

ONE

--the meanest tractor mechanic ever--

I had only been to Eldon Dunn's place one time before and swore I would never go back. The creeps. That's what the man gave me. The real-live creeps. But there I stood on his farmhouse porch with my dog. I don't think Deke wanted to be there either 'cause his tail was real still.

Eldon Dunn, the meanest tractor mechanic in Kansas. Maybe the meanest anywhere.

"Whatcha doin' here boy?" His voice bellowed and sounded as rough as the bottom of Harley's gravel pit. He was big. And, scary. I just wanted to get out of there.

"Uh...Can you fix my tractor magneto? It won't fire. Gotta get the plowing done."

Somehow, I managed to hold onto the heavy tractor part with one hand while gripping Deke's collar tight with the other.

"You're the Wilcox boy, ain't ya'?" He spit right past me. "So, where's your old man?"

"Gone, sir." I shrugged. "Since February."

"Figures." He stared at me. "What's your name?"

"Preacher...uh...Johnny," I stammered.

The thick glasses above Eldon Dunn's scraggly beard were so smeary I wondered how he could even see me. His glasses slid down his nose. He worked them to his eyes by tilting his head back, scrunching his face, flaring his nostrils, and moving his lips back and forth. His cheek bulged with a wad of tobacco. Brown juice oozed out of the corner of his mouth and dribbled down his chin. He spit on the porch, splattering my boots.

I lifted the magneto up a bit higher. "Can you fix it?"

He wiped his mouth with his hairy arm, never taking his eyes off me. Jagged scars marked his arms from his wrists to his elbows like he'd been wrestling bears or mountain lions.

"Can't do it," he said, folding his arms across his belly.

“You can’t?” He was the only one left around these parts who could do it.

“Too busy.” He spit again, this time missing my boots by a hair. “Them boys who helped me joined up. Right after Pearl Harbor.”

“Can you fix it another time...sir?”

“Maybe.” He grinned. Or, did he snarl? I couldn’t tell. “Maybe next week.”

Deke jerked backward and let loose a low growl. “Quit pulling, Deke!” Guess we both wanted out of there. Eldon Dunn slammed the door, and I stuffed the magneto back in my knapsack.

Within seconds, we peeled out of the farmyard. Pedaled so fast I thought my legs would fall off. But Deke sped right past me. Just in time, too, because I heard Dunn’s dogs barking on their way home from a run in the fields. They were as mean and snarly as Eldon Dunn himself, and I didn’t want to see them either.

The bike tires kicked up dust into my eyes. Running ahead of me, Deke’s coat turned the same color as the dirt on the ground.

“We need rain, Deke!”

He paid no attention to me. He didn’t have to care about the creek and cattle pond getting lower by the day. Or, the plowing getting done. As the new man of the house, that was my job. My problem.

We reached the Holcomb place and pulled into the drive. I dropped my bike, sat on the ground, and leaned back against the old cottonwood tree. It sure felt hot for June—more like July. Deke knew how to cool off. He lapped the water in the horse tank then slid his whole body right in.

The freshly painted house and barn nearly glistened in the sun. If the county had a contest for the nicest farm around, the Holcomb’s would’ve won it hands down. Lots of money helped. And hired hands.

Deke popped his head up out of the water and howled at a high-pitched sound. Yep. Earl Floyd Holcomb's whistle. He waved from the loft in the barn. My best friend could whistle louder than anyone else.

"On my way down!" Earl Floyd called, then disappeared inside. He ran up and kicked my foot with his boot. "Hey," he said. "Where've you been?"

"Took the magneto to Eldon Dunn," I said. This would get a reaction out of Earl Floyd.

He stopped in his tracks and stared at me. "Are you a lunatic? You wanna die?"

I ignored him. "And," I added, "Told him he'd best get to it straight away. He said, 'Yes, sir, Mr. Wilcox!'"

Earl Floyd plopped himself down, wiped his arm across his brow and brushed the sweaty hair out of his eyes. "Sure. And I'm a monkey's uncle!" He scratched under his arms like an orangutan. "You really went to Dunn's by yourself?"

"Had to. Mom was too busy, and my little brother would've been too scared. So, I just went alone. Dunn said he didn't have time to fix it."

"That guy is a crazy old coot! I hear there's a whole cemetery full of people he's scared to death." Earl Floyd always exaggerated. My dad used to say the Holcombs never let the truth stand in the way of a good story.

"What were ya doing in the barn?"

He hesitated and looked over his shoulder. "Hidin'. Dad keeps giving me chores to do."

"Like what? Feeding cats?"

Mr. Holcomb's favorite saying was *a working boy is a happy boy*. But Earl Floyd was happiest when he was *not* working. On their farm, hired hands did all the hard jobs.

"Well, my chore right now is to get our tractor running good so I can get the plowing done. I never know when this magneto's gonna fire."

Earl Floyd stretched his arms up and faked a yawn.

“Earl Floyd, this is important—if the magneto doesn’t fire, the spark plugs won’t spark. And then, I don’t have a running engine.”

“I know that. It’s just you never have time to do stuff anymore,” he said.

“Look. Dad ran off and left us on the farm. It’s not my fault.” The quiver in my voice surprised me. I turned my head, grabbing my bike and knapsack. “Come on, Deke! We gotta go.”

“Well, you don’t have to get all huffy, Preach.” Earl Floyd stood up.

I pointed my finger at him. “And I’ve told you before. My name’s Johnny now.”

“But…” Earl Floyd protested.

“The man of the house should have a real name, Earl Floyd. So, what’s on my birth certificate will do.” My dad gave me the nickname, Preacher. So, it needed to be gone—just like him.

“Alvin? You want me to call you Alvin?” Earl Floyd knew I didn’t like my middle name.

“Where in the heck did you get *that* name anyhow?”

“No, I don’t want you to call me Alvin, and I don’t know where it came from. Dad got to name us boys, and he wouldn’t tell me. Maybe a family name. I don’t know. Call me Johnny now. Or John. Or J.A. Take your pick.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it. Hey, if you’d been a girl, would your mom get to choose your name?”

“Yeah. She liked Betty Lou.”

I knew I shouldn’t have told him the second it came out of my mouth. Earl Floyd fell on the ground laughing, gripping his belly, and rolling from side to side. Great. I’d never live that down.

“So, what if *you’d* been a girl?” I asked him.

“I’ll never tell!” Tears ran down his face. “Betty Louuuuu!”

I started to ride away, but Earl Floyd jumped up off the ground and grabbed my arm.

“Truce? I’ll forget you told me the name. Promise.” He held up his right hand. Annoying as he could sometimes be, Earl Floyd was my best friend. And he knew the secret handshake.

“You’d better forget, or you’ll pay,” I held my hand out in peace.

He grinned and took it. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

We closed in so no one could see our handshake—not that the old cottonwood or Deke would tell. Two finger shake--one, two, and three. Three finger shake--four, five, and six. Then pat the ground, throw up a handful of dirt, lock thumbs and spit as far as we could to each side of us. Immediately after the first spit, we had to come up with another one quick for the other side. That was the fun part. Boy, did we ever have a great secret handshake.

“Hey,” I said, “grab your bike. Think I’ll go see what a new mag costs at Mr. Wallace’s store. Maybe I could get some odd jobs somewhere to pay for it. Then, no more Eldon Dunn.”

“Sure. Guess if I’m in town, my dad really can’t find me. I did enough chores already today, anyway.” He jingled coins in his pockets. “And, just listen to that soda money.”

Darn it, he always seemed to have money. I felt my pockets. Empty.