

Prologue

Vincent swore the railroad tracks hadn't been there a moment ago. He glanced back at the low bushes hugging the meandering creek, and then across the bright rails toward a dusty country lane bordering the open field. That was his road, wasn't it? Yes, the street ran by a gray house with a small barn out back. The building sure seemed like his home. He turned his attention to his seven-year old sister, unconvinced. "Dad said not to go beyond the creek."

"We didn't," Katy retorted. She brushed a fleck of mud off her blue play dress and retrieved a clouded jar of tadpoles from a knot of grass next to their impromptu trail. Her brown eyes widened. "Maybe this is one of those ghost trains."

"That's just old railroader tales," he replied, parroting Mom's often used admonishment when Dad told his stories. Vincent's sneakers crunched through bright white ballast rock. He kicked at the rail. Why was it humming? Pulling an unruly sweep of coal-black hair from his eyes, he hunkered down for a closer inspection. It would be great if even one of Dad's stories were true. Mountains made of rock candy. Railroad barons and knights. Vincent's lips pursed. Truth was, he'd been thinking of those sort of things a minute ago. Daydreams and fairy tales. That's what Mom always said. Now he had gone and gotten himself and his sister lost. He let out a breath and decided to head back to the creek.

Katy was not having any of it. Clutching her jar, she ran up on the roadbed and jumped up and down on a tie.

His nostrils drew in the tang of fresh creosote in the heat of an Indiana summer. "You're getting your shoes sticky, stupid."

"I'm not stupid, and you're not Dad."

“I’m twelve, and so I’m smarter than you.”

His sister stuck out her tongue. “Vincent Baloney!”

He wished he could hop on one of those trains Dad always talked about. Mom would backhand them both if Katy tracked goo on the carpet. “Maloney, stupid. It’s your name too, so grow up.”

“I’m not stupid.”

The rails wavered like molten silver as they merged in the distance. He sensed a sort of humming. The sound was constant--a tugging, natural rhythm matching the beat of his heart.

Katy set her jar on a tie and crouched. “I can hear singing.”

“Huh?”

Grinning, she gingerly pressed an ear against the left rail, her curly brown hair spilling across the bright metal. “It’s singing! Come hear.”

The excitement in her voice only brought a dryness in his mouth. “I don’t hear anything,” he lied.

“Vin, it’s so pretty. Like at church.”

Caught by the wonder in her eyes, he knelt and pressed an ear against the surprisingly cool metal. No church, just the same odd quivering hum set to the pulsing rush of blood to his face. No, wait. Something, but more like the echo of a summer storm than any choir. He looked down the rails again, and this time saw a baleful yellow ball dance like a mirage above the tracks. “Train coming.”

“Train coming!” Katy squealed, clapping her hands. “Train coming!”

He rose and brushed the white dust from his patched jeans. No question now. He felt the steel’s vibration, the noise in his head rising as if in anticipation. The approaching light was

bright enough to challenge the overhead sun, the vision gaining substance until a gray bulk surrounded the lamp. It was big, whatever it was. “Katy, off the tracks.”

“They’re singing my name.” His sister giggled, her little body bunched up along the rail, oblivious to the oncoming behemoth.

“Katy, get up.”

She stuck out a bottom lip. “No.”

He grabbed her arm and yanked the girl to her feet. “Get *up!*”

“I want to hear.” She tried to pull away. “Let go of my arm.”

“Dad said I was to take care of you.” Vincent kept his grip despite her struggles.

“My tadpoles!”

Sighing, he let go. Of course, she ignored the jar completely and put her head on the rails again. One look up the track was all he needed. Spouts of white smoke and steam jetted up from the engine, accompanied by a chuffing sound he rarely heard. The last steam engine he remembered was the one they had brought down to the town park a couple years back. He used to play on it. Now a fence surrounded the old steamer. The locomotive rumbling toward them was easily twice that engine’s size. Fending off kicks and bites, he pulled his sister away from the tracks. Vincent mustered authority into his voice. “You want me to tell Mom?”

Katy immediately settled down at the threat. Mom could really hurt when she got mad. Glowering, Katy let him take her wrist again. He stood well clear of the tracks.

The electric feeling in his head became lost within a greater rumble and shake of the approaching locomotive. The ballast leapt and spun along the quivering ties, the rails appearing to flex in eager anticipation. The steam engine’s great pistons drove four wheels taller than he was. Brass lines ran along a lustrous black boiler like attentive serpents. Billowing white gusts

exhaled from iron cheeks behind the black teeth of a broad cowcatcher, each breath adding to the shaking in Vincent's belly. He stepped closer, wanting the thrill of swirling vapors enwrapping him.

A geyser erupted next to the locomotive's main stack, and with it came a whistle's mighty blast. The engine fell on them like an earthquake, shadowing everything in iron and steam. He let the smell of oil and heated metal lift him, the moist clouds so thick he saw little beyond the rush of wheels and pistons. He caught a brief splash of green as the tender passed. Bright yellow letters inside a diamond spelled out "Erie".

Shaking like a leaf, he paid little mind to the clatter of brown freight cars passing by on screeching wheels. The bright red caboose brought him out of his rapture. He stared at his left hand, his fingers clenched around nothing but air. Guts cramping, he looked at the receding train; then back at the tracks. "Katy?"

Vincent stumbled along the tracks. Even the train was gone. Whirling, he dashed back to where he and his sister had stood. Had she gotten scared? *Tadpoles*. His throat threatened to close up on him as he ran back to the creek, ignoring the tug of brambles and grass on his pants legs. Heart pounding, he nearly fell into the shallow thread of water coursing its way through a tangle of scrub trees. Tiny shapes darted unmolested in miniature backwashes. She wasn't here. "Katy, where are you?"

Stifling a sob, Vincent headed back to the tracks but couldn't find them. Chest heaving with pain, he ran back to the creek, and then returned to where the grass had been pressed in by his and Katy's feet. His foot crunched on something in the tangle of weeds and wildflowers. Wiping the blur from his eyes, he stared down at several tadpoles flopping around in a fruit jar's shards.

“Kaaatyyyyyy!”

One

Vincent swept back a lock of greasy black hair and watched two punks having their nighttime fun with one of the back alley's denizens. Same idiots he'd noticed hanging around the corner bar earlier. One hood was a shaggy tough with a scalp like rat hide. His smaller blond buddy wore a leather jacket even the bum they were rolling would pass up. The object of their affections might be mistaken for another sack of garbage left beside the dumpster, save for the groans and pleas while they beat him.

He glanced around the building's corner. Streetlamps cast yellow reflections across the otherwise empty pavement at the alley's mouth. Help wouldn't be coming. Chicago's finest didn't give a shit about this place, and why should they? Flop houses, hookers, and drunks. Welcome to West Madison. Shrugging his long brown coat over a nondescript dark T-shirt, he buttoned the duster against the evening's damp and stepped from beneath the bar's flashing sign. The crumpled bills in his pocket, earned from replacing a jukebox's blown amplifier, should ensure at least one day's worth of warm meals.

The old Indian motorcycle still leaned against the grimy brick wall where he left it. The cracked and peeling seat looked a lot like the one thug's jacket. Vincent swung onto the machine with an inner smile. Sure, his ride looked like crap, but only until you heard the engine rumble to life. He was good at fixing things. Most things. His eye caught the glint of metal in the flash of the bar's red neon. A sickening thud followed. Jesus, did they have to use a pipe on the poor bastard?

Sighing, he slid off the seat. That drunk would be him one day if the best he managed were odd jobs at dead-end bars. He fished a pair of brass knuckles from the duster's pocket, the

coat being the only good thing his father left behind before running away years back. Not much for words, Vincent charged the two, their backs bent to the business of kicking the fallen vagrant. Rat-hair spun around in time to lose a few front teeth. Shifting his weight, he slammed a boot into the other's gut, bouncing him against the rusted bin like a ragdoll.

Rat-hair took to his heels clutching what was left of his mouth. Blondie bolted after him, pausing only to puke up an offering to the gutter gods. Yeah. Punks. They came with the territory, along with drifters like him and the bum lying at his feet. Damn if those two hadn't worked the tramp over good. He pocketed the knuckles and pivoted on a worn heel. *Not my problem.*

"Please...stay a moment." The words bubbled up from behind him.

He paused, took a breath, and then turned once more to consider the bloody heap. Most bums smelled of booze and piss, but this one looked more like an executive gone bad on his luck, yet still trying to hold the threads together. The victim's gray coat looked frayed only at the edges, though the wool was blotched by what those punks did to him. He even had himself a fancy-looking cane, not that it had helped the old man fend off West Madison's brand of vermin. Maybe the fellow simply took a wrong turn. He knew about wrong turns.

The man's busted-up jaw worked with effort, its gray bristles caked with blood. "A moment...just till the Westbound comes. Don't wanna meet it alone."

The plaintive entreaty tugged at him. Usually, he walked away from these things. Usually, however, didn't include a deep gash across the head right down to the bone. Vincent glanced back at the bar. Fat chance he'd get an ambulance out here. Poor guy's only crime was in being out of money, and finally out of luck. Just another of life's little blessings showered down by a loving God. "I'll call you a doctor, old timer."

A rasping laugh squeezed out from surprisingly even teeth. "Too late for that, son. Number 9's done pulled out of Asheville. Heading to that big ol' Rock Candy Mountain." The man shuddered and coughed up red spittle.

Damn, you're going to die right here. He sat down beside the man, not having heard such lingo in the ten long years since Katy and Dad performed their vanishing acts. Hobo talk--stuff his father brought home from the rail yard where he worked. Vincent eased his arms around the man's bony shoulders, ignoring the sticky wetness seeping through the seat of his jeans. Poor bastard looked to have hopped his last boxcar. Nobody deserved to go like this--propped up like sack of refuse. "I'll stay with you until your train comes, old timer." His throat constricted. "I had a sister who liked trains."

"Find her." The words struggled to whisper their way past bruised lips. Gnarled fingers scrapped at the pocket of patchwork pants that would have done a banker proud in their prime. The tramp pulled out a worn nickel.

Surprised at the chillingly appropriate request from a dying man's crumbling consciousness, he reached out and caught the coin before it rolled from relaxed fingers. A cold hand loosely grasped his wrist, and then slipped off after one long final exhale. Vincent stared into glassy eyes, wondering if the other's blank stare would punch a hole in someone's world once they found out about this wretch's ugly fate. Even hobos had family somewhere, didn't they? He eased the body down and rose. "Hope you caught your train, old man."

He turned the nickel around in his fingers. The coin's front and back had been altered. A hobo nickel. Looked like a girl's face on one side, though he couldn't be sure in the dim light. He slid the nickel into his duster next to the brass knuckles. Yeah. Find his sister. Katy's anniversary was coming up again, and he'd spend another pointless hour staring down at weeds just like the

year before. That and listening to Mom's accusations. If anyone needed disappearing, she did. The family he once called his own had long since buried themselves in Katy's field, himself included. Just too stubborn to admit it. Well, maybe Dad had figured things out. He'd taken off fast enough.

A bright beam dazzled Vincent's eyes, swept down to the body, and returned to his face.

Now you assholes show up. Vincent ran for his bike, knowing damn well what those cops inside the patrol car were thinking, especially with his record. He stomped down on the Indian's starter and wheeled the bike around while the cops were still making up their minds about whether or not he was worth the trouble. The motor woke with a spattering snarl, sending the rear tire spinning on wet cobblestones before finding purchase. He shot toward the police car before it finished backing into a turn.

The cop was one of the few smart ones. The driver-side door swung open in an attempt to block him from leaving the alley. Swearing, Vincent jumped the shallow curb, sending the bike along the sidewalk. This would be a bad time for somebody to stagger out of the bar. Lady Luck resurfaced. Maybe she enjoyed a good chase. Fine. He'd give her and the cops all the entertainment they could stomach. The Indian responded with a throaty roar gaining him West Madison. A siren howled its frustration behind him. Traffic was light at this hour. If he made Columbus Park, they'd never find him. In addition to fixing things, he also knew how to run.

A warren of tenements and back streets surrounded his goal, and Vincent made use of them all. The pack chasing him picked up more hounds as he led them into a rat's nest of dead ends and sharp turns. Silently coast the Indian up one street. Cut through a gap in a sagging fence somewhere else. Double back in the shadows. Soon it sounded like half of Chicago was after him. Hell of a send-off. Too bad. He still had a couple weeks rent left on his room.

His T-shirt clung to him because of either sweat or the old man's blood. He leaned hard into the turns, the old brown duster flapping like a cape. The long coat offered some protection against the night's chill. An inviting dark patch grew beyond a string of streetlights. The park. The neighborhood behind him looked like Christmas with all those flashing lights. He idled the bike's engine, killed the headlight, and endured the jolt and rattle while coasting across the intervening avenue and over the curb.

Time to play pinball with the trees. Branches clawed at him, near misses with dark trunks adding to the hammering in his chest. The surrounding streets offered only so much illumination, but he knew these paths and ponds. Ahead waited a black sea of wide fields under whose concealment he would slip away from those screaming banshees.

Vincent's first steady breath came after staring across the night toward distant lines of blinking red lights. His triumph disintegrated into a grimace. Those bastards got a good look at him, and this time it wasn't about stealing a quick meal. What little life he'd managed to scrape together up here was gone, courtesy of a moment's misplaced pity. God only knew where he was headed now, other than it wouldn't be anywhere near Chicago. He patted the bike's gas tank, grateful he'd just filled it. He needed somewhere to collect his thoughts and figure out how to deal with this latest serving of shit. His shoulders slumped. Like there was a choice, right?

Home. Bad memories or not, he could walk away from there a lot easier than some Chicago jail. He turned the handlebars south for the distant farmlands of his torn adolescence.

He eased out of the park and kept to side streets, skirting the Cisco rail yards and chancing one of the canal bridges. Caution dictated detours and a slow drive, turning a two-hour trip into a nervous exodus costing twice the time. The state of Indiana begrudgingly surrendered

stores and residential areas to more rural surroundings until settling on the dark silhouettes of cornfields beneath a May moon.

He pulled over onto a gravel swath and gave himself a chance to catch up. The only thing to worry about out here was bugs in his teeth. The sky was cool and clear, allowing an audience of stars to applaud his latest screw-up in silent derision. His shoulders sagged under the realization of how two years of shit jobs hadn't improved his worth in anyone's eyes. Go to the big city. Carve out a new beginning. *Now look at me.* Mom would have herself a good laugh before spitting Katy in his face again.

Cursing, he revved up the Indian and kept speeding southward until he crossed the Will County line in the pre-dawn's pearly glow. Even his duster couldn't keep the teeth-clenching chill at bay. Never mind. Wind was good. It kept him awake and cast an illusion of freedom around a future caged by his past. Sure, keep traveling and maybe find himself some obscure yellow-dog town. Sink into anonymity by becoming someone's field hand. Amounting to nothing was easy, but even being a nobody came with a cost. He didn't have enough money to get out of state. Heading home didn't mean he was walking up to Mom like a beggar, he reasoned. This was honest pay for giving her a little extra satisfaction.

Roosters heralded a wan sun as the Indian's tires negotiated ruts along the old gravel road where he grew up. His neighborhood was a slight rise of sandy clay overlooking a brushy field. Another year wrought only slight improvements along the irregular row of small houses. Some folks got around to replacing drab asphalt sheets with new siding. Such wasn't the case with the gray three-bedroom home capped by a non-descript brown roof. Vincent pulled into the yard, frowning down at what once had been a flowerbed until crabgrass overwhelmed it. The small

barn in back looked more like a decayed deck of collapsed cards, the sagging roof having given way. Dad would've hated seeing how rundown things had gotten here.

His key probably still worked, but he decided instead to rap his knuckles on the screen door's peeling brown paint. He glanced at his watch. Just past seven. She should be up.

The inner door squeaked open. For a moment, Vincent looked upon the woman's graying hair and hard lines without attaching any meaning to them. The faded green-and-blue patterned dress hanging off her slight frame reached out and wrapped him in heavy memories. "Mom."

Her brown eyes sank into wrinkled slits. For a moment she looked about to slam the door in his face. Her voice was a thin drawl of country life dipped in bitterness. "What do *you* want?"

"Something to eat and a little gas money. I'll be out of your hair after that."

She peered around his shoulder. "Police after you again?"

"They're always after me," he threw back, following her into a small kitchen. The yellow cabinets looked freshly washed, and judging from the delicious smell, she was baking bread. Yeah, there was a loaf already cooling on a long wooden table. He helped himself to a thick slice, the crust still hot. "You get yourself a new table?" he ventured, hoping to steer conversation into warmer climes.

"You'd know that if you'd come around other than when you're asking for a handout. It's Katy's anniversary. Go out and pay her respect."

He drew in a long breath. "It's not for a couple months, Mom."

Vincent jumped as his mother slammed an iron pan down on the counter. "It's Katy's anniversary, damn you!" She twisted to face him, her venomous expression no less potent now than during those tortuous years after his father had run out on them. "You go out there and tell

her you're sorry. You promised your father you'd take care of her when you took her, so get out there."

"Yeah, I promised," Vincent muttered, trying to keep his temper in check. As if a twelve-year-old kid was going to deliver on such an oath. Didn't matter. Apparently, every damn day was Katy's anniversary these days, so he'd best play along. He needed the shuteye, not to mention money and breakfast. He'd get nothing if he kept pissing her off.

"I hope the police find you. God knows you deserve prison."

God knows why I keep coming back here. Disgusted with himself for thinking this visit would be an improvement over the last; Vincent grabbed an apple from a bowl on the counter and turned for the door. He glanced outside at his bike, tempted to...do what? Start walking somewhere near the state line when his tank ran dry? Stuffing the fruit in a coat pocket, he shouldered open the screen door.

"Is that blood on your backside?"

The sound of genuine concern made him pause. Even a precious moment's glimpse at the mother she used to be was worth stopping for. "It's not mine, Mom, and no, I didn't kill anyone. There was an accident. I helped all I could."

"Accident," she snorted. "I bet you helped. That was your father's good work coat."

"I'll get it cleaned." Shaking his head, he walked down the dirt drive, thankful she didn't blame him for Dad's disappearance on top of everything else. Or maybe she did. One day Dad was there. The next... Vincent hated him for leaving, but Dad had stuck up for him the day Katy vanished. Said it wasn't his fault. How in hell wasn't it his fault? Obviously, Dad went looking for Katy. Why couldn't his father have taken him along?

How little the field across from the house had changed, though these days it looked a lot smaller than he remembered. Same half-hearted attempt at trees. Same Medusa's hair of grass, burrs, and brambles. Same churn in his guts while tromping toward a line of undergrowth along a creek that should've dried up by now. Ages ago, the stream had been an adventure to reach, something to plan an afternoon around. It was easy to think the creek was a world away back then. Now, he needed a few minutes to reach the same area, with only old nightmares to lengthen the walk.

Vincent stared down at the brief bank along a muddy bend, watching tiny shapes dart and wiggle beneath filmy water. A small frog plopped into the stream, chasing after a dragon fly. Sighing, he closed his eyes, his fingers closing around the coin in the pocket of his father's coat. A gift from a dying bum to a stranger's sister who was probably dead already. That was the worst of it. Not knowing if he had a sister. Or a father. He pulled out the nickel. It belonged here more than he did. His hand paused in mid-toss, catching something odd about the coin's face. Ah yes--a hobo nickel.

He studied the feminine features replacing Thomas Jefferson's head. Carved into the gleaming coin with exquisite detail was a woman-child's bemused face, her hair a swirling cloud beneath a fanciful top hat. The eyes were wide with an excited sort of innocence expertly captured in the silvery metal. The old man must've worked on the nickel for years. He wondered if the hobo also sought to leave a piece of his soul behind--a grasp at immortality, perhaps.

He flipped the coin around. The image of Monticello was gone, polished down to a mirror finish. In its place was a bas-relief of two circles touching. A hobo sign like those his father taught him when Mom wasn't around. This one meant something about not giving up if he remembered right.

He stuffed the nickel back in his pocket. Bad enough to see the artist ending up thrown away with the trash. His art deserved a kinder fate. Don't give up. A good piece of advice for any man, let alone a bum. He looked up into clouded skies. "You'll get this when I find you, Katy."

He turned back toward the house, a quick meal, and if he was lucky, enough cash to get him as far away from Chicago as the old bike could manage. He pushed his way through a tangle of saplings and wild flowers, and then broke out into an open stretch of field divided by white ballast and gleaming rails. His heart did a belly flop into his stomach. He lurched toward the tracks with drunken footsteps, praying the vision would hold long enough for him to once again feel the crunch of stones beneath his soles.

The iron rail with its bright surface felt substantial enough to his tentative kick. Damn if the track wasn't humming to him like the purr of a backstreet cat looking for scraps. Swallowing, he stepped between the rails and stomped hard on a tie. The metal beneath his feet was real. Actually real. He glanced over his shoulder, expecting another oncoming light. Not this time. There was only the line wavering into a distant shimmer. No matter. Facing west in the direction Katy's train had disappeared into, he leaned into a steady trot. "About damn time," Vincent muttered.

