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A WEIRD KIND OF NORMAL

CHAPTER ONE: SEPTEMBER

Diggy Lawson ducked into the barn to inspect his morning's work one last time. The stall was tidy, wood shavings evenly raked over the ground, and water trough scrubbed shiny. The rope halter, root brush and scotch comb hung exactly straight from their pegs. His new steer would settle in fast and happily.

Diggy again promised himself he would not name this calf. After three years competing steers at the state fair, he knew what to expect. Nothing could describe the 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. No names, no tears. An eighth grader shouldn't cry.

Diggy heard the distant whoosh of tires coming up the gravel road. He shoved the brush into his back pocket and walked partway up the driveway, watching July's truck crest the hill.

He patted his hair to be sure he hadn't broken the shell of goop that kept his cowlicks flat then he swiped sweat from his forehead. Mid-September weather was hit or miss in Minnesota, veering between summer, fall and almost winter on a day-by-day basis. This Saturday was summer, but Diggy wore boots and jeans. Anything less around a calf jittery after its first ride in a

trailer would make July think he'd forgotten everything she'd ever taught him. It didn't matter that she had seen him filthy before, covered in hay, dirt and cow poop. He didn't want to look messy around her when he could help it.

Pop came out, orange hair bright as a glow stick, and Diggy was glad he'd used the goop. It made his hair darker. As July's truck made the turn into their long driveway, he breathed deep to chase away the stomach swirlies. A fantail of dust blew on down the road like an echo of where she'd been.

"Do I get to say hi to her or do I have to make myself scarce?" Pop asked.

"Har har," Diggy said, though Pop's tone was so straight on Diggy wasn't sure if he was teasing or not. He squinted sideways at Pop.

Pop laughed and roughed Diggy's hair. "What the--"

"Quit it," Diggy cut him off. Luckily, nothing much had shifted. He pressed the shell back down.

"Is that hair gel or rubber cement?"

"Geezer. No one uses rubber cement anymore." Diggy snickered at his own joke. At thirty four, Pop was probably the youngest "Pop" on the planet but calling Pop old never got old.

"This geezer can still ground you."

"That would hurt you more than me."

Pop snorted. "I'm thinking you deserve a little something special for lunch today."

Diggy groaned. Pop was an expert prankster with a subspecialty of food doctoring. July parked and Diggy headed over, calling back to Pop, "As long as it's after July's gone."

Pop grinned, waved at July and made himself scarce. Diggy's gratitude doubled as he watched July climb out of the truck.

July Johnston.

Every time July came around Diggy's heart became the sun.

July, like her five sisters before her, would be homecoming queen now that she was a senior. Her hair was long and dark and shiny, pulled back into the usual ponytail. Her face was clear,

no makeup, and her dark eyes sparkled. She wore jeans, a t-shirt and boots and was pretty much perfect.

But it wasn't only that she was pretty. She was nice, too. Honest nice, not pretend nice like some of the popular girls. And she loved cows. Even though she didn't have to come, she liked being there when a calf was brought home for the first time.

Diggy pretended to himself he would have gotten involved in steer competitions on his own at some point, but he knew better than to believe it. He did it for July. The fact that he'd learned to love the steers, too, was secondary.

"Hey, there." She hugged him sideways the way she usually did, this time so she could look at the fence and post they'd use for halter breaking. "Everything all set here?"

He nodded, reeling from her cut grass smell and her bare arm over his shoulders and the little bit of sweat where her skin pressed against his.

She gave his shoulders a squeeze. "Of course it is," she said, smiling down at him. "You're an old pro."

Then she ruffled his hair. Tried to ruffle it.

Her eyes widened.

Diggy jerked away. "Sorry, I, uh." His face felt like a thousand fires. He mumbled, "My hair sticks up."

She grabbed his shoulders to make him stand still then she scratched his head until the goop crust was all broken up. "I like your head the way it is."

Diggy looked up into her smiling eyes, a good six inches above his, wishing he wasn't the shortest eighth-grader in his class and hoping all his hope that four years wasn't so big a difference.

He could have stood like that with July forever.

She patted his shoulders and turned up the drive. "Here he comes."

It took a few seconds for Diggy to hear the diesel engine over the thump of blood in his ears. Lenz was here with the calf.

Diggy joined July in waving Lenz in. He climbed out of the cab, walked back and slid out the short ramp like it was one motion, proof of having done it a thousand times. Their hello's to him were lost in the metallic clank of latches sprung and disgruntled moos, but Lenz heard Pop call out that there was coffee. Barely a minute after his arrival, Diggy and July were alone again.

July shook her head. "Never get a word in edgewise with him around."

Diggy laughed. Everyone knew Lenz talked more to his cows than to people. July's teasing helped Diggy relax a bit. His new calf was home.

Diggy had gone out to Lenz's last week to select the steer from among the other spring-born calves and had felt an immediate bond with the one he chose. But that was a week ago and in a different setting. Even though he knew all would be fine, had been every year, Diggy still got nervous when it came time to bring his steer home.

He walked around the back of the trailer and looked in. The calf was in a simple rope halter tied about three feet high with only a foot of slack. It saved time with the breaking to let the steers fight the halter during the ride.

Diggy eased into the back as quietly as he could, pretty much impossible with boots and an aluminum trailer. The calf rolled back his eyes and bawled. Diggy scratched its rump until the steer quieted then pulled the brush from his back pocket and stroked it over the calf's hide. Diggy couldn't help but admire what a fine calf he'd chosen.

He had a long, straight top with a clean line though 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. What Diggy liked best was the way the calf watched him back. Calm and alert. The eyes and hair were almost equally black and absorbed light like it would help him grow. Only his nose glistened.

Diggy was so focused on his new calf, it took him a while to feel July looking in on them. He turned to her, scratching the calf's rump again. "He already looks like a champ. And did you see how quickly he calmed for me?" It was a sign of trust that meant they'd have a good bond together.

The steer twitched its tail aside and pooped. On Diggy's boot.

Diggy groaned. "You're a real joker, aren't you." He laughed--Joker was a great name and the poop was Diggy's fault for having his feet in the line of fire--but the laugh burst like a bubble overhead, becoming a black cloud. He had promised himself he wouldn't name his steer!

He clattered out of the trailer, setting off fresh bawling, and dragged his boot in the grass.

July gave him the eye, clearly not happy with his behavior. "It's not like it's never happened before," she pointed out.

Diggy shook his head and sighed. "I wasn't going to name him."

July hugged him to her side. "I used to tell myself that, too, but every year..."

They looked in at the calf.

Joker looked back at them and winked.

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 it didn't matter. Barely thirty minutes was all it took for Diggy to break his promises to himself and fall in love.

It was too late now. The name was stuck.

Diggy went back in and brushed Joker some more to apologize for stomping off the way he had. When Joker was so calm he might have been asleep, Diggy unknotted the rope and pulled until the calf took a step forward. Diggy immediately released the pressure, and Joker took three more steps before stopping. Diggy repeated the pressure, easing up as soon as Joker moved again. Joker took several more steps and was quick to catch on to the lesson. A tug meant walk.

In no time they were in the barn with Diggy offering Joker his reward, an extra bit of the alfalfa-grass hay he'd eat all fall and winter.

"You're a natural, Diggy," July said. They watched Joker and talked about his assets and their plan for the coming year. July had won grand champion last year, took reserve the year before, and had always earned blues before then. This year she had been elected 4-H president and was one of the five national beef ambassadors, a big deal. She was going to be so busy with programs and traveling she had decided not to compete at the state fair. It was Diggy's duty to

take up the torch July was passing on to him.

He had to win grand champ at the state fair for her sake.

After July left, Diggy stayed in the barn and talked to Joker. The touch-and-talk method worked for a reason, but Diggy had been shy rambling to the calf in front of July. He made up for it, chatting with Joker about his new home, the great food, how much fun they'd have training, warning him there'd be early mornings and late nights, and how much he'd like Pop.

The calf listened, head cocked like a dog, and occasionally commented with a snuffle or a moo. Diggy felt like they made a good start.

Pop came out to look over the steer and deliver some lunch. Diggy took a bite of the tuna sandwich and remembered his geezer comment when the tuna turned out to be spicy hot. He blinked the sting of jalapeno fumes from his eyes and took another bite.

“Okay?” Pop asked too casual like.

Diggy nodded, afraid to speak. Fresh calves weren't fans of open flames.

Pop slapped Diggy on the back, laughing. “You're one stouthearted kid, Diggy Lawson.” He pulled a plastic-wrapped sandwich from his pocket and offered it over.

“No, this is fine,” Diggy choked out.

“I thought you'd say so.” Pop set the sandwich down and scratched Joker's rump. “He's a good one. You two are going to have a good year.” He ruffled Diggy's hair and headed out.

Diggy smiled at Joker then eyed the second sandwich. He slanted a glance at Pop.

“It's the same tuna, isn't it,” Diggy called out.

Pop whistled his way to the house.

After dinner--an average, un-tampered with dinner--Diggy went out to check on the calf again. The sun had taken its summer heat with it. A firm northeastern wind rattled fall-crisp leaves on branches that clacked and creaked. Diggy led Joker into the shivering night. A steer needed to be used to all sorts of sounds so it wouldn't be easily spooked by the time it entered the show ring.

The chill air was a double bonus because cold stimulated hair growth. Several kids he'd compete against at the fair kept their calves in cold rooms all year, but Pop had absolutely refused, three years running, to air condition a cow all summer so its hair would grow thicker.

The turned weather was a sign. This would be a good year--his year to win grand champ.

The calf was not wild about leaving the cozy barn and bleated a protest, crowding into Diggy's side. Diggy scratched and patted and had Joker calm again until a truck barreled down the gravel road and skidded to a stop at the end of their long driveway. Diggy looped Joker's lead onto the fence rail, just in case he thought about bolting, and talked quietly while scratching the steer's rump to soothe him.

The dust settled to reveal a man stumbling around the truck bed. He heaved a suitcase onto the ground, and it popped open like one of those 3-D party decorations. He lunged for the passenger door, jerking it so hard it squealed, then reached into the cab with two hands and hauled a boy out, tossing him onto the jumbled mound. The door hung open. Momentum slammed it shut when the man gunned the truck away. Gravel and dust spewed over the unmoving heap of clothes and boy.

Wind scabbled through the grass. Clouds slashed away at the moonlight.

Joker sidled into Diggy again but this time was soothed by a shaking hand.

Diggy really did not want to know what had been left on his doorstep.

CHAPTER TWO

Diggy knew about doorsteps. When he was a month old his mom had bundled him in a laundry basket and left him on Pop's.

Diggy felt that deep-gut rustle like the coming of a full-body shudder. This kid wasn't a baby, but he huddled into his suitcase like he could burrow through it to somewhere else. Diggy couldn't leave anyone like that. No matter how much he wanted to.

He made sure Joker's lead was tight on the fence rail then jogged close enough to the house to call out for Pop.

As he went up the drive, the pile moved. The boy knelt, swiped an arm over his face then pushed things back into the suitcase, trying too soon to zip it all back up.

"Wayne?" Diggy asked. Wayne Schley and Diggy had math and science together, that was it. They had never gone to each other's houses.

When Wayne looked up, the yard light tinted his face green. 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. The yard light washed those hints of color away. He stood trembling even though he was dressed for fall.

"Who was that?" Diggy asked him.

Wayne stared like English was a foreign language.

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

"Don't call me that," Wayne bit out. He grabbed the suitcase, and though he was a big kid, a lot bigger than Diggy anyway, he stumbled. The suitcase fell and flipped open again. Wayne stayed hunched over it.

Pop approached him like a spooked animal, slow and with quiet words. "It's late and you must be tired." He pulled the suitcase closed, and Wayne neither resisted nor moved. "Why don't you come in and tell us what brought you here."

Wayne looked up, his face too intent. "Did you know my mom?"

Diggy stilled. The words were one thing, but it sounded like the question was something

else. Diggy felt like he couldn't get enough air.

"We saw you at her funeral," Pop said.

Diggy wanted to run. Wayne's mom had been Diggy's third-grade teacher. He and Pop had gone to her funeral only three weeks ago, the day after school started. And Wayne was asking if Pop knew her.

"We couldn't find a marrow donor," Wayne said. "She's type O."

"Come inside." Pop put a hand on Wayne's shoulder.

Wayne jerked away. "My dad's A, and I'm B," he shouted like an accusation. Diggy barely heard him add, "He says you're my dad, and I have to live here now."

CHAPTER THREE

It had never seemed weird that everyone in town called Pop “Pop” even though he was only thirty four. 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.

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.

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. 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 had stranded the calf at a fence post. He did his best to rush Joker without making the calf stubborn and made it back to the barn in decent time. By the time he put out a bit of hay and 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 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. Wayne's dad even farther.

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

Inside, Wayne 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. Wayne might be bigger than him, but 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 again, "It's late. Give us a few minutes to clear some space," Pop

said, “then you can get some rest.”

The only “space” with a bed in it was the room where Diggy and Pop tinkered with the model rockets. If they moved their stuff...well, how long were they supposed to move their 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 at the familiar outline on this strange kid. 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 Pop again, “Did you know my mom?” This time Diggy understood what Wayne was really asking. Is it true? Could you be my father?

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 drops too fast. 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.

Once upon a time he'd hidden his mom's box in the tree.

It wasn't really her box. Diggy had bought it ages ago, a red fireproof safe he'd saved ten dollars to buy at Ole Jib's Hardware. Inside were the three things his mother had left with him in that basket. He had wasted a summer hiding the box in the tree, checking on it, bringing it in when it was supposed to rain. He didn't know where it had ended up.

The tree had been like his best friend. Staring at the night-blackened branches, he couldn't remember the last time he'd climbed into them.

He opened the window and clambered onto the ledge.

The branch that could support Diggy's weight was about three feet away. Not far in foot-steps but a lot farther when all there was beneath you was twenty feet of air. He had made the jump countless times--a long time ago. He was taller, so that would help, but he was heavier, and the branch might not be as strong as it was once. Diggy crouched on the sill, hands cupped under the window, and took the giant, twisting step he called his "leap of faith."

His bare feet easily made the branch, but his hands caught at twigs that broke. He slipped back, hands reaching, and finally snagged a branch that held. He pulled himself in and wheezed in the smells of cold bark, dry leaves and dirt.

"Are you crazy?" Wayne whisper shouted from beneath the tree.

Diggy had been thinking the same thing so it galled that Wayne would say it. "What are you doing out here?" he snapped. Quietly. He did not want Pop coming out. Pop was not likely to think Diggy's current position a wise one.

"You're barefoot in a tree in the middle of the night, and I'm the one who's supposed to explain what I'm doing?"

“How can you see that?”

“It’s not like I need night vision to see that you’re in a tree, especially when you threw yourself out a window to get there.”

“That I’m barefoot.” The safety light was on the other side of the house. “How long have you been out here?”

Wayne might have shrugged. He didn’t say anything, and Diggy couldn’t look down.

The cold blew in unsteadily. Branches heaved away from the sudden bursts of wind with such dismay Diggy had to concentrate to make sure his eyes and hands actually coordinated as he shuffled toward the center of the tree. The barefoot thing was already a problem. As he made his way down, the cold made every scrape of bark feel like cracked glass beneath his feet. He considered that this was not one of his better impulses, though not far beneath the rational interpretation of events was a jittery thrill for the deep night, the rustle, the clean arctic scent of the air.

“Why jump into a tree?”

Wayne said it in that way that was less about getting a response and more about doubting the intelligence of the person in question. Which ticked off Diggy. The kid had shown up at Diggy’s house, making impossible announcements and was, by the way, wandering around outside in the midnight dark so... Pot. Kettle. Black. Diggy was not the one that needed to explain anything.

This was his home and his tree and his middle of the night. Wayne could muzzle it. Diggy would be glad to make him.

He moved too fast and slid, scalding his heels, down the last deep vee and thudded against the trunk. From there, he flopped belly first onto a thick branch that dipped lower than the others, shimmied back until he could wrap his arms around it, dangle and drop. He shook the sting from his feet.

“You must have about the same IQ as that cow.”

Diggy tucked his head and shouldered Wayne into the side of the house.

Wayne got hold to push Diggy away and ended up forcing half his sweatshirt against his

throat.

Diggy twisted and fell to a knee, grabbing out and yanking Wayne's shirt. On the way down, Diggy managed to elbow Wayne in the gut before the kid landed on him.

Diggy bucked, slowing down Wayne's scrambles to get back to his feet.

A knee connected with a hip bone. An elbow caught an ear.

They finally got apart and stood puffing at each other.

Diggy braced for the next round but was distracted by a swooping flash of light. Pop would be ticked if he caught them out here.

"You want more?" Wayne said.

Diggy gave the kid credit for mustering some nerve, but his face already had that sheen of worry about what would hurt next. Wayne was a teacher's kid. This might be his first fight.

A flash again--headlights in the driveway--then a truck zoomed straight for them.

