

A calico fox let out a hearty sigh, a smile across his face as he set down the phone. His tail swishing back and forth, still filled with joy from that sorely needed call. His ears twitched as he heard a rumbling pounding, hurried heavy steps making their way towards him.

It was a rushing gator with the toothiest grin this side of the Mississippi, laser focused on the fox. "Liam, ralentis!" The fox exclaimed. But he already knew it was a lost cost, and moments later, Liam had scooped the petite fox into a full body hug with nearly enough force to turn him into pâte.

"Brah, I'm so happy he made it up there safe. We gotta go get all his stuff in the mail" Liam, wasn't really giving Tobin, the fox much of a say in the matter, the creature currently struggling to pull free and get a breath of fresh air.

He kicked the gator in the knee firmly enough to knock sense back into the large beast. Liam immediately dropped the fox to the ground. "Sorry Tobin, just we gotta hurry!" Tobin huffed at the gator's words, the fox pulling his TMNT shirt down over his toned gut.

"The postman ain't gonna send it any quicker if we take a little extra time. We still gotta pack the rest of it." Upon making that remark in perfect Creole French, Tobin left the sunroom, with Liam following behind as they headed upstairs to the fox's room. Most of his things were already boxed, ready to unpack into a dorm room later that week.

Alongside one wall there was a collection of items belonging to their closest friend Cody, a projector reel, a box packed to bursting with reels of film, a few rolled movie posters, clothes, and art supplies aplenty. "Hey Toby, I was thinking maybe we could do something special fer Cody." The gator spoke as he fidgeted with a Rubix cube, eyeing the fox inventorying everything they had to get in the mail.

"What do you have in mind?" Tobin stood and got his notebook, checking over the list he had of everything Cody had left in their care. "We gots to send him a care package, not just stuff from us. What about.... Garth?"

Liam had set the toy down, having stood up to poke through the reels of film. *"Eh! Don't mess with that. I got everything organized."* Tobin sighed, setting the notebook down. *"That idea ain't half bad. We never did manage to get that one gift, you know the one."*

"Well it's settled then! Come on, let's head over to Garth's first. Gonna need some full stomachs to tackle today." Liam started taping up boxes that Tobin signed off on, and worked on carrying them down to his truck.

The pair spent the next thirty minutes getting everything loaded into Liam's truck. Most of it was packed for shipping already, they'd just need a few more supplies from Coyote Courier Express, which they would be getting by the end of the day.

Climbing into the gator's truck, the fox glanced over at the unusually empty seat in the middle, eyeing an unexpected new addition. A small stuffed otter plushie, duct taped to the bench seat in a way that looked the mark of a serial killer. Tobin cocked his head to the side a little, right ear flicking as he tried to process the sight. *"Really, Liam... What the hell is that?"* Liam looked hot in the face, rubbing the back of his head nervously.

"I got tired of his spot being lonely... but it kept falling off so I used some tape." Tobin let out a soft chattering laugh at the gator's logic. *"Cody Jr. I like it, but maybe we should get him a baby seat or something. Anyone else finds that thing duct taped like a kidnap victim, probably gonna call the cops on ya."*

Liam, Tobin, and Cody Jr. set off in the truck, heading through the vibrant city they loved, even if it did seem just a little less cheerful now that Cody had moved away to Montana. Liam started singing along to '9 to 5' with a gruffness to his tone that only hardcore Country lovers would appreciate.

Tobin sighed as he distractedly looked out the window. It seemed as if every turn Liam took, drove them past another hangout spot, another film location, it was like watching a slideshow of his life pass by, each slide a little underexposed, dark, missing a spark to bring the whole image together.

Then Liam took a sharp turn, Tobin fumbled, falling over in his seat, colliding against Liam's side, Cody Jr. squished under the fox. He huffed and quickly sat back upright, ears going flat, even trembling a little. Barely managing to keep tears at bay. *"Sorry..."* Liam glanced over, trying to think of what to say *"Maybe we should get a baby seat like ya said."*

After a short ten minute drive, they parked on the street alongside Chef Garth's restaurant, 'Creole Bear's Grove.' The place was absolutely jumping with locals enjoying the best breakfast in N'awlins, after a quarter-hour wait Sandra, the white-tailed deer, radiating her usual aura of motherly love, led them to a table out in the garden.

"You boys want the usual?" She asked, not even setting down menus for the pair. "Yes please, thank you Sandy." Liam smiled, Tobin gave a nod, looking around the garden, replaying the farewell boil it hosted for Cody mere days ago in his mind. He soon found himself wondering if it had always been so dull, so plain-looking.

Sandra returned a short while later, setting down two glasses of authentic southern sweet tea, and a pitcher filled to the brim with more. "Y'all heard from him yet?" She asked, taking a seat at the table with them, probably catching the vibe.

"Yea, just a bit ago. He got an apartment already, so we's gonna mail all his stuff up later today." Sandra's ears perked at Liam's words. "Oh good, so he's having an alright time of it than?" She glanced over at Tobin. *"Still being as lucky as ever I think. He's got a job already too. But, we're gonna put together a little care package to send with his stuff."*

"I figure you're gonna ask chef Garth to add something to the package, yea?" She stood back up, glancing across the garden at a table motioning for attention. Not giving the pair a chance to respond "We're kinda slammed right now, tell you what. Swing back by 'round three, when we're switching things over for dinner. I've got something to add to it as well." She gave Tobin a gentle pet between his calico ears, and patted Liam on the shoulder, heading off to tend to more customers.

Their breakfast was delivered soon, a sizable portion of biscuits and gravy for Liam, and a Creole omelet, stuffed with Andouille sausage for Tobin. Hardly a word shared between them as they tucked into a feast that would fuel the day ahead.

Not long after, with their stomachs full, they loaded back into the truck. Tobin even gave a playful pat on Cody Jrs head, the stuffed toy still trapped in duct tape bondage, as helpless as the real Cody probably would be once Liam finally got a chance to hug the otter again.

Winding their way through the city, they made some stops at several of their favorite stores, picking up some more Polaroid film for Cody, a few packaged delicacies that they suspected he would never find in Montana.

Their last stop was a thrift store, looking rather out of place as they walked down rows of baby clothes, toys, strollers, and other items. The large gator holding the otter plush, bits of duct tape still clung to it, figuring it'd be good to have the toy there for scale.

"What about this one?" Liam set the plushie in a baby seat covered in pastel blue fabric, patterned with white flower outlines. Even going so far as to test out the buckle, making sure it fit well. Tobin raised a brow at the sight of the plush tucked in safely, when it suddenly dawned on him what they were doing.

"Sacrébleu, *what the hell are we doing damn it? Why are we in a store buying baby stuff like we're little girls?*" Tobin turned his back to the sight, looking out in the store and away from the kids' stuff. Liam undid the plush, and held it on top of the foxes head."

"It's so you don't keep falling over, you want me to put you in a baby seat instead?" Liam chuckled, trying to make the best of the situation. The joke even got a little snarl and a half smile out of the fox, who stepped away from the gator.

"*What do you think Cody would say if he saw us doing this? Probably tell us to use that plushie as a stunt double for him, buy little clothes for it.*" But then, Tobin paused, ears lowering again. "...*Except, If he was here to say that...we wouldn't even need the stupid seat, or the toy.*" Tobin balled his fists a little, brow furrowed "Why'd he have to move..."

Liam put the toy back in the seat, pulling Tobin into a gentle hug from behind. "I know it's sad, heck I thought you was gonna make fun of me for even having the stuffed toy." Freeing Tobin from the hug, the fox turned to look at the gator, still looking tense. "We got's to find ways to keep going with the current though, getting upset and trying to swim upstream isn't going to help us feel better."

Liam looked over at the plushie, smiling a little, though there was a clear shimmer of tears in his eyes. "If Cody knew what we's up to, I think... I think he'd find it funny and turn it into a movie. Couple of dudes having to raise a baby together, finally make a comedy or sumtin'." Tobin laughed at the notion, finally cracking a smile again, the anger fading away.

"*Shut up you big marshmallow.*" Tobin playfully punched Liam in the arm. "*Come on, let's just get that one so we can go get lunch.*" Liam promptly picked up the blue baby seat, and after checking out, they managed to get the seat in place. After they checked out, and got the seat in place—it was just the right fit to fill the space between them, and the toy looked like it rather belonged there, at least until Cody could make his way back to N'awlins. Already in their seats, the pair headed off to have lunch near Lake Pontchartrain.

Liam was enjoying a shrimp Po' boy, seated on the grass, a gentle breeze coming in to offer a reprieve from the hot summer afternoon. Tobin had just finished up his bowl of salad, eyes fixated on the boats moving around the lake. "*I think we should go see his teety.*" He said without flinching.

Liam choked on a piece of shrimp at Tobin's words, thumping his chest with a balled hand to get air back in. "Bruh, what?! No way, what if Mr. Laurent is there?" Looking over to Tobin.

"*I'll kick his ass if he tries anything. We're eighteen now, we can fight back.*" Tobin had a fire in his eyes, looking ready for the chance to pick a fight with Cody's abusive father, one that would make the previous spat seem like a preamble.

"Well, ya, but what do you think we can find there?" Liam glanced over for a moment as he asked, before returning to his sandwich.

Tobin jerked his head towards his friend "*How should I know? Why do you gotta keep asking so many dang questions?*" the fox's tone had changed sharply, his fur now bristled. "*I don't always have the answers. Why don't you just ask Cody? Oh, that's right, we can't because he left us behind!*"

Liam looked down at the grass, dragging his knees up against himself as best he could. "Sorry... I didn't mean to ask so many questions." A few tears rolled down the gator's snout. "Cody didn't leave us behind... he's gonna come back, he promised. We just gotta wait a bit. It'll be ok. Remember we're gonna see him for winter break, see all the cool art stuff he learned."

The gator sounded a little more cheerful towards the end, still confident that Cody would stay true to his words.

Yet the fox didn't seem to be comforted by a lick of it *"Yea, sure he is. He's just gonna make new friends and forget about us. You heard how happy he was."* Tobin let out a heavy sigh, punching the ground lightly with one balled paw before laying down fully.

"Doesn't matter. Look, Emma and his mom are about the only blood that ever cared about him. Maybe he will forget about us, maybe he won't, but the decent thing to do is ask her if she wants to send something."

"I guess..." Liam relented, laying back as well, both creatures finding themselves in a lingering moment of sadness, accompanied by tension thick enough to cut with a knife. A longing for Cody to be here with them, talking about their first college film over lunch, squeezing every minute of fun they could out of summer before the semester started. As much as they tried, there was a constant about them these past few days, a gap in their system, a void where once Cody shone, a freshly- opened wound that festered.

The holy trinity wasn't just a term used for Cajun cuisine, three foundation ingredients that served as the base of just about every southern masterpiece. The term also applied for their friendship, an intuitive, complimentary understanding of each other, a melody that put a skip in their step, that was now missing a note, an essential part of a recipe gone.

"Come on, let's get back to Garth's." Tobin reluctantly stood up, quietly heading back for the truck with Liam. The pair drove back to Chef's restaurant, which always closed for an hour and a half between lunch and dinner both as a chance to prep, and treat the staff to the Chef's special dish for that night.

A large black bear, heavy in the waist, a heavy seasoning of salt and pepper fur on his muzzle, with deep brown eyes, currently stood in the garden area, checking on the state of whole turkeys that'd already spent hours in the large smoker. *"Bonjour chef!"* the bear stood tall upon hearing Tobin's voice, turning to face them with a massive smile *"Bonjour! Sandy let me know what y'all are up to. Sit, sit, I'll be right back."*

Liam didn't have to be asked twice, while Tobin wandered over to the smoker. The fox took a deep breath of the BBQ bird, tail swishing back and forth, damn-near drooling from the spicy scent. The bear soon returned, laughing at the sight of the fox who looked ready to crawl into the smoker. *"Come o'r here a moment Tobin."* The bear set a small cloth bundle on the table, rolling it open to reveal a small selection of knives. Top quality, stainless steel, the envy of many a professional cook. *"So I got these knives for him, also got him a big jar of my famous rub, there's something else I want to get him, but that will have to wait till Christmas probably."*

"Well, these are for me, but what did you get Cody?" Liam joked, abashedly rubbing the back of his head like he wasn't entirely joking. Tobin half-smiled, then looked up at the bear approvingly *"Merci, chef. Cody is going to love this."*

The trio were soon joined by Sandra, the motherly deer carrying over a large blanket, made of over two hundred crocheted Black-eyed Susans.

"I wasn't able to finish it in time for his departure, but it's done now. Should help keep Cody nice and warm up there." Tobin picked up the heavy, folded blanket, his smile growing further. *"It's beautiful, Sandy, merci."* Both Sandy and Garth included letters with their gifts, which the fox also took. Not a second later the bear was already pulling Tobin and Liam into separate firm hugs, his hearty laugh filling their chests.

"You two best be back for dinner tonight; I'll keep a table open for you." Though their visit was brief, it was bountiful—the personal gifts no doubt would be a welcome sight for the otter, so far from home.

Neither of them was entirely looking forward to their next stop, though: a more recently constructed house about forty minutes from the heart of the city. Once there, they found a petite golden furred otter right outside, tending to her many bird feeders.

Liam stood awkwardly by the truck, eyes anxiously darting in every direction— but thankfully not seeing any sign of Mr. Laurent's station wagon.

"Bonjour Miss Emma." Tobin gave Liam a kick in the shins, motioning with his head for the gator to get over it and walk over to the otter. The middle-aged woman looked up at the boys *"Bonjour, how are you two?"* She stood up and wiped her paws on her skirt.

"We's alright, just getting ready for college n' such." Liam was stiff, which was unusual—he never had trouble talking with Cody's aunt before, they got along well enough, but it felt weird being here without Cody, and even a little worrying that Mr. Laurent would show up and cause trouble.

"Well, is there something I can do for y'all?" She looked at her watch, noting the time. *"We're putting together a little care package for Cody, we thought maybe you would want to add something to it."* Tobin spoke, that cool toothy smile on his face. Emma looked on the verge of tears at the words, she hadn't really expected the boys to think of her now that her nephew had moved.

"There is something, I didn't think I'd really have a chance." She sighed a little, taking out a rag to dot her watering eyes. "Just, wait here I'll bring them out." The otter went inside the home, leaving Liam and Tobin filled with curiosity over what she would have to add.

After a few minutes she came back outside, carrying a folder, offering it up to Liam. The gator peered inside briefly, seeing a number of sealed letters addressed to Cody, quickly spotting that all of them had a return address to "Aldric". One letter was taped back together, but Emma shut the folder on Liam before he could read it.

"Fiona asked me to keep these safe for Cody, she didn't want Frederick to know she had sneaked a couple of them away over the years. I know he got rid of all the ones he ever found in the post box." She wiped her eyes, drying away more tears. "But, can you send those in your care package? Cody should have them, now that they'll get to him for sure."

"Y-y-yesim mam, we will." Liam stuttered, struggling to get his words out. Though they knew Aldric had come back into Cody's life, they couldn't forget the months Cody had spent depressed after the letters stopped coming. They hugged Emma goodbye, and with their care package gathered together, they headed off to get everything ready for the mail, and on its way to Aspen Hollow.

Cruising along in the truck, Liam glanced briefly over, eyeing the folder filled with letters that Cody Jr. was currently keeping safe. "Theys from Aldric." He spoke abruptly, cutting the silence of the drive.

"*For real?*" Tobin reached a paw over, intending to grab it and take a peek. "Leave it brah, it's not fer us to read." Liam brushed the fox's paw away.

"*I never really got why he got so upset, it's just some letters, people move on...*" Tobin huffed, turning the radio up a bit.

"What are you talk'n 'bout? All he talked about fir the first two months of school that year was the summer camp." Liam kept his eyes on the road only after making sure the fox was really going to leave the folder alone. "We even went and made that lake monster movie because of his time there."

"*Just forget I said anything.*" Tobin curtly brushed off the gator once more, who frowned at the fox's words, but obliged his request. The way Tobin had tensed up, the raised fur on his neck, Liam was almost certain the fox was going to have another outburst if he said anything more. Keeping his mouth shut, eyes fixed on the road, he wished Cody was there to tell him how to make Tobin feel better.

Soon enough, they'd made their last stop, Coyote Courier Express, buying supplies to finish getting everything packed. Liam shed a few tears on the letter he wrote for Cody, Tobin having made a short letter as well. Two last pieces to be included in the fourth and final box that would soon be on its way north. "*Eh! Stop crying, it's not forever, right?*" Tobin jumped onto the gator's back, grappling around his neck, causing him to stumble and start laughing. Both of them could hear the otter in their minds, cheering on the rambunctious fox.

The pair soon head back to Garth's, to enjoy a filling dinner. Garth, Tobin, Liam, and Sandy raised glasses to the starry sky "Salut, Cody, missing you already." Garth spoke, the rest of the group responding together "Salut."