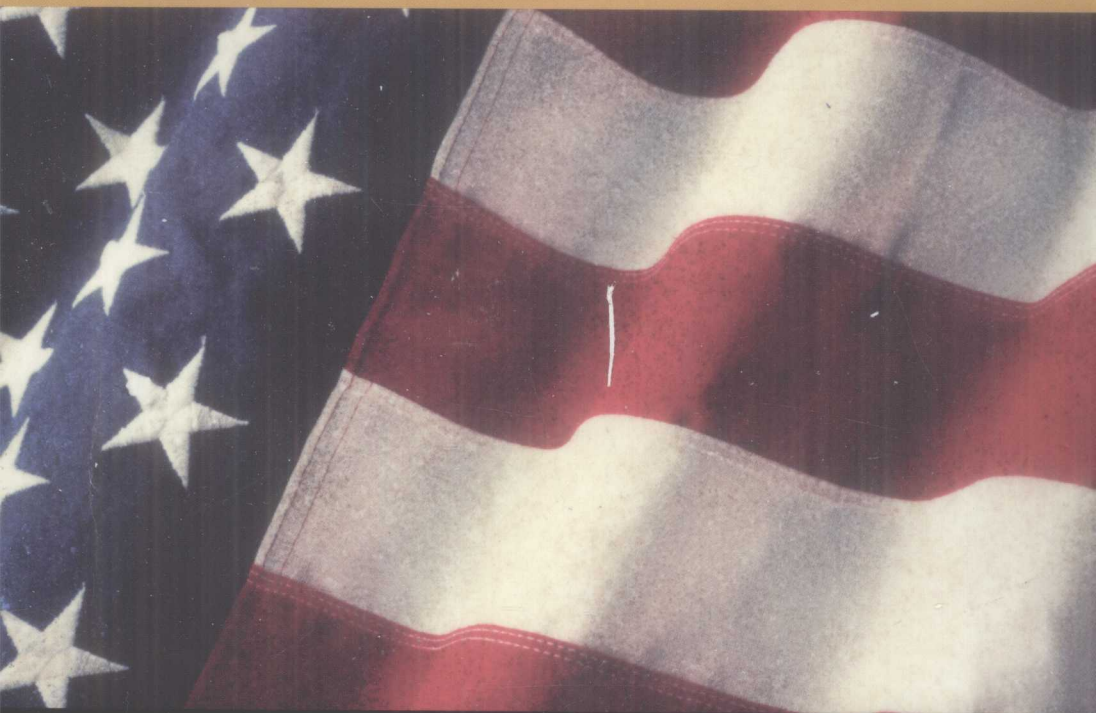


DAVID BALDACCI

A NOVEL BY THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



LAST MAN STANDING

"A master storyteller." —*People*

**DAVID
BALDACCI**

**LAST MAN
STANDING**



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THE MASTERFUL WORKS OF
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*To all the wonderful teachers and other volunteers across the country who
have helped make the All America Reads project a reality.*

This book is also dedicated to the memory of

*Yossi Chaim Paley
(April 14, 1988–March 10, 2001)*

The bravest young man I ever met.

“A wrongly accused man is always vilified
by the ignorant masses.

Such a man should fire at will,
he is bound to hit something.”

—ANONYMOUS

“Speed, surprise and violence of action.”

—HOSTAGE RESCUE MOTTO

1

Web London held a semiautomatic SR75 rifle custom built for him by a legendary gunsmith. The SR didn't stop at merely wounding flesh and bone; it disintegrated them. Web would never leave home without this high chieftain of muscle guns, for he was a man steeped in violence. He was always prepared to kill, to do so efficiently and without error. Lord, if he ever took a life by mistake he might as well have eaten the bullet himself, for all the misery it would cause him. Web just had that complex way of earning his daily bread. He couldn't say he loved his job, but he did excel at it.

Despite having a gun welded to his hand virtually every waking moment of his life, Web was not one to coddle his weapons. While he never called a pistol his friend or gave it a slick name, weapons were still an important part of Web's life, though like wild animals guns were not things easily tamed. Even trained lawmen missed their targets and everything else eight out of ten times. To Web, not only was that unacceptable, it was also suicidal. He had many peculiar qualities, but a death wish was not one of them. Web had plenty of people looking to kill him as it was, and once they had nearly gotten their man.

About five years prior he had come within a liter or two of spilled blood of checking out on the floor of a school gymnasium strewn with other men already dead or dying. After he had triumphed over his wounds and stunned the doctors tending him, Web started carrying the SR instead of the submachine gun his

comrades-in-arms toted. It resembled an M16, chambered a big .308 bullet, and was an excellent choice if intimidation was your goal. The SR made everyone want to be your friend.

Through the smoked-out window of the Suburban, Web eyed each fluid knot of people along the corners and suspicious clumps of humanity lurking in darkened alleys. As they moved farther into hostile territory, Web's gaze returned to the street, where he knew every vehicle could be a gun cruiser in disguise. He was looking for any drifting eye, nod of head or fingers slyly tapping on cell phones in an attempt to do serious harm to old Web.

The Suburban turned the corner and stopped. Web glanced at the six other men huddled with him. He knew they were contemplating the same things he was: Get out fast and clean, move to cover positions, maintain fields of fire. Fear did not really enter into the equation; nerves, however, were another matter. High-octane adrenaline was not his friend; in fact, it could very easily get him killed.

Web took a deep, calming breath. He needed his pulse rate to be between sixty and seventy. At eighty-five beats your gun would tremble against your torso; at ninety ticks you couldn't work the trigger, as blood occlusion in veins and constricted nerves in shoulders and arms combined to guarantee that you would fail to perform at an acceptable level. At over one hundred pops a minute you lost your fine motor skills entirely and wouldn't be able to hit an elephant with a damn cannon at three feet; you might as well slap a sign on your forehead that read KILL ME QUICK, because that undoubtedly would be your fate.

Web pushed out the juice, drew in the peace and for him there was calm to be distilled from brewing chaos.

The Suburban started moving, turned one more corner and stopped. For the last time, Web knew. Radio squelch was broken when Teddy Riner spoke into his bone microphone or "mic." Riner said, "Charlie to TOC, request compromise authority and permission to move to yellow."

Through Web's mic he heard TOC's, or Tactical Operations Center's, terse response, "Copy, Charlie One, stand by." In Web's Crayola world, "yellow" was the last position of concealment and cover. Green was the crisis site, the moment of truth: the breach. Navi-

gating the hallowed piece of earth that stretched between the relative safety and comfort of yellow and the moment of truth green could be quite eventful. "Compromise authority"—Web said the words to himself. It was just a way of asking for the okay to gun down people if necessary and making it sound like you were merely getting permission from your boss to cut a few bucks off the price of a used car. Radio squelch was broken again as TOC said, "TOC to all units: You have compromise authority and permission to move to yellow."

Thank you so very much, TOC. Web edged closer to the cargo doors of the Suburban. He was point and Roger McCallam had the rear. Tim Davies was the breecher and Riner was the team leader. Big Cal Plummer and the other two assaulters, Lou Patterson and Danny Garcia, stood ready with MP-5 machine guns and flash bangs and .45-caliber pistols, and their calm demeanors. As soon as the doors opened, they would fan out into a rolling mass looking for threats from all directions. They would move toes first, then heels, knees bent to absorb recoil in case they had to fire. Web's face mask shrunk his field of vision to a modest viewing area: his miniature Broadway for the coming real-life mayhem, no expensive ticket or fancy suit required. Hand signals would suffice from now on. When bullets were flying at you, you tended to get a bit of cotton mouth anyway. Web never talked much at work.

He watched as Danny Garcia crossed himself, just like he did every time. And Web said what he always said when Garcia crossed himself before the Chevy doors popped open. "God's too smart to come 'round here, Danny boy. We're on our own." Web always said this in a jesting way, but he was not joking.

Five seconds later the cargo doors burst open and the team piled out too far away from ground zero. Normally they liked to drive right up to their final destination and go knock-knock-boom with their two-by-four explosive, yet the logistics here were a little tricky. Abandoned cars, tossed refrigerators and other bulky objects conveniently blocked the road to the target.

Radio squelch broke again as snipers from X-Ray Team called in. There were men in the alley up ahead, X-Ray reported, but not part of the group Web was hunting. At least the snipers didn't think so.

As one, Web and his Charlie Team rose and hurtled down the alley. The seven members of their Hotel Team counterparts had been dropped off by another Suburban on the far side of the block to attack the target from the left rear side. The grand plan had Charlie and Hotel meeting somewhere in the middle of this combat zone masquerading as a neighborhood.

Web and company were heading east now, an approaching storm right on their butts. Lightning, thunder, wind and horizontal rain tended to screw up ground communications, tactical positioning and men's nerves, usually at the critical time when all of them needed to operate perfectly. With all their technological wizardry, the only available response to Mother Nature's temper and the poor ground logistics was simply to run faster. They chugged down the alley, a narrow strip of potholed, trash-littered asphalt. There were buildings close on either side of them, the brick veneer blistered by decades of gun battles. Some had been between good and bad, but most involved young men taking out their brethren over drug turf, women or just because. Here, a gun made you a man, though you might really only be a child, running outside after watching your Saturday morning cartoons, convinced that if you blew a large hole in someone, he might actually get back up and keep playing with you.

They came upon the group the snipers had identified: clusters of blacks, Latinos and Asians wheeling and dealing drugs. Apparently, potent highs and the promise of an uncomplicated cash-and-carry business cut through all troublesome issues of race, creed, color or political affiliation. To Web most of these folks looked a single snort, needle nick or popped pill from the grave. He marveled that this pathetic assemblage of veteran paint hackers even had the energy or clarity of thought to consummate the simple transaction of cash for little bags of brain inferno barely disguised as feel-good potion, and only then the first time you drove the poison into your body.

In the face of Charlie's intimidating wall of guns and Kevlar, all but one of the druggies dropped to their knees and begged not to be killed or indicted. Web focused on the one young man who remained standing. His head was swathed in a red do-rag symboliz-

ing some gang allegiance. The kid had a toothpick waist and barbell shoulders; ratty gym shorts hung down past his butt crack and a tank shirt rode lopsided across his muscular torso. He also had an attitude several miles long riding on his features, the kind that said, *I'm smarter, tougher and will outlive you*. Web had to admit, though, the guy carried the rag-look well.

It took all of thirty seconds to determine that all but Bandanna Boy were looped out of their minds and that none of the druggies were carrying guns—or cell phones that could be used to call up the target and warn them. Bandanna Boy did have a knife, yet knives had no chance against Kevlar and submachine guns. The team let him keep it. But as Charlie Team moved on, Cal Plummer ran with them backward, his MP-5 trained on the young back-alley entrepreneur, just in case.

Bandanna Boy did call after Web, something about admiring Web's rifle and wanting to buy it. He'd give him a sweet deal, he yelled after Web, and then said he'd shoot Web and everyone else dead with it. HA-HA! Web glanced to the rooftops, where he knew members of Whiskey Team and X-Ray were in their forward firing positions with rounds seated and lethal beads drawn on the brain stems of this gaggle of losers. The snipers were Web's best friends. He understood exactly how they approached their work, because for years he had been one of them.

For months at a time Web had lain in steamy swamps with pissed-off water moccasins crawling over him. Or else been wedged into wind-gusted clefts of frigid mountains with the custom-built rifle stock's leather cheek pad next to his own as he sighted through his scope and provided cover and intelligence for the assault teams. As a sniper he had developed many important skills, such as learning how to very quietly pee into a jug. Other lessons included packing his food in precise clusters so he could carbo-load by touch in pitch-darkness, and arranging his bullets for optimal reloading, working off a strict military model that had proved its worth time and time again. Not that he could easily transfer any of these unique talents to the private sector, but Web didn't see that happening anyway.

The life of a sniper lurched from one numbing extreme to an-

other. Your job was to achieve the best firing position with the least amount of personal exposure and oftentimes those twin goals were simply incompatible. You just did the best you could. Hours, days, weeks, even months of nothing except tedium that tended to erode morale and core skills would be sliced wide open by moments of gut-wrenching fury that usually came at you in a rush of gunfire and mass confusion. And your decision to shoot meant someone would die, and you were never clear whether your own death would be included in the equation or not.

Web could always conjure up these images in a flash, so vivid were they in his memory. A quintuplet of match-grade hollow points would be lined up in a spring-loaded magazine waiting to rip into an adversary at twice the speed of sound once Web's finger pulled the jeweled trigger, which would break ever so sweetly at precisely two-point-five pounds of pressure. As soon as someone stepped into his kill zone, Web would fire and a human being would suddenly become a corpse crumbling to the earth. Yet the most important shots Web handled as a sniper were the ones he *hadn't* taken. It was just that kind of a gig. It was not for the faint-hearted, the stupid or even those of average intelligence.

Web said a silent thank-you to the snipers overhead and raced on down the alley.

They next came upon a child, maybe all of nine, sitting shirtless on a hunk of concrete, and not an adult in sight. The approaching storm had knocked at least twenty degrees off the thermometer and the mercury was still falling. And still the boy had no shirt on. Had he ever had a shirt on? Web wondered. He had seen many examples of impoverished children. While Web didn't consider himself a cynic, he was a realist. He felt sorry for these kids, but there wasn't much he could do to help them. And yet threats could come from anywhere these days, so his gaze automatically went from the boy's head to his feet, looking for weapons. Fortunately, he saw none; Web had no desire to fire upon a child.

The boy looked directly at him. Under the illuminated arc of the one flickering alley lamp that somehow had not been shot out, the child's features were outlined vividly. Web noted the too-lean body and the muscles in shoulders and arms already hard and clustering

around the protrusion of ribs, as a tree grows bark cords over a wound. A knife slash ran across the boy's forehead. A puckered, blistered hole on the child's left cheek was the unmistakable tag of a bullet, Web knew.

"Damn to hell," said the child in a weary voice, and then he laughed or, more accurately, cackled. The boy's words and that laugh rang like cymbals in Web's head, and he had no idea why; his skin was actually tingling. He had seen hopeless kids like this before, they were everywhere around here, and yet something was going on in Web's head that he couldn't quite figure. Maybe he'd been doing this too long, and wasn't it a hell of a time to start thinking that?

Web's finger hovered near his rifle's trigger, and he moved farther in front with graceful strides even as he tried to rid himself of the boy's image. Though very lean himself and lacking showy muscles, Web had enormous leverage in his long arms, and strong fingers, and there was deceptive power in his naturally broad shoulders. And he was by far the fastest man on the team and also possessed great endurance. Web could run six-mile relays all day. He would take speed, quickness and stamina over bulging muscles any day. Bullets tore through muscle as easily as they did fat. Yet the lead couldn't hurt you if it couldn't hit you.

Most people would describe Web London, with his broad shoulders and standing six-foot-two, as a big man. Usually, though, people focused on the condition of the left side of his face, or what remained of it. Web had to grudgingly admit that it was amazing, the reconstruction they could do these days with destroyed flesh and bone. In just the right light, meaning hardly any at all, one almost wouldn't notice the old crater, the new rise of cheek and the delicate grafting of transplanted bone and skin. Truly remarkable, all had said. All except Web, that is.

At the end of the alley they stopped once more, all crouching low. At Web's elbow was Teddy Riner. Through his wireless Motorola bone mic, Riner communicated with TOC, telling them that Charlie was at yellow and asking permission to move to green—the "crisis site" of the target, which here was simply a fancy term for the front door. Web held the SR75 with one hand and felt for his custom-

built .45-caliber pistol in the low-slung tactical holster riding on his right leg. He had an identical pistol hanging on the ceramic trauma plate that covered his chest, and he touched that one too in his pre-attack ritual of sorts.

Web closed his eyes and envisioned how the next minute would play out. They would race to the door. Davies would be front and center laying his charge. Assaulters would hold their flash bang grenades loosely in their weak hand. Subgun safeties would be off, and steady fingers would stay off triggers until it was time to kill. Davies would remove the mechanical safeties on the control box and check the detonator cord attached to the breaching charge, looking for problems and hoping to find none. Riner would communicate to TOC the immortal words, "Charlie at green." TOC would answer, as it always did, with, "Stand by, I have control." That line always rankled Web, because who the hell really had control doing what they did?

During his entire career Web had never heard TOC reach the end of the countdown. After the count of two, the snipers would engage targets and fire, and a bevy of .308s firing simultaneously was a tad noisy. Then the breach charge would blow before TOC said "one" and that high-decibel hurricane would drown out even your own thoughts. In fact, if you ever heard TOC finish the countdown you were in deep trouble, because that meant the breach charge had failed to go off. And that was truly a lousy way to start the workday.

When the explosive blew the door, Web and his team would invade the target and throw their flash bangs. The device was aptly named, since the "flash" would blind anyone watching, and the "bang" would rupture the unprotected eardrum. If they ran into any more locked doors, these would yield quickly either to the impolite knock-knock of Davies's shotgun or to a slap charge that looked like a strip of tire rubber but carried a C4 explosive kicker that virtually no door could withstand. They'd follow their rote patterns, keying on hands and weapons, shooting with precision, thinking in chess maneuvers. Communication would be via touch commands. Hit the hot spots, locate any hostages, and take them out fast and alive. What you never really thought about was dying.

That took too much time and energy away from the details of the mission, and away from the bedrock instincts and disciplines honed from doing this sort of thing over and over until it became a part of what made you, *you*.

According to reliable sources, the building they were going to hit contained the entire financial guts of a major drug operation headquartered in the capital city. Included in the potential haul tonight were accountants and bean counters, valuable witnesses for the government if Web and his men could get them out alive. That way the Feds could go after top guys criminally and civilly from a number of fronts. Even drug lords feared an IRS full frontal assault, because seldom did kingpins pay taxes to Uncle Sam. That was why Web's team had been called up. They specialized in killing folks who needed it, but they also were damn good at keeping people alive. At least until these folks put their hands on the Bible, testified and sent some greater evil away for a very long time.

When TOC came back on, the countdown would begin: "Five, four, three, two . . ."

Web opened his eyes, collected himself. He was ready. Pulse at sixty-four; Web just knew. *Okay, boys, pay dirt's dead ahead. Let's go take it.* TOC came through his headset once more and gave the okay to move to the front door.

And that's precisely when Web London froze. His team burst out from the cover heading for green, the crisis site, and Web didn't. It was as though his arms and legs were no longer part of his body, the sensation of when you've fallen asleep with a limb under your body and wake up to find all the circulation has vacated that extremity. It didn't seem to be fear or runaway nerves; Web had been doing this too long. And yet he could only watch as Charlie Team raced on. The courtyard had been identified as the last major danger zone prior to the crisis site, and the team picked up its pace even more, looking everywhere for the slightest hint of coming resistance. Not a single one of the men seemed to notice that Web was not with them. With sweat pouring off him, every muscle straining against whatever was holding him down, Web managed slowly to rise and take a few faltering steps forward. His feet and arms seemingly encased in lead, his body on fire and his head bursting, he staggered onward a

bit more, reached the courtyard, and then he dropped flat on his face as his team pulled away from him.

He glanced up in time to see Charlie Team running hard, the target in their sights, seemingly just begging them to come take a piece of it. The team was five seconds from impact. Those next few seconds would change Web London's life forever.