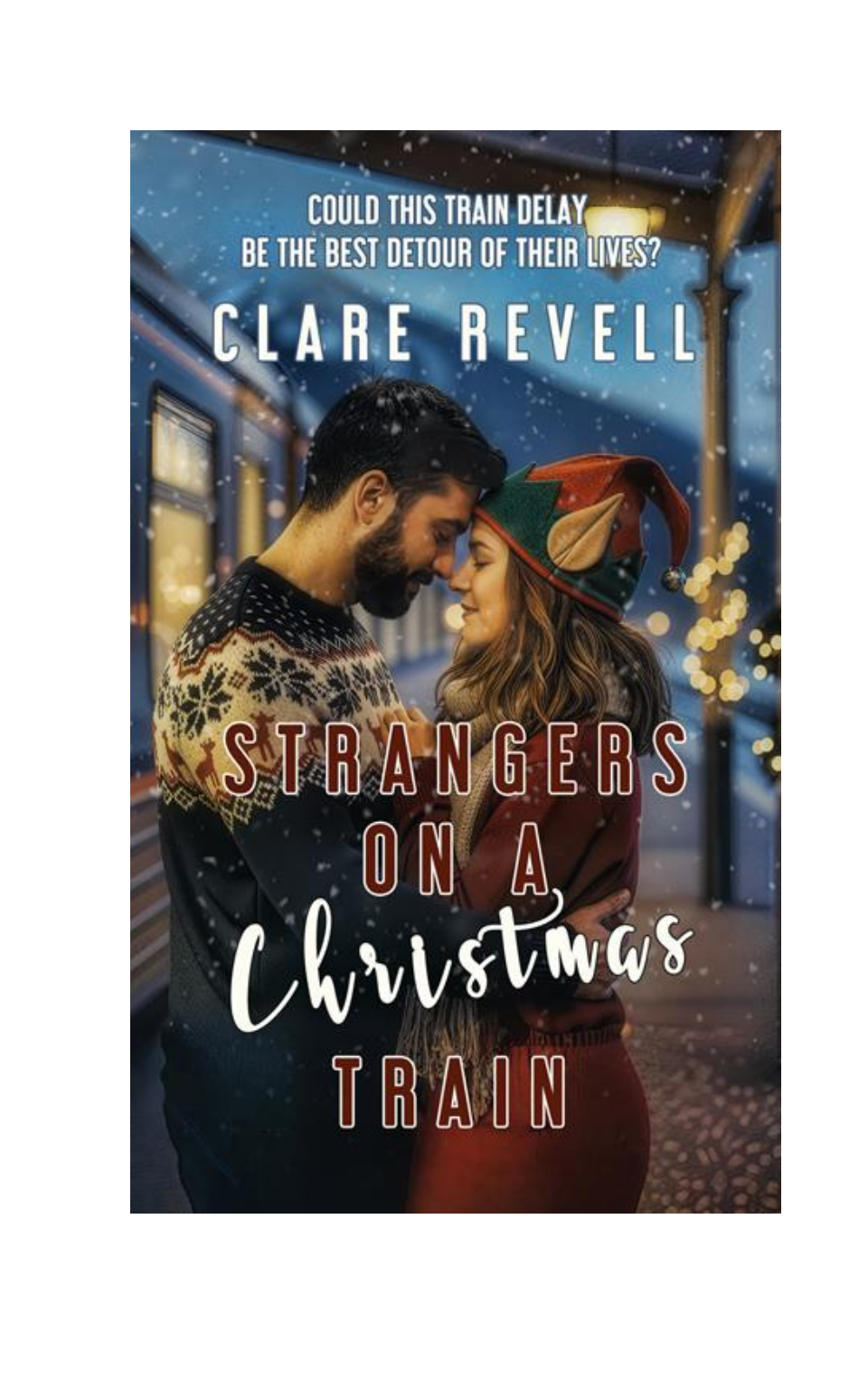




COULD THIS TRAIN DELAY
BE THE BEST DETOUR OF THEIR LIVES?

CLARE REVELL

STRANGERS
ON A
Christmas
TRAIN

Strangers on a Christmas Train

Clare Revell

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

In memory of all the many train journeys to Scotland we did as kids. Southampton to Waterloo, across London to Kings Cross in a taxi, or on one memorable occasion the underground, then on the 'Aberdonian' to Dundee. Still not sure how Mum and Dad did it, with four kids, a pushchair, luggage, including a bag of welly boots.

We'd be treated to a drink from the buffet car, we'd have a 'train picnic', read, draw, sleep as we were all dosed up on travel pills, something I still have to do all these years later, and arrive in Scotland many hours later to be met by my aunt and all pile into her tiny car for the drive to her house. Dad would pick up the hire car the following morning. And then a week or two later, we'd do the journey in reverse.

CHAPTER 1

22 December

Splash!

Noel had managed to avoid puddles. Until now. Freezing cold water seeped around the top of his shoe, oozing into his sock. Great. Even if he did have time to buy new socks, which he didn't, the inside of his shoe would still be wet.

London during the Christmas season was meant to be exciting and invigorating, full of wonder, joy, and seasonal cheer, all enhanced by the myriad twinkling lights strung across the streets and hanging from lamp posts. Noel Donner had read enough books over his thirty odd years on this planet to know that.

Gaily decorated shop windows ought to shine with yet more fairy lights, snow spray winter scenes, fake snow, and trees surrounded by brightly wrapped presents. Children bundled up in hats, scarves, and mittens against the cold winter air pressed their faces against the glass, eyes glowing as their want/need/must-have-or-life-would-be-ruined lists grew ever longer. Carols played by the local charitable band that put out donation boxes would wend upwards from the street corner, mixing with the

heavenly scent of roasting chestnuts. And snow. Several feet of crisp white snow.

At least that's what all the seasonal books and films insisted. The reality, as Noel was in the process of discovering, was rather different.

Instead of softly whirling snow, the rain bucketed down in a never-ending torrent, puddles rising on the crowded pavements and in the gutters, stretching over the roads. The exhaust fumes from the buses, cars, and taxis sat bumper to bumper made his headache worse than it had on the nine-hour train journey from Aberdeen. And it seemed as if it would never be fully light today.

Dodging puddles and spray from traffic was fast becoming a new Olympic sport, one he normally excelled at. But having just stepped in a deep puddle, he'd gone from first to last place in an instant.

Each decorated shop window tried to outdo the next. A solitary chestnut vendor stood on a street corner, hiding under an umbrella, steam rising from the cart in front of him. The delicious aroma made Noel's mouth water. Maybe after the meeting he'd buy some. He didn't think his nervous stomach could cope with anything right now, nor would it be a good move to go into said meeting smelling of chestnuts. Not with so much riding on it.

Noel loved Christmas. Of course, sharing the holiday with his birthday meant double presents as a child, but now it was typically one present fit all. But this year Christmas didn't fill him with joy or excitement. Only dread. And no, it wasn't a big

birthday either. The big three-oh was behind him, and he was several years away from the next milestone.

This year as he trudged the streets of London with squelching, wet shoes, he felt nothing but trepidation. If this meeting went badly, he'd failed. Not just himself. He could cope with that, since he was used to rejection, even if it was more along the lines of the personal female variety of dismissal, rather than professional.

No. If he messed up this meeting, he'd fail his family, right along with the twenty-seven people they employed. God would work everything out in the end, but Noel just wanted the good now. Survival of the family business would be *good*. Losing it would be bad.

His new leather gloves did nothing against the cold December day. He clutched the messenger bag tight, even though the strap was across his body. He couldn't risk losing it. His bag contained the things his entire future hinged on.

Noel tugged his trilby farther onto his head. His sister called him old fashioned for wearing it and the long overcoat. But he didn't care. His outdated clothing was comfortable and as much a part of him as his faith. Besides the hat brim did a fantastic job of keeping this constant rain out of his eyes.

He paused outside the huge store that was the destination everything rested on and patted the bag containing his latest projects.

Lord, I put this entire meeting into Your hands. You know what's at stake here. You alone know the way You want the business to go forward. I can plan and go my way,

*but if You are not going the same way, I know it will fail.
Show me the path.*

Three deep breaths later, Noel entered the store. Christmas music filled the air, and it was much busier than he'd anticipated. The store was packed to the rafters with last minute shoppers, over-excited children, and harassed parents. He wandered slowly through the crowds, studying the assortment of toys, unable to find anything that even came close to what he was offering.

He allowed a modicum of hope to creep in as he took the glass lift to the offices on the fourth floor. This level was darker lit than the others, probably to discourage customers from inadvertently wandering up here.

The lift doors opened revealing a small room containing a single couch. A woman sat behind a desk with her gaze fixed to the cell phone in her hand. At least she wasn't filing her nails. Although this probably was the twenty-first century equivalent.

Noel stood for almost a minute before he cleared his throat. The receptionist finally looked up and noticed him. He offered her a smile, knowing he should at least be polite. Kill them with kindness as his grandmother would say. "Good morning. I have an appointment at twelve-thirty with Mr. Danes."

"Name?" the woman asked in a disinterested tone.

How many appointments did the store manager have at twelve-thirty? "Noel Donner."

"Take a seat. You can leave your coat and hat over there." She pointed to a series of hooks mounted on the

wall, and then muttered something into an intercom, before going back to her phone.

Noel bit his tongue as he turned away. He'd never met such an unprofessional individual. That woman should be glad she didn't work for him. He had a strict policy of not touching a phone unless on a break. He paid his employees to work, not read or update their social media. Everyone abided by it, mainly because of the example he set, and the fact that in an emergency his receptionist, Viv, would put out a call on the tannoy asking them to phone home.

He removed his hat and coat and hung them on the indicated rack, before perching on the edge of the couch, not wanting to get too comfortable. It had been a long trip south, and despite having every intention of sleeping on the overnight train, nerves and worry had kept him awake. His stomach grumbled, reminding him he'd skipped breakfast, and it was now past lunchtime. He pressed a hand to his middle, willing it to be quiet for the next wee while.

A door to one side opened, and a blond-haired man minced out. He wore a black suit with a red tie, which clashed with his pink shirt. He took Noel in a single glance. "Mr. Donner?"

Noel rose. "Yes." He held out a hand.

"Clifford Danes." The handshake was limp, weak, and dropped as soon as was polite. "Thank you for coming all this way. Come on through."

The hallway beyond the door was carpeted with many doors off each side. Was Noel meant to be impressed that the top boss, owner of the company,

had personally come to collect him? Admittedly, he was a lot younger than Noel had imagined.

Mr. Danes pushed open the door at the far end of the corridor.

The room was almost blindingly bright after the dimness of reception and the hallways. Noel blinked hard. A large oval table filled the room, tall floor to ceiling windows lined one wall overlooking the street.

Three people sat on one side of the table, backs to the rain spattered window. Two men and one woman, all with folders and blank notepaper in front of them. Had it been sunny, they would have been nothing more than intimidating silhouettes.

The man in the grey suit and blue tie, with salt and pepper hair rose. "Welcome to Toyland, Mr. Donner. I'm Clifford Danes, owner, this is Mark Shepherd, and Yari Ephron."

Both rose as they were introduced.

Noel leaned across the table and shook hands with the black man in a dark blue suit, and a woman, in a cream suit, with hazel-brown hair pulled back into a tight bun and the prettiest green eyes he'd seen in a while. Warmth from her hand encircled his cold one, making his fingers tingle. Her wide smile made her eyes sparkle. "Hello."

"And you've met my son, Clifford. He's learning the business from the ground up. Please, have a seat. Would you like some coffee?"

Right now, that was all he could smell, the room heavy with the aroma of expensive coffee. It might be a good idea. Maybe it would placate his stomach a little,

con it into thinking he was eating something. "Please."

Mr. Danes turned to his son. "Clifford, if you wouldn't mind pouring Mr. Donner a cup. Then, I'm sure Maxine on the desk can find you something to do."

The younger man nodded and scurried to do his father's bidding. Seconds later a cup of steaming black coffee appeared at Noel's elbow, before the man scurried from the room without offering milk or sugar.

"Thank you." Not wanting to appear ungrateful, Noel took a sip, managing to swallow the hot, bitter liquid, even though he would prefer it white and very sweet. His gaze was drawn back to the woman the other side of the desk. Yari, an unusual name, but a beautiful one. He shook himself. He didn't have time for his mind to go off on a tangent. He was here for one reason only.

She shot him a smile full of encouragement, and he managed a smile in return.

"So, Mr. Donner, what do you have to show us?"

Noel hadn't even had chance to draw breath, never mind answer, when a phone rang.

Mr. Danes glowered. "Turn it off. You know the rules in here."

Miss Ephron blushed and muted the call. "Sorry."

The phone vibrated on the table.

Miss Ephron reached for the handset again. This time she slid it straight into her pocket without looking at it. "Sorry."

Mr. Danes scowled at her. "Next time leave it in your office, while..." He was interrupted by a knock at

the door. "Come in."

The receptionist peeked around the edge of the door. "Sorry. There's a phone call at the main desk for Miss Ephron. Caller says it's an emergency. She also said she tried her mobile first, but there was no reply."

The colour drained from Miss Ephron's face as she rose shakily to her feet.

"We're in a meeting," Mr. Danes snapped.

"I know. I'm sorry. I'll be as quick as I can. If it's an emergency, it can't wait." She tugged her phone from her pocket, the last vestige of colour fading as she read the screen as she trotted to the door. "Put the call through to my office, please, Maxine."

Noel didn't even want to guess at what the emergency was but sent up a quick prayer for the woman anyway.

"Mr. Donner, please continue."

He pulled his thoughts back, put the messenger bag on the table, and opened it. "I have two things I've brought with me today. The first is Noah's Ark."

"There's nothing new in that," Mr. Danes frowned. "Noah's Arks have been played with for decades if not centuries."

Noel carefully took the ark from its box and unwrapped it from the layers of bubble wrap and tissue protecting it. "This one is quite different. Our arks and contents are entirely hand carved, making each set unique. I made my first set when I was ten and the basic principle hasn't changed much since then."

Mr. Danes looked unimpressed. "Hmm."

"This is the proposal, product description, and

costs for both the ark and the other item." Noel slid the specifications across the table. Then, he carefully pulled the second item from his bag. "This one is something totally new."

He placed the wooden box on the table and gently opened the front. "I believe this is quite unique and special." As he turned on the box, Mr. Danes' eyes lit up with interest. Perhaps he really had a chance here.

CHAPTER 2

Yari closed the door to the office, wishing she could let the door slam, rather than wasting valuable seconds to close it quietly. But that would make her even more unprofessional than leaving the meeting already had. She scurried down the corridor to her own office. The words of the texts, all in capitals, screamed at her.

*Yari answer your phone. I've
rung an ambulance. This is
an emergency! Ring me now!*

She didn't even sit before snatching up the old-fashioned desk phone and hitting the flashing number two button. "I'm here. What's happened?"

"It's Dad. There's been an accident." Her mother's strained voice sent Yari's heart and stomach plummeting.

"What happened?"

"He was cutting down an overhanging branch in the garden and fell off the ladder. I called an ambulance. You need to cancel everything and be here."

Conflicted, Yari coiled her fingers in the phone cord. She didn't have the best relationship with her

father and now this. "How badly hurt is he? You know I have plans..."

Her mother hissed in displeasure. "How selfish can you be? It's not good. I really think you should change your *plans* and come home. I know you don't get on, but he's your father and..." She let the sentence hang for a second or two. "The others are coming. I must go. The ambulance is here."

To back up her mother's words, a siren echoed down the phone. "Please Yari...come home, put things right while you can."

She hadn't meant to be selfish. This was the first time in her life she was doing something for herself over the Christmas break, rather than what was expected of her. "I'll call you later, Mum. Soon as I can, promise. Give him my love. Love you. Text me when you know something."

The call ended. Yari put down the phone and stared at the wall opposite her, scrunching up her nose and blinking the tears from her eyes. Her mother had been trying to talk her out of going away for Christmas since she'd booked the trip to Finland back in June. And now? OK, her father wouldn't fall from a ladder deliberately. But the timing was a little off.

Lord, I don't mean to be selfish about this, but I've been looking forward to this trip for months and this wouldn't be the first time something like this has happened. Here I am, complaining again already. Sorry. Let him be OK.

She ought to go home. Even if it was the last place she wanted to be. Especially if the others were going. She shot her brother, Hosea, a quick text. Perhaps the

ambulance would take Dad to the same hospital he worked in.

*Heard about Dad. Do you
have any more info? Let me
know if you hear anything.*

She scribbled a note on her desk to remind her to cancel the flight, ski passes, and her ski hire. Maybe she could get a flight to her parents instead as she didn't have use of her car at the present time. If the others were coming, maybe someone could pick her up from the airport. If she weren't in this meeting, she'd do it now. Still, she was leaving work early today, supposedly for a girls' skiing trip. Plenty of time to find a flight later.

She closed her eyes, mentally calming and trying to get back into work mode. At least she didn't need to ask for time off, as it was already booked. It'd been hard enough getting the time off for an eight-day Finland trip, followed by New Year with her parents, as apparently, she was irreplaceable. The only reason the store was closed on Christmas Day, was because of a legal loophole Mr. Danes was unable to get out of. It was even open Sundays for the whole six hours the trading laws allowed. Not that she worked them, she'd insisted on having that as one of her two days off a week when he offered her the job, making sure it was written into her contract in case he changed her hours.

Yari stared at the seascape painting on the opposite wall, longing to be able to walk along those cliffs and put all her problems aside. But she had a

meeting to get back to, with... Had she imagined the almost clichéd electrical touch when they'd shaken hands? His short brown hair, clipped beard, gorgeous hazel eyes, firm handshake, along with the cut of his suit made him extremely handsome.

Taking a deep breath, she dropped her phone into her pocket and headed back into the corridor, grounding herself the only way she knew worked—prayer. *Lord, please let Dad be OK. The last words we exchanged were angry. He wanted me to forget my trip and go to stay with them. The first year I have ever done something different and...I'm sure he didn't deliberately fall out of the tree, even if it might seem that way. Be with the medical staff as they treat him. It sounds bad.*

"Miss Ephron, are you all right?"

Yari glanced up to see Maxine in front of her, phone still glued to her hand. She smiled and nodded, not about to spill her dilemma to the office gossip. It would be as if she'd plastered it all over social media. "I'm fine. I should probably get back in there."

Straightening her shoulders, she walked down the hallway, struggling to get her mind back on work. The right thing to do would be to give her apologies and leave now. Maybe she'd ask Maxine to do that on her behalf. No, that wasn't fair. She needed to do this.

Yari slipped back into the meeting and looked at her boss, holding the door open. "I'm sorry about that."

"Close the door. Everything sorted?" Mr. Danes asked in a nasty tone of voice.

Oh, he wasn't happy. She'd probably get

reprimanded before long. All the more reason to leave now.

"Not really. I need to leave."

"You need to sit down. And you can make phone calls on your own time in future, unless it's company related. You're taking enough time off as it is, not to mention leaving early today."

Yari dropped into her seat, once more feeling two inches tall and five years old. Why was she still here? She should have just left and not come back. Why didn't she just go with her gut and quit her job anyway? She'd wanted to discuss the idea with her friends, but maybe she'd just make up her own mind. The phone in her pocket vibrated several times.

She ignored it, opening the folder in front of her, ready to make her pitch for the advertising she'd planned.

Mr. Danes shoved all the papers on the desk into a red folder. "Well, thank you for coming to see us, Mr. Donner. We'll let you know. But as I said, mass marketing is the way to go. Hand carving went out with the ark, if you'll pardon the pun."

Yari jerked her head upwards. "I have a few questions and my own presentation. I haven't had a chance to—"

"You weren't here, Miss Ephron," Mr. Danes spoke over her. "Miss it, miss out, remember?"

Her cheeks burned and once again he'd made her feel like a child. She glanced at Mr. Donner and then lowered her gaze to the table.

He slid everything back into his messenger bag.

"Thank you for your time."

"Mr. Shepherd will see you out."

"When will you let me know?" Mr. Donner asked. "We're about close for the Christmas break, and I'd like to know before then if possible."

"Well, I don't know..." Mr. Danes huffed as he pointedly glanced at the expensive watch on his left wrist, indicating the meeting was over, while making it look as he were being rushed into a decision. "As it's Christmas, I'll let you know by three o'clock this afternoon. Good day, Mr. Donner."

Before the man could say another word, he was hurried from the room.

Yari turned to face her boss, unable to stay silent any longer. "That was incredibly rude. You could at least have let me have my say and told him about the ad campaign I spent hours working on."

"I was rude?" Mr. Danes yelled. "You left the meeting to take a phone call. Do you have any idea how unprofessional that is? And texts. Two calls and two texts. I don't care what your emergency was. You don't walk out of a meeting, and then expect to come back in and carry on regardless."

It was more like ten texts, but Yari decided it was probably best not to say that. Or add how unprofessional it was to berate an employee in front of other people. "Then perhaps you should take Maxine's phone away from her. You probably didn't listen to a word Mr. Donner said. Hand carving is what makes those toys unique. Each set will be totally different from the next, which will be a selling point. Have you