

RIDING THE RAILS

Parnell awoke with a start. A hulking, disheveled man stood over him, knife in hand, weaving, either from the lurching of the train or too much moonshine.

“I told you to clear out, mu’fucker!” the man screamed, slashing the knife through the dank, fetid air. “This is *my* boxcar! How many times I gotta tell ya?”

Parnell gathered his wits, sized up the guy. Another delusional blanket stiff riding the rails. Too many of them around these days.

“Show me your deed, then,” he said calmly.

“Huh?” A confused look crossed the giant’s oafish face.

“You say this is your railcar . . .” Parnell said, carefully reaching behind him, to his waistband, feeling the slick cool steel of his gun. “I want proof of ownership.”

The train thundered over the tracks below, wheels slamming the rails with a rhythmic *clackety-clackety-clack*.

The giant paused to consider this request, then blurted, “You some kinda wiseass or somethin’?”

“I just have this thing about legalities.” Behind his back, Parnell looped his finger around the trigger. “I’m not giving up my space to some asshole who doesn’t have proof of ownership.”

“Man, you one crazy dude,” the giant said, before springing forward and slashing downward with the knife.

Quick as a cat, Parnell rolled left, leaped to his feet, wheeled the gun around. Knife met gun with a metallic clank. Both weapons skittered across the floor.

Parnell felt a stinging pain in his right hand where the knife cut him, saw blood oozing from the slash. The bleeding wound enraged him. He went after the giant, threw a shoulder into him, the action like tackling an industrial size bag of cement. They stumbled across the boxcar, entangled, doing a herky-jerky tango, slamming into the far wall. The giant’s head cracked against the steel wall. Parnell felt the guy’s lungs deplete. The

giant's massive arms dropped to his sides, defenseless.

Parnell had stunned him. Time to put him down for good.

He tried the Adam's apple crush chop, but the giant seemed to regain his composure, dodging Parnell's punch with surprising agility. Parnell's bleeding right hand hit the wall with a metallic thud. He cried out in pain, a couple of fingers surely broken.

The giant leaped on him. They went down on the floor in a heap, rolling, body over body, sliding from one side of the car to the other. Parnell had the giant in a bear hug, flames of pain shooting up his arms as he held on. The son of a bitch was strong as an elephant. The giant got his arms free, began taking punches at Parnell's kidneys as they rolled across the floor. They crashed into the wall, a ball of human flesh and blood, the impact separating them with a chorus of grunts and groans. The giant got to his knees and reached to retrieve his knife. Parnell took advantage, kicking out and connecting solidly with the big man's chin. The giant went sprawling, arms akimbo, backpedaling toward the open side door ... backward, backward, backward ...

The giant screamed as he tumbled out the train car, arms wind-milling frantically.

Parnell rushed to the opening. Wind whipped at his face as he looked down the line of trailing cars, saw the his attacker flopping and bouncing like a rag doll alongside the tracks. He watched with a fascinated revulsion as the man got sucked under the train. A spray of blood stained the tracks. A severed leg shot down the hillside as though launched from a cannon.

And then, from a dark corner of the train car, Parnell heard the owl.

Hoot . . . Hoot . . . Hoot . . .

He turned and walked toward the sound. Looked up and saw the glowing amber eyes staring at him with an intensity that unsettled him. Huge shimmering orbs, like twin moons on an early summer night.

Derek Parnell knew it was an omen.

The winged harbinger of death had spoken.

NURSE ANNIE

Parnell hopped off the train at the Albuquerque yards, his right hand on fire, the pain nearly unbearable, his broken fingers throbbing with every beat of his heart. He needed to find a clinic downtown. Some small out-of-the-way Doc-in-the-Box kind of place. Fewer questions.

He walked along the tracks, the familiar scent of tar and cinder touching his nose. Parnell found 1st Street and crossed over, picked up Stover Avenue, shielding his bloody hand so as not to attract attention. He felt the fatigue in his legs. Exhaustion sapped his soul. Waves of dizziness washed over him. Several blocks down, he found the HealthFirst Clinic on the corner of Stover and 4th.

“Insurance?” the bored receptionist asked him.

“I’m paying in cash,” Parnell grimaced through the pain as he pawed through his backpack with his left hand.

The receptionist looked at him dubiously, taking in his ragged, unkempt appearance, his grotesquely swollen right hand, the blood trickling down his wrist. “This could be quite expensive,” she said.

Parnell stared at the crone. Bluish-gray hair, hands liver-spotted and gnarled. Her nametag announced her as Hilda Mortensen, Office Manager. “Don’t worry about it, Hilda,” he said. “I’ve got it covered, however much it comes to.”

She stared at him through her half-glasses, then pushed a clipboard to him, said, “You’ll have to fill out these forms.”

“Uh, no can do. Even if I could hold the pen, I doubt my penmanship would be legible.”

“Very well,” Hilda Mortensen said, staring at Parnell’s messed-up hand, the blood dripping all over the lobby carpeting. “I’ll get one of our nurses to help you.”

Soon, a young nurse dressed in a crisp white uniform entered the lobby from a side door. Her stockings swished as she approached him.

“Annie, please get Mister—” she glanced at the computer

monitor, “—*Parnell* back in one of the exam rooms.”

Nurse Annie ushered Parnell into one of the empty exam rooms. She handed Parnell a towel and an ice pack. “Keep this on the wound. It’ll help until we can get you stitched up.”

Parnell wrapped the ice pack to his hand with the towel. The stinging burn turned to a soothing cool numbness.

“So how’d this happen?” she asked, gently examining the broken fingers on his bruised, pulpy hand.

“I, uh . . . I fell down.”

“Yeah, sure,” she said, looking up at him, green eyes glittering with mischief. “And I’m Joan of Arc.”

“Okay then. I was in a fight.”

“That’s better.” She went back to examining his damaged hand. “Aren’t you a little old to be getting in a scrap?”

“Not when someone is threatening to kill me,” he said, grimacing as she moved his fingers.

“What were you fighting about? A woman? Money?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“I’m a very curious girl,” she said. “It was a woman, I’ll bet.”

Parnell thought about the guy on the train, the giant with the homicidal stare. “No, nothing quite that pedestrian.”

“Well, whatever it was, looks like you got the worst of it.”

Parnell envisioned the giant flying off the train and bouncing along the tracks, getting crushed under the huge steel wheels. He wanted to say, *Not really. You should’ve seen the other guy*, but decided it best to keep his mouth shut.

“Okay,” she said, grabbing a clipboard and tapping it with her pen. “Can’t get you fixed up until we have all of your personal data.”

She walked him through the usual litany of questions, Parnell answering honestly. He had nothing to hide. However, as usual, his legal address was a showstopper.

“I need a street address,” Annie said. “A post office box in Millford, Pennsylvania doesn’t cut it.”

“What the hell does it matter? I’m paying in cash.”

“We have to have a complete data sheet before we can tend to a patient. It’s the law.”

“Personally, I think you’re making that up, Annie. I think

you're bullshitting me."

"It's *not* BS. We have to have a legal address on file in case a patient brings a malpractice lawsuit against us."

Parnell chuckled. "Is malpractice a common occurrence around here?"

"No, but—"

"There's no way I'm going to sue you, Annie. Too much paperwork and hassle, and I'm not a big fan of lawyers." Parnell peeled back the cold compress on his hand, saw the wound was still oozing. "However, I might have to reconsider if I bleed out here in this exam room. Wrongful death and negligence. I know a nice girl like you wouldn't want that on her conscience."

Nurse Annie studied him for several long moments, then said, "I'm really not all that nice. In fact, I can be downright naughty. Especially with mysterious men like you."

Parnell held her gaze until she looked away. Another small-town girl, bored with her mundane existence, looking for a little excitement in her life. This Annie was bolder and more direct than most.

"Sorry, darlin'," he said, "You'll have to get naughty with somebody else. I'm already spoken for."

She turned defensive. "You think I—?"

"Could we get this hand stitched up? We wait much longer and you'll be sending my personal data directly to the morgue!"

Annie huffed out of the exam room, then returned with a stainless steel tray containing hypodermic needles and stitching implements.

"Okay," she said, removing the towel and ice pack from his hand, "I'm going to numb you up and then inject something that will reduce the swelling. Then I'll sew you back together."

"Wait a minute," Parnell said, pulling his hand back. "I thought a doctor would do this."

"Give me your hand, you big baby! I'm a registered nurse. First year Med students can do this in their sleep."

He felt the sting of the needle just above his wrist.

Annie had his right hand stitched up and the broken fingers splinted within five minutes. She definitely knew what she was doing.

"Do you need a prescription for pain meds?" she asked.

“Absolutely,” he said, standing.

“Wait here. I’ll get Dr. Jernigan to write you one for Percocet.”

Five minutes later, Annie was back, signed prescription in hand. As she gave it to him, she said, “I never did ask what you are doing in New Mexico. Vacationing?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“I have a couple of weeks saved up. Want some company?”

“No. I travel alone. Besides, I’m old enough to be your father.”

Her green eyes taunted him. “What’s the matter with you? I thought all older men fantasized about having an affair with an exciting young Lolita.”

Parnell sidestepped her as he moved out into the hallway. “You’re just a kid, Annie. Young enough to be my daughter.”

She turned huffy. “What does *that* have to do with anything?”

“*Everything*. If I wanted to travel with somebody, it wouldn’t be with a child.”

“Child? That’s how you see me?”

He turned on her. “Look. I *don’t* see you, okay? I don’t *know* you.”

Her tone softened. “Sorry, Mr. Parnell. What I really had in mind was me being your chauffeur. It’ll be a little difficult to drive with your injuries.”

“I don’t have a car,” was all Parnell could think of to say.

“So how do you get around?”

“Public transportation.”

“Well the buses only go so far. And taxis are a rip-off. Why don’t you let me drive you?”

“I said no!” Parnell barked, losing his patience. Now I appreciate the fine job you did of sewing me up, but I’m going to be on my way. *Alone!*”

ECHOES OF JENNIFER

He wandered the streets of Albuquerque until he found a pay phone. Damn cellular technology had made pay phones almost as extinct as the T-rex. Parnell never carried a cell. Too easy to trace his whereabouts. Little homing devices for Big Brother is all they really were.

He stepped up to the phone kiosk, fumbled with the receiver, finally got it to his ear. With his splinted index finger, he punched in the number for Blanton Miles, the guy who ran the nerve center of Parnell's operations.

"This had better be you, boss," Parnell heard Miles say.

"Yeah, it's me. Any messages?"

"That's it? You've been AWOL all this time and that's all you've got to say? *Any messages?*"

"I've only been incommunicado for five days, Blanton. Not exactly an eternity."

"It is in our line of work, amigo. You okay?"

Parnell watched a gust of wind pick up a spindly tumbleweed and carry it to the far side of the street. "Yeah, I had a close encounter with a boxcar Willie who thought he was a landlord." He looked at his bandaged right hand, tried to flex it, nearly passed out from the pain. "Got a little scratched up, but I'll live."

"I'm assuming the Willie didn't, however?"

"Correct. I red-lighted the son of a bitch."

"Ouch! Remind me to never hop a train with you."

"Shit, Blanton, the day you ride the rails is the day I run for Congress. You're too soft . . . settled into the pampered life. The Willies out here would eat your candy ass for breakfast."

A slight hesitation, then, "If it wasn't your signature on my paychecks, I'd have a witty comeback to that accusation."

"That's never stopped you before. Look, I'm not feeling all that spiffy at the moment. Don't want to hang on the phone. Any messages for me?"

"Yes. One in particular I think you'll find most interesting.

Some woman called here day before yesterday. Claims her name is Jennifer Parnell. She said she has information as to . . .”

Parnell didn't hear any more. The name Jennifer Parnell hit him in the chest like a heart attack. Somebody was messing with him. His head spun. He felt his blood pressure spike.

“. . . are you still there, Derek?”

“Yeah, uh . . .” He felt dizzy and off balance, wondered if it was a reaction to the Percocet or hearing the name of his long-dead daughter.

“This Jennifer person wants you to call her immediately, boss. She claims she knows things about what really happened to your Jennifer. She sounded like someone you should take seriously. My read is that she's on the up-and-up. Definitely not some deranged whack job. I deal with enough gonzo chumps to know she's not in that cuckoo's nest. You've got nothing to lose by calling her.”

Parnell felt the sweat trickle down his back, razor-hot pain slicing through the fingers of his right hand. “All right. What's the number?”

Blanton Miles recited the woman's number and Parnell committed it to memory. He wasn't sure, but he thought the area code was Arizona, maybe Utah.

He thanked Miles and hung up, stood there in the shadows of the phone kiosk, thinking. *Jennifer Parnell?* Who was fucking with him? And why?

He dropped a quarter into the slot and punched in the long-distance number. An operator came on the line and told him how much to insert for the first three minutes. Parnell did as instructed. A woman picked up on the third ring.

“Hello?” A mellifluous voice. Young, eager.

“Are you Jennifer Parnell?”

“Depends. Who wants to know?”

“Somebody from this number called claiming to be Jennifer Parnell.”

“Derek? Derek Parnell?”

He knew he had to be careful here. “I'm a friend of Derek's,” he said into the phone. “He gave me this number.”

“I know that's you, Derek,” the woman said without hesitation. “You sound very stressed out.”

Parnell felt the anger climb into his throat. "Is this some kind of a sick joke?"

A long silence, then, "I don't know what you mean."

"The hell you don't!"

Parnell could hear her breathing on the other end, could hear little pops and clicks on the line. Was the call being recorded?

Finally she said, "Look, I realize you must be terribly confused. I'm someone who has your best interests in mind. I'm Jennifer . . . Jennifer *Parnell*."

Parnell thought he detected a slight Scandinavian accent, a Nordic linguistic slant to the woman's words. Perhaps Danish or Swedish? Before he could think of a snappy comeback, or hang up, she said, "I have answers to the questions you've been asking."

"What questions might those be?"

"The questions your associate, Blanton Miles, has been trying to find answers to."

"I don't know anyone by that name."

"Don't lie to me, Derek. I have no patience for liars."

Parnell felt his spine go rigid, his face flush. "Who *are* you? What do you want?"

"I could be your worst nightmare, Derek. Or I could be the sweetest dream you've ever had," she said, cooing and soothing, while at the same time, maintaining a threatening tone. "It's totally up to you."

He felt his composure fraying. "I'm in no mood to be played, lady. What's your game?"

The woman ignored his observation. "I know you've been wandering the country like a gypsy the past six years, Derek, searching for something. I'm one of the few people on this planet who knows what that is. And I know where you can find it."

"Listen, bitch!" he yelled, "If you think you're going to extort money from me, it won't work. Racketeering is a federal offense. I know a criminal come-on when I hear one."

"You're a fine one to be calling someone else a criminal, Derek. I've got a long laundry list of your misdeeds in front of me here . . ." Parnell heard the shuffling of papers. ". . . murder, assault, blackmail, bribery, Internet fraud, forgery—"

"Forgery? You've gotta be—"

“Yes, forgery,” she continued. “We got a little greedy a few years back, didn’t we, Derek? You could probably buy and sell Croesus, and yet you wanted more.”

“That’s a lie!” Parnell said, trying to keep his voice even. He wondered if there was any significance to her reference of Croesus, whether she knew the relevance of that name to him.

“Look, Derek, we’re playing on the same field here. We’re both products of The Crash. You know it and I know it. If it hadn’t been for the greed that brought down Wall Street and the corruption and incompetence of our elected officials, you and I would probably be flipping burgers in a fast food joint. We’ve profited from our country’s misery—”

“Speak for yourself, *Jennifer*.”

“No, I’m speaking for the both of us, and you know it. Now let’s get down to brass tacks. You have a lot of money and I have information you’ve been seeking. I want your money and you need my information. There you have it. Supply and demand—the twin pillars of American capitalism.”

It was so ludicrous Parnell almost broke out laughing. “Man, you are one seriously twisted *puta madre!*” he said.

“Oh, I don’t deny that,” she said, with an assurance that startled him.

The operator cut in and told them they had another thirty seconds before Parnell would have to drop more coinage.

When the operator cut out, Parnell said, “You haven’t told me anything that convinces me you have anything worth paying for.”

“Okay. I understand your reticence. How’s this for a teaser? You believe that your wife and only daughter were both killed in a house fire seven years ago. You’re partially right. Your wife—maiden name, Barbara Stevenson Logan—did indeed perish in that fire. But your daughter Jennifer survived. She’s alive. A fine looking eighteen-year-old young woman, if not a bit damaged.”

“You’re insane . . . a complete bobblehead!”

“Am I? I don’t believe I am. But then I’m biased. Do you know where Sedona is, Derek?”

“Of *course* I know where Sedona is, but—”

“Good. I want you to go to Sedona and have your fortune read by Madame Crystal. She’s on Inspirational Drive, and she’s

expecting you. I'll be back in touch with you soon after."

Parnell was furious. "Listen, you conniving witch! I'll have your head for playing me this way!"

He heard a sharp click. The bitch had hung up on him! Then he heard the operator's unruffled voice, "Your three minutes are up. Please insert more money now or kindly hang up. Thank you."

Parnell slammed the receiver into the hook, pieces of the shattered plastic earpiece ticking against the Plexiglas cowling of the phone kiosk. His broken fingers throbbed.

He made a mental note to get Blanton to trace the number he'd just called. But he was pretty sure the effort would be futile.

Parnell turned and headed south, back to the Albuquerque rail yards. Even though his bandaged hand pulsed in stinging pain, there was a spring in his step. The woman on the phone who had so brazenly used his daughter's name had filled him with hope.

The hope that the real Jennifer Parnell was still alive. The hope that Derek Parnell had clung to throughout his travels of the past six years as he'd searched for elusive answers.

The woman on the phone was probably full of shit—just another hustler after his money—but he had to check it out.