

Chapter 00: Gas station mutt

GINGIN



“Fuck this, I’m pulling over” barked the Raccoon as he swung his sedan into the forecourt of a 24-hour gas station. “So much for the party. It’s nearly nine and we have no damn idea where we’re going.”

“Syd, oh my god, *chill*” the otter in the passenger seat sighed as his eyes rolled. “It’s an all night thing until 4am, we’ll be fine.”

“Stop telling me to fucking chill, *Connor*. Message whats-his-face and ask him directions because the nav is freaking out.” He rubs his eyes. “I’m going inside and grabbing something to eat. Don’t do anything, okay? We’re balls-deep in a super red part of the county.”

Sydney clambers out and slams the door, marching himself inside the convenience store mumbling his annoyances as he fishes for his wallet in his cargo pockets. He whips off his tank-top as the humidity hit his coarse fur like a tonne of bricks, shoving it with little care into one of his deep pockets.

Even at close to nine PM it was still broad daylight at this time of year and far too hot to sit in the car. Not wanting to slow-cook himself, Connor stepped out leaving the door ajar, leaning on the roof of Syd’s sedan, immediately getting lost in his phone trying to figure out how the hell they were getting to the venue in West Munroe. Everything he tried was forcing him over a bridge that had literally collapsed two weeks ago.

He closed his eyes and drew a deep breath, and that short moment of mental clarity allowed him to feel the pair of eyes fiercely locked in his direction. He blinked, and parked two bays over was a

beaten to hell pickup he somehow hadn't noticed. It's white paint was flaking off, the red racing stripe down it's entire side was barely holding together, rust spots littered the bodywork between a patchwork of dents and scrapes and the wing mirror was held in place with a prayer and duct tape.

The sludgiest doomer metal was echoing through the open windows as the driver, a dirty-blonde mutt in a trucker cap, hung an arm out clutching a takeout cup, the straw poking out between his fingers. His brows were furrowed and the stare was intense as he lay slumped in his seat.

The mutt took a sip of his drink. "The fuck you staring at?"

"UH! N- Nothing! I'm not staring at anything!" Connor was immediately panicked and it was signposted as brightly as a boardwalk arcade.

The canine adjusted his stereo and took another sip of his drink, brows still furrowed but looking more confused than anything else. He used his free hand to beckon the panicked otter across to his truck.

The otter didn't move.

"*Get your ass over here.*" The dog barked with authority.

Connor sheepishly shuffled over, his body as tense as a steel girder. Now, probably foolishly, at arm's length, he could get a better look at the man. His eyes were tired but a brilliant blue. His fur was short and well kept with a dirty yellow colour with the only blemish being a little scruff around his chin and muzzle.

The compliments didn't apply to his bright hair, horribly fashioned into a rough mullet running out from his cap and down his neck. His wife-beater was covered in sweat around the armholes and his chest, and he couldn't help but notice all his muscle definition, nor the giant stack of paperwork on the passenger seat. Clearly a working man and a tired and likely irate one, too. He looked so beaten down with bags under his eyes and roughened hands. It was hard to tell how old he was, but if he had to guess it was somewhere near his mid 30s.

Connor also noticed the pistol sitting in the centre console.

The mutt sighed and slowly plucked the cap from Connor's head with a smile. "The name's Daryl, and... dude, buddy, here's a tip when you're in a place like this, maybe don't wear a cap with 'SLUT' plastered across the front in neon green."

Connor gulped as his heart rate picked up speed. He didn't want to carry a spare set of clothes to the venue and so got changed before getting in the car, a clear mistake in hindsight. Daryl handed the cap back and once again locked eyes on the otter, making direct eye contact this time with a coy smirk. "Loads of people around here keep a gun and six boxes of ammo up their ass every waking hour, and you're not exactly hiding yourself very well."

Daryl scanned his eyes over the otter. He was slender in tight running shorts and a baggy stringer which barely covered anything. A few studs and a bar decorated his right ear. The cap simply made it far too obvious. "Did you get off at the wrong exit? Like, exit 30 or something?"

"Uh, well, we don't know". Connor uttered, fidgeting with the cap in his hands. "We're heading to a club in West Munroe."

“Ha! Okay. I know where you’re going. You need t-”

“*Connor!*” Sydney screamed, cutting Daryl off, with a pair of Burritos in one hand and two drinks in the other as he barrelled from the convenience store in a blind panic. “Don’t tell this hillbilly anything!”

Daryl’s muzzle wrinkled as he immediately turned angry. “Don’t call me a hillbilly, you faggot!” The dog boomed with a surly bite in his voice. “I’m trying to fucking help you, god-dammit!”

“Like shit you are! I saw that ugly grin on your face! Connor, get in the car.”

The dog growled and grabbed his pistol, holding it aloft with his finger mercifully not on the trigger. “Do you think if I was going to fucking try something I’d have done it already!? I’m just a dude sitting in a parking lot drinking lemonade! The fuck were you expecting!?”

All three paused in silence to let the tension in the air clear, the otter on the verge of crying as the cap in his hands became a crushed mess.

“Okay, fuck. Let’s start this again.” He lay the gun back in the centre console and took another sip of his lemonade. “The name is Daryl. Not hillbilly, or trailer-trash, or hick, or whatever the fuck fags always call me when they see me.” He shot a look to Sydney, before looking back at Connor and taking a breath to calm himself. “Look, I know where you’re going. It’s called *Animal Instinct*, yeah? That thing they host every summer?”

Connor nodded.

“How in the hell do you know what it’s called!?” Sydney barked as he threw the foil wrapped burritos and cans of energy drink into his car.

Daryl paused a moment before answering. “It’s all the conservative types bitch about this time of year. It’s four figure attendance for god’s sake. You think they wouldn’t notice?”

The raccoon sauntered over to the truck and leaned on it’s frame, looming over it’s canine driver, his eyes darted around the truck’s cabin as if looking for something he’d lost.

“I don’t believe you.” He said flatly.

The canine swallowed and stared daggers into Sydney. There was enough meat on the raccoon to cause a problem, still on the thinner side and not enough to win, he assumed, but Daryl couldn’t be bothered to start a fistfight in his post-work fatigue.

Daryl took another sip from the lemonade and set it in the cup holder, crossing his arms and squinting back at Sydney.

“I don’t give a shit if you believe it or not, because that’s the story you’re getting.”

They both stare each other down a moment more.

“*Directions.*” Demanded the irritated raccoon.

Daryl sighed. “The main bridge is closed. Sat-nav in this area are shit anyway so that’ll be confusing the fuck out of it.” The mutt huffed. “Rejoin the interstate, come off at exit 32 instead,

double back through Central to get to West. Follow the signs to West-point radio theatre and you'll spot your little *fag party* down second street, and then you'll be out of his shit-heel town and out of my face."

Connor started typing the directions into his phone. "Yup, that'll do it if I force it to come off at exit 32 and through a toll." The otter looked up from the screen to see the two still facing each other down, ignoring him entirely.

"Sydney, he... he has a gun. Let's just leave him alone, okay? We have our directions now."

"Listen to your friend, *prison-stripe*." Daryl was sure to add some punch to the slur. The raccoon's fur was standing on end he was so angry. He didn't let it get to him enough to cause drama, thankfully. Sydney spun on his heels and dropped back into his car, starting the engine and beginning to snack on his burrito with the air-conditioning cooling him off.

The longest minute passed, Connor still standing next to Daryl's truck. He didn't know what to do, he couldn't handle these kinds of situations well so he did what he always did: froze in place until someone gave him an order.

"Connor, or whatever the fuck your name was, will you piss off? I don't know why you're still standing here."

The otter turned to look at Daryl who's anger had faded into dejection.

"Are you okay?" The otter asked in a hushed tone.

"Nope."

The mutt slipped on his belt and pulled out the parking bay, tearing out the forecourt with a roar of the engine, barely stopping to merge back onto the main road. The sludgy stoner music was replaced with blood curdling black metal.

Connor set his cap back on after straightening out the brim, sliding back into Sydney's sedan with a forced smile and fastening his belt. "I don't care if I get crap all over your car, I'm hungry and this Burrito needs eating!"

Sydney huffed a laugh through his nose in disbelief. "You're just- you're not going to address that a hillbilly was just hitting on you?"

The otter was caught mid bite. "*Mmfft!?*"

"Dude, that mutt is closeted as fuck and he wanted *in* you!"

Connor swallowed a mouthful of burrito, the rice hitting his throat in such a way to cause a spluttery cough. "I mean," he pauses to swig an energy drink. "If it wasn't for the gun he'd be cute as hell."

"Stop thirsting for dumpster fires!"