

RAILDOGS EXCERPT

Prologue

The conversation was obviously over. Dougie Rackman balanced himself against the side of the boxcar as it rumbled down the southbound rail. This couldn't be happening. He tried to focus on something, anything, except the sound of his heart hammering against his ribs.

He felt more than saw the others scrambling around in the dark. Someone banged and scratched against the outer walls. Another let out a short sharp scream.

He looked up, his eyes desperately seeking a glimpse of daylight – a gap that offered the possibility of escape. He could hear footsteps above. The smell of the fuel invaded every corner as it poured through holes in the ceiling of the boxcar. Fumes rose from the pool of gasoline as the shaking train sent the liquid spreading slowly across the floor.

As he examined the number three tattooed on the inside of his wrist, he realized he was as angry as he was scared. He was third in line. This shouldn't be happening to him.

His head snapped upward at the muted roar of a blowtorch...

Chapter 1

Reno, Nevada

The figure sat unmoving, immobile. Hands on the arms of the chair, a light shawl was wrapped around her shoulders. Anyone walking the grounds would see Sarah Perez sitting in her window on the second floor and think she was some invalid relaxing in the sunshine, enjoying the nice early-summer weather. Anyone who walked the pathways regularly would know she was there every morning and night, absent only during her own afternoon walks.

This morning her gaze was again fixed on something beyond her window. Was it the flocks of birds wheeling across the sky? Perhaps the flowers and shrubs leading to the tree line? Maybe the mountains off in the distance? Or was it something that no one else saw?

Sarah looked young for this type of long-term care home, but at forty-five she had already been here for ten years, and had long ago settled in.

Her lip curled slightly as the sound of a tap at the door brought her back from her thoughts.

“Who is it?”

“Lunch time.”

She was pretty sure she heard the orderly mutter under his breath.

“You crazy hag.”

She hated the staff, and most of the decrepit old farts and crazy morons who lived here. But for some reason she liked her room and the view. That had been important back in the beginning and it was still true.

“On the table would be fine.”

She stubbed out her cigarette and pulled the window closed, her sole concession to the non-smoking rule. Quietly, she moved towards the small table. The staff had long ago given up trying to make her eat with all the others in the dining room.

The orderly dropped the tray on the table and grabbed the pastry before heading for the door, “You won’t be needing this.”

Her right eye twitched twice. She knew the light shake in her shoulders was anger. Looking down at her hands, she tried to unclench her fists. They had been stealing from her and taking advantage like this ever since she arrived. She hadn’t really noticed in the beginning, but back then she was in pretty bad shape. Now she saw it every day, and it just wasn’t right. But it had gone on so long that making it stop might take more effort than she had inside her.

Sarah watched him leave with her desert in his hand and looked down at the remaining food. She didn’t like it, or hate it. It was a damned necessity, rather bland and inoffensive. It didn’t take long to eat and before she knew it she was back at the window staring off at something. Or nothing.

The battle raged in her head constantly these days. In the beginning the demons had consumed her, and she lived pretty much in her mind. But in the years since she had created a balance of sorts. On most days she was living real life, just as much as she was stuck living in her head.

They all thought she was a little crazy, and at one time she would have agreed. Now she felt like she was just biding her time. She knew the years were going by, but she still grasped some belief, some hope, kindled by thoughts of walking away, free of this place. And she still had her son.

No one knew that he was who she was watching for. He would visit when he could, and so she waited for him.

The guilt was heavy at times. She'd had so many plans for them, for him. Then it had all come crashing down. Sarah shook her head and stared down at her fingers as they curled together on her lap. She'd abandoned him too young.

Lately, she had begun to examine this world she'd made for herself. She wondered how he was surviving out there and what kind of person he had become. Was he happy? He never really told her what he did for money.

It was time for her afternoon walk. She had to keep in shape, in case she ever got up the courage to walk out that door forever.

Salt Lake City, Utah

Cliff Turner scratched his head. He knew he was a scruffy kind of guy. He smiled to himself. He was a crafty son of a bitch as well. Running a hand over the two-day-old steel wool on his face, he looked out over the rolling hills of the Wasatch Mountains. "Not bad Cliffy, not bad."

The twenty acres of trees and scrub brush acted as a buffer zone around the modest house. The new place was private, one that no one knew about. It had been months since he had been to the crewhouse in town. He spent most of his time now on the deck that hung out over the rocky valley in back. It didn't matter, day or night; he just sat there and stared. There was something about this place that allowed him to let his guard down.

Was he really having second thoughts about the whole damned thing these days? Was he running out of steam? Or was it his balls? Was he getting soft? He formed his hands into fists, looking down at the white lines etched across the clenched knuckles. He still had his strength, so what was eating at him?

Did he have the answer in the back of his head already? He was finally in a position to consider letting this whole thing go. He was still so much farther ahead than when he started. Christ, what a trip it'd been.

Ever since Cliff had a chance to separate himself from the filth of the road, he'd been watching the neighbors who also lived along the canyon road. He'd begun to decide he really liked the way they lived. Lately, whenever it was time to go back at it, he'd been less and less interested. Everything that used to matter; the adrenaline, the power, the honest-to-god brutality, didn't seem to have the same pull as it used to.

Some part of him hated craving the freedom he got from having cash – too much easy cash – but some other part of him was becoming accustomed to this new life. Perhaps that was what was picking at him. He knew he had to keep the process going if he wanted to have it all.

Unclenching his fists, he looked back down, his eyes stopped on the tattoo. The number one was just two inches high, half an inch wide. Just one color, the black brand looked crude. On the inside of his right forearm, the number could be seen by anyone whenever he shook hands.

“You’ve come a long way Cliffy, a long way.”

He knew it was time. He had a gang out there. After all these years it worked well enough that they didn’t really need a leader there all the time, but Cliff still needed to make sure his baby was chugging along. Besides, however many doubts he had about the grind, the feeling of power was proving hard to give up.

Power had been everything in the beginning. He’d gotten drunk on it and abused it. Shivers went down his spine at the thought. Jesus, had he done damage. Once he had put the gang together it had been a free-for-all. Anyone who got in the way paid dearly.

Cliff smiled at the memories, the high they’d been on. Some days he had the odd twinge at the amount of carnage they had caused, and the pain the poor bastards who crossed his trail must have felt. Maybe he even experienced a little regret.

Right now he had to get changed and ready to head out on the rails again. He snorted. He may be trying to look more like the folks living around these parts, but he still wasn’t pulling it off. He looked down at his cargo shorts and loafers. There was something rough and awkward about his look that didn’t fit into designer clothes too well.

From the chest in the basement he pulled out a pair of grease-stained coveralls, a black watch cap, and work boots. Stuffing a few things into an old shoulder bag, he checked the mirror by the door to make sure he looked the part. Not good enough. He rolled his lip into a snarl, and nodded. That ought to do it. He knew deep down this was who he was, but still, he felt a little uncomfortable in his own boots these days.

He looked back at the discarded loafers sitting at the bottom of the steps. The thought of giving it all up, choosing comfort over hardship, was becoming more tempting.

His Raildogs were spread out across America, riding the freight trains and preying on the never-ending supply of riders looking for a cheap way to travel the country.

Cliff pulled out his black book, checking to see which members of the gang were current on their dues and which ones he still needed to collect from. If you wanted to make money on his tracks, you became part of the gang and paid your dues. He liked knowing they were out there now, making money and causing mayhem.

Driving down from the hills, his beat up old Chevy step-side truck would be safe for few days somewhere as public as the parking lot at the all-night Wal-Mart in Salt Lake. He climbed on the city bus for the final ride down to the freight yard.

The old loading docks and switching yards were in a run-down section of town where the old carpet and textile factories used to be. Now the boarded up warehouses were slowly becoming condos. He could never figure why someone would want to live in such a place.

To him it was just another day at the office.

Billings, Montana

Bart Forest eased back inside the tree line and glanced left at his partner.

"You ready man?"

"Yeah, yeah."

He didn't know how Danny was going to be able to run beside the train with those stupid brown dress shoes. He reached down and pulled one last time at the laces on his Doc Martens. Good and tight.

Bart really wasn't sure exactly how he got involved with the kid. The kid may be only eighteen, but the dude dressed like somebody's grandpa in a department store windbreaker and brown dress slacks. His bright curly red hair flopped down over his black-framed glasses. The only thing on the kid that didn't stand out was that big old suitcase he carried; it was a dark enough green to blend into the trees.

The two of them had spent the winter hatching a plan that all came down to this very moment. The long row of freight cars was headed their way. The only free ride out of Billings was on the Burlington Northern. Once they got further south there would be other rail lines, but right now this was it. Weeks spent watching around the clock, taking notes, meant they were sure which train to catch.

They knew enough to stay clear until the train started to leave. There was always a chance that someone from the railroad would walk down the train track looking for riders, and they had no intention of getting caught. Shit, they could even end up in jail. Worse, the trip would be over before it began.

The train jerked and the car's couplings slammed together, steel on steel, as the long line of cars rolled forward.

"We gotta go man." Bart pushed away from the tightly packed trunks of the Aspen trees. "We gotta go now!"

"I'm with ya." Danny was up and running right behind his buddy, the two of them sprinting hard down the slope to meet the train.

What sounded easy in the planning was proving harder in reality. The rocks of the rail bed were loose in places and running in the dark was never a sure thing. They had to get close enough to the railcars to grab on, and the sound of the steel wheels rolling on the rails was nerve-wracking. One slip in the wrong direction and the wheels would get you. There were plenty of examples on the internet to drive that point home.

The boys had even seen a story about a town in Brazil that had built a hospital at the train station because of all the people who were injured trying to jump on the freedom train running north to the US.

Bart, a little quicker, ran along side the train, trying to decide which car to jump on. He wanted a grain car because the V-shaped hopper left enough space at each end to shelter under out of the weather.

A steady stream of refrigerated cars left little option. They weren't supposed to be too bad, the little overhang of the cooler unit stuck out on the end of the car above a level area of grating where they could sit with their backs wedged against the wall.

"This one," Bart looked back for a split second, then grabbed the railing on the end of the car. Keeping his legs going, he stayed even with the train for a few seconds as he searched for a foothold on the steps.

He knew he couldn't run with both hands holding on for long, so he jumped into the air and pulled hard at the same time. His eyes locked onto the steps as he flew through the air and slammed against the steel.

It took him a spit second to be sure he'd stopped there and wasn't about to fall off, before he scrambled up to where they would be able to sit. Bart relaxed a second, then looked around, remembering Danny. Was he going to make it?

He watched the kid trying to gain traction as he ran. The friggin' shoes were slipping and sliding while his suitcase acted like a pendulum, swinging him off balance as he ran, but he had a fierce look of determination as he kept pushing.

Bart wasn't even sure why he was hanging with this kid, let alone taking off on a trip with the guy. He didn't need anyone. He liked being a loner. He didn't care that he had no friends at school or in the neighborhood. He didn't think there was a cool one in that bunch of pussies.

Danny ran beside the car, looking ahead and then over at the train as his legs pounded forward.

"Come on Danny, before it's too late." The train was slowly picking up speed.

The kid reached out with one hand and grabbed the rail. As he ran, he swung the suitcase back, and then with one last blast of effort, windmilled it around towards the stairs. The suitcase's momentum jerked Danny off his feet as his body followed and slammed to a stop against the steps.

Bart grabbed the suitcase and pulled, hoping the kid was holding on tight. It took a second for Danny to get his footing and begin to push the suitcase up onto the landing. Shaking, he crawled up and lowered himself beside the case.

The two of them sat there holding on tight as the train shook it's way along the track. It must have been more than ten minutes before they looked at each other and burst out laughing. They'd made it. The laughter went on a little longer than it should have, they both knew they'd been scared shitless.

Dragging his packsack close, Bart reached in and pulled out a couple beers. He cracked the tab on the can of Bud and lifted his hand. "Cheers buddy. Nothing but sunshine now."

He could tell the kid was hesitating. Did he even drink? Finally Danny opened up the beer and tipped it forward in response, "Florida."

Houston, Texas

Trains were stopped, loading, hooking up or moving. The twenty or so sets of rails were all pretty much full. Some trains were eastbound and others westbound, but the Pacific Southern was heading north towards Oklahoma City.

The two black men watched the train closely, waiting until the last second to jump on. They wanted to see as many cars go by as possible before then climbed aboard, hoping to see other riders.

Athletic and tall, Devon wore his shoulder length hair in dreads, for this trip he'd made sure his running shoes, cargos and sweatshirt were all black. His only distinguishing feature was the gold-capped tooth visible when he grinned.

"I want some action tonight Ras man."

Rashad was shorter, thicker and balder. A linebacker in high school, he knew how to use his weight and more importantly, he liked to use it. Devon looked over at his partner, Ras wasn't a thinker or a leader, but he sure was back-up.

Devon saw it first, a flash of something red coming right at them. He moved to the edge of the ditch and started to run. Rashad reacted late, taking off towards the train. The bright color wasn't normal and Devon wanted to be close when it went past.

The red flashed by. Bingo. It was a packsack on the back of a refrigerated car. Devon didn't see anything else, but someone could have been lying down, out of sight. They should have hid that packsack. He smiled to himself.

"People on the train Ras man, run!"

The train was picking up speed.

They make it look easy. It took a flat-out run to keep up, and the rail car with the red packsack was gone, but the two men raced beside the train. One after another they quickly grabbed hold and jumped up on the side of one of the boxcars. They'd clearly done it before.

Catching their breath, they didn't seem disappointed. Devon was patient, "The train will stop again at the north yards, there's always extra cars to hook up. We can move up then."

Rashad leaned out, keeping an eye up the side of the train, watching for anyone jumping off. They rode in silence with no idea what was coming, just understanding that there was going to be some kind of action shortly. Sure enough, the train slowed as it entered another rail yard. Devon knew it could be stopped for a minute, or an hour. Either way the two men wouldn't wait to find out, they both hit the ground running.

Devon slowed up as he neared the car with the red packsack. The switchblade clicked out of the four-inch handle, instantly doubling the length of the weapon. Rashad caught up, already wearing steel knuckles on each hand.

Nodding, they stormed the stairs. Two heads popped up at the sound of boots on steel and Devon didn't slow down. Stepping forward, he kicked the first person square in the face and watched as the neck snapped back and the head banged against the unforgiving side of the rail car.

Still moving, he came down hard with his fist on the head of the target's wide-eyed companion. A quick knee to the head was just instinct at this point, and he relaxed it at the last second, knowing it wasn't necessary.

"Fuck Devon, leave me something man." Rashad stood behind him, fists up, pissed that he didn't get a shot in.

"Don't worry Ras man. These guys'll wake up soon." He couldn't stop himself from grinning at his buddy's anger. "We'll wait until the train is out of town, then you can have some fun."

One of their victims woke up before the train started moving, but he decided to stay put when Rashad gave him an evil stare.

Devon sat on the ledge at the back of the railcar and went through the packsacks the men had been carrying, finding nothing of interest. It was pretty clear that they were bums with no money or anything. That was too bad for them; they were only staying on the train if they could pay their way.

Devon asked a question and Rashad moved closer, waiting to hear the answer. "Where's your money?"

No one answered and Rashad let his right arm fly loose as he punched the closest guy in the mouth.

The second one was quick to speak up. "We don't have any."

Rashad's punch caught him off guard as his head cracked against the steel storage container. Devon's problem was he knew they were telling the truth. Everyone always said they had no money and all you had to do was beat it out of them. But he knew that would get them nothing here. These losers didn't have a cent.

"You gotta pay to ride these rails, those are Raildog rules. No pay, no ride."

The shocked look on the two bums turned to hysteria when Devon grabbed the red packsack and threw it off the moving train. Rashad grabbed the second pack and it quickly followed the first. When someone was really holding out, the sudden loss of their stuff, was usually a back-breaker, but again Devon knew there would be no money this time.

The bums began to struggle when the two black men stepped forward and grabbed them. Devon had the first one's hoodie over his head while his other hand pulled on the oversized jacket. When the bum grabbed onto the Raildog's leg to stop his progress Devon pounded his head with both fists until he let go. Then he dragged the bum to the edge of the car.

The guy was screaming as the countryside rolled by. The steel wheels scratched and squealed over the rails. He held the guy there for a moment, half-suspended in mid-air, and let his situation sink in. He wasn't sure if the guy was appreciating the view like he was.

"Hey Rashad, pick your number."

"Two."

Devon smiled, that was a pretty low number. The bodies always bounced at least a couple times. "I call three."

He gave the bum a twist in the air as he dropped the guy off the car and watched as he hit the rough rock that ran beside the tracks, bouncing once, twice, and then a third and fourth time before rolling to a stop.

"That's ten bucks Ras man."

Rashad held the other guy's face, bleeding and scraped, against the steel plate of the landing. He could feel his victim shake uncontrollably as he watch his buddy thrown from the train. Now the guy started to flail around as Rashad got off the bum's back and half-dragged him, face down, towards the side.

"Over or under," he asked.

Devon chose under.

Rashad didn't hesitate, keeping the momentum of his victim's body going, he pushed the weight out into mid-air, and let go. The body seemed to hover a second before falling fast to the rock below. The bum took an awkward bounce and settled

into a heap.

“Sweet mother, I love this job Ras man.” He grinned. Devon was wide-eyed and full of energy as they looked back at the bums lying alongside the track. “That looked like two bounces man. You owe me twenty.”

He sucked a whistling breath in around the gold tooth. The adrenaline was still pumping hard, surging through his muscles. He was proud of the number fifty he wore on the inside of his forearm. He looked at Rashad, his good buddy wore number fifty-two.

Devon liked the beginning of the month, the guys all got together on the line they patrolled and paid up their dues. Then the boss would throw a party and they’d all have a blast. Nothing like perks with the job.

“Let’s get up to Oklahoma,” he said. “The boss will be waiting and we got some partying to do.”

Chapter 2

San Antonio, Texas

Sam Dorson hung out from the side of the freight car. The wind pulled at his hair and with his eyes closed he let the rush of air wash over his face. He still couldn't believe the fucking peace of mind he got from riding the rails.

A trucker by trade, he had seen every goddamn corner of the country before giving it up to run and hide. Since he knew some things about a few women who had disappeared, when he felt the heat getting a little closer on that missing woman case, he'd decided it was time for a change of scenery.

He'd have to think long and hard about how he got on the rails in the first place, where had it been? It didn't matter now. That was twelve years ago. Now he was a Raildog. He looked down at the number two tattooed inside his left wrist and smiled before he swung back into the freight car, reinvigorated and alive.

"Fuck boys, it's another sunny kick-ass day. You up for it?"

Their shouts and whistles echoed in the rail car, sounding like applause to him. Some of the crew had been with him when they left San Antonio and the rest would be waiting in Phoenix.

Sam lived on the rails most days. He controlled the southern section of line running east-west from Texas to Arizona. He didn't want to miss any part of the action that was always going on. He knew Cliffy was getting out on the tracks less and less these days, and he heard one of the Rackman brothers was holed up in Vegas pretty much full time, but he didn't care. He wasn't slowing down for nothing.

The beginning of the month meant the whole gang was on the rails. It was the only time everyone was mobile. Dues to pay, and hopefully there were travelers to collect from. If the people out there knew it was the worst time to hitch a ride they'd stay away, but they didn't, and people were always riding at the first of the month for their own reasons.

It didn't matter how much money he put in his pocket, Sam would be out working his turf and taking advantage of any opportunities that came his way. The big man, over six foot and at least two hundred and thirty pounds of muscle, liked beating people up and making them pay to ride the rail. He really liked when he came across women riders, because that was an entirely different ball game.

Sam drifted back to the open door of the railcar. He knew the train would slow again near Eagle Pass. He watched the landscape roll by, wondering if there was anybody waiting for the train up ahead.

Pittsburg, Pennsylvania

The rain pounded down as the slow moving train lumbered down the rails. Dark, miserable and wet was the only way to describe it. Raul Alvarez crouched against the back of the railcar holding a chunk of blue tarp over the two of them. His girlfriend Maria Martinez was huddled against him, asleep. He shook his head, shit,

how did she do it?

Raul was pissed at the weather, not just with this rain tonight, but the whole damned northeast. He'd been sent here last fall to set up another route for the Mexican cartel to ship drugs into the northeast U.S.. More and more, the cartel was moving their product directly to major cities and cutting out middlemen.

Raul was an up and comer. This project was a big step for him and he was sure it would lead to bigger opportunities. But right now all he wanted was to get back into Mexico where the sun was always shining, the weather always warm. Shit, in this place he might not see the sun for weeks.

Everything was in place and ready for final testing. The route, the couriers, and the distributors. Raul was heading back south to lay all the details out for the bosses and oversee the first test-runs himself. He had always used freight trains down south when he was a junior couriering shipments of weed into the U.S. and he sure wasn't renting cars or taking planes at this point. He never left a paper trail.

So he was riding from Pittsburg to Cincinnati in the rain and his ass was already sore. How long was it going to take to get to Mexico?

He could barely make out Maria's shape in the dark. The hoodie and oversized clothing he forced her to wear turned her into a hobbit. He almost laughed out loud.

He never should have let her come along, but who was he kidding. He wanted her with him from now on, wherever he went. The little Panamanian had a figure that didn't end. Long black hair, dusky skin and sensual lips drew Raul in like a moth to a streetlight. They had been drawn to each other from the moment they met in New York. It hadn't taken long for her to move to Pittsburg, now they were inseparable.

He had been just about to leave his apartment when she arrived to join him on the trip. She looked so serious.

"I'm packed and ready to go."

"Baby, you can't wear that stuff. I told you we're going on a train." She was rocking a tight skirt and high heels and pulling a pair of rolling suitcases.

"I go everywhere in heels Raul, you know that."

"I told you to bring a packsack, what are those?" He pointed at the two suitcases.

"Raul, you know a woman needs her things." This time her lips formed a sultry smile as she fluttered her eyelashes at him.

He had finally won their long discussion and laughed out loud when she'd reappeared from his bedroom wearing two layers of track pants, sweatshirts and a large hoodie, all of them too big for her. It was a good thing they were traveling in the rain, because he was sure he wouldn't be getting any for a while. Her packsack was stuffed with old cargo pants and sweatshirts, which pretty well ensured she wasn't going to be happy.

Raul listened to the pelting downpour drumming against his tarp. The only other sounds were the steel wheels against the rails and the rattle of boxcars as they swayed from side to side through the open country.

Cincinnati, he thought to himself, St. Louis, and then down to Mexico. The sooner, the better.

Spokane, Washington

"Raildogs! Gather up." Albert Simms rounded up the posse.

"Al, there's riders up near the front of the train!" A young guy ran down the side of the freight train yelling.

"We'll take this boxcar, load up." The train was about to pull out of the rail yard headed south towards Salt Lake. The men started throwing their packsacks and shoulder bags in the open door of the car. "Mickey, take someone and go get those riders. Bring 'em back here."

He pulled a gun from his waistband and threw it to the younger gang member, motioning to the guy who had spotted the people. "Hurry, show him where they are."

Albert slowly crawled up into the boxcar. Jesus, he liked his life. He ran this section of the northwest rail and loved every second of it. He wasn't a big guy, but everyone knew the number five tattooed on his wrist made him a top dog. A Raildog.

Looking around at the others, he could feel the adrenaline starting to pulse through the car. Everyone knew what was coming next. Albert cracked his knuckles and waited, feeling the rush of anticipation creeping over him.

He could picture what was happening up ahead, he'd done it before himself. Mickey wouldn't piss around. He knew the drill. Storm the fuckers, take them hard and fast, show them who was boss.

Of course how hard you had to be depended on what you found. Sometimes they folded right away, and sometimes they fought back. Albert liked it when they fought back. With his violent nature Mickey would strong-arm them off the train and bring them back by hand, he figured. He probably wouldn't even need to pull out the gun.

His thoughts were interrupted when a body slammed against the steel doorframe of the car. Then another, and another lined up beside the first. He could hear Mickey yelling, "Climb up you pussies. I'm not fucking around."

One of the kids wasn't quick enough and Mickey started punching people in the back of the head. All three began climbing, hand over hand, scrambling over each other. Albert noticed the shiner on one face and the blood coming from the nose of another. He caught his lieutenant's eye and they shared a knowing smile.

As if on cue, the train started to move. Someone lit a propane lantern in the corner and Albert took a last look at the daylight before pulling the heavy sliding door closed.

Although the scene must have looked like a horror show to their captives, it was a comfort zone for Albert. He let his eyes adjust to the darkened interior. Gradually the light from the lantern seemed to grow until he could see into the dim corners of the train car.

The three kids huddled together just inside the door while his crew taunted them. Attempting to scare the shit out of them was more like it.

He pushed off the sidewall. "Get them up."

A kick to the shin of the nearest kid was enough and they all jumped to their feet. It took awhile to get good at walking around in a moving freight train. Albert and the crew had it nailed down, while the kids didn't.

One kid leaned back against the sidewall with both palms against the wall to

hold himself upright. The second was trying to use his knees to ride the roll of the boxcar, but he didn't seem able to maintain control because he was standing facing forward instead of sideways. The third one looked sick to his stomach. It was pretty easy to tell he was fighting not to puke. Even in the dim light, Albert could see the kid's face was changing colors as he searched wild-eyed for something to hold on to.

"Where you going boys?"

No one answered. Albert's face changed from casually friendly to frighteningly dangerous as he started forward, "You don't want to answer...?"

He paused, then took one more step forward before the middle one squealed out, "We left Eastport this morning."

"That's better. Now where are you headed?"

The kid swallowed hard. "Through Oregon and down to Oakland."

Albert smiled like he was on some great adventure with them. "So it's off to California for the summer."

No one answered.

He took the last few steps to stand in front of the teenagers. "I sure hope you got money to pay for your ride," he looked around. "Because this here is my rail line."

Still no one answered.

A quick backhand knocked the kid into one of his companions.

Albert stepped sideways to stand in front of the next guy, staring down at him. "Someone better answer me soon, because I'm getting pissed."

"I got some," the kid started fishing for his cash, he looked up with a handful of bills squeezed in his fist. "How much is it mister?"

Albert laughed at the absurd question, reaching out to engulf the kid's hand and money in a tight grip. He squeezed, feeling the smaller hand crumpling in his own, "Everything you got kid."

He squeezed even harder and felt the kid trying to pull his hand out of the vise. Slowly he let the fingers slide free and watched the kid shake his hand in pain. Laughing, he opened his fist to look at the wrinkled bills. How easy was that?

The next kid had his money held out in the air, gripping the edge of the bills as if to distance himself as much as he could. He seemed eager to give the cash away. Albert reached over and snatched it.

"How about you puke face, got any money?" The kid shook his head side-to-side, no.

"Really, a trip with no money. You telling me the truth boy?"

"I... I don't have any cash, sir."

Albert usually ate up the sir and mister stuff, but something about the way the kid said it got his attention. He reached over and grabbed the kid by the hair, raising him onto his toes. He pulled hard, almost hoisting the kid off the ground.

"You fucking with me kid?" He lifted up harder on the hair, pulling the kid off balance.

"I got a card. I got a bank card in my bag."

Albert slammed the kid's head backwards off the wall. Then he let go. The kid slumped down to his knees, leaned forward and lost his battle to hold back the vomit. His puke slammed into the floor, splattering in a wide circle.

"Someone go through all their bags. Let me know what you find. I want them off

the train before we get to Hinkle.”

The crew went to work ripping the kid’s bags apart, coming up with a little bit of weed and the kid’s bank card. Albert knew the crew was itchy so he made it simple. “You get the bank information first, then you can have some fun.”

He didn’t consider kids a challenge, it was a bit disappointing that they were so young. Mickey and the guys didn’t care so much. They pushed and taunted the boys, hitting them with the odd shot to the face or stomach. Whatever it took to get the account numbers. At first the kids turtled to avoiding the blows, until they were warned that if they didn’t fight back one-on-one they would be gang beaten.

The three brutal fights didn’t last long.

The first kid to summon his courage and step forward got kicked in the kneecap with a pair of worn out work boots. His face held pure shock as he buckled forward and was met with a knee in the face. Even Albert felt a twinge as the kid’s nose flattened and blood flew out in every direction. He was out.

Albert always wondered how the next guy convinced himself to step up, surely they must realize at this point it would have been better to be first and get it over with. The puking one stepped off the wall and got his hands up in a fighter’s stance. Mickey took a run from ten feet away and jumped up in the air. Leading feet first, both heels hit the kid in the stomach and drove him into the wooden wall of the car. Mickey bounced up to pummel the breathless kid until he lay on the floor, unmoving.

Usually, the last guy would either collapse in fear, or take the gang-beating, which always ended up being the worst. Or he would get pissed, even though the odds were against him and come out fighting.

This kid was a fighter.

He waited for the Raildog to come closer. When his opponent was in range he struck out with a power punch to the head. Albert laughed at his man for getting hit, but knew the kid would pay.

The Raildog rushed in hard this time, leading with his shoulder and colliding with the kid. He wrapped him up, raised him off the floor, and slammed the kid down again on his back. His victim yelled out in pain as the gangster pinned him. Now in a dominant position, he started punching down into the kid’s face, he didn’t stop until the others finally pulled him off.

Albert was used to the adrenaline surge from the action, but his crew was younger and he could tell they were still fired up. He looked at his wristwatch, they were halfway to Hinkle, so it was time.

He slid the boxcar door open. Fresh air rushed in and sunlight glared through the opening, Albert waited a second for his eyes to adjust before turning, “It’s time to say goodbye boys.”

He motioned to Mickey. “Get it done.”

There was a quick scramble as the crew collared the desperate kids and dragged them to the doorway. Kicking and screaming they were thrown off the rapidly moving train at long enough intervals that they landed well apart. Mickey watched out the door as the last one tumbled down a small cliff.

To Albert it looked like another good run was brewing. Ten a.m., they’d just left Spokane and still had a ways to go before hitting Salt Lake, already they had cash in

their pockets and a bit of stuff to puff on. He reached into his bag and pulled out a bottle of bourbon, spun the cap off, and took a nice long swig.

Turning towards his men he lifted the bottle up in salute before passing it to the right. "Raildogs rule!"

Reno, Nevada

The old guy manning the front desk recognized the tall muscular kid. He'd been there before.

David Perez didn't care if he stood out. It didn't matter that he looked out of place dressed in black, a battered duffle bag slung over his shoulder. He deliberately kept his long dark hair tucked behind his ears to emphasize the piercings on his face.

He never concerned himself much about what other people thought about his look, he'd given up on that a long time ago. He had enough going on with his own shit to bother with others.

"Going in to see my mom," he said.

"You'll have to sign this here book first young man."

David went through the motions of scribbling something down. This was stupid. He hated rules for this and rules for that. Dropping the pen on the open book, he didn't look back at the clerk, as he headed down the corridor. He knew where she was.

"Visiting is only till three mister..." the clerk trailed off as he squinted to read the scribble in the book.

"Yeah, yeah." David waved his hand without looking back. More friggin' rules.

She was waiting with the door open when he got there. She always was. He'd seen her sitting in the window, watching him as he walked up to the building.

"Hi Mom."

She reached her arms around him, as big as he was, and tried to squeeze him, "I'm so glad you could visit. Come and sit with me."

It was awkward and they sat quietly for a bit taking each other in. She seemed to still be in good shape, healthy, and as usual, a little nervous with him there.

He could tell she was always taken back by his growth. He was twenty-five and seemed to still be growing. Of course his father had been just as big.

David knew his visits were important to her and that it went without saying that she was wondering if he had gotten anywhere. He hadn't, but he was almost ready. He'd let her know when it was time, until then he was just happy to see she was okay.

"You're still sitting in your room alone mom." He wanted her to get out and socialize, visit with the others in the home. In his head it was like she was living in a jail cell.

"I'm okay David," she looked over at him. "I still hope to get out of here. These people around here are sick. They scare me."

He couldn't help feeling sorry for her. She'd had so much going for her and then

her world had come crashing down. The fact she'd been doing everything for him when it had all happened put a strain on his shoulders. It was a weight that felt heavier every year. He knew that was why he kept coming to visit, and would until he fixed everything.

He let her fuss over him and he worried for her, reminding her to eat properly and get her sleep. He didn't know what else to say.

David didn't notice the desk clerk watching him as he walked down the long driveway. He pulled out his small leather bound journal from his duffle bag, flipping through the pages as he walked from the building. What was the date? He had to figure out where he was headed next.

Colton, California

Bill Dewton used to be a good cop. Until his daughter Cindy left with a friend for a simple weekend in Long Beach, just a couple hours west on the coast and never came back. Then everything in his life went to hell.

The other girl made it back, although she was in pretty rough shape. Bill had been given permission to interview her right away. When it became clear to him that the two girls had planned to ride the freight trains east to New York he'd been floored.

The Long Beach story was a lie.

All autumn and into the winter he and his wife argued. Every time he demanded to know, "Why didn't you know she was going to do this?" She'd turn it around on him. "What did you do to make her leave?"

The insinuation was that he worked her and pushed her too hard. Christ, he'd only wanted his little girl to succeed.

Bill had heard it before, but still wasn't ready when their marriage broke down. He should have known – losing kids could do that. He didn't know where his wife was now, didn't care. They should have pulled together in the crisis, should have depended on each other, supported each other. He'd always blame his wife for copping out.

He stared out the window briefly, burning to be out on the streets, working a case. But those days were over. He was lucky to still have a job. His boss had put him on a desk. His way of showing loyalty for time served. Now Bill did research for the bullpen and worked his daughter's case on the side.

He didn't get far over the winter, but as spring came the feeling was like he was finally getting ahead. He'd made arrangements to do another interview with Cindy's friend the next week. He felt leaving the other girl alone over the winter had been respectful under the circumstances. She had been awfully drained and mangled the last time he'd seen her.

What he had been able to do was put feelers out with other departments and set up some alerts in the computer system in case anyone else came across anything to do with freight trains and missing people. With all his free time, he spent hours on the computers after each shift searching police files on unidentified bodies, checking

prison files and anything else he could think of to locate her, alive or dead.

Around eleven he finally left the precinct, hitting the gym on the way home. The place was simple, free weights and benches. None of those new machines. He was in pretty good shape for a middle-aged guy, once you overlooked the shiny dome. The smell of sweat built up in the windowless basement and hung there. At this hour the place was almost empty, except for the hardcore, and they kept to themselves, deep in their workouts.

As usual, with too much time to fill, he was thinking about freight trains. All winter it had been the same.

Now he worked out, pushing hard, because he'd made up his mind. He was going to have to retrace her steps. That meant riding the tracks himself. He could take the summer off. God knew no one around here would mind, he was deadweight anyways.

He sat down at the bench press. Get on the tracks and then what? Shit, what else could he do? He leaned into the weights, pushing, straining. Find something, anything, that was what. Sitting here wasn't getting him anywhere.

Bill finished his workout and headed for the showers. Tomorrow. Tomorrow he would put in the paperwork to get the time off.

He stepped out of the gym into the warm southern night. He felt better for some reason.