



THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

DAVID BALDACCI THE WINNER


“Baldacci has come up with another good one.”
—*New York Times*



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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Jackson studied the shopping mall's long corridor, noting haggard mothers piloting loaded strollers and the senior citizens group walking the mall both for exercise and conversation. Dressed in a gray pinstriped suit, the stocky Jackson stared intently at the north entrance to the shopping mall. That would no doubt be the one she would use since the bus stop was right in front. She had, Jackson knew, no other form of transportation. Her live-in boyfriend's truck was in the impoundment lot, the fourth time in as many months. It must be getting a little tedious for her, he thought. The bus stop was on the main road. She would have to walk about a mile to get there, but she often did that. What other choice did she have? The baby would be with her. She would never leave it with the boyfriend, Jackson was certain of that.

While his name always remained Jackson for all of his business endeavors, next month his appearance would change dramatically from the hefty middle-aged man he was currently. Facial features of course would again be altered; weight would probably be lost; height added or taken away, along with hair. Male or female? Aged or youthful? Often, the persona would be taken from people whom he knew, either wholly or bits of thread from different ones, sewn together until the delicate quilt of fabrication was complete. In school, biology had been a favorite subject. Specimens belonging to that rarest of all classes, the hermaphrodite, had never ceased to fascinate him. He smiled as he dwelled for a moment on this greatest of all physical duplicities.

Jackson had received a first-rate education from a prestigious Eastern school. Combining his love of acting with his natural acumen for science and chemistry, he had achieved a rare double major in drama and chemical engineering. Mornings would find him hunched over pages of complex equations or malodorous concoctions in the university's chemistry lab, while the evenings would have him energetically embroiled in the production of a Tennessee Williams or Arthur Miller classic.

Those accomplishments were serving him very well. Indeed, if his classmates could only see him now.

In keeping with today's character—a middle-aged male, overweight and out of shape from leading a sedentary lifestyle—a bead of perspiration suddenly sprouted on Jackson's forehead. His lips curled into a smile. This physical reaction pleased him immensely, aided as it was by the insulation of the padding he was wearing to provide bulky proportions and to conceal his own wiry frame. But it was something more than that too: He took pride in the fact that he became the person totally, as though different chemical reactions took place within him depending on who and what he was pretending to be.

He didn't normally inhabit shopping malls; his personal tastes were far more sophisticated. However, his clientele were most comfortable in these types of surroundings, and comfort was an important consideration in his line of work. His meetings tended to make people quite excited, sometimes in negative ways. Several interviews had become extremely animated, compelling him to think on his feet. These reminiscences brought another smile to Jackson's lips. You couldn't argue with success, though. He was batting a thousand. However, it only took one to spoil his perfect record. His smile quickly faded. Killing someone was never a pleasant experience. Rarely was it justified, but when it was, one simply had to do it and move on. For several reasons he hoped the meeting today would not precipitate such an outcome.

He carefully dabbed his forehead with his pocket handkerchief and adjusted his shirt cuffs. He smoothed down a barely visible tangle in the

synthetic fibers of his neatly groomed wig. His real hair was compressed under a latex skullcap.

He pulled open the door to the space he had rented in the mall and went inside. The area was clean and orderly—in fact too much so, he thought suddenly as he slowly surveyed the interior. It lacked the look of a true working space.

The receptionist seated behind the cheap metal desk in the foyer looked up at him. In accordance with his earlier instructions, she didn't attempt to speak. She had no idea who he was or why she was here. As soon as Jackson's appointment showed up, the receptionist had been instructed to leave. Very soon she would be on a bus out of town, her purse a little fatter for her minimal troubles. Jackson never looked at her; she was a simple prop in his latest stage production.

The phone beside her sat silent, the typewriter next to that, unused. Yes, absolutely, too well organized, Jackson decided with a frown. He eyed the stack of paper on the receptionist's desk. With a sudden motion he spread some of the papers around the desk's surface. He then cocked the phone around just so and put a piece of paper in the typewriter, winding it through with several quick spins of the platen knob.

Jackson looked around at his handiwork and sighed. You couldn't think of everything all at once.

Jackson walked past the small reception area, quickly hitting the end of the shallow space, and then turned right. He opened the door to the tiny interior office, slipped across the room, and sat down behind the scuffed wooden desk. A small TV sat in one corner of the room, its blank screen staring back at him. He pulled a cigarette from his pocket, lit it, and leaned far back in the chair, trying his best to relax despite the constant flow of adrenaline. He stroked his thin, dark mustache. It too was made of synthetic fiber ventilated on a lace foundation and attached to his skin with spirit gum. His nose had been changed considerably as well: a putty base highlighted and shadowed, to make his nose's actual delicate and straight

appearance bulky and slightly crooked. The small mole resting next to the altered bridge of his nose was also fake: a concoction of gelatin and alfalfa seeds mixed in hot water. His straight teeth were covered with acrylic caps to give them an uneven and unhealthy appearance. All of these illusions would be remembered by even the most casual observer. Thus when they were removed, he, in essence, disappeared. What more could someone wholeheartedly engaged in illegal activities want?

Soon, if things went according to plan, it would all begin again. Each time was a little different, but that was the exciting part: the not knowing. He checked his watch again. Yes, very soon. He expected to have an extremely productive meeting with her; more to the point, a mutually beneficial meeting.

He only had one question to ask LuAnn Tyler, one simple question that carried the potential for very complex repercussions. Based upon his experience, he was reasonably certain of her answer, but one just never knew. He dearly hoped, for her sake, that she would give the right one. For there was only one “right” answer. If she said no? Well, the baby would never have the opportunity to know its mother, because the baby would be an orphan. He smacked the desktop with the palm of his hand. She would say yes. All the others had. Jackson shook his head vigorously as he thought it through. He would make her see, convince her of the inescapable logic of joining with him. How it would change everything for her. More than she could ever imagine. More than she could ever hope for. How could she say no? It was an offer that simply no one could refuse.

If she came. Jackson rubbed his cheek with the back of his hand, took a long, slow drag on the cigarette, and stared absently at a nail pop in the wall. But, truth be known, how could she not come?

CHAPTER TWO

The brisk wind sailed straight down the narrow dirt road between the compression of thick woods on either side. Suddenly the road curved north and then just as abruptly dipped to the east. Over a slight rise the view yielded still more trees, some dying, bent into what seemed painful shapes by wind, disease, and weather; but the majority were ramrod straight, with thickening girths and soaring, leafy branches. On the left side of the road, the more diligent eye could discern a half circle of open space consisting of mud interspersed with patches of new spring grass. Also nestled with nature into this clearing were rusted engine blocks, piles of trash, a small mountain of bone-dry beer cans, discarded furniture, and a litany of other debris that served as visual art objects when covered with snow, and as home to snakes and other creatures when the mercury made its way north. Smack in the middle of that semicircular island rested a short, squat mobile trailer atop a crumbling cinder block foundation. Seemingly its only touch with the rest of the world were the electrical and telephone lines that ran down from the thick, leaning poles along the road and collided with one side of the trailer. The trailer was a decided eyesore in the middle of nowhere. Its occupants would have agreed with that description: The middle of nowhere was aptly applied to themselves as well.

Inside the trailer, LuAnn Tyler looked at herself in the small mirror perched atop the leaning chest of drawers. She held her face at an unusual angle, not only because the battered piece of furniture listed to one side with a broken leg, but also because the mirror was shattered. Meandering lines grew outward on the surface of the glass like the slender branches of a