

# T

Turn here,” the Judge said from the back seat as he tapped me on the shoulder. “You’re about to miss the prison entrance.” Obedient ever, I veered left, the Model T skidding across the melting asphalt only to lurch over the gravel road’s ruts. At the sight of a chain gang marching toward us, I slammed the brake, and the tires spewed a cloud of red dust into the air. The walking boss—on horseback today, no fool in the summer heat—tipped his hat and hurried them along.

Four denim-clad white men stumbled over the gravel and their chains but managed to hang onto the rectangular pine box they carried. Another inmate, a tall, freckled ginger laden with shovels and pickaxes, hurried behind them.

“You’d think they’d assign trusties to the burial detail,” the Judge said. “Then they wouldn’t have to chain them together.”

At the time, I’d only been in the States a few months. All I knew about the American penal system was the getting nicked part, but I’d heard somewhere that convicts could gain special status and privileges, even authority over other inmates, through the trusty system. Whether the grift operated on good behavior, bribes, or extraordinary kowtowing, I couldn’t say. “Maybe they don’t trust all that many prisoners.”

I continued to watch the men as they made for a small burial plot atop a rise about fifty feet off the road. The ugliest tree I’d ever seen in my life—half-dead, misshapen, and sprouting wicked thorns at odd intervals—crowned the hilltop but provided not a whit of shade from the noonday sun. Crumbling limestone grave markers poked out of its base. I pictured the roots, slow but sure, crushing the flimsy pine boxes and the poor sods under the hillside.

Just thinking on the fella they were about to plant among strangers in this godforsaken place gave me the heebie-jeebies. A wisp of a cloud must have passed over the sun; shadows covered the graveyard for a moment. But what should have been a small blessing felt like a threat.