No Time Left
by David Baldacci
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Absolute Power
Total Control
The Winner
The Simple Truth
Saving Faith
Wish You Well
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Hell’s Corner
Frank Becker was exceptionally good at his job and took great pride at being so exceptionally good. He took his client’s orders promptly and carried them out with professionalism and attention to detail. This was not simply being a sound businessman or even demonstrating altruism. It was very much in Becker’s interests to sweat the details, to obsess over them in fact. If he wanted to survive.

He was a small man with an ego many times the size of his body. A fat baby, he’d grown into a trim, methodical adult who did not overindulge in anything. He was single, lived quietly except when he was working, and had seen a large slice of the world because in his particular area of expertise there were no borders. He never expected to marry because that would be complicating, and he never desired to have children because that would be pointless.

He now stood outside on the curb in front of a modern building in the middle of a city that had seen more prosperous days. It was making a comeback of sorts, to the extent that steel, asphalt, and concrete and the populations that reside in and on them can have second chances. And it was a historical city with many sites of cultural significance that could draw tourists.

Becker didn’t care about any of this. He had flown here for one reason only and it had nothing to do with tourist sites or second chances.

He lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out his nostrils as he’d watched his father do when Becker was a child. For many years he’d longed to release smoke out his nostrils like his father. While some sons pantomimed shaving while watching their old man, Becker had watched his dad smoke and exhale, memorizing the technique and the timing. And at age sixteen he’d accomplished his goal, but not without some coughing and hacking. Now he’d become an expert at nostril smoke exhalation, and he did it with a certain style. That was one of only two things he did that made him stand out a bit. In every other aspect of his life, Becker blended right into the crowd. The bland suits he wore, the low decibels of his speech, his everyman’s features, and the vacant expression in his eyes were all designed to place everyone’s attention on any location other than him.

He drew a bit of tobacco off his tongue as his gaze flickered like a dying light bulb at the tall, thin man in the excellent suit where each jacket cuff showed the exact same margin of white shirt underneath. He was pushing through the glass double doors of the downtown office building and began walking down the street. Becker bought a newspaper from a vendor and headed in the same direction. The other fellow was a prosperous and pleased-looking gent principally because he was very successful at what he did. Indeed, he owned the building he’d just exited. He’d accumulated lots of money, all of it legally, and gave a substantial portion of it away to good works. He was married to a lovely and refined woman and with her had had three bright children who would soon make their positive marks on the world. He had few enemies in the world.

But as Becker knew, it took only one determined adversary to change your life.

Becker folded the paper in half and carried it under his left arm, leaving his right one free to swing the umbrella he carried. It didn’t necessarily look like rain today but the weather person had cautioned folks that morning that a thunderstorm was certainly possible given the recent atmospheric potboilers of heat and humidity. He wore gloves though the day was not cold. This was the second thing he did that was out of the ordinary, but vanity left him no option. The gloves were black leather and had cost him two hundred dollars. He considered them well worth the price.

The fellow up ahead had his daily rituals. A walk during lunchtime was one of them. From watching him the past four days Becker knew that he would head south down one block, turn left, proceed to the park, enjoy the trees and birds and then retrace his steps and return to his office. Rituals like that were nice, comforting. And completely asinine, Becker knew. He had no such routines. At any given minute of his day no one would be able to tell where he would be based on the previous day’s experience. Most people embraced sameness; Becker raced from it. He knew how deadly routine could be if someone wanted to do you harm.

The man slowed. There was a crowd gathered at the corner. It seemed like something of significance was coming down the street and for this reason the police were holding folks back. Perhaps it was a parade or an official motorcade carrying a suitably important person, important enough indeed to warrant traffic police and clogged intersections. Like a rugby scrum at the corner, folks were massing. Some broke off from this pack and were craning their necks to see who or what was coming. Becker had picked this day based solely on this event happening at this
precise moment. The fellow he was watching reached the intersection and joined in the head craning and standing on tiptoes to see over the jostling crowd. As more people packed the spot, it became like a log-filled river with a strained dam ready to burst. The cops swepted and pushed and cursed the citizens into some degree of order. Becker smiled at their plight. He had never much liked cops. His old man had been a policeman after a failed attempt at a career running a butcher’s shop in a small town. He’d moved to the city when Becker was still a baby. After he started wearing the blues he had taken to beating Becker with his nightstick after he came home and downed a few shots of gin so cheap and strong that it could burn a hole in metal. That and the smokes were his dad’s chief vices, other than beating his son while Becker’s stepmother looked on, drink in hand, and gave advice on where to hit him next. Becker’s real mother, he’d been told, had died at childbirth. That was all he knew. That was more than he ever cared to know actually. He doubted his real mother would have been any more loving than his stepmother.

As the police used their bodies and barricades and the strength of their lungs to keep the human logs back on the curb Becker angled to the left and stepped further into the crowd. It took him ten seconds to work his way forward, using pointy elbows and apologetic looks at folks he pushed past. Now he was standing directly behind the man. He checked his watch. He had a contact who’d given him a heads-up on this traffic-snarling event. In one more minute the limo and the surrounding trucks with bodyguards would be passing by. He edged closer. Before he slipped the newspaper into his coat pocket he glanced at the date. May 5, 2000. His birthday was next week. He would turn fifty. His celebration would consist of dinner alone and no presents. He cared for birthdays even less than he did beatings.

He counted the moments off in his head. This was really unnecessary because the crowd’s collective energy spiked when the motorcade drew within sight of the intersection. He started taking shallow breaths. It was not to control his nerves. For all he knew he had none. He wanted to reduce his oxygen a bit, to get a natural high from what he was about to do. He’d found it better than sex actually, because he had no concerns about pleasing anyone other than himself.

“There he is!” cried out one person.

Becker’s right hand increased its grip on the handle of the umbrella. He edged the point of the device upward and forward at the same time. The limo was passing, and the crowd had started screaming and waving. Becker thrust the tip into the flesh and then in the next motion moved to the side and flitted away.

As the other fellow rubbed the back of his thigh where the stinging impact had occurred, Becker was walking away, casually reading his newspaper with one hand while he twirled his umbrella with the other.

The man’s obituary appeared in the city newspaper two days later. He had succumbed to some inexplicable malady that had left him in agony before killing him. An autopsy would be done to see what had caused the poor fellow’s demise. His bereaved family lay in ruins, his business disintegrating without his stalwart hand at the helm.

As Becker sat in his apartment a thousand miles away reading the account on the computer he knew he could save the poor medical examiner the trouble.

“Compound 1080,” he said aloud. He knew that the man had died of ventricular arrhythmias. Compound 1080, discovered by German chemists during World War II and used in various pesticides, disrupted cellular metabolism and with it the citric acid cycle, also known as the Krebs Cycle, depriving cells of energy. The poison worked rapidly and did incredibly unpleasant things to the person injected with it. The cylinder in Becker’s umbrella point had been filled with enough Compound 1080 to finish off the fellow in a matter of hours. There was no antidote and his last few hours of life, Becker knew, had been filled with unimaginable pain that no human could withstand. He had no doubt screamed to his God for mercy. He was a religious man, Becker knew, having followed him and his beautiful family to Mass the Sunday before plunging his umbrella point into the unfortunate gent’s hamstring. His God had not answered back. Even all-powerful gods bowed before poisons with no known antidotes.

Becker was a student of history, or at least certain esoteric parts of it. He’d gotten the idea of the umbrella delivery system from an attack carried out by the Bulgarian secret police in the 1970s against a person making trouble for the government. Why reinvent the wheel? However, he had put his original spin on the matter because the Bulgarians had used that old standby, ricin, as the killing agent. Compound 1080 was, at least in his mind, far classier.

He used his computer to check his bank account, making sure that the remainder of his kill fee had reached his overseas bank. He would never read or think about the man again. He would not mentally commiserate with the widow or the children who’d lost their father. There was nothing productive about that. If he had those types of feelings, or weaknesses rather, he would not have chosen this line of work. It was a job, just a job. And it was time to move on to another one. Becker was much in demand. That came from never having failed and being unwaveringly discreet.

A week later the letter arrived in the mail. It was time to go to work again.

He stepped aboard another plane, landed, rented a car, and drove to the man’s house out near the water. It was a
beautiful estate set amid rows of mature oak and maple trees, fat bushes draped in bloom, flower-lined stone and gravel paths that meandered in and out of sight. The home itself was large and at least two centuries old with the plentiful trappings of that era’s architecture, gables and Doric columns and balustrades, lichen-covered ashlar quoins at the corners and rows of arched windows in front. He was ushered into the library by a dour woman in a black maid’s uniform. The shelves were filled with old books that looked well read, and the vast room had a pleasant aroma of mingled scents, leather, tobacco and candle wax.

The man who joined him moments later was tall and cadaverous, with a horseshoe of white hair remaining on his head. His mustache drooped over his small mouth. His teeth looked false. He wore a set of ancient tweeds, with an overly starched collared shirt and a drab tie that disappeared down into a waistcoat, which looked as though it would be scratchy to the touch. Across its front was a fat watch on a gold chain. He sat down behind an enormous mahogany desk meticulously organized and motioned for Becker to sit across from him. Becker had sat across from many clients at meetings like this. They were all different in terms of sophistication and motivation, yet there was something about the old house, room and man that bothered Becker. Yet details about his client were not his concern. He was here to listen and accept the assignment or not. Becker crossed his legs and waited expectantly. He never spoke until the potential client did. At this point in his career, he wanted to feel challenged. Early on he would accept whatever request came his way. Now he was more selective. Most tasks required weeks of planning and he wanted to spend it only on something he felt was worthy of his talents. Life was too brief, nearly as brief as the people he was paid to kill.

The old man cleared his throat and looked appraisingly over Becker’s bland suit, average features, black gloves and downcast gaze and came away apparently pleased or at least satisfied.

“You come recommended.”

Becker lifted his gaze a millimeter. “I often do. May I ask who the reference was?”

“Schultz.”

“I see. Yes, I can understand that. A tricky one.”

“Indeed.”

“And your request?”

“Trickier still,” said the man. His mustache hairs rippled outward as he spoke. For some reason this irritated Becker when he observed it. He kept his gaze planted downward after that. It was critical to be objective at this point.

“I look forward to being impressed then,” said Becker with a bit more arrogance than he had intended. There was something about this fellow, he suddenly concluded, that bothered him. Something other than the rippling mustache.

The old man leaned forward, resting the well-worn elbow patches of his tweed coat on the polished desktop. He took a few moments to draw a small hooked pipe from his waistcoat pocket and ignite it, nursing the tobacco to life with a few expert intakes of breath. He bent the match in half with long, spidery blue-veined fingers and brushed it into a copper ashtray next to the black rotary dial phone.

“A woman needs to be taken care of.”

“Her name and address?”

“It will be provided through the post.”

Becker glanced up at this. “The post? You mean the mail? That is unusual.”

“You call it one thing and I another,” the man said amiably. “But it means the same thing.”

“I also meant that putting such information down in writing could become awkward if the authorities ever saw it.”

“I’m a very old man, so such things do not bother me. What will be will be.”

“All right. What has she done to you that warrants my intervention?”

The man puffed his pipe thoughtfully before answering. “Does it matter?”

Becker shifted uneasily in his seat. “No, it doesn’t. My terms are relatively simple. Half now, half on completion.”

“So I understand.”

“Please also understand that on only one occasion has someone failed to complete the final payment. His funeral was extremely expensive because of the oversight.”

“I see your point and I would never hazard to repeat his mistake. I have not many years left to live, but I would like to enjoy them in peace and comfort.”

“And the challenging part?”

“You will see that first-hand.”

Becker gave him a curious expression. “Why call this meeting then?”
“So I could see you, and you could see me. I’m sure you would agree that our business is a personal one. If I may say the most personal of all. A face-to-face contact seemed to me manifest.”

Becker shrugged, unimpressed by the man’s words. “Suit yourself. I will await your post. I’ll give you an address that will reach me.”

The other man’s reply surprised Becker.

“I already have it.” He held out his hand. “Shall we shake on it?”

“That’s not necessary.”

“No, it is. I’m an old-fashioned man, as I’m sure you discerned from the moment you stepped in here.” He held out his hand. Becker still hesitated.

“Please,” insisted the old man. “Indulge an old man who’s about to pay you a hundred thousand dollars.”

Finally, Becker held out his gloved hand.

The old man shook his head. “Flesh to flesh. It is a point of honor with me.”

Becker hesitated again and then slowly removed the leather covering. He had four fingers. Where the fifth one, the index finger, should have sprouted, there was only a small nodule of dead bone barely an inch in length. It was a genetic defect inherited from his mother. It was the chief reason he never used a firearm in his work. He couldn’t pull the trigger properly. It was also the reason for the gloves.

The other man made no note of the deformity but gave Becker’s hand a firm shake and then released it.

“I feel so much better now,” he said.

“You’ll feel even better when the woman is dead,” thought Becker.

“I never got your name,” he said. “Only directions to come here.”

“Wells,” said the man. “Herb Wells.”

The letter came two days later. Becker read through his instructions with growing bewilderment. The old man had said the job would be challenging. This seemed anything but. It was so straightforward, it put Becker fully on his guard. Yet the half payment was in his bank account, and there was a train ticket in the envelope for the day after tomorrow.

Becker dressed in his average suit and slipped a six-inch blade in his pocket after donning his ubiquitous gloves. He caught the high-speed train five minutes before it was set to leave the station. During the ride, the motion of the train, the clickety-clack of the wheels, and the passage through a long, dark tunnel made Becker do something he never had before. He fell asleep while traveling on an assignment.

When he awoke the train was just pulling into the station.

A sudden thought hit him as he came out of his stupor.

Bellows of a steam engine? Why would this train make such a noise?

As he climbed off the train he stood quite still on the platform. The folks passing by him looked normal except for their clothes. He saw bowties and suits with wide lapels. All the men wore hats, bowlers and flat-brimmed straw hats, and one elderly fellow even had on a top hat! The ladies were dressed in wide pleated skirts hanging below the knee with sharply pointed hats and dainty shoes with thick heels of modest height. The children were formally dressed too. One skinny boy was twirling a wooden yo-yo.

The absence of something else made Becker jerk his head in the direction of the station.

No one had a cell phone. No BlackBerrys. No laptop computers, no buds in ears with iPods connected to belts.

He headed toward a stand and bought a newspaper. When he handed the man a dollar, he received ninety cents back. Becker stared down at the coins in the palm of his hand. For some reason the coins looked odd, but Becker thrust them in his pocket and forgot them when he saw the startling headline.

North Korea had just invaded South Korea. As he read further, his skin grew paler and there was a pronounced tic in a blood vessel on the left side of his temple. President Harry S. Truman denounced this unwarranted invasion and pledged support to the South Korean government. Becker shot a glance at the date.

“1950?”

He lowered the paper and stared suspiciously around. Vintage automobiles passed up and down the street. As he looked across at the train he’d just climbed off, he noted that the bullet train he’d earlier boarded had now turned into a diesel model that had long since been relegated to train museums.

Challenging? This must be what the old man had been referring to in his request. The job itself sounded simple. Yet how would Becker get back home, to his own time? How had he gotten here in the first place? He thought back. He remembered the long tunnel, how the train’s interior faded to darkness. How he’d fallen asleep at that moment. Normally, he was pumped and energetic for a job.

Frank Becker had spent the last twenty years of his life maintaining strict discipline and intense self-control. He
grabbed hold of his rambling nerves, drew a long breath and dropped the paper in the trash. He fingered the knife in his pocket. He had his instructions and he’d received half his fee. He’d complete the job and then figure out how to return. He was a professional. Perhaps it would be as simple as boarding the train again, going back through the tunnel and falling asleep.

Asleep! Am I asleep? Dreaming?

Becker didn’t know what else to do, so he pinched himself and winced at the pain. He was not dreaming. He was fifty years in the past. He gathered his nerves, squared his shoulders, and walked out of the station.

It was a small town, really a village, with a butcher, baker, shops, restaurants, a pub, and a church on the main avenue. As Becker walked, this delicate burst of retail energy petered out and the lane he was walking alongside became quiet. All he heard was the wind and a few birds. Becker had memorized the contents of the letter from his client and then put a match to it. If things went awry, no one would find any evidence on him.

Like the successful man in the city, the woman he was looking for had a routine. Today being Thursday, she would be at her cottage a half-mile distant. She cleaned her home on Thursdays and then prepared a simple meal for her husband who came home promptly at six from work in town. Becker checked his watch. It still ran though it was now apparently five decades earlier than it had been this morning. He had four hours. More than enough time. The couple had no children, the letter had said. She would be alone.

He didn’t have to ask for directions to the cottage. The details in the letter were spot-on. He arrived there twenty minutes after leaving the train station. It was a small footprint of weathered clapboard with chipping white paint, a gingerbread trim painted in soft green and a small flowerbed on either side of the two-foot-high entrance gate that Becker stepped right over. The blooms were pretty, zinnias, geraniums, impatiens. And there was also some fox-glove, which Becker recognized, since he’d once milked deadly quantities of digitalis from the plant in preparation for poisoning another target of his some years ago.

The front door wasn’t even locked. The hinges were well oiled, and his entrance was silent. The place was isolated. He hadn’t passed one person or another home on his way here. He had seen an old DeSoto sedan parked on the side of the road, but there was no one inside.

He didn’t call out as there was no reason to give any warning. His hand slipped to his pocket as he cautiously made his way through the interior space from front to back. The kitchen and what would in the 1950s probably be called the parlor were empty. A pot was on the stove with simmering water in it so the woman of the house had to be nearby. The space was simple and contained no luxuries that Becker could see. He had no idea why a young woman—the letter informed him that she was only nineteen—living in such ordinary circumstances had incurred the wrath of his present client. But his was not to reason, only to execute.

There was only one room left. When he opened the door he saw instantly that it was the bedroom. A four-poster bed with cheap cloth hangings dominated the space. There was a mirror on the wall in which Becker caught his reflection for an instant. He froze. It was the only time he’d ever seen himself about to kill. His face was calm, but his eyes seemed to have swollen to unnatural size, as though the enormity of the deed to come had filled them like hot gas poured into a balloon. Then his attention became riveted on the chair next to the bed. The young woman sat there, her hands busy with knitting needles and yarn. He marveled at the dexterity of her fingers. Yet something did not quite seem right with the image.

He crossed the room and slipped the knife from his pocket. She had not yet looked up. For some reason he wanted to finish the job before she could look at him. Get back on the train, go back to where he belonged. It was the mirror. His reflection had unnerved him somehow. A bead of sweat appeared on his forehead, just above his left eyebrow.

His wish was not granted. She turned to stare at him. He did not like to face his victims. His job, of course, required nerve and daring, but he was actually something of a coward, preferring to strike from behind with an umbrella or a knife. And then run away. That was how he’d killed his father. A hammer to the head and then he’d run to catch a freight train to a new life.

Her expression surprised him. There was a strange man in her bedroom coming at her with a knife, but she did not look afraid. He raised the blade. His heart was pounding, his temples expanding and contracting with the pressure. Her mouth parted as though she were about to say something. But she remained silent because of what he did next. His blade struck, once deeply in the chest, once in the neck for good measure.

She slumped back in the seat, her hands falling to her sides, the knitting needles clattered on the wooden floor. Her chest heaved, throwing her blood outside her body through the two wounds. He should flee, he knew that, but he felt rooted to the spot. His gaze flitted around the room. He saw the leather apron hanging from a hook on the wall. It was spotted with blood and bits of dried meat. Then, his mind working feverishly, he recalled the butcher’s shop he’d passed in the village. That was where the husband must work.

With that thought a cold worked its way into Becker’s skin that paralyzed him. He managed to slowly turn his
head back to the dying woman. He looked down at her right hand. He gripped it, turned it upward, drawing it to the light from the window. When he saw the little nodule of bone where the index finger should have been he instantly dropped the hand and it swung back down, hitting the side of the chair.

Becker’s mind was beginning to shut down with each heave of the woman’s body as life left her. As his eyes focused on her body, Becker saw the large hump in her belly. And on her lap was the object of her knitting. A small blue knit cap for the baby boy she was very close to delivering. Now, of course, they were both dead.

As Becker slumped to the floor, his own breaths coming in agonized gasps, he thought he saw his mother smile at him. But he could have been wrong about that. The answer would never come. A moment later he was gone.
David Baldacci is a worldwide bestselling novelist. With his books published in over 45 languages and in more than 80 countries, and with over 110 million copies in print, he is one of the world’s favorite storytellers. David Baldacci is also the cofounder, along with his wife, of the Wish You Well Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting literacy efforts 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 program to spread books across America at www.FeedingBodyandMind.com.
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