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MR. SHIVERS

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CHAPTER ONE

By the time the number nineteen crossed the Missouri state line the sun had crawled low in the sky and afternoon was fading into evening. The train had built up a wild head of steam over the last few miles. As Tennessee fell behind it began picking up speed, the wheels chanting and chuckling, the fields blurring into jaundice-yellow streaks by the track. A fresh gout of black smoke unfurled from the train's crown and folded back to clutch the cars like a great black cloak.

Connelly shut his eyes as the wave of smoke flew toward him and held on tighter to the side of the cattle car. He wasn't sure how long he had been hanging there. Maybe a half hour. Maybe more. The crook of his arm was curled around one splintered slat of wood and he had wedged his boots into the cracks below. Every joint in his body ached.

He squinted through the tumble of trainsmoke at the other three men. They hung on, faces impassive. One of them called

to the oldest, asking if it was soon. He grinned and shook his head and laughed.

Ten miles on Connelly felt the train begin to slow and the countryside started to take shape around him. The fields all seemed the same, nothing but cracked red earth and crooked fencing. Sometimes there were men working in the fields, overalled and with faces as beaten as the land. They watched the train's furious procession with a country boy's awe. Some laughed and called to them. Most did not and watched their coming and going with almost no acknowledgment at all.

The old man before him hitched himself low on the train, eyes watching the wheels as one would a predator. He held up three fingers, waved. Then two. Then one, and he dropped from the side of the train.

Connelly followed suit and as he rolled he saw the churning wheels no more than three feet from him, hissing and cackling. He slid away until he came to rest in a ditch with the others. They stood and beat the dust and grit and soot from their faces. Then they crouched low in the weeds and waited until the train's passage was marked only by a ribbon of black smoke and a roar hovering in the sky.

"Think they coming back?" whispered one of the young ones. "Coming back to look for us?"

"Boy, what are you, an idiot?" said the old man. "No train man is going to double back looking for trouble. If we're off then we're off. Done."

"Done?"

"Yeah. Count your limbs and teeth and start using your feet. Maybe your head, too, if you feel like it." He scratched his gray hair and grinned, flashing a crooked mouthful of yellowed teeth.

They shouldered their packs and began heading west, following the tracks.

"Should have held on longer," said one of the men.

"Ha," said the grayhair. "If you did that then I guarantee you wouldn't be looking so hale and hearty right now. Don't want to get caught, caught by the freight boss. He'd whale you raw."

"Not with him, I'd reckon," the man said, nodding toward Connelly, who was a head taller than the others. "What's your name?"

"Connelly," he said.

"You got any tobacco?"

Connelly shook his head.

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Hm," he said, and spat. "Still think we should've held on longer."

They took up upon an old county road. As they walked they kicked up a cloud of dust that rose to their faces, turning their soot-gray clothes to raw red. The land on either side was patched like a stray's coat, the hills dotted with corn lying flat as though it had been laid low by some blast. Roots lay half submerged in the loose soil, fine curling tendrils grasping at nothing. In some places growth still clung to the earth and men grouped around these spots to pump life into their crop. As Connelly passed they looked up with frightened, brittle eyes and he knew it would not last.

The two younger men paced ahead and one said, "Why don't these dumb sons of bitches leave?"

"Where they going to go?" asked the other.

"Anywhere's better than here."

"Looks like home to me. This seems to be my anywhere and it ain't much better."

"Things'll turn different in Rennah," the other said. "You just watch."

The grayhair dropped back beside Connelly. "You headed to the same place? Rennah, you headed there?"

Connelly nodded.

The grayhair shook his head, swatted the back of his neck with his hat. "Your funeral. Nothing going to be there, you know that?" He leaned closer to confide a whisper. "These fellas is just suckers. They flipped that ride 'cause they heard there's work here, but there ain't. Further down the line, I say. Maybe south, maybe west. Eh?"

"Not going for work," said Connelly.

"What? What the hell you going for, then?"

Connelly bowed his head and pulled his cap low. The old man let him be.

The sun turned a deep, sick red as it sank toward the earth. Even the sky had a faint tinge of red. It made a strange, hellish sight. It was the drought, everyone said. Threw dirt up into the sky. Touched the heavens with it. Connelly was not so sure but could not say why. Perhaps it was something else. Some superficial symptom of a greater disease.

He counted the days as he walked and guessed it had been more than two weeks since he had left Memphis. Then he counted his dollars and reckoned he had spent a little over three. He was spending at far too high of a rate if he wanted to go much farther. And he would have to go farther. The man had a week's head start on him at least. It was unlikely that he'd even be in Rennah. But he had been there once and that was all Connelly needed.

Closer, he said to himself. I'm close. I'm very close now.

"Town's up that way," said one of the men, pointing to a few lines of smoke on the horizon.

The old man eyed the spindle-like lines twisting across the sunset. "That ain't the town," he said.

"No?"

"No. Those are campfires."

The men looked at each other again, this time worried. Connelly was not surprised. He knew they had expected it, whether they said so or not. For many it was the same as the town they had just left.

Connelly caught its scent before he saw it. He smelled rotten kindling and greasy fires and cigarette smoke, excrement and foul water. It was a plague-stink, a battlefield-reek. Then he heard the cacophony of dogs barking and children crying, a junkyard song of pots and pans and old engine parts and drunken melodies. Then finally it came into view. They shaded their eyes and looked at the encampment before them, saw jalopies lurching between canyons of shuddering tents, people small as dots milling beside them. A wide smear of gray and black among the white-gold of the fields. There had to be at least a hundred people there. At least.

"Jesus," said one of the men.

"Yeah," said another.

"Can't see there being much work here."

"I reckon not, no."

"Told you so," said the grayhair softly. "Told you so."

Connelly and the men parted ways as they approached. The men walked on and came to the camp's ragged border. Some of the people had tents and some had cars and some had nothing at all but still mingled around these tattered constructs like

refuse caught washing downstream. They watched the new strangers approach, too tired to hold any real resentment. The men split up and wandered in and were caught among the webs of the encampment, filtering through the grubby people to find some spot to sit in or a fire to stand by. They sat and made talk and waited for night and the following dawn. By now it was routine.

Connelly did not join them. He walked around the camp and into town.