

A Good Day for Pie

The Collected Stories of Ramsbolt #4
Jennifer M. Lane



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CHAPTER ONE

“You stay here.” Kyle bent to rub the puppy’s ears. The yellow lab wasn’t welcome in the farmhouse. “You get under Zeb’s feet, and it makes him grumpy. Not that he needs the help. Trust me. I’d rather be out here with you.”

Jacques’s puppy tail thumped the workbench, his jaw dropped in a broad grin. His ears flopped as he yipped a demand for attention.

“I gotta go. Fix a tractor while I’m gone, would ya? Better yet, go upstairs and make me some coffee. Pay some bills and clean up that apartment while you’re up there. I’ll be back before this fog clears.”

Kyle tugged the barn door shut. It skipped in its track and creaked to a close, sealing the puppy away with his work. Half of it, anyway.

Gravel crunched beneath his feet, and he kept his head down, careful not to twist an ankle. The soles of his boots were as thin as his wallet, and he couldn’t afford to be flat on his back. Not with a barn full of broken tractors and a boss who wanted him to perform a miracle.

He cleared the two-acre gap between the barn and the farmhouse and arrived on the porch with damp hair and muddy boots. He left mud and mown grass on the scraper.

Inside, Dan and Bern fought over the paper, their voices thundering through the screen door, tightening the knot in Kyle's stomach. He didn't hate them; he just didn't fit in with them. They all came from the same town. But Kyle's college degree and the years he spent in a corner office in Boston drove a wedge between him and the people of Ramsbolt. If Zeb wasn't waiting for him, he'd have turned back to the barn.

"Damn mud." He kicked off his boots and left them by the door. The screen door slammed behind him.

"I wanna read this stupid story about the stores." Bern snatched at the page in Dan's hands, and Dan held them away like a defiant older brother pushing buttons that would set off fireworks. Bern punched his arm.

"Go ahead." Dan threw the pages at him. "Nobody's gonna open a store in Ramsbolt, of all dang places. Ain't nobody here to buy anything. What're you gonna do? Open up a soap store? Finally learn how to wash your grubby hands?"

Kyle ducked his head in the fridge. Zeb kept drinks in there for the field hands, and if he was lucky there'd be enough sweet tea left from the day before to sugarcoat whatever financial disaster he'd been summoned to fix. The shelf was empty, but for half a jug of apple cider that floated on a bed of sediment.

"Kyle? Is that you out there?" Zeb's voice boomed down the hall. "I need you to explain this mess to me."

Bern snickered behind the newspaper.

Dan scowled and wagged a finger. "Somebody's in trouble."

He rolled his eyes as he plodded down the hall, stepping over lumps in the carpet. The faux wood paneling held onto more smells than it had

been exposed to, rancid and sour. The den at the end of the hall was dark. Yellowing wallpaper peeled at the edges. Zeb sat at his metal desk, beard trailing into his lap, still wearing his thin blue pajamas.

“What the Sam Hill is this?” Zeb jabbed his finger at the computer screen. The monitor was ancient and took up half the desk. The other half was coffee cups and ash trays, littered with the cinder tumbleweeds of cigarettes past.

Kyle slipped behind the desk and stood next to him.

“That would be your bank balance. That’s the cash you have in the bank.”

Zeb spun to face him, eyes on fire, and Kyle stumbled back, taking shallow breaths of the acid air. “That’s not enough. Not enough! I thought you were better with money than with those tractors. That’s what your dad said. What you said. You did finance. Finance!” He waved his arms in the air. “For big fancy companies.”

“Investment portfolio management.” Kyle ran a hand over his face and squinted at the screen. “I can’t make money out of thin air. What are you saying is wrong with that number?”

He’d worked with plenty of clients who threw temper tantrums when they didn’t like the numbers, but none of them had half of Zeb’s unbridled ire, and their offices smelled nothing like this one.

Zeb’s eyes went so wide Kyle could see the white around them. “You paid the whole gas bill.”

“That’s what you do with the bills. You pay them. We’ve talked about that. This one has the biggest penalty. You don’t want to take on all that interest.”

Zeb leaned forward, pounding his finger on the desk like a teacher spelling out a wrong. “I need to pay my employees. If I can’t afford to

pay them, you'll be the first one not getting a check." He opened a drawer, pulled out a pack of smokes, and muttered as he tried to light one with fingers thin as twigs. "Too damn good at money for your own good, I tell ya. I hired you to fix some tractors as a favor to your dad 'cause he was a friend. Never shoulda let some city finance guy stick his nose in my damn books. Shoulda known when you blew all your own cash."

The lighter snapped and fire licked at the end of his cigarette.

"I didn't blow it. I took care of my father. I was trying to help. Him and you."

"You said you were good at it, though. You should have stuck to the tractors."

Kyle's blood boiled. He knew better than to react. Zeb was just trying to get a rise out of him.

Zeb took a long draw. Smoke curled from his nostrils. "You might be half as good at tractors as you are at finances, by your own standards, but at least I know what I'm getting out of you as a mechanic." He stood from his chair and cursed his knees. "All I know is you gotta figure this mess out. All of it. Ain't nobody around here gonna be happy until you do."

Zeb took an ashtray from the desk and scraped down the hall, brushing the walls with his papery skin and his thin pajamas.

"Hard work does not pay off around here, does it?"

His boss was too far off, and too hard of hearing, to pick up on his grievance.

"How did I even get here? And how the hell am I going to get out?"

Kyle fell into the warm seat and spun to face the numbers.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A Maryland native and Pennsylvanian at heart, Jennifer M. Lane holds a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Barton College and a master's in liberal arts with a focus on museum studies from the University of Delaware, where she wrote her thesis on the material culture of roadside memorials. She resides with her partner Matt and a tuxedo cat named Penny.

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