

Chapter I - The Derelict

Chapter I - The Derelict begins with Link Ferris caught between the glow of temporary friendships and the gnawing responsibility he forgot to keep. What had started as a cheerful evening of camaraderie with two well-meaning strangers had soured into frustration when Link realized that the store, where he was supposed to cash his market check, had already closed. His fogged mind sharpened quickly at the weight of that error, and beneath the warmth of whisky and friendly laughter came the chill of failure. Standing in front of the locked door, he felt both foolish and angry. The folded bills in his vest couldn't fix what was already lost: time, trust, and tomorrow's plans. As he stumbled away from the storefront, indignation twisted inside him. What had been a lighthearted detour now felt like betrayal—by others, and worse, by himself.

His frustration mounted as he passed the tavern's bright windows and the clash of noise inside poured into the street. He walked faster, ashamed of how easily he had been distracted from duty. At the bend in the road, deep mud and darkness conspired against him, sending him crashing face-first into a puddle of muck. The laughter from nearby loafers struck him harder than the fall itself. Drunk, angry, and humiliated, Link found himself surrounded by jeering men who quickly turned their mocking into violence. Outnumbered and dulled by drink, he struggled to defend himself. And then, out of the night, salvation arrived on four legs. Chum, silent and fierce, lunged into the fight like a storm unleashed, scattering the attackers with fangs and fury. Link, dazed but deeply moved, recognized the loyalty in those glowing eyes.

As the village constable waddled onto the scene, more crowd than authority, the tension began to ease. Chum, panting and triumphant, danced around Link with visible joy, as if proud to have arrived in time. The fight had ended, and although Link's dignity was bruised, something in him felt repaired. He leaned against Chum for balance, the dog's presence more comforting than the gawking faces around them.

Amid the noise and confusion, Link's thoughts drifted from revenge to rest. He was led back to the tavern, celebrated as a fighter and a fool alike, and dragged into more drinks and loud admiration. But the warmth of the barroom turned sour. His body revolted, and his thoughts turned inward, drawn toward one image that cut through the haze: home.

The thought of home was bittersweet. He pictured the battered house, the tired garden, the lonely barn. But most of all, he saw Chum—waiting, hungry, patient. Link felt the pull of responsibility sharpen again. He mumbled an excuse, trying to rise, but another drink was pressed into his hand. He drank. And with it, the image of Chum flickered in and out like a dying candle. A second time he stood, more determined than before, brushing past mocking hands and the half-hearted offer from the constable to walk him home. Link scoffed at the idea. He had Chum. That was enough. A man didn't need anything more when he had a dog like that.

Out into the night again, he moved forward—less steady, more stubborn. The cool air was a balm, drawing some clarity back into his aching head. The village disappeared behind him, replaced by darkness and the soft, sucking sound of mud underfoot. And though the night offered no light, Link pressed on. His legs wobbled, and his thoughts swam, but something told him to keep going. Behind him, soft steps followed—familiar, measured, loyal. It was Chum. No need to call him. No need for words. The dog was there, just as he had always been.

Every stumble, every slip, was met with the comfort of knowing someone followed close. No judgment. No questions. Only presence. That was what made Chum different from people. No false friendships. No barroom cheers that vanished at dawn. Just quiet loyalty, guiding Link through the fog and toward something steady. Home wasn't far. Not in miles, and not in meaning. And with Chum's silent footsteps echoing behind him, Link Ferris finally felt less lost.

Even in his state, he recognized that companionship like this didn't come often. It wasn't loud or showy, but it never wavered. A dog like Chum didn't ask for praise or rewards. He gave his protection and his trust freely, expecting nothing more than to

walk alongside the man he chose. And in that muddy road, under a sky heavy with fog, Link Ferris finally understood the shape of love—not flashy or fickle, but steadfast, silent, and beside him, step by step.

