

Prologue

The ghost wouldn't leave her alone. Violet scrunched up in the swaying train car's bench seat, tucking her red leggings up under a yellow dress wrinkled by time and travel.

Another tap on the window. "Oh, would you stop pouting," the wispy voice said. "Come out and play."

Nobody else could see the feather-headed girl swirling in the locomotive's passing steam. Violet wished she couldn't, either. The apparition's eyes were as wide as a child's on Christmas morning, brimming with an eagerness to challenge the bleakness eating through Violet's heart.

Violet clapped her hands over brunette tangles. "Go away."

The ghost had been haunting her ever since the train pulled out of Omaha. At first Violet thought herself dreaming when the clouds billowing from the engine up front began making shapes. Until the ghost appeared, swimming among the vapors like a minnow. A little girl about her age, wearing a smock and shorts with long boots cast in the same gray mists as her trouble-making face. And peacock feathers for hair.

The window cleared again. Violet stared out across featureless plains where endless rows of corn waved their yellow tassels at a Nebraska sun. Somewhere ahead would be another city. More squinting farmer's wives inspecting her mouth as if she were some pig heading to market. She'd given the last one a good bite. She didn't want another mother.

Violet's chestnut eyes squeezed shut. What had she done that was so bad? *I have to let you go because I love you.* How could Mother say that, and then let those two men drag her from the sickroom where they'd put her?

"I'm glad you died," she hissed. Violet cringed away from her lie, trying to make a hole inside herself to crawl into. She tried humming like Mother always did. *I see the moon, the moon sees me...* Except Mother wouldn't see her again. Wouldn't sing this to her. Wouldn't anything.

The glass beside her vibrated with another insistent rap. "Listen to the music, silly. Can't you hear your name?"

Whirling around, Violet banged at the window, her exasperated scream causing the two drab girls in the adjacent seat to cringe. Of course she could hear her name, along with music calling to her between each click and clack of the tracks. She didn't want to sing. She wanted to die.

The ghost merely laughed, then stuck her tongue out. "I'm not going away, but you are. Midtown's coming to get you." The grinning face vanished again.

"That's enough from you, young lady."

This voice was real, brittle, and uncompromising. So, too, the stinging cuff to the back of her head.

Violet spun around and kicked at the rail-thin woman who looked like a starchy black pencil with a face to match. "Go away!"

Her keeper grabbed Violet's shoulder. "Back to the room for you, Miss Winsmith."

She wouldn't spend another day in that smelly old bathroom. Violet scratched at the wrist seizing her and ducked under grasping arms. Or tried to. Mrs. Fitzgibbons proved quicker, and banged her against the seat's hard wooden back. The remaining orphans in the car shouted their delight at this break in the monotony.

One of the two girls across from her shrieked and pointed toward the window. "Look! There really is a girl in the window...with feathers!"

Even Violet gave a start at the fierce glare and curled back lips revealed in the swirling steam. Ghost hands gripped the sides of the window and shook. The entire car lurched. Yelping, she barely avoided Mrs. Fitzgibbons' sharp elbow as the woman tumbled into the seat. Brakes screeched and children cried out.

Violet saw her chance. She jumped over her minder and into the aisle while the coach rocked with deceleration. The passenger car's door flung wide of its own accord as if daring her to leap out.

She tumbled down a mild slope of warm earth. The sharp edges of gray ballast stones among the grass made her cry out. Sucking in a determined breath, she found her feet and looked back to see those two girls in their plain brown dresses staring at her from the door as the train shuddered to a squealing stop. She started to yell to them to join her when someone jerked the pair back inside.

She didn't wait to see who did it. She'd met the man with the broad strap once already when she'd bit that woman back in Omaha. He hurt far worse than these stones did. Crying out, Violet ran as fast as her red leggings allowed, but not toward the cornfield with its inviting green smells. Something inside her chose to scramble along the tracks toward the big black engine.

The children threw open windows along the olive green coach and jeered at her stupidity. Maybe the ghost was right. Maybe she would die here and join the feather-headed girl. Such a fate certainly seemed to be the case judging by the heavy footfalls closing in behind her.

Past the black riveted steel oil tender. Past the locomotive cab above her. Violet fled in a growing panic, hearing her unseen pursuer gaining ground. She plunged through a whoosh of steam from the engine's piston, the hot moist bath of white clouds enveloping her. She broke out the other side unable to go on. Panting, she pressed against driver wheels taller than her. A shadow appeared through the mist with balled fists and a brandished belt. The strap man paused, his broad chest heaving beneath the white shirt and open black vest. He stared right at her, but didn't step forward. The hand with the strap lowered. He slowly backed away through the puffing steam, his eyes still fixed on her.

"He knows better than to bother a steam child." A new voice chuckled with the lightness of a morning breeze. The amused comment came from the front of the locomotive.

Swallowing, she turned, expecting the ghost. The apparition seemed ghostly, but not really spooky. This one's appearance was definitely different, the face a little less mischievous as if undecided between child and grownup. The way this new ghost stood before the engine with her hands clasped in front of her reminded Violet of an English teacher back in New York. Of course, teachers didn't have an

impossibly long ponytail made up of blonde and brunette bands. Nor would they consider wearing a bright green bandana to tie off the extension.

The girl wasn't all gray steam like the other. Her purple top and lacy white vest appeared no less substantial than the blue train engineer's dungarees stuffed into calf-high leather boots with bright brass buttons. Only when Violet looked really close did she see the wispy outlines telling her this wasn't a regular person. That, and the fact she could see through her.

"Well, come on and say hi." The ghost beckoned. "Violet, right?"

"Yes," she stammered out, stepping forward until she stood even with the locomotive's front grill. "You with the other ghost?"

The newcomer clapped her hands. "Oh, am I a ghost, now?" She executed a curtsy, spreading an imaginary dress with her fingers as she dipped. "My name is Midtown, and I am not a ghost, thank you very much." She folded her arms and squinted. "Hmm, didn't your daddy tell you anything?"

"Never met my daddy," Violet admitted with a lowered voice. Mother always talked as if she loved Father, even if she never expected him to stay. A contradiction she never understood. Until now. Father left like her Mother had, just a lot sooner.

"Mommy tell you about steam children?"

She stuck her lip out. "She's dead."

"Well, we're not," Midtown countered with a roll of her eyes, blunting Violet's dramatic barb. Her accent wasn't much different than that of the farmer woman at the last stop, except younger sounding. "Don't you know anything about Hobohemia, dear?"

"Hobo... what?"

Midtown groaned and threw up her hands. "Quickly. Go tell the engineer everything's fine, but this'll take just a bit longer."

"Yes, Mom!"

Violet looked up to find the more familiar ghost perched atop the dome behind the locomotive's chimney. Except this time she displayed herself in color too, right down to the gaudy peacock feathers in her hair. The girl waved at her. "Took you long enough!"

She didn't hear Midtown come up next to her, and yelped at the warm touch of the other's fingers against her cheek.

Midtown crouched down. "How old are you?"

"Eleven," Violet answered, bristling at pity in the other's tone. Those nurses back at the hospital sounded like they cared too, but they didn't stop those men either.

"Eleven." Midtown sighed. "And quite the angry little thing. Such sour notes running down my tracks. Well, now that you've been reborn, you'll need a name that's more fun. Nice leggings by the way. You should keep them."

Violet regarded her legs and gave a shriek. She was see-through too. "I'm dead?"

Midtown snorted. "Enough with the dead nonsense. You're a steam child just like me."

"A...what?"

"Steam child, silly." She pointed to the tracks. "We keep the living rails alive. Go ahead. Listen to them."

Puzzled, Violet did as she was told and bent over. There, the song she heard earlier, and much more. An orchestra of sounds, with each string tied to something separate and meaningful as if the musician existed there along with the music.

Midtown gestured toward the huffing machine behind them. "Everything starts with the union workers who make steam engines. They use more passion and imagination making one of these things than a single locomotive can hope to hold. So along comes a special man who can focus all of that wonderful spirit into tracks the engine can run on. He's called a gandy dancer. He can make the living rails, but can't keep them alive. That's where his daughters come in." She spread her arms. "That's you and me."

“My father was one of them...a gandy dancer?” Violet stared at her steamy arm.

“Obviously, dear. And don’t worry about how you look. One can’t gather the spirit of Hobohemia like we do unless we’re spirits ourselves.”

“Hobohemia?”

“As I said, the steam engines can’t keep all the creativity to themselves. Not even the tracks can. So the spirit coming from the union shops just keeps spreading out along the rails, attracting all kinds of like-minded folks. Did you know that hobo actually means someone who’s homeward bound? They come here because they belong here. Just like we do.”

Violet glanced back at the train. Several perplexed heads peeked out of the windows. Was her body lying there? She didn’t see anything. “So...I’m not a ghost?”

“No, silly, you’re just a younger me who’s about to have herself more fun than she ever imagined.” Midtown encircled her with an arm feeling real enough. “Much younger,” she threw in with a smirk. “Sooo, about that name. Are those moose embroidered into those leggings of yours? How about we call you Moosey? Or Red?”

“Red,” Violet blurted, wanting to shed all the pain draping her former name. She felt red. Her father was the one who supposedly liked moose.

“Red suits you,” Midtown confirmed with a nod. “Now, about that fun. Do you like going really fast?”

Red gulped. “You mean fly?”

“That too, but for now let’s just use the tracks.” Her voice raised. “Hey up there, Quickly. Quit playing around in that locomotive and say happy birthday to Red.”

A sharp toot of the engine’s steam whistle preceded a puffy white geyser shooting from the boiler’s top. “Red, Red, Red,” the other steam child sing-songed, diving to grab Red in a whirling embrace. “Happy birthday! Oh, wait until Glory meets you.”

“Glory’s new, too,” Midtown said. “Quickly here is about to have her own adventures with the Baltimore and Ohio barony, so she’ll be leaving us soon.”

The feathery girl paused in her hug to flip upside down in a gravity-defying maneuver ending with a quick topsy-turvy kiss on Midtown's forehead. "Such a wonderful mom. She's actually a steam mother. Not many of us are old enough to be called that." Quickly hovered in the air, becoming half of herself from the waist up while the rest looked more like some genie cloud. She laughed. "See? You can look anyway you like."

Hearing the sarcasm in Quickly's comment, no doubt aimed at her rumpled clothes, Red imagined her dress a defiant pink. Suddenly, the cloth became just as she envisioned. The feat earned a clap of delight from both spirits.

Quickly giggled. "Learns fast. So Mom, we can skate home, now?"

Midtown took Red's hand with a grin. "Hold on. You're going to *love* this!"