

DAVID BALDACCI

A NOVEL BY THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *SAVING FAITH*



WISH YOU WELL

**DAVID
BALDACCI**



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AUTHOR'S NOTE



The story in *Wish You Well* is fictional, but the setting, other than the place names, is not. I have been to those mountains, and also was fortunate to grow up with two women who called the high rock home for many years. My maternal grandmother, Cora Rose, lived with my family in Richmond for the last ten years of her life, but spent the prior six decades or so on the top of a mountain in southwestern Virginia. At her knee I learned about that land and the life there. My mother, the youngest of ten, lived on that mountain for the first seventeen years of her life, and while I was growing up she passed along to me many fascinating stories from her youth. Indeed, both the hardships and the adventures experienced by the characters in the novel would not be unfamiliar to her.

In addition to the stories I listened to as a child, I spent considerable time interviewing my mother in preparation for writing *Wish You Well*, and it was an enlightening time for me, on many levels. Once we reach adulthood, most of us assume we know all there is to know about our parents and other family members. However, if you take the time to ask questions and actually listen to the answers, you may find there is still much to learn about people so close to you. Thus this novel is, in part, an oral history of both where and how my mother grew up. Oral histories are a dying art, which is sad indeed,

for they show appropriate respect for the lives and experiences of those who have come before. And, just as important, they document those remembrances, for once those lives are over, that personal knowledge is lost forever. Unfortunately, we live in a time now where everyone seems to be solely looking ahead, as though we deem nothing in the past worthy of our attention. The future is always fresh and exciting, and it has a pull on us that times past simply can never muster. Yet it may well be that our greatest wealth as human beings can be “discovered” by simply looking behind us.

Though I am known for my suspense novels, I have always been drawn to stories of the past in my native Virginia, and tales of people living in places that sharply limited their ambitions, yet provided them with a richness of knowledge and experience few have ever attained. Ironically, as a writer, I’ve spent the last twenty years or so hunting relentlessly for story material, and utterly failed to see a lumberyardful within my own family. However, while it came later than it probably should have, writing this novel was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.

CHAPTER ONE



THE AIR WAS MOIST, THE COMING RAIN TELEGRAPHED BY plump, gray clouds, and the blue sky fast fading. The 1936 four-door Lincoln Zephyr sedan moved down the winding road at a decent, if unhurried, pace. The car's interior was filled with the inviting aromas of warm sourdough bread, baked chicken, and peach and cinnamon pie from the picnic basket that sat so temptingly between the two children in the backseat.

Louisa Mae Cardinal, twelve years old, tall and rangy, her hair the color of sun-dappled straw and her eyes blue, was known simply as Lou. She was a pretty girl who would almost certainly grow into a beautiful woman. But Lou would fight tea parties, pigtails, and frilly dresses to the death. And somehow win. It was just her nature.

The notebook was open on her lap, and Lou was filling the blank pages with writings of importance to her, as a fisherman does his net. And from the girl's pleased look, she was landing fat cod with every pitch and catch. As always, she was very intent on her writing. Lou came by that trait honestly, as her father had such fever to an even greater degree than his daughter.

On the other side of the picnic basket was Lou's brother, Oz. The name was a contraction of his given one, Oscar. He

was seven, small for his age, though there was the promise of height in his long feet. He did not possess the lanky limbs and athletic grace of his sister. Oz also lacked the confidence that so plainly burned in Lou's eyes. And yet he held his worn stuffed bear with the unbreakable clench of a wrestler, and he had a way about him that naturally warmed other's souls. After meeting Oz Cardinal, one came away convinced that he was a little boy with a heart as big and giving as God could bestow on lowly, conflicted mortals.

Jack Cardinal was driving. He seemed unaware of the approaching storm, or even the car's other occupants. His slender fingers drummed on the steering wheel. The tips of his fingers were callused from years of punching the typewriter keys, and there was a permanent groove in the middle finger of his right hand where the pen pressed against it. Badges of honor, he often said.

As a writer, Jack assembled vivid landscapes densely populated with flawed characters who, with each turn of the page, seemed more real than one's family. Readers would often weep as a beloved character perished under the writer's nib, yet the distinct beauty of the language never overshadowed the blunt force of the story, for the themes imbedded in Jack Cardinal's tales were powerful indeed. But then an especially well-tooled line would come along and make one smile and perhaps even laugh aloud, because a bit of humor was often the most effective tool for painlessly driving home a serious point.

Jack Cardinal's talents as a writer had brought him much critical acclaim, and very little money. The Lincoln Zephyr did not belong to him, for luxuries such as automobiles, fancy or plain, seemed forever beyond his reach. The car had been borrowed for this special outing from a friend and admirer of Jack's work. Certainly the woman sitting next to him had not married Jack Cardinal for money.

Amanda Cardinal usually bore well the drift of her husband's nimble mind. Even now her expression signaled good-natured surrender to the workings of the man's imagination, which always allowed him escape from the bothersome details of life. But later, when the blanket was spread and the picnic food was apportioned, and the children wanted to play, she would nudge her husband from his literary alchemy. And yet

today Amanda felt a deeper concern as they drove to the park. They needed this outing together, and not simply for the fresh air and special food. This surprisingly warm late winter's day was a godsend in many ways. She looked at the threatening sky.

Go away, storm, please go away now.

To ease her skittish nerves, Amanda turned and looked at Oz and smiled. It was hard not to feel good when looking at the little boy, though he was a child easily frightened as well. Amanda had often cradled her son when Oz had been seized by a nightmare. Fortunately, his fearful cries would be replaced by a smile when Oz would at last focus on her, and she would want to hold her son always, keep him safe always.

Oz's looks came directly from his mother, while Lou had a pleasing variation of Amanda's long forehead and her father's lean nose and compact angle of jaw. And yet if Lou were asked, she would say she took after her father only. This did not reflect disrespect for her mother, but signaled that, foremost, Lou would always see herself as Jack Cardinal's daughter.

Amanda turned back to her husband. "Another story?" she asked as her fingers skimmed Jack's forearm.

The man's mind slowly rocked free from his latest concocting and Jack looked at her, a grin riding on full lips that, aside from the memorable flicker of his gray eyes, were her husband's most attractive physical feature, Amanda thought.

"Take a breath, work on a story," said Jack.

"A prisoner of your own devices," replied Amanda softly, and she stopped rubbing his arm.

As her husband drifted back to work, Amanda watched as Lou labored with her own story. Mother saw the potential for much happiness and some inevitable pain in her daughter. She could not live Lou's life for her, and Amanda knew she would have to watch her little girl fall at times. Still, Amanda would never hold out her hand, for Lou being Lou would certainly refuse it. But if her daughter's fingers sought out her mother's, she would be there. It was a situation burdened with pitfalls, yet it seemed the one destined for mother and daughter.

"How's the story coming, Lou?"

Head down, hand moving with the flourishing thrust of youthful penmanship, Lou said, "Fine." Amanda could easily

sense her daughter's underlying message: that writing was a task not to be discussed with nonwriters. Amanda took it as good-naturedly as she did most things having to do with her volatile daughter. But even a mother sometimes needed a comforting pillow on which to lay her head, so Amanda reached out and tousled her son's blondish hair. Sons were not nearly so complex, and as much as Lou wore her out, Oz rejuvenated his mother.

"How're you doing, Oz?" asked Amanda.

The little boy answered by letting out a crowing sound that banged off all sides of the car's interior, startling even the inattentive Jack.

"Miss English said I'm the best rooster she's ever heard," said Oz, and crowed again, flapping his arms. Amanda laughed and even Jack turned and smiled at his son.

Lou smirked at her brother, but then reached over and tenderly patted Oz on the hand. "And you are too, Oz. A lot better than me when I was your age," said Lou.

Amanda smiled at Lou's remark and then said, "Jack, you're coming to Oz's school play, aren't you?"

Lou said, "Mom, you know he's working on a story. He doesn't have time to watch Oz playing a rooster."

"I'll try, Amanda. I really will this time," Jack said. However, Amanda knew that the level of doubt in his tone heralded another disappointment for Oz. For her.

Amanda turned back and stared out the windshield. Her thoughts showed through so clearly on her features. *Life married to Jack Cardinal: I'll try.*

Oz's enthusiasm, however, was undiminished. "And next I'm going to be the Easter Bunny. You'll be there, won't you, Mom?"

Amanda looked at him, her smile wide and easing her eyes to pleasing angles.

"You know Mom wouldn't miss it," she said, giving his head another gentle rub.

But Mom did miss it. They all missed it.

CHAPTER TWO



AMANDA LOOKED OUT THE CAR WINDOW. HER PRAYERS had been answered, and the storm had passed with little more than annoying patches of drizzle and an occasional gust of wind that failed to motivate the park trees to much more than a skimming of limbs. Everyone's lungs had been pressed hard from running the long, curvy strips of park grass end to end. And to his credit, Jack had played with as much abandon as any of them. Like a child, he had hurtled down the cobblestone paths with Lou or Oz on his back laughing riotously. Once he had even run right out of his loafers and then let the children chase him down and put them back on after a spirited struggle. Later, to the delight of all, he hung upside down while he performed on the swings. It was exactly what the Cardinal family needed.

At day's end the children had collapsed on their parents, and they all had napped right there, a huge ball of wild-angled limbs, deep breathing, and the contented sighs of tired, happy people at rest. A part of Amanda could have lain there the rest of her life, and felt as though she had accomplished all the world could ever reasonably demand of her.

Now, as they returned to the city, to a very small but cherished home that would not be theirs much longer, Amanda felt a growing uneasiness. She did not particularly care for con-

frontation, but Amanda also knew it was sometimes necessary when the cause was important. She checked the backseat. Oz was sleeping. Lou's face was turned to the window; she also appeared to be dozing. Since she rarely had her husband all to herself, Amanda decided now was the time.

She said softly to Jack, "We really need to talk about California."

Her husband squinted although there was no sun; in fact the darkness was almost complete around them. "The movie studio already has writing assignments lined up," he said.

She noted that he stated this without a trace of enthusiasm. Emboldened by this, Amanda pressed on. "You're an award-winning novelist. Your work is already being taught in schools. You've been called the most gifted storyteller of your generation."

He seemed wary of all this praise. "So?"

"So why go to California and let them tell you what to write?"

The light in his eyes dimmed. "I don't have a choice."

Amanda gripped his shoulder. "Jack, you *do* have a choice. And you can't think that writing for the movies will make everything perfect, because it won't!"

Her mother's raised voice caused Lou to slowly turn and stare at her parents.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," said Jack. "I really appreciate it, Amanda. Especially now. You know this isn't easy for me."

"That's not what I meant. If you'd only think about—"

Lou suddenly hunched forward, one arm grazing her father's shoulder even as her mother retreated. Lou's smile was big but obviously forced. "I think California will be great, Dad."

Jack grinned and gave Lou a tap on the hand. Amanda could sense Lou's soul leaping to this slight praise. She knew that Jack failed to realize the hold he commanded over his little girl; how everything she did was weighed against whether it would please him enough. And that scared Amanda.

"Jack, California is not the answer, it's just not. You have to understand that," said Amanda. "You won't be happy."

His expression was pained. "I'm tired of wonderful reviews and awards for my shelf, and then not even making enough money to support my family. *All* my family." He glanced at

Lou, and there appeared on his features an emotion that Amanda interpreted as shame. She wanted to lean across and hold him, tell him that he was the most wonderful man she had ever known. But she had told him that before, and they were still going to California.

"I can go back to teaching. That'll give you the freedom to write. Long after we're all gone, people will still be reading Jack Cardinal."

"I'd like to go somewhere and be appreciated while I'm still alive."

"You *are* appreciated. Or don't we count?"

Jack looked surprised, a writer betrayed by his own words. "Amanda, I didn't mean that. I'm sorry."

Lou reached for her notebook. "Dad, I finished the story I was telling you about."

Jack's gaze held on Amanda. "Lou, your mother and I are talking."

Amanda had been thinking about this for weeks, ever since he had told her of plans for a new life writing screenplays amid the sunshine and palm trees of California, for considerable sums of money. She felt he would be tarnishing his skills by putting into words the visions of others, substituting stories from his soul with those that would earn the most dollars.

"Why don't we move to Virginia?" she said, and then Amanda held her breath.

Jack's fingers tightened around the steering wheel. Outside there were no other cars, no lights other than the Zephyr's. The sky was a long reef of suspect haze, no punctures of stars to guide them. They could have been driving over a flat, blue ocean, up and down exactly alike. One's mind could easily be tricked by such a conspiracy of heavens and earth.

"What's in Virginia?" His tone was very cautious.

Amanda clutched his arm in her growing frustration. "Your grandmother! The farm in the mountains. The setting for all those beautiful novels. You've written about it all your life and you've never been back. The children have never even met Louisa. My God, *I've* never met Louisa. Don't you think it's finally time?"

His mother's raised voice startled Oz awake. Lou's hand went out to him, covering his slight chest, transferring calm

from her to him. It was an automatic thing now for Lou, for Amanda was not the only protector Oz had.

Jack stared ahead, clearly annoyed by this conversation. "If things work out like I'm planning, she'll come and live with us. We'll take care of her. Louisa can't stay up there at her age." He added grimly, "It's too hard a life."

Amanda shook her head. "Louisa will never leave the mountain. I only know her through the letters and what you've told me, but even I know that."

"Well, you can't always live in the past. And *we're* going to California. We will be happy there."

"Jack, you can't really believe that. You can't!"

Lou once more rocked forward. She was all elbows, neck, knees—slender limbs seemingly growing before her parents' eyes.

"Dad, don't you want to hear about my story?"

Amanda put a hand on Lou's arm even as she gazed at a frightened Oz and tried to give him a reassuring smile, though reassurance was the last thing she was feeling. Now was clearly not the time for this discussion. "Lou, wait a minute, honey. Jack, we can talk later. Not in front of the kids." She was suddenly very fearful of where this might actually go.

"What do you mean I can't really believe that?" Jack said.

"Jack, not now."

"You started this conversation, don't blame me for wanting to finish it."

"Jack, please—"

"Now, Amanda!"

She had never heard quite this tone, and instead of making her more afraid, it made her even angrier. "You hardly spend any time with the kids as it is. Always traveling, giving lectures, attending events. Everybody already wants a piece of Jack Cardinal, even if they won't *pay* you for the privilege. Do you really think it'll be better in California? Lou and Oz will never see you."

Jack's eyes, cheekbones, and lips formed a wall of defiance. When it came, his voice was filled with a potent combination of his own distress and the intent to inflict the same upon her. "Are you telling me I ignore my children?"

Amanda understood this tactic, but somehow still succumbed

to it. She spoke quietly. "Maybe not intentionally, but you get so wrapped up in your writing—"

Lou almost vaulted over the front seat. "He does not ignore us. You don't know what you're talking about. You're wrong! You're wrong!"

Jack's dense wall turned upon Lou. "You do not talk to your mother that way. Ever!"

Amanda glanced at Lou, but even as she tried to think of something conciliatory to say, her daughter proved swifter.

"Dad, this really is the best story I've ever written. I swear. Let me tell you how it starts."

However, Jack Cardinal, for probably the only time in his life, was not interested in a story. He turned and stared directly at his daughter. Under his withering look, her face went from hope to savage disappointment faster than Amanda could take a breath.

"Lou, I said not now!"

Jack slowly turned back. He and Amanda saw the same thing at the same time, and it pulled the blood from both their faces. The man was leaning into the trunk of his stalled car. They were so close to him that in the headlights Amanda saw the square bulge of the man's wallet in his back pocket. He wouldn't even have time to turn, to see his death coming at him at fifty miles an hour.

"Oh my God," Jack cried out. He cut the wheel hard to the left. The Zephyr responded with unexpected agility and actually missed the car, leaving the careless man to live another day. But now the Zephyr was off the road and onto sloped ground, and there were trees up ahead. Jack heaved the wheel to the right.

Amanda screamed, and reached out to her children as the car rocked uncontrollably. She could sense that even the bottom-heavy Zephyr would not maintain its balance.

Jack's eyes were silver dollars of panic, his breath no longer coming up. As the car raced across the slick road and onto the dirt shoulder on the other side, Amanda lunged into the back-seat. Her arms closed around her children, bringing them together, her body between them and all that was hard and dangerous about the car. Jack swung the wheel back the other way, but the Zephyr's balance was gone, its brakes useless. The

car missed a stand of what would have been unforgiving trees, but then did what Amanda had feared it would all along, it rolled.

As the top of the car slammed into the dirt, the driver's door was thrown open, and like a swimmer lost in a sudden rip, Jack Cardinal was gone from them. The Zephyr rolled again, and clipped a tree, which slowed its momentum. Shattered glass cascaded over Amanda and the children. The sound of tearing metal mixed with their screams was terrible; the smell of freed gasoline and billowy smoke searing. And through every roll, impact, and pitch again, Amanda pinned Lou and Oz safely against the seat with a strength that could not be completely her own. She absorbed every blow, keeping it from them.

The steel of the Zephyr fought a fearsome battle with the hard-packed dirt, but the earth finally triumphed and the car's top and right side buckled. One sharp-edged part caught Amanda on the back of her head, and then the blood came fast. As Amanda sank, the car, with one last spin, came to rest upside down, pointing back the way they had come.

Oz reached for his mother, incomprehension the only thing between the little boy and possibly fatal panic.

With a whipsaw motion of youthful agility, Lou pulled free of the destroyed guts of the car. The Zephyr's headlights were somehow still working, and she looked frantically for her father in the confusion of light and dark. She heard footsteps approaching and started saying a grateful prayer that her father had survived. Then her lips stopped moving. In the spread of the car's beams she saw the body sprawled in the dirt, the neck at an angle that could not support life. Then someone was pounding on the car with a hand, and the person they had almost killed was saying something. Lou chose not to hear the man whose negligent actions had just shattered her family. Lou turned and looked at her mother.

Amanda Cardinal too had seen her husband outlined there in the unforgiving light. For one impossibly long moment, mother and daughter shared a gaze that was completely one-sided in its communication. Betrayal, anger, hatred—Amanda read all of these terrible things on her daughter's features. And these emotions covered Amanda like a concrete slab over her crypt; they far exceeded the sum total of every nightmare she

had ever suffered through. When Lou looked away, she left a ruined mother in her wake. As Amanda's eyes closed, all she could hear was Lou screaming for her father to come to her. For her father not to leave her. And then, for Amanda Cardinal, there was nothing more.

CHAPTER THREE



THERE WAS A CALM PIETY IN THE SONOROUS RING OF THE church bell. Like steady rain, its sounds covered the area, where the trees were starting to bud and the grass was stretching awake after a winter's rest. The curls of fireplace smoke from the cluster of homes here met in the clear sky. And to the south were visible the lofty spires and formidable minarets of New York City. These stark monuments to millions of dollars and thousands of weary backs seemed trifling against the crown of blue sky.

The large fieldstone church imparted an anchor's mass, an object incapable of being moved no matter the magnitude of problem that assailed its doors. The pile of stone and steeple seemed able to dispense comfort if one merely drew near it. Inside the thick walls there was another sound besides the peal of holy bell.

Holy singing.

The fluid chords of "Amazing Grace" poured down the hallways and crowded against portraits of white-collared men who had spent much of their lives absorbing punishing confessions and doling out reams of Hail Marys as spiritual salve. Then the wave of song split around statues of blessed Jesus dying or rising, and finally broke in a pool of sanctified water just inside the front entrance. Creating rainbows, the sunlight filtered