

Bluefish

By Pat Schmatz

Travis went into a stall in the boys' room, closed the door, and sat on the toilet. The mud clump stuck in his throat, not going up or down.

Mrs. Keatley, the reading specialist at Salisbury, used to say, "Try, Travis. Can't you just try?" At first he'd tried really hard. After a while, Mrs. Keatley's lipsticky lips got less smiley when she saw him, and they both knew it was a waste of time. He stopped trying.

He couldn't read. Not really. Not like Velveeta, or Amber, or Chad or Bradley or Megan or everyone else. Even Grandpa could read. He swallowed hard, pushing the mud down. Maybe he should just try again. *Just try, Travis.*

The memory of Mrs. Keatley's voice was enough to stop him. He stood up, slung his backpack over his shoulder, and rubbed his hands hard over his face. He stepped out of the stall just as Bradley came in from the hallway.

"Hey, Travis, where's Velveeta?" he asked. "Is she sick?"

"How would I know?"

"Do you know about the girls' report cards?" Bradley held out a piece of paper.

Travis scanned the paper and found his name. Across from it was a line of letters. A couple of As, a B and a C and 2 Fs. Of course there were Fs.

"They've been doing report cards on all of us, and Cassidy made me a copy. I flunked tall and hot, but I got a C for cute and an A for smart. I don't get how hot and cute are different, do you?"

Travis shook his head and handed the paper back to Bradley. He couldn't even tell what he got the two As for.

"Chad was the only one who got an A for funny."

A couple more guys banged in, and Travis headed for the lunchroom. He sat in the usual spot by himself. Amber Raleigh sat the end of the table, reading.

Travis glanced over as she turned another page. He reached in his backpack, took out the fox book, and looked at the picture. Remembered the beginning of the story McQueen had read. He traced the fox with his finger and looked at the hound in the background.

He opened to the first page. It. Was. A. Something, so something, that, something, the ...

He didn't want to try. Just the idea of trying made his guts clench. But McQueen hadn't said, "Try." He'd said, "I will teach you and you will learn." Like it was a done deal. Like he knew.

After the last bell, Travis stood in the doorway of McQueen's classroom. McQueen was there. Travis almost backed out. Then he took a deep breath, walked quickly across the room, and stopped in the doorway of the office.

"Yes, Mr. Roberts?"

"I decided."

"Decided what, Mr. Roberts?"

"I want to learn."

McQueen grinned like he'd been waiting all day for Travis to stand in his doorway and say exactly that.