

321 Lumina Dot Com presents

The Last Fast Train to the Past

Episode 1



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Episode One

World 54 · 1895 → World 5839 · Summer 2025

The buggy hit a rut and Ramona grabbed the side rail without looking up.

That was the thing about her. She could be reading, thinking, scanning the tree line for a shimmer that nobody else would notice, and her body just handled the rest. Thaddeus had watched her catch a falling lantern once on World 112 without breaking a sentence. He had stopped being surprised by Ramona somewhere around the fourth world they'd visited together. He had not, however, stopped watching.

"They're behind us," she said.

Not a question. Not a guess.

Thad already knew. He'd clocked the second buggy the moment it rounded the elm-lined corner two blocks back on Hargrove Street — too deliberate, too steady, keeping exactly the same distance a trained man keeps when he doesn't want to spook his quarry. The late afternoon light of World 54's 1895 was doing what late afternoon light did here — turning everything amber and soft, the gas lamps on Millbrook Avenue just beginning to flicker on, the smell of coal smoke and horse and something faintly floral drifting from the milliner's shop they were rattling past.

A beautiful world, World 54. Gentler than most. The cobblestones were well-kept, the buildings brick and proud, the women on the sidewalk in their high-collared dresses moving with the particular unhurried confidence of people who believed the century they lived in was the finest one yet achieved. They had no idea what rode their streets tonight.

"Two of them in the cab," Thad said, keeping his voice easy, his posture relaxed. A man without a care. "Driver's theirs too."



"Three then." Ramona finally looked up from the small leather-bound journal she carried everywhere — not a travel log, but a record of portals. Locations, behaviors, the way they felt when they opened. Years of notations in her small, precise handwriting. She tucked it inside her coat without being asked. "How far to the station?"

"Six blocks."

"We won't make six blocks."

She wasn't wrong. Thad's hand moved to his jacket, confirming by touch what he already knew was there — the watch-compass on his left side, the satchel wedged between his boot and the footboard, the smaller cloaked detector in his breast pocket running warm and quiet. The detector had been pulsing for the last ten minutes. Keeper Police. At least one of them recent — still carrying the stiffness of someone who hadn't done this enough times to be bored by it.

The buggy lurched around a corner onto Fenwick Road and the pursuing cab matched it without hesitation.

"They're not being subtle anymore," Ramona said.

"No. They've decided." He glanced at her. "Do you feel anything?"

She tilted her head slightly — a gesture he'd come to understand meant she was listening to something nobody else could hear. Ramona didn't find portals the way a navigator finds a destination. She found them the way a musician finds a note that's slightly off. Something in her registered the soft wrongness of a place where time had grown thin, where the membrane between one world and the next had worn through from use or accident or the particular cosmic indifference that scattered portals across history like coins dropped from a careless pocket.

"There's something," she said. "Two streets over. Small. It's old — hasn't been used in a while."

"Can you open it?"



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"I can try." She was already reaching into her own coat, producing what looked to anyone watching like a woman checking a small decorative compact. It was not that.

Behind them, the sound changed. The second buggy had picked up speed.

Thad took the reins from their hired driver — a startled young man named Cecil who had absolutely not agreed to this — pressed two silver dollars into his palm, and said, "Get down and walk away, Cecil. Right now. Don't look back."

Cecil, to his eternal credit, did exactly that.

The horse didn't need much convincing. Thad had driven worse, on worlds far less cooperative than this one. He swung them hard left onto a narrow lane called Petticoat Row — lined with fabric shops, all closed at this hour, bolts of cotton and silk dimly visible through dark windows. The cobblestones here were rougher, the lane barely wide enough for a single carriage, and the pursuing cab would have to slow or risk losing a wheel.

"Closer," Ramona said. She wasn't talking to him.

She was talking to the portal.

He had never entirely gotten used to that.

"Twenty seconds," she said. "Then I need you to stop the buggy."

"Stopping a buggy with Keeper Police thirty yards behind us is not my favorite plan."

"It's not a plan," she said, with the faint tone she used when she found him charming and wasn't going to say so. "It's a fact. The portal is fixed. We go to it."



Thad pulled the horse left again, into a small cobbled courtyard behind a closed chandler's shop — wax and wick smell hanging in the cool evening air, a wooden sign creaking above on its iron bracket. The pursuing cab appeared at the lane entrance a moment later, and two men stepped out before it had fully stopped. Long coats. Purposeful walks. One of them had already reached inside his jacket.

Thad stepped down from the buggy. He straightened his coat. He looked at them pleasantly.

"Gentlemen," he said.

"Templeton." The taller one — lean, with the flat affect of someone who had been doing this long enough to find it routine — stopped ten feet away. His partner fanned left, just slightly, the way they were trained to do. "You're going to want to come with us."

"I'm going to want to do a lot of things," Thad agreed. "That's rather the point, isn't it."

Ramona stepped down on the other side of the buggy, quiet as a thought.

The tall Keeper's eyes moved to her, then back to Thad. "We don't have a quarrel with your finder."

"She's not my finder," Thad said. "She's her own."

The courtyard sat still. Somewhere in the city, a church bell began counting the hour. The horse shifted its weight and blew a long breath into the cooling air. The Keeper's partner had moved another step left.

Ramona said, softly: "Now, Thad."

He didn't look for the portal. He didn't need to. He trusted her the way he trusted the watch-compass in his pocket — completely, and with full understanding of exactly what he was trusting.

He stepped to his right.

The world went sideways.



Not violently — it never was, with Ramona's portals. It was more like a sentence that ends in a different language than it began. The chandler's courtyard, the amber lamplight, the two Keeper Police reaching forward with expressions shifting from routine to something considerably less composed — all of it folded away, replaced in the space of a half-breath by —

Light. Flat and white and enormous.

Heat.

The sharp synthetic pop of a paddle striking a ball.

Someone nearby said, "You're up next — doubles, court three!"

Thaddeus Templeton stood at the edge of a pickleball court on World 5839, summer of 2025, squinting in the midday sun. He was wearing a wool vest. Ramona, beside him, was still holding her not-a-compact. Around them, a dozen people in athletic wear milled between courts, someone's portable speaker pushing out something with a cheerful beat, a child on the bleachers methodically destroying a snow cone, a banner overhead reading WELCOME TO THE MILLBROOK SUMMER CLASSIC.

Ramona looked down at her coat.

Thad looked at his wool vest.

A woman with a clipboard and a lanyard bustled past, paused, looked them up and down with the particular tolerance of someone who had seen all manner of eccentric court fashion, and said, "Love the vintage look. Court three, you're on deck."

Ramona turned to Thad.

Thad turned to Ramona.

"Do you know how to play pickleball?" she asked.

"I know how to play," he said, "approximately everything."

She smiled — and there it was, the thing he'd been watching for across four worlds and eleven months and more close calls than he cared to count. That smile.



Chandler's

He reached into the equipment bin beside the court and produced two paddles. He handed her one. She took it without looking, already scanning the far fence line with the quiet, habitual attention of a woman who was never entirely off duty — checking sight lines, reading the space, feeling for the particular atmospheric texture that meant a portal was nearby or recently closed.

Old habit. Good habit.

"Anything?" he asked quietly.

"Not yet," she said. "But there's something interesting near the far baseline."

Thad bounced his paddle once against his palm and looked out at the bright green court, the cheerful crowd, the impossible ordinary Saturday afternoon of World 5839.

"After the match," he said.

"After the match," she agreed.

The ref blew a whistle. They walked onto the court.

WELCOME TO THE MILLBROOK SUMMER CLASSIC



About the Time Keepers Universe

Welcome to a multiverse of countless worlds, each with its own version of history. Some are nearly identical to ours. Some are wildly different. All are real.

Portals connect the worlds — small, rare, often hidden. Most people pass through life without ever noticing one. A few find them.

Thaddeus Templeton is a traveler. Ramona is a finder. Together they cross from world to world for reasons that, in time, will become clear.

The Keeper Police would prefer they didn't.

Each episode of *The Last Fast Train to the Past* is a stop along the way. Some are quick. Some take longer. All of them are real.

Welcome to World 54. Welcome to World 5839.

Welcome aboard.

Coming Next

Episode 2

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