

Chapter One

Philip Thomas played his flashlight across the Susquehanna's black waters. He glanced at his wristwatch. Midnight, on the dot. It was time.

He set the light against the railroad bridge's short railing and picked up the green vessel containing his father's ashes. He owed Dad this, though the unexpected addendum to his parent's Will caught him by surprise. Why the Rockville Bridge of all places? And why in the middle of the damn night? Yes, this was the longest stone arch viaduct in the world, but Dad only mentioned it when talking about Granddad and an alternate railroading world called Hobohemia. Sure, crazy stuff, until the yellowed photographs came out. Philip didn't know what to believe these days. Yet here he was halfway across the river in jeans and a Star Wars T-shirt capping the end to a tragic life.

He pulled the top off the canister. Inside were the mortal remains of the man who had raised him on a mix of dreams and practicality.

"Sorry," he muttered, pulling the inner plastic bag free. The ashes were heavy. So was the guilt. "I didn't mean what I said. I was just mad."

Of course he hadn't known it would be the final time he would see Dad, thanks to some hit-and-run asshole. A father should've heard better last words from his twenty-seven-year-old son.

An unhealthy blend of fish and algae wafted from the river forty-three feet below. The twin set of tracks next to him added an oily scent of engines and freight. The odor didn't bother him. Railroading was in his blood. Then Dad sold the Western Maryland out from under him. Nineteen-eighty-seven was proving to be a shit year.

Philip shoved disappointment aside and ripped open the plastic bag's seal. This wasn't the time or place for venting his anger. Dad must have had his reasons. How much had the judge given Mom during the divorce last month? Apparently more than Dad could afford.

Wind batted at him, waves sloshing around the old stone arches. He regretted leaving his jacket in the Mustang. This shouldn't take long, including the words Dad wanted him to say.

Sure, he could dump the ash and walk away, but again it came down to guilt and no small measure of respect for all Dad had gone through. He'd helmed the once mighty Baltimore & Ohio through its final days as a mere financial instrument of the Chesapeake & Ohio railroad. Now even those sad traces of America's first railroad were gone in the sweep of an accountant's pen. It would have broken Granddad's heart.

I don't hate you, Dad. I never did. He shook out the bag. Blustery winds sent gray billows into the darkness.

"The debt is paid," Philip shouted, completing his father's odd last request.

"The debt remains!"

Holy shit, what was that?

The howling response iced up Philip's spine. He seized his flashlight and whirled around. Had some demented vagrant followed him? The voice came from everywhere, as if the bridge itself woke in a spectral rage.

East toward Marysville, the light's beam became a hazy bar as smoke erupted from the gravel railbed. Blue-green flames licked at the ties and reddened the steel rails along both tracks. He gagged at the smell. Sulfur? Philip's guts shook with the rumble of a birthing volcano beneath his feet.

On a bridge.

Above a river.

Had someone slipped him some acid? The eruption worsened, the tracks wrenching apart in a moan of agony.

Philip shivered from a sudden nearness and turned to gape at a figure standing beside him. A disheveled man glared back through shrunken sockets. He appeared to be in the process of dissolving, his bones crumbling into a yellow-white powder.

"Curse you and yours to hell." The apparition pointed a rusting metal staff at the jagged orange tear in the bridge.

Scorching heat and stench drove Philip back. His heart hammered as if trying to escape his ribcage.

Something answered in the same fast thumping rhythm from inside the glowing red tunnel. *Chug-chug. Chug-chug.* Each steamy exhale whooshed from the pit in suffocating gasps. Then came the whistle. One long piercing scream.

His father's tales about another world called Hobohemia caught up with his panicked mind. The Midnight Express. The train said to fetch damned souls for a one-way ticket to hell.

The nightmare was real, and it was coming for him.

He ran.

Looking back was a mistake.

The hellhole vomited up a fiery locomotive fashioned from fused metal and searing flesh. Blackened bodies writhed in chains lashed to a bulging red-hot boiler, their agonized cries rising and falling with each horrendous breath exhaled from blood-soaked pistons. Exposed pipes pulsed like entrails. The Rockville Bridge shuddered as burning wheels bit into the tracks and bore down on him. A gout of sparks whooshed from the thing's smokestack. Each ember twisted in pain as it was consumed.

Philip lost his footing and slammed into the quivering stones. He scrambled to his feet. It was no use. He'd never make the shoreline before being devoured. One choice left. He vaulted the railing. His last glimpse before tumbling over the edge was of inside the engine's cab. *Oh, God.* What leered back at him was worse than the fall.

He hit the water in a shock of pain, forcing out air he meant to conserve for the plunge. The impact hurled him down a black pit of nothingness. One moment he was falling, the next he found himself staring up at a starless sky.

He didn't move for a moment, trying to sort through what just happened.

Shouldn't he be drowning? Engulfed by fire? Where was the hell train, anyway? He searched a featureless haze, hearing only distant whispers of wind rustling through unseen trees. He glanced down at himself. Nothing broken. He wasn't even wet. Uh-oh.

The bridge was gone; however, there were tracks in the distance unobscured by surrounding mist. Rails gleamed pearlescent as if bathed in moonlight, despite no moon. The railbed's pale ballast was unblemished by-passing engines. For an awful moment he imagined miniature skulls instead of pebbles, but the vision didn't hold as he approached.

Alabaster arches emerged from the fog, spanning a bottomless ravine. As with the Midnight Express, his father's stories filled in the missing pieces. This could only be the Bostian Bridge, connecting the world of the living with that of the Hereafter. He couldn't help the shiver making his legs weak.

Now he knew where he was. Dead.

He stiffened for a moment upon spotting a blob of light bouncing beside the tracks. Someone walking up with a railroad lantern?

Dad talked about the real Bostian Bridge in North Carolina and how a train hurled off its tracks back in the late eighteen hundreds. It was said the conductor's ghost could still be seen warning off other trains. Was this him? Ballast crunched beneath the fellow's feet. The new arrival sounded solid enough as he emerged from the fog. The man was real, right down to the blue uniform and wireframe glasses perched over a narrow nose.

"Hello?" Philip ventured.

The conductor tipped his cap, exposing silvery hair. He didn't act like a ghost. "Howdy."

Philip caught a glint of spectral light on the hat's brass nameplate. Indian Valley Line. The railroad his father said carted souls to their eternal reward. "I'm guessing you're with the Westbound train and I'm screwed."

The fellow smiled. "Name's Timepiece." He pulled a dog-eared leather booklet from his coat and flipped through the pages. "Philip Thomas, son of Fredrick Thomas. Ah, so you're Baron Abernathy Thomas' grandkid."

He nodded. *Baron*? There was one place where the term ‘rail baron’ was said to be taken literally. “Is this Hobohemia?”

Timepiece chuckled. “Well, not quite, Lord Thomas. Maybe a foot in the door, so to speak. Or out of it.” He paused as a long lonesome whistle echoed. The conductor produced a gleaming gold pocket watch and gave a satisfied grunt. “On time, as usual. I’d recommend the coffee in the dining car. Best there is.”

The Westbound. A far cry from the previous monstrosity he’d fled from, but not where he’d thought the night would take him. A shiver of hope ran through him, even if it would be a consolation prize. “Any chance my father might be on board? He, uh, just passed.”

“Sorry to hear. Can’t say for sure. They do things differently across the tracks.”

Philip could see the engine now, or at least its headlamp. A warm yellow glow of sunlight snaked toward them.

A little girl’s shrill voice pierced the silence. “You leave him be, Timepiece!”

The conductor arched a snowy eyebrow. “Mila? Mila Johnson? That you I’m hearing?”

A pre-teen girl with curly brown hair and a button nose materialized beside Philip. She batted at the hem of her pink-and-yellow dress. “Hey! Don’t go around telling people my real name.”

Timepiece doffed his hat. “I’m sorry, little lady. So what brings you here? Finally had enough fun?”

The child pointed. “I’m here for stupid.” She grabbed Philip’s arm with more strength than a small girl ought to possess. “Come on, before Number Nine gets here.”

The conductor released a slow chuckle. “Seems you’ve got yourself a reprieve, Lord Thomas.”

Philip allowed her to tug him a few steps away from the tracks before confusion bubbled into irritation. “Wait, are you telling me I’m being brought back?”

“You never left. Not really. Come on. Important people are expecting you.”

So was a rail-riding demon from hell. He slowed, wanting as much distance from the tracks as possible but needing answers too. “Wait. Mila, hold up a second and tell me what’s going on.”

She jerked his arm. “Never call me that.” The waif continued dragging him into the fog. “You don’t have the right.”

This kid was obnoxious as hell, but a chance at getting his life back wasn’t something Philip intended to pass up. He let her pull him deeper into the gray until he couldn’t see much of anything, let alone her. He caught a glimpse of something passing him. A head crowned with long peacock feathers? Was this the same girl?

Her pull became a sudden push. Did she just kick him in the butt?

“Head for the lighter part.”

The mist lifted ahead. Questions still shackled his feet. “You mind explaining what happened to me on the Rockville bridge?”

“Last Chance hates your family for killing him. You woke him up, you big idiot, so he sicced the Midnight Express on you.” A blast of wind threatened to knock him on his face. “Now hurry! You need to start breathing.”

He broke into a run toward the brightening shadows.

