

Chapter 5

Hit and Run

Cody propped a handful of wild flowers down by the construction site. The place was on the way to his work at the gas station, so he figured the least he could do was pay the proper respects to the late fiery beast.

“May you rest in peace Mr. Bull. At least you didn’t eat an entire dream village like that imaginary squirrel demon.”

He quickly made his way back to the main road. And as he went to cross the street, an oncoming pickup truck started speeding toward him. It screeched to a halt at the crosswalk, but the puddles on the dirt road only caused it to hydroplane. It swerved to the side of the road as Cody leapt out of the way. His face first landed on a big rock.

“Oh, give me a break! Come on!” He cried out.

The truck had skidded to a complete stop. The driver couldn’t be seen due to a sun glare on the windshield. The only thing he could see inside was a rubber duck hanging from the truck’s car mirror. It rocked back and forth like it was just in a storm. The window of the truck rolled down, revealing Penny, the actual real life one. This time, her hair was brown unlike in Cody’s dream. She stepped around, barely able to keep her balance. The sudden stop must’ve put her in quite the daze.

“I’m so sorry, sir! I couldn’t stop the car in time. Are you hurt?” said Penny. “Wait. Cody?”

Penny took her sunglasses off to get a better look at him.

“Penny?”

“Oh my goodness, Cody, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay, worse things have happened to me”, said Cody, nervously scratching his back. He slowly picked himself while making his best effort to look Penny in the eyes without getting nervous. “Are you okay?”

“Only my pride’s hurt.” She shrugged. “I should be the one asking if you’re okay.”

“Don’t worry. Your car didn’t even touch me.”

“Okay, that’s good”, said Penny, opening the truck’s side door. She pulled out a bottle of orange soda. “Here, take this as a token of apology.”

“You’re gonna give me diabetes with all these tokens.”

“Give it to the poor then.”

“Thanks.” Said Cody as he took the bottle.

In a world where everybody was a closed book, Penny was a walking theatre production. She expressed herself in every motion, and it made talking with her so easy. Even the way she handed a bottle was meaningful. Most people pointed the cap at the person they’re handing it to. Penny oriented the bottle to fit perfectly into the hand of the other.

And now here she was, being concerned for Cody when she didn’t even hit him. “Do you really mean it that you’re not hurt?” She asked.

Cody nodded.

“In that case,” Penny continued, “I need to head out. I’ve got a million deliveries today!”

“Wooow, a million? Yesterday was only a hundred thousand-”

Penny drove off before he could finish his sentence. Cody stood there in silence, feeling like he could melt into a puddle out of embarrassment. Quite literally, he did feel like he was melting. Drops of water ran down his head, except it wasn’t raining.

“Am I sweating that much?”

Cody touched the side of his head and instantly realized he was bleeding. Penny definitely didn’t hit him, so this must have been from the rock he jumped onto.

I’ve gotta stop leaping out of the way whenever I see danger.

Inspecting the dark red marks on his hand, he began to feel light headed. He must’ve hit that boulder pretty hard. Thankfully, he felt no pain.

“It’s okay,” he said to himself. “I’ll just wash everything off before I get to work, and then I’ll check it again during break.”

Fortunately for Cody, it was slow for a Saturday at the gas station. Usually, many roadtrippers passed through Lumber Land during that time of the day. But likely due to the mudslides, his work shift was calm and quiet. During his break, Cody took a swig from the bottle of orange soda. He smacked his lips with a scowl. He didn’t want to like orange soda anymore. It reminded him of failure and pain. Unfortunately, orange soda was too addicting to wean off.

Right as he stood to check on his head wound, a clumsy hand smacked the half-drunk bottle right from his grip. Not to his surprise, it was his co-worker, Chris Lief Clover. He was half black, half Irish, and always out of luck. This boy was even smaller than Cody, and yet he still had the guts to mess with him every now and then.

“You know orange soda stains don’t go away from sanitizer. You need the big boy chemicals to get ‘em out.” said Chris. “And you’re putting that in your body!”

“Worse stuff has entered it, like your mom’s lasagna.”

“Hey, no one else got sick from it. Your stomach’s just weak.”

“Or maybe Irish mothers should stick to making Corn Beef.”

“Come on, man! Why’d ya have to go there? She does Irish cuisine better than your mom does Mexican food.”

“My mom’s Costa Rican!” Cody burst out. “You could’ve just said tacos and been accurate.”

“Sh-shhut up. Your stomach’s WEAK.”

Mrs. Kumar, their boss, suddenly popped out of her office window and **shushed** them.

“I guess I’ll have to strengthen it by drinking the orange chemicals,” said Cody, shrugging with a wide smirk.

Chris chuckled back and tossed the bottle back to Cody. He missed, and it shattered against the stony ground.

“HEY!!” shouted Mrs. Kumar.

The cocky smile from Chris’ face disappeared in a flash. “Uhh s-sorry, Mrs. Kumar. I’ll clean it up immediately.”

As Chris scurried to grab a bucket full of cleaning supplies, Cody went to clock back in.

“How did things go with Penny!?” Chris called out from around the corner.

Right after she was out of his mind, her name just had to be brought up again!

Cody froze in place. “Ummm, she got lost at sea.”

“Don’t be stupid. Did she say yes?”

Cody could hear the sly grin on Chris. He groaned and sighed before responding. "A lot of things. And the more I think about it, the less I want to remember."

"That's your body recovering from the pain, bro." Chris said while sweeping the broken glass. "Did she seem grossed out? Or did she tense up like a deer in headlights?"

"None of that. She just - in the most casual way possible - stated how a simple hangout was impossible."

"Dang, most girls usually take the casual hangout."

Cody faintly nodded, trying to conceal his heartbreak from showing.

"She probably likes guys who actually focus on their work", said Ria as she stepped in to grab a stack of newspapers.

"We're on break." Said Cody

"I'm not." Said Chris.

Ria glared at the two with eyes that burned with the rage of a 1000 suns. Then she shut them and turned herself around in disbelief. "I didn't hear that. I didn't see you." she said.

"Hey Ria," called out Cody. "How long does it take for a girl to realize they like a man?"

"You're still going on about Penelope?"

Cody and Chris went absolutely still.

"She goes by Penny." Cody muttered.

"Oh my gosh, you are! Cody, stay away from her!"

"I'm trying to. But-"

"No 'buts!' You have more important things to worry about in life." said Ria, rolling her eyes. She faced Chris and continued, "Did you know this guy bested a monster of fire last night?"

"Wait, what!" Cody panicked.

"He beat him like a matador. Genius!" Ria said to Chris.

"Code, I didn't know you had that in ya!"

"No one was supposed to see that!"

“Technically, I can’t ever see it-- but I saw fire sparks and smoke coming from the construction zone! You totally prevented a wildfire from happening.”

“Is that true, Code?”

Cody stumbled over his words as he rushed to a response. “R-ria didn’t s-see anything. And you didn’t hear anything, Chris! Also, the forest was never in danger of a wildfire. The whole area was wet.”

“Cody, don’t talk yourself down like that. You’re a monster hunter! You should be chasing DEMONS, not women.”

Chris was about to make a joke, but Ria stopped him. “Shush! We all know the joke you’re gonna say, and it’s not gonna be funny.”

“Hey, when you talk about monster hunting, can you make sure you’re a little louder so the customers outside can ALSO HEAR YOU!”

“What customers?” Ria retorted. “And you’re embarrassed about monster hunting?”

“No, it’s just a secret.”

“Your crush on Penny should be a secret. Did you know she skipped her delivery today?” Ria groaned.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. She never showed up.”

“But I saw her earlier.”

“Stalking now? I see.” said Ria, as she stepped out of the breakroom.

Cody followed her into the cashier counter. “No, she almost hit me with her truck.”

“Wow. It’s astonishing what us gals have to go through to let a guy know we’re not interested.”

“It’s not like that. She couldn’t brake because of the mudslides. And she was in such a rush, she barely had time to check I wasn’t hurt.”

“She was rushing to ditch you.”

“I know that sounds like a dumb excuse not to talk. But she didn’t seem uncomfortable or anything. In fact, she was talking like I never asked her out!”

“Because she was uncomfortable, dude!”

“She gave me that orange soda bottle.” Cody pointed to the broken bottle as Chris was walking in with his dustpan. “If she was willing to violate company protocol to do something nice for me, I doubt she’d skip a delivery to avoid me.”

Ria paused, and then nodded in agreement. “You might not be totally wrong, but why would she not show up?”

“The roads. She could’ve gotten into an accident.”, said Chris. “For crying out, she almost hit Cody.”

“Is that why you’re bleeding?” Ria asked.

Cody’s jaw dropped. He tapped his hand against his temple, feeling a small trickle of blood again.

“Dang it.”

The three kids quickly dealt with the wound by notifying Mrs. Kumar and then using a first aid kit. Afterwards, Cody had a big white gauze wrapped around his head in diagonal fashion. Afterward, the rest of the day passed by quietly. Penny never ended up showing up. Eventually, each of the three attempted to reach out to her on their phones. None of them were successful. Once the end of his shift had come, Cody grabbed a strawberry soda bottle. He set it down on some newspaper at the counter as he rumbled around his pocket for change.

“Penny’s probably fine. You don’t have to worry about her.” said Ria as she opened her register.

“But she didn’t respond to any of our messages.”

“That’s not your concern.”

“But what if I was possibly the last person who saw her-”

“Heed my word, **boy**.” said Ria. “Leave Penny Stracciatelli alone!”

Cody glanced down at the newspaper as he took his bottle. Having a hunch something was wrong, he grabbed the paper and started flipping through the pages, frantically searching for any announcements of a missing teen. Even if the pages came up blank, he knew what to do next.