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## CHAPTER ONE

Travis stood in front of locker number 78. The clatter and bang and yammering voices pounded at the back of his head. He started the combination, slowly spinning the dial. Seventeen . . . back to the left . . .

*KaBLAM!* Something hit the locker next to his head and sent a jolt through him. He whirled, fists up and fight juice flooding. A shoe landed on the floor next to him, new white leather with a dark-blue swoosh on the heel. Travis took a shaky breath in and out and wiped his hands on his pants. He picked up the shoe and looked around.

The hall was full of kids talking, laughing, slamming lockers, and heading toward class, but nobody so much as looked his way. Seemed like the shoe had thumped out of thin air.

Travis leaned against the locker and held the shoe sole-to-sole against his own. It was a size or three smaller and made his ratty Converse edged with swamp mud look like something he'd dug out of a Dumpster.

A head bobbed down the hall toward him, dipping with a one-shoe walk. The guy was small, and Travis figured him for a seventh-grader, maybe even sixth. He had deep brown skin and hair cropped too short to kink, and he carried a nice new over-the-shoulder book bag. He was very tucked in and tidy except for his shoeless left foot. His right foot wore a new white Nike.

Travis waited until the kid passed, then edged up behind him. When he got close enough, he bumped the shoe into the kid's hand. The kid spun around, brown eyes big and mouth open to show a bundle of braces. Travis hustled on past, weaving into the crowd. If it were him, he wouldn't want to have a big chat. He'd just want his shoe back.

First period, Travis settled into a seat on the outside row, halfway back. Social studies, Ms. Gordon. She read down the roll call, made it through to the *W*s, called "Vida," and then tripped all over a last name.

"It's Would-ja-husky," said the girl behind Travis. "My public calls me Velveeta."

“Think cheap cheese,” called a tall guy across the room.

“Ms. Gordon, you should know: Chad’s kinda damaged,” said Velveeta. “He repeats the same jokes over and over. I think it’s a condition, but we don’t talk about it.”

“Shut up, Cheap Cheese.” Chad flipped her the bird behind a raised palm.

“All right, enough.” Ms. Gordon closed the roll book. “Chad Cormick, come on up here and pass out the textbooks.”

Chad dumped a text on Travis’s desk as he passed by. It landed with a thud. Heavy. Dense. Travis folded his arms across his chest and dropped his chin. Another school year. No way out.

He slogged through a couple of hours of first-day science and math, the air pressing in hotter and heavier, the walls closing around him. Fourth period was a short one, only thirty minutes. He had reading in Room 134. He hadn’t had reading as a separate class since fifth grade.

He stopped in the doorway of the classroom. The entire back wall of the room was a built-in bookshelf, loaded with books. Bookshelves lined the opposite wall. No windows. The ceiling looked lower, the walls closer, than in the other rooms.

Travis backed out, dropped his pencil and notebook in his locker, and headed for the double doors and the rays of sunlight. He pushed the door open, feet moving without stopping.

He turned left, crossed the asphalt parking lot, and

headed out of town. When the sidewalk ended and he was walking on gravel beside the road, he looked over his shoulder. The school building squatted behind him, spread out beyond the cars, too far away to reach out and drag him back.

Travis had run away from school the first day Grandpa left him off at kindergarten, and three more times after that. The fourth time, he got smart and hid in a culvert, so they didn't find him for a few hours. They had to bring the sheriff in, and then Grandpa didn't think it was funny anymore.

*You ditch out of school again, and the dog sleeps outside.*

Travis hadn't ditched again. Until now. Rosco was gone, so why not?

At the county highway, he took a left, toward the old place. It was more than twenty miles away, but soft white clouds puffed across the clear blue overhead, and a light wind lifted his hair. He untucked his shirt, and the breeze cooled the sweat on his back. A car vroomed by, and a crow hollered from the other side of the road. His feet kept moving, his arms swinging, his body so relieved to be out of the school building that it was worth whatever came after.

Travis had been walking for a long time when the truck crawled up behind him. He knew it was Grandpa without turning to look. Not just the familiar sound of the engine,

but the feel of it, the slowing down of it, the ready-to-pounce of it. Grandpa pulled over, got out, and slammed the door.

From the corner of his eye, Travis watched Grandpa stalk across the road. He got ready for Grandpa to step in front of him, shove him back. Then Travis would hit out like he used to in kindergarten, and Grandpa would laugh and slap Travis's hands away like pesky flies.

Only it wouldn't go like that, not anymore. Grandpa knew it, because he didn't step in front of Travis. Instead, he walked alongside, pulling a cigarette out of his shirt pocket.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked as he lit up.

"Nowhere."

"I can't be leaving work to babysit you."

"So don't." Travis kept walking.

Grandpa grabbed him by the back of his shirt and pulled. Travis went with it, swinging around to face Grandpa, getting a faceful of smoke.

"That hound is not going to be waiting on the porch for you. He's gone, and we don't live there anymore."

Travis turned away from the smoke. He looked out across the fresh-cut hay field on his right. The hay lay in clumps, ready to be baled. Soft. The smell surrounded them. Travis tried to stop the sneeze coming on—he didn't want to give Grandpa that much. He turned away as it blew out of him, breaking the silence.

“Get in the truck.” Grandpa flicked his cigarette butt on the ground. “Unless you know someone else who’s going to buy your food and put a roof over your head.”

And because Travis didn’t know anyone like that, he followed Grandpa across the road and got in.

# *Velveeta* on TUESDAY

Hey, Calvin. Hi. I'm in your trailer. When I got home from school, Buttface Jimmy's truck was in the drive, so I came over like always and slipped my key into the keyhole and expected it not to work, but you know what? It slid right in. The door opened.

Everything's exactly the same except for how much you're not here. The empty air in this trailer weighs eighty trillion tons, and it's jumping up and down on my lungs like an elephant on a trampoline. But that beats my creepy brother's wide-alive air any day. I'm going to stay here until he leaves.

Today was the first day of school. The madre was going to give me some money for school supplies, but guess what, she forgot. If you weren't dead, you would've bought me a three-ring binder and a protractor and a calculator.

Your trailer is still the safest and best place I know. Nobody knows I'm here.

If you were here, you'd make me do homework. But you're not here. So who's doing homework? Not me.

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## CHAPTER TWO

The next day, fourth period, Travis walked into Room 134. He looked around, not knowing if they'd been assigned seats the day before. Everyone else was dropping papers on the podium as they came in. A short, round balding guy with glasses came out of his office at the front of the room, spotted Travis, and walked over.

"Travis Roberts?" he rumbled in the deepest voice Travis had ever heard.

He nodded, and the teacher stuck out a hand.

"Owen McQueen."

His skin was soft, but his grip was hard.

“You can sit there.” He pointed to a seat halfway up the first row. “Yesterday you missed my dramatic reading of Billy Collins’s poetry, but there’ll be more. You also missed your first assignment, a one-pager on the best thing you’ve ever read in your life. Turn that in tomorrow, please.”

McQueen. What a name. He probably got called Queenie when he was a kid, especially if he’d been short and round then, too. But his voice — that was something different.

“Thank you all for your fine papers. I can’t wait to read them.” McQueen stepped to the front of the room. “I’m supposed to teach you how to take the standardized reading tests so you won’t be the child left behind. But because I’m subversive” — he turned and wrote the word on the board as he talked — “(look it up if you don’t know what it means, and it will be on the vocabulary test next week), I’m actually going to try to teach you a passion for the written word. Emily Frasher, roll your eyes again in my classroom, and severe castigation will be the inexorable result.” He wrote two more words on the board, then turned to face the class. “Between now and the ring of the bell in twenty-two minutes, you are to pick a book from the library wall. Then start reading.”

“Mr. McQueen, what if we’re already reading something? Can we use that, or does it have to be a book from the wall?”

It was the no-shoe kid, sitting up in the front corner. He was either a grade skipper or a really, really little eighth-grader.

“Excellent question, Bradley Whistler. You may read any piece of literature.”

“Define literature,” called a girl behind Travis.

“I’ll tell you what, Rachel: *you* define literature. All of you. On Friday, please turn in a one-paragraph definition of literature. No copying from Wikipedia. Plagiarism” — he scrawled on the board again — “will have the same result as not turning the paper in — an F. Meanwhile, start reading, and if you can make a case for it being literature, that works for me. Okay, books. Go.”

Everyone crowded to the back wall. Travis stayed in his seat until the rush cleared. Then he walked over with his hands in his pockets. The rows were messy, leaning this way and that where books had been plucked out. Paperbacks slid off stacks on the bottom shelf, showing some covers. On one, a fox ran across a snow-covered field. Travis picked up the raggedy book and looked more closely. A tiny hound in the distance of the picture ran behind the fox.

When Travis turned around, he almost bumped into the Velveeta girl who sat behind him in first-period social studies.

“Oops, sorry,” she said. “I almost ran you over in my rush to get a book. I bet you took the one I wanted.”

He handed it to her. One was as good as another.

“Oh, no, no,” she said, waving her hands. “That’s not the one I want. I’m sure there’s something here that can make me” —she dropped her voice, trying to shove it down as low as McQueen’s— “develop a passion for the written word.”

She wore a filmy, shimmery scarf wrapped around her gray hoodie, all July-sky blues and deep pine greens. The colors hit Travis like a fresh breath in and out. The girl stepped around him and tilted her head, flicking book spines one at a time with her middle finger as she moved down the row.

“Need help choosing, Velveeta?” Mr. McQueen came up behind her.

“Don’t rush me,” she said. “Too important to rush.”

“Are you a Kjelgaard fan?” McQueen asked, turning to Travis.

Travis shook his head, having no idea what McQueen was talking about.

“The book.” He pointed to the fox cover. “Kjelgaard. If you like this one, he’s written a lot more. All animals, all outdoors, all the time.”

“Oh,” said Travis, backing away. “Okay.”

He went back to his seat, opened the book, and stared at the first page.

At lunchtime, Travis used his magic plastic card to buy his free lunch: a burger and fries and a cookie. He took the tray to a table in the back corner and sat down. He was about three bites in when a voice came up behind him.

“Hey, mind if I sit here?”

He shook his head, and Velveeta set her tray down across from him.

“Where’d you go yesterday?” she asked. “You were there first period, then gone. Did you puke? Have to go home?”

“No,” said Travis. “Had something I had to do.”

“Evasive answer. I like that.”

She tore open a packet of ketchup and drew a red smiley face on her burger. Then she opened a mustard and added yellow eyebrows and a mustache.

“So what’s your story?” she asked.

“What story?”

“Yours. Everybody’s got one. You’re new. What’s yours?”

“No story.” He squeezed ketchup on his fries.

“So are you an undercover cop, here to break up a raging crystal-meth ring?”

Travis shook his head.

“Maybe you’re an alien, morphed into an eighth-grader so you can infiltrate the human race and learn our secrets.”

She waved her hands, erasing that idea before the smile even made it across his face.

“No, wait, I’ve got it. You’re a super-big brain like Matt Damon in *Good Will Hunting*, a secret math genius, right? That’s why you don’t say anything, because smart math formulas would pour out and they would ship you off to work for the government, right?”

“Nope.” The smile feeling dipped back under.

“Okay, I give up. What are you?”

The old third-grade picture of the bluefish popped into Travis’s mind, standing beneath the swimming one-fish, twofish, and redfish. Just hanging around, leaning on an ocean wave, smiling because it was too stupid to know it was stupid.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Well, then, where are you from? Have you ever seen *Old Yeller*? No? It’s very old Disney, a classic, about a Travis who lives in Texas. Are you from Texas?”

“No, Salisbury.” He finished off his burger.

“Salisbury, Wisconsin? Seriously? Okay, I get it, that’s the cover story, because it’s so boring no one will question it, moving from one crappy little town to another. You going to eat that cookie?”

She reached across to Travis’s tray and took his cookie and held it up in the air, a hostage.

“Hey!”

“Straw is cheaper; grass is free; buy a farm, and you can have all three. Come on. Tell me something. One clue and I’ll give it back.”

“But it’s my cookie.”

She looked at the cookie in her hand, then back at him.

“You’re right,” she said. “Why trust me with your checkered past? I’m a cookie thief. Doesn’t exactly inspire confidence, does it?”

She handed the cookie over.

“This school makes the best cookies—it made me lose my mind for a minute. Sorry. I just wanted to make sure you didn’t throw it in the garbage. That would be a travesty. Ha. Travesty. Travis.”

As she picked up her tray to leave, he broke the cookie in two.

“Here,” he said. “You can have half.”

She looked directly into his eyes. Like she was reading whatever was written on the back wall of his brain.

“Thank you, Travis Roberts, Mr. Undercover Alien Genius Cop Man,” she said. “I think I like you.”

She took the cookie half and walked away, her black-and-gray camo pants sagging and dragging on the floor behind her.

## *Velveeta* on WEDNESDAY

Remember how you said there's only two stories: someone goes on a trip or a stranger comes to town? Remember how I went crazy for days, trying to think of a movie that wasn't either of those to prove you wrong? And no matter what I came up with, you figured out some way to make it one of those.

There's a stranger in town, and if you were here asking me "How was school?" and pushing for details every day like you used to, I'd be telling you about him. But you're not here. It's two and a half weeks now of you being more not here every day.

This is morbid, writing to you. Like, what? I'm going to put it in an envelope and write *Calvin Whalen, Dead in Heaven*, and stick it in the mail? Like writing letters to Santa Claus? It makes me feel better, though, coming here after school. Like maybe you're on a long vacation and you'll be home soon. Nothing wrong with pretending, right? Like *The Muppet Movie* song, remember? *Life's like a movie, write your own ending. . . .*

Because I gotta say, I don't like the way this movie is going lately. We need a better writer.

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## CHAPTER THREE

Did you do the reading?" Velveeta slid into the seat behind Travis first period.

He shook his head.

"How about McQueen's paragraph on literature?"

He shook his head again.

"Me neither," she said. "Homework is against my religion."

Someone behind them whistled, and Velveeta turned. A couple of girls in the back corner whispered and almost fell over giggling.

"See those girls? They write for *People* magazine, and they've spotted us as the smoking-hot new eighth-grade

romance. All we have to do is adopt octuplets, and the paparazzi won't give us any peace."

Travis knew why they were giggling, and it wasn't about octuplets. One of them had corrected his science paper the day before.

"Please turn to page eight of your text," said Ms. Gordon. "You can read a paragraph or just say 'pass' if you prefer not to read. The next person can just pick it up. Megan, will you start us off?"

Travis let out a long, slow breath. The windows were open on the other side of the classroom, and warm air breezed in. Sunshiny bright and cooking up to be another hot one. The swamp would be thick with that baked summer pine-needle smell. Gallons of drool would be sliding down Rosco's sloppy tongue.

"Travis!"

Travis's face flushed hot, and he pretended he was trying to find his place.

"Would you like to pass?" Ms. Gordon asked.

"Yeah, pass," he said.

Velveeta started reading, and Travis relaxed. Her voice motored across the words as if they were a flat, smooth road — no bumps.

At lunchtime, two different groups of girls called Velveeta's name out, but she walked right on by and set her tray across from Travis.

"Look, we're regular lunch buddies now," she said.

“You didn’t have one clue where we were in social studies, did you? What were you thinking about?”

“Nothing.”

“Do you have a talking quota?” asked Velveeta. “Like, a limit, maybe fifty words a day, and if you go over, you, what, lose your undercover badge? And you can’t waste any of them reading out loud in class. Is your limit fifty or only twenty-five? No, no, don’t answer — then you’ll have to kill me.”

“Ten,” he said.

“Ha. And you’ve already used two on me. *Nothing* and *ten*. Better shut up and eat.”

He finished off his grilled cheese and started spooning up soup.

“Are you going to eat that cake?”

Velveeta had already finished hers. Travis cut his and handed half across to her.

“Okay, so sometimes the words are not so necesario,” she said.

After inhaling the cake, Velveeta sat back and crossed her arms.

“I know what you’re thinking. *Why does she pick me?* he wonders. She could be baaing with the popular sheep over there, or shooting baskets in the gym with the jocko-las, or outside smoking with the delinks, so why is she sitting with me again?”

She leaned across the table, bringing her nose close to

his. One end of her purple-and-blue scarf trailed on the tabletop.

“Because I saw you give Whistler his shoe back,” she said. “That’s why.”

After the last bell, Travis walked through town, crossing the street so he wouldn’t have to pass in front of the big glass window of the bakery where Grandpa worked. He stopped at the bridge and leaned on the railing, trying to find the cardinal that was blasting its lungs out. He scanned the trees alongside the pond and finally spotted it, high in a birch, a hot patch of red in the swim of green.

“Hey, you gonna jump or what?”

Four guys sat on a picnic table in the green space on the other side of the bridge, smoking cigarettes and drinking sodas.

“You need a push?” yelled one of them. “Or a dump?”

“Dump, ha, I’ll give him a dump.”

“Maddox, you are a dump,” said a heavy-shouldered guy with a hint of blond mustache trying to crawl across his lip.

Travis looked closely, measuring them. They must be high-schoolers. He hadn’t seen them in the halls, and they were his age or a bit older. The two smaller guys he could take, no problem. Maybe the one called Maddox, too. The blond guy was solid, though, and he had that look. He was the one to watch.

Travis shoved away from the bridge railing and walked past. If they were going to come after him, they'd have to climb the little hill up to street level, and they weren't moving. But their eyes on him wrecked the bird and the water and the color, so there was no point in hanging around. That was the problem with living in town. Someone looked at him wherever he went. Even the houses had eyes, watching every move.

Travis headed up the hill, and as he rounded the curve, the sidewalk ended. The houses became scruffier and farther apart, with shaggy yards and gravel driveways. The paint-peeling yellow box on the right had an empty yard and drive. No old hound standing out front, waving his thin cord of a tail, droopy red-rimmed eyes asking why they'd made him walk the whole twenty miles. Not today. Maybe tomorrow.

Travis fished the key out of his pocket and opened the door. He made a peanut-butter sandwich and took it out to the back stoop. He pushed Grandpa's stinky soda can of soggy butts away and leaned against the house. Three school days down. A zillion left to go.

In the back corner of the yard, a little pine tree tried to scraggle its way up past the shade of the tall wooden fence. The other corner was full of dried dog dookey, and a path was beaten all the way around the perimeter where some trapped dog had run in endless circles.

The front door banged.

"Want a doughnut?" Grandpa called.

Footsteps tromped around the house. Then Grandpa stepped out on the stoop, lighting a cigarette.

"It's a sticker out here," he said. "Musta been hot in school. Want a doughnut?"

"You said that already."

Grandpa looked down and gave Travis a very un-smiley smile.

"Did you manage to stay there all day?"

Travis handed him the butt can. Grandpa sat down and tapped the ash of his cigarette. Then he squinted at Travis through a curl of smoke.

"Everything okay? Teachers and all?" he asked.

Travis shrugged, looking away. Grandpa dragged off the cigarette again, then turned his head sideways to blow out the smoke.

"Can you give it a chance? I miss the woods and the dog, too. But we're both going to have to buck up and make the best of what we've got."

The dull ache chewed on in Travis's chest. Everything he'd ever cared about was gone. Every single thing.

"Okay, don't buck up, then." Grandpa dropped his butt in the can and stood. "Make it as bad as you want. I'm going to the six-thirty meeting. I'll pick you up a burger on the way home."

Footsteps, bathroom door, shower, and Grandpa headed out to his AA meeting. He hadn't had a drink since that hot and horrible afternoon in August when Rosco went missing, but he smoked six times as much,

and he was full of useless advice. As if not drinking meant he could tell Travis how to feel.

Travis got up and wandered around the yard, stopping at the little pine in the corner. He ran his fingers over the soft needles. Even if it stretched tall enough to look over the fence, it didn't have anything to look at but another scraggy backyard.

*Because I saw you give Whistler his shoe back. That's why.* Velveeta's voice slipped in and interrupted the chewing ache. That was the best thing anybody had ever said to him inside a school building.

The neighbors' TV noise rose over the drone of the air conditioner next door. A car backfired on the street. Travis leaned his head against the fence, looking down at the skinny half-bare white pine. He bent over and pressed the green needles to his nose, breathing deeply, trying to fill himself with the smell of woods. The tree had nothing to give.

"It's okay," said Travis, petting the needles like they were Rosco's ears. "Not your fault, trapped here. If I could, I'd dig you up and take you someplace good."

## *Velveeta* on THURSDAY

Your buddy Connie was lying in wait for me after school. When I passed the library, she waved me over like some street-corner drug dealer and offered me a J-O-B. I asked her why, and she said maybe it would make her not miss you so much.

I told her I wasn't going to be joining the old people's canasta club, so forget it. She said she doesn't want me to play canasta. She just wants me to shelve books and do whatever else she says. Five bucks an hour. Four hours on Saturdays and two hours Wednesdays after school.

She said since I'm not fourteen yet, it'd have to be under the table, and she'd pay me in cash and was that okay?

Ha. Is that okay? Now, THAT is funny.

Thirty dollars a week for whatever I want. Maybe I can get the electricity turned back on in your trailer so I can watch movies. Do you know how much torture it's been to not watch movies? I even watched reality TV with the madre last night. That is desperate. That should be a reality show.