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BLUE MOO

CHAPTER ONE

Today was officially spring, but Minnesota has no grasp of calendars. Diggy Lawson wore his usual fleece-lined, water-resistant pants, flannel shirt and down-filled vest to check on the calf after dinner.

Diggy promised himself again that he would not name his calf. After three years competing with junior steers at the state fair, he knew what to expect. Nothing could describe that long, final walk to the packer's truck, knowing that in only a few days his steers would be served at Hartley's Steakhouse.

He was an experienced cattleman now, mostly through eighth grade. No names, no tears.

The calf was tied to a post with a simple rope halter, about three feet high and with only a foot slack. Halter-breaking his last steer had been grueling, but this calf was stoic. Diggy scratched its rump. "You'll be broke in no time."

The steer twitched its tail aside and pooped.

Diggy laughed. "You're a real joker, aren't you?"

The laugh burst like a bubble overhead, becoming a black cloud. He had promised himself!

Diggy stomped to the shed for the rice root brush then returned, stroking the calf too vigorously. Joker rolled an eye back and snorted.

Diggy eased up on the brushing. It was too late now. The name was stuck.

Joker winked at him.

Diggy chuckled despite himself. He knew the wink was only a blink, that he couldn't see

the other side of Joker's face, but that didn't matter. Barely twenty-four hours was all it took for Diggy to break his promises and fall in love.

He took comfort from how fine a calf Joker was. He had a long, straight top with a clean line through the throat and brisket. He was full but not too muscled so he had room to grow, and his legs were sturdy, not too bent or too straight. But what Diggy liked best was the way the calf watched him back. Calm but alert. The eyes and hair were almost equally black and absorbed the fading light like it would help him grow. Only his nose glistened.

Diggy wiped a sleeve across his own nose, drippy from the chill air, and unknotted the rope. He pulled steadily until the calf took a step forward. Diggy immediately released the pressure, and the calf took three more steps before stopping. Diggy repeated the pressure, easing up as soon as Joker moved again. Having been through the same routine yesterday afternoon and this morning, Joker was quick to catch on. Diggy led Joker through the route along the edge of the pasture.

Halfway around, Diggy heard a car gunning along the gravel road. He grumbled about the dust that would inevitably swirl his way and powder Joker's black hair, but the car skidded to a stop and the cloud billowed around it instead, white against the dark horizon. Slowly, it drifted away to reveal a truck at the end of the long driveway.

Diggy tightened his hold, feeling where the halter's chain and leather strap met. The light permitted only black silhouettes, but it looked like one pushed the other against the passenger door. The driver got out and walked around the truck bed, holding and needing it for balance. He heaved something onto the ground, and it popped open like one of those party decorations that starts out flat but opens into a three-dimensional pumpkin or cake.

The man jerked the passenger door open so hard it squealed. The rider didn't move and now voices could be heard--tones, no words--and Joker shifted his hooves.

The man reached into the cab with two hands and hauled a boy out, throwing him onto the popped open bundle. He slammed the door, used the hood to maneuver back to the driver's side and skidded away. Gravel and dust spewed over the unmoving pile on the ground.

Joker pulled against the halter. Diggy quickly led him to the post and tied him up. Before heading up the drive, Diggy jogged close enough to the house to call out for Pop.

As Diggy got closer to the pile, he slowed. Though it was cold out, his body tingled like it did when he walked into the warm house after being outside too long, heat returning to body parts so quickly it was almost painful. That was a good feeling. This was not.

The pile moved. The boy knelt to pull things back into the suitcase, trying too soon to zip it all back up.

“Wayne?” Diggy said. Wayne Schley and Diggy weren’t not friends, but they weren’t friends either. They had math and science together, but that was about it. They had never gone to each other’s houses.

When Wayne looked up, the yard light lit his face in greenish black and white contrast. Diggy knew Wayne’s hair was dark brown, and that he was always pale, even in summer, and that his eyes were a weird light blue. But the yard light washed those hints of color away. He stood like a black and white outline of himself, shivering, dressed like it really was spring.

“Who was that?” Diggy asked.

Pop strode up to them. “You all right, son?”

“Don’t call me that,” Wayne bit out, and suddenly he was flushed red. He grabbed the suitcase, and though he was a lot bigger than Diggy, he stumbled. The suitcase fell and flipped open again. Wayne hunched over it, his shoulders shuddering.

Pop approached him like a spooked animal, slow and with quiet words. “It’s late and you look cold.” He pulled the suitcase closed, and Wayne neither resisted nor moved. “Why don’t you come in to warm up and tell us what brought you here.”

“Did you know my mom?”

Diggy stilled. Wayne looked up.

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

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 the day after Christmas. And Pop would have

done anything for her.

“We couldn’t find a marrow donor,” Wayne said. “I didn’t match.”

“Come inside.” Pop put a hand on Wayne’s shoulder.

Wayne jerked away and swiped his forearm across his face. “I don’t match my dad either.”

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 four, hair still orange. Though he was mechanically inclined, he’d had a tough time learning 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 twelve-year-old 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 thirteen-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 in their driveway, 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. 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.

The suitcase popped open again.

The three of them peered at the knotted jumble of clothes.

After a while, Pop said, “Oh, right.” He collected clothes together and carefully secured the suitcase. Diggy rarely thought about Pop’s age, but he seemed young all of a sudden. Heck, he was young. At thirty four, he had to be the youngest “Pop” on the planet.

He began the long walk down the driveway. “We use the door around back.”

Diggy waited for Wayne to move; he didn’t want to turn his back to the kid. But Joker bawled, and Diggy remembered he hadn’t put out the calf’s feed. He rushed to the shed and quickly filled the bucket stationed at Joker’s post. By the time he turned back to the house, Wayne was almost there.

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. Mr. Schley even farther.

Diggy’s stomach clenched. He swallowed hard. That man that had dumped Wayne in the driveway was his dad.

Thinking that, about what that meant, Diggy didn’t push it when Wayne refused to go in first. He went in then stood transfixed at the sight of the suitcase, a girly pink and blue flowered thing that sucked on grey and denim clothes. It was a while before Diggy noticed that Wayne, too, stood transfixed, staring wide-eyed at the walls.

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 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 he 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. He meant to hide out in his room but was waylaid by the sight of Wayne's profile in the doorway from the kitchen.

Wayne had a jaw like Pop. And Diggy.

Wayne asked again, “Did you know my mom?”

Diggy didn’t need to see into the kitchen to know that Pop nodded.

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 had practically lived in when he was 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 half-way 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 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. He thought of his mom. How she had left him on Pop's doorstep, bundled in a laundry basket before he was a month old. How she couldn't get her car started again and then couldn't get Pop's truck started and rode out of town on the John Deere tractor. Everyone in town knew the story. Diggy wondered how long it would be before everyone knew that Wayne had been left on Pop's doorstep, too.

Diggy's brain clouded white again.

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 something he hadn't considered before. 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, barely untangling 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 on his skin, 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 rarely heard. 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 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?"

CHAPTER THREE

Diggy didn't go back to bed. He pulled on his gear, adding a sweatshirt over the flannel and under the down vest. He clomped downstairs in boots that normally would have been left by the back door. Everything was backward last night. He clomped harder.

But Wayne was awake and rummaging under the kitchen sink.

"What are you doing?"

Wayne stood, a brown paper grocery bag in hand. "My mom used to keep them under the sink, too."

Being warm hadn't improved Wayne's color much. He was gray now, quite a feat considering the fuchsia walls.

"Packing up your stuff?" Wayne obviously had more than the suitcase could hold without it tearing open.

Wayne paled and looked away. Then he gritted his teeth and that jaw, Pop's jaw, jutted out at Diggy. "My book cover got torn off."

Diggy noticed the books arranged on the table. With a glass of milk. Wayne had been doing homework. Making himself comfortable in someone else's kitchen.

"Ask before you take stuff," Diggy snapped. He crossed his arms, but he had enough clothes on that he couldn't cross them all the way.

"You dressed for the Iditarod?" Wayne smirked.

Diggy wasn't sure what that was. He snatched at the paper bag, but Wayne didn't let go and a crooked tear stretched down the middle.

"That was the last one!" Wayne said.

"Teacher's pet."

Wayne pushed Diggy.

Diggy stumbled against the table. Milk splashed onto homework. Diggy charged forward, shouldering Wayne back against the sink.

“Hey!” Pop barked. The boys froze. “Diggy, get to cleaning that milk.”

“He spilled it!”

“Now.”

“You’re taking his side,” Diggy protested.

Pop rubbed his hand up then down his face. “This is not about sides.”

“Yeah, right.”

“One more word, kid,” Pop said with that voice.

Diggy stomped around getting a towel then slapped at the milk. He fumed.

“Wayne,” Pop said. Then he didn’t say anything else. After a while, he rubbed his hand up and down his face again.

Wayne still leaned against the sink, only now instead of looking as if he had been pushed against it, he seemed to cower as if waiting for another attack. His words popped into Diggy’s head, My book cover got torn off, and he saw again how Mr. Schley had reached into the truck with both hands to haul Wayne out.

Diggy was too hot in all his clothes, but Joker would wait. He rearranged the towel and cleaned the books and table more carefully. Peeling off a damp paper cover to wipe a book clean, he said, “Hey, this is my math book.”

“I don’t think mine made it into the bag,” Wayne mumbled.

Diggy concentrated on his task though the towel was too wet to be useful anymore.

Finally, Pop said, “Sit down. Both of you.”

Diggy had to reach around Wayne to drop the towel in the sink. He felt as shaky as Wayne looked and didn’t mind sitting down. It was the what-comes-next that made him nervous.

Pop breathed deep a couple of times. It dawned on Diggy that Pop didn’t know what to say. The thought was shocking. Pop always knew the right thing to say or do. He was Pop. Pop at a loss for anything was unimaginable yet here it was.

“I didn’t know.” Pop looked for a long time at Wayne, at Diggy. “Ann never...” he trailed off.

Diggy slanted a glance at Wayne. It was weird hearing Pop call Mrs. Schley “Ann.” Mrs. Schley was Mrs. Schley, his teacher. It was weird to think teachers had first names. Weird, too, to think Pop knew her as Ann. But Diggy couldn’t tell what Wayne thought about it. He was too gray, like he had been all morning.

“You have a place here,” Pop said.

Diggy felt like his heart stopped. Was this really real? Was Pop saying Wayne was... what was Pop saying?

“He was drunk,” Wayne said, barely said. The words were the smallest rustle from barely open lips.

“I’ll talk with Harold,” Pop said.

Wayne flinched a little then clenched his jaw. Pop’s. Damn. Jaw.

Diggy tipped the chair over standing up. “I’ve got to feed Joker.” He half fell out the kitchen door but still heard Pop ask if there was anything else Wayne needed that might have been left behind.

You have a place here echoed in Diggy’s head. He went through the motions, adding fresh water to the trough, putting out feed, leading Joker on a short loop around the field. He felt like he had been thinking too much all night and all morning but also like he couldn’t think at all.

How was it possible to think of Wayne as his brother?

The cold seemed colder, like snow was piling up around him, then Pop added a sheen of sleet when he called out to get a move on before the bus got there.

The school bus. Because it was Tuesday and a school day. It was another impossible thing that yesterday had been Monday, like any Monday followed by Tuesday, and that he should have to go to school. On the bus.

Wayne didn’t ride the north bus.

Diggy dashed to the house. “Can’t you drive us?”

Pop set a plate of eggs and toast on the table. Wayne’s plate had already been replaced by homework he stayed bent over rather than help Diggy convince Pop. Diggy automatically shov-

eled in food, toed off boots, gulped milk, stripped away layers of clothes and argued. “Everyone will know something’s up and there will be a lot of talk for nothing when Wayne goes home.”

Pop frowned at him. “Wayne has a place here.”

“But he said his dad was drunk.” Diggy winced a little, but Wayne didn’t look up. “He won’t care about it today. He might not even remember.”

“But I will,” Pop shouted. “I care.” He pointed a hard finger at Diggy. “And so should you.”

Pop had been mad before, but this was pure, simple fury, and it was entirely focused on Diggy.

He couldn’t swallow and had too much food in his mouth. He’d only gotten one leg out of his work pants, and his pajama bottoms were twisted funny around his thighs. Every heartbeat tried to pulse blood into hands clenched too tightly to the table, making both Diggy and the table shake.

“I’ll talk with Harold,” Pop said, his tone still hot, “but if I don’t like what I hear, Wayne stays. You got that?”

Diggy jerked his head up and down.

Pop turned his attention to Wayne. “That goes for both of you.”

Wayne still didn’t look up, but he nodded.

“The bus will be here soon, and both your butts will be on it.”

They nodded again.

Pop yanked a coat off the rack and stomped out the door. Its slam rattled the license plates on the walls.

Diggy felt heat rise and rise and rise. He had never seen Pop so angry. He had never felt so angry himself. He spat the food onto his plate and kicked the work pants off his leg. He wanted to pound on Wayne, just pound and pound until he was a gray mush because of course he sat there, gray as ever, staring at the door like ravenous zombies stared back at him.

“He wanted to hit me,” Wayne whispered.

“I want to hit you!”

“He wanted to hit us.”

“He did not,” Diggy scoffed. “Like he would ever hit a kid.”

The thought was totally beyond anything in even the remotest way possible--Diggy knew this the way he knew that steers ate feed and poop stank.

But Wayne didn't.

Part of Diggy still wanted to pound on Wayne, but now it seemed like too much work. He convinced himself it was the sleepless night and not that Wayne didn't know fathers could be mad at their sons and not hit them.

Diggy got wet enough in the shower for it to count, but that was it. The bus lady honked a tune while he finished dressing. He lost more time trying to find his books. When he went outside to ask Pop if he knew where they were, he found Wayne with both their backpacks. Diggy yanked it away.

Pop jogged up, waving hello to the bus lady. “Some rhythm you got there.”

“Practice. Heaven help me if he's ever on time.”

Diggy rolled his eyes.

So did Pop. Diggy felt a lot better.

“I don't know what to do with my suitcase,” Wayne said.

Pop put a hand on his shoulder. “I'll take care of it. Is there anything else that might have got left at home? Just in case?”

Wayne shrugged, but it didn't seem so much an answer as not knowing what to do about Pop's hand on his shoulder.

“How are you for lunch?”

Wayne blushed. “Mom set me up on the school plan for the year.”

No eighth graders were on the school plan. Pop gave Diggy a twenty dollar allowance each week to use for lunch or whatever. Wayne's mom must have know she wouldn't be there to give him allowance. And that his dad wouldn't think of it. All of a sudden, Diggy was plain old sad.

Mrs. Schley had been a really nice lady. Her not being around anymore was about the crappiest thing Diggy could imagine, and it was real.

“You know Wayne Schley?” Pop called to the bus lady.

“Sure,” she said, way too cheery. She looked like she wanted to say something more but wasn’t sure what.

Diggy was glad she left it at that and climbed aboard. One of the things he hated about the bus was that, because he lived so far out, he was the first one picked up. That meant he always had to be up earlier than everyone else, and it killed him sometimes to think of all those other kids getting extra sleep, some of them as much as half an hour. It didn’t matter that Diggy woke up early anyway to take care of his steers. It was the principle of the thing. Today, however, was a rare occasion when being first was a bonus.

Wayne got on the bus and examined the rows of empty seats.

“It’s not law or anything,” the bus lady said, “but I’m sure it’s the same on your bus that everyone has their seats. If you don’t want to disturb the pecking order, you can sit with Diggy or behind me.”

“It’s just for today,” Wayne said. He took the seat behind the bus lady.

Diggy didn’t want Wayne to sit with him, but still, he got mad at Wayne. The seat behind the bus lady was the worst seat on the bus. Even kindergarten kids didn’t sit there because whoever did was visible to everyone else in the rear view mirror and could be watched the entire ride, no place to hide. Later, as kids were picked up, Diggy started to feel bad for Wayne since every kid passed him with a “What’s this?” look followed by a smirk. Wayne sat reading his textbook like he didn’t notice anything, but like everyone else Diggy could see Wayne in the mirror. His face was tight, the jaw particularly so. But seeing the jaw reminded Diggy of Pop and made him mad again.

The bus ride was quiet for Diggy. He was in the odd position of being the only kid in his grade on the bus. As the oldest middle school kid, none of the younger ones talked to him unless he talked to them first. But, since he was a middle school kid, none of the high school kids talked

to him either. Usually, Diggy napped.

Today, though, he kept glancing past the growing number of heads to the rear view mirror. Every time he did, he told himself to stop checking it and looked away. There were lots of younger kids, a few other middle school kids, a bunch of ninth and tenth graders, the couple of junior boys who couldn't arrange rides that morning and absolutely no seniors. Seniors could get permission to park in the school lot and every one of them did. It was death not to have a car by senior year. Any kind of car was fine as long as it operated most of the time. Diggy was already saving money for his car. If he didn't have enough for something by the time he finally got his driver's license, he would get Pop's old truck, the one Diggy's mom couldn't get started that morning she left town on the John Deere. Diggy took enough crap about his mom's escape on the tractor without having to invite it by driving the truck-that-wouldn't-start.

The bus thumped over railroad tracks, signaling the transition to "town." Diggy heard some whispering, always louder than normal voices, then the boy in front of him turned around.

"You know what Schley's doing on the bus?"

The kid was a seventh grader, one of the eight or nine Downer boys. He was usually pretty cool so Diggy responded. He shrugged.

"Because Vicky said that Heather said that Shawn said that Wayne was on the bus when he got on, and Shawn's first one on after you."

Diggy closed his eyes. His best hope was that Wayne would keep his mouth shut, get on the southeast bus this afternoon, find everything fine with his dad at home, his dad not having said anything to anyone either, and all would be back to normal, the unsolved mystery of Wayne's ride on the north bus quickly replaced by a couple's breakup or the baseball team's latest loss. The whispering got louder.

The elementary and middle schools were two buildings right across the street from the high school. Rather than have two different buses go the same direction to pick up the younger and older students, the county saved money by sending one bus each in eight directions for everyone from kindergarteners to seniors. The bus dropped the younger kids off first. Diggy hated being

part of that group. Only a couple more months, though, and he would be part of the older group, watching the little kids get off before he was bused over to the high school. He could not wait for eighth grade to end.

Especially when he heard more whispers and saw people pointing at him in the hallway. Didn't they have anything better to talk about than Wayne being at his house last night?

Then things got worse. It was time for math class.