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BESTSELLING AUTHOR

David
Baldacci

the
christmas
train

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chapter one

Tom Langdon was a journalist, a globetrotting one, because it was in his blood to roam widely. Where others saw only instability and fear in life, Tom felt graced by an embracing independence. He'd spent the bulk of his career in foreign lands covering wars, insurrections, famines, pestilence, virtually every earthly despair. His goal had been relatively simple: He had wanted to change the world by calling attention to its wrongs. And he did love adventure.

However, after chronicling all these horrific events and still seeing the conditions of humanity steadily worsen, he'd returned to America filled with disappointment. Seeking an antidote to his melancholy he'd started writing drearily light stories for ladies' magazines, home-decorating journals, garden digests, and the like. However, after memorializing the wonders of compost and the mir-

acle that was do-it-yourself wood flooring, he wasn't exactly fulfilled.

It was nearing Christmas, and Tom's most pressing dilemma was getting from the East Coast to Los Angeles for the holidays. He had an age-old motivation for the journey; in LA was his girlfriend, Lelia Gibson. She'd started out as a movie actress, but after years of appearing in third-rate horror films she'd begun doing voiceover work. Now, instead of being cinematically butchered for her daily bread, she supplied the character voices for a variety of enormously popular Saturday-morning cartoons. In the children's television industry it was accepted that no one belted out the voices of goofy woodland creatures with greater flair and versatility than golden-piped Lelia Gibson. As proof, she had a shelf full of awards, an outrageously large income, and a healthy share of syndication rights.

Tom and Lelia had hit it off on an overnight flight from Southeast Asia to the States. At first he thought it might have been all the liquor they drank, but when that buzz burned off a couple hours out of LA, she was still beautiful and interesting—if a little ditzy and eccentric—and she still seemed attracted to him. He stayed over in California and they got to know each other even better. She visited him on the East Coast, and they'd been a comfortable if informal bi-coastal item ever since.

It might seem strange that a successful Hollywood lady would go for a nomadic gent who ran through passports like water, could spout off funny if lewd phrases in thirty languages, and never would be financially secure. Yet Lelia had tired of the men in her circle. As she diplo-

matically explained it once, they were complete and total lying scum and unreliable to boot. Tom was a newsman, she said, so at least he occasionally dealt with the truth. She also loved his rugged good looks. He took that to mean the deep lines etched on his face from reporting in windswept desert climates with bullets flying. In fact his face was more often than not down *in* the sand in observance of local safety regulations.

She listened with rapt attention to Tom's tales of covering major stories around the globe. For his part, he observed with admiration the professional way Lelia went about her loony-voice career. And they didn't have to live together year-round—a decided advantage, Tom believed, over the complex hurdles facing couples who actually cohabitated.

He'd been briefly married but had never had kids. Today his ex-wife wouldn't accept a collect call from him if he were hemorrhaging to death on the street. He was forty-one and had just lost his mother to a stroke; his father had been dead for several years. Being an only child, he was truly alone now, and that had made him introspective. Half his time on earth was gone, and all he had to show for it was a failed marriage, no offspring, an informal alliance with a California voiceover queen, a truckload of newsprint, and some awards. By any reasonable measure, it was a miserable excuse for an existence.

He'd had an opportunity for a wonderful life with another woman but the relationship had, inexplicably, fallen apart. He now fully understood that not marrying Eleanor Carter would forever stand as the major mistake of his

life. Yet, ever the man of action, and wanderlust upon him once more, Tom was taking the train to LA for Christmas.

Why the train, one might ask, when there were perfectly good flights that would get him there in a fraction of the time? Well, a guy can only take so many of those airport security search wands venturing into sacrosanct places, or requests to drop trousers in front of strangers, or ransacking of carry-on bags, before blowing a big one. The fact was, he'd blown a big one at La Guardia Airport. Not merely a nuclear meltdown, his detonation resembled something closer to the utter destruction of Pompeii.

He'd just flown in from Italy after researching yet another bit of fluff, this time on wine-making, and imbibing more of the subject matter than he probably should have to get through the ordeal of crash-learning soil diversification and vine rot. As a result, he was tired, cranky, and hung over. He'd slept for three hours at a friend's apartment in New York before heading to the airport to catch a flight to Texas. He'd been given an assignment to write about teen beauty pageants there, which he'd accepted because he enjoyed blood sports as much as the next person.

At the security gate at La Guardia, the search wand had smacked delicate things of Tom's person that it really had no business engaging, socially or otherwise. Meanwhile, another security person managed to dump every single thing from Tom's bag onto the conveyor belt. He watched helplessly as very personal possessions rolled by in front of suddenly interested strangers.

To put a fine finish on this very special moment, he was then informed that a major warning flag had been raised regarding his ID, his hair color, his clothing choice, or the

size of his nose. (They were never really clear on that actually.) Thus, instead of flying to Dallas he'd be enjoying the company of a host of FBI, DEA, CIA, and NYPD personnel for an unspecified period of time. The phrase "five-to-ten" was even bandied about. Well, that, coupled with his exploited physical parts, was his absolute limit. So, the lava poured forth.

Langdon was six-feet-two and carried about 220 pounds of fairly hard muscle, and real honest-to-God steam was coming out his ears. His eruption involved language he ordinarily wouldn't use within four miles of any church as he launched himself at the security team, grabbed their infamous search wand, and snapped it right in half. He wasn't proud of his violent act that day, although the rousing cheers from some of the other passengers who had heard and seen what had happened to him did manage to lift his spirits a bit.

Thankfully, the magistrate Tom appeared before had recently endured airport security of an extremely overzealous nature, and when he gave his testimony, she and Tom shared a knowing look. Also, the red flag raised at the security gate had been, *shockingly*, a mistake. Thus Tom only received a stern warning, with instructions to enroll in anger-management classes, which he planned to do as soon as his uncontrollable urge to maim the fellow with the search wand subsided. However, the other consequence of the blowup was that he'd been banned from placing his miserable person on any air carrier that flew within the continental United States for the next two years. He hadn't thought they could do that, but then he was shown the appropriate statutory power in the micro-

scopic print of the airline's legal manifesto under the equally tiny section titled "Lost Luggage Liability Limit—Five Dollars."

And that's when he had his epiphany. Being unable to fly, his usual and necessary way of traveling, was an omen; it had to be a sign of something divine, something important. Thus he was going to take the train to LA. He was going to write a story about it, traveling by rail from sea to shining sea during the Christmas season. He had a grand motivation, beyond spending the holiday with Lelia. Tom Langdon was one of the Elmira, New York, Langdons. To those with a keen knowledge of literary history, the Elmira Langdons brought to mind Olivia Langdon. Olivia, besides having been a lovely, resilient, if ultimately tragic person in her own right, gained lasting fame by marrying the loquacious orator, irascible personality, and prolific scribe known to his friends as Samuel Clemens, but otherwise known to the world and to history as Mark Twain.

Tom had known of this familial connection since he was old enough to block-letter his name. It had always inspired him to earn his living with words. For Twain had also been a journalist, starting at the *Territorial Enterprise* in Virginia City, Nevada, before going on to fame, fortune, bankruptcy, and then fame and fortune again.

Tom, for his part, had been imprisoned twice by terrorist groups and very nearly killed half a dozen times covering a variety of wars, skirmishes, coups, and revolutions that "civilized" societies used to settle their differences. He'd seen hope replaced with terror, terror replaced with anger, anger replaced with—well, nothing,

for the anger always seemed to stick around and make trouble for everybody.

Though he'd won major awards, he believed he wasn't a writer with the ability to create memorable prose that would stand tall and strong over the eons. Not like Mark Twain. Yet to have even a marginal connection to the creator of *Huckleberry Finn*, *Life on the Mississippi*, and *The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg*, a man whose work was timeless, made Tom feel wonderfully, if vicariously, special.

Shortly before he died, Tom's father had asked his son to finish something that, according to legend, Twain never had. As his father told it, Mark Twain, who probably traveled more than any man of his time, had taken a transcontinental railroad trip over the Christmas season during the latter part of his life, his so-called dark years. Apparently he'd wanted to see some good in the world amid all the tragedy he and his family had suffered. He'd supposedly taken extensive notes about the trip but for some reason had never distilled them into a story. That's what Tom's father had asked him to do: take the train ride, write the story, finish what Twain never had, and do the Langdon side of the family proud.

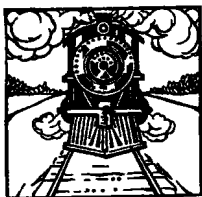
At the time Tom had just finished a frantic twenty-hour plane odyssey from overseas to see his dad before he passed. When Tom heard his mumbled request, he was struck dumb. Travel across the country on a train during Christmas, to finish something Mark Twain *allegedly* hadn't? He had thought his father delirious with his final suffering, and so his dad's wish went unfulfilled. Yet now, because he could no longer fly in the Lower Forty-eight

unless he was fingerprinted and shackled, he was finally going to take that trip for his old man, and maybe for himself too.

Over almost three thousand miles of America, he was going to see if he could find himself. He was doing it during the Christmas season because that was supposed to be a time of renewal and, for him perhaps, a last chance to clean up whatever mess he'd made of himself. At least he was going to try.

However, had he known what life-altering event would happen to him barely two hours after he boarded the train, he might have opted to walk to California instead.

the capitol limited



Washington, D.C., to Chicago

chapter two



As he got out of the cab in front of Union Station in Washington, D.C., where his train trip would begin, Tom reflected on the few rail journeys he'd taken in the United States. They'd all been along the Northeast Corridor—the routes between D.C., New York, and Boston—on the newest Amtrak equipment, the Acela high-speed trains. Fast, beautiful, and spacious, these trains were easily in the class of their European cousins. They had cool glass doors between train cars that slid open when one approached, reminding Tom of the portal on the bridge of the Starship *Enterprise*. Indeed, the first time Tom was on the Acela and those doors slid open he started looking around for a Vulcan in a Starfleet dress uniform.

Tom had reservations in a sleeping-car compartment on the Capitol Limited train that would carry him from D.C. to Chicago. He actually had to take two trains to get to the West Coast. The Capitol Limited constituted the

first leg, and the venerable Southwest Chief would handle the second and much longer jaunt. The Capitol Limited had a storied history, being part of the fabled Baltimore and Ohio line. The B&O was the first common-carrier train company in the United States, and it also held the distinction of being the first to actually haul people.

The "Cap," as the Limited was affectionately known, was always considered the most stylish and sophisticated long-distance train in the country. It had once boasted lobster Newburg on the menu and china and real glass in the dining room, and fancy domed train cars out of which to see the countryside roll by. It also had Pullman cars with legendary Pullman car attendants who made, it was said, tips of enormous proportion. In its long history the Cap had carried kings and princes and presidents and movie stars and titans of industry from Chicago to D.C. and back again, and the stories that poured forth from these trips constituted a legendary part of railroad lore. Tom could have had a lucrative career as a society reporter simply covering the ribald antics of train passengers on that route.

In his youth, because of the family connection and his father's great interest in the man, Tom had immersed himself in Mark Twain's life, work, and wit. In preparation for his transcontinental trip, he'd reread *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain's account of a five-month journey on the steamship *Quaker City* to Europe and the Holy Land. He thought it one of the funniest, most irreverent travel books ever written. If one could imagine Sam Clemens—then a rawboned man fresh from the Wild West, very removed from the world-famous, sophisticated man of

letters he'd become—in the company of a boatload of pious Midwesterners on their first sojourn to the Old World, the outrageous possibilities became readily apparent. Tom wasn't going abroad, but in many ways he felt like a pilgrim traveler in his own country, because, ironically, he'd seen far more of the rest of the world than he had of America.

The Capitol Limited left D.C. at precisely 4:05 P.M., made twelve stops between Washington, D.C., and Chicago, and arrived the following morning in the Windy City punctually at 9:19 A.M. Tom had a layover in Chicago until that afternoon where he'd board the Southwest Chief and sail on to LA. It was a good plan and it got his juices going in a way that articles detailing the best times to prune one's holly trees or pump out one's septic tank never had.

He picked up his tickets, checked his ski equipment with the baggage agent—Lelia and he were going to the elegantly chic slopes of Tahoe for Christmas—and observed the grandeur of Union Station, which, before it was revitalized, came very close to falling victim to the wrecking ball. In the late 1960s and '70s it had become the National Visitors Center—basically a broken slide show in a big hole that no one ever visited. After that \$30 million misfire, the National Visitors Center with no visitors was quietly closed except for one tiny and leaky part of the building where one could, of all things, actually board a train.

Tom's father, returning from the Second World War in 1945, had come through this Romanesque-style train terminal on his way home. As Tom walked through the lav-

ishly sculpted and adorned marble halls, he imagined himself retracing his father's optimistic steps back to the safety of civilian life after helping to save the world from tyranny with nothing more than a gun and a young man's courage. It seemed fitting that Tom should start his journey here since his father had ended one life and begun another through this portal. The son could only hope to do as much.

Tom took a few minutes to look at the enormous model Christmas train set up in the main hall's West End. The area was packed with children and adults doubtless intrigued by the miniature metal creations racing through elaborately built town and country sets. Trains had a nostalgic magnetism that was undeniable, even for the many Americans who'd never even been on one. In this spirit, Tom found himself smiling broadly as the little cars whizzed by on the tiny tracks.

The train would be boarding shortly, so he headed to the departure area. Even though some train stations had recently implemented baggage screening, a person could still literally arrive at the last minute and make their ride. There were no security checkpoints, no nosy wands, no inane questions about whether you'd let a complete stranger load a small thermonuclear device in your carry-on bag while you were in the men's room, as though you wouldn't have volunteered such information on your own. You just jumped on and went. In the modern world of endless rules, the simplicity of it all was actually very refreshing.

Tom sat down in the Cap waiting area and began studying his fellow passengers. When he had ridden the