

JAY

Other Novels by W. Royce Adams

Me & Jay

The Computer's Nerd

Rairarubia

Return to Rairarubia

Raid on Rairarubia

Revenge on Rairarubia

Ring from Rairarubia

JAY

W. Royce Adams

A sequel to Me & Jay

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Foreword

While all the characters in *Jay* are fictitious, some of the names of people referred to in the story are real and used for effect. In doing research for this story, I discovered numerous books and web links to information about past and present freight-train riders. I read about “Children of the Rails,” orphans who were shipped out west to rid New York of thousands of street urchins. I found original stories of the hardships suffered by many forced to jump trains to find work during the depression in the mid-1900s. I learned that yearly hobo meetings are held to elect the King and Queen of the Hobos. Steam Train Maury Graham, elected King five times, wrote a book about his rail-riding experiences. Even now, a group calling themselves “The Hobohemians” uses cell phones and the Internet to plan their illegal train catching.

Like the character Jay in this novel, a growing number of young fright-train riders put their lives in danger daily. Homeless for whatever reason, they hangout wherever they can “catch out” aboard a freight that takes them no place in particular. Living on handouts or diving into garbage bins to eat, bumming for change, and sometimes stealing, these young “new-age hobos” are part of a growing band of train hoppers. What may seem like a fun, adventurous, even romantic life is in reality anything but. Hundreds of train jumpers die or are arrested every year. It is not only illegal, but perilous.

I know firsthand. I still bear a scar on my side from a stupid escapade with “catching out.”

The story you are about to read takes place two years after the end of Me & Jay . . .

CHAPTER I

THEY CAUGHT SEVEN of us jumping off the boxcar when the train pulled in. I don't know how they knew it, but as soon as our feet hit the gravel, strong flashlight beams hit us in the face. Scared and nervous, I couldn't tell who they were or how many there were. Shouting nasty orders, they force-marched us into an old, windowless railroad shack. Inside, the gloomy yellow lighting and gross, stuffy smell gave my stomach an uneasy turn. What had I gotten myself into?

I noticed they didn't wear uniforms or show us any badges. But right then none of us doubted they were the law. The guns pointed at us were proof enough. I'd heard stories, mostly not good, about railroad cops—"bulls," they call them. But this was no story.

I've been afraid big time before, like that time me and Geri—yeah, I know—Geri and I got into that cave trouble, but never like this. On my own now, this was scarier—way scarier. I just prayed my shaky knees wouldn't buckle on me, or worse, my bladder betray me.

You could tell one of the men with a gun was enjoying his catch. With a mean grin, he drawled out, "Now, you ho-bos know you can't ride the railroad without a ticket. Any of you 'bos got a ticket?"

He knew we didn't. Just yankin' us around. He shook his head and waved his gun, meaning he wanted us to line up. Another guy in the shadows kept smacking a long, black club against his thigh. "You deadbeats ought to know the routine by now. Against the wall." He held a big flashlight in the other hand and kept pointing the beam into each of our faces.

We all backed up against the wall, shoulder to shoulder. I didn't know anyone in the lineup. I'd only been riding the freight for

about two hours when the train stopped here—wherever here was. When I'd jumped on I noticed there were some others in the car, but nobody spoke, which suited me fine.

"Now strip."

I didn't think I'd heard right. But the men on either side of me started grumbling and taking off their clothes like they'd lived through this before. Someone started to protest, but he got the end of a club rammed into his stomach. He went down, gasping, trying to find air. I gasped myself. I could hear my speeding heart beat in my ears. This wasn't what I'd run away for.

"Any one else here think they're privileged?" the bull yelled. He waved his club and his flashlight all along the row of us. Before the flashlight beam reached me, my all-thumbs fingers went to work undressing.

We stood there with all our clothes and whatever packs we carried at our feet. Embarrassed, I felt totally helpless fidgeting there naked, worried stiff what might happen next. Another man appeared from nowhere. He started going through our stuff. No sleeping bag, backpack or pocket got left out. The brims of hats, insides of shoes, and even belts got checked. Every time money was found, which wasn't often, it was handed to one of the guys with a gun.

By the time the railroad cop reached my stuff, they'd only collected a few dollars and let us know they weren't too happy about it. I had a twenty, which I thought I'd hidden pretty well in the lining of my jacket. But this guy found it almost like he knew where it was. He looked at me, held the twenty in my face, smiled, then handed it to the other guy. Then he shook out my sleeping bag, went through the pockets of both pairs of jeans, shook out my two shirts, even checked in my rolled-up spare socks and shorts. The photo of my mom fell to the floor and I reached for it.

Before I could get it, he smacked my arm. "Watch it! Stand back," he barked. He gave me a look, picked up the photo, looked, and threw it on the floor again. He tossed aside what little food I had, but took the last of my cigarettes, found my Swiss Army knife

and slipped it into his pocket. The guy was an expert on searching. I don't know where I could have hidden anything without it being found. Mostly, I hated to lose my knife, but standing around buck-naked shivering, scared about what could happen next, bothered me a big bunch more.

The collector continued down the line until everything had been searched and all the money found. He nodded to the one with the club.

The one with the club started walking down the line. He tapped his club on the shoulder of the first guy in line, still holding his stomach and wheezing, and said, "You stay." He tapped the next man's shoulder. "Get dressed." The next was told to stay.

When he got to me, he tapped me and said, "You stay."

My knees almost folded, and I came close to letting my bladder speak for my fear.

The collector spoke up. "Naw, that one had money. He can get dressed."

I felt the flashlight beam search up and down my naked body.

"Why, he's just a kid," the bull said. "Tall for your age, ain'tcha. How old are you, boy? Fifteen? Sixteen?" He laughed. "You don't even have a good patch of hair between your skinny legs yet." He held his light on me there. I tried to cover myself with my hands. Most helpless, useless, upsetting feeling in the world, for sure.

I didn't know if he really wanted me to answer or not. But I couldn't form a word in my dry mouth if I tried. He smiled, seeing me shaking, mostly from fear, but now from some anger, too, especially with everybody laughing at my expense. Even some of the riders joined in. I felt my face turn hot. Yeah, real funny, you bunch of . . .

Right then, I wanted to gain ten years and twenty pounds. I'd laugh while I used his stupid club on him. All of them.

He grinned at me. "What's your name, little 'bo?"

I ran my tongue around my teeth, trying to wet my dry mouth. I managed to get out a weak. "Jay."