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“Jake! It’s five-thirty! Get a move on!”

I groaned. Dad was yelling from outside, and he knew I wasn’t out of bed yet. I’m usually up by five in the morning to begin my chores around the farm. Today, however, I was really tired, and I’d fallen back to sleep.

I groaned again, and climbed out of bed.

Might as well get started, I thought.

The roosters were already crowing, and I could hear the hens clucking near the barn. Our family has a small ranch about a hundred miles from Dallas, Texas. We have chickens, horses, hogs, cows . . . the

usual farm animals. I wouldn't trade it for the world, but sometimes, the work can be pretty boring.

Today, however, would be different. My best friend, John Culver, was coming. He used to be my neighbor when we lived in Houston, but we moved away to the farm a couple of years ago. I don't get to see him much anymore.

But today he would be coming to spend the whole *week* with us! John is eleven, the same age as me. We have always gotten along great, and we like a lot of the same things.

And it was July. The middle of summer vacation. School wouldn't be starting for another two months!

Not that I don't like school, because I do. It's just that summer in Texas is so much *fun*.

With John visiting, the coming week was going to be nothing but fun with a capital 'F'.

At least, that's what I thought when I got up that morning. I thought that we'd spend the coming days fishing and swimming and biking.

That wasn't what would happen. Oh, we would have fun for a little while.

But by tonight, everything would change—and our fun would be over.

Our fun would be over . . . and the terror would begin.

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I ate a quick bowl of corn flakes before heading outside. The sun was already coming up, and the eastern sky was all pink and yellow. If you ever come to Texas, don't miss the sunrises. We have some of the coolest sunrises in the world. The sunsets are beautiful, too.

It took me a couple of hours to take care of the animals. We have hired hands that help out, but it's always been my job to look after the livestock. It's hard work, and I'm not complaining.

It's just that I *really* wanted to get everything done before John got here. That way we would have all day to hang out. We could go down to the creek and fish, catch turtles and frogs . . . heck, we would have

a blast.

I went into the barn to find more food for the geese. We have seven geese on the farm and when they don't get fed on time, they get really cranky. When they saw me coming this morning, they started honking and making all kinds of noise.

In the barn, we have several big pieces of farm equipment, including some really cool tractors. They're awesome! Dad used to take me for rides when I was little, but now I can operate them all by myself. One of the tractors—a big red one—is one that I drive a lot. It's my favorite.

There is some other heavy machinery we have, too. Dad bought a bulldozer and a small crane at an auction, but they're too big to put in the barn. When they're not being used, we keep them out back near the corral.

"Jake!" I heard Dad call out. I turned and walked out of the barn.

Dad was standing by a big green diesel storage tank. Most of the tractors and farm equipment run on diesel.

"Yeah?" I replied, squinting in the morning sun.

"I'm going into Dallas today. I'll need you to fuel up all of the equipment for the workers. I want to use the new fuel in everything to see how it works.

Shoot, I thought. Fueling up all of the equipment would take another hour. Dad bought this new experimental gas that is supposed to make the equipment run longer.

I had my doubts. Fuel is fuel. It wasn't going to make any difference.

I was wrong.

Really wrong.

The gas . . . the new experimental fuel that Dad wanted to try out in all the farm equipment . . . would do more than simply make the equipment run longer.

A lot more.

And when I fueled up all of the tractors and dozers and equipment with that gas, I had no way of knowing the trouble we were in for.

"Okay," I answered, and I turned and walked back into the barn.

Gas up everything?!?! I thought. There is no way I'll finish before John gets here!

By now, the geese were really making an awful lot of racket. They were hungry.

I had just walked out the front of the barn when I spotted something that made me freeze in my tracks. I didn't move, for I knew better.

And if you saw what I saw, you'd do the exact same thing.

Right next to my foot, only inches away, was a rattlesnake.

A big one.

And he was coiled up, preparing to strike!

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I didn't move a single muscle. That's the only thing you can do when you're confronted with a rattlesnake. I wear thick leather boots when I work, but that doesn't mean that a rattlesnake can't bite through them.

And if this one did, I'd be in *serious* trouble.

So, I froze like an ice cube.

The snake remained poised, ready to attack and sink its razor-sharp fangs into my leg.

And then:

Giggling. I heard giggling coming from the side of the barn!

I still hadn't moved an inch, but now I slowly turned my head to see who was laughing.

“Haha! Gotcha!” a voice exclaimed.

John!

I relaxed, and took a step back from the snake. Obviously it was fake, but it sure was a *good* fake! It really looked like an actual, coiled rattler!

“Isn’t that cool?” John said.

“That’s awesome!” I replied.

“It’s yours. I bought it at a store for you. I have one, too, and I fool *everybody* with it!”

“For me?!?” I exclaimed. “Gosh . . . thanks!”

I picked up the fake snake and looked at him.

“When did you get here?” I asked.

“Just a few minutes ago. Our car is in the driveway on the other side of your house. My mom and dad are inside, talking to your mom and dad.”

“Help me finish up, and we’ll head down to the creek,” I said. “I’m almost done. We just have to gas up the equipment.”

“Cool!”

I put the coiled snake on a fencepost, and we got to work. With John’s help, it didn’t take long to finish up with the livestock.

Then it was time to fuel up the equipment. I drove the tractors out of the barn and up to the tank filled with the experimental fuel. That didn’t take too long, either. After filling each tractor, I drove them

back into the barn.

However, since I'm not allowed to drive the heavy equipment out back, Dad would have to fill those up himself. I wish I could, but Dad says not for a few more years.

"This gas smells funny," John said as we filled up the last piece of equipment. "It smells like rotten bananas."

"It's some kind of experimental gas that Dad wants to try out. He says it's supposed to be better than the diesel fuel we normally use."

"It stinks," he said, holding his nose.

Just then, I heard shouting. A *girl* shouting. And she wasn't very far away.

I turned, puzzled by the noise. I don't have any brothers or sisters.

"That's the bad news," John said dryly. "My little sister is going to stay here all week, too."

Oh no! Janey is a whiney little brat!

"You're kidding?!?" I said.

John shook his head. "I wish I was," he replied. "But Mom asked her if she wanted to stay, and she said yes. She's never been to a farm before. Your parents said that it was okay, too. So . . . we're stuck with her."

What a drag. Janey is a pest. She'd want to tag

along with us everywhere we go!

Then I had an idea.

“Let’s hide from her!” I hissed. “Maybe we can sneak off down to the creek without her!”

“Good thinking!” John agreed.

I finished filling up the dozer and wiped my hands on a rag. I could hear Janey calling out, trying to find us.

However, we were behind the barn and she was in front. She couldn’t see us!

John peered around the corner.

“Can you see her?” I asked.

“She just went into the barn,” John replied.

“Cool! Let’s make a run for it! She’ll never find us!”

We darted around a crane and ran along the corral . . . but we didn’t get very far.

Suddenly, Janey began screaming. Not a fake, girly scream . . . *but a scream of all-out terror!*

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Janey's screams were awful. Whatever was going on was *serious*.

John and I stopped, and our feet kicked up a cloud of dust. We immediately spun and began running around to the front of the barn.

"She's never screamed like that before!" John huffed as we raced to help.

"She sounds like she's really hurt!" I said.

We darted around the corner of the barn and raced inside. Janey's screams of terror continued.

"*Over there!*" I cried. "*She's over there! On the other side of the tractors!*"

I knew that something had to be horribly, horribly wrong.

We sprinted past the equipment to find Janey flat against the back of the barn! She was scared stiff, and her eyes were bugging out of her head!

And right in front of her, two feet away, was the reason for her fear.

A goose.

A plain old, ordinary goose.

It honked a couple of times, pecked the ground, then honked some more.

“What’s wrong?!?” I shouted.

Janey was still shrieking like crazy, and I placed my hands over my ears.

“The giant ducky is attacking me!” Janey screeched. She had backed up against the wall, and she couldn’t go any farther.

“For crying out loud,” I said. “It’s not a giant ducky! It’s just a silly goose. He won’t hurt you!”

“He attacked me!” Janey repeated. She was crying now, and she wouldn’t budge one inch from the wall. “He’s trying to eat me!”

“He didn’t attack you,” I said. “He just thinks that you have food for him. He’s not going to eat you.”

“Remember . . . she’s never been to a farm before,” John whispered. *“Just be glad she didn’t see a goat.”*

I smiled, and walked up to the goose.

“Go on,” I said, waving my hand at the bird. “Git! Get outside!”

The goose scooted beneath a tractor, clucking and honking.

“See?” John said. “It was only a goose. He’s not going to hurt you.”

“He had big teeth and he tried to bite me!”

I rolled my eyes.

“Geese don’t have teeth,” I insisted. “Come on, John.”

As soon as John and I turned to leave, Janey unglued herself from the wall and began to follow.

“Huh-uh,” John said, shaking his head. He stopped to face her. “You’re not coming.”

“Mom says I can.”

“I say you can’t.”

“I’ll tell Daddy.”

“Daddy doesn’t like you. He’s going to swap you for a set of golf clubs.”

“Is not!”

“Is too!”

“Is not!”

“Is too!”

This was going nowhere, fast.

“Enough!” I said loudly. “Janey . . . you can come with us . . . *if* you promise to leave us alone.”

“I promise!” she said, bobbing her head.

“Come on, John,” I said. The three of us walked past the parked tractors and out the door.

Suddenly, I stopped.

Something was wrong. There was something odd about one of the tractors.

“What?” John asked. “What’s the matter?”

“I . . . I’m not sure,” I replied.

My eyes scanned a few of the machines. There were several tractors and an old push lawn mower parked in a cluster, right where I’d left them. One of the tractors—the red one that I drive a lot—was parked near the door.

“This tractor,” I said curiously. “It’s . . . it’s”

I paused. John and Janey were silent, waiting for me to finish.

“*Oh my gosh!*” I suddenly exclaimed. I leapt back, pulling John and Janey with me. “*This tractor! Look at it! It’s . . . it’s alive! It’s coming to life! We have to get out of here!*”

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