

## Dear at Any Price

Cody twisted his cigarette butt into the seat of his car as soon as he saw the black sedan roll up the hill. Shit. Most of the time, Cody was an auto mechanic, and all he could tell about the car was that it was a Volkswagen, an overseas model you wouldn't find walking onto any old car lot. It was the nicest car that Cody had seen so far. Usually, these guys knew better and drove rented economy cars. But Cody wasn't gonna complain. It just meant a bigger payday, anyways. Cody wrenched the ignition off immediately, interrupting Lorretta Lynn mid-song, and climbed out of the truck before the Volkswagen had made it within a thousand feet of him.

The man who slipped from the fancy car wasn't anything special to look at visually-- he looked like any other insurance agent. The man was a head shorter than Cody, with a skinny yet pillowy build, donned in a short-sleeved teal fishing shirt and a brand-new pair of hiking boots. He pushed his glasses up his nose and smiled politely.

"Mr. Sidonia?"

"You can just call me Cody."

"Well, Cody, it's nice to meet you. I'm Mr. O'Reilly, with Cardinal Health." Cody shook O'Reilly's eely hand. "I see why you're the expert on the valley, here. This little old place isn't even on our maps. I've never had to take two separate gravel roads to get anywhere before," he chuckled, turning around towards his car.

Cody grunted in response. "This place ain't even on the radar for most rangers, either, so it's perfect, as long as you keep it lowkey." He spit out a loogie on the gravel beneath their feet. "When you bring your people back here, you oughta not bring a car that nice."

O'Reilly chuckled as he turned back around, fumbling with a little notebook in his hands, languidly elbowing the car door closed, the sound of which made him jump in terror, like an old

dog startling at the sound of its own fart. The man laughed it off self-consciously. "I'll make a note of that," he smiled appreciatively, clicking his pen.

The way that the man's bumpy tongue stuck out at the corner of his mouth in concentration as he wrote made Cody's stomach churn. He stared resolutely at the journal in the man's grip instead, navy, and embossed with Chinese characters in the upper righthand corner. He darted his eyes up to the man's deep horseshoe hairline and his dimpled forehead. Still gross. Cody shifted his feet.

"O-kaaay, got it. Are you ready to mosey down the trail?"

Cody nodded. "D'ya mind if I bring my rifle?" he pointed his thumb over his shoulder to the rifle leaning out of his truck bed.

Mr. O'Reilly's lip jutted out in consideration as he eyed it. "Sure, I guess."

Silently, Cody retrieved his gun. Flicked the safety off. Loaded it, sliding a shell into the magazine, tugged on the bolt. Flicked the safety back on. Slung it over his back, grabbing the bundle of trail markers. Then he marched down the trail without another word.

"Ah-- wait up!" O'Reilly scrambled behind him to catch up, walking behind Cody and his rifle. Not a word was said at first as they descended down towards the river gorge. It was just birds, some sparrows singing, peckers pecking, mockingbirds mocking. The trees swayed like slow pompoms overhead. The gun clacked against the metal embellishments on Cody's belt. They stopped along the way, every now and then to tie a ribbon around a tree to mark the trail, and that was when O'Reilly would try to make conversation.

"You hunt very often?" O'Reilly asked, panting.

Cody grunted, finishing the bow tie knot around the tree efficiently. "No sir."

They moved onto the next tree a couple hundred feet up the trail. Pine straw crunched beneath their feet.

“Why not? I’m sure there’s great game down here. Deer, ducks-- hell, bet there’s wild turkeys running around too.”

Cody hummed. “There sure is. And plenty more than that.”

Knot tied, they kept walking.

They came into a deeper gorge in the valley where the trees nearly blocked out the pale morning sky. Cody started walking slower, assessing his surroundings, watching O’Reilly, who was swatting the bugs that kept landing on him. A little red splat of his own blood tomatoed against his arm. They just kept on coming, though. He sniffed.

“This is probably a good resting point for the moment, before we need to be cautious,” Cody said, tying another neon pink ribbon to a tree.

Mr. O’Reilly fumbled a step. “Is there-- is there something dangerous here?”

Cody stopped walking, and O’Reilly nearly tumbled right into his back. He gestured towards a tree stump for his guest to sit at, which he plopped himself down upon, looking up anxiously at Cody.

“My whole family’s from around here, always has been. Doe River Valley’s always been our home. I’ve played in these woods since I was a kid. Started goin’ on hikes as soon as I grew into my uncle’s old pair of boots, from when he was a kid. But my gran, she always warned me not to stay out here too long, or go too deep in the river gorge. This’s why nobody comes down to this neck of the woods, this deep down the gorge. Our town’s got plenty of hunters who get rabbits or fowl, but nobody ‘round here shoots deer, even though there are plenty. You just don’t,” Cody murmured, eyes downcast. And then, “There are stories.”

“Stories?” O’Reilly repeated.

“That’s right.”

“What kind of stories?” His bald head was getting shinier with sweat.

“Well. My Auntie Enid used to date a guy named Cal. Cal wasn’t from this valley, he came from south of here, ‘round Pigeon Forge. You know it?”

“I think so. Where Dolly Parton’s from, right?”

Cody grinned. “Yep. Dollywood. You should’ve stopped by on your way here. I fucking love Dolly Parton. My mom raised me on her and Tammy and Patsy. You know, I can never decide between Patsy and Dolly. Mama and Gran always preferred Patsy Cline, because of the haunting way she’d tell her stories. She’s got that voice, y’know. Haunting. Grips you from the very start. And I get it, y’know. I really do. That song makes me feel like I’m in the bottom of a canyon. There’s nothing like it. It’s probably the best song ever, though she didn’t write it.

“And maybe that’s why I prefer Dolly. She does it all. Throw an instrument at her, and she’d play it somehow. Hell, on ‘9 to 5,’ she uses the click-clack of her own fingernails on the song. She writes her own songs, y’know. And her songs, they tell stories too, like Patsy, they just sneak up on you, you don’t suspect ‘em when she’s singing in that nice pleasant voice of hers. Even the sad ones sound like they’re sung with love. I reckon I like that better about her. She does it all, she loves it all, you know, and you can tell. Hell, look at Dollywood. The impact it has had on her community has been phenomenal. Business-wise, obviously, but uplifting the people-- most people don’t know this, but she delivers a book to needy children each month. It’s really uplifted that community. It’s inspirational.

“When I try to explain this to my family, they don’t get it. They see all the bells and whistles and tits and they don’t get it. They’re women, so you think they would, but hey--

anyways. I want to do the kinds of things Dolly does, you know, for the community. But, even then, 'Crazy' is probably the best song of all time. I'm caught in the middle, you see... What do you think, Mr. O'Reilly? Who do you like better?"

O'Reilly cleared his throat a little, thinned his lips, then smiled politely. "Well, I suppose I don't have a preference with country music. I like when Blake Shelton comes on the radio."

Cody's smile dimmed. "Blake Shelton, huh?"

O'Reilly cleared his throat a second time, straightening his shoulders. "What was that you were saying about the stories? Your aunt's boyfriend?"

"Oh yeah, that." Cody frowned. "Well, my Auntie Enid dated a guy named Cal from Pigeon Forge. Not from around here. He was a real nice guy. Ended up here for work. I'm a mechanic, you know. Well, he dabbled in it. Whenever he'd be working on a car I'd sit on a milk crate in the garage and watch. I liked it. It was like a puzzle. And cars look real cool. There was a period of time where they broke up and Auntie kicked him out of her house, so he lived out of his car, until he went repenting on his knees at her doorstep. They never had any issues again after that. He was the closest thing to a father I ever had.

"But, well, he wasn't from around here, so he never listened to the superstitious stories my family fed him. He got tired of hunting rabbits and ducks and decided to go hunting for deer. He wanted me to taste veal at least once in my life. Well, against everybody's protests, he ventured into the valley, here. It was from him, really, that I learned of this spot at all, and about foraging, too. One morning before everybody else had woken up, he told me he was gonna go down into the woods here and shoot me the biggest buck in the damn county."

Cody paused for a stretch, closing his eyes.

"And," O'Reilly stammered, "and did he get the deer?"

“No,” Cody sighed, “he didn’t. Nobody heard from the poor bastard ever again. Broke Auntie’s heart at first. But she got over it quickly. Blamed it on him not listening to her, not respecting local tradition. She’s always loved the valley. If he’d have come back from it, she may have kicked his ass to the curb again. Who knows.” Cody shrugged.

O’Reilly looked like he was about to start beavering away at his fingernails. Cody tried not to smile at his expression. That story always worked.

“Moral of the story-- don’t mess with the deer here. You oughta write that down before you head back. Now, come on, let’s get going. Be sure to be real quiet, from here on out, too. I double tied the tree to help you remember.”

They kept walking down the trail. Downhill, downhill, downhill. O’Reilly stopped making comments at each trail marker. The air chilled as they descended into the earth, and Cody thought he heard the man’s teeth chatter at one point. Meek sunshine broke through the canopy like splattered paint before them. Something like an owl hooted as they reached the base of the gorge.

Cody stopped again. He was holding out his arm for O’Reilly to stop behind him, every muscle stiff. A gust of wind bristled the treetops.

“D’ya see that?” Cody rasped.

O’Reilly startled. “Where?” he hissed, darting his eyes across the whistling, empty treeline on the other side of the clearing.

“In front of us. On the ground.”

O’Reilly craned his head down. Clover and grass and fungi blanketed the clearing. He squinted. Among it all, he made out little red clusters that dotted the floor. Red clusters standing on stalks with three leaves, with five leaflets. “Ginseng!”

Cody dropped his arm. “Don’t step on it. Go ahead and see if it’s to your needs.”

O’Reilly scrambled to his knees, inspecting a few different plants along the forest floor, ambling towards the bellybutton of it all. Carefully, the man scraped at the dirt, uprooting the plant in a swift, steady jerk. He whistled at it. “Geez, get a load of this. Thick roots, and old too. Take a look at all these scars,” he traced his nail along the indentations. “Shanghai is gonna love this.”

Cody watched from the edge of the clearing as Mr. O’Reilly scrambled around in the clover, back turned, holding up ginseng roots in the spots of sunlight.

As quiet as he could manage, Cody slung the rifle off his shoulder. He turned the safety off, raised the gun a little. Double checking, he confirmed that O’Reilly was none the wiser. These kinds of poachers never were.

He lined up the bald shiny head in his sights, rear and front, and took a deep breath.

A branch snapped. *Click, click, click.*

On the other side of the clearing, in front of O’Reilly, stood a deer.

It was a buck, really, a proper stag. A fearsome thing, tall and confident. Its antlers twisted back like goat horns, like a corkscrewed oak tree, each antler branched into a fine point. The thing looked lean, like it hadn’t eaten, malnourished with all its ribs poking out, its fur coarse like a tomcat. It was strange, but Cody had never actually seen a deer in these woods before, not even once. The scary stories were supposed to be just that-- stories.

The stag stepped out into the clearing.

O’Reilly darted his head up, dangling a ginseng root like nothing was wrong. Then, “Oh, oh hey--” Cody was able to see the exact moment that his story flashed back into the man’s mind. His knuckles turned white around the plant.

Frantic, and still pointing the gun at the back of his head, Cody hissed, “Don’t move an inch!”

O’Reilly stayed kneeling, stock-still, a rope of ginseng root dangling in his hand. The back of his head got shinier in the light.

*Click, click, click.* The noise, again. The buck’s jaw was unhinging, or trying to. Cody realizes it was its teeth, clacking together like tap shoes.

Cody could hear O’Reilly whispering something. A prayer, probably. But Cody couldn’t make out the words.

The buck took another step forward. Cody realized that its limbs were bowed out, like the joints had been attached the wrong way, ambling like a grasshopper. Drool trickled out of the thing’s mouth like a lazy fountain. It was trembling.

Cody raised the sights to the deer’s skull. He had a clear shot, right through the eye. But--

*Click, click, click.* That noise was bothering him. Where had he heard it from before? It almost sounded like summer cicadas perched outside his bedroom window, like the woodpeckers in his backyard, like Mama cracking an egg on the side of the mixing bowl, like the tapping of Gran’s foot to the record player, like the scolding click of Auntie Enid’s tongue, like the sound of Cal’s hammer walloping against the nails in a half-built birdhouse, like the sound of the river at night, the sound of something he knew most intimately.

Cody still had the stag clearly in his sights, but--

The buck stepped forward again, and O’Reilly started trembling with it. Cody marveled at how it was still alive. Its fur seemed matted with blood.

*Click, click, click.*

Cody lowered his gun.



*Click, click, click.*

The buck limped forward again.

O'Reilly cleared his throat. "H-hey there big fella--"

The buck charged him full speed.

A dull thud rang across the valley. The buck slammed its skull against O'Reilly's. He shrieked mously, scrambled against the creature. His hands reached for its antlers to push it back, but the damn things were so sharp, his palm slid right through them. O'Reilly wailed. His glasses crunched under the deer's hoof. Pinned, O'Reilly squirmed like a fish.

Then the buck got to work. It slammed its skull against O'Reilly's, again and again, skull-splitting cracks, and cracks, and cracks. Pink matter spilled open across the clearing. Cody couldn't tell whose it really was. *Crack, crack, crack.* Wet cotton candy.

O'Reilly stopped screaming at some point. His skull had been cracked open like a creme brulee, all the gooey warm insides oozing out. When the buck pulled back and removed O'Reilly's corpse from its antlers, it didn't look much better. Blood tinged Pepto Bismol pink dribbled down its snout, from the gaping gorge in its head. *Had that been there the whole time?* Cody wondered. The buck dipped down and tasted the brains with a fluttering tongue. *Click*, it seemed to say in compliment.

When it rose, it met Cody's gaze, completely quiet, save for one inquisitorial click, completely still, too. Cody felt like he couldn't move a muscle, brow furrowed. Again, *Click?* It asked. Stiffly, he nodded towards the deer, in acknowledgement. *Click.* It felt like shaking hands. Satisfied, the buck licked its lips and flitted out of the clearing the way it came.

Cody stood in the clearing, gun in his loose grip, sweat prickling at his neck, in silence, for about a minute. "Fuck."

He swiped the man's crumpled little notebook and car keys from his pants pockets, and then marched out of the base of the gorge. He untied all the pink ribbons smoothly, whistling his favorite tune. Walking uphill felt like gliding on air. He hitched the fancy car to the back of his truck and drove home, listening to Dolly Parton on the radio with a smile on his face.

A week later, when Cody came down into the Doe River Valley Gorge with another sucker, the only thing that witnessed them was a perky field of clover and ginseng, and the distant clacking of teeth.