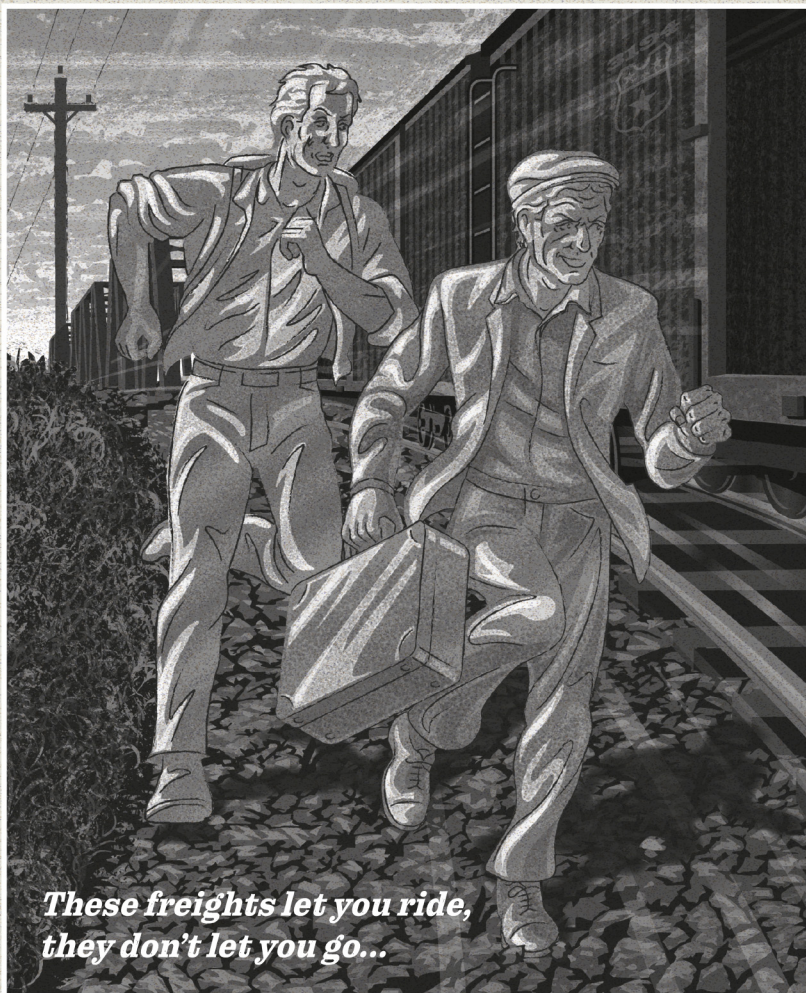


THE LAST PROFESSIONAL



Ed Davis

Advance Praise for *The Last Professional*

“With *The Last Professional*, Davis has done for American railroads what Kerouac did for American highways, and Steinbeck did for American nomads.”

Jerry Cimino, Founder of The Beat Museum, San Francisco

“With wonderful, lyrical writing that reflects author Ed Davis’ own history of adventurous journeys on freight trains across the American landscape, *The Last Professional* captures the imagination. With his latest solid effort, Davis weaves an intriguing tale of mystery, sacrifice, and personal triumph. Compelling characters add to the literary mix, potentially positioning Davis as a fresh bright light among American fiction writers. Very well crafted.”

D. C. Jesse Burkhardt, author of *Travelogue From an Unruly Youth*

“Lynden Hoover was a boy who had been abandoned and taken and abandoned again. Like a coda from a powerful song, he was coming full circle when he bolts a lucrative job and jumps a train “to wherever”. Onboard a box car in the heat, he meets The Duke, a hobo royal who guides him through the violent and cinematic survival. Finally, a father figure appears from the rough skids of tramp life. Along the way, Lynden becomes “Frisco Lindy, but who is The Last Professional? The last act of Frisco’s enlightenment comes in a hobo jungle worthy of a raw Quentin Tarantino awakening. Blood. Love. And a man’s self-respect—fashioned by the force of Ed Davis and the rough poetry of life on the rails.”

Viola Weinberg, Poet Laureate Emerita & Glenna Luschei Fellow

“Davis’s wordsmithing is masterful. He evokes another time in modern times, deftly defining the wilderness of America’s railways and building characters—teacher and student—whose complex stories unfold in moments lit by starlight and fueled by baking powder biscuits, and in quick jolts, screeching like metal wheels on rails.”

Tracy Salcedo, National Outdoor Book Award winner.

“*The Last Professional* invites us to take a leap, hang on, and discover a secret world far from our comfortable lives. In this beautifully written story, Ed Davis draws readers into the shadows to discover a vanishing brotherhood who, despite their raw, gritty, and sometimes desperate ways, elicit our respect for their absolute commitment to freedom. You will never see a passing freight train the same way again.”

Fran Braga Meininger, Author of *The Years Beyond Youth*

THE LAST PROFESSIONAL

A story of the River of Steel

By Ed Davis

Illustrated By Colin Elgie



Chapter One

*So pay attention now my children
And the old story I will tell
About the jungles and the freight trains
And a breed of men who fell.*

Virginia Slim

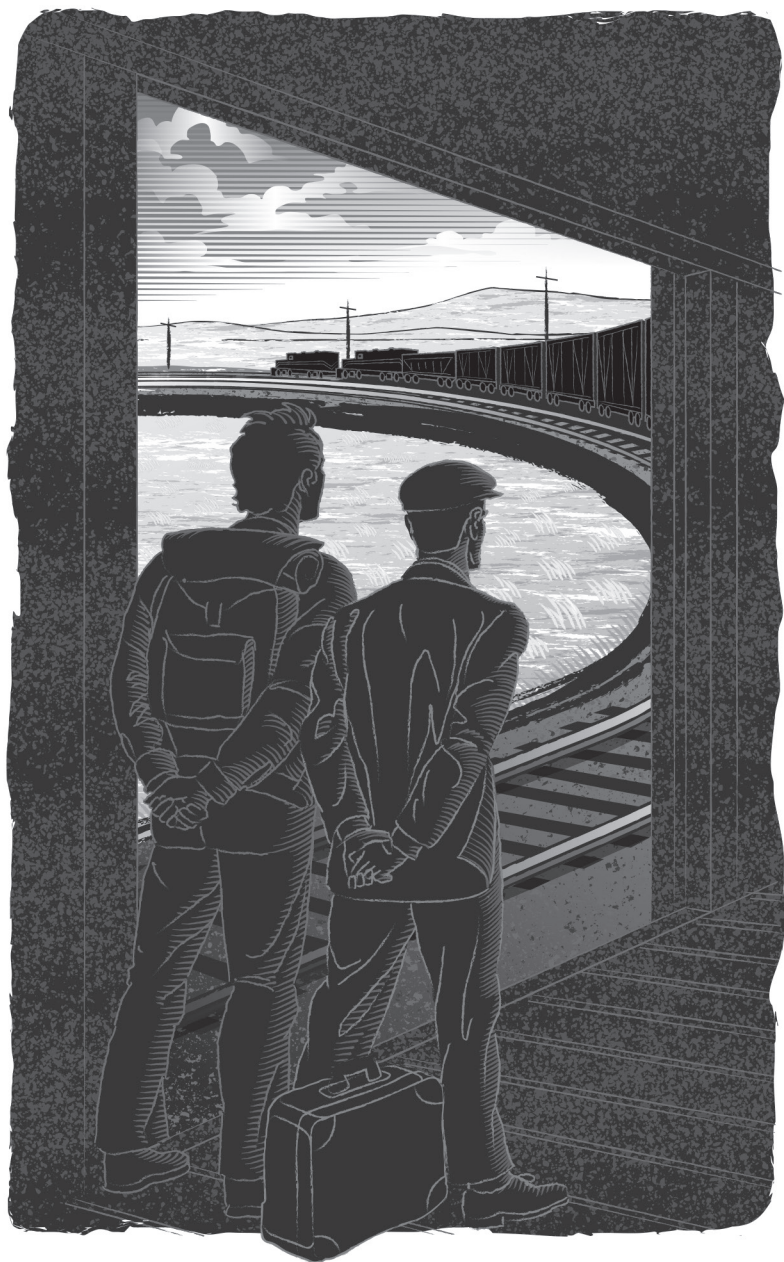
Until the rails arrived virtually at their doorsteps, most people lived within a day's walk of where they were born. America was smaller. Horizons meant something. The span of a life was measured out in strides.

A desire for more, a restlessness of the soul, always lay in wait.

It was a gnawing in the gut that comfort would abate for most, and conformity could subdue for others. Yet, in the hearts of some, the compulsion to wander was so irresistible that they had no choice but to follow. On horseback, on a raft, or on the last of their shoe leather, they would eventually leave everything they knew, seek solace in movement, and go in search of themselves.

These pilgrims, who longed for a different path, found that a river of steel had burst to life at their feet. Surging from the midst of the sprawling cities to the smallest hamlets, its tributaries traversed defiant mountain ranges, spanned impossibly vast prairies, and linked the remotest reaches of the country as they had never been linked before.

Hobos these pilgrims were called, phantoms of the



road, and except to one another, they had no names.

The river of steel still flows through the land, but it is a changed land and a changed river. Its tributaries no longer reach into every corner, its currents are no longer inviting. The hobos that once were, are no more, having caught the westbound long ago. At the time of this tale, late in the last century, their golden age was a distant memory, their legacy known to but a dwindling few.

* * *

The country east of Roseville is a gentle plain of grassland and houses, tilting steadily upwards toward the Sierra Nevada. It's a gradual climb that an automobile wouldn't notice, but the eastbound freight labored at it, all six power units throwing thick black smoke into the afternoon sky.

In their boxcar Lynden and The Duke stood like sailors on a rolling deck—hands clasped at their backs, feet wide apart for balance, faces thrust forward into the wind. Their car was like an oven from a day's worth of sun, so they pushed back both doors to catch a cooling breeze. On either side, the great brown landscape peeled by. Hills sloped into the long valley. Palisades defined the hollows of the grasslands. The open doors framed the passing scenery like a movie screen, a private showing just for them.

Lynden remembered his first time on a train—fifteen years earlier, when he was only eleven. It was summer and dry, and the hot metal side of the boxcar stung his hand. Inside, the car smelled of grain and warm wood.

He remembered the pasture behind his house in Auburn, Washington, and the railroad tracks just beyond the back fence-line—a line he knew he should never cross. He remembered the trains he often saw there. He'd learned to read the names on the cars, and he'd said their numbers aloud.

Occasionally the trains stopped. He'd see men riding in the cars. Sometimes he'd lean against that fence and talk to them. Sometimes he'd cross it. When the trains pulled away, the men would wave, and he'd shout back, his chest tight when they were gone. His father was gone. "He's not dead. Just gone," his mother would say, until he stopped asking. Lynden remembered them fighting, remembered hiding in the darkest corner of the chicken coop until it was over—until his mom would bring him in for the night.

When his dad left, the fighting ceased, and they were alone.

The train Lynden would never forget stopped behind his house the summer after sixth grade. Since then, everything around him had changed, everything but that train. Time had not faded it, nor improved it, nor altered it. The train was too strong. It went forward, always in his dreams forward, all the cars linked and bound, the great length tied and whole. The train was real. Its attraction was real. It had been calling him across all his days.

His favorite tramp was on it, one he had talked to many times. He'd told the man how much he missed his father. The man listened and seemed to understand. Then, on that day, as his train started to move, the tramp reached down from his boxcar and pulled Lynden in.

He could remember exactly what he felt at that instant: surprise, fear, excitement—hope. Maybe the tramp was taking him to find his father.

The tramp was just taking him.

From nowhere the smell of sweet tobacco came to Lynden's nostrils. That scent, mingled with sweat, grime, saliva, was so primitive, so pungent it clung in his memory even now. The tramp rolled his own cigarettes—his fingers reeking of that pungent smell as they fondled him, probed him, held him if he tried to pull away. But he didn't try, not really. For the three weeks they were together he

did not resist.

He did not fight back.

For the fifteen years since, he'd been haunted by that fact. If he'd been drowning, he would have struggled for air, if slipping, he would have strained for any handhold that might arrest his fall.

But on that train, he drowned, he fell.

After three weeks of it, the tramp abandoned him—just like his dad.

He did not know the man's name. "The Tramp" was how he thought of him, and he thought of him often—of punishing him for what he had done. What he hadn't seriously considered, until a day ago, was doing something about it.

Only yesterday he'd been offered a promotion that would have made the business section of the Mercury News. "Data Dynamics, pegged as one of 1983's fastest growing tech firms, today named Lynden Hoover, age twenty-six, head of Product Development. Hoover becomes one of the youngest Silicon Valley programmers to hold such a post, and possibly the highest paid."

There was no *possibly* about it.

There was also no story.

Instead of saying yes, he'd said goodbye.

His coworkers, who did not know him well or understand him at all, were sure it was the added pressure. Either that or a ploy for more money. It wasn't about money. Circuits were like barricades for Lynden, equations like battlements. When he brought them together with code, they created a fortress, a realm that was entirely his own—one he could control. He understood every inch of that world, just as prisoners know every inch of their cells.

As long as he was in self-imposed solitary, he could convince himself that he was fine.

But when Derek Zebel, the new VP and his immediate

supervisor, cornered him in the men's room—right after he'd offered him the promotion—it was like discovering he had a rapist for a cellmate. It pushed him over the edge. Not the breakdown edge or the bughouse edge. Just the quitting edge. He'd done it before. Hell, others at his level had done it before. All programmers were a little crazy up front, and all the good ones knew when to bail.

Yesterday was different. The new design was going smoothly, and the prototype of the DD 2000—Double Dildo the techies were calling it—was fifty percent locked down. But it wasn't the Double Dildo that toggled him from a one to a zero.

It was Derek Zebel, and the confidence in his voice when he said, "I *know* you've been saving it for me." The squeeze of his hand on Lynden's crotch, not a caress but a vice-like *squeeze*, was a statement of control, and possession, and a declaration that he could and would do anything he wanted.

Anything at all.

And behind Zebel, fifteen years behind, it was The Tramp.

From nowhere the smell of sweet tobacco came to Lynden's nostrils and he saw the glint of sunlight on polished brass. Zebel seemed amused when Lynden shoved him away, a reflex so strong that he could not have restrained himself. "Go ahead... play hard to get," his new boss grinned, "but you're not fooling anybody, and we both know it." Lynden heard him, and though he *didn't* know it, the question plagued him. And it wasn't Derek Zebel's voice that he heard, or Derek Zebel's face that he saw.

It was The Tramp's. The Tramp, standing over him. Not a face or a body or anything clear, but there was no mistaking it for anything, or anyone else.

And he felt, what? Dread? Shame? Longing? Maybe all

of those. Or maybe just the hole they left behind.

Fifteen years, and he still wasn't sure.

Small problems you walk away from, he thought. He'd been doing that most of his life. But from big ones, you run.

He sprinted through the plant, tossed his I.D. badge at the guard as he hit the door, and didn't stop until he'd grabbed his backpacking gear from his apartment, hiked to the nearest onramp and stuck out his thumb.

It may have been an accident that the first ride he hitched ended in Roseville. He could accept that. But going down to the freight yards was a decision he'd been wrestling with for fifteen years. His Tramp might still be out there. Lynden pictured the man standing over him. After all this time he wasn't sure he trusted the image, but the emotions it stirred remained clear and raw—always ready to ambush him when he least expected it, or when they would do the most harm.

The scent of sweet tobacco. The gleam of polished brass.

And in the background, all this time, that deep deadly rumble.

Beckoning. Fearsome.

The sound of the trains.

Now he was on a train again, the first he'd ridden since he was a boy. He'd jumped aboard as it was rolling out of the Roseville yard—an awkward and clumsy catch with the heavy pack strapped to his back. Somehow he got on, scrambling into what he thought was an empty boxcar. It was only when he was safely inside, catching his breath and shucking off his pack, that he realized he wasn't alone. From the darkest corner of the car he saw a silver glint on a long steel blade, and the shadowy shape of the man holding it.

* * *

The Duke was not accustomed to being scared.

For two weeks now he'd been glancing over his shoulder, and every time his gut jumped a little. In fifty years on the road, bulls had pistol-whipped him, jungle buzzards had knifed him for the change in his pockets, and the killing wheels of the freights had always been there, ever sharpening themselves on the whetstone of the rails. He had seen men die beneath those wheels, seen them sucked in and ripped apart, but none of it had derailed him. Not until two weeks ago. Not until that mess in the jungle outside the Colton Yards.

Not until Short Arm.

Now he was running.

That night in Colton he snagged the first freight he saw—anything to get away. Turned out it was a Southern Pacific shuttle, so he rode it to the old LA yard, then ditched and lay low. He was sure nobody saw him, but on the Coast Express next morning he stayed hidden anyway.

Countless times that coastal had carried him from LA to Oakland. Usually, he stood in a boxcar door watching the ocean and the sand dunes and the broad blue sky. This trip he watched nothing, crouching in the car's darkest corner, listening. He dreaded the moments when the train slowed down.

He made it through Santa Barbara and the crew change at San Luis Obispo. By Paso Robles his nerves were shot. What if somebody saw him when they set out cars at King City? What if the bull at Watsonville stripped the train? And if he made it to Oakland—what then? He was "The Duke," and if some Sixth Street stew-bum recognized him, that was it.

Paso Robles might be safe, he thought, at least until things blew over. Only local freights stopped there anymore. In steam days there'd been a water tank at the south end and next to it a hobo jungle where some home-guard

boys were still holding it down, their riding days long past.

When the coastal slowed for the grade south of town he left it. Twenty miles per hour, yet he hit the grit running and stayed up—not bad for an old man.

A week in the Paso jungle, and nothing. Part of another week and all he'd seen were rum-dumbs by the jungle fire and freight trains working up and down the grade. He started to relax, to tell himself that he'd never been afraid. He was Profesh, damn it. In a lifetime on the rails he'd faced every kind of danger the road could throw at him.

All without fear.

Then, one afternoon when he was coming back from the Sally, one of the home-guard boys slipped him word, one of the few who still knew the score. "Some yegg came through lookin for you. A Johnson if you ask me, though I ain't seen one of those evil rat bastards since Hector was a pup. Big guy with a wing missin."

That was three days ago.

He fled north. First on foot, then by thumb, but finally back to the freights. No place on the coast was safe for him now. That left the East, or maybe Canada, though Short Arm might still give chase. Most yeggs and jack rollers wouldn't leave their home turf and worked a circuit where the law and the routes and the easy prey were all familiar.

But Short Arm was different, the last of his kind and crazy at that.

There was no predicting what he would do, only what he wouldn't do.

He wouldn't stop.

Since before dawn The Duke had been in Roseville, working not to be noticed. Though he hadn't eaten in two days, he avoided the Salvation Army soup kitchen. The Sally was the first place Short Arm would look. Same with the last remaining hash house down on the main stem, and the watering hole next to it, both too well-known in

their ever-shrinking universe to be safe. In any case, he told himself, he'd need what little money he had for the long trip ahead.

He snatched a couple of over-ripe pears from a neglected tree in an untended back yard, devoured them down to the seeds, and licked his fingers clean.

The next northbound left at four o'clock, the next eastbound not long after. The Duke had ridden both many times before. Unless he wanted Short Arm to catch him and kill him right here, he'd have to flee town, and flee the state, on one of them.

While he waited, he stayed clear of the yards and the rescue mission and the park where a few bums dozed in the shade. He changed his usual mackinaw and work pants for a dispatcher outfit. His slacks, old suit jacket and yellowing white shirt turned him into a retired railroad employee. He would think like a side-tracked dispatcher, act like one, go to all the places a retired railroad stiff might burn time. Since hitting town he'd spent a few hours in the library and a few more down at the mostly empty Roseville depot swapping lies with the custodian.

At half-past four—freights can always leave late, and often do, but never early—he ducked between some broken-down bad-order tankers parked on a dead-end siding and hit a string of boxcars just as the power units began to move, pulling slack out of the couplings, the sound coming to him like slow thunder from the head end of the train. He found an open boxcar and tossed his road-worn leather satchel into the darkness inside. He followed after it, with a grace and ease that belied how complicated the movement was, and suspended, for a moment, his terror that Short Arm might be waiting for him there.

* * *

"I've seen prettier catches," the stranger stepped into the light.

Lynden flashed on the last time he'd been with a man in a boxcar. The fear, the excitement, the shame—all of it switched on in an instant. But there was no cunning in this voice, no threat. Only wariness.

“What do you figure that backpack of yours weighs?” The hobo was a compact old man, a foot shorter than Lynden and well north of sixty years old—the rugged features of a life lived outdoors imprinted deeply on his face. He wasn't brandishing the knife, just making sure Lynden could see all of its twelve-inch length.

“Forty pounds, forty-five maybe.” In the hobo's other hand Lynden saw a battered valise. “How about that bag of yours?”

“Ten pounds,” the hobo considered. “Hell, eight pounds. And there's times I got nothin but my wits and my walkin stick. Seein all your gear, I don't guess you'll be wantin mine,” he opened his bag and placed the hunting knife inside. “This here's my boxcar, but you're welcome to share it, long as you behave.”

“I'll do my best,” Lynden felt himself begin to relax, enough to offer a hint of a smile along with his answer. “Where's this train heading, do you know?”

“Wherever the hell she takes us,” the old man stepped to the open door. “If she swings north up here, then it's Dunsmuir and on to Oregon. If she holds straight east, then it's over the hump to Reno and Sparks. You goin somewheres in particular?”

“No. Just like you said, wherever the hell she takes us.”

* * *

In the fifteen years since he'd been hauled into that first freight, everything in Lynden's life had changed completely. Yet, out the door in front of him now, a familiar watery image of a shadow train shimmered dimly beside them. He remembered that from before, and it was just the same. Silver wheels honed and polished themselves on the

anvil of the rails, the air filled with their raw, steel scent. He knew the smells—diesel and rust—and a roar like the ocean in a shell. His feet vibrated with the strain of a hundred thousand tons and the surging of the air lines and the flexing of the springs. Doors banged, metal slapped, dust flew. This was the train that threaded through his dreams, The Tramp's train. It pulled him, relentless as gravity, but onward.

Their freight headed east at the switch, then climbed a ridge rising gradually above the valley floor. Lynden scanned the wide, sweeping land of ranchettes and open range that spanned to the south below. A row of palm trees undulated over the rolling hills. Not far from the tracks, billboards blared at the heedless freeway traffic speeding by. Horses grazed in dry pastures. On the larger estates, the unreal blue of swimming pools glittered like cold gems sewn into the fabric of the warm, brown plain. As the track curved, Lynden could see the full length of the train. *This thing's more than a mile long.*

Fifteen years long.

Within an hour they were deep into the Sierra Nevada. Pines and huge cedars crowded close against the tracks; cars moved at a walker's pace. The Duke stepped back from the doors. Lynden remained in the waning light, and watched the hard-edged landscape soften into pastels, evening's gossamer veil layering mystery over the meadows, suggesting secrets in the forest glens.

Night, and still he watched. High in the mountains a harsh wind bit his face and eyes. The sudden cold and dark enlivened him. Moonlight illuminated the great rock faces rolling by, close enough to touch. Tunnels and snow sheds. Patches of snow like icing on the ground. They were crossing a trestle over a deep canyon. The snow in the bottom, a hundred feet below, glowed as if lit from within. He imagined himself stepping off the edge of the car and falling

towards it—the thrilling release, the wind in his face and his hair, the gentle grasp as he sank in.

The last sheer face of Donner Summit rose, menacing and ghostly, before them. The rock's cold white fingers reached into the obsidian sky. A snow shed opened, and one after another the cars were sucked in, like the mountain inhaling.

Magnifying the train's roar, the snow shed grew darker, eclipsing light and shadow when it became a tunnel. Lynden clutched the edge of the door. He touched his palm to his nose. His eyes searched the car, at the noise from the opposite door, then to where The Duke hunkered down. Blackness. He inched his head outside toward the front of the train, a hot wind coursed roughly over his face—the smell of diesel and damp and mold. His eyes watered from the wind and blowing grit. Nothing to be seen.

He closed his eyes and rubbed them hard. He could see then, but no more than familiar swimming colors behind his eyelids.

Lynden floated, weightless, sailing through a shapeless void, unable to sense the train's direction except when it lurched. As he had watched the foothills in the daylight, and the forests of the mountains at dusk, he settled back and watched the absolute darkness.

The train emerged beneath brilliant moonlight and stars that, after that darkness, were as shocking to his eyes as a million small suns.

"Tunnels been known to eat greenhorns like you," The Duke was standing beside him, moon glow playing across his face. "Me and some boys rode through the Moffat tunnel with this young fella one summer and damned if we didn't lose him. While we were inside, the fool got up to relieve himself—relieved himself right out the door."

The train's character shifted as it plunged down the eastern slope. After hours of plodding, pleasant and harm-

less, it was gathering speed, uncoiling into a rolling threat. Lynden's feet picked up the tension as a thousand brake shoes engaged spinning steel. The air filled with the hot metallic smell of friction.

Soon the boxcar began pitching wildly from side to side, its wheels at odds with the rails.

"You scared kid?"

"Yes... aren't you?"

"I was, when I was like you. Ask me again, you ain't so green."

The rapid waters of the Truckee River threw darts of silver light back at the sky, and a hot wind came whistling through the boxcar doors. They were flying down the mountain, rushing and swinging, hurtling toward the great flat desert below.

Whether it lasted minutes or hours Lynden wasn't sure, but finally the train began to slow onto the flats, its frantic spell broken.

In the distance, like a beacon, the pulsing glare of Reno drew them steadily closer.

Track #1

On the Fly — To catch a moving freight.

Before we took a break to eat and tend the fire, you were talking about the truth, remember?

Was I?

You said it's all that counts. *Strip away the good and bad, and what's left is the truth.* Those were your exact words.

Good words. Seems a guy will say almost anything for a drink of whiskey and some hot chow.

Maybe, but I don't think you'll lie to me.

Won't I?

When we began, it's the way you said you wanted it.

I guess I did.

The truth, then. Let's start with who you are.

I'm a hobo, a stiff who rides trains. That's true enough. You might see me waving out a boxcar door when you're stopped at a crossing, waiting... if you see the freight at all that is. Or cooking up in a camp by the tracks like this one here... a *jungle* we call it... cause it's usually tucked away in the bushes and trees. Maybe even walking down the street next to you. I'm not the sort you always notice, but I've been around. Just a colorful character from the old days, like in the folk songs. *Listen to the steel rails hummin', that's the hobo's lullaby.*

That sounds like who you think I *want* you to be... not who you are.

Then maybe you oughta get your ears checked.

The truth, remember.

Whose... yours or mine?

You think there is more than one kind of truth?

Don't matter what I think. You want the painless truth, the awful truth, or the final truth? You want the preacher's truth, the lawyer's truth? Maybe the lover's truth is what you're looking for. There are as many kinds of truth as there are kinds of people. You can pick it off the rack like a suit of clothes.

We're after the real truth, aren't we?

That can be damn hard to find. Harder to face.

I'm willing if you are.

You may not like it.

Chapter Two

*Seeing the raveled edge of life
In jails, on rolling freights
And learning rough and ready ways
From rough and ready mates.*

Harry Kemp

Lynden stood between the open boxcar doors, his eyes shifting from the anxious faces on the sidewalks to the neon brilliance of Reno all around them. Back in the shadows, The Duke rode quietly and watched.

Casinos glittered on either side of the tracks. Crowds waited for the slow rolling freight to pass. Some gamblers, frustrated with the train's interminable length, were so eager to try their luck at the next gaming palace that they grabbed a ladder and scrambled clumsily across the couplings—risking more than a few dollars.

"Yard's starting," the old man said softly.

"What?"

The Duke pointed outside. They were still in the midst of the casino district, but a siding had appeared next to them, and another next to it, like the branches of a candelabra springing from its stem. Glare from the first of the freight yards many blinding floodlights, perched atop their fifty-foot towers, filled the car, and Lynden slipped back into a corner.

The rhythmic dirge of the freight beat slower with every turn of the wheels. Lynden and The Duke watched the yard slip by. To their left a web of sidings splayed out, to

their right a wide gravel area with trucks and sheds. They passed a string of power units idling on a spur. The yard office came into view, then the depot, and both slid back into the night.

"She'll change crew here. When she rolls out again, we can snag her by the overpass down at the east end."

"We have to get off?"

"There's desert to cross tomorrow. How much water you carryin?"

"A full canteen."

"Yeah, we have to get off."

The tempo slowed till the rocking motion stopped. With a dull clanking it came to a stone silent halt. The quiet was so intense that neither man spoke.

A burst of air blasted from under the car.

"Christ!" Lynden froze.

"It's only the air release." The Duke grabbed his bag off the floor. "You comin?"

Lynden shouldered his pack and stepped into the open doorway.

"Don't move." The Duke stopped Lynden with a hand on his shoulder. Its strength startled him. A few sidings over a low white sedan was cruising left to right, tires stepping clumsily over the rutted access road.

"Did you tangle with a yard bull in Roseville today?"

"Tangle? No... a guy chased me out of the yard. Told me to stay out. When he was gone, I snuck back in." Lynden had liked the thrill of it, of disobeying. "Why?"

The sedan came to a stop.

Nothing moved. Boxcars ceased banging in the yard, engines quit their droning.

The sedan inched forward again.

"Maybe he didn't spot us." Lynden's eyes fixed on the car.

"Like hell." The cruiser pulled out of sight. They heard

it accelerate as it hit the city streets. “Get your I.D. yanked twice on the same line, you get thirty days... county.” The Duke was scanning the open yard. “Guards will shake you down for everything you’ve got, and you’ll end up with a boyfriend if you’re lucky... ten if you ain’t. With that back-pack on, can you run?”

“Can you?”

They jumped down from the car and broke into a sprint.

Lynden *could* run—Bay to Breakers every year, and three miles before work most mornings. But with his pack he was no match for the old man.

A hundred yards and no sign of the bull. A hundred fifty and still no sign.

The Duke ran past the service road that marked the yard boundary.

Lynden stopped there, feet numb, shoulders raw. He shifted the pack to relieve pressure, then heard a sound. He looked back.

The white sedan was almost on him.

The Duke was gone, hidden in the bushes. Lynden dashed to the first opening he could find and dove in. It was a tunnel through the thicket, branches and brush all around. His pack snagged. He lurched, broke free, tumbled into a hollow of weeds and blackberry brambles.

“Where the hell you been?” The Duke, crouching beside him, had his knife drawn.

“Jesus Christ!”

“Save your prayin for later.”

“What’s that thing for?”

“Him.” The Duke answered. They heard the bull’s car pull to a stop in front of them.

“Look... it’s not worth it, even if we go to jail.”

“No?” the old man spat on the blade, polished it with the heel of his hand.

Through the bushes, just yards away, they could see the bull's legs and hear the snap as his holster opened.

"You can't use that thing on him!" Lynden, against the rising panic of what he thought was about to happen, tried to whisper, matching the old man's volume.

"Watch me."

Beams of yard-light glare filtered through the bushes— The Duke held his knife in one of them and flashed its blade toward the tracks. "I've never stuck this thing in nobody, but I've never had reason to. Right now, he's wondering if it's worth it. Chances are we're leaving his town. Chances are he won't ever see us after today. But he knows what he'll see if he comes in here." The Duke flashed the knife some more.

They watched the legs take a step forward.

"All right," the Bull's voice, loud but lacking conviction, made them both jump. "I know you're in there."

Lynden opened his mouth as if to answer.

The Duke stopped him with a hard look.

Stillness.

"Don't let me catch you in my yard again!"

The legs took a step backward. The holster snapped.

Moments later the car pulled away.

* * *

Lynden was lying against his pack, heart still sprinting. "Are you nuts, old man?"

"He had your I.D." The Duke reached into his battered leather valise, took an undershirt from the bag, and wrapped the knife. "It was on your account I run him off. You got a thing for getting busted?"

"I've got a thing for not getting shot!"

"Did you?"

They glared at each other. A light wind carried the smell of creosote, hot gravel, and rusting iron. Back in the yard a switch engine groaned on the hump.

Minutes passed.

The Duke put his knife away.

“You hungry?” Lynden pulled his pack open, not sure if the tension between them was broken yet, or ever would be.

“Guess I could eat... if you’re offerin.” The Duke, who had hardly eaten in days, managed to sound disinterested, even as his stomach growled.

Lynden began to pile food on the ground. Cans of corned beef hash, stew, beans. Some coffee, fruit, a sack of beef jerky. “I stocked up... thought I might be gone awhile.” He yanked out a folding stove and a can of Sterno. Mess kit, silverware, salt, pepper. Even a dented pot for coffee. “I camp a lot. The stuff accumulates.”

“I camp too.” The Duke began to lay out the contents of his valise. A thin blanket, tightly rolled and bound with a belt. A mackinaw and work pants. A denim shirt. Shaving gear, the knife, something wrapped in a kerchief. That was all. He undid the belt and rolled out his blanket. “You got half the grocery store in that balloon of yours. Bring your wardrobe too?” The old man slipped off his old suit jacket, laid it carefully on the blanket and pressed it flat with his hands.

“Some of it. A couple pair of Levis, some shirts. Just what I grabbed on the way out.” He held up a can of hash. “This all right with you?”

“It’s your grub.”

“And some coffee?”

“You’re fixin it.”

The Duke removed his shirt, folded it, then shucked off his pants. “This here’s all I carry.” He rolled up his town clothes in his blanket, so tight it was hardly bigger than before. “Keeps em pressed, in case I gotta look good,” he cinched the belt. “Whole thing don’t weigh more than a promise.”

“Why so little?”

“Why so much?” He pulled on his road clothes and pointed at the pack. “You actually expect to catch trains with that on your back?”

“Unless you want to carry it for me.”

As Lynden prepared their meal, The Duke watched. Whenever there was a sound from the yard, he could see his new companion stop, listen. The Duke listened. He knew the sounds, knew them so well he hardly heard them anymore. *The kid seems to know them too*, he thought, *but different.*

The Duke recalled a Christmas in Kansas City when the Salvation Army put on a symphony show for the bums. He hadn’t heard that kind of music since back in Cumberland, back before he left home. His mother had a gramophone that she played sometimes, mostly when she was feeling low. It was symphony music she played, and that Christmas at the Sally in KC, The Duke listened and remembered. *That’s how the kid looks right now, like he’s remembering something.*

As Lynden reached to hand him a plate of food, The Duke grabbed his wrist and held it. “What the hell’s your story? This isn’t some camping trip. People die on these rails.”

“I know that.” Lynden looked him in the eye and held his gaze. “When I was eleven years old, I ran away from home and met up with a tramp. We rode trains.”

“When you were eleven?” The Duke released his grip.

“That’s what I said.” Lynden hesitated. *We rode trains*, he thought. *That makes it sound so simple.* “After a few weeks we split up. I came home.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“What are you doin out here now?”

“Just looking. Want to see if it’s like I remember?”

“And that stiff... you lookin for him?”

“I don’t remember him.” Sweat stood out on Lynden’s forehead. “He was just a tramp.” *A tramp? The Tramp. Whose hands smelled of sweet tobacco. Whose boots were laced with wire.*

“Did he hurt you?”

“No!”

Lynden watched the old man studying him, and felt naked.

* * *

Half an hour later they were sitting on the sidewalk in front of an all-night grocery and laundromat. Each of them was drinking beer from a can in a brown paper bag, absently watching the comings and goings in the parking lot. Since leaving their hiding place they’d said almost nothing.

“Data Dynamics...” The Duke nodded toward Lynden’s logo tee shirt. The company gave them away to programmers who were usually too preoccupied to dress themselves in anything else. “That’s computers, right?”

“You’ve heard of Data Dynamics?”

“Just cause I sleep under newspapers sometimes don’t mean I can’t read em.”

The store lights illuminated the parking spaces in front of them like a stage. A car pulled up. They both watched as the old lady behind the wheel got out, skirted past them, and disappeared into the store.

“What were you gonna say to that bull... if I hadn’t stopped you?”

“I don’t know.”

A man in his thirties came out of the store, the two little girls with him carrying dripping Popsicles. The man nodded as he walked past. The kids flashed red Popsicle smiles.

The old lady came out carrying a carton of milk, a loaf

of bread, and a smell that reminded Lynden of moth balls, only sweeter.

“You computer guys used to doin just what you’re told?”

“I guess it depends on who’s doing the telling.” Lynden thought of Derek Zebel, and the way he seemed so sure that Lynden would do *exactly* what he was told.

“Yeah, I guess it does,” The Duke drained his beer and crushed the can. “There ain’t many I’ll step aside for, and that bull isn’t on the list. What he don’t seem to know is that I own these rails.”

“Is that right?” Lynden considered him. “Unless I was imagining things back there, what *he* owns is a gun.”

“Ownin and usin ain’t the same... we just seen that.”

“Maybe. Or maybe we got lucky.”

Another car pulled up—a fifty-seven Chevy, polished and gleaming. A hard-edged high school boy, seventeen at most. Hair combed perfectly; tee-shirt so white it glared. His girlfriend at his side.

“Listen... you probably got enough dough to buy a ticket out of here. I don’t buy tickets.”

“Meaning what?”

“I’ve been run outta yards plenty of times. I’ve never *stayed* out. I’m going back there and catch me a train.”

Inside the Chevy the boy stared straight ahead, one hand on the steering wheel. His girlfriend stared at him. Lynden could see their lips moving. “Going back is stupid,” Lynden’s eyes were locked on the scene in the car. “Why don’t I buy us bus tickets to the next big town... assuming we want to stick together. We can pick up a freight there. I don’t even know where we’re going.”

“We’re goin east. I’m goin by train. And if you hadn’t just cooked me dinner, I’d take it personal... you callin me stupid. What the hell’s your name anyway? I’m not used to getting insulted by strangers.”

“Lynden. Lynden Hoover. Until a couple of days ago I worked at Data Dynamics. Now, I don’t know what the hell I’m doing... or who I’m doing it with.”

“Them that knows me... and there’s damn few that still do... they call me The Duke,” the old man offered his hand. “I ride trains.”

The boy in the car turned his head, she turned hers, and the couple kissed. No hands, no holding, nothing but their two mouths stamped together. She arched toward him; her arms pulled back at her sides as if pinned. Lynden could see the curve of her chest straining beneath her blouse. The tip of her breast brushed against her boyfriend’s flexed bicep, hard within the sleeve of his bleached white tee shirt.

She froze there. She was giving herself to him, but she was also taking. It was exactly the sensation she was after, the touch of lips and breast against the hardness of her man. She moved against him now, only touching him there and there, only taking what she wanted to take.

“Like I asked before, what the hell are you doin out here?” The Duke said, breaking Lynden’s spell. “If you can buy a ticket, why are you on the rails?”

Lynden reluctantly pulled himself away from the scene, the girl in the Chevy having lain back against the seat, for the moment satisfied.

“I’m here to ride trains, too.”

“Sure, but there’s a bull in every goddam yard. You gonna run from all of them?”

Lynden stared at him. “I’m sorry I called you stupid.”

“What?”

“I’m going with you.”

It was the Duke’s turn to stare. “Are all computer guys light on ballast? Or is it just you? Hell, I don’t care. If we’re gonna do this thing, let’s do it.”

In a dumpster behind the laundromat The Duke found

an empty plastic bleach jug with the cap still on. He rinsed and filled it from a dripping hose bib on the back of the building, water for the trip.

When they walked back across the parking lot, the Chevy was gone.

* * *

A four-lane highway passed over the Sparks yard at its eastern limit. The highway bridge had pedestrian spirals at each end and a jump-proof fence all across both sides. From mid-span, looking west, Lynden and The Duke could see the entire layout; freight cars hulking in the darkness, car-knocker's lanterns bobbing like fireflies as they checked the couplings. A switch crew was making up a train at the west end, and on the main line a string of power units waited, ready to roll.

"That'll be our ride," The Duke pointed at the engine marker lights. "Chances are she's the same one we drug in on."

"How long till it leaves?"

"Could be anytime. That engineer will hit the horn, then goose the throttle. After that, it's up to us."

"And the bull?"

"He's out there. And we won't see him until he wants us to. But once we're on that train, we're gone. I ain't seen em stop a freight to catch a hobo in better than thirty years."

"And if we don't get on?"

The Duke wasn't listening. His ears were tuned toward the yard, toward a sound he could hear that Lynden didn't. Then a change in the monotonous droning of the engines, a shift in pitch more than volume, and Lynden caught it. "Is that us?"

The lead engine's tracer light flashed on, its swinging beam splashing against the overpass. A hand moved on the throttle. As one machine, three giant power units revved their huge engines.

Triple columns of hot smoke and spark shot up into space.

The diesel horn cried out, then again and again.

A low, vibrating groan. The engines lugged, caught, and the train began to roll.

"That's us. Just watch me. Stay close, and we'll grab this sucker by the tail."

Lynden made ready to run.

"Easy." The Duke cautioned. "There's nothin to ride on the head end anyway, and no sense tippin the engine crew we're around."

They walked off the bridge and ducked under it, watching as the power units rumbled by.

"When do we go?" The freight was picking up speed, and already moving faster than at Roseville.

"Don't worry, there's still plenty of train."

Seconds ticked past. The cars began rocking gently back and forth, each faster than the last. Lynden watched them anxiously, watched The Duke.

"You ready, kid?"

"Ready!"

"There's our car." A gondola coming up fast. "Make for the front ladder on that gon and run like hell!"

They raced forward, Lynden and The Duke side by side.

A wide concrete bridge support separated them from the tracks. Lynden dodged quickly around it and out to the cars.

Behind him, The Duke stopped. The old hobo couldn't move. Some crude writing on the support caught his eye, some chalk scribbling on the face of the concrete slab.

He was almost past when the letters connected in his mind, connected to form words, a name.

Short Arm.

Beneath the name was a date, two days old, and under

it an arrow. Short Arm was eastbound. How was that for hobo's luck? The man he'd been running from for the last two weeks, the man who meant to kill him if he caught him—his old partner—had slipped by and was now waiting somewhere out across the desert. The Duke had seen it play out like this before. Sure, it was a wide country, but the rails were narrow and connected—a steel ribbon that always wound back on itself. No matter how hard you ran, if you stayed on those rails long enough, your past would catch you.

He hadn't seen Short Arm in more years than he could remember, was sure he was dead. Then two weeks ago in that jungle outside the Colton yard, there he was—still alive, but changed. Short Arm had been glad to see him. That was a surprise, considering the way they parted. And his old friend was eager to demonstrate a new talent—something he was sure The Duke would appreciate. That demonstration ended with one man murdered, and The Duke running for his life.

The old hobo couldn't move. Two days earlier and Short Arm would have caught him right there—would have stepped out from behind that pillar and ended it. Somewhere he was waiting right now. In the dark, in the shadows, waiting. The Duke's skin was pimped with cold. He could head back west again, maybe south to Mexico. Anywhere but right on Short Arm's heels and he'd be safe, at least for a while.

He turned to leave.

* * *

Lynden reached the train, looked around, and the old man was gone. He glanced frantically both ways on the tracks.

The Duke was nowhere in sight.

What he did see was a pair of headlights bouncing violently as they sped straight at him out of the yard.

The gondola rolled by. He could still catch something, maybe, or search for The Duke, or face the bull and his gun.

“Fuck!”

He didn’t move.

* * *

The Duke burst out from behind the pillar, saw the headlights coming, the train going, and Lynden caught motionless in between. “Go for the flat!” he yelled, then yelled again to be heard over the freight noise. He saw Lynden turned toward him, confused. “That flat right there!” he pointed to a flatcar just a few lengths up and coming fast.

Lynden saw, faced it, and broke into a run.

Twenty cars back the caboose was clearly in sight, the bull’s headlights seconds behind it.

Both men hit the flatcar’s front ladder at the same time.

Lynden grabbed hold.

The Duke faded back, going for the rear. Rapidly the car slid by him. He wasn’t going full speed yet, but he knew what full speed was, and knew he’d need all of it.

The car was halfway past when he quickened his pace. The lumber flat had headboards at both ends and the rear board was almost on him. Between strides he tossed his bag up, then the bleach jug, and saw them roll to a stop at the back of the car.

With his hands free he hit full speed, his body balanced and natural. Fifty years of chasing trains had taught him how to run. Arms reaching, legs stretching, hands clawing the air, running flat out.

It wasn’t enough.

The train was going faster.

He saw his gear sliding by. The ladder was just above his shoulder. His only chance.

Surging forward he reached out and grabbed.

The shock was so stiff it popped all his knuckles.

His arm jerked tight. His shoulder stretched.

He held on.

The tips of four fingers was all that gripped. He reached with the other hand, found a grasp, and instinct took over. His legs still ran, his feet still hit the ground, but with each step his strides grew longer and longer till he was leaping, yards at a time. Then a spring and a pull.

The Duke was on.

Lynden wasn't on.

He had the ladder with both hands, but his feet were moving so fast he couldn't push them off the ground.

Out the corner of his eye he'd seen The Duke hoist himself onto the train. He tried it, stumbled, caught himself.

He had to get on, let go, or run until his legs gave out.

The train was flying. He concentrated. Took an extra-long step.

As he pulled up, the searchlight hit him.

The bull was abreast of their flatcar, hacking the blackness with the blinding beam. It hit Lynden like a blow, shocking him at the instant he jumped.

The coarse gravel roadbed seemed to shift beneath him, pulling his feet away.

For a second, he hung in mid-air.

Then, instead of running, he was being dragged.

His hands slipped, held—then slipped again.

At the bottom rung he hung on; his body suspended inches above the scouring gravel. Feet skittering across the rocks and ties, muscles stretched screaming tight. The hungry jaws of the car's huge wheels were pulling him in. A whisper away.

The bull's spotlight carved jaggedly through the rushing dark.

A hand grabbed Lynden's forearm.

"Pull yourself up!" The old man was leaning out over

the ladder, the bull's light slashing across him. "Use your arms! Forget about your feet!"

Lynden's arms wouldn't move. He hung upside down, his backpack swinging from his shoulders like an anchor.

"Let it go! Let the damn thing go!"

It was the only way.

He released the ladder with one hand and his body dropped down even lower. The pack jerked violently. He twisted, shucked off a strap. He switched hands to free the other arm. The pack caught, hit the ground, and shoved him head first toward the pounding wheels.

He closed his eyes.

The backpack bounced free, flew up, then sucked under the train and was gone.

Both hands on the ladder again, Lynden began to climb.

The Duke reached down, grabbed his shirt and pulled him onto the car.

The last the bull saw of them, Lynden and The Duke they were hugging, screaming, and beating each other's backs as they disappeared into the Nevada darkness.



Track #2

Profesh — A professional hobo, bound by a code.

Why do you ride freight trains?

Because it's faster than walking.

So is a bus. So is a plane. You don't ride those. Why?

Can't afford to.

Why go anywhere? Why not stay in one place?

And do what?

What other people do. Live, work, have a family, a home.

I've got a home. You're in it.

We're in a hobo jungle. It's not yours... not really.

Nothing's mine or yours or anybody's... really. We use it for a while, sure, but it isn't ours for long. What if I did own a house? It wouldn't be much good to me once I caught the westbound, would it? Some other fella's gonna move in, and it won't matter a bit that I spent my whole damn life trying to keep the weeds down and the mortgage paid.

You don't think much of the American Dream, do you?

Hell, I *am* the American Dream. I've got everything I want. A train to ride, food to eat, and more country than a body could ever see. All that's mine. I look at it, own it while I'm in it, then turn it loose for the next guy.

And the trains?

I've got to get around to see my holdings, don't I?

That's the only reason you ride them?

I ride them... I'll always ride them... because I have to.