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## BLUE MOO

### CHAPTER ONE

Diggy Lawson thought *he* was the only kid ever actually left on a doorstep. Everyone in town knew the story. How Diggy's mom bundled him up in a laundry basket when he was barely a month old and left him at Pop's. How she couldn't get her car started and then couldn't get Pop's truck started and rode out of town on the John Deere tractor.

But that was fourteen years ago and long before Diggy and Pop drove home from their Tuesday night dinner at the VFW and found someone else on the doorstep.

Pop looped the truck in the front drive, headlights shining on a half-zipped, overstuffed flowered suitcase and a person now shielding his eyes from the glare.

“That’s Wayne Schley,” Diggy said. “We’ve got math and science together.” He and Wayne weren’t *not* friends, but they weren’t friends either. His location on the doorstep proved that.

Diggy climbed out of the truck, muttering, “We don’t use the front door.”

Wayne ignored him. His attention was all on Pop, even as both Pop and Diggy approached. In the truck’s lights, Wayne was a contrast of blacks and whites. Diggy knew Wayne’s hair was dark brown, and that he was always pale, and his eyes were a weird really light blue. But the headlights washed those hints of color away. He stood there like a black and white outline of himself, shivering, and Diggy wondered how long he’d been waiting in the cold.

Pop spoke low, like to a spooked animal, “You all right, son?”

“Don’t call me that.” Wayne bit out and suddenly he was flushed red.

Wayne grabbed the suitcase, and though he was a lot bigger than Diggy, he stumbled. The suitcase clipped Diggy hard across the shin.

“Hey,” Diggy protested.

Pop took the suitcase, though Wayne resisted. ““It’s getting late and you look cold. Why don’t you come in for a few minutes, tell me what brought you here then I’ll be glad to drive you wherever you want.”

Wayne didn’t follow. “Did you know my mom?”

Diggy froze. His fingers tingled.

“I would have done anything I could for her,” Pop said.

Diggy couldn't get enough air. He wanted to run. Wayne's mom had been Diggy's third-grade teacher. He and Pop had gone to her funeral a few months ago, the day after Christmas. And Pop *would have done anything for her*.

"We couldn't find a marrow donor in time. I didn't match." Wayne shuddered.

"Come inside," Pop said and put a hand on Wayne's shoulder to lead him in.

Wayne jerked away and swiped his forearm across his face. Maybe something got in his eye because Diggy couldn't imagine a boy his age crying.

"I don't match my dad either," Wayne shouted. Diggy barely heard him add, "He says you're my dad and I have to live here now."

## CHAPTER TWO

It had never seemed weird that everyone in town called Pop “Pop” even though he was only thirty seven, hair still orange. It had taken him longer than most to learn a tractor’s clutch. People told him over and over that he had to pop it. It was a joke at first, to call a kid Pop, but after a while it had stuck.

When Diggy was old enough to understand the difference, he liked that other people said “Pop” and meant one thing while Diggy said “Pop” and meant another.

No one ever doubted Diggy was Pop’s kid. Diggy had the same bright orange hair, brown eyes and large jaw, though on his not-quite-fourteen-year-old face, the jaw was too big and square. Pop was over six feet, but not one of those long and skinny tall. He had big shoulders and lots of muscle. The jaw fit him. Diggy couldn’t wait for the growth spurt that would make all his parts fit right. He hated being the smallest boy in his class. He fought when required to prove his size didn’t matter.

Wayne Schley had always been the biggest boy in class. Diggy hadn’t messed with him because for one, he never bothered Diggy, and two, he was a teacher’s kid.

But now Wayne was on Pop’s doorstep, and he was tall and big, just like Pop. Though his hair was dark brown and he had those weird blue eyes, he also had a big square jaw. Just like Pop.

Pop looked about the way Diggy felt—cracked wide open. The night sky was a skillet and Diggy was dropping into it, ready to scramble. He reached an arm out for balance but got Wayne instead. Wayne shook him off, Diggy shook his head, and the ground was back where it was supposed to be.

Pop picked up the suitcase again, turned the front doorknob, and pushed. The door rattled but didn't open. "Oh, right," Pop said, looking around like he had forgotten they were at the front door. He pulled his keys out of his pocket and twisted to examine them in the light from the truck. He flipped each key in turn, from one side of his palm to the other. Diggy counted seven keys then Pop looked up at him and Wayne, back and forth a couple of times.

Diggy rarely thought about Pop's age, but he seemed young all of a sudden. He *was* young. At thirty-seven, he was probably the youngest "Pop" on the planet.

"We'll have to walk around back," he said. "Diggy, why don't you turn off those headlights."

Diggy nodded, but none of them moved. After a while, it was Pop's turn to shake his head, like it was dusty. He led the way around back.

Diggy turned off the headlights, blinded by the fresh darkness. He used the truck's heat and periodic tick of the cooling engine as a point of reference to walk back to the house but still bumped into a solid mass. Wayne hadn't moved.

Wayne pushed Diggy away from him. Diggy had to take a long step back to keep his balance. He stepped right back in, ready to do some pushing himself, but Pop called out, "Come on, it's cold," and Diggy knew better than to get in a fight with Pop right there watching.

Diggy's eyes had adjusted to the dark so stepping into the bright pink kitchen was almost as blinding as turning off the headlights had been. But he soon focused on that girly suitcase. The giant pink and blue flowers sucked down grey and denim clothes shoved tight into the half-zipped thing.

Wayne followed. Diggy was vaguely surprised, some part of him thinking Wayne would refuse to enter the house. But then, where could he go? It was cold, it looked like most of his clothes were here, and the nearest buildings were a tilted-over, abandoned farmhouse and a turkey hangar. People were three miles away. Three miles wasn't impossible, but it was a lot farther at night.

Diggy crossed his arms, ready in case Wayne got pushy again, but Wayne stared wide-eyed at the walls. Diggy automatically turned to see what Wayne goggled at.

The kitchen was fuchsia. Diggy hadn't thought about it in a long time. He and Pop had to pull out the refrigerator last year to replace a hose, and the wall behind it was a pretty, dark rose color, exactly something a grandma would pick out. But the paint hadn't held up well. It had gone bright pink on all the exposed walls, like the color of someone's stomach from the inside. To hide the color, he and Pop covered the walls with scraps of whatever—rusted license plates mostly, a few traffic signs like “Yield” and “Men at Work,” some old election posters, and a banner advertising quick-set concrete. Not that it helped. Even with so much covering the walls, the color still engulfed the space.

“We keep meaning to paint it,” Pop said.

Two glasses stood washed upside down on a towel next to the sink. Pop filled them to the top with milk then set them on the kitchen table. “Go ahead and sit down.” He got a third glass from a cabinet and filled it with water from the tap.

Diggy was aware of Pop's movements peripherally, but he kept his attention on Wayne who stared back at him. Diggy didn't care that Wayne was bigger than him.

Diggy would fight if he had to—he'd done it before. He didn't think he'd ever heard of Wayne fighting anyone.

“Go on.” Pop nudged Diggy off balance and led him to a chair. Pop held it out for Diggy in that way that meant sit or be sat so Diggy dropped into the chair, not happy about it. Pop sat, too, and waited, watching Wayne, until Wayne finally took a seat on the other side of the table. He stared at his glass a long time then picked it up and drank the milk all in one go. Diggy couldn't help but be a little impressed.

After a while, Pop said, “It's late.”

It wasn't late at all, barely 8:30 p.m., but Diggy couldn't help but think Pop was right. He felt almost as tired as Wayne looked.

“Give us a few minutes to clear some space,” Pop said, “then you can get some rest.”

Just like that, Diggy was wide awake again. The only “space” with a bed in it was Diggy's rocket room. If he moved his stuff...well, how long was he supposed to move his stuff for? “What's wrong with the couch?”

Pop looked at Diggy like a wormy ear of corn.

“The couch is fine with me,” Wayne said.

His jaw jutted out, and Diggy couldn't help it, he gasped to see that jaw so like Pop's. He pushed away from the table so fast his chair almost knocked over, and went down the hall to the stairs, calling, “I'll get a blanket and stuff.”

On the stairs, he heard Pop say the bed was more comfortable and Diggy paused.

“I can go back tomorrow,” Wayne said. “It's been rough, that's all, since Mom died.”

Diggy had an idea that “rough” meant a lot more than it seemed, but he didn’t stop any longer to think about it. He rushed up the rest of the stairs, ducked into the rocket room and grabbed the folded blanket and pillow off the end of the bed. At the top of the stairs again, he threw the blanket and pillow down, not caring that Pop would be ticked at him. Diggy went into his room and closed the door as much as he could. He cursed for the thousandth time that one bent hinge that prevented the door from closing all the way. He lay down on top of the covers. His feet hung just over the edge of the bed, his head resting on the mattress below the pillow.

Wayne had a jaw like Pop. And Diggy.

He heard footsteps on the stairs. The sound was the same as ever; only Pop came up.

The perpetually cracked open door meant that Diggy could almost see the top of the staircase. He didn’t mean to, but there was the familiar creak when all of Pop’s weight hit the top floor, and Diggy looked over.

Wayne called up, “Did you know my mom?”

Pop nodded.

Diggy rolled away from the door.

## CHAPTER THREE

At night, the house was noisy in that way old houses get when the temperature is low. It creaked and cracked and popped, sometimes because of a wind, sometimes because of nothing. Diggy listened to it a long time.

He stared out his bedroom window at the star-framed outline of the tree he practically lived in when he was finally big enough to climb it by himself.

It was a great tree, so big at the base that his arms stretched out all the way didn't go halfway around. The bark was thick and scratchy with lots of deep ridges for fingers to hook into. Six major branches arched out from the trunk and split so often he could climb the tree every day for a month and never go the same way twice. It was old and tall and strong so he could climb high enough to see over the roof. If it was windy, he used to pretend he was in a rocket during liftoff, holding himself steady against gravity's pull.

He'd hidden his mom's box in the tree.

It wasn't really her box. Diggy had bought it, a red fireproof safe he'd saved ten dollars to buy at Ole Jib's Hardware. Inside were the three things he had from his mother. He had hid it in the tree so long ago bark had grown around the corners. He used to climb the tree to check on the box at least once a week. Now, though, he lay in bed and stared at the collection of black vees and couldn't remember the last time he'd climbed them.

He read somewhere that black was the absence of color while white was actually the presence of all colors. He had thought and thought about it, never quite understanding how all the colors combined could cancel each other out like that. He got

it now. His brain was filled with so much of everything, he couldn't focus on any one thing—his head was a white space. Every now and then an idea would pop up, a brightly colored firework, then all was white again.

If Diggy and Wayne had the same dad, what did that make them? Diggy couldn't stand to think about it. It wasn't fair. Wayne was bigger. And was even a little older. If Diggy had to have a brother, he should at least be a little brother. Diggy was the one who had been with Pop all this time.

After a while, his mind blanked out again. Then another firework burst. Sometimes he imagined his mom coming back and what she would say, what he would say. Sometimes the meeting would be good, but usually it wasn't. There were so many ways he could screw things up until she was gone again, this time forever. Now he thought about two problems he hadn't considered before. Diggy had always imagined his mom coming back for him. What if she had been waiting all this time for him to find *her*? A lot of time had passed. What if Diggy wasn't the only kid she ever had? Did that mean there was someone else out there like Wayne?

With thoughts exploding over and over in his head, Diggy couldn't sleep. He bounced back and forth between his mom and Wayne, Wayne and his mom until at some point he confused the two and started thinking about Wayne's mom and how nice she was and not that old and what it would be like to know that someone he loved could never, ever come back. Diggy had known people who died, but they were all like Mrs. Schley, his teacher, or the library lady, or the guy down at the gas station who used to sneak him Fireballs. What if Pop died? And Diggy had to go to his funeral and walk up to the casket and see Pop inside, his orange hair bright on a white silk lining.

The image was so frightening, Diggy woke up and couldn't move. He was rolled in the blanket like a burrito. He struggled and half fell out of the bed. He untangled himself in time to not land on his head. It was almost dawn.

Diggy opened his window and leaned out. He thought his sweat might turn to frost, but he didn't care. He breathed in the cold air then watched his warm breath stream out, clouds floating into the tree branches. There were no more stars, only a grey blank. It was quiet in a way Diggy had never heard before. No birds, no insects, no tractors in the distance. No wind, not even a creaking in the tree. Utter silence until Diggy had to let go his breath and there was at least one sound again. He felt the cold. His fingers creaked pulling away from the windowsill. He closed the window and went to pee.

In the hall, he met Pop. His orange hair was grayed by the muted light and poked up in odd directions. The thermal he wore was stretched out of shape and almost covered boxers that were so loose they made Pop's legs look skinny and weak.

In that moment, Pop was so unfamiliar to Diggy, he felt robbed, and angry, because if anyone had robbed him, it had been Pop himself by getting older. And for letting Wayne stay.

"You all right, son?" Pop asked. His voice sounded like it did after days of shouting over a tractor engine.

Diggy turned into the bathroom. Before he closed the door, he said, "How many more of us are there?"