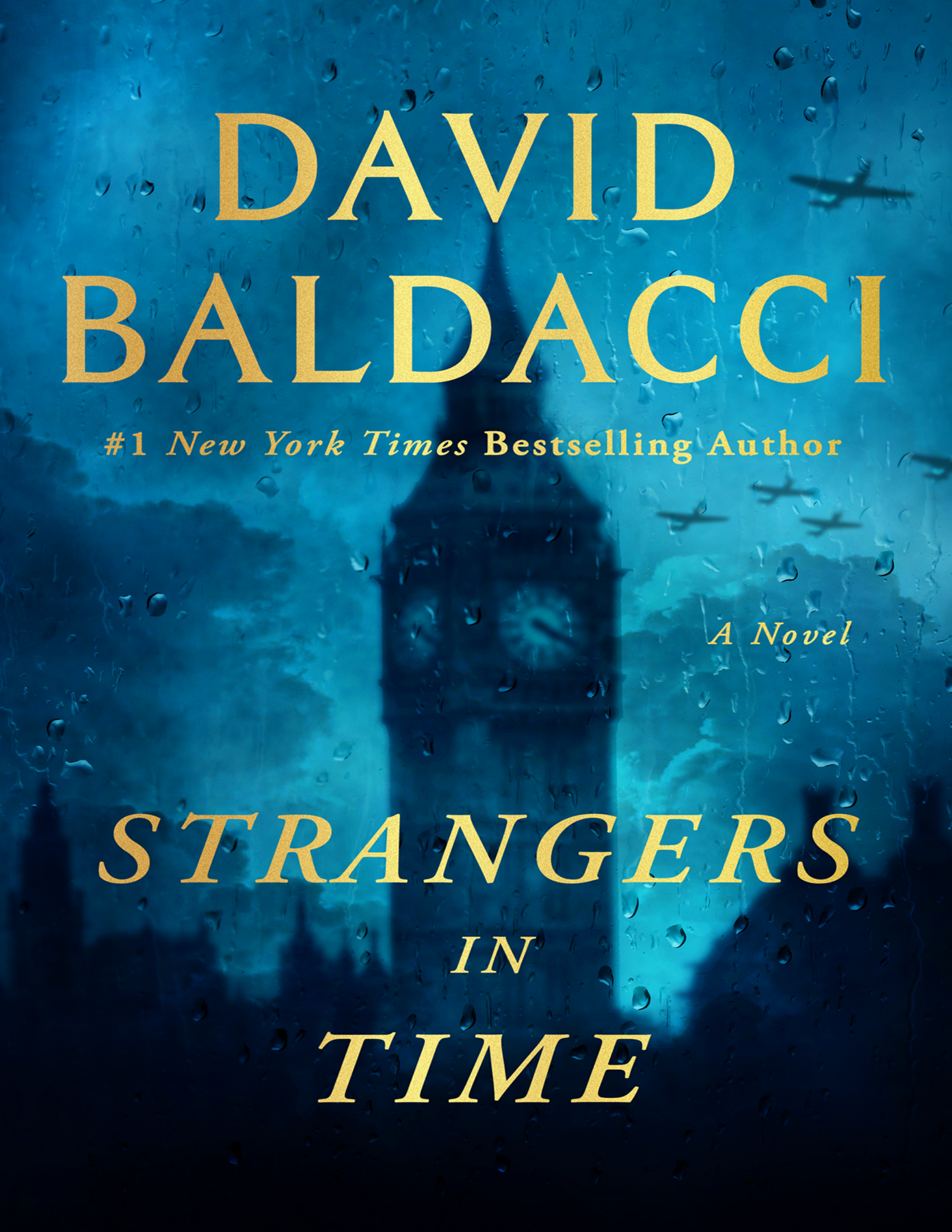
DAVID
BALDACCI
#1 New York Times Bestselling Author
A Novel
STRANGERS
IN
TIME

STRANGERS IN TIME

DAVID BALDACCI

GRAND CENTRAL
New York Boston

This book is a work of historical fiction. In order to give a sense of the times, some names or real people or places have been included in the book. However, the events depicted in this book are imaginary, and the names of nonhistorical persons or events are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance of such nonhistorical persons or events to actual ones is purely coincidental.

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Grand Central Publishing
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
grandcentralpublishing.com
@grandcentralpub

First Edition: April 2025

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Print book interior design by Marie Mundaca.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Baldacci, David, author.
Title: Strangers in time : a World War II novel / David Baldacci.
Description: First edition. | New York : GCP, 2025.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024050786 | ISBN 9781538742051 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781538742082 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Orphans—Great Britain—Fiction. | World War, 1939-1945—Fiction. | LCGFT: Historical fiction. | Novels.
Classification: LCC PS3552.A446 S77 2025 | DDC 813/.54—dc23/eng/20241104
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024050786

ISBNs: 978-1-5387-4205-1 (hardcover), 978-1-5387-6929-4 (large print), 978-1-5387-7435-9 (international trade), 978-1-5387-7441-0 (BN.com signed edition), 978-1-5387-7437-3 (BAM and Indigo signed edition), 978-1-5387-4208-2 (ebook)

E3-20250118-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

To the memory of Abner Stein, a wonderful agent and friend, who taught me much about the publishing business, and life

Only the dead have seen the end of war.

—George Santayana

There are no strangers here
Only friends you haven't met yet.

—attributed to William Butler Yeats

A Boy Called Charlie

It was well past the midway point of 1944 when Charlie Matters clambered over the piled-up debris that littered much of London, while doing his best to fade into the lingering edges of the nighttime. Charlie would be fourteen on his next birthday, and years had passed since his parents had been alive. Eighteen thousand souls had died violently in the eight months of the Blitz alone, and one in six Londoners had been left homeless at one time or another. Sometimes there seemed to be more fallen buildings than ones left standing. A person could easily become desensitized to such profound loss. Yet while the war years had tried their best to rob him of it, Charlie was still resolutely in possession of a heart.

He hurried along streets lit mostly by hazy moonlight. The blackouts were still in full effect, and the electricity that was permitted was reliably unreliable. It was the same for the bluish plumes of gas, while plump fists of contraband coal were but a distant memory for most, especially folks like Charlie. They were all still steeped in the hostilities that had engulfed the world and struck particularly fiercely at the city of Charlie's birth. Yet he didn't mind the darkness; it was actually an aid to him right now.

He continued to skitter over bricks heaved up like stilled waves, and weaved around the stark warning signs of possible unexploded ordnance. Charlie had seen a defused bomb once. The crude lettering on the device was written in a language he couldn't actually read, but he still knew exactly what it said:

GOTT VERDAMMT DIE ENGLISCHE

Well, God would choose which people to damn, and it certainly wouldn't be the English, he believed. Things were actually appearing far more hopeful than a year ago, at least according to the snippets coming

through on the wireless, and conversations Charlie overheard on the streets, and the bits of newspaper headlines he managed to glimpse.

He tugged up the waistband of his tattered pants with the cuffs turned up three times. Until last week they had resided in a bin shop that gave out worn castoffs for a few shillings in return. The queue had flowed out the door and snaked down the pavement, as desperate East Enders sought to augment their meager piles of necessaries. His grandmother, her ration book allotment for clothing nearly exhausted, had dutifully waited for hours on tiring pavement to get her grandson a proper pair of trousers that he could at least grow into over the next year or so.

At the bottoms of Charlie's long, knock-kneed legs were shoes that were too small and caused him to step gingerly even in haste, which was often how he was compelled to move.

As the wailing wind—which darted through wide, ominous gaps where buildings had once stood—quieted for a few moments, Charlie heard the sputtering belch of a motorcar approaching. He quickly scooted behind a dustbin filled with the bombed-out wreckage of the building it fronted. When Charlie saw who was coming, he was glad he had hidden.

The pair of bleary-eyed constables puttered by in their rickety Morris. They were looking for people like Charlie. People up to no good, with the West End's accusatory finger pointed doggedly toward the likes of Bethnal Green, Stepney, and East Ham.

I am up to no good, but for a very good reason, thought Charlie.

The poor cherished their possessions, because they could invariably see all of them at the same time. The rich did not miss that for which they had four spares. Thus, Charlie had no compunction relieving from affluent folks a bit of their surplus.

The Morris receded into the night as Charlie stepped clear of the dustbin. He passed by one bombed shop with no windows and no door and eyed the sign out front, which read MORE OPEN THAN USUAL.

Charlie's goal tonight was straightforward: shoes. Footwear for boys his age were in unusually short supply in London. But for those with enough money, they could be had. Well, he didn't have the money, so Charlie's process was a smidge different, though on a legal scale it was rather more significant than that.

St. Saviour's, a prominent school, was his destination. The majority of the students were enrolled there because of the influence of money and peerage. The remaining few had gained access based on actual merit.

Charlie lacked the money, the peerage, and the merit. He wasn't traveling to this school for a privileged education or for future glory, but simply for reasonable footwear. He would have preferred a steady job to outright theft, yet he was apparently too young, too uneducated, too *common-looking*—a term he'd heard more than once—for gainful employment as, say, an assistant shop clerk or a butcher's boy. And even with the odd job he occasionally found, it seemed that when it came time to pay the wage, folks conjured all sorts of reasons why they couldn't part with their shillings.

The rain fell and embellished what appeared to be shiny layers of frost lying everywhere. It was actually powdered glass from windows shattered and then fused by the heat of the bombs. In the heavy drizzle, this coating gleamed like the metal wreckage of a plane, something Charlie had also seen. Aircraft had been in abundance in the skies over London, and not all had remained there.

Night after night Charlie, his gas mask on, had huddled with his body clenched like a fist, while steel, explosives, and detonators collided with laid brick, mortared stone, and, more than occasionally, fragile flesh. One never knew when something dropped from above would strike and that would be the end of you. So far he had survived all that.

He licked his thin lips and took a deep breath.

I'm not a boy.

I'm a man.

Act like it, Charlie.

This had been his mantra for a while now. It might be so for the rest of his life, however long or short that actually turned out to be.

St. Saviour's School

As the rain picked up, Charlie felt drops of it creep inside his threadbare coat, which was missing half the material and associated warmth it had started out with. He passed by a building where the façade was gone, revealing a twisting staircase leading to an upper floor that was no longer there. He glanced at a sodden newspaper lying on the street. There was a blurry photo of a stocky, balding man with burned bits of coal for eyes and a pugnacious jaw. He was holding a fat cigar, his waistcoat fronted by a stout timepiece on a chain.

Charlie knew that this man was the prime minister. He had told his people to be strong, and calm and patient, while the world fell apart all around them. And they had, for years, mostly done just as he asked. Yet there were limits to people's willingness and ability to sacrifice, and for Charlie and many like him, these limits were growing steadily nearer.

For tonight's task Charlie had reliable information that St. Saviour's rear door had a lock that could be defeated with the right tool and skill, both of which Charlie possessed. Just inside this door was a till with the money students paid for their meals. Maybe a few quid. Maybe many pounds. Certainly it would be enough to purchase secondhand bin shoes.

He calculated the timing of his operation. His grandmother would not be up until five. Each morning she left him his school lunch tin, and the food in the icebox for his breakfast. Then she went to work at the bakery shop. She believed that Charlie awoke, ate his breakfast, and then hurried off to school with his lunch tin and a heart eager to learn.

Instead, over a year ago, he had forged a letter in her hand, informing his teacher that his grandmother and he had moved to the country. The woman had freely accepted this because many people had traded dirty rubble and wretched loss for trees and open green fields, along with a centuries-old drafty stone church in which to pray for something better than what was currently available in London. He had been afraid that he might run into his

former teacher at some point, which would reveal his lie. However, Charlie had learned that she had died in a bombing a month later. It was emblematic of the world they lived in now that Charlie had not been devastated by the woman's violent passing. There were simply too many people dying all around him, from bombs and even more from sickness, to dwell long on any one of them.

Yet it was not the same experience for everyone. Rich people's shelters weren't in coal cellars, tube stations, an Andy bomb shelter, or under-the-stairs cupboards. They went to the Ritz or the Dorchester or the Savoy for pampering and full English breakfasts before being whisked off to country estates in chauffeured motorcars. At least that was what Charlie had often heard, including from his gran, and therefore fully believed.

He nimbly clambered over the school's low gate and dropped quietly inside the darkened grounds.

St. Saviour's was two stories tall and built of only the finest forged brick and quarried stone. For some inexplicable reason, as with St. Paul's, no bomb had ever scored its hardened, noble hide.

Imperious white columns fronted the entrance. Dramatic moldings soared horizontally overhead. An elegant fanlight topped the pair of imposing solid oak front doors. A statue of a solemn-looking gent clad in a frock coat and gripping a walking stick and a book stood as weathered guard outside. Whether this chap was St. Saviour, Charlie didn't know. He *did* manage a smile at the thought of a hallowed saint in a ridiculous coat destined to stand in the rain and muck for all of eternity.

Charlie would not be going in the front door. For East End blokes like him, the tradesman's entrance would be the expected one for all their natural lives.

Unfortunately, he found the rear portal had *two* locks fronting it, stacked one on top of the other. This was an unexpected dilemma.

Charlie took out a sturdy piece of metal with a precise bend at the end and a protruding bit of blackened iron on its top side shaped in the form of a rectangle. He had been given the tool by his mate Eddie Gray. Eddie said his father had claimed it could defeat 90 percent of the locks in all of England. One like it had passed to Eddie when, years before, his father had died during a botched armed robbery. Eddie, who was good at making things, had fashioned a second lockpick and given it to Charlie. Eddie had

also patiently instructed him on how to overcome a lock with it.

Charlie worked away intently, twisting the metal this way and that, while feeling through his fingers the guts of the lock moving around. It would be easier and simpler to pinch things from the open stalls of Brick or Petticoat Lanes back in the East End. Yet he didn't like stealing from his own kind, and they had no spare boots there anyway.

He finally heard a soft click. Charlie turned the knob and it rotated freely. However, when he tried his instrument and skill on the top lock, Charlie could make no progress. After a few minutes of concentrated effort, he withdrew the pick in despair. This must be one of the 10 percent of the locks his tool couldn't conquer.

Bloody well figures.

The high-set windows on the sides of the building were iron-barred. There was no iron left in the East End; it had all been stripped and melted down for the war effort. But this wasn't the East End. One ventured "up" to the West End, but "down" to the East End, and those terms were literal in all possible senses. He had been told by one constable that in Charlie's world you had your costermongers, fish curers, and thieves, with the latter adding up to about nine in ten of the population, the bobby reckoned. And he had included Charlie in that criminal group, although the lack of hard evidence at the time had sent Charlie on his way with only a stiff caution instead of the darbies put on with a swift ride to the clink to follow.

Charlie clutched the bars, hoisting himself up and peering through the glass. Looking in instead of out was his lot in life, it seemed.

Then he let go and fell to the damp earth.

He'd been lied to. There was probably no money in the till here. There was probably no till. The two boys who had told him about this opportunity didn't have parents and had stayed with a hodgepodge of distant relatives, friends, fosters, and child minders. Recently, they had been sent to an orphanage just outside of London, but had broken out, they had informed Charlie, after telling him how awful it had been.

"You ain't even got a name in there, Charlie, just a number," said Lonzo Rossi. "I was bloody T207 or some such, but I always just been Lonzo."

Eddie Gray, Lonzo's best mate, had said nothing, but had looked off into the distance with an expression that spoke to Charlie of traumatic experience.

Charlie jogged back to the east and soon found himself in the heart of Covent Garden. A minute later the rain was bucketing down so hard that he could barely see; his sore feet felt encased in stone. And he still had a four-mile trek ahead of him to Bethnal Green. He stumbled along until he saw a bit of light coming from an alley. He peered down its mouth, conscious of the silence all around him, except for the *drum-drum* of the falling rain. In the drench, he saw a glimmer of light from a shop. At this hour that was truly remarkable. And it drew Charlie like metal to a magnet.