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#### EXCERPT FROM *BLUE MOO*:

(Need to know: Since Wayne moved in, he has slept on the couch downstairs in the living room, despite a spare bedroom upstairs. July is a high school senior and part of the reason both boys decided to raise steer for the junior steer competition of the state fair. Pop has gone out for the night.)

#### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When the pizza finally arrived, Wayne and Diggy ate and watched a crappy movie that was worthwhile only because of how the curse words had been dubbed over. Neither talked much, and Diggy went to bed “early” for a Friday night.

He woke to moos. Short, excited moos more like cries, but brief. No, cut off, that was it. Diggy jerked out of bed to his window. He couldn’t see the steers. It was too dark, and it sounded like they were on the far end of the field. Pop’s truck wasn’t in the drive yet so Diggy went straight downstairs and flicked on the living room light. He stumbled into his sneakers and walked to the back door at the same time.

Wayne was bleary for maybe five seconds then he was up and had his shoes on, too. “What is it?”

“Something’s wrong with the steers.”

Diggy half fell out the back door then finally got his feet organized beneath him and started running. He reached for the gate and caught barbed wire. “Crap.”

Wayne got the gate open, but Diggy charged through first. Then he heard it.

Three sharp barks.

“Get!” he hollered into the dark. He ran faster, spurred by a snarl, a thud, a short yelp. One of the steers had gotten a kick in.

Diggy could see them now, darker black forms outlined against the tree line. He ran faster than he ever had in his life and was still too far away.

The dog leaped. He got a hold of a steer, near the shoulder point, under the neck.

The steer screamed. It was the only word to describe it. He tried to kick at the dog with his front legs, but couldn't reach, and the dog wasn't coming loose.

Diggy slammed into the two of them. His momentum tore the dog away and both tumbled across the ground. Diggy was at the dog's back so when the animal snapped its teeth and tried to scratch itself free, it couldn't quite reach. Diggy felt the roll ending and pushed the dog away. The dog righted itself fast and turned back, barking.

“Get!” Diggy shouted, stumbling to his feet.

A rock whizzed past his ear. “Get out of here,” Wayne yelled, too. He threw another rock, advancing on the dog. “Go on!”

The dog growled, but Diggy and Wayne kept advancing then Wayne scored with his next throw.

The dog ran away.

The boys waited. They strained to see into the darkness.

“I don't think he's coming back,” Diggy said.

Wayne punched Diggy's arm. “That was the stupidest thing I've ever seen,” he yelled. “What if he'd been rabid? He could have torn you to pieces.”

Diggy knew it. His head felt funny, like it might float away from him, and he thumped to a seat on the ground.

“Did he get you?” Wayne said, still yelling. “Bites or scratches?”

Diggy thought about his body. His back and legs and arms hurt from the rough roll. “I think I’m okay,” he said.

The steer bawled. He was hurt.

“Check on him,” Diggy said.

Wayne shook his head at Diggy but went to check on the steer.

Diggy stood carefully. Achy, but not too bad.

“It’s too dark,” Wayne said. “It’s sticky, though.”

“Let’s get them to the shed.”

Diggy went to the other steer and finally was able to tell them apart. The smell and feel of the unhurt steer was entirely familiar. Joker had been spared.

They didn’t have halters, but the steers were well-trained enough and spooked enough to want to go back to the shed so they were easily led.

Once there, Diggy ran, a lot slower now, to the barn and got a clip-on light. The light was way too bright—everybody flinched, including the steers.

Diggy blinked until the brightness didn’t hurt then checked out Wayne’s steer. There was blood. His hide was punctured in a perfectly shaped dog bite. “I’ll go call someone.”

He ran through the kitchen to the hallway and punched numbers into the phone. It rang twice then Mr. Johnston said, “What’s wrong?”

“A dog attacked Wayne’s steer. July got the vet for their shots. I don’t know who to call.”

“Diggy?”

“Yes, sir. Is July there?”

“Hang on.”

Diggy noticed his hands. He checked the phone. He’d gotten blood on the numbers.

“Where’s Pop?” July asked.

“Not back yet. He went out.” He wished Pop were home, too.

“Hang up,” she said. “I’ll call the vet and drive over. Are you all right?”

“Yes.” He hung up as instructed.

He grabbed a couple towels and wrapped them around his hands as he went back outside. “July’s coming. She’s getting the vet.”

Wayne looked at the towels bundling Diggy’s hands. “You didn’t know it was my steer.”

Diggy’s hands hurt and now he was ticked off. “You think I would have just stood there and watched if I had known?”

He kept his eyes focused on his steer. “I just appreciate it is all.”

Diggy shuffled his feet. “Yeah, well. No big deal.”

“Yes it is.”

“You would have done the same.”

“I don’t know.” The steer bawled again. Wayne scratched its rump. “I was scared,” he mumbled. “I didn’t know what was happening.”

“You found the rocks pretty fast. And in the dark.”

Wayne nodded.

“You can’t throw for crap,” Diggy added, “but you found them okay.”

Wayne squinted at him. "Yeah. I was aiming for you."

Diggy sputtered a laugh through his nose, eyes wide. "Good one." He eyed Wayne's steer. "Now you can finally name him."

Wayne cocked an eyebrow.

"Fang. Cause those are like vampire marks on his neck."

Wayne considered the name. He shrugged. "Works for me."

A minivan skidded into the drive. July left the door open in her rush to get out. "You're both okay?"

She wore a white t-shirt and blue pajama pants dotted with winged cows and clouds. Her feet clopped in big rubber boots.

"Nice outfit," Diggy said.

She frowned at him. "So you're fine." She looked at Wayne.

"Me too," he said.

She examined the steer briefly then grabbed a brush off a nail and started working Fang's hide down the back, away from his wound. "It'll help keep him calm."

And, Diggy thought, keep her calm, too. Her hands were a little shaky. She had really been afraid for them. He couldn't keep from smiling.

"What?" she said.

He blushed but still smiled. "Your braid's falling out."

Her hand went to her hair. She shrugged and went back to brushing and scratching.

They told her what happened, the details pretty confused, with Wayne adding and Diggy correcting and back and forth until a truck pulled into the drive. Fast. And skidded next to the minivan. Pop jumped out.

“You boys okay?” He ran to join them.

“How’d you know?” Diggy asked.

“Mr. Johnston.” He grabbed Diggy’s shoulders and spun him to look him up and down. “What the hell happened to your hands?”

July made a sound. “Why didn’t you tell me?” and rushed to his side, too.

Diggy had kind of forgotten his injuries, but maybe he had let Joker’s body block July’s view of his hands. They looked stupid wrapped in kitchen towels, and he didn’t want her to think he was a wimp.

Pop unwrapped the towels and carefully cupped Diggy’s hands in his palms.

“Shit,” he said softly. “That steer going to be okay for a while?” he asked July.

“I’ll stay with him until the vet comes. They should both sit down.” Her eyes were wet. “I’m sorry I didn’t send them in right away.”

“You did good, girl. Thanks for coming so fast.”

She nodded but didn’t look convinced.

Diggy wanted to say something, but Pop got him moving to the house. Inside, Pop ran cool water at the sink. Diggy winced pretty good when the water first hit but no way was he going to cry with July outside. She could see him through the window if she wanted. Pop hugged Diggy’s head against his chest, and Diggy let him.

While the water ran, Pop looked back at Wayne who had taken a seat at the kitchen table. “You okay?”

Wayne nodded.

Pop waited.

“Really,” Wayne said. He showed his hands and that he could move everything like he was supposed to.

Pop nodded. “So what happened?”

Wayne told the story again.

Diggy didn’t interrupt this time. He was too tired. Another truck came up the drive. “The vet should have gotten here before you—it’s an emergency.”

“He’s on the other side of town,” Pop said.

Diggy reached to turn off the water and go out to meet the vet.

Pop stopped him. “July can handle it.” He draped fresh towels over Diggy’s hands and directed him to a chair. He studied them again. “A pretty deep scratch here. Doesn’t look like teeth marks. I don’t think it’s bad enough for stitches.”

Diggy looked, too. Most of the cuts were shallow scrapes, like when you fell on asphalt and caught yourself with your hands. But instead of the palms, the scrapes were mostly on the backs of his hands. The one deep cut was along the outside, under his pinky. The dog must have gotten a claw in after all.

“Must have been one of Chaney’s,” Diggy said. The dogs barked like crazy every time Pop, Diggy and Wayne drove by, but they weren’t mean. At least, Diggy hadn’t thought they were.

“I’ll call Chaney tomorrow,” Pop said. “He can pay the vet’s bill.”

Diggy yawned. He blinked fast to wake up again. He wanted to hear what the vet had to say.

Pop mussed Diggy's hair. "Stay awake a little longer, kid. I want to cover those hands with some gauze."

He went upstairs to get the first aid kit.

"Go out and see how Fang's doing," Diggy said.

"The vet will come in when he's done."

Diggy squinted. "You don't have to stay with me."

"I know," Wayne said. And stayed.

Diggy sighed. And waited.

Pop came back and wrapped Diggy's hands loosely with gauze.

Diggy studied his mummy hands. "How do I pee?"

"You're on your own with that one, kid." Pop grinned.

"Don't look at me," Wayne protested.

Diggy snorted. "Thanks a lot." He stood. "Now can we please go see what's happening?"

They went outside. The vet stitched three of the bigger holes, probably caused when Diggy's momentum had ripped the dog away. The other wounds would heal on their own, the vet said, and gave them an ointment to apply several times a day to keep infection from setting in. He left. Diggy finally realized what he was looking at.

"He shaved the hair!"

July winced. "It will have plenty of time to grow back."

Diggy glanced at Wayne. Back at Fang. "Will he be scarred?"

“A little,” July nodded, also glancing at Wayne. She put an arm around his shoulders. “It’s low on the neck so the judge won’t be as likely to notice it. We’ll be really creative with the clipping, too. Your steer will show fine.”

“I hadn’t even thought about it,” Wayne said.

Diggy believed him. But, Diggy knew Wayne was thinking about it now, and he wasn’t thinking very positive thoughts. It sucked that this had happened to Fang. Diggy was glad that it hadn’t happened to Joker. Really glad. Really, really glad.

The next morning, Diggy packed up his rocket stuff.