

THE NUMBER ONE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

DAVID BALDACCI

One Summer

When the love of your life has gone, how can you start again?



DAVID BALDACCI

One Summer



MACMILLAN



First published 2011 by Grand Central Publishing, USA

This edition published 2011 by Macmillan
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-230-75328-0

Copyright © 2011 by Columbus Rose, Ltd.

The right of David Baldacci to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

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

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or
transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written
permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized
act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal
prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The Macmillan Group has no responsibility for the information provided by
any author websites whose address you obtain from this book ('author websites').

The inclusion of author website addresses in this book does not constitute
an endorsement by or association with us of such sites or the content,
products, advertising or other materials presented on such sites.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Printed in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

Visit www.panmacmillan.com to read more about all our books
and to buy them. You will also find features, author interviews and
news of any author events, and you can sign up for e-newsletters
so that you're always first to hear about our new releases.

One Summer

David Baldacci is a worldwide bestselling novelist. With his books published in over 45 different languages and in more than 80 countries, and with over 110 million copies in print, he is one of the world's favourite storytellers. His family foundation, the Wish You Well Foundation, a non-profit organization, works to eliminate illiteracy across America. Still a resident of his native Virginia, he invites you to visit him at www.DavidBaldacci.com, and his foundation at www.WishYouWellFoundation.org, and to look into its programme to spread books across America at www.FeedingBodyandMind.com.

ALSO BY DAVID BALDACCI

The Camel Club series

The Camel Club

The Collectors

Stone Cold

Divine Justice

Hell's Corner

Sean King and Michelle Maxwell series

Split Second

Hour Game

Simple Genius

First Family

Shaw series

The Whole Truth

Deliver Us From Evil

Other novels

True Blue

Absolute Power

Total Control

The Winner

The Simple Truth

Saving Faith

Wish You Well

Last Man Standing

The Christmas Train

*To Spencer, my little girl all grown up.
And I couldn't be prouder of the
person you've become.*

I

Jack Armstrong sat up in the secondhand hospital bed that had been wedged into a corner of the den in his home in Cleveland. A father at nineteen, he and his wife, Lizzie, had conceived their second child when he'd been home on leave from the army. Jack had been in the military for five years when the war in the Middle East started. He'd survived his first tour in Afghanistan and earned a Purple Heart for taking one in the arm. After that he'd weathered several tours of duty in Iraq, one of which included the destruction of his Humvee while he was still inside. That injury had won him his second Purple. And he had a Bronze Star on top of that for rescuing three ambushed grunts from his unit and nearly getting killed in the process. After all that, here he was, dying fast in his cheaply paneled den in Ohio's Rust Belt.

His goal was simple: just hang on until Christmas. He sucked greedily on the oxygen coming from the line in his nose. The converter that stayed in the corner of the small room was on maximum production, and Jack knew that one

day soon it would be turned off because he'd be dead. Before Thanksgiving he was certain he could last another month. Now Jack was not sure he could make another day.

But he would.

I have to.

In high school the six-foot-two, good-looking Jack had varsity lettered in three sports, quarterbacked the football team, and had his pick of the ladies. But from the first time he'd seen Elizabeth "Lizzie" O'Toole, it was all over for him in the falling-in-love department. His heart had been won perhaps even before he quite realized it. His mouth curled into a smile at the memory of seeing her for the first time. Her family had come from South Carolina. Jack had often wondered why the O'Tooles had moved to Cleveland, where there was no ocean, a lot less sun, a lot more snow and ice, and not a palm tree in sight. Later, he'd learned it was because of a job change for Lizzie's father.

She'd come into class that first day, tall, with long auburn hair and vibrant green eyes, her face already mature and lovely. They had started going together in high school and had never been separated since, except long enough for Jack to fight in two wars.

"Jack; Jack honey?"

Lizzie was crouched down in front of him. In her hand was a syringe. She was still beautiful, though her looks had taken on a fragile edge. There were dark circles under her eyes and recently stamped worry lines on her face. The glow had gone from her skin, and her body was harder, less supple than it had been. Jack was the one dying, but in a way she was too.

"It's time for your pain meds."

He nodded, and she shot the drugs directly into an access

line cut right below his collarbone. That way the medicine flowed directly into his bloodstream and started working faster. Fast was good when the pain felt like every nerve in his body was being incinerated.

After she finished, Lizzie sat and hugged him. The doctors had a long name for what was wrong with him, one that Jack still could not pronounce or even spell. It was rare, they had said; one in a million. When he'd asked about his odds of survival, the docs had looked at each other before one finally answered.

"There's really nothing we can do. I'm sorry."

"Do the things you've always wanted to do," another had advised him, "but never had the chance."

"I have three kids and a mortgage," Jack had shot back, still reeling from this sudden death sentence. "I don't have the luxury of filling out some end-of-life bucket list."

"How long?" he'd finally asked, though part of him didn't really want to know.

"You're young and strong," said one. "And the disease is in its early stages."

Jack had survived the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. He could maybe hold on and see his oldest child graduate from college. "So how long?" he'd asked again.

The doctor said, "Six months. Maybe eight if you're lucky."

Jack did not feel very lucky.

He vividly remembered the morning he started feeling not quite right. It was an ache in his forearm and a stab of pain in his right leg. He was a building contractor by trade, so aches and pains were to be expected. But things soon carried to a new level. His limbs would grow tired from three hours of physical labor as opposed to ten. The stabs of pain became

more frequent, and his balance began to deteriorate. His back finally couldn't make it up the ladder with the stacks of shingles. Then it hurt to carry his youngest son around after ten minutes. Then the fire in his nerves started, and his legs felt like an old man's. And one morning he woke up and his lungs were like balloons filled with water. Everything had accelerated after that, as though his body had simply given way to whatever was invading it.

His youngest child, Jack Jr., whom everyone called Jackie, toddled in and climbed on his dad's lap, resting his head against his father's sunken chest. Jackie's hair was long and inky black, curled up at the ends. His eyes were the color of toast; his thick eyebrows nearly met in the middle, like a burly woolen thread. Jackie had been their little surprise. Their other kids were much older.

Jack slowly slid his arm around his two-year-old son. Chubby fingers gripped his forearm, and warm breath touched his skin. It felt like the pierce of needles, but Jack simply gritted his teeth and didn't move his arm because there wouldn't be many more of these embraces. He slowly turned his head and looked out the window, where the snow was steadily falling. South Carolina and palm trees had nothing on Cleveland when it came to the holidays. It was truly beautiful.

He took his wife's hand.

"Christmas," Jack said in a wheezy voice. "I'll be there."

"Promise?" said Lizzie, her voice beginning to crack.

"Promise."

2

Jack awoke, looked around, and didn't know where he was. He could feel nothing, wasn't even sure if he was still breathing.

Am I dead? Was this it?

"Pop-pop," said Jackie as he slid next to his father on the bed. Jack turned and saw the chubby cheeks and light brown eyes.

Jack stroked his son's hair. Good, thick strands, like he used to have before the disease had stolen that too. Curious, Jackie tried to pull out the oxygen line from his father's nose, but he redirected his son's hand and cupped it with his own.

Lizzie walked in with his meds and shot them into the access line. An IV drip took care of Jack's nutrition and hydration needs. Solid foods were beyond him now.

"I just dropped the kids off at school," she told him.

"Mikki?" said Jack.

Lizzie made a face. Their daughter, Michelle, would be turning sixteen next summer, and her rebellious streak had been going strong since she'd become a teenager. She was into playing her guitar and working on her music; wearing junky

clothes, sneaking out at night, and ignoring the books. "At least she showed up for the math test. I suppose actually passing it would've been asking too much. On the bright side, she received an A in music theory."

Jackie got down and ran into the other room, probably for a toy. Jack watched him go with an unwieldy mixture of pride and sorrow. He would never see his son as a man. He would never even see him start kindergarten. That cut against the natural order of things. But it was what it was.

Jack had experienced an exceptionally long phase of denial after being told he had little time left. That was partially because he had always been a survivor. A rocky childhood and two wars had not done him in, so he had initially felt confident that despite the doctors' fatal verdict, his disease was beatable. As time went by, however, and his body continued to fail, it had become clear that this battle was not winnable. It had reached a point where making the most of his time left was more important to him than trying to beat his head against an impenetrable wall. Most significantly, he wanted his kids' memories of his final days to be as positive as possible. Jack had concluded that if he had to die prematurely, that was about as good a way to do so as there was. It beat being depressed and making everyone else around him miserable, waiting for him to die.

Before he'd gotten sick, Jack had talked to his daughter many times about making good life choices, about the importance of school, but nothing seemed to make a difference to the young woman. There was a clear disconnect now between father and daughter. When she'd been a little girl, Mikki had unconditionally loved her dad, wanted to be around him all the time. Now he rarely saw her. To her, it seemed to Jack, he might as well have been already dead.

"Mikki seems lost around me," he said slowly.

Lizzie sat next to him, held his hand. "She's scared and confused, honey. Some of it has to do with her age. Most of it has to do with..."

"Me." Jack couldn't look at her when he made this admission.

"She and I have talked about it. Well, I talked and she didn't say much. She's a smart kid, but she really doesn't understand why this is happening, Jack. And her defense mechanism is to just detach herself from it. It's not the healthiest way to cope with things, though."

"I can understand," said Jack.

She looked at him. "Because of your dad?"

He nodded and rubbed her hand with his fingers, his eyes moistening as he remembered his father's painful death. He took several long pulls on the oxygen. "If I could change things, I would, Lizzie."

She rested her body next to his, wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and kissed him. When she spoke, her voice was husky and seemed right on the edge of failing. "Jack, this is hard on everyone. But it's hardest on you. You have been so brave; no one could have handled—" She couldn't continue. Lizzie laid her head next to his and wept softly. Jack held her with what little strength he had left.

"I love you, Lizzie. No matter what happens, nothing will ever change that."

He'd been sleeping in the hospital bed because he couldn't make it up the stairs to their bedroom even with assistance. He'd fought against that the hardest because as his life dwindled away he had desperately wanted to feel Lizzie's warm body against his. It was another piece of his life taken from him, like he was being dismantled, brick by brick.

And I am, brick by brick.

After a few minutes, she composed herself and wiped her eyes. "Cory is playing the Grinch in the class play at the school on Christmas Eve, remember?"

Jack nodded. "I remember."

"I'll film it for you."

Cory was the middle child, twelve years old and the ham in the family.

Jack smiled and said, "Grinch!"

Lizzie smiled back, then said, "I've got a conference call in an hour, and then I'll be in the kitchen working after I give Jackie his breakfast."

She'd become a telecommuter when Jack had gotten ill. When she had to go out, a neighbor would come over or Lizzie's parents would stop by to help.

After Lizzie left, Jack sat up, slowly reached under the pillow, and pulled out the calendar and pen. He looked at the dates in December, all of which had been crossed out up to December twentieth. Over three decades of life, marriage, fatherhood, defending his country, and working hard, it had come down to him marking off the few days left. He looked out the window and to the street beyond. The snow had stopped, but he'd heard on the news that another wintry blast was expected, with more ice than snow.

There was a knock at the door, and a few moments later Sammy Duvall appeared. He was in his early sixties, with longish salt-and-pepper hair and a trim beard. Sammy was as tall as Jack, but leaner, though his arms and shoulders bulged with muscles from all the manual labor he'd done. He was far stronger than most men half his age and tougher than anyone Jack had ever met. He'd spent twenty years in the military and

fought in Vietnam and done some things after that around the world that he never talked about. A first-rate, self-taught carpenter and all-around handyman, Sammy was the reason Jack had joined the service. After Jack left the army, he and Sammy had started the contracting business. Lacking a family of his own, Sammy had adopted the Armstrongs.

The military vets shared a glance, and then Sammy looked over all the equipment helping to keep his friend alive. He shook his head slightly and his mouth twitched. This was as close as stoic Sammy ever came to showing emotion.

"How's work?" Jack asked, and then he took a long pull of oxygen.

"No worries. Stuff's getting done and the money's coming in."

Jack knew that Sammy had been completing all the jobs pretty much on his own and then bringing all the payments to Lizzie. "At least half of that money is yours, Sammy. You're doing all the work."

"I got my Uncle Sam pension, and it's more than I need. That changes, I'll let you know."

Sammy lived in a converted one-car garage with his enormous Bernese mountain dog, Sam Jr. His needs were simple, his wants apparently nonexistent.

Sammy combed Jack's hair and even gave him a shave. Then the friends talked for a while. At least Sammy said a few words and Jack listened. The rest of the time they sat in silence. Jack didn't mind; just being with Sammy made him feel better.

After Sammy left, Jack lifted the pen and crossed out December twenty-first. That was being optimistic, Jack knew, since the day had really just begun. He put the calendar and pen away.

And then it happened.

He couldn't breathe. He sat up, convulsing, but that just made it worse. He could feel his heart racing, his lungs squeezing, his face first growing red and then pale as the oxygen left his body and nothing replenished it.

December twenty-first, he thought, *my last day*.

"Pop-pop?"

Jack looked up to see his son holding the end of the oxygen line that attached to the converter. He held it up higher, as though he were giving it back to his dad.

"Jackie!"

A horrified Lizzie appeared in the doorway, snatched the line from her son's hand, and rushed to reattach the oxygen line to the converter. A few moments later, the oxygen started to flow into the line and Jack fell back on the bed, breathing hard, trying to fill his lungs.

Lizzie raced past her youngest son and was by Jack's side in an instant. "Oh my God, Jack, oh my God." Her whole body was trembling.

He held up his hand to show he was okay.

Lizzie whirled around and snapped, "That was bad, Jackie, bad."

Jackie's face crumbled, and he started to bawl.

She snatched up Jackie and carried him out. The little boy was struggling to free himself, staring at Jack over her shoulder, reaching his arms out to his father. His son's look was pleading.

"Pop-pop," wailed Jackie.

The tears trickled down Jack's face as his son's cries faded away. But then Jack heard Lizzie sobbing and pictured her crying her heart out and wondering what the hell she'd done to deserve all this.

Sometimes, Jack thought, living was far harder than dying.

3

Jack awoke from a nap late the next day in time to see his daughter opening the front door, guitar case in hand. He motioned to her to come see him. She closed the door and dutifully trudged to his room.

Mikki had auburn hair like her mother's. However, she had dyed it several different colors, and Jack had no idea what it would be called now. She was shooting up in height, her legs long and slender and her hips and bosom filling out. Though she acted like she was totally grown up now, her face was caught in that time thread that was firmly past the little-girl stage but not yet a woman. She would be a junior in high school next year. Where had the time gone?

"Yeah, Dad?" she said, not looking at him.

He thought about what to say. In truth, they didn't have much to talk about. Even when he'd been healthy, their lives lately had taken separate paths. *That was my fault*, he thought. *Not hers.*

"Your A." He took a long breath, tried to smile.