

DAVID BALDACCI

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

TWO
MURDERS

A

TWO
SUSPECTS

CALAMITY OF SOULS



DAVID BALDACCI

A Calamity of Souls

MACMILLAN

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To librarians and teachers: The shining stars of my universe

Some of the language used in this novel is a reflection of the author's intention to recreate a very specific time and period in American history. We want to alert readers that there are harmful phrases and terminology in the work that were prevalent at the time this novel is set. The terms used in the novel are deliberately chosen but used sparingly, as David Baldacci says in his author's note. They do not represent the opinions of the author or the publisher and their inclusion in this work of fiction does not constitute an endorsement of the characterization, content or language used.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I started writing this novel well over a decade ago, by hand, in a journal like the one my mother gave me as a child to jot down my stories. Then I set the manuscript aside to work on other projects, but something kept pulling me back to the story, and it has to do with my past.

I grew up in the sixties and seventies in Richmond, Virginia, the old capital of the Confederacy, home to all those statues of rebel elites on Monument Avenue. I was not born into economic privilege, and I grew up with an ethnic surname in a world steeped in the history of the Old South, where the names Lee, Jackson, Stuart, and Davis were revered by many. Thinking back, I believe I would not have become a writer had I not been born in that place and at that time.

I was observant and curious, and I remember much from my youth. Where I grew up, the Black-white divide was so ingrained that despite the efforts of the Civil Rights movement and the Warren Court, life was not so very different from many decades before. The old ways were intractable, and accepted to such an extent that most people never even thought about it, at least people who looked like me. And while I was the observer of racial bigotry and hatred, I was never the target. To borrow a line from Mark Twain, that is truly the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.

There are many autobiographical elements in this story, from how Jack Lee grew up—although decades earlier than I did—to the thoughts, questions, and misgivings he had about the world in which he lived, how books played an important role in forming his outlook on life, the sometimes confusing and conflicting relationships with family and friends, and the uneasy coexistence of Black and white worlds, for they were distinct, separate entities. Like Jack, I delivered the morning paper, and I grew up to be a trial lawyer. My mechanic father fixed up an old Fiat that I drove for a period of time. And there is a Tuxedo Boulevard in Richmond, and, yes, to

the best of my recollection, the county dump was at the end of the all-Black neighborhood.

My sixth-grade class was one of the first in Virginia to be bused to a Black school, finally realizing *Brown v. Board*'s ruling, albeit nearly twenty years late. It was an emotionally and mentally bewildering time for all the students, which I looked back on for quite a while as traumatizing. However, as I grew older, I came to understand that it had been necessary to allow children from different walks of life to finally be together after having been separated for centuries for purely toxic reasons.

When writing a novel dealing with race in America, the subject of the N-word usually comes up. I cannot think of another term that even approaches the heinous connotations of hatred and evil that stand next to it. However, to create a story set in 1968 that takes on issues of race and fails to use it in some form would be criticized, and justly so, as inauthentic at best, cowardly at worst. Thus, I have deployed it sparingly and in a hybrid form that may not satisfy some, but was the one I chose after much deliberation.

Though distinct elements of self-governance date back as far as ancient Greece if not further, democracies were a thoroughly unproven and unpopular form of governance when America came into being. At that time, the most powerful nations were organized under autocratic systems, usually monarchies, and "individual freedom" was an oxymoron. Although there are other legitimate claimants to the title, the United States of America is arguably the world's oldest nation with a continuously surviving democratic government; it is certainly the best-known example. However, having only been around for less than 250 years, we are an infant in the annals of history, and our existence has been, at times, uncomfortably turbulent.

There were multiple instances in our past when we were at each other's throats, and where a decisive breakup seemed imminent. We ultimately fought a costly civil war to end slavery and keep the union intact. Clearly, enough people believed the American experiment of freedom and self-governance was worth the blood shed on all those battlefields. However, none of us should ever take that sentiment for granted, lest our system of elected representation disappears from under our distracted gaze, taking our hard-won rights along with it.

Finally, I wanted to make this a story of two people from divergent life experiences who come *together* to tackle a problem as difficult as any

America has ever confronted. I wanted it to be an unwieldy, fractious partnership, like the one experienced by those sixth graders decades ago. I wanted each to learn from the other, and for them to eventually find mutual respect and empathy for one another.

In the end, what can we strive for that is more vital, for all of us?

*Not in Utopia, subterranean fields,
Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
But in the very world, which is the world
Of all of us,—the place where in the end
We find our happiness, or not at all!*

—William Wordsworth

CHAPTER 1

ON ANY OTHER DAY THE dead quiet coming from this room would have concerned no one, because the elderly couple usually napped peacefully, sat stationary as cats, or read their twin King James Bibles in silence, aged fingers turning pages replete with wisdom, tranquility, and violence.

The latter was on embellished display, for the man was sprawled on the floor on his back, while the woman was draped across a finely upholstered chair. Life had been rent from them with a grim certainty of purpose.

They were not remarkable in any way that mattered to most. What was memorable was the grand upheaval that would define and qualify the full measure of their deaths. It would fuel a calamitous surge of energy, like that of a sawed-off shotgun randomly discharged into an unsuspecting crowd.

Their violent end would be gossiped about in Freeman County, Virginia, for decades.

“You got the right to remain silent. You hear me, *boy?*” the first lawman said to the only suspect in the room.

That suspect was on his knees, his hands shackled behind him, the cuffs cutting deeply into flesh. The only signs of his granular fear were the trembling of fingers, and the quick exhalations of breath.

“This coon don’t look like he can talk even if he wanted to,” countered the second deputy. He was six feet, cattail-lean, with a soft jaw and eyes that resembled creased bullet holes. A policeman’s hat was tipped far back on his head.

The debilitating humidity, wicked off the nearby McHenry River, spread everywhere, like mustard gas weaving through the war trenches. The sweat dripped off the deputies’ faces, darkened their starched shirts, and, like gnats flitting around nostrils and eyes, added annoyance to their rage.

The first deputy continued to read off the little white card he’d drawn from his pocket. He was short, and squat as a tree stump. He had just arrived at the part about an attorney being provided if the accused couldn’t afford one,

when his partner, clearly troubled by these new legal rights, interrupted once more.

“You tell me what lawyer in his right mind would represent this here colored boy, LeRoy. ’Cause I sure as hell would like to know the answer.”

Raymond LeRoy ignored this and continued to read off the card, because he hadn’t yet memorized the words. He actually doubted he ever would; the will was just not in him. He had no idea who this Miranda fellow was, but LeRoy knew that the legalese upon the paper was designed to help *those* people, who had committed crimes, usually against white folks. And that transformed every word, which he was compelled to read by the decision of nine robed men hundreds of miles away, into bleach on his tongue.

“You understand what I just read to you?” said LeRoy. “I apparently got to hear your answer accordin’ to those sonsabitches in Washington, DC.”

His partner gripped the butt of his holstered .38 Smith & Wesson. “Why don’t you just take off them iron cufflinks and tell him to run for it? Save the good folks of this fine county payin’ for his trip down to Richmond and the chair.”

“They ain’t doin’ executions no more, Gene. Say it’s cruel and unusual.”

Gene Taliaferro bristled. “And what the hell has he just done to *them*, LeRoy?”

In one corner an overturned table had upset the items that had long rested upon it, chiefly, a photograph taken over fifty years ago of the couple in their courting days. He with his slouch hat in hand, along with a pair of brooding eyes, she with a bonnet resting on her small, delicate head, the hair parted in the middle, making her resemble a child. They were framed by an arch of fragrant honeysuckle and jasmine that was hosting both bees and butterflies, tiny, whirring apparitions trapped by the flash pop and shutterbug.

Now the photo lay on the floor, its front glass shattered, a cut across the picture bisecting the woman’s face and reaching to the man’s left eye.

LeRoy said, “We ain’t gonna shoot him, Gene. Boy’s in custody.”

“He’s only a g-d n——!” exclaimed Gene.

“I *know*,” bellowed an out-of-his-depth LeRoy. “Do I got me two eyes or what?”

“Well then?” demanded Gene. “Ain’t be the first time we done it.”

“Well, it’s not like that no more, is it?” countered a disappointed LeRoy.

“A hundred years ago where was the capital of the Confederacy?” Gene

pointed to the floor. "It was right chere in Virginia. And nuthin' can change that. Granddaddy four times removed owned boys just like this one." He stabbed his finger in the direction of the kneeling man. "Owned 'em! I got me a picture! They ought 'a fry his ass."

"Then let 'em," muttered LeRoy. "But I ain't havin' a bunch 'a Negro lawyers comin' after me. And now that that Dr. King got hisself killed down in Tennessee, coloreds are riotin' all over the damn country."

Gene snorted. "He weren't no real doctor!"

"Gonna let my son take up the cause. We got to keep fightin'. Hundred years, thousand years, it don't matter."

Gene sucked in a long breath and let it go. The gesture seemed to sap the core of his fury like cold mist on a candle's flame. But then the lawman's expression grew cagey. He squatted down on his haunches next to the only suspect in the room and slipped a wooden billy club from his belt. Along the wood were cut a dozen horizontal notches.

"I don't remember tellin' you to get on your knees, boy. Now stand up." Before the prisoner could move, Gene struck him full in the gut with the head of the billy club, propelling the man to the floor.

Gene rose. "I told you to get up, not fall on your damn face. Now get your ass up boy, right now. *Now*, or you get some more of the wood."

Slowly, the prisoner managed to come once more to rest on his haunches.

Gene knelt next to him and said in a near whisper, "Now who told you to get your ass off that floor?"

He battered the prisoner on the back of the head with the club, sending him down once more, now bleeding from his scalp.

Gene stood up and said, "Jesus, you ain't too smart, and here you wanna be equal to the white man. Now get up. Get up." He jabbed the prisoner fiercely in the ribs with the club. "I ain't tellin' you again, boy. Up!"

The prisoner, inch by tremulous inch, levered himself back onto his knees.

Gene knelt down again. "Good, good, boy." He grinned at his partner. "Who says you can't teach critters new tricks, LeRoy, huh?" He turned back to the bleeding, woozy prisoner and eyed the band on the man's finger. "Hey, now, you got yourself a woman?"

Gene walloped the suspect with the club on the side of his head. "I asked you a question. You ain't got no choice 'cept to answer me."

"Y-yes."

“Yes, what?”

“Yes . . . sir.”

He leaned in closer. “Good, good. Bet she’s pretty. She pretty, boy?”

The prisoner nodded, which got him another clubbing to the head.

“You speak, boy. You don’t never nod at no white man. It’s disrespectful.”

His eyes closed, the man said, “She real pretty, *sir*.”

“Good, good. Now, you got you kids?”

“Y-yes sir.”

“Fine, that’s fine. How many babies you got?”

“Three, sir.”

“Three!” Gene looked at his partner. “Boy say he got him three colored babies.” He turned back to the prisoner. “Okay, now after they fry your ass over in Richmond I’m gonna go see your pretty wife and your babies with some friends of mine. Now let me tell you what we gonna do to all them after we finish havin’ some fun with her.”

He leaned close and whispered in the prisoner’s ear.

The man roared in rage, knocking Gene down with his maddened, gyrating bulk.

The deputy slid across the floor, grinning. He took off his hat, swiped back his hair, and gripped his billy club extra firm. He rose and headed back to the only suspect in the room, who was now sprawled helplessly on the floor.

Gene said triumphantly, “Resistin’ arrest plain as day. You seen it, LeRoy.”

And he raised the club.

CHAPTER 2

JOHN ROBERT LEE, WHO WENT by Jack to all but his mother, finished pumping Esso gas into his ancient, four-door Fiat pillarless saloon car. The front doors opened regularly, back to front, but the rear doors opened front to back. It had a long hood terminating in a fancy grille with silver cased headlights that sprouted from the front slim fenders like incandescent daisies. Its four-cylinder engine could hit fifty-three miles an hour with a decent tailwind. He paid over a crisp single and two dull quarters to the attendant, who was studying the funny-looking car with interest.

“What the hell is that thang?” he asked.

“It’s a Fiat,” answered Jack.

“A fee-ought?”

“It’s Italian made.”

“I-talian? Ain’t that where the pope’s from?”

Jack nodded. “That’s right.”

“You Catholic?”

“No, I’m agnostic,” said Jack.

The man screwed up his face. “What’s that? Like Presbyterian or Methodist?”

“It’s actually a skeptical man’s faith,” replied Jack.

He climbed into the Fiat that his father had gotten from a car cemetery and resurrected back to the road. It was a gift from his parents when he’d graduated from law school. It was not a prestigious law school, like the mighty University of Virginia, or Richmond’s or William and Mary’s illustrious legal institutions. However, he had passed the Virginia State Bar exam on his first attempt, while he knew some from the glorified universities who had failed to do so. They still got the jobs in the big firms because that was where their daddies labored, too, selling their professional lives in hour increments for handsome compensation, prestigious homes, and golf memberships at the country club. They also married lovely, elegant women

with fine pedigrees and firm skin, who ended up drinking too much, or bedding the gardener or the pool boy because of all the extra time on their hands.

Jack was a white man, thirty-two years old, at least for a bit longer, and eight years out of law school he was just getting by, and still unmarried, much to his mother's chagrin. As the 1970s approached, men were wearing their hair far longer, but his was as short as when he'd been in the Boy Scouts, though he was starting to grow out his sideburns. He was two inches over six feet, broad shouldered and slim hipped and a bit too lean; he had never earned enough from his law practice to eat all that well. A six-pack of peanut butter crackers and an RC Cola was often his end-of-day repast.

The Second World War had made everyone underfed and overworked. Then the fifties had ushered in a roaring economy with a chicken in every pot and a Ford or GM loitering in every driveway. Then the sixties had come along and proceeded to upend all that dollars-and-cents progress. It had also foisted stark changes upon society at large that were far too swift for many.

He drove over to his parents' modest house in a working-class neighborhood where the husbands primarily used their muscle to earn their daily bread and their wives handled everything else. He had been born there in the main-floor bedroom, and he was fairly certain both his parents would die there, barring something unforeseen. No fuss and no muss, that was the Lee way.

He pulled into the gravel drive. All the homes here had been carved out of a plantation that more than a century ago had grown tobacco as a cash crop. Nearly all the residences looked the same: brittle asbestos siding, high-pitched roofs with black asphalt shingles, one front door and one in the rear, three bedrooms total along with one bath, set on a quarter acre of solid red clay with a grass veneer.

At his parents' house there was an aging weeping willow tree out front, and an apple tree in the back that had never been honestly pruned, and consequently sagged with the weight of the coming harvest. There was also a detached garage sitting where the gravel drive ceased. At the very rear of the property was the grave of the dog that had been Jack's faithful companion as a child: a black-and-white Belgian shepherd as loyal and good as God ever made canines. He'd toppled over one morning in his ninth year of life and

hadn't lived the day. Jack and his younger brother had cried like they'd just lost their best friend, and, in some important ways of little boys, they had.

The Lees also had a second bathroom upstairs, thanks to their father, who was quite talented at creating useful things from castoffs. Then there was a galley-sized kitchen, an eight-by-ten dining space bleeding off that, a small living room, and a TV den containing a faux-wood Motorola with two dials big as saucers on its face.

Jack climbed out of the Fiat and put on his suit jacket.

He could smell through the front screen door chicken breasts and legs popping in a frying pan of sizzling Crisco. And he imagined the potato salad resting in the small almond-white Frigidaire, and the heated pots on the electric stove top, the coils red-hot and holding pans of simmering green beans and stewed tomatoes his mother had harvested and then preserved from the kitchen garden. The meal would be concluded with chocolate sheet cake and Maxwell House coffee purchased from the A&P.

The dinner tonight was to commemorate Jack's thirty-third year on earth. At 7:10 p.m. on this day in 1935 he had emerged headfirst into a world still devastated by an economic collapse. His birth had occurred in the downstairs bedroom, while his nervous father had prowled the hall outside smoking his American-blend Camels. After a spank on the ass Jack had given his first cry and hadn't stopped for four years, according to his mother.

He'd grown up to play myriad sports, loved to debate folks, and was an avid reader from a young age. And every morning from the age of twelve until his junior year of high school, he'd risen long before the crack of dawn to deliver the *Virginia Times Dispatch*.

Many of the parents from his childhood still lived in the neighborhood. Their children, like him, had moved on. Most, unlike him, had married and now had their own swelling broods. He'd see them occasionally disgorging a passel of kids from battered station wagons to go visit grandparents who were getting more fragile and forgetful by the day. Yet sometimes the natural cycle of life was broken and children remained closer than Mom and Dad might desire.

And didn't Jack's parents know that.

He opened the screen door.

"Hello?" he called out. "Birthday boy's here." He'd seen his father's tan GMC pickup by the garage. It was their only vehicle because his mother

didn't drive.

"Hello?" he said again.

His sister edged around the corner from the dining room, where he could see the dinner plates laid out on the small table purchased years ago on layaway. There was a balloon tethered to a closet door handle, the words "Happy Birthday" stenciled upon it.

"Hey, Lucy girl," said Jack.

His elder sister rushed over and gave him a hug that nearly cracked his back. She'd always been strong, and he'd always believed it was nature's way of balancing out what was missing upstairs.

It had begun with his mother's trip to the dentist to remove a painfully impacted wisdom tooth. She'd been given laughing gas as a sedative, a term Jack had later learned was for the compound nitrous oxide. Only she hadn't known she was with child at the time. Eight months later his sister had been born. And a year after that, when Lucy was not developing as she should, some specialists had diagnosed her with "severe and irreversible mental retardation," or so his daddy had told him years later when Jack had questions about his sister.

She was now thirty-seven, a grown if physically stunted woman, with the innocent mind of a child. Her blond bangs hung right above eyes so extraordinarily blue it was the first thing folks noted about her. Jack had the same eyes that she did, only with something of a different sort behind them.

He kissed the top of Lucy's head and said her dress was very pretty. It was light brown with vivid blue dots that nearly matched her eye color and had puffy sleeves that hung down to the crooks of her delicate elbows. His birthday was probably the only thing that she had talked about all day.

"Momma, Daddy, it be Jack," Lucy bellowed over her shoulder.

She pulled him over to the balloon, poked it, and laughed as it oscillated on the end of its tether. Jack laughed, too, but there was a definite hollowness to it. The same gas that was holding the balloon aloft had made her what she was today. He'd often wondered what his sister would have grown up to be if the dental visit had never occurred. Perhaps Lucy Lee would have been the lawyer in the family.

His mother had never forgiven herself for her daughter's fate, though there was no fault in her ignorance. She had had two more children, Jack and his one-year-younger brother, Jefferson, who went by Jeff to all but his mother,