

The young woman, who is in charge of the motel during the day, jumps as she turns from putting away cleaning supplies to find me standing on the other side of the counter.

“Heavens,” she says, hand to her heart, and chuckling. “You walk like a ninja.”

“The doorbell’s broken,” I point out. I’d noticed the lack of the traditional tinkling as I opened it the first day staying here, and the magnetic sensor at the top of the door.

“I don’t think that thing’s ever worked.” Her breathing steadied. “Is there a problem with the room? Do you need it cleaned?”

I shake my head. I slept for six hours after returning to the motel from breakfast with Alex and Emil, and it’s time to return to my investigation. “Have the Walkers lived here all their lives?” Who better to start with than the motel’s clerk/maintenance woman.

“Oh no,” she replies easily. “They got here... a few years ago.”

“Do you know how many?”

“Five, I think.”

“Have they gotten into trouble with anyone in that time?”

“What are you, the police?” she asks with a laugh.

I give her a depreciating smile. “No, I’m just curious. Do they seem a little odd to you, or is it just because I don’t know them?”

“Isn’t everyone a little strange, when you get to know them?” she replies.

“Good point. Can I get a set of towel for our room? I didn’t realize my husband had used them all before I went to bed.”

“Oh, of course.” She takes the towel and washcloth out of the linen closet and hands them to me. I replace the used towels, bring the dirty ones back to her, and head out.

My options to gain information on the town’s oddities are as wide as the people who live here, but gaining that information without it seeming like it’s what I am doing makes it more difficult. I need a place where people gather and have a willingness to speak to a stranger.

The diner is a possibility, but people tend to be focused on eating or whatever item they brought to divert themselves with while doing that. The bar is another one. Alex mentioned it served snack like foods outside of its official bar hours, and that people gather before it. Unfortunately, Alex will be there, making use of the Wi-Fi and taking in far too much coffee. Together, we will become the object of people’s curiosity. While they are surprisingly accepting of two married men, considering how far from the major center of populations they are, they are bound to have questions about us that will distract from my own inquiries.

If the community center is open, it would do, and I can justify my presence there. It has been a few days since I have had the chance to work out. Unfortunately, there was no schedule by the door and I—

“Hey there!” a man in his late twenties call, and I do on alert.

I smile back. “Greetings.” There is no one close enough to be able to come to his help if I need to defend myself. The closest is the elderly woman watering flowers. While age doesn’t indicate weakness, her posture indicates she has issues with her hips.

“How are the repairs coming along?”

I stare at him while bringing boxes back under my control.

“You are the family who brought in a RV for repairs, right?” he asks with a nervous laughter. “It’d be just like me to have missed there was a second dark skin man in town.”

“Black,” I correct him, and the situation falls into place. I am an oddity even by myself, and word will have spread of our presence, as well as why we are here.

“I didn’t want to offend.”

“That is considerate, but you should go with African-American, the next time.”

“Right, sorry.”

“And the repairs are coming along. The estimate Ralf gave us has them done at some point tomorrow.”

“It will be. I don’t think I’ve ever heard being wrong about how long it’ll take to fix something. When one of us has to get our car worked on, we have a pool doing for how close to the actual time he gives for it to be done, it will end up being done.”

“And how off is he, usually?”

“I don’t think he’s ever been more than one hour late, and we had a power failure that day. They have their own generator, but I expect they had to ration it, and that would affect the repairs.”

“They seem well integrated within the town. How long have they been here? The young woman at the motel mentioned they were here for five years, but she didn’t seem certain.”

“Dolores!” the man yells at the older woman watering the flowers. “When did the Walker Brothers get here?”

“Seven years ago, give or take a few months. Why do you ask?” she has a slight limp as she approaches, still holding the hose.

“This gentleman was asking about them. Ralf is repairing his family’s RV.”

“Very nice fellows,” she says. “Half-brothers, you know. Different fathers.”

“They told you that?”

“I thought they were adopted,” the man says.

“They have to be related. That skin condition they both have, that’s genetic. So different fathers, on account of the different skin color.”

“It could be the same father and different mothers,” an older man comments and the woman at his arm nods. They were drawn by the yelled question. Other are approaching. None of them walk with demonstrative training, but I remain on alert while exploiting the situation.

“Do they get along with everyone?” I ask.

“Oh yes,” the older man says. “Two of the nicest boys you’ll ever meet. Ryan’s always willing to help and smile.”

“Unless he’s working,” his wife adds. “He is a very serious young fellow, then. No time for smiles or small talk.”

“Or any talk at all,” a middle age woman says. “If he’s sitting on that stool at the bar, it’s a waste of time to talk with him.”

“But the rest of the time,” the older woman says, “he is very nice.”

“Does he get about town a lot?”

"I wouldn't say a lot, but he isn't a shut-in like his brother," the middle age woman says. "You'll see him out mainly in the evening and morning, before he starts working and during his nightly run."

"He always run at night?"

"With working at the bar, he must sleep most of the day. Although he will be out during the day once a week for the groceries."

Considering his age and apparent health, with training, Ryan could function with five hours of sleep, and he could split that, letting him function outside of what these people expect.

"You said Ralf is a shut-in. Do you know why?"

"It's just how he likes it, I guess," the young man says. "The only time I've seen him leave their garage is to tow someone's car that can't be driven there."

"And they've never caused trouble?"

The silence is uncomfortable.

"Well, there was that one time," the older man says.

"What happened?"

They exchange looks. The only one who doesn't have the same guilty expression is the young man.

"I just heard about it," he says when he noticed me watching.

Dolores sighs. "It was about a year and a half after they arrived. We didn't know them well even after that time because Ralf didn't leave the garage and Ryan only left it for work. We all asked about the two of them when we saw him at the bar, but like Nicole said, that young man is all business when working. But even Chevie, she owns the bar, told us the one time she asked about Ralf, Ryan got all suspicious about her asking."

"You said there was trouble," I prod her back toward my point of interest.

"So, we talked and figured it wasn't good for him to be inside all the time. We picked a nice Saturday, prepared for a picnic, then went to the garage to have him come along. We would have invited Ryan too, but he works every night, so we knew he'd be sleeping."

"Ralf seemed confused," the older man continued. "Like he didn't understand what we wanted him to do. When I told it was okay, he just said he had work to do. I tried to explain it was good to stop working once in a while, but he insisted he had work to do."

"Then Ryan came running down those stairs," the middle age woman said, and the women blushed.

"Nude," Nicole added.

"And angry," her husband said. "In spite of him being so muscular, I'd never been afraid he'd hurt one of us, except then. He stepped between us and Ralf, and laid into us about invading their privacy. About how they live if none of our business and they we had no right to impose how we wanted things to be on them."

They fall silent.

"Do you think Ryan is forcing him to remain indoors?"

The older man shakes his head. "A few days after that, I encountered him at Sunshine and I apologize or overstepping like we had. I explained why we did it, and he said that Ralf just prefers being indoors with his work and his documentary. Ryan said

that he agreed it would be good for Ralf to spend time outside, since he can get too lost in his work, but that Ralf just doesn't always deal well with it, so he prefers staying indoors." [I am going for a certain level of accuracy here as to Ryan's explanations, so if you feel I've got his view on Ralf wrong, let me know]

I nod understandingly. They made a good intentioned faux-pas and things were then settled and the Walkers became the town's little oddity.

This is exactly what I'd do to ingratiate myself within such a community. It's what I did when living in Alex's house. Made myself just odd enough to be normal. Played of black stereotypes to become invisible to them.

Our little group breaks up after this with excuses of having to go tend to one item of importance or another. I return to the motel to look through the local newspaper's history.

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My search revealed nothing of interest. No unexplained disappearances, no unsolved crime someone like me might commit.

While watching Ryan and Ralf finish their dinner, I wonder how many bodies I could leave behind in a way they would be folded within criminal averages and not draw attention. If I killed with that intention, I could do so and never be caught. But monsters like me don't always control our intentions. I have my pressure valve that lets me commit enough pain to keep me from losing control. Without that, would I be able to keep that particular box from exploding spectacularly?

I follow Ryan at a distance.

Is Ryan a monster like me? Is Ralf his pressure valve?

He doesn't turn on Frankford, continuing on Davis. Is he breaking pattern because of me, or have I not been watching him long enough to know all the normal deviations? Nicole's husband said Ryan did errands once a week. I did not have a plausible way to ask which day it was.

He walks onto the warehouse's property, staying to the walkway. When I reach it, he has made it to the other end and turns with the sidewalk there. I run to reach the building's corner and glance around it to ensure I maintain the right distance to remain unnoticed, but I don't see him.

The turn in the road is too far for him to have reached even if he pushed himself. There are no cars in the parking lot for him to hide behind, and he had no reason to hide. Did he have business inside? I glance along the wall. There is a door, so he might—

The crunching of gravel, no more than three paces behind, nearly rips control from me, but I remain still as I force the boxes to silence. When I turn, it is with apparent calm.

Ryan's expression doesn't contain the satisfaction I expect. He lifts his foot out of the gravel that lines the concrete walkway and crosses his arm.

"Wasn't last night enough for you?" he asks.

He noticed me tailing him, and didn't act on it. He got this close without me noticing until he purposely put his foot in the gravel. I am not someone who is easily taken unawares. Ryan has training. The kind of training that makes him dangerous even if he isn't a monster.

Black OPs? CIA assassin? Impossible to know. That he hasn't struck while we are alone implies violence isn't the purpose of confronting me.

"Now what?" I ask.

He raises an eyebrow. The only indication something about my response surprises him. The relaxation is minute. He expected me to be violent. He still considers it a possibility.

"How about you join your husband in bed? I'm sure he missed sleeping with you last night."

"Alex isn't there yet."

"Then go warm the bed for him. Get a full night of sleep. You will have a long day of driving ahead of you tomorrow. You really don't want to be falling asleep at the wheel after Ryan went to the trouble of doing all the repairs expertly."

He wants me out of his territory, his hunting ground.

I still the box. It is assigning my traits to him. Nothing in his behavior speaks of a hunter. Everything I've heard or seen points to his trigger being Ralf. He is been the cause of every raise in aggression from Ryan I have witnessed or been told about. Those at the bar can be attributed to him doing his job.

Boxes are protesting. He is a threat. I need to remove him.

He is a threat. That I cannot deny.

But has he done anything to warrant being removed? Nothing in the news reports for the last decade registered as the work of someone like us. He has integrated himself within the community. Is accepted, is respected.

I nod, take a step back, then turn and head to the motel.

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Alex gives me a concerned look as we enter the garage. I told him of my encounter with Ryan and my conclusions. Emil noticed our unusual silence during breakfast, but didn't comment.

Nearly everything is back within the RV, only the bench is still outside, as well as its content, and Ralf is taking putting it on a jack.

"I need to talk with Ryan," I tell him and he nods to the stairs, instead of the kitchen as I expected.

I'm halfway up when I am able to make out his voice.

"I'm sure."

I continue. This isn't about listening in, it's about ensuring there are no misunderstanding between us.

"Of course not," he continues after a silence. "It's not my place."

I'm coming out of the stairwell and the door to an office is open. He sits behind the desk and is looking at me.

He isn't pleased, but when he speaks, his tone doesn't carry it. "I'm sorry, Em, but one of Ralf's client needs to speak with me." He listens. "Yes." He listens again. "Like I said, that isn't for me to decide. I'll call you back later."

He disconnects and places the phone on the desk. I make out a picture behind the icons, a group of people, but the angle doesn't let me see details of who they are.

"I am not a threat to Ralf," I state.

“You’re going to be gone within the hour, so I don’t expect you’ll be.”

“I won’t return. I won’t try to find out more about him.”

He considers me. “Why not?” there is no surprise from him that I am not including him in my promises. He understands why I am stating Ralf is safe.

“He hasn’t done anything that warrants me looking closer.”

He nods and stands. “I guess I have to believe you and see what actually happens, don’t I?” A confirmation that he will not proactively remove a perceived threat. So long as I don’t act, I have nothing to worry about him.