travis walked over to the grave.

"You want some time alone here?" asked Grandpa.

He nodded, and Grandpa got in the truck and backed out the two-track. Travis didn't have any more tears in him, just the big empty hole. Somewhere under the rock and the dirt were those long, soft ears. Travis used to put them across his face, the way Velveeta did with her scarves. He missed the smell, the dog hair on his clothes, and Rosco's deep *row-wow* bark. Most of all, he missed the way Rosco acted every day when he got home. Like nothing better in the world than Travis Roberts could come out of that school bus.

He knelt down and drew in the dirt. He outlined a hound like the one at the beginning of chapter two.

"I miss you, buddy," he said. "So much."



He'd been there just long enough to get chilly when the truck came bouncing back. The sad was all over Travis, inside and out, and it drowned out any mad he had left. Grandpa came over and sat down on the other side of the grave.

"Funny how this goose egg makes me feel better," he said after a while, touching his jaw. "Guess I felt like I needed to be whupped for what I did. I thought you were going to do it that day on the steps."

"I didn't touch you that day."

"Maybe not, but it felt that way. Lying there in the dirt, I had that AA moment-of-clarity thing. The one where you know the jig is up. Quitting time."

So that was it. That's why everything started changing that day. AA meetings and moving. If Travis had known Rosco was dead, the moving would have been different. If he'd known Grandpa did it . . . Well, who knows?

"It's harder than I thought," said Grandpa. "I figured once I detoxed, it'd be cake, but then it got harder in a different way. Guess I started feeling sorry for myself, and that's poison in the head. I'd be drinking now if you hadn't clobbered me."

"That's not why I did it," said Travis.

"I know. Doesn't matter. Same result. Travis, I swear to Christ Jesus I want to do right by you. Better than I did with your dad, anyway."

Grandpa's face sagged into tired wrinkles. Like an upside-down clown face.

"Did he drive into that tree on purpose?" Travis asked.

"I don't know. I've asked myself that a few times."

"Because of me?"

"Good God, is that what you think?" said Grandpa.

"You're the only thing that mattered to him after your mama died. Never saw anyone love a kid like he loved you."

"Not enough to stay."

The words hung out there, vibrating. The breeze came through and knocked a few yellow leaves down.

"It's not that," said Grandpa finally. "The booze had him by the throat, same as me. It twists everything. Makes it all somebody else's fault."

Travis rolled a sharp pebble against his thumb, pressing hard so it hurt.

"Rosco's my fault," he said. "If I'd taken him, he wouldn't be dead."

"No!" Grandpa barked. "Shut up with that. Not your fault."

Travis rolled the pebble harder, making a dent-trail in his skin.

"This is, though." Grandpa tapped his chin. "Lucky I don't have a glass jaw, or you'd've shattered me all over the kitchen floor. You can't go around hitting people like that."

"I know," said Travis.

"I mean, if you have to, it's okay. But you can't just do it because you feel like it."

"I *know*."

Travis poked the pebble into the dirt on the edge of the

grave, pressing it in deep. The wind came colder through the cornstalks, and the sun dipped behind a cloud.

“Okay.” Grandpa pushed himself up. “I gotta move before my knees rust so bad I can’t get up again.”

Travis waited until Grandpa was in the truck with the door closed. He ran his palm across the grave, smoothing over the hound drawing and the pebble hole. Then he stood and walked back to the truck. He hunched against the wind, his hands jammed in his pockets. Rosco was under there, under the dirt. Never coming back.

Everything was different now.

## *Velveeta* Banished on WEDNESDAY

After school I told Connie about getting banished, and the way she looked at me, my eyes got wet. Especially when I told her my scarves were in there. She handed me a Kleenex and said I should ask for them and maybe I could apologize for trespassing.

I told her Sylvia would kill me and stuff my body in a rental truck, and then she'd have to get a new library lackey.

On the way home, I practiced saying I was sorry and please give me the scarves.

Sylvia opened the door just as I put my foot on the bottom step, and everything I'd practiced saying melted out of my brain. I just stood there on the doorstep half chokey and pathetic. I thought I might throw up. She stepped back and told me to come in. I didn't want to, but I wanted the scarves.

We stood there toe-to-toe in your kitchen and she started slugging lawyer questions at me like we were in a courtroom, only there wasn't anyone on my side to object.

**HER: What did you have to do with my father?**

me: He kind of watched out for me.

**HER: He was your babysitter?**

me: Nobody paid him.

**HER: Did you know he had a daughter?**

me: Yes.

**HER: What did he say about me?**

me: That he was a bad dad and you won't forgive him for it.

**HER: He said that?**

me: More than once.

**HER: He was.**

me: Not to me.

She almost rocked over backward when I said that, like I'd smacked her hard. But she came back with her voice slicey-sharp.

**HER: I think you should go now. Where do you live?**

me: Next door. I come here sometimes because I miss him.

She leaned against the wall then, staring at me. I stared back. I figured if it was a stare-down, I'm good at that. I stared and she stared and neither of us blinked for a long time.

**HER: What is it that you want from me?**

me: I want the scarves. He gave them to me — they're mine.

**HER: Why would he give you my mother's scarves?**

I stared at her without any words like I was Travis. She turned her back on me and looked out the window like I wasn't worth beating in a stare-down.

**HER: Go home.**

me: What about my scarves?

**HER: He didn't put anything in writing. You could be lying for all I know.**

me: But I'm not. He was right when he said you've got a mean streak.

**HER: Get out of here before I call the cops.**

I hate her.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A few kids were scattered around the lunchroom, eating breakfast, but Velveeta wasn't there. Travis wandered past her locker a few times. Maybe she was still mad at him for walking out on her at the library Monday. That seemed so long ago now.

She didn't show up first period, either. Where could she be? Something must be wrong. He kept *Haunt Fox* tucked inside one of his textbooks and worked on it all morning. He went over and over the words he knew and circled the unknown ones farther ahead.

"Hey, Travis." Bradley came up behind him in the lunch line. "Where's Velveeta?"

"How should I know?" Travis pulled away. "Ask her yourself."

"I can't — she's not here."

Travis got his food and sat at the usual table, kitty-corner from Amber and her book. He pulled out *Haunt Fox*. Amber's eyes roved back and forth over her pages quickly, and she flipped a page. Travis tried to move his eyes fast over the first line, but he lost words.

He was headed back to his locker after lunch when Chad Cormick shouldered up next to him.

"Hey, Roberts, want to fight me?" he asked.

He nudged Travis, then danced back, both fists up, grinning.

"No."

"Yeah, you do. Come on, show me how it's done."

He tapped Travis on the shoulder again, fake-punched toward his head, and kept his feet dancing. Travis turned away, and Chad danced around in front of him.

"Come on, dude! Why you gotta be so like that?" He pointed at his chin. "Right here, come on, just one."

Travis shifted the book to his left hand, brought his fist up, and dinked Chad on the jaw. Hard, but not mean. Chad twirled, fell to the floor, and popped back up.

"Check it — you didn't even put your book down to deck me. Roberts, you are the moolio."

He lightly slapped Travis on the side of the head,

hopped backward, and spun away. Like a fox puppy, bouncing down the hall. Velveeta would have loved that. Where was she, anyway?

After the last bell, Travis poked his head into Room 134. Grandpa had gotten a letter from school about parent-teacher conferences. He'd never gone to one before, but he'd been talking as if he might actually do it.

"What's on your mind?" asked McQueen.

"What do you tell parents at conferences?"

"We go over your work and your grades on assignments and talk about any problems or anything that's going especially well. Why? Is there something you do or don't want me to tell your parents?"

"My grandpa," said Travis. "If he comes. He might not. But if he does. He doesn't know, you know."

"Doesn't know you have trouble reading?"

"Not exactly."

"And you don't want him to know?" McQueen raised his eyebrows to the ceiling.

"Well, I want him to know I'm doing good. If he comes."

"I'll tell him you're doing well, that you're one of my best students. I won't go into specific detail about the work unless he asks. But if he asks, I'll answer every question honestly. How's that?"

"That's good."

Travis pushed out the double doors and into the cold breeze. *One of my best students*. The sky was sunny-sharp blue, and leaves skittered along the sidewalk. A good day



to lie on the merry-go-round and watch the trees spin. Travis headed for the park but stopped short in the alley.

Hard, mean laughter smacked out from a huddle by the slide. He flattened against the building and peeked around the corner. Three of the guys from the picnic table had Bradley backed against the ladder. The tall guy with long dark hair — Maddox? — laughed again. Chilson said something in a low voice, and Travis caught a glimpse of Bradley's face. He was scared half to death, actually crying.

He'd been nice to Travis in the locker room, didn't even say a word about it later. And anyway, three on one was too much for anyone. Especially Bradley. Travis dropped his backpack off of his shoulder and pushed away from the building.

"Whistler!" he yelled.

"Look, Chilson," said Maddox. "It's Skinnyboy from the bridge! What you want, Skinnyboy?"

Travis pushed through and grabbed Bradley by the front of his jacket, jerking him away from the slide. Bradley was so startled, he almost fell over, but Travis hauled him upright and gave him a hard shove.

"Did you think I was kidding?" yelled Travis. "Pay up or I'll kill you."

"Oh, look," said Chilson. "Bradley's popular today. What do you want with him, Skinnyboy?"

"None of your business," said Travis.

"Ooooo." Maddox took a step back with his hands in the air. "Tough guy."

The short guy in the monster-truck T-shirt laughed. Travis grabbed Bradley again by the collar and yanked him, making space between them and the three guys. He started walking fast toward the bleachers, dragging Bradley with him.

"Don't cry, Bradley!" called Maddox. "Don't cry! Boo-hoo-hoo, Bradley!"

Travis pulled Bradley up past the back of the tavern toward Main Street, and let him go as soon as they were out of sight. Bradley crumpled on the ground next to the building.

"Bradley, get up. They might follow us."

Travis stepped to the corner of the building and looked back at the playground. Monster Truck had found Travis's backpack by the building. He opened it and pulled out *Haunt Fox*. Travis turned to Bradley.

"Stay there," he said.

That guy had his book. If he opened it, he'd see the pencil marks. What if he ripped it up? *You can't go around hitting people*. Grandpa's voice spoke in his head as he stomped back across the park.

Chilson spotted Travis and grinned. Monster Truck tossed the book on the ground.

"Hey, Skinnyboy," said Chilson. "You think I'm stupid? You think I fell for that?"

Travis stopped about five feet away. Maddox and Monster Truck moved up, one on each side. Travis took a couple of steps back so he could watch all three of them.

"What do you want?" asked Chilson. "You saved your girlfriend. Now, get out of here before we kick your skinny ass."

If Travis looked at the book — if they knew how much he wanted it — he'd never get it back.

"Why pick on Bradley?" he asked. "He's like half your size."

"Point." Chilson nodded. "But you're not. So you think you can take all three of us?"

Travis looked them over, one at a time, then centered back on Chilson.

"Probably not. But maybe."

"You think you're pretty tough, huh?" said Maddox.

He stepped in, chesting up close. Travis knocked him back. He shoved, and Travis shoved harder. Maddox stumbled and almost went down. Travis's hands came up into fists, and he felt the heat moving through him, pumping but not boiling over. Maddox bounced back, and Travis zeroed in, gauging the distance between them.

"Hey, look," said Chilson. "There's Bradleycakes. I guess he's going to save you."

"Shit," said Monster Truck. "He's on his phone."

Travis didn't turn to look. He kept his eyes nailed on Maddox, who was moving in.

"You know what, Skinnyboy?" Chilson shouldered between them. He pointed his finger at Travis's nose. "I like you. You've got guts."

"I'll stomp his guts," said Maddox.

"Not now," said Chilson. He turned and left through the alley, and Monster Truck followed.

"I'll see you later," Maddox said, glaring at Travis. He held up both middle fingers as he backed away. "Count on it."

Travis waited until they'd all turned the corner, then picked up *Haunt Fox* and put it in his backpack.

"I'm sorry," said Bradley, coming up behind. "I should have backed you up right away. I just —"

"Don't worry about it. The phone was smart. Did you really call anyone?"

Bradley shook his head and slumped slowly to the ground. "I hate them," he said, his hands over his face. "I really hate them."

Travis was still juiced from the almost fight. Grabbing Bradley by the shirt, shoving him around . . . he'd actually enjoyed that part a little bit. Even if it was to keep him from getting killed.

Bradley kept talking, shaky-voiced, heaving words as if he couldn't get them out fast enough.

"We were sort of friends, Josh and me, when we were little. Then he started picking on me. Last year, when he was still in middle school, I was scared to go in the bathroom even."

Travis stopped pacing and sat on the edge of the merry-go-round. He leaned over and picked up a couple of rocks.

"And when you came up, they were saying all the stuff

they're going to do to me and . . . If you wouldn't have showed up, Travis . . ."

Bradley tried to suck in a sob, but it got loose and then he couldn't quit. Travis had never seen anyone cry that hard before, nobody but himself on the bridge. The cold wind blew through, and Travis shivered. He wanted to leave before those guys came back, but he couldn't leave Bradley crying alone in the dirt.

"Hey, it's okay," he said. "Really, come on."

Bradley's whole body shook and jerked so hard that Travis felt it himself, deep in his chest. Finally, Bradley slowed down and took a big shaky breath. He scrubbed his face with the back of his hand and turned to Travis.

"You're going to hate me now, too."

"Nope," said Travis. "Not for that."

"Why do I have to be so scared?"

"Everybody's scared of something."

"You're just saying that to make me feel better."

"No, I'm not."

Bradley stared until Travis looked away.

"You really are like the Master Chief," he said. "You neutralized all three of them just because I'm on your squad. Aren't you scared of them at all?"

"A little." Travis shrugged. "Three on one, that's something to watch out for."

"I've never been in a fight. But you didn't even hit anybody — they just backed off."

That was true. Travis hadn't hit anybody. He'd just

growled like Larry the dog. No concussions, nobody on the ground, no cold sludge in his guts.

"Come on," he said. "I'll walk you as far as the bridge in case they're still hanging around."

They walked in silence until they got in sight of the bridge. The picnic table was empty.

"I lied when I told Velveeta I don't lie," said Bradley. "I lie all the time to my dad. I leave early for school so I won't run into those guys and I say it's to study. That's why I was in the locker room yesterday morning. I say I have chess club after school, but really I stay in the school library or wait in the park until they leave the picnic table."

"Geez, Bradley," said Travis.

"I'm un-asking Velveeta to the dance. You should ask her. She likes you better. Are you scared to ask her? Is that what you're scared of?"

Travis shrugged.

"It's okay. I won't tell."

## *Velveeta* on THURSDAY

I've been wearing the same scarf for four days in a row. It's my only one now and forever. If I knew I could only have one, I would have kept that orange one.

Walking toward school, I thought about no scarves and no trailer, never again.

When I got to the library, my feet turned. They took me to the back door, and I sat there on the cold cement, freezing, until Connie showed up. She let me in, even though the library doesn't open until ten. I told her about Sylvia not giving me the scarves, and then I started crying and couldn't stop. Connie hugged me. Nobody ever touches me anymore. Not even a pat on the shoulder. That made me cry harder.

Connie got me some Kleenex and asked if I was ready to go to school, and I told her if I went there, I'd puke. She asked if I'd eaten anything and I said no. After some hemming and hawing, she said I could spend the day at the library, but I couldn't just sit there — did I have any homework?

I pulled out *The Book Thief*, and Connie got this funny squint-eyed look on her face, kind of like someone was stabbing her and telling her a joke at the same time. She asked me how far I was, and I told her I was almost done but it was too depressing to finish. The girl Liesel already learned how to read, and now everything is about war and people dying. Connie said I could stay at the library all day if I finished the book. I told her she is in cahoots with McQueen and that's

probably illegal, but she pointed at the book and said she'd be back before ten, and locked the door on her way out.

She came back with scones and muffins from the bakery and sent me to the study room to keep reading. I couldn't eat because that book made me cry so hard, I couldn't even breathe. Connie said to keep reading and keep breathing, like that was easy. Tears and snot just about came out of my butt, I cried so hard. After I finished the book, Connie fixed up a spot in the study room with a pillow.

I told her that Calvin being dead is like a long-fingered claw that keeps scratching at my heart. She said she knows that claw. She said grief is a rough ride but the only way through it is through it. Then she told me to take a nap.

Liesel the book thief was tough.

I'm not tough.

I'm not anything.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Travis high-low whistled, and Larry came barking down the driveway. Travis threw him half a muffin.

“Hey, Larry. Didn’t know if you’d be out this early on a cold morning.”

The rising sun touched the frost tipping the grass and weeds, painting a frigid sparkle picture. Larry swallowed the muffin and came closer. Travis knelt on the driveway, holding out his hand, palm up.

“Come on, Lar. It’s okay. Look, I even know your name now.”

"How do you know his name?"

Travis jumped to his feet. Larry turned and ran back to the old woman. She leaned on her cane and looked down at Larry, who now sat in front of her.

"How does this boy know your name, Larry?"

"I heard you call him that one day." He turned around, walking quickly back to the road. "I'm leaving."

"This boy heard me call your name?" The woman talked louder, so Travis would hear. "I wonder where he heard that? I've never seen him before. And Larry, it looks like you're friends with him. You let him walk right up the drive. I wonder why you did that."

"It's not his fault." Travis turned around to face her. "I gave him some baloney."

"Bribed! By a boy with baloney."

"Sorry, I won't do it again."

"Larry, I wonder if this boy would want to take you for a walk sometime. I bet you'd both like that."

"He wouldn't go with me. I tried."

"Since this boy is not afraid of you and seems to feel free to wander around our driveway, maybe he would come up to the house sometime. Maybe he'd knock on the door and introduce himself."

Larry wagged his tail. If Travis had one, he might have twitched the end of it.

"Okay, then, let's hope he does that. But right now, I think the boy should go to school and we should go indoors. It's cold out here."

She started back up the drive, Larry next to her. Travis watched until they went around the curve and out of sight. Then he hurried to school so he wouldn't be late for McQueen.

"Before we get started," McQueen said, "I want to check in with you again about your other classes. I've mentioned to your other teachers that you're working with me —"

"Did you tell them?" Travis's head snapped up.

"Mr. Roberts"—McQueen's voice dropped so low, Travis leaned forward to hear him—"do you think they don't know? You never turn anything in, you don't do class projects, and math is the only class where you participate at all."

The skin on Travis's neck started the slow burn upward.

"If you'd kept pretending with me, you wouldn't be rattling off lists of words now," said McQueen. "You need to talk to your teachers. And start paying attention in the classroom."

Travis couldn't pay attention. *Haunt Fox* and word lists were all he could handle.

"Don't worry so much. Might be more slack lying around for you than you know. Ask Ms. Gordon about that reading program. Plenty of kids with vision or reading problems use it. Now, let's see, I think we were starting chapter two, weren't we?"

McQueen started reading about a boy and his hound puppy who found the fox's tracks. Travis let himself fall inside the story and forget about everything else. The boy headed out in the new snow to follow his hound and the fox.

"So, how are the words going?" McQueen closed the book.

"I need a new list. And I've circled all the way through chapter four."

McQueen wrote down a new list of five words, and they went over them a few times.

"You know quite a few words now, and you've got some uncircled space to run in," said McQueen. "I'd like you to start looking at a sentence or two, where you know all the words. Read them out loud, and take it slow. When you hit a comma, stop and chew. When you hit a period, swallow. Don't try to eat any circled words."

"Only the ones that go down easy?"

"Right." McQueen grinned. "I don't want you gagging. Now, go on — the first bell's about to ring."

Travis stopped in the doorway to Ms. Gordon's room. Velveeta was there in her seat, watching the door. She smiled. A soft, close-lipped smile. Relief whooshed over Travis as he sat in front of her.

"Where've you been?" he asked.

"I was here Wednesday — where were you? I thought maybe you had the bubonic plague."

"So were you sick those other days or having Velveeta time?"

"Neither."

Bradley popped up at Travis's locker before fourth period.

"Hey, I un-asked Velveeta to the dance," he said. "Plus I told my dad about what happened in the park. He said to invite you over. Want to come home with me after school tonight?"

"What did she say?" They walked into McQueen's room.

"She who?"

"Velveeta. About the dance."

"She doesn't care. She didn't want to go with me anyway. So what about tonight?"

"Mr. Whistler," said McQueen. "Seat, please."

Travis pulled out *Haunt Fox*, but he couldn't concentrate. Every time he looked over at Velveeta, she was staring straight ahead at nothing. Then McQueen called her into his office and she was in there for a long time. When she came out, she put her head down on her desk. The bell rang and she didn't move. Travis started to walk over and see if she was okay, and then he stopped. Took another step forward. Then another one back. Finally he backed out of the room and got in line for lunch.

When he came out with his lunch tray, she was sitting with Bradley. He waved, and Travis sat across from them. Velveeta didn't have any lunch in front of her.

"Hey, Travis. I told her about yesterday," said Bradley.

"He says you neutralized Chilson and his buddies," said Velveeta. "I'm not really sure what that means, but it sounds impressive. Better than me. I got dumped by Bradley Whistler."

"No, you didn't! You didn't want to go with me."

"Aren't I supposed to decide that?"

"No," said Bradley. "I asked you. I can un-ask you."

Travis chewed through a taco, listening and watching. Velveeta said Velveeta-like things, but she said them with the volume turned down and the lights dim. As if she was running on half-power.

"It doesn't really bother you, does it?" asked Bradley. "That I un-asked you? I mean, it seems like something is bothering you."

Travis caught Velveeta's eye, and she quickly looked away. As if she didn't want anyone seeing her.

"Bradley," said Travis, "do that 'what's the password?' thing you do."

Velveeta looked sideways at Travis with one tiny nod. Thanking him.

"Really? Right now?"

"Yeah, come on," said Travis. "Do it."

Bradley launched in, knocking on the table. "'Hey, open up.' 'What's the password?' 'Password? Oh, man, I forgot.'"

Bradley kept going, and Travis set his whole chocolate-chip cookie on a napkin and slid it in front of Velveeta. She met his eyes, but he could barely see her. She was way back there. Hiding.

"I've got chicken stir-fry," said Bradley, breaking out of his password rap. "You want some, Velveeta?"

"I'm not hungry." She pushed Travis's cookie back. "But thanks, anyway. I'll see you later."

She left, even though there was still more than five minutes until the bell.

"Something really is wrong, isn't it?" Bradley asked. "Do you think she's waiting for you to ask her to the dance?"

Velveeta walked across the lunchroom, her head down. Like the day he'd hurt her in the hallway, only ten times more. Whatever was wrong, it was bigger than anything Travis knew about.

## *Velveeta* on FRIDAY

Bradley un-asked me to the dance as soon as I got to school. Whatever.

McQueen dragged me into his office. I gave *The Book Thief* back. He asked me a bunch of questions, I guess to make sure I'd really read the whole thing. He said he didn't make me read it because of Travis.

I told him not to lie, and he said helping Travis was only a tiny part of it. Then he said to relax and put my feet up because he was going to read me his favorite part. So I put my feet on the stack of books in front of his desk. He read the part about Death coming for Liesel's papa.

That's the part that made tears come out of my butt. Liesel's papa reminds me too much of Calvin. I couldn't figure out how McQueen knew, and I was thinking maybe Connie told him. I was starting to get mad about that when he slammed the book shut and pointed at me and said "That's you." "That's me what?" I asked him.

Then he got all *Stand and Deliver*ish and said I was that kind of person, the kind who sits up when Death comes to get them. The souls who put out a lot of light in the world. Like Liesel's papa. Like Liesel.

I told him I am not like Liesel at all. My voice shook like crazy, just like I was one of the kids in that movie.

And McQueen said yes, I am. He said I'm one of the best



sitter-uppers he's ever met, and that's why he gave me *The Book Thief* to read.

Then he just sat there and stared at me, and that was good because it made me settle down. I was not going to get eye-wet in front of those snakey social-worker eyes. He gave me a little teeny-tiny smile like he knew that, and then he waved at the door and told me to get out of there.

All I can think about is Calvin dying. Did he sit up when Death came, like Liesel did? Did he look Death in the eye? Was he sad about leaving? Does he miss me? Because I miss him so much I can't stand it. It's like my heart is getting pulverized with a sharp-pointed jackhammer, every second and all the time.

When I got home from school, I checked his trailer door, just in case.

Locked.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Saturday morning, Travis leaned on the bridge railing and looked out over the pond. Beneath his feet the water ran and rumbled over the dam. Out ahead it lay flat and still, reflecting the trees in a perfect upside-down image. He looked down Water Street toward Bradley's house.

He'd gone there after school and met Bradley's mom. She was nice. So was his dad. But what about Velveeta? He didn't know anything about her outside of school, not one single thing, except that she watched a lot of movies, she worked at the library, and she did her own laundry. If she

was sick, who took care of her? Someone like Grandpa? Or someone like Bradley's parents? Or nobody at all? Did she have brothers and sisters? A dog?

Travis headed down the street to the bakery. Grandpa liked working there, and not just for the doughnuts. He said it did him good. Travis had never been in there, had never even walked on that side of the street. The sign, *Harvest Moon Bakery*, hung out from the front of the building like a flag.

He pushed the screen door open, ringing the bell overhead. Grandpa turned from the coffee machine, and his mouth actually dropped open.

"Hey," said Travis. "Can I get half a dozen doughnut holes?"

"Yessir." Grandpa grinned as if Travis had just given him a big present wrapped up with a shiny bow. He opened the display case, pulled them out with tongs, and dropped them in a paper bag. "What's this for? You don't like doughnuts, remember?"

"Feed the birds."

Grandpa looked him up and down, slit-eyed.

"Pretty expensive way to feed the birds." He rang it up on the cash register. "Dollar fifty."

Travis paid with the spare change Grandpa always left lying on the coffee table, and put an extra quarter in the tip jar. Grandpa stared at it, then back at Travis, and broke into a cackle.

"You crack me up, boy," he said. "Go feed the birds."

The bakery bell rang behind Travis as he turned onto the sidewalk. A sparrow chirped from the bushes, asking for its handout, and he rolled the top of the bag tighter. A squirrel made a dash across the street. The closer Travis got to the library, the slower he walked.

Maybe she didn't want him coming there. Maybe he'd be bugging her. Maybe whatever was wrong was none of his business. He stood in the library entryway and looked through the window. The angles were all wrong; he couldn't see anything but books. Finally, he opened the door.

"Hi, Travis." Connie looked up from the computer at the front desk. "Velveeta's busy right now, but have a seat and she'll come find you."

Travis took out his math book and started in on the homework. He'd talked to Mrs. Lane on Friday afternoon and said he had trouble with the story problems. She'd been much nicer than he expected.

"What's that, math?" whispered Velveeta. She pulled a chair up next to him. "Why are you doing that?"

"I brought you something." He handed her the bakery bag.

"What is this?" She looked inside. "Nice. But I can't eat them now or I'll get fired."

She took the bakery bag into a back room and shut the door. Connie, who was watching from the front desk, smiled at Travis and nodded. Not like she was mad at Velveeta for slacking off. More like she and Travis were in on some secret together.

He kept working on the math, looking ahead to see if he could figure things out on his own. Velveeta came back over at noon and sat across from him.

"Why are you still here?" she asked.

"Waiting for you. What are you doing now?"

"Taking my laundry home. What are you doing?"

"Helping you?"

Velveeta's mouth turned down. Like she was mad.

"I gotta check with Connie about something."

She and Connie disappeared in back for almost fifteen minutes. Travis figured he'd done something wrong, but he had no idea what it was. Finally, the door to the study room opened, and Velveeta nodded. He picked up his books and followed her. He glanced at Connie on the way, and she gave him two thumbs up. Whatever that meant.

"So, Travis, why are you here, really?" Velveeta retrieved her red wagon from behind the library. She put the bakery bag beneath a towel.

"I don't know — to cheer you up, I guess." He reached for the handle of the wagon. "Seems like something's wrong."

"I can pull my own wagon." She pushed his hand away. "What makes you think something's wrong?"

"For one thing, you're wearing the same scarf you wore yesterday."

Velveeta stopped dead in her tracks.

"I'm sorry," said Travis quickly. "I like this scarf — it's a good one — it's just that you usually don't . . ."

She started walking again. Travis walked next to her, kicking himself for saying anything about the scarf.

"How's the reading going?" Her voice sounded funny. Like she was choking on something.

"It's okay."

"Are you ever going to let me help you again?"

"You don't let *me* help *you*. You won't even let me pull your wagon."

The words flew out of his mouth. As if they came directly from his guts and forgot to pass his brain on the way. Velveeta stopped again. She dropped her head, and her hair fell forward so it hid her face. He waited, hoping she'd just give him the wagon handle.

"Don't follow me," she said.

She took off, the wagon rattling behind. Travis stood on the sidewalk and watched until she turned the corner. She didn't look back.

## *Velveeta* on SATURDAY

I had to go ask Connie what to do when Travis brought me doughnut holes. I told her I didn't have it in me to make him laugh. I told her I'm the entertainment monkey and people only like me because I make them laugh.

She said, "Velveeta, honey, if that's the only thing you give them, then that's the only thing they're going to know to want."

She said Travis has the sweetest face she's ever seen and if he wants to be my friend, I should let him. But I don't know how. When he said I'd been wearing the same scarf every day, I felt like he was stabbing me in the guts, not in a mean way but like he could see inside of me whether I told him anything or not.

Then he said that thing about wanting to help me. How I wouldn't even let him pull my wagon.

I thought my heart was going to fall out of my chest—that's how bad it hurt.

Why did that hurt? It doesn't make any sense.

I don't understand anything.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Velveeta was still wearing the green scarf first period on Monday. She waved the end of it at Travis when he walked in the door. Not mad.

“Thanks for the doughnut holes,” she said. “You kept me from getting malnourished over the weekend.”

“Are you okay?”

“I don’t have the bubonic plague or a broken leg. So yup, I’m okay. Pay attention — the teacher’s talking.”

Travis faced front. She seemed more okay. Not one hundred percent, but definitely better. But why was she still wearing the same scarf?



"You know what you said?" she whispered, jabbing the back of his neck. "About how I won't let you help me? You help me all the time."

How, or when, had he ever helped Velveeta? She never needed help. She helped him, and all he'd ever done was hurt her, like that time in the hallway. Plus the time he'd told her to quit bugging him. That wasn't helping.

He snagged Bradley in the hallway before fourth period.

"Can you do me a favor?" he asked. "Don't sit by us at lunch, okay? I want to ask Velveeta about something."

"You going to ask her?" Bradley's eyes fired up. "About the dance?"

"Bradley, get off the dance. I just have to ask her something, and lunch is the only chance I'll get."

The smile fell off Bradley's face. He took a step back and looked Travis over like he was calculating a complicated equation.

"Something private?"

"Sort of," said Travis.

"Okay." Bradley nodded, his face serious. "I understand."

At lunchtime Velveeta said, "Hey, look — Bradley's sitting with Reed and Jake. Is he done with us already?"

"I told him to leave us alone today," said Travis.

"Why?"

"What did you mean this morning when you said I helped you?" He rushed the words before he chickened out. "How?"

Velveeta picked up the end of the green scarf and fingered the fringes. She squeezed them together in a ponytail and then spread them out.

"Helping you learn words is the best thing that happened to me in the last forty-four days," she said.

Travis counted back. Forty-four days — that would be sometime in August. Around the time they'd moved to Russet. Velveeta's pizza sat untouched on her plate.

"Did you ever have a place that was really good?" She talked down to her scarf. "Someplace you could go and everything was sort of more okay?"

"Yes," said Travis.

"Do you still go there?"

"No. We moved away from it."

The silence stretched. Travis finished his pizza.

"Do you have a place like that?" he asked.

"I did," said Velveeta. "Now I don't. All my scarves used to be there. Now I can't go to the place anymore, and all the scarves are gone except for this one."

Whatever she was saying and not saying, he could feel it all the way inside. It hurt. Velveeta kept staring at her scarf as the minutes ticked by.

"Are you going to eat your pizza?"

"No," she said. "You can have it if you want."

"I don't. Just seems like maybe you should eat something."

She looked up at him, and her eyes were the softest he'd ever seen them. She didn't smile, but she stretched her lips a bit.

"You're nice, Travis," she said. "Really, really nice."

The bell rang, and she got up. Travis followed, careful not to crowd her. She threw her whole lunch in the trash. Her pizza lay upside down on top of the other garbage.

That evening, Grandpa left for parent-teacher conferences at 7:35, and Travis paced the house from 7:36 until 7:49. Then he went out in the yard. The breeze ran goose bumps across his skin.

He traced the steps of the phantom dog around the inside of the fence. The last of the dog dookey had disintegrated. Travis paced the yard one way and then turned and circled in the other direction. What would McQueen say about him? What if Grandpa swore or lit up a cigarette in McQueen's office?

When headlights turned into the driveway, Travis ran back inside and jumped on the couch. He put his feet on the coffee table and grabbed the remote. The TV flicked on just as the front door opened.

"Hey, Trav."

Grandpa went into his room. Travis stared at the TV, holding his breath. Wasn't he going to say anything? After

a few minutes, Grandpa came back out, picked up the remote, and clicked the TV off. He set something with a clink on the coffee table.

Rosco's collar. Beat-up brown leather, with the rabies tag still attached.

"You want that?" Grandpa lit a cigarette.

Travis picked it up, turning it over in his hands. The inside was greasy, the feel of Rosco still there.

"I should've given it to you a while ago, but. Well. I didn't." He kicked back the recliner and took a deep drag. "So this McQueen fellow, he's taken quite a shine to you."

"Yeah?" Travis's pulse thudded in his ears. "What'd he say?"

"Said he's never seen a kid try so hard. Said you've got an A in his class and you've been coming in early to do extra work."

Travis ran his fingers across the stitches in the old leather collar.

"And that Ms. Gordon—you have a D in her class right now, but she thinks you'll do better the second half of the quarter."

He cleared his throat, and Travis looked up. Grandpa cleared his throat another time and tapped the long ash of his cigarette into the ashtray.

"Trav," he said, "I know it doesn't help much now, but . . ."

"It's okay." Travis said it fast.

"I should've known."

Grandpa stubbed out his cigarette, closed his eyes,

and leaned his head back. He swallowed, his Adam's apple jerking up and down. Then he cleared his throat again and looked Travis in the eye.

"I've been keeping that collar in my room to remind me why I shouldn't drink. But I don't need it now. I look at you and I can remember pretty good."

## *Velveeta* on MONDAY

I almost told Travis things about Trailer World today. Maybe he really is an undercover cop. Sometimes he says exactly the right thing and it almost cracks me open. I stopped by the library on my way home, and Connie gave me three DVDs. She said they came in as donations but they're duplicates and I can have them.

I said that's real nice, but thanks to Sylvia I don't have anything to watch them on.

One of them is *Running on Empty*. I love that movie. I remember the last time I saw it. Calvin made popcorn, and afterward he gave a big lecture about boys and staying out of trouble. I loved it when he lectured me.

When I got home tonight, the madre was freak-ing because Jimmy said he's moving to Texas. He has said that seventy-eight times before, so why would this time be different.

Tonight is parent-teacher conferences. The madre has never gone once. She says me and Jimmy got it backward, that he should be the smart one so he could make us millionaires and I could stay home and take care of her. Instead it's me that's smart and that just means I'm going to leave her and she'll be all alone.

I want her to be right about that, and I feel super-bad that I want her to be right about that.

If I leave her, will I turn out like Sylvia? Rich and mean?

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Travis stopped in to see Ms. Gordon. She took him to the computer lab and showed him how to get into the shared files under her name.

"This file has your initials," she said. "I've scanned most of the material from the first few weeks in here."

She handed Travis the headphones. He put them on, and the computer started reading the text to him. Yellow shading jumped across the section being read, chewing through a word at a time. Ms. Gordon showed him how he could adjust speed, back up, and ask the computer to give him an out-loud definition if he didn't know a word.

"Stay here through first period this morning," she said, "and get the feel of it. Try different speeds. See here—you can make the text bigger or smaller, and you can take it a word at a time or a phrase at a time, whichever you like."

"So you can put any book on here?"

"We just have to scan it in. I'll show you how. You could ask your other teachers to put material on here, too."

He spent the rest of the hour playing with the Kurzweil. Speeding up, slowing down, watching the yellow highlighter crawl across the words. He made it read the same sentence over and over to see if he could mouth the words along with it.

The voice wasn't as good as McQueen's, not by a long shot. It was machiney and choppy. Good for reading textbooks, not fox stories. But it meant that he could read. Social studies. Science. All those handouts they gave him that he ditched in a folder. He could find out what they said. All of them.

"So, Travikins," said Velveeta when he sat down at lunch. "Bradley here tells me you've been walking home with him. Are you his official bodyguard now?"

"No." Travis looked at Bradley. "Did you tell her that?"

"She made the bodyguard part up. Next time I run into them, I'm going to try what you said." He turned to Velveeta. "Travis says if I treat them halfway normal, they'll leave me alone. Do you think that'll work?"



"Why'd you say that?" Velveeta asked Travis. "They'll kill him."

"Maybe, but when he acts all scared, it makes them want to kill him more. Like if you run away from a mean dog, it's going to chase you and kill you."

"Chilson, mean dog, grrr, bark, slobber, grr," said Bradley.

"He's not a dog," said Travis. "You say stuff like that, no wonder he doesn't like you."

"You're the one who said dog."

"I didn't say *he* was a dog."

"I didn't mean anything by it," said Bradley.

"Well, nobody really means anything by anything, do they, Bradley?" said Velveeta. "Travis has a point. Maybe Chilson thinks you think you're better than him."

"Maybe I am," said Bradley. "I'm smarter for sure."

Travis looked up and met Velveeta's eyes.

"Should I try to be not smart?" asked Bradley. "It's not my fault I'm smart and he's not."

"Yeah, but it's your fault you go around saying that," said Travis.

"Bradley," Velveeta stood up as the bell rang. "If you're really as smart as you think you are, you'd listen to Travis more."

As she walked away, Bradley grabbed Travis by the sleeve.

"Did you see how she looked at you?" he whispered. "She totally wants you."

"Bradley, shut up."

"Okay. But she does."

Travis sat in Life Skills sixth period, not listening. Velveeta's volume was still turned down. It had to be about her place and her scarves. Whatever happened, maybe it was as bad as his place and his dog. Maybe worse.

After the last bell, he walked alone through town, working over a new idea. He forgot all about the picnic table until he got to the bridge.

"Hey, Skinnyboy," yelled Chilson. "Where's Bradley-cakes? Did you two break up?"

Just Chilson and Maddox were there. Travis reached in his pocket and found Rosco's rabies tag. He'd taken it off the collar and put it on his key ring the night before. He crossed the bridge and walked directly down the slope to the table. By the time he got there, Maddox was on his feet. Chilson stayed on the table, his feet on the bench.

"You want to stomp my guts now?" asked Travis.

He'd never walked into a fight on purpose before. They always just happened.

Maddox walked in a circle around him. "I kind of do," he said. "I'm not sure you're worth the trouble, though. Seems like a lot of work, making your guts spout out your nose."

"Can you guys just lay off of Bradley then?" Travis said to Chilson.

"Why should we?" Chilson flicked his butt away.

"You know you can make him cry — so what? What's it prove?"

"Ooo, that's all deep," said Maddox. "So now you're telling us what to do?"

"No." Travis said it to Chilson. "Just asking."

He turned and walked away. His back crawled with the hope and the dread of Maddox rushing up behind him, but it didn't happen. When he got up to the road, he turned and looked over his shoulder. Maddox was back on the picnic table. They both had new cigarettes lit.

Travis walked on up the hill, hammering away at his new idea. He turned it over and around, looking at it from every angle. It was risky. Much riskier than inviting Maddox to stomp his guts.

"Hey, Grandpa," he said when the front door opened. "How was your day?"

"What do you want?" Grandpa looked at him sideways.

"I was just wondering — I know someone else is renting the old place now, but what if I wanted to go back to the swamp? Just to walk around back there? Do you think they'd mind?"

"I could call Chuck and ask him to check with them," said Grandpa. "How you planning to get there?"

"I was hoping you might drop me and a friend there on Saturday when you get off work. I want to show her the swamp."

"Her? This friend is a her?"

"She's just a friend."

"What's her name, this just a friend?"

"Okay, forget it." Travis got off the couch. "If you're going to make it into a big thing, forget it."

He shut his bedroom door behind him and dropped onto the bed. What made him think for even a second that could work?

"Don't sulk!" yelled Grandpa through the door. "God, boy, you are the touchiest thing crawling. Can't you take a joke?"

"No!"

The TV came on, and Grandpa banged around the kitchen for a while. Travis finished his math homework and worked on his word list. The TV went off.

"There's dinner on the stove," Grandpa yelled through the door. "I'm going to the meeting. I'll be home later."

Travis was on the couch when Grandpa came back.

"I called Chuck and it's a go," Grandpa said as he walked in the door. "I'll take you and your friend to the swamp Saturday. But just tell me this — are you going there to fool around? Because if you get her pregnant, I'll —"

"Grandpa! God! No."

Grandpa was as bad as Bradley. Worse.

"No sex, no drugs. Rock 'n' roll, that's fine."

"Forget the whole thing," said Travis. "It was a bad idea."

"I'll drop you for an hour or so and pick you up after."

Travis stared at the TV. Maybe it wasn't a bad idea. Even with Grandpa in the picture.

"What time you want to go?" asked Grandpa.

"I'll let you know. I gotta check with her."

"Her." Grandpa giggled. "You ever going to tell me the name of this her?"

"No."

Grandpa slapped his knee and lit up a cigarette.

## *Velveeta* on TUESDAY

Since the madre didn't come to conferences, they gave me my mid-quarter grades today at school. It's the worst I've ever gotten. All Cs. I'd rather be almost anything than average. Calvin would give me sad eyes over this, and probably only let me watch black-and-white movies for a month.

I keep thinking about how Travis rescued Bradley from that punk Chilson and his buddies. I wish I could have seen it. I just love it that he protects Bradley. I liked that about him from the very first day.

I'd still love to see him beat the crap out of Jimmy. It can't ever happen because they'd have to be in the same place at the same time, and that would cause some freaky disruption to the space-time continuum of the universe. But it makes an amazing movie in my head. Best movie I've ever seen.

I've decided to quit the no-homework religion. It's no fun anyway since Travis converted. I took some books home and stopped by the library after school. Connie's teeth just about fell out of her head, she was so surprised.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Travis found Velveeta in the lunchroom, eating a bowl of cereal.

"You get off at noon on Saturday, right?" he asked.  
"Are you busy after that?"

"Why, do you want to pull my wagon?"

"No, I want to take you someplace."

"Where?"

"It's a surprise. We'll be gone for like three hours. My grandpa's going to drive us. Do you want to?"

"That's a vague invitation." Velveeta got up and cleared her place. "Are you going to kidnap me and hold me for ransom?"

"No, but I have some words I need help with, and I thought we could do some of that."

"You're trying to help me by letting me help you. Don't think you're being tricky."

"I'm not being tricky. I just want to make sure you'll come." Travis followed Velveeta to her locker. "But you have to promise not to yell at me to try. If you do that, I'll leave."

"Let me get this right. You want me to go to some secret place with you, for some completely unexplained reason, and if I tell you to try, you'll walk away and leave me wherever we are."

"Right," said Travis as she closed her locker.

"That sounds like a perfect action-suspense setup. What time?"

"Anytime after one, because my grandpa works in the morning."

"One fifteen?"

"Okay, good. Wear warm clothes if it's cold, because we'll be outside."

"Is that a date?" Megan came up behind them as they entered the classroom. "Are Velveeta and Travis going on a date?"

"Pull your nose in, Megan," said Velveeta. "It's no date. It's a financial summit with our lawyers and accountants in Vegas. You can't come, so stop begging."

"Like I'd want to," said Megan.

"Yes, exactly like you'd want to."



Megan whispered to Cassidy on the other side of the classroom, and they both laughed.

"You're so mysterious," said Velveeta. "Okay, so probably not Vegas. But are we going to a secret hidden cave? *Indiana Jonesy?*"

"No. Tell me where you live so we can pick you up."

"No. You can pick me up at the library."

Ms. Gordon closed the door, and Travis faced front, happy little birds fluttering around inside his chest. She said yes! This was going to be good.

"Okay, so you know Friday is the dance, right?" Bradley set his lunch down.

"Quit with the dance," said Travis.

"No, I know, I know. Not the dance. You're both invited to my house on Sunday for the anti-dance."

"Two invitations for Velveeta in one day," said Velveeta. "What's an anti-dance?"

"It's a party where nobody dances. I wanted it to be on Friday night, but my parents are busy. My dad said you can come Sunday afternoon for a while."

"Sunday afternoon — that's pretty anti-dance." Velveeta nodded. "Are your gamey pals coming?"

"No, they're going to the dance, so they can't anti-dance. It's just you and you and me. Travis, say yes and make her say yes."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"Will there be food?" asked Velveeta.

"My mom said she'd make that spinach-pine nuts thing for a late lunch."

"Tempting. I'll think about it."

"Okay, this time that means yes, right? Oh, and Travis, she's going to make that cherry crisp thing that you liked last time you were over. Please? Say yes?"

"Don't beg, Bradley," said Velveeta. "Or we'll sic Chilson on you."

"I'm in," said Travis.

Bradley grinned so big, Travis thought the rubber bands on his braces might snap.

"I knew you would be. Come on, Velveeta, say yes."

"Okay, Bradley, yes. I will come to the anti-dance. If nothing else, just because you should be rewarded for thinking that party title up."

"Yay." Bradley gave a little hop in his seat and opened his lunch bag. "Two o'clock Sunday. My house."

When the bell rang, Travis walked with Velveeta to her locker.

"He's so Bradley-esque," she said. "You can't help liking that."

"He doesn't really care if we make fun of him, does he?" said Travis.

"No. I think he's adopted us, and the anti-dance is the official ceremony."

## *Velveeta* on WEDNESDAY

When I got to the library today, Connie yanked me into the back room and held up a key. She said I needed a place to study and I could use the library when it's closed, but only under three conditions. Then she started jabbing the key in the air, a jab for each rule.

Jab number one: I can't tell anyone I have it, and if she ever hears about it from anyone else, she'll take it away from me. She said Pauline already knows, and Pauline's the only other one who has a key. So if anyone else ever knows, it's because I told them and key gone.

Jab number two: I have to lock the door when I'm in here. Always. If she ever comes and I'm here and the door isn't locked, key gone.

Jab number three: I can't ever bring anyone here with me. Because of course, that would also be breaking rule number one. Anyone here with me, key gone.

I told her it's not like I'm going to have crack parties in here. Maybe I'd just want Travis to come and study sometimes, and she said no, we can do that during open hours. No Travis, period, the end. Could I live with those rules, and did I want the key?

I asked her why she was so nice to me.

She said because Calvin was so nice to her.

I told her she is twisted.

And yes, I understood her rules, and yes, I want the key.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Travis turned the radio on and the volume up as he and Grandpa drove down the hill to pick up Velveeta.

"If you don't want me to say anything, just say so."  
Grandpa talked loud over the music.

"I'm saying so."

"Okay, I'll shut up."

Velveeta was waiting on the sidewalk in front of the library.

"There, pull over," said Travis.

"That's the girl? Velveeta is your her?"

Velveeta opened the truck door with a huge grin, and Grandpa turned the music down.

"Mr. Ed is not your grandpa. Tell me he's not. Mr. Ed, are you his grandpa?"

"Travis, you dog," said Grandpa. "Why didn't you tell me this was the girl you were talking about?"

Travis slid over so she could get in.

"Travis was talking about me?" Velveeta clicked the seat belt between her and Travis. "What did he say?"

"Not very much at all. Gotta drag words out of him with a backhoe and a crowbar."

"I know, right?" Velveeta laughed. "He only gives out ten a day. Fifteen on Fridays."

That was good for a big ol' hee-haw from Grandpa, but then he leaned over and turned the radio back up.

"Where are we going?" asked Velveeta.

Grandpa actually did not say anything. He stayed shut up.

"We're not talking now, are we?" Velveeta whispered in Travis's ear.

Travis shook his head, and Velveeta elbowed him in the side. They rode with nothing but music until Grandpa pulled over to the side of the road by the old place.

"You're dropping us in a ditch?" asked Velveeta.

"See you at three thirty, kids! Remember, Travis: only rock 'n' roll."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Velveeta as he drove off.

"Nothing. He's crazy. How do you know him, anyway?"

"I see him every Saturday at the bakery. He appreciates the Velveetic humor. Where are we going?"

"You'll see. Follow me."

The driveway was familiar but also completely different. A blue Prius instead of the truck. No Rosco row-wowing up to greet them. Travis kept his eyes turned away from the sunny spot on the gravel.

Just past the drive, trees closed in around them. Travis put his feet on his favorite dirt path, and the smells and sounds wrapped around him. Treetops murmured a soft and comforting conversation overhead. A red-winged blackbird tweedled the local gossip. Travis's skin stretched wide open, pulling it all in. He pointed at a pileated woodpecker that swept across the path in front of them. They both stopped and watched until it flew out of sight. The sun sprayed through the colors in the trees, and leaves drifted down in front of them.

"Oh, Travis," said Velveeta. "This is pretty."

"Remember you asked about a place? I'm taking you to it."

The path narrowed, and they couldn't walk side by side.

"So, you used to live by here?" Velveeta spoke softly behind him.

"Yup, in that house we just walked past. I came out here every day after school."

He turned at the fork, and the path widened as they

climbed the ridge near the swamp. The swamp water was as still and black as ever. Rusty pine needles layered the ground, along with shifting patterns of red and yellow leaves. Travis leaned against a birch trunk, and Velveeta sat next to him.

"Look at those yellow leaves on the water," she said. "They look like little boats. Why would you ever move away from here?"

"Kind of a long story."

"Oh. I know about those."

The sun shone on the stand of maples, firing up the opposite side of the swamp with red and orange like Velveeta's scarf that she didn't have anymore.

"So, will you tell me anything about anything?" asked Travis. "Like, what happened to your other scarves?"

"What's that noise?" asked Velveeta.

A high, throaty warble drifted across the treetops, growing louder.

"Sandhill cranes." Seven of them came into sight, big birds with necks stretched out straight and legs trailing behind. "Flying south."

The birds passed overhead in a V, hooting the whole way.

"Very *Jurassic Park*," said Velveeta as the sound faded. "I should have brought my lawyer friend. Maybe a T. rex would eat her."

"What lawyer friend?"

Silence settled around them, no sound but the breeze

rattling the leaves. Travis sat perfectly still like he used to do when waiting for a fox pup to stick its nose out of the den.

Velveeta lay back, looking up at the sky.

"This old guy Calvin lived next door to me," she said. "In a trailer. He was my best friend. I know that sounds like it might be skinny, but it's not. He gave me all those scarves. There were twenty-three of them. They used to be his wife's before she died. And then he went and died."

"When?"

"Forty-nine days ago."

Travis pulled Rosco's rabies tag out of his pocket. He rubbed it between his fingers.

"His daughter came back last week and kicked me out of the trailer and took the scarves. She's the lawyer I want to sic a dinosaur on."

"Why did she take them?"

"Because she is a manifestation of the forces of evil."

A woodpecker rattled, and Travis searched the tree-tops, trying to track the sound. It stopped, then started again, farther away.

"Can we get them back? I mean, maybe we could figure out a way."

"Nope," said Velveeta. "She lives in San Diego. The scarves are gone. Except this one because I was wearing it."

She stared up at the sky, rubbing the scarf between her fingers. Travis took the rabies tag off the key ring and handed it to her.

"Rabies vaccination?" She sat up to study it.



"I know it's not the same, but our dog, Rosco, died on August ninth. I mean, he's not a person or anything, but he was . . ."

What *was* Rosco? Mother father and a couple of brothers? Best friend? All that and more.

"August ninth this year? A Saturday?" Travis nodded. "That's exactly one week before Calvin died." She handed the tag back. "Calvin liked dogs. Maybe they're hanging out together."

"You think?"

A couple of birch leaves floated down into their own reflections in the black swamp water, more bright yellow boats in the harbor. Travis pulled *Haunt Fox* out of his backpack and opened to chapter two.

"See this?" He pointed at the line drawing of the hound. "That's what Rosco looked like."

"Oh . . ." Velveeta ran her fingertips across the picture.

"He had the softest ears ever. He was about the same color as your hair. Maybe a little more red."

Velveeta stroked the *Haunt Fox* dog's ears.

"Let's do some words," she said. "Or I'm going to get too sad."

"You sure? We don't have to do that."

"Yes, we do. Do you have a list?"

"I want to work on something else. Can you find the part where it talks about the puppy? It's in the second chapter."

Velveeta scanned through the pages.

“‘He was a big, sad-eyed hound’?”

“Yeah, that. I want to learn all the words in that paragraph.”

“It’s a long paragraph. Look, it goes all the way to the next page.”

Travis took the book from her and counted. Twenty-four circled words.

“Can you drill me through them all?”

He took out his notebook and pencil and handed them to her.

“You sure? You won’t get mad?”

“As long as you don’t tell me to just try.”

Velveeta wrote down the words. She fed them to Travis, one at a time. Once they’d gone over the list a few times, he asked her to read the paragraph out loud.

He lay back on the ground as she turned the print on the page into a living dog, same as McQueen had done in his office. Travis had never known puppy-Rosco, and he never would. This was the next best thing.

When Velveeta finished the paragraph, he sat up. “Show me where it starts?” he said. “And read just that first sentence?”

She pointed at the words as she read. The string of print jumbled and shifted in front of him.

“Wait here,” he said. “I’m going to go over there and try it by myself first.”

“Is this the part where you run back to the truck and leave me alone in the woods?”

"No. I'm just going over there, by that tree. You can see me from here."

He sat with his back to her and looked at the words in the sentence one at a time, chewing through them slowly. He stuck with that first sentence, again and again, word by word.

"Travis," called Velveeta, "you okay over there?"

He nodded and drilled through the sentence again. Then he went back over and held the book up between them.

"Okay, you do it first. Just that sentence."

She read it. He followed with his eyes, imagining the yellow highlight from the Kurzweil moving across each word.

"Now you?"

Travis looked out at the swamp, taking in the hush of it, the breeze on his face, the crunchy smell and the soft carpet.

"See that stand of pines over there?" he said. "All the different greens? Just like your scarf."

"Here." Velveeta unwound the scarf. She put it around Travis's neck, and it settled soft and slidey on his skin. "It'll give you superpowers. Now read."

Travis gulped a big breath and plowed into the sentence. He kept tripping. He couldn't get through it.

"Wait, let's do the words again," said Velveeta.

They drilled words again, one at a time. Travis broke a sweat.

"Why do you want to do this?" he asked, taking a breather.

Velveeta lay back with her hands behind her head.

"Because it seems like I'm doing something real," she said. "That first time in the library, watching those words stick to your brain? That was so fun."

Travis lay next to her. The maple leaves blazed against the blue.

"Calvin would have liked you."

"Why?"

"He liked what I liked. We liked all the same movies. Anything he said was good, it was good. Even the black-and-white ones."

"What did he die of?"

"Heart attack. In his sleep. One day, boom, gone. No more Calvin."

Big puffer clouds moved slowly across the expanse of blue sky. The sun shone on Travis's face, warm but not hot.

"If it wasn't for him, I probably wouldn't know how to read, either. He always made me do my homework."

Travis felt like he could lie there all day listening to her talk, but Velveeta grabbed the shoulder of his shirt and pulled him up.

"Come on, try the sentence again."

"You said *try*," he said. "You're not supposed to say *try*."

"Sorry. I forgot. Don't try."

Travis sat up, took a breath, and shook himself loose.

Then he took the book from her and read the sentence all the way through. Not one stumble.

"Travis, that was so great!" yelled Velveeta. She held up her fist. "Pound it!"

Travis lifted his hand and tapped it gently against hers, and she caught his eyes and held them tight. Their knuckles stayed together, touching. The light hit her hair like it had that day by the garbage can, the deep brown-red of Rosco lying in the sun.

"What color do you call your eyes?" asked Velveeta. "Is that what they call hazel? Because they should have a whole different name for that color."

"I better check the time." Travis fumbled in his pocket for Grandpa's watch. "Uh-oh, we're late. Come on, we've got to run."

He shoved the book in his backpack and they took off. Travis couldn't have read another word, not after that. Velveeta's feet pounded behind his, along the dirt path and up the gravel drive to the road, where Grandpa was waiting in the truck.

## *Velveeta* on a Sit-up SATURDAY

So I walked into the home trailer after the best day of my life so far and the madre did not even ask me where I'd been or did I have a good time. She told me Jimmy called and he's in Texas. Can this be true? I don't believe it. I think he's still in Russet and lying, but she had another drink.

I've been thinking about the whole sitter-upper thing that McQueen talked about from *The Book Thief*. The madre is not a sitter-upper. She's a lier-downer. But Travis is a sitter-upper.

If it wasn't for him, I would have turned into a lier-downer after Calvin died. Or for sure after Sylvia took my scarves. I don't want to be a lier-downer. Even if I never get out of Russet for my whole life. I'll be a sitter-upper waitress if I have to.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Travis met Velveeta at the corner of Water Street.

"Travelli," she said. "We are going to a party at Bradley Whistler's, right? Pinch me and tell me I'm not in some wacky nightmare."

"You're not. See? That's his house at the end of the block. That brick one with the white trim."

"Oh, and there's Bradley, just coming out to look for us. Look at him — he's so excited."

Bradley herded them in the front door and introduced Velveeta to his folks. Everyone said good to meet you, and they sat down to the spinach-pine nuts stuff

for lunch. Travis picked around the green and orange and ate the pasta. There was plenty of fresh bakery bread and homemade applesauce, and cherry crisp for dessert. Much better than bakery day-olds.

Velveeta started off quiet, but by the time they got to dessert, she loosened up.

“Okay, wait, watch this,” she said. “Watch me—I’m Bradley.” She knocked on the table. “Hey, open up. What’s the password? What’s the password, roger roger? I’m the Master Chief—give me the password. That’s the password. What’s the password? The password is the password.”

“No, no,” yelled Bradley, laughing. “It’s ‘Oh, man, I forgot.’ Then it goes —”

She knocked on the table again. “I’m Bradley of the supersonic brain. Open the door. I don’t need no frickin’ password. Just hook my games back up right now. Come on, hand them over or I’ll neutralize your whole squad.”

Bradley’s parents totally cracked up. They laughed way harder than Travis could see what was funny, and Bradley’s mom actually snorted water out her nose.

“Velveeta, you’re good,” said Bradley’s dad, still trying to get his breath. “You kids go on and do your anti-dance thing. We can’t take any more.”

Travis and Velveeta followed Bradley upstairs. His room was big enough to put three or four of Travis’s bedroom in it.

“Why do you have two computers, Bradley?” asked Velveeta. “Do you type on a different one with each hand?”



"No, that's one of my mom's old ones. She lets me take it apart and mess with it. I'm the family IT department."

"No TV in your room? Of course, with a big flat-screen like that one downstairs, who needs it?"

"I used to have one in here, but my dad took it on his anti-electronics binge. I'm lucky he let me keep the computers and my phone. I told him it'd be good if we could play when you guys came over, but he said I can't contaminate you in this house."

"Bradley Whistler contaminating me," said Velveeta. "That's a walk into backward land. Look at all these books. Have you read them all?"

She walked along the full-wall bookshelf, trailing her fingers across the spines.

"Mostly," Bradley sat on the floor.

"You could open your own library," said Velveeta.

Travis sat near Bradley and leaned against the dresser.

"So, Travis," said Velveeta, "why does Cormick call you Moolio, anyway?"

"He says Travis is one coolio moolio," said Bradley. "That's way better than Chocolate Chip."

"Chocolate Chip was not Chad's best effort. Velveeta, on the other hand, was a stroke of genius."

"Chad named you that?" asked Travis.

"Back in second grade. Chad can't call anyone by just their name. It's a speech impediment. Do you like Moolio?"

"Beats Bluefish."

"Bluefish? What's that?" asked Bradley.

"They called me that at my old school. Because of the reading group I was in, back in third grade."

Bradley bounced up and pulled a book off the shelf. He pointed at the cover.

"This, right? Your groups were One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish?"

The dumb bluefish stared at Travis with that stupid blank idiot smile.

"But look!" said Velveeta. "That bluefish is the moolio fish. He's all cazh, kicking back on a wave while One and Two and Red are swimming around like a herd of water sheep."

"I want to be a bluefish," said Bradley.

"You can't," said Travis. "You're too smart."

"No, no." Velveeta took the book from Bradley and pointed at the picture. "Look at how the bluefish will not swim when the others swim. The bluefish is at the anti-dance."

She leaned against the shelf in the same pose as the bluefish leaning on the wave, hand on hip, smiling the big close-lipped smile. Only it didn't look stupid on her — it looked like she was up to something.

"See? I'm a bluefish."

"Wait, me too!" Bradley leaned on his desk and popped his eyes wide open and smiled like a maniac. "Am I doing it right?"

"You don't want to." Travis shook his head, laughing.

"Yes, we do," said Velveeta. "We're here, we're anti-dancing, we're bluefish. I think we should have tattoos. Bradley, do you have a blue pen?"

Bradley tossed her a blue marker from his desk. She drew the fish picture on the back of her hand.

"That looks more like a fat worm than a fish," said Bradley.

"Okay, you're so good, let's see you draw one. Put it on Travis's hand there."

Travis held out his fist, and Bradley drew the fish. It was much better than Velveeta's.

"Look at the long eyelashes on that thing!" said Velveeta. "Bradley, I had no idea you were all artistic. Put one on your own hand."

Bradley took a long time to draw his own. Finally, he held his hand up.

"Look, it hardly shows on me," he said.

"That's because you're a stealth bluefish," said Velveeta. "Cleverly disguised as a onefish. Look, we can even have a secret bluefish wave."

She rippled her hand through the air, dipping it up and down like it was riding ocean waves.

"Everyone wants to be a bluefish, but we're a very select group. We need a password and a secret handshake. We should make up a bluefish code. Everyone will want to be us."

"Hey, kids." Bradley's dad knocked. "It's going on

four. Travis, Velveeta, get your shoes on. I'm taking you home."

"You don't need to drive us home. We can walk," said Velveeta as Bradley's dad opened the door.

"You sure?" he asked. "It's no trouble."

"We'd rather walk, right, Travis?" said Velveeta. Travis nodded. "It's not raining or anything."

They followed Bradley's dad downstairs. Travis and Velveeta thanked Bradley's parents, and everyone said how much fun it was.

"That actually was fun," said Velveeta once they got up the street a ways.

"Yeah, it was. How come you never let anybody drive you home? You even made us drop you off at the library yesterday."

Layers of clouds blanketed the sky, and a chilly wind blew them along. Velveeta wrapped the ends of her scarf around her neck and tucked them inside her hoodie.

"Mr. Noticer Boy, are you sure you're not an undercover cop?"

"Even if Mr. Whistler drove us, you'd make him drop you at the library, right?"

"Right. So listen, I've been thinking about Rosco's rabies tag. Does carrying it with you make you feel like Rosco is less dead?"

"Not really." Travis found the tag in his pocket. "I mean, if anything, it makes him feel more dead because if he were alive, then he'd be wearing it, not me."

“Right.” She unwound her scarf a couple of turns and wrapped one end around her palm. “This is different. I’d be wearing it even if Calvin were still alive.”

“But carrying it with me . . .” Travis pressed the tag, flat and warm, into the center of his palm. “It doesn’t make him not dead, but it makes him not as much gone, you know? Like sometimes when I rub it, I can sort of smell him.”

Velveeta rubbed the scarf across her cheek. They came to Main Street, but instead of turning toward town, Velveeta stepped onto the bridge and leaned over the railing. The water looked cold and choppy in the wind, and leaves swirled down and hit the surface.

“So it’s not like you’re someone who never had a Rosco, right? So even though Calvin’s dead, it’s not like I’m someone who never had a Calvin. Because if there’d been no Calvin, there’d be no scarf.”

“Yeah,” said Travis. “Not that scarf, anyway. I mean, you could go buy some other scarf, like I could go get another rabies tag. But you couldn’t get that one.”

“Even with all the scarves gone but this one, I can’t turn into a no-Calvin Velveeta. Like you can never be a no-Rosco Travis, right?”

“Right.”

The water rushed beneath them. Travis picked up a stick and threw it in. It drifted toward the bridge, picking up speed as it got close to the dam. When it went under, they ran across and watched it come out the other side.

The stick hurtled over and crashed into the white water at the bottom.

"So I was wondering," said Velveeta. "Is there a Mrs. Ed?"

"Nope. She died before I was born."

"What about Ed Junior? Or Edwina?"

"My dad died when I was three. So did my mom." Velveeta opened her mouth, but Travis stopped her. "It's okay. I hardly remember them."

He picked up another stick, crossed the road, and threw it as far as he could. The wind and the current pushed it swiftly toward the dam. He crossed back over and leaned next to Velveeta.

"So you don't miss them?" she asked.

"No. Not like Rosco."

The stick shot over the falls and disappeared into the foam and rocks at the bottom. Travis leaned farther over the railing, looking for it to pop up again. Velveeta pointed at the bluefish Bradley had drawn on his hand.

"Did you mind?" she asked. "Us getting all bluefishy with it?"

"No, it's fine," said Travis. "It's different here."

"That's because you've got me and Bradley in your school. Ha. Get it, your school?"

"Ha," said Travis.

The stick finally resurfaced near the steep bank, floated downstream on smooth, fast-running water, and disappeared around the curve.

"Hey, speaking of school, have you been practicing that sentence so you can wow McQueen tomorrow?"

"I've got the first two down now."

"Can I come and watch you wow him?"

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

"Fine, cut me out of the good part. That's just like you." She pushed away from the railing. "I'd better get going. See you tomorrow, Travarelli."

About a block away, she turned around and walked backward. She rolled her left hand up and down in the bluefish wave. Travis bluefish-waved back. She flipped the end of her scarf at him, turned around, and walked on.

Travis leaned over the railing and held his fist out over the rolling water. The smile wasn't all that stupid. It was kind of quiet and happy. And the way the fish leaned on the wave was, maybe, a little bit moolio.

Travis opened his fist, and dipped his hand up and down in the bluefish wave, skimming and diving over the surface of the water.

"Fssssshhh."