

RUNAWAY

BY

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There was nothing more entertaining than a runaway train. Andy O'Conner enjoyed hauling his middle aged paunch up on a bar stool and regaling others about catching a rogue Berkshire locomotive in Ohio. Or how he moved up from driving those big rattlers to chasing them down. People would hand him beers. He'd spin another railroader's yarn. Everybody would laugh and have a good time, even if half of his stories were salted with blarney.

He'd never chased a damn thing, of course. Sure, once in a while a crew would leave their engine for one reason or another and he'd have to drive the thing back. These days, however, the only thing he ran after was paperwork up in Santa Fe.

Today was one big sopping exception, and it was all his fault. Andy stared along a stretch of dead-ended track in a cold Missouri downpour. He adjusted his straw hat over a balding head, trying to keep the rivulets out of his creased face. How'd he know the Union Pacific's newly inaugurated rail baron would be among those listening to his tall tales? Or worse still, believe him.

So here he was in the middle of a corn field getting soaked despite his trench coat, trying to figure out what to do next. The spur down which he'd cornered engine Seven Eighty-Six came to an abrupt halt at a stack of weed-laced ties. There wasn't anything beyond the blockage except a gurgling wash bordering another farmer's field. He looked around with a sigh, listening as the rain's spatter give a standing ovation to the locomotive's disappearing act. Andy dipped a finger in an oily pool collecting between two ties. He gave a sniff. No mistake. The steamer had been here...and kept going. Andy looked over the corn's waving tassels, dreading the only explanation left. Seven Eighty-Six had left Hobohemia for the other side of the tracks. No living

train had any business being in a world where they didn't even have cabooses. A place where steam locomotives were relegated to museums and amusement rides, or left to rot. It wasn't called the Lost Lands for nothing.

Swearing, he turned back to the yellow company pickup he'd straddled the tracks with. Less than two years away from retirement, and then boom. He couldn't blame the Baron for wanting this mess fixed fast and quiet. The man ascended to the Union Pacific barony's top spot just a couple weeks ago. People said he was too young. Too inexperienced. All hogwash, but having a black mark this early in his rule was going to hurt.

Trouble was, Seven Eighty-Six wasn't something you could easily sweep under a rug. He was a Mikado engine, with eight big driver wheels shaking the ground. One and a half tons worth of rogue iron. He bolted from a Nebraska crew stop, heading out with just his tender and caboose. His engineer, fireman, and even the brakeman scooted for parts unknown. When the conductor realized he was on a runaway, he bailed too. Ended up taking sanctuary in a hobo jungle.

Andy jumped into the pickup and tossed his dripping hat on the floorboard. He'd thought he'd save precious time and head Eighty-Six off rather than interview the remaining crewman about how this happened. Now he had no choice. Back to square one.

He arrived in the sprawling Bailey Yard by late evening. Floodlights dotted the Nebraska prairieland like fallen stars, spreading their yellow light across an ocean of rails and rolling stock. The largest Union Pacific marshaling yard never slept. Switcher engines hooted and huffed in a haunting refrain while jostling their charges into position. Wheels screeched and boxcars thumped together in a cascade reminiscent of distant thunder. He wound his way along

gravel maintenance roads, his pickup bouncing over the many crossings. Tonight he'd catch a meal and a few winks. Tomorrow morning he'd find Eighty-Six's skipper.

A chatty dispatcher changed his breakfast plans with talk about the best pancakes this side of heaven at the same hobo camp he intended visiting. The fellow pointed to where maintenance sheds edged up against the South Platte River. Andy thanked him for the directions. He could find the conductor and fill his expansive belly at the same time. The Union Pacific was all about efficiency. He gassed up the pickup at an adjacent pumping station and headed toward the row of gray buildings.

He parked next to a slumbering yard engine across from the work area. His hat and coat were still damp from yesterday, but provided comfort against the cool spring air. The sky was clearing, but that didn't stop a handful of fat drops from splashing across his hat's brim. Surprised, he looked up, and got a face full. Accompanied by giggles.

Wiping his brow, Andy glanced around. Sure enough, a wisp of vapor peeked out from behind the switcher's smokestack. The steam condensed into a little girl's mischievous face.

*Steam child*, he realized. The Bailey Yard was purported to be a place where the young ones learned their way around the living rails. "Hi, sweetie," he cautiously greeted, not wanting her to blow his hat halfway to Kansas City just for fun.

The mist flowed along the engine's gangway, gathering into a ten-year old apparition wearing jeans and a loose smock. Her hair was a spray of gray peacock feathers above a trouble-making grin.

"Hi!" she chirped in a fluttery greeting as if the morning breeze found a voice. "I'm Quickly." She flew from her perch to dart around him. "What are you doing?" Her ghostly eyes

gleamed. “You a yard bull? You don’t look like a yard bull. I bet you’re a one of them anyway, right?”

He doffed his hat, grateful that his Union Pacific badge was covered by his coat. Steam children loved teasing railroad police. He wouldn’t be getting much of a welcome from those hobos either, which gave him an idea. “I’m looking for some pancakes, sweetheart. Know where I can find any?”

She clapped her hands together. “Ooo! You want to see Flapjack. I’ll take you.”

Andy smiled to himself while following her whisking form along a rutted path between two locomotive barns. Steam children, or riders as the hobos called them, were once human girls. Not particularly hard to distract.

He followed his ephemeral guide down a low slope to where an assortment of shacks and lean-to’s spread across the river flats. They were met by two beefy farmhand types brandishing big hickory sticks. Andy eyed the brown bowler hats on their heads. Hobo knights. Order of the Open Road. He didn’t know if it was professional courtesy or Quickly’s presence getting him by with a slight scowl. Probably the latter, as he’d hoped.

“This is the King’s palace,” Quickly informed in her windy voice, pointing to a sprawl of corrugated steel and stovepipes. “Best call him Your Honor.”

So this Flapjack was the king of this hobo jungle? Andy turned to thank her for that useful tidbit, but the steamy sprite was already halfway up the hill again. He turned for the ramshackle building’s entranceway. There were two more knights flanking the blue tarp leading inside. He earned a few stern glances, and this time the burly men followed him inside.

The interior was a festival of color. Red and blue railroad lamps shone over makeshift tables filled with patchwork people. Crisp bacon and stove-fresh bread permeated the air. Three

hobos in stained aprons worked a field kitchen whose gleaming counters were probably liberated from some boxcar. His stomach rumbled its approval at the sight of butter dribbling down the sides of golden brown pancakes.

The rotund black man taking his order and money was all grins. “Why hello, Agent O’Conner,” he greeted with a genteel Creole accent. “Folks here call me Flapjack.” He spread his arms. “Welcome to my little slice of heaven.”

Andy glanced around. “I take it I’m expected...Your Honor,” he added, remembering Quickly’s advice. Most hobo jungles were ruled by kings who took their titles as seriously as this guy did his baking.

Flapjack extended a beefy hand. “Got you a plate of cakes and sausages waiting over yonder at the rear table.”

He shook the other’s hand without asking questions. Not with those two hobo knights drilling holes through him with their glares. “Appreciate it.” Flapjack had obviously been tipped off to his visit despite the short notice.

His table was an upended cable spool covered in a linen sheet. There was more than just breakfast waiting for him. A scrawny face looked up with sunken blue eyes as if he hadn’t slept in a week. Perched over unkempt yellow hair was a conductor’s cap. He had the blue uniform, too.

Frowning, Andy wordlessly planted himself on a chair next to the young man and began eating. Everything had been neatly arranged for him, including his quarry. He hated dancing on the end of someone else’s strings. Andy let his coat drape open so the guy could see the Union Pacific badge on his shirt. The feathery consistency of the cakes softened his disposition enough to consider being sociable. The poor bastard looked to have been through hell already. “I’m

Agent O’Conner.” He raised a cautioning hand. “Relax, I’m not here to pick you up. Just ask questions.” The last thing he needed was this kid bolting into the arms of those knights back there yelling for help. “What’s your name?”

“Fred Fitzgibbons,” the conductor rasped.

“You were on Seven Eighty-Six. So what happened?”

Fred looked down for a moment, absently stirring at the coffee mug before him. He spoke in a near whisper. “We killed a little girl.”

Andy stopped eating. “What?”

The kid’s face scrunched up like an empty toothpaste tube. “Did a crew change in Omaha. We were going too fast. No whistle. Not even a bell. Told them we were rolling through a neighborhood. They didn’t listen any more than when I told them to stop drinking.”

He eyed the conductor’s shiny Union Pacific pin displayed proudly on the lapel of his blue vest. A tenderfoot. Maybe even on his first solo run. From the way the fellow trembled, this was probably going to be his last. “So your crew were drunk on their asses?”

“I saw the bicycle. Just bits and pieces.” He squeezed his eyes shut, his words forced. “Wasn’t just the bike.”

*Jesus, Joseph, and Mary.* “You stopped, right?”

Fred shook his head. “Called up, but no answer.” His knuckles whitened around the spoon he held. “They all ran once we got to the rest stop. Bastards knew what they’d done.” He rubbed at his temples. “Told them to slow down.”

“Well, your engine ran off too. Any idea where?”

Fred nodded, much to his surprise. “The conductor I was apprenticed to had been with the same engine for eight years. He finally cashed in his pension. Kept talking about going home

to Conroy, Missouri. Do some fishing. Eighty-Six missed him something terrible, so I'm guessing he ran there."

It made sense. That spur went into Missouri. "So, this Conroy...any chance it's on the other side of the tracks?"

"Yeah. Ernie came over to Hobohemia early on. Said railroading was in his blood." Fred shuddered. "God, I hope he doesn't find out."

"Anything else?"

Fred stared at him as if he were playing the part of a ghost with dire warnings from beyond the grave. "Engines don't talk, but they dream. He's living a nightmare right now, with debts to pay. Best stay away from him." He pushed away from the table. "I'm done. I'm not going back."

"An injured soul needs time and good company," Flapjack's cultured voice broke in as the king sauntered up. He slid a fresh plate of pancakes on the table. "We've got plenty of both, here."

Andy glanced toward the door. Now there were three knights sizing him up. "I think Fred's fine where he is."

Flapjack's deep chuckle told him he wouldn't have gotten far arresting the conductor anyway. "Smart fellah, Mister Special Agent. Smarter than most bulls I've met. Head on up to the spike. Lady Midtown would like a word with you. Maybe help with that rattler you're looking for."

The spike? Another name for Bailey's dispatch tower, no doubt. He regarded Flapjack with little relish. "*Lady Midtown?* Any chance we're talking about a steam child?"



“Talking about their big momma.” He turned, then paused to look back with a knowing nod. “Best you show her respect, Agent Man.”

He let the distraught conductor enjoy the extra pancakes. Kid could use a few pounds. The clock wasn't on Seven Eighty-Six's side. Every hour spent on the other side of the tracks meant a memory slipping away until the engine faded into a soulless hunk of iron. Something Andy knew he'd never be able to bring back.

The dispatch tower was Bailey Yard's pride. The Union Pacific built it as a reminder of Promontory Summit in Utah where the first transcontinental track was joined. The building was therefore painted and shaped to resemble the famous golden spike driven into the ground to mark the occasion. Andy headed to the observation deck atop its eight stories.

The view was meant to be spectacular, showcasing the huge yard to visitors from across the country. This morning's panorama ended up gray, windy, and host to a terrifying sight. Jaw sagging, he stared at a young brunette wearing a white lace vest over a purple blouse and dungarees. She was sitting precariously atop the railing, her engineer's boots dangling over thin air. One breath away from slipping off.

“Lady,” he began, slowly closing the outside door behind him lest it slam shut and startle her. She wasn't even trying to hold on, her arms resting primly in her lap.

She regarded him with the kind of quiet look he knew would haunt him forever once she disappeared over that railing. A pretty English teacher's face smiled at nothing beneath a green bandana. Then he noticed the crazy ponytail curling down her back in brown and blond twists to coil upon the deck. The end tassel appeared to be smoking. What the hell?

He edged closer. His hammering heart slowed upon noticing a fine mist exuding from her body as if she'd just stepped out of a sauna. Almost corporeal, but not quite. "Midtown?" he ventured from a dry throat.

"Agent O'Conner," she replied in a breezy voice.

He slumped onto a bench. Damn, he was getting too long in the tooth for these girls and their shenanigans. "You look a bit old for a rider."

She glided off the rail, apparently satisfied with nearly giving him a heart attack. Midtown settled beside him only to dissolve into a cloud of moist steam. The vapors reformed into a small girl wearing a yellow dress with pink ribbons. What lurked behind those doe-eyes didn't look so young. "This better?"

He swallowed his unease. She looked too real either way. Far more than the other steam child. "I'm told you know something about a runaway I'm looking for."

"Poor Eighty-Six. A good engine. Faithful and proud." Her expression grew pensive. "Maybe too proud. I want him back, Agent O'Conner. Randolph doesn't deserve this black stain any more than Seven Eighty-Six does."

"Randolph?"

She folded her arms as if he'd just handed in his homework late. "Randolph Holiday. I believe you met him?"

"Ah, the Baron. Yes, we talked."

"So he told me," she said in a brittle voice belonging to no pre-pubescent girl. Her eyes narrowed. "He was assuring me of your, ah, experience. Something concerning your catching a Berkshire?" The last was delivered with an icy mockery.

Damn if she didn't know the truth. "Well, I..."

“We must not disappoint the Baron,” she snapped, interrupting his excuse. “Not so early in his stewardship.” Midtown puffed back into her adult self, drawing close enough for him to feel an actual chill from her breath. “We must not shame him.”

Was that frost stinging his nose? “No...no, Ma’am.”

Midtown pulled away with a disarming smile. “Good. We do understand each other after all. You’re what, less than two years shy of retirement?” A meaningful stare spoke volumes in the following silence.

He swore for a moment there was lightning in those eyes. They called this woman a steam child? “I’ll get him back,” he swore, heading off her implied threat.

Her nose wrinkled. “With what? Paperwork?” She snapped her fingers with an electric crackle. “His screams just stopped. Vibrating the rails one moment, and then gone. That means he’s run to the Lost Lands where I can’t hear him. You will need someone who can lay track between the two worlds. A gandy dancer. Isn’t it lucky that I happen to know where one is?”

He swallowed. “I’d be grateful.”

“You’d better be more than that, you old fraud. We both know there’s never been a runaway Berkshire. Ever.” Her lips pulled back. “Randolph doesn’t need to know, and won’t if you bring that Mikado back.”

His face reddened, but this rider held all the cards and she knew it. “I get the message. Where’s this gandy dancer?”

“Go to the Gentilly Yard outside of New Orleans. Ask for Louis LaCroix. He’s bringing his wife and daughter to meet with me. It’s time for his little Melissa to play with us. Her mother’s put things off long enough.”

Being at a desk didn't mean he was ignorant of old railroader stories. He'd plagiarized more than a few of them in trade for drinks. "You're turning her into a steam child?"

Her demeanor lightened. "Don't be silly. She won't need any help. It's in her blood. Gandy dancers create the living rails. Their daughters are fated to keep them alive as one of us. I'm simply making the transition a bit easier for everyone concerned." Her smile frosted. Literally. "Gentilly Yard, Agent O'Conner. And be quick about it."

He hit the road with eighteen hours between him and New Orleans. Most of the driving ended up outside of Hobohemia. Leaving the world was easy, though you were never sure once over the tracks if you'd be on a super highway or country road. Or no road at all. Reality had a way of changing its mind. Getting back was tougher. Sure, there were cities half in and half out like Chicago. Most of the time, however, it was more a matter of heart than location. Hobohemia was a place where the romance of the rails never died. Some sought the world out. Others, like himself, were born along the tracks to begin with.

He ate lunch in Kansas City. Dinner and a roadside hotel south of Tulsa. Another day's push through Baton Rouge to New Orleans where he crossed over again. Returning to Hobohemia was a gut feeling. He knew he was home when he saw Gentilly Yard, the swath of rails sitting between Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi.

Finding a gandy dancer would normally be problematic. There weren't many of them, and they tended to wander. Several adopted the hobo lifestyle, with names like Cracker Jack and Red Socks. Fortunately, Louis LaCroix owed his allegiance to the Union Pacific and would be on a baronial roster. His address was easy to find at the local station. With the sun low in the Louisiana sky, Andy decided on a hotel and good food in the French Quarter before taking up the chase bright and early.

The following morning he found the house east of the yard alongside a levee extending over the lowlands in an earthen ripple. The gandy dancer's home sat across from rails curving toward a gap in the shrub-covered earthworks. Low mists from an adjacent bayou cast a surreal orange glow over the rising sun.

The house was surrounded by a tall wooden fence that wouldn't let him see much more than the tops of a few trees. Three men were visible between the fence and levee, raising a bright green pavilion beneath the spread of an old magnolia. A good place to begin introductions since they were preparing for a party he hadn't been invited to. Andy parked his truck behind a battered red pickup alongside the road. He dispensed with his tie, trying to appear as approachable as someone in gray slacks and a white office shirt could in these parts. They'd already seen the Union Pacific heraldry on the side of his truck's door.

One of the three workers headed toward him at a leisurely gate, the morning sun flashing off the gold knob of a mahogany cane he absently twirled. He wore jeans and a denim jacket over a t-shirt emblazoned with a hand holding four cards. All aces. Both the shirt and its owner looked well-worn. A pair of square spectacles rested on a sharply defined nose. His dark brown goatee and loose hair suggested someone you wouldn't want to be facing across a Bourbon Street poker table.

His easy smile and outstretched hand felt a lot more amiable. "Louis LaCroix at your service. How can I help you?" He peered at Andy's badge for a moment. "Officer O'Conner."

"Just Andy," he replied, shaking the man's hand. Louis's grip felt warm and personable. "I was sent to see you by a mutual acquaintance. Rider by the name of Midtown, and I don't know how much she's told you."

Louis rested both hands on his cane and nodded toward the house. “Favor for a favor. She’s been with my Melissa and her Momma since yesterday morning. Trying to make things easy.”

Yesterday morning? Well, steam children were known to move fast down the rails. Apparently a lot faster than that rattletrap the company had given him. Andy regarded the raised pavilion. “Going away party for your little girl?”

Louis nodded, and for a moment Andy caught the pain behind the gandy dancer’s dark eyes. “Time to get her out of the yard.” He pursed his lips. “She’s going to be free. Freer than you and I, eh? Live forever if she wants.”

Andy hated to imagine what the man must be going through. Now he understood the fence. They didn’t want their daughter even looking at a locomotive, much less getting close to one and vanish in a puff of steam. “I need a spur out to a place called Conroy in Missouri. Got an engine to pick up.”

Louis clapped him on the shoulder. “So Midtown said, and time’s wasting. Best get you there. Bring back a little surprise for my Melissa.”

He wasn’t sure if steam child had told Louis much about Seven Eighty-Six. Hopefully as little as possible. Better that Louis’s daughter found herself a better train before he got back.

He followed the gandy dancer through the levee, walking along a narrow gap of tracks guarded by flood gates on the eastern face. They crossed a short bridge over an intersecting river, the green waters visible between the ties.

Louis pointed his cane to an overgrown side track on their left overlooking verdant swampland. “This’ll do. Straight shot through the gate. Just mind the curve up beside my house when you come back.” He glanced at the badge pinned to Andy’s shirt. “You can drive, right?”

“Started out a rated engineer,” he assured. “How close to Conroy can you get me? It’s about two days travel by car.”

The gandy dancer shrugged. “Distance don’t matter when it’s temporary track. I’ll put you on the doorstep once I get the feel for the place. Best not take too much time. This kind of rail won’t last the day.”

He couldn’t help the sigh escaping his lips. If Midtown promised a locomotive, Louis had a right to know what his daughter was getting into. “That steam child tell you what kind of engine I’m bringing back?”

Louis looked out over the surrounding marshland. A breeze came up, carrying the smell of wet mud and algae. “Says he’ll be one that needs her most.”

“That’s it?”

“Good enough for me.” His eyebrows creased behind the glasses. “You know that rider much, Mister O’Conner?”

“Not really,” he admitted.

“My Pappy knew her.” He drove the end of his cane deep into the ballast with a dry crunch. The mahogany darkened into solid iron in the time it took Andy to blink. No longer a cane, the alignment rod stood as tall as the one who held it with both hands. “His pappy did too,” Louis continued. He inclined his head. “Appreciate you step on down the tracks a bit. Prefer doing this alone.”

All he could provide was a humble “Yes, sir,” before giving the man his space. Andy backed up to the bridge. He’d heard stories about how calling living track was done, but never thought to see the process itself. The act was supposed to be hard on the gandy dancer. Very hard.

There wasn't any crack of thunder. No angelic choir or bright light. Just Louis sagging over his alignment rod as if it were the only thing holding him up. His shoulders shook, wrenching out a gasping sob time and again. Andy couldn't stand to hear the gandy dancer's agony any longer and stepped forward. A sudden gust nearly bowled him over.

"Don't," Midtown's windy voice warned. She materialized in a vortex of spray. River water dripped from her long ponytail. "Just watch. He has to recall a time of heartbreak before finding his peace again."

"You mean losing his daughter?" Andy looked away, hating the sight of a man having his heart torn like this.

"Maybe that. Maybe worse. You don't put your soul into the rails with just a smile." Her hard expression softened to match the steam enveloping her. "There."

He turned to see the gandy dancer slumped next to the rod, a quiet serenity replacing the tortured face. Louis's arms folded in an empty embrace, as if he was hugging his Melissa.

Midtown looked at Andy. "What is the most beautiful moment you remember?"

He didn't try to understand, let alone answer. He'd seen enough Hobohemia magic for one day. What counted was the shiny ribbon of steel arcing northward over a fresh roadbed. Ballast as white as marble. Black ties unblemished by weather, and spikes gleaming as if newly struck.

"I can't come with you," Midtown spoke, vocalizing his next thought. "More than engines fade in the Lost Lands. I'll be here with Melissa." Her demeanor darkened to a summer squall. "We'll be waiting for you."



There was no sense asking Louis for help. The man managed a tired smile while gesturing toward the bright rails with a sweep of his arm. Nodding, Andy headed down the new spur, hoping not to disappoint either of them.

“Bring her back a good one,” he heard Louis mutter.

And what if the engine didn’t want to come back? The downside of keeping things quiet for the Baron was not enlisting another locomotive and crew to drag the recalcitrant rattler back. Assuming there was anything left of Seven Eighty-Six to put up a fight. Andy trudged toward his fate.

Louis was right about one thing. The tracks put him just outside town. Swamps gave way to red clay and corn fields. Expecting to bat away mosquitoes and gnats, he was relieved to see evidence of habitation on the horizon. *Should’ve brought the pickup.* He paused for a breather beside a bent sign proclaiming “Conroy” amid the rust. The tracks arched toward a pair of smokestacks shimmering in the Missouri sun.

He kept walking, noting the transition as clean steel rails merged at a switch with tracks corroded with disuse. The road’s ballast mixed with coal dust and weeds. The line looped through a simple yard serving a five-story power plant with blackened brick walls. Neither of the twin stacks produced much smoke. Smudged block letters along their side spelled out “CO-OP”. The place stank of cinders. Sagging transmission lines reached out to a collection of businesses and homes. A wandering row of trees suggested a river about as lazy as this facility. No fences. Nobody to walk up and ask for his identification. He did see a couple tinny-looking cars lined up along the plant’s exterior near a large mound of coal.

He crossed the yard, glancing at a squat blue machine sitting on the rails next to a trio of battered coal cars. A switcher engine with its cab stuck midway along its blocky frame. “Diesel,”

he identified in distaste, not needing this sharp reminder of where he was. A soulless engine in a soulless land. They didn't even have cabooses here. Or did they? He caught a splash of yellow in the otherwise drab yard. There was something behind that coal pile, and it damn sure looked to be the back porch of a Union Pacific caboose. A telltale curl of steam rose over the black mound.

“Got ya,” he said, picking up his pace.

Muggy air and effort had his white shirt clinging to him by the time he rounded the pile. The Mikado sat at idle, a green hose snaking up his tender. He wasn't alone. A cluster of men stood alongside the locomotive as if trying to decide what to do next. The exception was a lone gray hair who rocked slowly in his chair on the caboose's back porch. He flagged Andy down with a conductor's cap. The fellow wasn't wearing a uniform, a tan fishing vest over a red shirt suggesting tackle over manifests. The casual ensemble ended with dusty cowboy boots hiked up on the back railing.

*Making yourself right at home.* Andy began having suspicions about who this might be. Eighty-Six had come here for a reason. He waved back, hurrying over as quickly as his out of shape body would permit. Which meant a fast walk.

“Was wondering when you boys would show up,” the stranger called out in a grainy drawl. He stood up to help Andy up the side stairs.

“You Ernie by any chance?” He looked about the right age, his stubbled round face showing the weathering of age and endless schedules.

“Ernie Halifax. Did the kid come with you?”

“Fred? No, he's just about quit.” He offered his hand. “Andy O'Conner. Special Agent for...”

“Yeah, I can see the badge. What happened?”

Andy glanced uneasily toward the engine. "Eighty-Six didn't tell you?"

The old conductor shook his head. "He barely knows my name." Ernie jerked a thumb toward the front of the brief train. "You need to get him out of here before those vultures end up sticking him in a park or something. Told those buzzards the Union Pacific would be along to pick him up. That was yesterday when I heard his whistle." He glanced over Andy's shoulder. "You brought a crew?"

"I'm rated. Long story, but the new Baron wants this kept quiet. Need you up in the fireman's seat."

"Politics as usual," Ernie grumbled. "Look, I've topped off his water. He's still got enough oil and good pressure. You want this engine back home, we gotta go now." He stomped a foot. "*Right* now, while there's still something left of him out here." The conductor paused, then let out a breath. "So what happened?"

"Bad crew. Got drunk and ran over a little kid."

"Jesus. Then I'm guessing they all ran like hell?"

"Yeah. Fred tried warning them early on, but they weren't about to listen to somebody still wet behind the ears."

Ernie followed him in silence down the stairs. The conductor jerked the water hose from the tender as if taking the head off a snake. He stabbed a finger at the bunch walking toward them. "Time to wave that badge of yours around, Agent."

Andy waded into a circle of business suits and demands, signing anything thrust at him and making promises he wouldn't keep. Power company wanted recompense for "loaning" their yard. Sure. An offer from a restoration society. Go to hell and we'll get back to you, but said nicely. Same for the Conroy Herald. A sheriff talking fines. You bet. Union Pacific will accept

all charges. God, he hated the Lost Lands. All about the money. A person could go bankrupt out here just visiting a hospital.

He climbed up into the cab with Ernie taking the left chair. The blank looks staring up at him suggested they didn't realize he was about to take their cash cow away.

The conductor placed a gentle hand on the window sill. "You don't deserve this, Eighty-Six."

"So why couldn't you just have him come home?" Andy asked while going through his pre-checks. "He's still got plenty of fire in the boiler."

"He hardly knows himself, let alone how to get moving." Ernie adjusted a red atomizer valve, then flicked at the water gauge. "We'll have to do the honors. Another day and you wouldn't have Eighty-Six at all. Just a soulless as that diesel out there. He'd get throw off living rails like a flea on a dog's tail."

Andy peered down the track. As he suspected, the road curved in a simple circle leading back to the spur. Fortunately, none of those cars were in the way. He set the Johnson Bar and opened the cylinder cocks to release Eighty-Six's brakes. Two short blasts of the whistle resulted in a few "Hey, you can't do that!" shouts from below. Nobody chose to contest several tons of iron when Eighty-Six surged forward in a huff of steam.

Andy looked over at Ernie. "Getting anything from him?"

The conductor's grimace said it all.

*We'll know soon enough.* Right now they were creaking around a curb of dead track in front of the coal heap. Once they hit the switch they'd be on living rail. If this engine was truly gone, they'd be derailed in an instant. He eyed the diesel as they chugged passed. It didn't just take a gandy dancer's soul to create tracks. The engines riding on them had to have one too.

The clatter of the engine's leading pilot wheels signaled their arrival over the switch.

"Here we go," Ernie said. "Damn, thought I left this nonsense behind."

"I'll get you a bus back." Andy grinned at the old man to ease the tension in his own gut.

"Could use a beer and a fishing pole myself." He eased the brass throttle forward. Nothing to lose.

The creak and groan of decrepit track gave way to a smooth singing click and clack as they traversed. Eighty-Six responded with a smooth surge forward. The steam whistle blew loud and long. Dark soot and steam billowed from the Mikado's stack.

"Wasn't me," Andy said with a grin. "Think he's waking up again."

The pistons' tempo quickened.

Andy adjusted the Johnson Bar to put a little less steam into their strokes. "Best bring his exuberance down a bit. There'll be a curve coming up just before we make Gentilly Yard."

"He's building up a good head," Ernie observed in a half-shout over the growing clatter. He paused. "Don't like the sound of that whistle."

Andy frowned. Sure enough, Eighty-Six hadn't stopped blowing it. Instead, the noise kept climbing. Becoming shrill. He tried to hide a feeling of panic as corn fields whisked by in a green blur. "Easing up the throttle."

Except he couldn't.

Ernie's face went white. His voice shook in a monotone of dread. "He's remembering."

"Need help," Andy gasped, unable to budge the short handle. "That curve's up against a bayou."

The conductor put his hands around Andy's, but to no avail. "He knows why he came over. Can't you feel it?"

The man knew a lot more about this engine than he did, but Andy caught a slow rocking sensation beyond their hurling down the track. The kind of back and forth motion he'd seen at funerals. Something you did with your eyes closed against the pain. When you wished you were dead too.

"He doesn't want to make that turn," Andy realized out loud.

Ernie glanced out the window, his gray hair flying. "Too fast to jump."

And there was the levee. He could see the curve coming up through the gap, and the horror only compounded.

The conductor's eyes widened. "There's people on the tracks! My god, a little girl. *Stop this thing!*"

Andy tried kicking at the brake valves. The throttle. Even the Johnson Bar wouldn't move. The tragedy sending Eighty-Six into the Lost Lands was about to repeat itself.

He guessed the engine finally saw her through his anguish when the throttle slammed shut of its own accord, numbing his fingers as his hands banged against the boiler. The Johnson Bar wrenched into full reverse. The whistle didn't just blow, it screamed.

"Hang on!" Andy yelled, gripping his chair. Worse still, he knew who the girl would be. Melissa. About to die right before her parents' eyes. "Get off!" he yelled uselessly into the wind. The girl looked rooted to the spot, a tiny speck in a white dress with her arms outstretched.

The cab lurched and rocked as they flew over the intervening bridge. The Mikdado shot through the levee's gate in a shower of orange sparks and screeching wheels. They hit the turn. He could see her face. Caught between joy and fear. Not understanding. "Move!" he sobbed, knowing neither she nor anyone else could hear him.

The cabin tilted. He hoped they would plunge over the steep bank before reaching her, but knew his last prayer to be a futile one.

Everything happened. Louis LaCroix's daughter vanished beneath the wheels. Bright steam whooshed from the stack as clean as the overhead clouds. An impossible column of wind, branches, and dirty water erupted from the bayou to slam into the Mikado, rocking the decelerating engine back on the tracks. A wall of debris knocked him from his seat and he knew no more.

Andy regained his senses to find himself propped up against the base of the fireman's chair with a press of faces staring at him. One was Ernie. The other two concerned expressions were set in gray swirls. A long vaporous ponytail curled and twisted across the wet metal floor. "He'll be fine," Midtown's whispery voice assured. She sounded both relieved and exhausted.

The other steam child adjusted square spectacles over a snub nose. "You sure?"

"Yes, Melissa. He brought him back just as I said he would."

The younger one's lower lip stuck out. "Eighty-Six is really sad."

"I know, honey. Go cheer him up. Tell him he's not to blame. He lost one girl but gained another. Tell him that."

The newly minted steam child jetted through the window in an excited rush.

Midtown sighed, her shoulders dropping.

Andy gave the drained sprite a measured look. "I take it that twister was you."

Midtown nodded and rose with a soft groan, her body reduced to a cloud with feminine outlines. "As I said, Eighty-Six is a bit too proud. Still thought he had a debt to pay."

"You telling me you expected this would happen?"

She matched his incredulous grin. "Of course."

Andy struggled to his feet with Ernie's help, catching a roll of the rider's smoky eyes.

"Guess I'm not the only spinning tall tales around here."

She returned an imperious snort. "You've done your Baron a service, Agent O'Conner. Since I, um, have Randolph's ear, what can he do for you in turn?"

Andy dropped back into the seat nursing a sore arm and banged up head. He glanced at Ernie beside him with a crooked grin. "Early retirement?"

THE END