

SELDOM WILLING

A NOVEL OF RAILROADING

BY FRED W. FRAILEY

FLANGED WHEEL BOOKS

CHAPTER I

Standing in total darkness southwest of Kansas City is not where Jerry Jenks would prefer to be at ten minutes past two on a muggy August morning in 1978. Jerry is a trainmaster for the Central Pacific Railroad. And as an enforcer of rules, he's going without sleep tonight, perhaps to get Jodie Yarborough and Bobby Benson fired.

Consider Jerry's predicament. He's on the spongy cusp of a swamp created by the flood-prone Marais des Cygnes River as it weaves through eastern Kansas and into Missouri. Civilization is 100 yards to the east, in the form of U.S. Highway 69. Yet Highway 69 is sound asleep at this hour, so Jerry may as well be in a Peruvian forest. A quarter mile east of the road is the village of Agricola, population 350, also darkened and quiet. Close to Jerry, a bullfrog utters its mating call. *Jug-o-rum!* Then again. And again. *Jug-o-rum! Jug-o-rum!* Jerry is unsettled. Insects land on his hands and neck. Some of them bite. Within the swamp, who knows what animals are looking at him now and calculating the odds of venturing closer? Jerry is 26 years old, short (5 feet 7), getting pudgy and starting to lose his hair. A city boy, he's

unused to being so close to nature. He hopes someone will appreciate what he's doing tonight, enforcing the railroad's operating rules, but even Jerry knows better than that. Where's the damn train?

Jodie and Bobby—Bobby also goes by Breaker because of his teenaged clumsiness—are now passing Williamsburg, Kan., six miles away, on a freight train bound from Kansas City to Denver. Jodie is the engineer, and Bobby is the conductor of train number 801. Engineers run the train, which is an exacting task because of grades, curves, road crossings, speed restrictions, signals and braking calculations, all of which engineers must deal with. Conductors on this division of Central Pacific ride with the engineer as the second pair of eyes and ears. They also handle all the paperwork and do the groundwork—for example, uncoupling cars, joining air hoses, and inspecting the train.

Jodie, stocky and in her mid-30s, is one of the few women engineers anywhere on Central Pacific. She's an evangelical Christian and mother of three children between the ages of 5 and 12, all asleep just now in suburban Kansas City. Jodie yawns and stands up beside her control stand to stay alert.

Bobby, a decade younger than Jodie, sits on the other side of the locomotive cab. His head is wedged against the back of the cab and the side window, and his mouth is open. In other words, Bobby is fast asleep. He's been that way since their train left Kansas City 70 miles ago. Bobby has a problem traveling in darkness: The experience puts him to sleep, almost like a four-year-old on a late-night ride with his parents. His habit burdens the engineers he works with, who

can't depend upon him to remain alert and help prevent mistakes that could cost them their lives.

Yet in Bobby's two years working for Central Pacific, no engineer has ratted on him. For one thing, railroaders don't do that to one another. For another, when awake, Bobby Benson is a cheerful and happy worker—intelligent, tireless and eager to please. His coworkers like Bobby.

Back on the edge of the swamp, Jerry Jenks aims his flashlight at his mosquito-bitten left wrist and reads the time. 2:15. Jerry has nothing against Jodie and Bobby. Enforcing rules is what trainmasters do, so this is just a night's work. His legs hurt, and his feet ache, but he dares not sit down and get dew-heavy dirt on his slacks. He should hear train 801 whistling for road crossings at any moment. Beside him, between the rails, sits an octangular stop sign, the same as you'd see on a street corner. Jerry had placed it there an hour ago. Beside that stop sign stands a block signal on a tall mast. The signal shows bright red, though no other train is within 50 miles of number 801. Jerry has placed a metal shunt across the two rails to cause the signal to display red. Hit that stop sign, or pass that red signal, and your railroad career ends. Railroads can forgive many rule violations, but working inebriated or passing a red signal is unforgivable because it undermines the safety culture.

A low murmur builds in intensity—the sound of working locomotives and the rumble of a mile of freight cars. Train 801 is approaching.

But there are a few things Jerry Jenks doesn't know. One is that Jodie Yarborough knows the stop sign and red signal

await her. Railroaders look out for each other. Jenks must coordinate his rules-compliance tests with the chief train dispatcher of the Kansas Division in Kansas City, Kan. As she does each time, Susan McCorkle, the clerk to the chief dispatcher, soon excuses herself to go to the bathroom but instead drops a dime in the pay phone across the street from the division office building. The call goes to her cousin Jack Simpson, who happens to be the local chairman of her union, the Brotherhood of Railway and Airline Clerks. Jack then calls his counterpart at the United Transportation Union, who passes word to the crew that will be tested. Small wonder, therefore, that Central Pacific crews on the Kansas Division seldom fail a rules-compliance test.

The other thing Jerry doesn't know is that he's not alone. Late the afternoon before, without contacting the railroad, a film crew hired by a Kansas City advertising agency had entered the Marais des Cygnes (pronounced *maray de cinya*) swamp with a truckload of equipment. This film shoot will be young creative director Tommy Vincennes's big break. A Topeka distillery is coming out with a new whiskey, Sizzlin', flavored with cinnamon and a touch of jalapeno pepper. Tommy's idea is to have a model—in this instance, his girlfriend Tanya—holding a bottle of Sizzlin' high in her hands and radiating joy while clad only in a bikini as the train rushes past her—sizzlin'—in the swampy night. He gets the client's approval, and the crew sets up and wires a 100-yard path of powerful klieg lights on the south side of the right of way. Tanya takes her position on the north side, waiting on a raft. Tommy had instructed her to stand just outside the

rails. Tommy knows little about trains. So he is unaware that trains extend a foot or more outside the rails. Tanya will die if she does as told.

The wait lasts a long time. Train 801's regular 9 o'clock departure from Kansas City was delayed tonight by three hours to await 24 cars of heavy steel from a connecting train. The cars had sat two days in Chicago, and the customer in suburban Denver had screamed bloody thunder to a CP traffic manager the day before.

Tanya complains that she's cold. But everyone is cold. She says she's hungry, but nobody expected the wait to be this long, so everyone is hungry, too. But they brought beer aplenty, and Tommy, Tanya and the film crew had become nicely sloshed. Tanya lights a joint she had tucked into her bikini top.

Now they discern the same faint rumble of approaching 801 that alerts trainmaster Jenks. They hear the same horn. A soft halo of light turns into a piercing headlight as the train nears the swamp.

Aboard 801, Jodie is slowing to stop at the red signal and octagonal stop sign that lay dead ahead. To Jodie, this test is stupid. She doesn't want or need to be warned because she follows the Central Pacific's operating rules as religiously as she studies the New Testament. The automatic block signals are a safety overlay used on busy rail lines. They don't tell trains where to meet or overtake one another. Instead, they keep trains from running into each other. For instance, that yellow block signal Jodie just passed tells her to reduce speed and expect the next one to be red, meaning stop. And

that's what her train does 50 feet before reaching the stop sign. Jodie nudges Bobby awake.

Jerry Jenks climbs aboard and enters the cab. He shakes hands with Jodie and Bobby and has each sign a form attesting to the test's success. Once he descends, Jodie slowly gets the big train underway. The slack—that slight free movement of a car before it transmits its motion to an adjoining coupled car—is fully stretched a mile later as the train achieves 50 miles per hour. Now train 801 is in the middle of the swamp. Jodie focuses on the track ahead and doesn't see Tanya get off the raft and approach the tracks.

Then klieg lights come ablaze on the south side of the right of way, illuminating a young woman holding a bottle on the north side. Jodie grabs the whistle lever and doesn't let go. If this girl doesn't move, she'll be struck by Jodie's locomotive. But instead of watching the train, the girl looks straight ahead toward the cameras and lights. And those lights! What's going on?

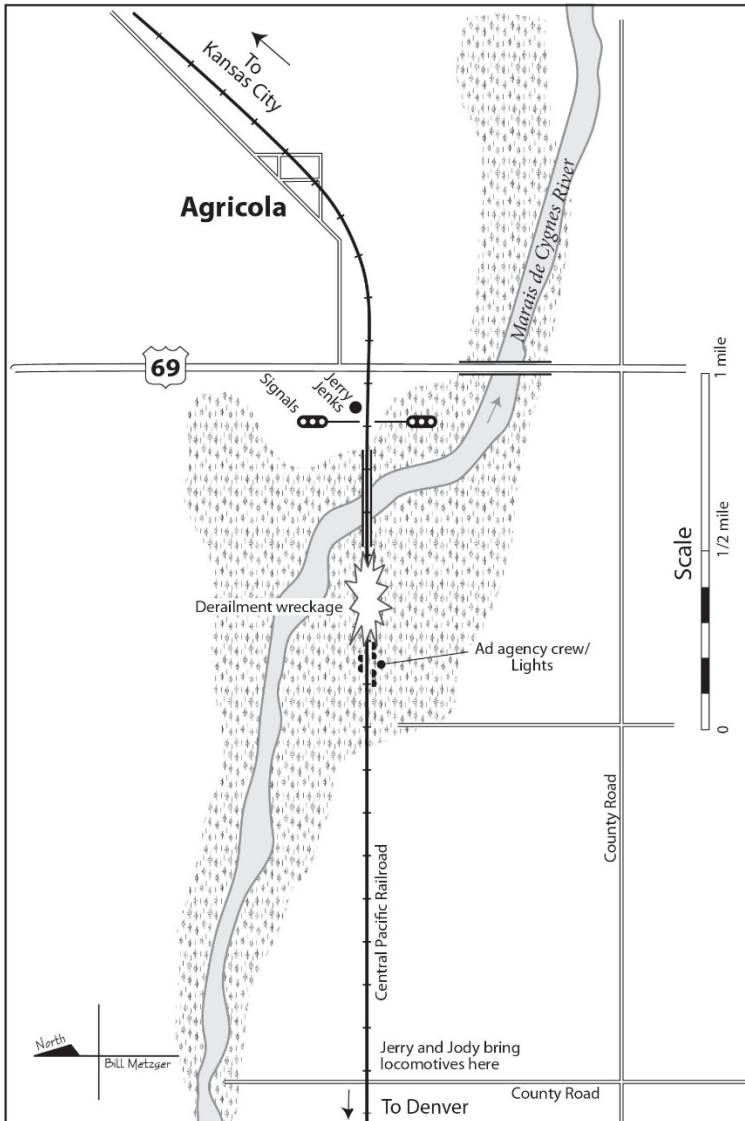
Things head south in a hurry. Tanya glimpses the approaching train, realizes her unfortunate predicament and freaks out. She's unprepared for being borne down by this monster with its blinding headlight and screaming horn. She flings the whiskey bottle she had held for the camera onto the rails, turns and splashes into the shallow water.

By then, Jodie has lost it, too. What are those blinding lights? Was that a Molotov cocktail she saw flung toward her train? Is this a terrorist attack? What else is about to happen? It's all too much to process. She screams, "Breaker!" Her left hand grabs the brake lever and pushes it to the

emergency position. Now powerful mechanical forces are in motion, and nothing can stop them.

Startled by Jodie's scream and confused by the lights and braking motion as he awakens, Bobby dives for the floor. His head strikes Jodie's control stand, opening an ugly, bloody wound.

Tommy Vincennes stands transfixed beside three cameramen, who continue filming. The loud exhaust of air leaving airbrake cylinders means nothing to them.



Jodie's split-second decision to stop train 801 creates a chain reaction. Airbrakes on a train do not set up in unison. Instead, braking works sequentially from the locomotive

down the length of the train, car by car. And remember those 24 carloads of steel? The railroad's train-makeup guidelines say to put them at the front of the train. But in its haste to get train 801 underway, a switch crew in Kansas City shunted these cars onto the train's rear—unfortunate because most other cars on the train are empty grain cars.

As the front of the train quickly loses speed, a mile to the rear, the heavy back end of the train continues to go merrily forward at 50 mph. And the pressure this puts on the freight cars on the front is exacerbated by the run-in of slack as the train bunches up. Usually, nothing comes of it. But tonight, 23 cars behind the locomotives, the forward wheels of a 50-foot empty flatcar are lifted off the rails by the forces slamming into it, and freight cars begin piling up.

Tommy, Tanya and the film crew now flee for their lives.

The rear end of train 801 is passing Jerry Jenks when he sees the flash of light caused by the bright lights and, ten seconds later, hears the cacophony of steel cars ripping apart as they scatter along the elevated right of way and fall into the swamp. Then comes the voice of Jodie Yarborough over the portable radio attached to his belt. "Mayday! Train 801 is in emergency at milepost 552. My conductor is on the floor unconscious. We may be on the ground." Sitting inside the locomotive, she senses a derailment behind her but cannot see evidence of it in the darkness.

Immediately, Jerry hears the voice of train dispatcher T. B. Pettigrew in Kansas City over the radio. Train dispatchers rule a railroad. They are the voice of authority to crews. They determine where trains will meet or pass. And when matters

go to hell, it's their job to stay calm. In person, T-Bone, as he's known, is a slender, mild-mannered, courteous man in his early 60s. Over the airwaves tonight, he's all business.

"Train 801, are you stopped?"

"Yes."

"What is your exact position?"

"The head end is about a mile west of the west siding switch at Agricola."

"What's the nature of your conductor's injury? Can he inspect the train?"

"He hit his head on my control stand. He's lost blood and appears unconscious. T-Bone, the strangest things happened. In the middle of the swamp, these bright lights came on. A girl stood in the water very near the train—we were about to kill her. At the last second, she flung a bottle against the rails and jumped into the swamp. I thought it could be explosive. By then, I had applied the brakes in emergency."

"Goddammit! Those fucking railfans again!" Well, sometimes he's all business.

"T-Bone, please do not talk like that! Oh, Breaker is trying to sit up. I'm going to try to stop the bleeding."

"Yes, do that, Jodie. The night chief is asking the Peoria County sheriff to send an ambulance. They're asking for the closest road to your locomotives."

"It's another mile in front of us. After we get out of the swamp."

"Somehow, we'll have to get a stretcher to you. What a goddamn shitstorm."

"T-Bone!"

“Dispatcher, this is trainmaster Jenks. I’m near Highway 69. The rear of the train stopped just west of me. I’ll find that road Jodie mentions. Then I’ll walk to the train, uncouple the locomotives and allow Jodie to reach the ambulance at the crossing.”

“Thank you, Jerry. I’ll start waking people up. Jodie, stay calm. We’ll get people there.”

After a few moments’ silence, dispatcher Pettigrew is back on the radio, again all business. “Jodie, looking at the train list, I see three cars of crude oil in positions 38 through 40 on the train. Are they secure?”

“I have no way of knowing. . .” she starts to say. Standing at the train’s rear, Jenks sees a fireball and hears a loud boom.

“T-Bone, this is Jenks. I just saw a huge flash and heard a boom. That may be a car of oil going up. Wait! There’s another fireball! And another!”

“It’s the oil, all right,” says Pettigrew. “There’s no other hazmat on the train. Now we have an environmental disaster on our hands.” Crude oil is not particularly explosive. But anything can happen when a tank car is ripped open during a derailment, as sparks fly.

Tanya begins to wander in the swamp’s water, cut off from her colleagues by the derailment and terrorized by the fires only a few hundred yards from her. Trying to leave the swamp, she almost walks into the river. She turns back, lost, shivering cold and increasingly hysterical.

At 2:31 a.m. on Monday, August 7, 1978, the drama is just beginning for employees of the Kansas Division.

CHAPTER 2

Chet Whitfield is dreaming of Carla again when ringing awakens him. He turns on the bedside light and looks at his watch. 2:33 a.m. He's relieved to be free from the tyranny of that dream. Before picking up the phone, he sits up and takes a deep breath to prepare himself. He always does this. Whenever the phone awakens the Kansas Division superintendent—and his phone seems to ring a lot at night—what greets him is never good news. The night chief train dispatcher, Larry Rollins, is calling. And yes, the news is grim: Train 801 just went aground in the Marais des Cygnes River swamp near Agricola, three carloads of crude oil are burning, no telling how many other freight cars are off the tracks, and there's total confusion about what is happening.

“Jodie Yarborough is the engineer. She said a line of bright lights burst on, and a girl in a bikini threw a bottle of something at the train. She thought the train was under

attack. T-Bone thinks it was railfans doing a night photo stunt.”

“T-Bone is mistaken. He says that anytime something goes wrong,” replies Chet. “This doesn’t fit that pattern. I suspect it’s something else. Is anyone hurt?”

“Yes,” says Rollins. “Breaker Benson has a bad gash on his forehead, according to Jodie. He’s bled a lot.”

“Forehead? Did they collide with something?”

“We don’t think so. Jodie said he dived off his chair, hit his head on the edge of her control stand and became unconscious. It’s just me talking, but I suspect Breaker was asleep and got startled.”

“That’s for later. He needs to go to the emergency room. And someone needs to be there and stand over Benson while he’s treated. Otherwise, he could concoct a story about the injury, make an OSHA case out of it, sue us and never have to work again. Where is Jerry Jenks?”

“An ambulance is on its way. And funny that you should ask. Jerry had just conducted a rules-compliance test on the train, and it was getting underway again when this happened. The front of 801 is a mile from the nearest road, so Jerry will walk to the locomotives, uncouple them from the train and allow Jodie to get Breaker to where the ambulance will be waiting.”

“Good,” says Whitfield. “Have Jerry follow the ambulance to the ER. Do this and call me back. I’m getting dressed.”

Chet Whitfield has run the Kansas Division for four years. Already it’s clear to him that this is a doozie—a mess

the likes of which he's never seen. Insurance kicks in after \$50 million in damages and cleanup costs, and this could come close to that threshold. When Rollins calls back, he's ready with more instructions.

"Larry, make a list. Call Hulcher and get them started. Call Sam and have him meet me at the scene, PDQ." Hulcher Services is a company that cleans up derailments for railroads, using off-track equipment staged in dozens of locales. And Sam Spencer is the division engineer responsible for track maintenance. His people will rebuild the track structure once Hulcher leaves, whenever that is.

"Next, call the War Room and tell them what you know." The War Room is a 24-hour office in the Central Pacific Operating Department's headquarters in Des Plaines, Ill.—actually, in an old warehouse rented when most employees were kicked out of the former downtown Chicago headquarters building. It keeps track of train movements and locomotive assignments across the railroad and assists during emergencies.

"Call Lee, Mary Beth, Marty and Jeremy and send them to Agricola." Lee Spahn is the division special agent (cop). Mary Beth Franklin is the division claims agent. Marty Ward is the assistant division superintendent for operations, and Jeremy Benjamin is the maintenance-of-way roadmaster for this part of the division. "Tell Lee to look for anything suspicious, such as flashbulbs or lightbulbs. And wake up your boss"—chief dispatcher Fred Fulton—"and have him come help you. What am I forgetting?"

“Chet,” says Larry, “you’re forgetting that the UPS trains are coming toward this stew from both directions. Going west, train 805 is 30 miles east of Kansas City, and 806 went by Great Bend an hour ago. A new crew for 806 is called at Florence for 3:45.” Trains 805 and 806, handling United Parcel Service trailers, are the hottest freights on the Kansas Division, the only trains not burdened by CEO Buzz Whitaker’s ultimatum to pile tonnage onto every train.

“Okay, hold 806 at Marion”—Marion is 10 miles west of Florence—“and ask the War Room to call Union Pacific and request the use of their tracks for a detour from Marion to Kansas City. It will probably take UP three or four hours to find a pilot for our crew.” When emergencies require trains to detour over another railroad, the host company assigns an engineer or conductor to “pilot” the detouring engineer over unfamiliar territory.

“Arrange to taxi the relief crew from Florence to Marion to wait for UP’s pilot. And ask the War Room to plead with Santa Fe to let 805 on its tracks from Kansas City to Garden City. Otherwise, it’s blocked by this derailment. I’m leaving now. Keep me updated over the radio.” Chet hangs up.

Ninety minutes later, reaching the railroad’s crossing of Highway 69, he’s surprised to find himself the first Central Pacific person on the scene besides Jodie Yarborough, who is two miles away, sitting in her locomotive. Chet is stunned by the kaleidoscope of flashing red and blue lights of sheriff and state police cars, fire trucks, ambulances and other emergency equipment. He parks, finds a Kansas State Police lieutenant and identifies himself.

“Sir, you can see the rear of your train in the distance,” the lieutenant says, pointing in the darkness toward a flashing red light that adorns the last freight car. “The front of your train is a mile from the nearest road. Nobody has reached the fire and derailment because of the swamp water on both sides of the track. But something really strange just occurred.”

“Strange?”

“A film crew appeared and said they were filming the train in the swamp. They’re from a Kansas City ad agency. Their boss said their model, wearing only a bikini and flip-flops, was separated from them by the stopped train and the derailment. Some firemen crawled under your train to the other side and found her so hysterical she couldn’t talk. She has small cuts all over herself from the swamp vegetation.”

“The engineer of our train reported a woman like that throwing a bottle of something directly in front of the train and running in the opposite direction. Where is she?”

“We just got her into an ambulance. We’re making sure her vital signs are stable. Want to see if you recognize her?”

Chet does, but glancing at the unconscious woman wrapped in blankets confirms she’s not an employee or anyone else he knows.

“Officer, when you question her, the story of this strange affair will probably spill out.” With that, he walks toward his car.

Nobody will reach the wreckage until locomotives pull back undamaged freight cars on both sides of the pileup to give emergency workers access. He takes the handheld radio

from his belt and instructs T-Bone Pettigrew to call a crew in Kansas City to get locomotives to the scene and remove the rear portion of the train. Then he follows the lieutenant by car to the road crossing on the west side of the swamp.

He gets there to find the two locomotives standing where Jodie Yarborough had stopped to get Bobby Benson to an ambulance. The rest of the train is a mile to the rear, in the swamp. He boards the lead unit and greets Jodie.

“Thanks for hanging in there. It’s just you and me, so let’s get started. I’ll ride the rear unit and guide you to a coupling. Then I’ll walk the train to the derailment—if I dare get that close—uncouple the last undamaged car and tell you to move forward slowly until we’ve passed this road. Ready?” She nods yes.

The easy part is getting the locomotives reattached to the front of the train. Then Chet walks back alongside the freight cars with a flashlight to guide him. The experience is frightening. Where the granite ballast that supports the trackage stops, the right of way slopes steeply downward and into the swamp. Chet must stay on the ballast, and there’s precious little not occupied by freight cars. His footing is treacherous. Plus, he is middle-aged and hasn’t done something like this since he can’t remember when. He did have the foresight to put on steel-toed boots instead of loafers. Otherwise, he’d have wrenched both ankles by now.

The closer he gets to the derailment, the ghastlier the inferno in front of him becomes. Chatter from the radio on his belt keeps him company. He hears T. B. Pettigrew but is too absorbed in keeping his footing to listen to what is said.

Twice Chet loses his balance and topples down the slope and into the water. The second time his left knee strikes rocks, tearing his trousers. Soon he can feel blood slowly descending his leg. Every freight car he walks past, he inspects for damage, hoping that he's not missing damage on the other side of the car. As heat from the fire sears his face at the twentieth car, he finds a set of wheels off the rails.

"Jodie," he says on the radio, "bunch up the slack, so I can get the train uncoupled. But do it nice and easy." Soon he hears the cars gently bang against one another as the locomotives inch backward. Now he can lift a lever to loosen the coupler pin. The train is separated.

"That's enough, Jodie. We're uncoupled. Now pull forward slowly. I'm riding the nineteenth car. I'll tell you when we're clear of the road. Pray I don't lose my grip and disappear in the water." He hears her laugh over the radio. Chet wishes he could laugh, too.

The whole maneuver consumes an hour. When Chet steps off the freight car stirrup at the country road crossing, Central Pacific people are present in abundance.

"Jesus, Chet, you look like shit," says Marty Ward, one of his two assistant superintendents. His remark breaks the tension. Marty gets a first aid kit from the trunk of his car, washes his knee with bottled water and bandages it. Chet permits a fire chief to drive his firetrucks over the tracks to reach the conflagration. Two pumpers bump over the wood ties and begin pumping water from the swamp onto the fire. But many hours will pass before the spilled crude oil burns off and the white-hot heap can be inspected.

Chet immerses himself in the unending details of dealing with mayhem. He sends Marty to work with Jodie to get the train's front end stowed in the next siding and tells T-Bone to send a van to get her back home. Before she steps off her locomotive, she asks about Bobby Benson.

"I've heard nothing, Jodie," Chet replies over the radio. "But heads are hard even if they bleed profusely. Breaker will be fine and soon woo the ladies with his handsome scar."

At the train's rear, someone will have to go through the same ordeal he did getting the intact freight cars out of the way once the locomotives arrive from Kansas City. Then the mess will be approachable from both sides. At least now it's daylight. It seems as if every vice president of the railroad calls from Chicago via a radio patch to ask questions or offer advice. A *Kansas City Star* reporter and a crew from Channel 4 appear, asking questions about how the derailment occurred and the source of the raging fire. Chet explains what he knows, which isn't a lot. Hulcher's trucks arrive from three cities and offload giant cranes and forklifts. After surveying the derailment, Hulcher's foreman is ambivalent about when the railroad can reopen—at least two days and maybe as many as five. "This is impossible terrain," he tells Chet. "Water everywhere. We'll have to build a cofferdam around the wreckage on both sides of the tracks and drain the water to get equipment in place. Then you have to rebuild the track."

It's almost 3 o'clock that afternoon before Chet, his trousers ripped and bloodied, enters the division headquarters in

Kansas City. Pink telephone slips adorn his desktop. He ignores the media calls—if they wanted to talk to him, they could have gotten off their asses and gone to Agricola. One telephone slip he cannot ignore. It's from his daughter Kay, who is married and the mother of two of his three grandsons.

“Dad, I heard about the derailment. Are you okay? Is it horrible?”

Chet laughs. “It’s somewhere between messy and an ongoing disaster. We’ll be days climbing out of this hole. I’ve never experienced anything quite like this. At least we know what to do. And this brings out the best in everyone. But tell me: How are my two little lions?”

“They can’t wait to see you. They think you have the most glamorous job in the world. All they play with are their toy trains.”

“Not glamorous today, sweetie. You should have seen me at five this morning, sprawled in the water, my pants torn and my knee bleeding.”

“Dad, I worry about you, about. . .”

“You mean, without your mom?”

“Yes. That.”

“It’s hard every day. I was dreaming about her when the phone rang this morning. I’ll get past this. It won’t consume me.”

“Can we come to visit this weekend?” As she says this, the other phone line lights up, displaying the number of Adam Morgan.

“Sweetie, Chicago is ringing. It’s my boss. Yes, visit, but let’s wait a week. Love you!” He punches the other button on his phone.

“Hello, sir. This is Chet.”

“Chet!” replies Morgan with false heartiness. “I’m sorry to call you now. You’ve had a terrible day. We’re doing everything we can to get the railroad open again.” As if he knew what to do. “But now I have to make your day more terrible.”

“Adam, making my day more terrible would be hard.”

“I need you to be at our executive offices tomorrow at 10. You need to know something before we go public with it, maybe later tomorrow.”

“Can I send someone else? We’re in a crisis here.”

“We’re in a crisis here, too,” says Morgan. “It would be better if you were here. Can you do that? Please say yes. I realize I’m asking a lot.” Never has the imperial Adam Morgan pleaded with Chet to do anything.

“If it’s what you want, I’ll be there,” Chet says wearily, and they ring off. Only then does Chet remember that Central Pacific had contracted with the consulting firm Arthur Andersen & Company six months earlier to do a downsizing analysis of the railroad—what should stay, what could be jettisoned, to emphasize the company’s strengths and spin off its weak limbs. Since then, he’s heard not one peep. Is the Kansas Division a weakness?

Before going home to get some sleep and get ready to fly to Chicago, Chet types a note to his assistant to schedule a disciplinary hearing in two weeks. On the carpet will be Jodie Yarborough and Bobby Benson. Brian Blades of the

United Transportation Union will appear, too, to be their advocate. Chet is determined to get to the bottom of what happened today. In other words, did a screwup occur?

As the saying goes, he's unconscious before his head hits the pillow. Carla leaves him alone.

CHAPTER 3

At 50, Chester Whitfield sports reddish brown hair showing edges of gray and a smile whose warmth puts people at ease. He's worked for only one employer, Central Pacific, starting as a switchman after graduating from Florence High School. Tiny Florence, Kan., is a railroad town, the first crew-change point west of Kansas City. In Florence, you work for the railroad or live next door to someone who does.

In time, Chet stepped up from switchman to conductor and then locomotive engineer. He and a cute hometown girl, Carla Fleming, married and became parents. Carla's sunny disposition and Chet's calm demeanor were a good match. She enjoyed decorating their house on the edge of Florence, and he, mechanically minded, liked fixing things. Chet's future seemed predictable. He'd spend the rest of his days running freight trains east to Kansas City or west to Larned, Kan., the next crew-change point on the path to Denver.

Then Claude Milligan came calling on a mission. Milligan ran the Kansas Division as its superintendent, and his mission was Chet Whitfield.

Under an oak tree in the backyard, they drank lemonade. “You going to do this the rest of your life?” asked Milligan.

“Do what?”

“Run trains back and forth. A guy as smart as you will go batty. I would”

“The pay is good. So’s the lifestyle. I’m not complaining. Do you have a better idea?” Chet sensed that Milligan did.

“Yes. Get out of here and come to Kansas City. You’ll be an assistant trainmaster, working the terminal. Heinz Henry wants me to find fellows who are comfortable in their shoes, know this business inside and out, make friends easily and are unafraid of change. That’s you, Chet.” Heinz Henry had just become Central Pacific’s assistant vice president of operations, reporting to Adam Morgan. Milligan continued: “You have a way with people. They look up to you. Trust me. You could go a long way. You could have my job someday.”

Claude Milligan’s job? What a terrible idea! Who wants to be crushed between the demands of top management to constantly cut costs and the gripes and petty complaints of the unionized workforce? Chet’s idea of fun didn’t include handing out demerits for minor rule violations, driving to every derailment along the division’s 655-mile path or listening to shipper complaints. Most shippers were crabby owners of grain elevators and feed stores.

Chet looked up to see Claude grinning at him.

“I know what you’re thinking,” the superintendent said. “But my job has its moments. Some days I’m helping instead of punishing people. Some days customers call with

compliments. Ask yourself this, Chet: How do you want to conduct the second half of your life?” With that, Claude said goodbye.

At first, Chet resisted Milligan’s offer. Not just resist, either—he turned him down. Chet and Carla agreed they enjoyed their lives. They adored the healthy simplicity of Florence, where both were born. They not only knew everybody but also the good and bad about them. Children rode bikes to school and spent summers in treehouses. Few families locked their doors at night, and neighbors cared for neighbors. Kansas City? All Chet saw of it during layovers was its gritty underbelly.

But Claude Milligan had planted a seed in Chet’s mind, and it grew. Against his will, he began to acknowledge that Florence had two sides, one not as homey and loving as the other. Florence was also insular, ingrown and a bit intolerant of outside points of view. What became of his high school friends? They either stayed to work for the railroad—the only employer, really—or left town. The turning point for Chet was his admission to himself that his job was tedious from relentless repetition and taking him nowhere but over the same ground again and again. He didn’t yearn to spend the next 20 years running trains back and forth, each day much like the one before. He became uncomfortable living without ambitions—and the chance to improve his lot in life.

So Chet dropped in on Milligan during a Kansas City layover and asked if the job of assistant trainmaster remained open. Of course, replied Claude—I knew you’d be back. Chet and Carla talked it over and made a year’s commitment.

They'd rent out their house in Florence. Milligan promised that his old job would await him if they didn't like city life and his being a junior officer.

They found a modest home in suburban Prairie Village. Their children Roy and Kay excelled at Shawnee Mission East High School. Carla got her broker's license and became the star of a small real estate company. Chet, however, faced huge adjustments. At the bottom rung of the management ladder, he worked longer hours and earned less than he did as an engineer, overseeing the big Kansas City terminal at night, 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., with every other weekend off. He was perpetually tired.

But Chet stuck it out and discovered he enjoyed dealing with challenges, thievery being one of them. Lately, stuff had begun disappearing from freight cars, seemingly in front of everyone's eyes. During his second week in Kansas City, Milligan tasked Chet with stopping the plunder.

"Shouldn't Lee Spahn be doing this?" said Chet. "He's the special agent."

"Lee has a theory, but I want your thoughts and how you propose solving this. Get to work."

Chet looked for a pattern and saw one immediately. Looted cars always carried high-value merchandise like beer, whiskey, razor blades or cigarettes. Only one explanation fit: Someone within Central Pacific alerted thieves to these cargos. Chet visited Spahn, and they hatched a simple plan. A boxcar destined for California arrived early one afternoon. Its reported contents: cigarettes, except that it was empty. At Chet's request, the chief car inspector ordered the

car removed from the train to repair a wheel bearing, which worked perfectly. It went to an out-of-the-way track in the yard, where Chet, Lee and plainclothes officers from the Johnson County sheriff's office hid in wait.

Soon after sundown, two pickup trucks stopped beside the boxcar. Two men emerged from each vehicle and got to work, stripping the seal from the door and opening it. "Hey, there's nothing in here," said one, just as Chet stepped into view at one end of the boxcar and captured the moment on his flash camera. From the other end emerged two men holding badges in one hand and pistols in the other.

"Johnson County sheriff!" barked one deputy. Shouted the other: "Don't move! You're under arrest!" Rather than obey, two of the four bolted in the opposite direction and right into Chet and Lee, who tackled and held them down until they could be handcuffed.

Chet looked at the face of the man he had thrown to the ground. "Sweet Jesus, you're Gus Williamson." Williamson was a switchman. Ditto for the other three. In its midst, thought Chet, Central Pacific hides a little La Cosa Nostra. Unlike the real La Cosa Nostra, these thieves quickly ratted out six other employees, including two locomotive engineers and a clerk, her job being to inspect car listings of trains approaching Kansas City to find those with valuable goods. A week later, Chet got a letter of appreciation from Adam Morgan, the vice president of operations. He'd never laid eyes on the man and even played with the idea that Adam Morgan was mythical.

Six months into the Kansas City adventure, Milligan made him the terminal trainmaster, supervising the day and night assistant trainmasters. Now Chet began to sense the limitations of having only a high school diploma. Claude may be his booster today, but how much higher would Central Pacific elevate him? (“Where did you go to school, Chet?” “Florence.” “I love Italy!”) He began living a double life, railroader by day, student at night, by enrolling in correspondence courses at Kansas State University. Taking every business and management course he could, Chet earned an associate’s degree in three years.

For a course about solving problems at work, he wrote a paper that ended up on Claude Milligan’s desk. “Reorganization of Kansas City Terminal,” it said on the cover.

Kansas City terminal consisted of two yards on the Kansas side of the state line. On its 36 tracks, Argentine Yard built and switched through freight trains in both directions. Outer Yard, four miles west and much smaller, with 16 tracks, dealt with local freights and industry-switching jobs. As traffic rose through 1972 and continued into 1973, Chet could almost see Argentine buckle under its burden. Trains waited for hours outside of the city for an empty track. By comparison, Outer Yard remained a sleepy village. Surrounded by the city, Argentine couldn’t expand. But maybe different processes would yield better results. That’s what Chet proposed to his boss.

Westbound freights consumed most of Argentine’s capacity because these trains needed reclassification into blocks of cars sorted by destination. In the process, cars from

other railroads got added for the trip west. Eastbound trains required far less handling because they were reclassified at other locales.

Chet proposed to devote Argentine Yard entirely to westbound trains and the smaller Outer Yard to the more modest needs of eastbound trains. Each yard was nicely sized for such demands. Not only would train hold-outs decline or even disappear, but the streamlined terminal might require fewer than the 24 switch crews working daily. A new, three-mile-long bypass track would tie everything together neatly, allowing eastbound trains to scoot around Argentine without being delayed and without disrupting the switching of westbound trains. Chet estimated the cost of the bypass track at \$3 million.

Milligan was impressed. The Kansas Division had a reputation for outside-the-box thinking. Several years earlier, with Chicago's approval, Milligan had proposed to the United Transportation Union's local chairman that the Kansas Division pay firemen and brakemen to quit. Then CP would "retire" these positions, allowing through freights to operate with just an engineer and conductor. Conductors would ride on the locomotive, making antiques of cabooses. The UTU asked how much the railroad would offer people to quit. Eventually, the two sides agreed on \$75,000 per resignation. Everyone was happy. Central Pacific realized a 50 percent annualized return on this investment, and many former firemen and brakemen could afford to retire their home mortgages early. The UTU soon thought better of this and

refused to make such deals elsewhere on Central Pacific or with other railroads.

Milligan sent Chet's proposal to Heinz Henry, the assistant VP of operations in Chicago. Several weeks passed before Milligan discussed the matter with Henry in a phone conversation. "Claude," said Henry, "this is very clever, but it won't work without the UTU's buy-in, and the union won't buy into another job loss. Its members will sabotage this idea in ways you and I can only imagine."

"So I'll tell Chet that part of this project is to get employees behind it. We'll test his management cojones. If it works, it works. If it doesn't. . ."

"If it doesn't, what?" Henry asked.

"If it doesn't," replied Milligan, "then Chet isn't ready for bigger things. But it will work. I don't know how, but I know it will."

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