

Prologue

What is a weirdo?

Oftentimes, the term 'weirdo' was used as a thoughtless insult against socially awkward children. However, if you actually read a book or two every now and then, you'd eventually discover that Weirdo's are much more incredible than that. They're more common and useful than you think.

Some folks call them monsters; but truthfully speaking, only the most dangerous, vicious weirdos would be considered *monsters*. Those ones are a vocal minority. They definitely don't represent all who wield the title. At the end of the day, Weirdos are just people who don't think or talk or look the way we do. However, if they smell bad, keep your distance. They're probably not a Weirdo;. Instead, they're likely someone with poor hygiene habits. Carry on.

Chapter 1

Orange Soda

There was no chance in the universe that Penny Stracciatella could ever like me back.

That phrase stubbornly repeated itself in Cody's mind as he made his way up. He was climbing the ladder on a decrepit gas station store, like he had done a hundred times. It was a shock that the cheap plywood and metal on the store awning could hold his weight. Cody Overture was as thin as a breadstick, but even his scrawny body tempted gravity while on top of that shack.

As he scratched his messy blonde hair, loose strands got all over his sweater. It was a salmon sweater, a salmon-colored top with a picture of a salmon fish to be more specific. It was his favorite shirt, so he made sure to not get it wet from the awning. Every inch of the rooftop was wet thanks to a recent storm. School was even cancelled due to heavy rain and mudslides. While most of his classmates were seemingly out having fun with each other, he was risking a broken neck just to sit on a rooftop and gaze at the Lumberland Forest.

The setting sun cast a shimmering glow over the luscious, wet trees that stretched across the mountainous terrain. The result was a golden hue on the whole forest. It was a sight he'd never grow tired of. While taking in the sights, he cracked open a cold bottle of fresh orange soda.

Especially now, he needed this. As far as he knew, relaxing by an ethereal sunset was the best cure to a heart that was ripped to shreds.

All his thoughts suddenly became empty as a boastful windgust rushed past the ponderosa pines that bordered his homely town. The folks who lived here were strange people, modestly speaking. Most passerbies driving through town saw them as quirky. And compared to the residents, Cody felt he was odder than most of them. While his classmates were thinking of college, Cody was thinking about finding buried treasure. While his neighbors were thinking about lawn decorations, Cody was thinking about barricades from wild animals. It was already an issue that Cody lived in a weird town... but to be the weirdest kid in Lumberland, Colorado was quite another. It also hurt his chances with finding a date to the Spring Dance at his school.

Thankfully, there was only one girl in Cody's heart. His old classmate, Penny.

Penny Stracciatella was the kind of person that just made everything easier. Conversations were less nerve-wrecking. Problems were solved faster with her. And most importantly, her kindness came at a cost. She drove the truck that delivered snacks and drinks to the gas station store Cody worked at. And every time he would sign off a delivery, she'd leave him a spare bottle of orange soda. It was his favorite. He didn't even need to say it for her to know—

“Cody!! Good heavens! What the heck are you doing on the roof?”

He whipped his head downward and saw Mrs. Kumar - his manager - staring up at him from the parking lot. She wore her hair in a bun and was dressed up in a traditional Indian robe. She had her hands on her hips, but she looked more concerned than angry.

“Oh hey, Mrs. Kumar,” said Cody, nervously waving, “I'm just enjoying the sites of our beautiful nature surroundings...”

“Right. Yeah, I'm not gonna risk having to pay for your injuries because you wanted to enjoy nature. Please get down, *carefully*.”

Cody sighed and stood up from his resting spot. Before he could step down the ladder. He noticed a ruffle in the distant trees. Soon after, a murder of crows fled from the site. He hadn't seen crows in Lumberland for a long time.

“Hey, I have a question.” said Cody, descending the ladder.

“Hold on.” She replied, her arm stretched out as if she was physically halting him from speaking. “I have a question for you first.”

Cody nodded, having safely landed on the ground.

Mrs. Kumar looked left then right; and then with a cross expression, she asked, “Did you really flirt with the delivery girl?”

“I didn’t ask out anyone- w-wait, who told you that!?”

“My daughter said you were flirting with the delivery girl behind the building.”

Cody could feel himself shrinking into his clothes. Not only was he rejected by his love, but now there was an audience to it.

“I didn’t FLIRT with anybody. I asked a FRIEND if she wanted to hang out. And her response was to turn into an out-of-order slot machine spewing out random excuses.”

“Interesting word choices... What were her excuses?”

“Oh she had work. And she’s gonna be going on vacation that week. She thinks she’s gonna be sick tomorrow.”

“Well, if she’s gonna be both sick AND working, that’ll be bad for business. I’ll call for another driver to come in next time. Hang in there, buddy.”

“No, don’t punish her for establishing a boundary,” said Cody.

“Boundary? What is she, my landlord?”

“Just please keep on running the shop as usual. I promise it won’t be awkward.”

“This conversation is awkward.”

“Not to me. It’s actually nice to open up-”

“-Cody, I’m your boss, not a get-well card. This talk is uncomfortable.” said Mrs. Kumar. “As long as she doesn’t file a complaint, you’ll be fine. So, um, get back to work.”

“She’s my friend. She won’t complain. And I’m not scheduled today. I’m here to look at the trees.”

“Then look at the trees away from my shop... please. You’ll get hit by a road tripper at this station.”

Mrs. Kumar sympathetically patted Cody on the shoulder before retreating back to the store. Seconds after she did so, rain started pouring again. Even though the sun was still out the golden hour of evening, the clouds in the sky still wanted to drench Lumberland.

“Great timing, God.” Cody groaned.

The red sun sunk slowly past the hills that bordered the town. Its blanketing trees glistened from the evening sprinkle as murky streams rolled down the rocky slopes . Cody kicked down splotches of mud as he trudged down the forest trail. This was the path he always used to get home - so he knew it well. Regardless, it wasn't wise for anybody to travel in the woods alone at night... even the locals... especially when they were emotionally distracted. Before another downward-spiraling thought about lost romance could cross Cody's mind, another hustle and bustle from the trees sounded off. This time, it was louder and closer. On instinct, Cody looked up. And sure enough, more crows were gunning for the sky. Their screeches echoed across the dirt trail. Cody frowned. He knew what was causing this tree rustle, and he was probably the only one in town who had a clue on what it was.

“Ugh. Please don't be another monster.” Cody muttered to himself.

Lumberland was a strange place for many reasons. Despite its unique reputation, it had a secret far more absurd than all of its quirks combined. Only a few people knew this, but the whole forest and town was filled with vicious monsters invisible to the regular human eye. And it just so happened that Cody Overture was one of the few humans in the world who could see them.