

## Chapter One:

Off in the distance, obscured by the night, the approaching train drew closer. The whistle made a mournful sound as the behemoth of steel entered the switching yard, maneuvering its nearly two hundred tons of steel through the congestion as its speed slackened. The CSX engine weaved past dozens of parallel tracks, temporary home to a wide assortment of rolling stock; dusty gondolas laden with coal, their mountains of black obscure in the darkness; box cars of assorted styles and colors, doors barricaded to conceal their contents; enclosed auto transports, stacked with vehicles direct from The Motor City.

Massive arc lamps stood as silent sentinels throughout the yard, throwing their harsh light over the environs. And while the illumination did much to reveal the surroundings it managed as well to cast dark shadows everywhere, shadows that merged with the night and concealed details.

Figures moved through these shadows.

The four teenagers kept close together, each of them gripping several cans of spray paint as they stumbled across the uneven terrain. From time to time they would stop in the shadow of one of the train cars, taking a few moments to scan the surroundings before continuing their journey. The progress was slow. They didn't seem in a particular hurry.

"All clear," Micky announced, as he led

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the quartet from concealment. Micky was the unacknowledged leader of the group, the one in the forefront of their activities. He achieved this position, not through any particular attributes or abilities, but rather due to the fact that he was the oldest of the four. As such he had long come to expect obedience from the others.

Tommy, his junior by three months, couldn't resist the urge to brook an argument. "What's wrong with where we're at?" He shook the can in his hand, the rattle of the agitator within sounding unnaturally loud in the gloomy surroundings. "Let's just do this."

It was too dark to detect the look of scorn Mickey responded with, though his tone of voice managed to convey his opinion of Tommy's suggestion. "We'll do it when I say we do it. Understand?"

"Sure, Mickey." Tommy hesitated, casting furtive glances around them, reluctant to back down but hesitant to resist further. "Whatever you say."

"You're not scared, are you?" Mickey suggested.

"'Course I ain't scared."

The question bothered Tommy. Most things about Mickey bothered Tommy. The older boy's status was an accident of nature that troubled Tommy to no end. It annoyed him, this feeling of subservience he felt around Micky. To compensate, he took every opportunity to strut his stuff, his adolescent pride attempting to win the others over to his side for the slight he felt thrust upon him due to his age.

"Cut it out, you two," Jason interjected, hoping to forestall any further arguments. The constant bickering of the two boys was an irritant he could do without. He pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose, then

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turned to look behind him. "You comin', Rosie?"

"Sure. I'm right behind you."

Rosaletta was the youngest of the group, over two years in age behind her brother Tommy. Though only fifteen she looked much older, having blossomed through her adolescence into a striking young woman with raven black hair and a flawless complexion. She was aware of her physical attributes, as aware as she was of the undesired attention she often received from older boys because of her appearance, but she wasn't comfortable with it. Rosaletta tended to dress conservatively. She didn't like attention; she preferred to blend into the background.

This was difficult to achieve in most situations, but particularly so when it came to dealing with girls her own age. They seemed threatened by her somehow, as though her attractiveness was something she flaunted in front of them. But she couldn't help her looks. For a long time it had bothered her, this isolation from other girls her own age. But after a while she grew accustomed to it.

She no longer missed spending time with the girls. She didn't need them anyway.

At least she could be herself when she was with her brother and his friends. They looked out for her. They made her feel like part of the group, even allowing her to join them on their nocturnal excursions together.

"That train's getting awful close," Tommy remarked, feeling the beginnings of rumblings beneath his feet.

Mickey laughed at the comment. "What a wuss. Afraid the big bad train is gonna run you down?"

Tommy drew closer, feeling the need to defend himself. "I ain't afraid!"

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"Yeah. That's what you say." A mischievous grin spread across Mickey's face. "We'll see. Follow me."

Mickey sprinted across the yard, crossing a set of rails, his shoes crunching against the gravel.

"Now what?" Tommy asked, to no one in particular.

Jason shrugged. "Who knows? Let's see what he's got in mind."

Then there were just the two of them standing there. Rosaletta moved closer toward her brother, touching him lightly on the arm in an attempted show of solidarity. "Why do you let him get to you, bro? Who cares what Mickey thinks, anyway?"

He shrugged the gesture off, as though finding it offensive. "Don't you start in on me."

"I'm not starting nothing. But you know Mickey likes to ride you. Just ignore him. It don't mean nothing."

"That's easy for you to say."

For several seconds they stood together in silence, watching their two companions moving away, the retreating figures blending into the shadows.

"So what you gonna do?" Rosaletta asked at last.

"What can I do?"

Tommy turned, walking briskly across the tracks, and his sister followed moments later.

Mickey was standing defiantly in the center of the train track. His arms were poised on his hips, his legs spread slightly; all he lacked was a cape to make the Superman stance complete. His voice matched the bravado presented in his appearance.

"I figger the train's comin' down this

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here track." His stare locked onto Tommy.  
"You willin' to stand here with me, and see who lasts the longest before movin' outta the way? Or are you chicken?"

Tommy hesitated, common sense getting the better of him. "I don't know...."

"That's what I figgered," Mickey interrupted, a smile of satisfaction crossing his face. "You don't have the balls for it."

Tommy spat on the ground, then dropped the paint cans he had brought with him, before moving forward. "You wanna bet?"

"Tommy, don't."

Rosaletta grabbed for his arm but he shook the motion off.

"Stay outta this, Rosie."

A long-legged stride carried him across the steel rail to Mickey's location. A moment later both boys stood together, standing side-by-side on the creosote-soaked ties, staring down the line at the steadily increasing light of the locomotive as it moved toward them.

"Come on, guys," Jason urged. There was no denying the concern in his voice. He wanted to grab his companions, to shake some sense into them, but his reluctance to cross the rail held him back. He glanced down the line.

"This is stupid."

"You callin' me stupid?" Mickey glared.

"Yeah, you're stupid. Thinking this is a good idea is crazy. Only thing this proves is you're both a couple a idiots."

The blast of the train's whistle cut off the last of Jason's words. The engine was slowing through the yard, in preparation for the coming stop, but momentum continued to urge the locomotive forward. It bore down on the group, relentless in its motion. Vibrations coursed through the rails, emanating from the diesel's motors. The ground shook, disturbing

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the ballast, sending tiny avalanches of stone cascading downward.

Mickey still smiled, the devilish grin he reserved for use while performing his pranks, but a somber look had entered his eyes, testifying to the realization of what he had gotten himself into. He chanced a look at Tommy, expecting to see fear etched in the other boy's features, but no show of emotion was revealed. Tommy stared straight ahead into the night, his attention captivated by the approaching contraption. He held his breath. He waited, immobile, like a statue.

"Please, Tommy." Rosaletta was crying, her body shaking. "Don't be doing this."

Her brother turned to face her. She could tell by the look on his face he had no intention of backing down. He had made his stand and was determined not to falter. She covered her eyes, refusing to look any longer.

The boys were bathed in light by now, the engine's triple headlamps seeking them out in the night, its glow revealing the silhouetted figures standing on the tracks. Air brakes squealed. The whistle moaned yet again. Time seemed to slow, anticipating the inevitable conclusion of the confrontation between man and machine.

"Oh, hell!"

Mickey jumped to the side as the words escaped his lips, his wild leap throwing him to the ground. He rolled across the loose gravel, lurching to a stop and looking back toward the tracks.

Tommy smiled, confident in his victory, and walked casually out of harm's way. He came to a stop, barely off the tracks, as the engine hurtled past. The wind from the passing train whipped at him, slapping his coat against his body and tugging at the legs of his jeans.

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Loose stone and debris pelted him, stinging the back of his neck, but he failed to respond. A smile graced his face.

"Who's the coward now, big man?!" Even with shouting, his words barely carried over the racket of the passing line of cars. They rattled behind him; metal scraping against metal, aged suspension systems groaning in the night.

Rosaletta looked up, forcing her hands away from her face. She smiled at her brother, excited for him and what he had accomplished.

The smile lasted a moment only.

Somewhere along the line - somewhere between the switching yard in Chicago and the end of the line in Toledo - a rusted ladder leading up the face of a boxcar had captured a limb from a decaying tree. The branch had lodged in the rungs, riding the untold miles of rail in darkness, occasionally shifting position as the train jostled along its way. It had managed to stay upright for most of the journey. Only now, with the train's momentum slackening, the limb had shifted. It leaned to the side, threatening to fall to the ground, but somehow it's movement was arrested. Like a giant gnarled hand, the wooden obstacle reached out in the night.

Tommy never saw it coming.

The others, too horrified to do anything but watch, could only stare dumbfounded as the branch slapped across the young boy's head. He spun a complete circle, a pirouette accented by a sharp snapping sound, and fell to the ground.

No movement came from him other than the red flow that oozed from beneath, the rivulet of blood slithering toward the three remaining youngsters like accusatory fingers.

Rosaletta was the first to react, running

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to her brother's side and kneeling down beside him. Ignoring the loose gravel that dug into her skin, even through the jeans she wore, she reached for Tommy's face. The motion stopped, her fingers inches from his cheek. She found herself drawn to his eyes, staring into the lifeless orbs.

"Shit!" Mickey stepped closer toward the still form on the ground, spun indecisively about, then faced the siblings once again.

"Shit!"

"We gotta do somethin'," Jason suggested.

"What we gonna do?"

"I don't know. Shouldn't we call somebody?"

"No sense callin' no one. Just look at him. It's too late."

"Maybe not. Maybe he'll be okay...."

"Just look at him, for Christ's sake. He's dead."

"No!" Rosaletta turned to face the bickering duo, the tears in her eyes glistening. She cradled her brother's head, stroking his hair. "He's gonna be okay."

"Forget it, Rosie." Mickey stepped closer. "He's dead. Ain't nothin' you can do for him now."

"No." Her head shook violently back and forth. "He's gonna be okay. I know it."

By now the string of train cars on the track behind them had coasted to a stop. The diesel engines still throbbed with life, like some sort of metal animal breathing in the night, but gone was the clatter of the couplers and the scraping of the wheels against the rails. Gone was the rattle and groans of the shifting rolling stock, the cars having settled into a peaceful slumber where they stood. It seemed almost quiet now, a still night disturbed only by the subdued roar of passing



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cars from nearby Interstate 75 and the sobbing of the young girl kneeling in the gravel.

Footsteps sounded, from somewhere down the track, of someone hurriedly moving their direction. Rosaletta failed to notice but both boys were drawn to the disturbance. Mickey and Jason exchanged knowing glances.

"I'm outta here," Mickey announced. Moments later he disappeared, swallowed by the darkness.

Jason touched Rosaletta lightly on the shoulder. "Come on, Rosie. We need to leave."

"I can't." She faced her friend. "I can't leave him. Not like this."

"You can't do him no good now. We need to leave."

"No." She turned back toward the still form cradled in her arms. "You go. I'll be okay."

Jason hesitated several seconds before making his decision.

And then Rosaletta was truly alone.

### Chapter Two:

Benjamin Tuppelo arrived on the scene thirty-five minutes later. Several police cruisers were on site by the time he reached the train yard. The vehicles had their headlights on, the white light accenting the still form of the teenage boy sprawled on the ground, while the flashers on the roofs bathed the area in red and blue, lending a macabre carnival-like atmosphere to the surroundings.

Tuppelo was a big man. He strode from his

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car with the assured gait of someone who had served twenty-four years with the Toledo Police Department. The detective had seen death countless times while on the force. He had witnessed hundreds of accident scenes during his career. Each one struck him with the same feeling of regret, mourning the tragic lost he was called on to investigate on a regular basis. It all seemed so senseless to him.

Somehow a crowd had gathered already, a phenomenon about crime scenes that never failed to amaze the detective. It was well after midnight, in a location that could hardly have been more isolated, but that didn't stop the onlookers from congregating. Several had cellphones on the ready, hoping to catch a picture of the scene from where they were held at bay by a crew of uniformed officers.

"What do we have?" Tuppelo asked no one in particular as he approached the scene.

A junior tech, someone Tuppelo recognized but whose name eluded him at the moment, answered. "Looks pretty cut and dry. Couple of kids fooling around." He kicked at one of the spray cans of paint abandoned on the ground. "Probably came here to leave their signature on some of the train cars."

The tech motioned to the body which lay on the ground, staring at the stars above with lifeless eyes that saw nothing.

"This one - the name's Thomas Guterrez - got too close to where he shouldn't have been."

Tuppelo looked up and down the line of cars on the nearby siding, as though searching for something, then returned his attention to the still form at his feet. The blood had coagulated into an ugly brown pool that surrounded the youth's head, though there was no sign of bruising or lacerations. He must have bled from somewhere in back, the damage

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concealed now due to the position of the body.

It didn't look right to Tuppello. He made no attempt to disturb the victim as he considered the scene. "I would have expected worse, being hit by a train," he offered at last.

"That's just it."

The technician stood, wiping some gravel from his hands.

"The train didn't get him."

The detective's look revealed his confusion.

The tech pointed to a tree branch laying on the ground, about sixty feet further down the track. "We think that's what did it."

One end of the limb looked freshly broken, where it had snapped off against the train's ladder. The other end was discolored with blood.

"We think it may have been sticking out from the train. Swiped the kid as it passed. Looks like his neck was snapped from the blow. At least it was probably quick. Chances are he didn't even have time to react."

Small consolation, Tuppello mused.

"Any witnesses?" the detective asked.

"A couple."

The tech pointed to a man leaning casually against the side of an enclosed boxcar. The indicated figure wore jeans and a flannel work shirt. A windbreaker - the letters CSX emblazoned on the front - hung at his side, as though he had gotten too hot wearing the jacket and had taken it off. He smoked a cigarette, taking quick puffs. He didn't seem to be enjoying the taste, but appeared too nervous to stop.

"Henry Cullins," the tech continued. "Works here in the train yard. He was up in the tower when it happened."

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Tuppelo turned the indicated direction, taking in a three-story white-brick structure perched beside the track. A metal staircase clinging to the building led to the top floor. Lights glared from what must have been an office of some kind.

The tech continued his recitation. "Cullins says he saw four figures down here. Looked to be a bunch of kids. Didn't really get a good look at any of them."

"What happened to the others?"

"Two of them decided to vamoose after it happened. Probably scared shitless. Only one of them stayed behind."

"Where's he at?"

"She." The Tech pointed to a young girl sitting on the ground across from them, staring at hands that, even in the dim light of the yard, appeared to be stained in red. "Her name's Rosaletta. Rosaletta Guitierrez."

The Tech stopped to look back at the body on the ground. "She is - that is, she was - his sister."

Tuppelo sighed.

Sometimes he hated this job.

"I guess I better talk to her."

His steps took him past the railroad worker, who threw his half-lit cigarette to the ground and moved forward to approach the police detective. "Are you in charge here?"

Tuppelo answered with no hesitation. "Yes I am."

"Listen, I need to get back to work. Do I have to stick around here much longer?"

"I'll be with you in a few minutes, Mr. Cullins."

"You better be. The company don't pay me to stand around all night, you know."

"I'm sure you're a busy person."

"Damn straight. They told me I had to

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wait until someone in charge came here."

"That would be me."

"Good. Then I'm ready to tell you what I seen."

"It will have to wait a few minutes, Sir. There's someone else I need to talk to first." The detective glanced once more at the teenage girl. She looked like an innocent child, lost and confused. Several police officers stood nearby, as though ready to pounce on her should the need arise. Their attention made her seem that much more vulnerable.

And, somehow, more alone.

The yardman caught Tuppelo's glance. "Who, her? Hell, she ain't going nowhere. She shouldn't of been here to begin with. None of them should a been here. This here's private property, you know."

"Is that so?"

The tone of the detective's response betrayed the fact that he held little interest in what Henry Cullins was saying. The yardman failed to notice.

"Them kids come in here all the time. Sneaking around where they don't belong. Hell, I'm surprised nothing like this has happened before. It serves them right, know what I mean?"

Tuppelo glanced back toward Thomas Guitierrez's body. "You mean that teenager deserved to be killed?"

"No. No. I don't mean that. It's a shame what happened to him. Of course it is. But he shouldn't a been here to begin with. Right?"

Tuppelo said nothing.

"Anyway, I'm ready to tell you what I seen tonight."

The detective studied the man for all of five seconds, the police officer's glance never

wavering, an intense glow in his eyes.

"I'll be with you when I'm ready."

The matter obviously settled, Tuppelo turned and walked away, seemingly oblivious to the mutterings coming from behind him as he approached the young girl.

"Hello, Rosaletta."

Tuppelo waited several seconds, thinking she hadn't heard him, and was about to repeat his greeting when she looked up. Her mascara ran in streaks down her face, smudged from the tears she had shed. Her eyes held a pleading look, as though expecting to hear something that would ease her pain. But no such words were forthcoming.

"I'm Detective Benjamin Tuppelo," he continued. "I'd like to ask you a few questions, if that's all right?"

She nodded but continued her silence.

He towered over her, especially since the young girl sat on the ground. And though he was accustomed to controlling a situation, and under normal circumstances would be more than content to take advantage of his position, this seemed neither the time nor the place for a show of strength.

Tuppelo squatted down beside her, closing the gap between them.

"I'm sorry about your brother."

"Don't be." Her voice surprised him with it's harshness. "It was his own fault. His own stupid fault."

"Can you tell me what happened here tonight?"

"Not much to tell. Tommy was acting the big man. Like he always done. Trying to show off. I told him one day it would get him in trouble. I guess today was that day."

The detective made no reply, allowing

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Rosaletta time to collect her thoughts.

"Mickey was riding Tommy," she continued at last. "Like he always done."

"Who's Mickey?"

She nearly blurted something out, then apparently thought better of it. "It don't matter."

"If this other boy, Mickey, did something to your brother...."

"Mickey didn't do nothing."

She practically spat the answer out, as though she found the taste of the words awful but felt they had to be said.

"Tommy was just being stupid, that's all. Like he always done."

She looked past Tuppelo, toward the still form laying on the ground beside the train tracks.

"Guess he won't be doing that no more, will he?"

There was no need to answer the question.

"Do I need to stay here any longer?" she asked.

He was far from finished with her. Questions swirled though his head. But Tuppelo didn't need to be a seasoned detective to realize Rosaletta Guitierrez was reluctant to speak out about the night's events. It could have been grief concerning her brother. Or the fear many teenagers felt when confronted by authority.

Regardless, there would be time for questions later.

"Of course you don't need to stay here. I can take you home whenever you're ready."

She stood, slowly, as though uncertain how to face what was ahead of her. "That's okay," she managed. "I can find my own way home."

"I don't think that's a good idea, considering what you've been through."

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She shrugged, displaying a lack of concern.

"Besides, I'm sure your parents are worried about you," Tuppelo suggested, fishing for information.

"That will be the day."

"Do they even know where you're at?"

"Mama wouldn't care none. She's with her boyfriend. That's all she cares about anymore."

"And your father?"

She looked toward her brother. The still form was being manhandled onto a gurney. He was covered up now, just a shapeless nonentity in the night.

"My father's with Tommy," she offered, before turning and walking away.