

Heading south, there's just one car on the road, heading north, and the way the driver never looks around and I'm pretty sure the only thing keeping him from zooming through the town is the thirty miles an hour limit. Anyone else I encounter is on foot.

And there goes another one, smiling and waving at me.

And I'm waving back.

What is this place doing to me? I suppress the shudder until they've walked past.

I am not the kind of person who waves at strangers.

Fuck, I don't even think I wave at people I met. Of maybe I have and never noticed?

No. I don't wave at people. Period.

Is this coffee withdrawal? I do have the growing headache of going too long without it. But it should make me irritable, not pleasant.

Maybe they have something in the water. It would explain the way everyone is acting.

And the server was right. I couldn't miss Gigi's. It's the last building along the road. The only other sign I get is when I'm in its parking lot. 'Gigi's Country store' written on the sign over the door.

Which I guess makes sense, with the building facing the state highway. Not that I expect anyone driving the fifty-five miles an hour allowed on it will notice it.

"Coffee?" I ask the man behind the counter. "How about Wi-Fi?" There are racks full of the kind of stuff I'd expect in a convenience store, but more of them. There's even a freezer at the back with ice cream.

"Coffee's by the food." He motioned to the other side where there are half a dozen tables with people eating. "Password's up there." Past them, against the wall, there's a buffet style display of food. Over that is a sign with Gigi as the name and—and I can't believe this—the digits zero to nine as the password.

The display has an odd selection. Seems early for chicken with some white sauce on top of it. There's green beans next to that, mashed and chunked potatoes, some cheese sauce and—there's the coffee machine.

I have the pot in hand when I consider something.

"Is it any good?" I ask the thirty something at the table next to the stand. He has a half-empty cup of the stuff, so it can't be that bad.

He looks at his cup. "It's pretty good." And as if I need the convincing, he takes a swig.

That's good enough for me. I locate a travel mug on a shelf, pay for it and the coffee it will contain, then fill it, cap it and put the laptop on a free table. I take my first sip of—and nearly choke on whatever that stuff is.

Pretty good, my ass. I glare at the back of the guy's head. If he can drink this stuff, there's something wrong with him. I'm just staying here long enough to do some—how the fuck is the Wi-Fi strength only one bar? I'm in the building.

There goes me ever returning here.

I bring the travel mug with me as I leave, but dump the content as soon as I'm outside. Sunshine's got to have better coffee, and I'm there under five minutes.

Unlike Gigi's, the building looks like it was put up this decade, clean lines, white

siding, brick front for accent. Now, that's what I call an inviting plac—

Okay, talk about false advertising.

Whoever's responsible for keeping the outside clear definitely doesn't take care of the inside.

"Do you have coffee?" I am not asking about the internet. If the coffee is palatable, I'm taking that elsewhere to drink.

He motions to the other side of the counter and one smell of the slug that's in there makes me run like my life depends on it.

Okay, I don't run, but I am out of there.

A search for coffee only brings up three options, and I've tasted each of them already.

I was wrong. This isn't heaven. It's hell.

It's on very own, personal hell.

What the fuck am I supposed to do now? I can't get any work done without fuel.

I might as well join Tristan and Emil at the garage. If nothing else, I can get comfort in my man's arms.

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I'm not even one block up Frank-something road when I notice the group of people holding styrofoam cups and speaking animatedly. Way to animatedly for what's in their cup to be the horrible stuff I've experienced here. Behind them is a narrow but long building, red brick, except for the white siding front with the paint peeling. Instead of the name of the store, the sign advertises a beer brand.

Unless... no, the app identifies this as Chevie's bar. At least that explains the sign. I approach the people, and I don't smell beer, so there is still hope?

Inside is...confusing. There's a counter with stools on one side, with a couple of fridges against the wall, a counter with glasses and a few bottles. Against the other wall is a long bench with tables and chairs. While narrower, this reminds me more of the diner than a bar.

A woman steps out of a doorway, carrying two cases of beers, and pauses, studying me. "Can I help you?" Her accent isn't local.

"I'm hoping that what the people outside are drinking is actually coffee, and that they got it in here."

She smiles. "Not from the area I take it." She put the cases on the counter.

"Only here until our RV's fixed."

"Ralf'll do a good job," she says, filling a styrofoam cup from the carafe that was hidden by bottles. She hands it to me, bringing a holder of sugar and cream closer.

I start by smelling it, and it smells like coffee. A sip, and my body relaxes. A full swallow and I am alive again.

"You have just rekindled my hope in the existence of coffee."

She chuckles. "The local variety takes some getting used to."

I glare at her. "No, it takes someone passing a law making whatever that is illegal. How is it you have something good?"

"My nephew comes by every few months and brings bags of coffee beans with him. I'm ever so slowly converting people here."

“You have more courage than I do. I’d run for the hill if someone suggested I settle here without you around. Any chance there’s someplace really close to here with decent Wi-Fi? This is giving me the energy to get work done, but I don’t want to have to go too far.” I put the empty cup on the counter. “Can I open a tab?”

“I don’t usually offer those for coffee,” she replies with a chuckle, “but seeing how you’ll be here while you work, I can make an exception.” She writes something on a napkin. “Name of the network and password. Just pick a table. It’s quiet enough through most of the day no one will mind.”

I look at the network on my phone and smile. Five bars. “Keep the coffee coming.”

I sit at the furthest table and power up the laptop. I hop on the network and run a check for its integrity. It isn’t great, but then again, in a place like this, I doubt people hacking their network is that much of a problem. I still spend ten minutes upgrading the security.

Then I do a quick search for Walker’s Garage and come up with nothing.

Okay, I guess in a place like this, word of mouth is more effective. I’m still surprised, Ralf seems savvy enough, with three industrial printers, so understand how useful advertising online would be.

Then, I do a search for Ralf Walker. Adding...what did Emil call it? Vitiligo removes all of them. Okay, maybe it’s short for Raphael? Only I get similar results. Ryan Walker is the same thing.

A search on vitiligo as a condition gives me a possible reason. It’s not a birth defect, as I expected, but something that happens to people in their twenties and up.

“Chevie,” I call and she puts the crate of glasses on the counter. “The Walkers, how long have they lived here?”

She thinks about it. “Six, maybe seven years. Why?”

“Just curious.” So it’s possible they met once the condition set it, and like Emil said, bounded over it. It might have been through a support group, but even if they have their names, without knowing which city it was in, there’s no way I can find out with this machine. It’s powerful for a laptop, being built for the military and all that, but it’s still a laptop. Those will never match a properly built rig.

I add ‘raccoon mask’ to a vitiligo search, but get nothing useful. A few testimonies from people who have it, a couple of medical looking papers about it, and that’s it. I can’t think of a way to describe how it manifested on Ryan that would give me limited results.

I set them aside for the time being and go about looking over accounts I’ve accessed over the last month for signs someone noticed and laid traps. Dear Old Dad’s got so many accounts it’s not like they can all be under scrutiny, but it’s when you stop paying attention to things like that, that you get caught.

It’s slow work, but my cup’s always full. When I have to stop for bathroom breaks, there are a variety of people at the counter or table eating. I order fish and chips and it’s surprisingly good.

I will say this for the food in this town. It’s always been more impressive than their coffee.

The feel of the room shifts through the day as people come and go. It registers mainly as sound level while I work. And then, as I stretch after looking over my access to

one of Mommy Dearest's charities, Ryan enters and speaks with Chevie. He's a lot more cordial with her, even making her laugh, than he was with us.

Check-in the time, it's nearly seven, so I shutdown the laptop, pay my tab and leave a hundred dollar tip. I'm tempted to go up by an order of magnitude, but that might draw attention.

My wishing Ryan a good evening, as he sits by the door, inside, is met with a grunt. At least it's not the suspicion from the garage, so he must be warming to us. Once outside, instead of making a right as I'd planned, to head back to the motel, I cross the street and join the man leaning against the side of the building facing the bar.

My man, who really has no business leaning there, looking like he has no problems in the world.

"Should I even ask what you're doing here?"

He looks me up and down and licks his lips.

I raise a finger to stop him. "Were you really incapable of not finding something suspicious about someone in the one day we've been here?"

"You worry too much." He pulls me to him.

"You remember we aren't in a position to kill whoever is causing trouble and driving off, right? Well, we could steal a car and drive off, but you'd have to leave your pemican behind, not to mention the rest of our things."

He squeezes my ass. "Everything is going to be fine." He grinds against me.

"I know exactly what you're trying to do, Tristan."

He leans in and bites my earlobe. "It's working anyway," he whispers.

"Of course it's working." I press against him. "But I'm telling you, it's not going to change my mind. I'm not helping with whatever you have planned."

"All I'm planning on at the moment is fucking you until you can't remember your name."

"Emil's going to bitch about us keeping him awake again."

Tristan grins. "If we keep him awake from here, I'm going to consider that an accomplishment."

Before I protest that there are things even I won't do in public like we are, he nods to the copse of trees behind the building.

Well, that's different. I'll just have to try to scream like I'm one of those birds that's really loud.